

Dungeon Diver: Stealing A Monster's Power

Chapter 711

The 5 Great Demon Families are bound together in an alliance to rule the Upper Realm.

It is their family loyalty and strict hierarchy that keeps them from betraying one another and focused on advancing for the good of their family branches.

To ensure these strict rules and regulations are followed, all Demons within the major Royal Branches have their avatars connected to a central interface monitored by all of the family heads.

If any Demon dies, all the families will be notified, and the threat will be dealt with swiftly.

This is a well-kept secret. Only high-ranking 1st Class Lords, who have dealt with Demons in the past—tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of years ago, back when Demons didn't have as much power in certain zones of the Upper Realm—are aware of it.

While the average Lord in the crowds of the Volterra District feels as though their show was stopped right before the best part, the Human and Ogre putting on this display know very well that if they were to end this match by killing these Demons, they would be in far more trouble than they can handle right now.

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In the center of the Citadel, Andras, the Noble Vermillion Demon stationed to watch over this Citadel, curses loudly while pacing back and forth even faster.

Ember's voice echoes out through the hologram at the front of his massive room, and Andras hears the words echoed for millions of Lords to hear.

"Is that all? You Demons challenged me. A 5th Class human... Forced me to accept your terms... -And you were beaten this badly just because I purchased a few Avatar upgrades..."

Ember walks closer to the mutilated, melting avatar at the back of the room, shaking his head.

Torvak speaks at the same time while stepping a heavy foot onto the remains of the chest of the Demon in his room.

"Out of respect for the Vermillion Family Head, we won't kill these runts. For the strong to bully the weak is cowardly. The Ogre Conglomeration will do business with any race that gives us a deal, and I will gladly challenge anyone who believes we have wronged them. However, this is the last duel I shall accept on such baseless shallow claims."

The Ogre steps off the avatar and kicks it aside, looking up to the ceiling of the dueling room.

Ember takes a similar stance, as they know exactly who is watching.

—

The Citadel Lord yells out with rage, but he didn't receive this position for his strength alone.

Andras Vermillion is a very intelligent tactical Noble Demon. He understands that the opponents he is dealing with know knowledge from an era before he was brought to the Upper Realm just 18,000 years ago to follow the family head.

An utter defeat like this is quite an embarrassment, but it can still be salvaged.

Their family head has not been notified, so everything that has occurred here is still contained on a local level. Only the Ellipsia Citadel knows of this blunder.

The Demon opens up a few panels of his status to yell for some of his servants.

"Close the Citadel ports! I want all Fast Travel Orbs to and from this sky base halted until this matter is taken care of!"

As the Demon closes his status, he's faced with the fact that even though these two have caused him great trouble and damaged his family name in front of millions of Lords, simultaneously, he should be thanking them.

If Ember and Torvak had killed both Demons then and there, the Vermillion Family name would have lessened in stature in the eyes of the other 4 Great Families. *R*

Even the Family Head would most likely fire him from his post and replace the Ellipsia Citadel's Lord position with a strong 1st Class Demon being nurtured in the Grand Citadel, or possibly the new Noble Lord that is said to be arriving soon.

While it looks like a declaration of war on the outside, there are many layered meanings to this display. He believes the Ogre Conglomeration wants to make a deal before they're inevitably squeezed dry of resources. It is better to make a scene and take what they can get while they still have some influence in the city.

"An interesting tactic. You had a better hand than expected... I guess it's now my turn to make another move..." The Demon whispers in a room alone as both of the dueling counters for the first round hit 0, and the automatic system declares the Human and Ogre winners of their duels.

The dueling room's life support systems take the two Demons in, assessing their shattered avatars and damaged minds, administering the best stabilization treatment they can on-site. Their bodies are locked away in private holding rooms within the World Trade Palace.

The crowds around the Citadel erupt into cheers and chaos, quickly getting over the fact that the Demons weren't killed, and crafting their own theories as to why.

Public perception of the Demons has now been twisted. While they are still the most feared and dominant race, questions about how they even took control of this Citadel wander into people's minds.

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Gossip from old Lords who remember when the Ogre Conglomeration was in power spreads fast, and the narrative of a Citadel War on the horizon becomes the main topic of concern.

The fact that a Human beat a Demon still interests some, but it is forgotten quickly as the invisible fire was nowhere near as flashy as the enormous Ogre's lightning strikes and greater form.

When the two walk out of their dueling pods, neither says a word to the crowds of interested customers as they walk back to the isolated room overlooking the district.

Torvak opens up his status as they overlook the streets filled with millions of Lords talking about them.

Ember stretches his arms and legs, then sits right back down in the chair, throwing his feet up on the empty table.

"Well, that went better than expected. I didn't have to go all out."

Torvak chuckles at Ember's words while reading thousands of transmissions coming in from business partners and high-value customers.

"I haven't fought like that in quite a while. The mandatory system linking avatars up here really does make the new generation rely on their command tech way too much. I almost feel bad for them."

Torvak then stops on two notifications and connects his status to the room's holographic system to show Ember.

He replies with a grin.

"Looks like the High Orcs and Berserker Kings are already interested in reforming the alliance."

Torvak nods, continuing to scroll through the incoming messages.

"Yes... but the Wyverns haven't said a word. They're the cautious types."

Torvak's eyes reflexively turn down to Ember's palm, and his expression fills with curiosity, though he doesn't pry.

Ember replies.

"They're loyal but have been on the brink of extinction far too many times to join in matters like this until they're certain of victory. They'll come around after the next phase."

Ember's crimson eyes peer down to his palm as well, entertaining Torvak's gaze.

"This is from the help I said was on the way. Looks like he'll be making his way up here pretty soon..."

—

As these events shake the Citadel's culture to its very core, my entire being vibrates and processes copious amounts of divine threads. I'm fighting my own internal battle down below the clouds.

I watch the corpse of the Goblin King I just killed dissolve away, as the thick clouds of divine energy in the atmosphere tear through it like it never existed.

Without a soul to bind with the matter, the avatar breaks away as if it is just raw mana I'm standing on.

However, this is the least of my focus.

As my feet hit the hard black rocky ground, the immense amount of green threads within me still tears and churns away at my own flesh.

However, I feel much more able to fight back; and within just 10 minutes, I assimilate with all the power granted to me and the excess threads I exposed myself to while absorbing this power.

What took over an hour to adapt to while falling through the sky down here now only takes ten minutes; and I even feel lighter on my feet with far more divine energy in my core.

Memories of the Goblin King's Ether stores—at roughly 400 Low Quality Ether—and a far better understanding of how these avatars really work now flood into my mind.

My ether stores have risen by over 25x, and I have a clear-cut path through these Exile Zones to the Citadel that I've watched the Goblin King travel thousands of times in its life.

The ins and outs of many districts within the Citadel become crystal clear, and the knowledge of how dungeon contracts are formed and placed on worlds is the most mind-blowing part that sticks with me.

With all this comes the Goblin King's thousands of years of sorrow. When these emotions hit me, I push them to the back of my mind and come back to reality to see Ava's worried gaze staring at me from less than 10 meters away.

I look up and speak to her, watching the years that have gone by since the Goblin King bought her on the Exile slave market and stole her world replay in the back of my mind.

"You're... free... I guess."

It's quite odd to look at her now, with far more knowledge of her past and the very realm we stand in. Up until now she's been my guide, teaching me the ways of this strange world; but in an instant the roles have swapped.

I smile as her eyes of worry don't cease, but I raise my hand and wave it in front of her face while walking closer.

"Your world is fine, by the way. I got it right here if you want it back."

I stop about a meter in front of her, and she finally replies.

"H-how, how'd you do that? And what are you? Where did you really come from—I..."

I shrug.

"Put your hand out. I already told you everything. I fell from the sky because that Citadel wouldn't let me in past their automated defense protocol."

She raises her hand with a [0] on it, and I raise mine with [167] to press against her palm. Then I speak again.

"The only way I'll be able to transfer this is if you swear your loyalty to me. Not as a new Exile contract or anything, just as a follower, or better described, a Co-Lord. We're going to need to rewrite that Permanent Exile code on your avatar if you ever want to make it out of this zone."

Ava's eyes widen, as detailed memories of the Goblin King placing Exile contracts on countless Lords flash through my mind.

It works similarly to mind and body control buffs, like the Curse of the Lich King's or the Sun God's Curse Mark, but is manually registered into each avatar. The only way to break it would be fulfilling the contract and receiving a new avatar; or in this case, I believe rewriting the permanent buff is possible if I replace it with a stronger one.

Ava replies.

"If that is truly possible... I... swear my loyalty—"

As she says these words, I open up my purple barrier again, exposing myself to the pressure outside, and mimic the vivid feelings the Goblin King shared with me when his avatar would transfer worlds through its token to others on the free market high up in the sky.

A notification rings in my ears, confirming a new link of loyalty, while the new perk I earned allows me to co-own a world with any Lord that swears their loyalty to me.

Her palm lights up with [1] as I transfer the 3rd Class world this Goblin King took from her. My palm flickers down to [166], and back to [167] once the link of loyalty is formed.

Her eyes widen, and for the brief second that our skin is touching, I feel joy and thankfulness rippling through; but I soon fall to my knees, writhing in agony from exposing myself to the pressure of the outside again.

Ten minutes pass, and my mental state becomes clear again after absorbing even more green threads forcefully thrust into my core.

"Looks like it worked..."

My head turns back in the direction of the base camp, where many goblins are knocked out cold from the pressure of our fight that ended over 20 minutes ago. Others are starting to wake up and struggle to stand to their feet.

Ava looks at me with a concerned expression again, as two times now I've fallen unconscious for many minutes in pain, done the impossible by stealing worlds from a Lord I killed, used unique avatar commands, and exhibited many other odd tendencies and words that don't add up.

She's equally enamored and confused, but I point to the base camp of green domes.

"I'll explain things later... Come on, let's check on your mining squad then get out of here. We have to move fast before the owner of this Exile Plot realizes I killed the Lord Renting 4 of his Zones..."

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As we start to walk, my gaze catches the massive black axe stuck in the ground, one that didn't dissolve with the Goblin King's avatar.

Many memories of this Lord using a system storage rush through my mind, but training to replicate that ability without avatar commands seems far too time-consuming right now.

I turn to Ava and yell out, pointing to it.

"Bring that axe along with us. I want to save it for later."

With the rapid increase in my adaptation to this environment, I estimate I'll eventually be able to walk around without my purple barrier. When that time comes, I'd like to feed my Soul Sword every bit of loot I can get my hands on.

Ava's confused look makes it clear she doesn't understand why I'd want this worthless chunk of black, dead soul weapon material, but after what she just witnessed, she decides not to question my intentions. However, she has a different concern.

"My avatar doesn't come pre-loaded with storage space-"

I reply quickly, as more memories of the Goblin King piece together in my mind.

"Check your shop function. There should be a small storage feature for 10 Ether. I'll pay you back, but we have to go..."

She opens her mouth to reply but closes it just as fast, opening her system interface and doing as I say.

Seconds later, a green and white sliver of space opens up in front of her free hand that doesn't hold her hammer. Then, the axe from this battle falls inside. Quickly, we run to the center of the mining zone to check on the remaining goblins.

The majority of them are still out cold, but a handful have managed to stand. Two in particular I recognize very well. We head straight toward them.

Ava confronts Troy and Rain, explaining what happened and convincing them again that they can trust me. I press my palm onto both of the goblins' hands, gaining two new links of loyalty with the two 5th Class goblins.

I manage to complete both transfers in a single go, with my barrier open for almost a full second, but it still takes about ten minutes to recoup feeling in my body.

I'm not doing this out of the goodness of my heart.

It's mostly to appease Ava when I tell her I want to leave all these underlings behind. But also, I want to have eyes and a direct telepathy channel down here accessible to me if need be.

—

On the outside, my words and actions may seem cold and cryptic; but I'm taking the simple optimal path that doesn't take much thought while processing a lot of information.

My mind is quite scattered and busy conceptualizing the thousands of years of new memories.

I've received glimpses of the past via the Originator's tomb and Celia's ability before... but those were just slideshows of someone else's life.

The memories I received from Drako Vermillion were vivid and overwhelming too. However, it was just a few hundred years, mostly consisting of training and waiting within cultivation rooms and a labyrinth.

To add to the simplicity of the demon's memories, I received them once the threat I was facing was defeated. I had all the time I needed to digest and ruminate on their information.

Now, I've received vast knowledge of a race on the other side of the galaxy, and his ventures within a realm that trades entire worlds like they're nothing more than gold coins.

My perspective of my existence in reality has vastly expanded.

The Goblin King's memories were nearly ten times as long as the demon's and packed with hundreds of times more information.

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It's impossible to sift through it all, but very recent memories surface in my mind that happened right before my battle with this Lord began. It shows me the path this Goblin King took to get here from the Citadel, just earlier today.

—

Every month, all Lords of Exile plots are allowed to descend from the Citadel and collect profits from their zones.

On the underside of the Citadel, a large mountain of black rocks climbs up to almost touch its base. This is where the power plant at its center drops the drained world tokens, and they fall into the endless Exile zones for scavengers to mine.

This mountain of forgotten worlds loses its steep walls the farther away from the Citadel one travels. So far out here, the ground is basically flat.

The zone we're in now is near the outer ring, where only 5th Class Ether Stones can be found. Many call these zones the Hollow District, as the souls cursed to work in these mines never find anything of profit. It is well known that Lords of this status never have lifespans long enough to fulfill their contracts.

The middle ring, which I ventured near a few times with Ava watching near the border, is filled with 4th Class Ether Stones. The central peak—the steep mountain land right below the access point—is where fortunes can be made. It's privately owned land not available for rent, where 3rd Class and above Ether Stones are said to be mined.

Between certain Exile zones, there are pathways that are common ground—neutral zones where Lords can venture to and from the Citadel access point.

The Goblin King took his time making his way over, and this was the last zone it visited.

I've wasted a long time healing after the battle, and even if I book it with everything I have, taking the winding neutral path between Exile zones isn't going to get me to the access point in time.

A blurry map of certain zones in the Hollow District and Middle Ring floats in my mind. Memories of the Goblin King's past pair these random zones with faces of all kinds of illegal avatar dealers, slave traders, and shady Lords.

—

Once I recover after granting the two goblins their worlds back, I see a clear path I can take to make it to the access point in time if I run now.

It isn't exactly going to be a legal route, and it may stir up some chaos in the city above, but I already unknowingly committed to this path when I killed the Lord renting this plot.

I look up to Ava as I stand to my feet.

"Alright, the access point to the Citadel is closing. If we don't run now, it's going to take at least another month before we'll get another chance."

I look back to the goblins, watching even more of the small green lords hold their heads while standing to their feet behind Rain and Troy.

"We can't bring them, but I promise we'll come back..."

In the back of my mind, memories of the Black Market District on the edge of the Citadel flash through my thoughts. I know exactly who owns these plots, and for the right price, any deal can be agreed upon. I just hope I don't meet with them until after I leave this place, as they often come down here to survey their more valuable plots in the Middle Ring.

Ava looks saddened by my words, but my urgency and confidence in my decisions over the last few minutes make her believe every word I've said.

"Understood."

She turns to the two and holds their hands, saying a few words to them while I turn my gaze into the green fog, straight in the direction we'll be headed next.

After half a minute passes, the goblins scurry away and start helping their fellow lords.

Many of them look very injured and fatigued. It makes me wish Abby was here. She could've healed them all in an instant...

With this train of thought, another memory floats to the front of my mind—a time the Goblin King entered a shop in a high-end store in the Ashen Blue District, right near the center of the Citadel. This is where he purchased the ability to send a signal down to the Lower Realm, contacting the Kings of the Golden City back on his homeworld.

Vague imagery of the possibility of sending and receiving items and energy between realms comes to mind, but I push them back to my subconscious as I focus on the present.

Ava and I run forward, powering our footsteps with ether, leaving the mining base behind us, straight toward the barrier we had been walking along for days.

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As we near it, Ava's face shows hesitation, but her actions don't falter as she runs straight through.

Her eyes widen with surprise, and I grin as my theory that my Rising Emperor's buff would override an exile contract is confirmed.

In my internal interface, I see her status clearly now.

She is level 4521, with a [Hobgoblin Transformation] buff, a [Lone Warrior's Energy Form] buff, and a single skill that has never been upgraded called [First Instinct].

Memories of many other Exile zones the Goblin King owned sift through my mind as we run forward. No other zones in the Hollow District's outer ring ever had a 3rd Class Lord like her in them.

On top of that, none of my new memories, nor my experience sparring with her over the last few days, ever showed me her energy form or skill in use.

I believe there is far more to this hobgoblin than I first assumed, but I decide to push off bringing it up once we're not in such a time crunch.

I yell out after climbing a large hill of black rocks.

"Alright, this is the edge of the neutral path separating the Hollow District and the Middle Ring. We can't afford to go around the long way, but the next two zones should be clear, their lords have most likely already started making their way back to the access point. We can take a shortcut and run right through them."

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With Ether powering our footsteps, Ava and I make great time rushing through the two empty zones that make up the first portion of the middle ring.

Each plot ranges from 5 to 25 kilometers wide, and the neutral pathways between zones are a few hundred meters thick at most.

Within the two zones we cut through, many exiled lords with [0]s on their palms show up in my senses as they continue to work, mining out pits of stones just like back in the Hollow District.

From my new rush of memories, I can calculate these plot prices and know many of the workers here have exile contracts that need thousands of Ether to be fulfilled over similarly long thousand plus year contracts.

Many of the workers in these mines come from 3rd Class worlds, just like Ava. She should certainly be placed in a contract like this but was stationed out in the Hollow District for some reason.

As we pass by, many don't even look our way; we're using up lots of Ether to speed through, and those who do look at us quickly lower their gazes to avoid offending a Lord like myself with over 100 worlds.

When we get to the next neutral checkpoint in my senses, we follow the curving pathways around a zone that my past memories tell me is always occupied by a strong 2nd Class Orc Lord.

It is far stronger than the Goblin King I just fought, and the pathway we're on is basically a straight shot to the next empty plot in my mind's eye.

Ava keeps up with me, as still keeping my barrier closed doesn't allow me to use my divine energy or mana to push myself faster.

On top of that, she's now benefiting from the 500% all-stat buffs that linking a 3rd Class world to one's avatar grants.

In the Goblin King's memories, I can see that 5th Class Worlds granted a 50% buff, 4th granted a 100% buff, and the single 2nd Class World it held granted a 2500% buff to all stats.

There are stacking limits depending on the Avatar granted to the Lord. Basic Avatars can only grant 25 planet buffs per Lord, and the High Grade Avatar the Goblin King had allowed up to 100 planet buffs.

No memories of what 1st Class worlds grant in stat buffs or the limits of a Premium Avatar come to mind, but it makes my mind spin with many questions as we continue our travels.

I keep quiet, processing all these thoughts, and my mind eventually calms down quite a bit. One thing doesn't add up, and I decide to turn to Ava and ask.

"I couldn't help but notice... most of the 3rd Class Lords we've passed don't have true cores. How did you manage to awaken yours?"

Words from Ember and the Lich King come to mind, as before I awakened mine, they all said a similar thing: that if I were to compress my core before reaching a green core, it would bring me far more power later on.

From what I've seen down here, the only two beings I've seen achieve a True Core are Ava and the Goblin King. It took hundreds of years and the cumulative resources of an entire 2nd Class World for it to achieve this.

Ava replies as I continue to theorize in my head.

"Long story short, an ancient Goblin King descended from the upper realm to die on my world in peace, most likely millions of years ago. They left their inheritance deep beneath the crust of our world. My unique skill happened to point me in the direction of its tomb, with enough Divine Energy for me to almost saturate my True Core in less than 30 years. The next strongest hobgoblin on my planet was lucky to awaken their red core in 300 years with the natural divine energy in our Star Sector."

She grins and turns to me with an eyebrow raised.

"What about you? A third-class human with a True Core? There must be something special about your world... there's no reason a demon would waste one of those ascension artifacts on it otherwise."

I think about her words carefully and realize I've actually succeeded in a similar way.

Celia's pocket world was an inheritance of sorts, as for decades it allowed many humans to extract enough divine energy to compress many True Cores.

In the end, it actually gave us enough power to stop the world from being taken by demons.

I nod and reply.

"A similar thing happened to me. A higher life form left behind enough divine energy for me to ascend..."

I pause as we make it to the edge of the next abandoned zone.

"First Instinct, right? That's the name of your skill. What does it do?"

Ava shrugs, not surprised I know its name at all, and looks off into the green mist in front of us.

"I still don't know. Sometimes I feel it helps me with battles, boosting my reflexes. Other times, I believe it allows me to seek out high levels of energy, like an improved mana

sense. It is always active, like a passive skill, but I can pour mana into it to increase its range. There is never a decisive answer, only a warm instinctual feeling..."

I look at her with a curious and confused gaze.

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When I look at her skill within my internal interface, there are no details that tell what this skill really does either. I can't confirm or deny anything she's telling me, and this mystery interests me very much as she continues.

"Look. It's... hard to explain. I activate it when I have hard decisions to make, or am in a life-or-death scenario. It's never proved to lead me astray."

She chuckles. "Though, I was having my doubts when I chose to willingly be an Exile in the Hollow District instead of a 400-year contract in the Middle Ring. Things tend to work out..."

My gaze tightens with skepticism. A battle instinct or large energy sensory field that helped her find an inheritance tomb makes sense. However, deciding to work until she dies instead of picking a shorter contract term on a whim sounds insane. I decide to look back into the mist and point, not wanting to challenge a string of coincidences I can't prove. If she believes it to be so, that is fine.

"Come on, let's move."

We speed-run through three more zones, making it 50 kilometers deeper into the Middle Ring, closer to the Citadel.

Hundreds of past treks to and from the Citadel of the Goblin King rush through the back of my mind; and its speed doubles mine with ease.

If, in our battle, it had decided to only dodge and use its overwhelming strength and speed to its advantage, it could have easily gotten away.

Ether alone in my footsteps isn't going to be enough to make it.

I stop once we get to the edge of another abandoned zone, closing my eyes and trying to make a mental map, but many of these areas this far away from the Goblin King's plots are unknown to me—mostly unexplored territory.

They just appear as black foggy blotches in my mind's mental map.

It is impossible to know if running through them will result in the same success as the last five empty zones or if there will be waiting lords mad that we're trespassing, like the Orc's plot I avoided before.

When my eyes open, I shake my head and whisper under my breath, "We have to take the risk. I'm not spending another full month down here..."

I run forward instead of taking the long way around on the neutral path, and Ava follows without any hesitation.

Minutes pass, and we make it through, just like any other abandoned zone; and my confidence to do so again rises, so we run straight through the next mystery plot without stopping for a second.

Over half an hour passes, and we run through half a dozen more mystery plots with no problem.

Many of them I shouldn't even know if the Lord Owners are present, as we don't even run into any workers on a few of them.

However, I find myself in the dead center of a mystery plot, with no known zones on all sides, and hear a loud resounding yell come from the mist in front of me.

"What zone do you come from? State your name! Who dares step on my land?"

The voice is deep and confident, and I sift through all of the new voices that the Goblin King has dealt with down here in the mines and even up above in the Citadel, but none come to mind.

This is an unknown Lord, with an unknown strength, and I don't know at all if they're territorial or if this is merely one of the exiles that works on this plot. So, I reply in a calm tone, not wanting to cause any more trouble than necessary.

"We're just off to the Access Point before it closes, no other reason. We'll leave your plot at once—"

Before my words even cut off, I see three massive crescents of Ether-infused energy cutting through the eerie mist in front of us, curving around to close in directly on me.

I grit my teeth while channeling Ether into my hands, then jump forward to block the two crescents as they intersect.

A bright explosion of white light, green divine threads, and crystal-clear mana-infused water magic bursts all around me.

The brunt of the blow is stopped by my barrier, but the intensity of Ether that ripples through me is near the same attacking force as the Goblin King's axe, and it was a long-range attack.

I fall back to the ground, landing on my feet, and Ava lifts her hammer in defiance behind me, but I yell out again in a far more stern tone this time.

"We're seriously not here to fight! I'll transfer you some Ether for the trouble if that's what you want. We're going to be late for the Access Point, I don't want to make an enemy out of you—"

A loud roar comes back, and a deep yell follows.

"I do not care for your excuses, and I do not want your Ether! This disrespect will not be tolerated. You will die for stepping onto my plot! Thieves!"

This is followed by echoing footsteps, and the figure of a humanoid creature, over 7 meters tall, comes our way.

As its body comes into even more focus, I begin to see a long tail trailing behind it and thick scales covering its body.

Despite the green threads vibrating out from it, the shapes all shimmer with a shade of dark blue, and its sharp eyes match this color.

My gaze shifts to its hands and feet, which are covered in black armor, same as its middle body covering its vitals.

However, as this Blue-Scaled Lizardman lets out another roar, I watch the black-armored gauntlet around its right three-clawed hand glow with Ether, mana, and divine energy, telling me this is certainly a Soul Weapon user we're dealing with. The thick gauntlets cover up its world token, so I can't see how many worlds this being has, if any at all...

It charges forward much faster than either Ava or I could run on our way over, so I know I'll have to engage.

I charge up my fists, channeling the same mental energy that cooked the Goblin King's mind in seconds, and yell even louder as it lets out another three energy blades from its claws.

"Last chance! Back down, or I'm not holding back."

I sense Ava already moving her stance behind me to dodge the impact of these slashes, so I just allow all three to hit me across the body point-blank, taking the brunt of the blow while focusing on charging my fists with even more compact Ether.

It feels much easier, faster, and second nature to separate the brighter, tougher physical Ether from the compact and compressed translucent Ether that comes from deep within my mind.

The charging Lizardman doesn't seem to register anything I'm doing as it charges up its other gauntlet and lets out another three water-based Ether blades my way.

I allow them to hit my purple barrier, and it does nothing to me but fill my body with a light tingling sensation.

As the beast gets within striking distance of me, I shake my head and jump upward.

While punching the blue-scaled lizard in the chest, I yell at it again.

"I told you to stand down!"

Then, I release a concentrated mental attack that flows right through its armor and permeates its avatar's instant defenses with ease.

The Lizard's eyes roll to the back of its head, and it stops its roars and furious charging instantly while falling backward with me standing on its body.

My first thought is that this is all a waste of time and energy. While I'm in the wrong for trespassing into its plot, it could have just let us leave. This makes me think twice about killing my partially innocent attacker.

Though, before I can even decide whether or not to continue running and spare this mindless beast's life, I hear even more rumbling footsteps coming from all around us.

My gaze locks eyes with Ava as I jump off the lizard's chest and stand beside her holding her bright white hammer. Then, we stand back to back to scan the rolling hills and deep mining pits of black stones, preparing for whatever this rhythmic rumbling coming our way is.

Very soon after, we find out exactly what these footsteps and growing shadows are. Over one hundred identical blue scaled lizardmen figures emerge from the fog and move in on us from all sides.

Chapter 714

No more voices ring out; only footsteps and hot Ether-imbued auras emerge from the green fog around us.

The pull in my Ether Senses tells me all the approaching Lizardmen have Ether strength similar to the one I just incapacitated in a single attack.

However, it most likely means these are all just miners, and their plot Lord is not present.

I try to sift through more of the Goblin King's memories as the hordes of lizards come out of the fog in full clarity.

Every single one of them has the exact same deep blue scales as the one lying unconscious nearby; however, many of them carry varying Soul Weapons.

I spot swords, shields, clubs, axes, daggers, hammers, and strange weapons I've never seen before.

All of them simultaneously glow with a bright white Ether radiance, and I draw a blank in my memories.

This patch of the middle ring is still a complete mystery to me.

The Goblin King always trekked many zones away from this one. All the surrounding zones from here until reaching the central peak—where the land actually slants upward to form a mountain—are unknowns.

Even conversations I recall with the merchants and slave traders in the black market never mentioned renting out these plots. They're all certainly privately owned...

I snap myself back to reality to deal with the situation at hand. It doesn't matter who owns this plot—I just need to make my way through.

I call out again, "I'm not here to make a mess. I just want to leave and make it to the access point in time..."

My gaze scans over everyone, and not a single one of them flinches.

I know that no matter how many physical attacks I take, my purple barrier can protect me.

However, the tightly gripped hammer in Ava's grasp, less than ten meters away from me, doesn't put me at ease.

There is no way to protect her with enemies coming from all sides, and her avatar limits the amount of Ether she can use in a single attack. Even if I gave her half of my stores right now, it wouldn't make a difference.

Transferring some of my base stats to her might give her a slight edge, but it would drastically decrease my own fighting ability and healing speed in case I'm injured. Only one possibility comes to mind.

I make the split decision to use my internal Rising Emperor's domain interface to share my mythic-grade All-Seeing Eye with her and transmit quick instructions on how to upgrade her skill.

It will drastically increase her reflexes—and, hopefully, a little luck. There isn't much more I can do other than yell through our link while I run forward.

"Stay near their fallen miner. I doubt they'll go all out and risk killing a fellow Lizardman."

I watch her skill proficiency tick up to Special Grade, then Legendary Grade, and finally Mythic Grade as her eyes widen and she steps backward toward the sleeping Lizardman.

My fists burn hot with condensed mental Ether, and my footsteps trail with bright physical Ether streams.

Even now, it's become easier to tap into this power than it was moments ago.

I just visualize and manifest the same feeling as I did in my last two battles and challenge the marching blue-scaled lizards without fear.

Their eyes show no fear at all either, and when I run far enough away from their fallen miner, a barrage of energy slashes comes flying my way.

—

I'm hit from every side, but the attacks aren't much more powerful than the ones I received head-on before.

Over a dozen energy slashes dissipate, and their Ether invades my body. But it is nothing more than hot tingles that are instinctively healed by the time I take my next step.

A smile grows on my face as the marching Lizardmen send more attacks my way, and they do little to no damage while I quickly close the gap.

However, I notice that some of their attacks are not water-based.

I sense wind blades striking me, concentrated crescents of fire, and even the rare attack made of mana-summoned stone. While it's unexpected, it isn't something I need to ponder much.

With every attack powered by Ether, being the only substance that can penetrate my defensive barrier, the makeup of the mana base doesn't matter to me at all.

I jump upward to collide with a dual-sword-wielding Lizardman and punch its blade, not even aiming for its body.

The impact is more than enough to send waves of my condensed Ether through its Soul Weapons, attacking its psyche with a horrible shock.

I gauge their strength to be similar to the Goblin King's and only send enough deadly Ether into their minds to knock them out, not kill them.

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They are in the right here, protecting their land from a random rogue Lord trespassing on their territory.

Even if I did kill them, I would make another enemy out of an even stronger Lord ruling over all of them.

This is my thought process as I turn midair to strike another Lizardman's incoming spear while the sword wielder I just clashed with falls backward unconscious, staring blankly.

As my fist collides with the spear's tip, another one falls, and I land on the ground, changing my fists to turn toward the next one.

I waste no time, running in jagged patterns, using condensed mental attacks one after another on the Lizardmen aiming to kill me without fear or remorse.

They see their fellow warriors falling left and right, but dive toward me to try and land attacks like loyal soldiers.

My proficiency with my attacks grows faster and more concentrated with every punch I throw.

I land hits on the sides of some lizards' armor, collide with others' weapons, and strike bare scales on others.

Each attack I throw tones down my Ether consumption because my proficiency rises. If I punch too hard, I'll easily fry these monsters' minds permanently.

Dozens of warriors fall, but from the depths of the fog on the horizon, I begin to see more shadowy outlines of another row of Lizardmen joining the battle.

While I could fight here all day, that's part of the issue...

I want to get past this zone and make it to the central peak, yet I don't know exactly how far I must travel or how many soldiers will appear.

At this very thought, while I punch a Lizardman out cold and land on my feet, I see its palm tightly grasping its weighted longsword and notice an unexpected [1] on its world token.

I lunge forward, blocking an axe swinging down on me while stopping a dagger user from the other side, both with fists full of condensed mental Ether.

They fall unconscious the moment they collide with me, and I pay far more attention to their palms, noticing the same [1] on each of them.

I run forward again, receiving over fifty slashes across my body. Some are strong enough to throw off my footing, but none are strong enough to do any real damage. I knock out another fourteen Lizardmen. Every single one of them has a [1] on their world token, and I realize things here might not be the same as every other exile plot I've seen before.

I look back and spot Ava, standing atop the first Lizardman I knocked out.

Her glowing white hammer is raised above its head, and about two dozen Lizardmen surround her with their weapons raised as well. She's using their fellow man's life as insurance, and they're at a standstill.

A one-against-twenty-four standoff, when all of these Lords have at least Second-Class strength, would not have gone in her favor no matter what she tried. Her tactic worked out well to stall, but it won't last forever.

However, it seems like the more I fight, the more Lizardmen gather around me.

The next line of blue-scaled lizards has now emerged from the thick green fog, essentially replacing the fallen soldiers I've taken out over the last minute.

"Not good... We're going to miss the access point closing at this rate..." I whisper under my breath, surrounded by over a hundred Lizardmen converging on all sides.

Even more emerge from the green fog on the other side of the battlefield, and the two dozen surrounding Ava double in numbers quickly, with far more troops approaching.

Every single one of them is a Lord with a world of their own, and the odds of both of us making it out in one piece drastically fall.

I try to wrack my brain for more ideas as the seconds pass and more Lizardmen fall around me. When I think things couldn't get any worse, I spot a far larger problem.

Above, a few hundred meters in the air, just high enough for my vision to see its shadow, the outline of a massive creature flaps its wings overhead.

My eyes widen as the only thing I can see is a glowing [1426] in the sky as it circles above us, watching its underlings overwhelm their prey.

—

Meanwhile, even higher above the clouds in the Citadel, a meeting is taking place on the top-floor office of the World Trading Palace.

Torvak answers two calls incoming from his system interface, linking it to the room's conference feature; two large holograms stare back at him and Ember.

One of the holograms has a user tag reading [Asic793], and the massive nine-meter-tall High Orc below the tag gives a professional smile as he sees his company.

"Congratulations on your matches. I believe this is a secure channel, correct?"

Ember recognizes the face of another First-Class Lord he's done business with in the past, but Torvak replies with a thin smile.

"It should be secure, but a trip to a central meeting point to discuss real business would be far wiser. In theory, while using linked Avatars, any of our conversations can be tapped."

The High Orc grunts and nods, looking over at the second hologram in the room with the user tag [Zashen1005].

It belongs to a towering twelve-meter-tall Berserker Giant King with terrifying sharpened teeth, green eyes, and two massive longswords in its grip. The swords are raised in the air as it joins the conversation.

"Oh, come on, who cares if they hear us! You've already basically declared war on the Demons. We're going to have to fight them no matter what we say."

Ember laughs and speaks.

"Zash, you haven't changed a bit..."

Ember grins with his arms crossed and looks up at the massive hologram. The Berserker Giant lets out a laugh of his own.

"No one calls me that but..." His eyes widen as he realizes who this red haired human really is. "No way... you're really back?!"

Ember nods.

"Indeed. You think Torvak would provoke the Demons like this without a plan? And I'm Ember from now on. Ember the Human."

The Berserker Giant swings its swords about and even throws one spinning up into the air so high that it disappears from the hologram's view.

Asic, the High Orc, looks far more serious as he replies.

"It's good to see you back. Times have changed up here. I've managed to stay alive and keep a large amount of my First-Class Worlds safe, but that's only natural for us—the Warlords of the Ellipsia Citadel. Many of my lower-class races have had to resort to selling illegal Avatars and black-market deeds just to get by."

Torvak nods slowly and replies.

"Yes, I've brought Ember up to speed. He has seen my books and knows of the Demons' suppression."

Zashen catches his sword mid-air and jumps in.

"I've also managed to hold a good amount of my 1st Class Worlds. Most of my newly ascended race does alright too. We make enough in the Grand Citadel's yearly fighting tournaments to get by. And... for a side business, many of the First- and Second-Class Demons use us as their sparring puppets until our avatars break. We're the only race strong enough to stand up to their raw strength and speed."

Ember nods along and finally replies.

"Good. I studied the books and spent a few days in the Volterra District listening in on the general concerns of citizens. While it looks as though this Citadel is still booming on the outside to visitors, all it would take is one more Noble Demon to show up, and the power balance would tilt entirely in their favor..."

He pauses, glancing over at Torvak's messages and noticing one still completely left in the dark, continuing his thoughts after a few seconds. Search the * website to access chapters of novels early and in the highest quality.

"Before I explain what I'd like from you, I have one question. The Wyverns. I didn't expect them to call in after a single stunt, and of course, without confirmation that I'm truly here... but I'm curious. Where have they gone? Not a soul spoke their names in the streets these past three days. It's as if they've disappeared from the Upper Realm."

Chapter 715

The massive shadowy figure flapping its wings in the clouds above continues to circle the battlefield, watching its subordinates surround and overwhelm us.

I'm not necessarily in any real danger; however, in my current state, I can't fly to get away from these seemingly endless hordes of blue-scaled lizards.

The best I can manage is a few steps into the air, and even then, the monsters surrounding me are far faster, so running wouldn't solve my issues.

I'm able to easily knock out every creature I hit. Whether that's making contact with their weapons or scales, every collision adds another fallen lizardman to the ground and simultaneously increases my Ether proficiency by a small amount.

While none of the hits I'm receiving help me train my healing or make any massive leaps in progress that shock my system, I'm still growing stronger.

Yet, out of the corner of my eye, I watch the lizardmen surround Ava, and one even throws an attack despite Ava threatening to drop her hammer on their fallen lord's head.

It is a surprise attack—a white wind crescent from a curved blade aimed at her back.

The Ether within it is strong, but I've come to realize while digesting the Goblin King's memories that my Ether senses are quite unique and fine tuned.

Those with normal avatars can't sense the heat coming their way instinctively, so my eyes widen when I see Ava jump up in the air to start the momentum of a backflip, throwing her hammer forward, missing the fallen lizardman's head beneath her by less than a meter.

Her aim was not to injure or even scare the lizards around her; it was to create extra momentum to throw herself upward on a gut instinct.

The white energy blade from behind skims under her feet by millimeters, then curves upward to avoid the hordes of lizardmen nearby.

While I punch three more lizardmen out cold and start running Ava's way, I watch over three dozen weapons heat up with Ether, divine energy, and mana, preparing their attacks to hit the easy target in the sky.

I'm equally shocked at her ability to dodge an attack from a being far stronger and faster than her, but simultaneously spare the lizardman's life below her while jumping up in the air with a smile on her face.

My punches speed up, and I take out ten more enemies, but I'm still over 100 meters away when she reaches the peak of her jump into the air. She is upside down gracefully finishing her whole flip, rising above the sea of lizardmen from my point of view.

The looming [1426] glowing in green circling above us dives downward, and its wings grow larger and larger in my vision.

Its pointed head, with sharp blue and black eyes, pierces out from the fog, and its wide scaled blue wings flap again as it swoops down to reveal its enormous body, stretching over double the distance between myself and Ava, covering the entire battlefield with an eerie shadow.

Right before the lizardmen below release their attack, its deep and wise-sounding voice echoes through the sea of Lords.

"Halt your attacks."

Ava falls to the rocky ground in the center of all the lizardmen as they grip their weapons but don't follow through on their attacks.

Even the lizards around me step back, uncharge their weapons, and lower their heads.

The massive creature above flies all the way overhead, and I see its clawed legs and tail trailing behind its body.

"A Blue Wyvern..." I whisper under my breath, recognizing this creature from a special floor on a labyrinth I farmed long ago.

However, this creature that is flying over me now is hundreds of meters long, far larger than any simulated wyverns I've faced. Along with that, no memories from the Goblin King ever mentioned the existence of wyverns at all... r

As these thoughts race through my mind, it continues to circle around us, and the lizardmen all back away, receding like shadowy outlines in the mist. Some of them remain visible, while others are now just out of sight.

I run over to Ava, through the dozens of lizardmen I knocked out during their attack.

She is completely fine, grabbing her hammer from the ground as I come near, and the massive wyvern circles around again to land in front of us with a resounding thud.

Its taloned feet grip deep into the loose rocky ground, one of them glowing with its world token. It brings its wings inward, making its body look far smaller once it's settled in.

The creature stares down at us with a curious gaze, and a bright orb of white translucent light erupts from its forehead.

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At first, I try to put up defenses, but it expands extremely quickly—far too fast to react to—and by the time I activate my Ether defenses, the ball has already washed through the entire battlefield, then dissipates into the air like it was never even there.

The wyvern's mouth opens again, and I hear its low and calculated voice speak once more.

"Who are you? A human with the abilities of an Elder Lord before this era... It is an impossible feat; your race cannot even reach a lifespan of 1,000 years in the higher zones."

Its sharp eyes shift and focus as if it's looking through me; yet I don't feel any hostility coming off this massive creature.

It looks like it wants to ask more questions but waits in silence, ready for me to answer.

Seconds pass, and I feel Ava moving closer to me, very confused at this turn of events and far more scared of what will happen next than I am.

This is because all of the lizardmen that litter the battlefield around us begin to wake up, stand to their feet in a groggy manner, and then bow to the wyvern.

I'm positive the attacks I sent into them should have knocked them out for hours, if not days, yet after being consumed by that pulse of Ether from the wyvern, they all are miraculously healed.

It reminds me of how Ember sometimes heals, so I don't waste any more time and reply.

"I could ask the same thing to you... That was not an avatar ability."

In the same moment, I close my eyes, trying not to forget the imagery I just witnessed, and ball up Ether that I would normally use to probe my surroundings, focusing it in a small orb within my consciousness.

Then, I release it, showing a much smaller ball of white light erupt from my mind and cover the battlefield.

It certainly isn't as strong as the wyvern's, and is missing the healing properties it infused. However, I manage to send a pulse of Ether perception out over 500 meters in all directions, increasing my senses by over two times and heightening its depth by a large degree.

I sense dozens of 4th Class Ether stones in the rocks around and over 250 lizardmen within my immediate perception.

Their Ether glows hot in my senses as bright as day; however, it is exactly the same in every one of them.

Systematic, machine-like, all stored like identical data in the avatars they wear.

My senses even pulse through Ava, as she's the closest to me, and I sense all of the Ether stores within her avatar.

It is hot and strong, yet it is all in its physical base form, like the basic attacking and blocking maneuvers.

None of the lizardmen or Ava have any condensed, translucent mental Ether within their bodies. In fact, they don't have any Ether within their true beings at all. It all floats within this artifact that is here in place of their bodies and isn't even theirs to begin with. It's like a piece of gear they're temporarily using, giving them quick fixes of power but ultimately stunting their long-term growth.

My mind is being blown at this realization while simultaneously looking into the massive wyvern's being that glows with an immense amount of both physical and mental Ether. It has an avatar, but I can tell there is a great separation between its true mind and the mana and divine energy that tethers it to this physical plane.

I can't see too deeply, as I only let out a single pulse of perception, and the feedback I get is far too bright and convoluted. It looks similar to the first time I looked into Ember's body within the throne while using my Ether senses for the first time.

The wyvern's eyes shift again, and it speaks in the same calm tone.

"We both may have secrets to hide, but I must know one thing. Are you aligned with the Demons?"

My heart rate speeds up at this question, but I reply quite quickly and honestly.

"Considering I had to kill one that was trying to take over my world to get here, and they kicked me out of their citadel before I even stepped foot on it, I'd say we're not on good terms."

The wyvern doesn't move, but its gaze stays locked on us as it thinks over my words.

We're at quite the stalemate here. Both of us know that this wyvern is stronger physically, but it witnessed me take its underlings' attacks head-on without flinching or receiving a scratch, and the probing it did earlier most likely revealed the fact that I have a Demon Lord's Core in my chest.

Given the memories from the Goblin King about the demons' overwhelming rule of the citadel above us, I can infer this creature doesn't want to risk offending them even if there is a small chance I'm one of their servants.

However, there is much that I don't know. No memories of these so-called Elder Lords before this era come to mind, as the Goblin King must not have been old enough to hear of this name; it never even knew wyverns existed.

I try to take advantage of this gap in knowledge while respecting its power.

"We do not want any trouble. I had no knowledge that you owned these plots. My partner and I were just trying to make it to the access point before it closed—and well, that may not be possible now, but we don't want to fight."

The wyvern doesn't take as long as it usually does to reply.

"I thank you for sparing the lives of my subjects. However, I do not believe your words, and I cannot let you leave my land. A human like you with such power logically should not exist. My belief is you are a demon in disguise, and you have violated the terms of our agreement."

Its eyes focus more, and I start to see Ether glow around its body. It speaks again.

"I have intel that a new Noble Demon is arriving this month. It is not impossible that this is a plot to plant the seeds of our extinction once and for all. So, I will ask you to prove you are truly against them, or you shall never leave this plot alive."

—

Simultaneously, above, in the meeting of Elder Warlords of the Ellipsia Citadel, eyes widen after Ember's question about the wyverns that have gone missing.

No one replies for a full ten seconds.

Even Torvak, beside him in the room, starts to sweat. However, as no one else wants to speak, he is the one who breaks the silence.

"The Vermillion Family... 12,000 years ago... its family head made its footing to be declared the 5th Great Family by exterminating the Wyvern Clan. They were the ones with control of the Grand Citadel after all. It's only natural their remaining troops went into hiding."

The room goes silent, and Asic, the High Orc, adds to Torvak's point with a saddened nod.

"I haven't received a transmission from them in over 10,000 years. Last I heard, the last Red Wyvern was publicly executed in the Grand Citadel 6,000 years back."

The Berserker Giant King still keeps its battle-hungry grin, but undertones of anger can be heard as it swings its blades in the hologram and replies to Asic.

"I got to fight a Bronze Wyvern 8,000 years back in the battle tournament; but yeah, they're as good as gone. I'm sure many are in hiding still, but the Citadel surveillance would surely pick up on their presence the moment they showed themselves in public..."

Ember stays silent for a moment after this information comes to light, but behind his eyes, an even mix of fury and excitement stirs. Finally, all of the puzzle pieces of this zone of this upper realm's fall from its former grace fit together in his mind.

Chapter 716

The Wyvern's gaze doesn't move off of us, and continues to become more skeptical as I try to explain why I'm here.

"I assure you, I am not aligned with the Demons. This agreement you've made with them is not knowledge that I have..."

The massive, blue-scaled monster stares with an unchanged gaze, but I feel the Ether aura around it begin to grow hotter; as it already said, it didn't believe me and wants concrete proof.

The ground beneath its taloned feet starts to vibrate, and I think through all the possible ways I could convince this random creature I'm not aligned with the Demons. However, its logic is quite sound...

From all the knowledge I've already gained from the Goblin King, humans cannot grow much further than goblins; even the King would have trouble facing one of the scaled lizards I was facing with ease moments ago.

The dense Demon's Core in my chest doesn't help my position at all, but I reply with the truth.

"That noble Demon you speak of... The Vermilion Family's next Lord... right? I killed him to protect my world. I fell down to the Exile Zones by accident. It is merely a coincidence we've met. I trespassed to try and make it up to the Citadel."

The Wyvern's gaze finally changes, but it is not in the way I would have hoped... Its growing Ether aura increases in intensity, and it yells back.

"A human... killing a Noble Demon... Do you take me as a fool?!"

The ground shakes, and many piles of black rocks all around us begin toppling over.

The massive monster doesn't move; it still sits in place staring down at us, waiting for an explanation. However, there is none to give.

I contemplate opening up a telepathy channel with Ember, but the distance from here to the Citadel is still thousands of kilometers. I need to diffuse this situation myself.

"I'll prove it by killing the Vermilion Family Head!" Memories from Drako's life rush through my mind, and I see the two conversations he had with the family head on the Demon's homeworld in the Lower Realm.

It was stated that once he made it to the Upper Realm, clear instructions on his family duties, and the opportunity to meet the Royal Family head would become available.

It is safe to say the Demons that attempted to enslave my homeworld are a common enemy to this Blue Wyvern, so the claim I yell isn't out of the realm of possibilities.

Its eyes widen, and the shaking ground paired with the expansion of its aura stops all of a sudden.

"It is possible you're serious... Would a spy sent down here even dare to say such a thing?"

Its tone turns to ponder my words, and I stare up at the massive being for over ten seconds as it thinks.

The tension in the air doesn't break until the Wyvern stretches out its wings, and a thin smile appears on its long face.

"I do not believe your words, but I do think your reason for being here is far more complicated than I've made it out to be. I have a test for you. Complete it, and you'll make it out of here alive while simultaneously getting to the access point before it closes."

A rush of relief washes through me as the Wyvern flaps its wings, then turns its body to whip its long blue tail around, moving hundreds of meters in the blink of an eye before crashing down in front of me.

The movement was so fast I couldn't even see it until it already finished. It covered its scales in dense white Ether that feels searing hot just looking at it for too long.

The shielding that covers its scales moves up its tail and covers its entire back as it speaks again.

"Both of you, climb on. I will take you to the Central Peak. If you are truly enemies of the Demons, and have such ambitions to kill the Vermillion Family head, then taking out the Exile Guardian first shouldn't be a problem, right?"

Ava is frozen in confusion. Everything that has happened in the last few minutes makes no sense at all.

Considering she has little knowledge of the Citadel other than the basic rules and regulations transmitted from Avatars and her brief stay above the clouds when being processed before her contract date began.

I am in a similar state. While the Goblin King has seen the Guardian before, it was in the Neutral Zones and always from a great distance. Plus, with no Ether senses active, all I know is its race.

The imagery of a shadowy cyclops figure that roams the large mountain of Ether stones below the power plant comes to mind, but I don't know anything other than that.

It doesn't trust me, and its words make it sound like it doesn't believe my story about killing a noble demon. However, from its shift in tone, it sounds like it is trying to make the best out of a strange situation.

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While I'm certain it's trying to take advantage of me in some way, in some ways, I'm trying to do the same. So, I reply.

"Very well, point me to the enemy, and I will pass your test..."

I look at the curved tail that leads to the Wyvern's back and hesitate.

"I might be quite heavy..."

Its gaze tightens again as the bright white shielding covers its entire body. Then another pulse of Ether comes out from its forehead, rippling through both of us, focused solely on perception.

Then, its eyes widen.

"Your existence defies reality once again..."

Another wave of white Ether wraps its body again, and it nods.

"Your unique avatar should not be a problem..."

My eyes widen back, as I can't tell if it sees my true form or if it really thinks I have a special Avatar.

This being has unfathomable strength and wisdom, I decide not to question its words any further.

I just nod and take a few steps forward, but stop right before the edge of the Wyvern's tail and turn back to put out a hand to Ava.

"Come on, let's pass this test. If he wanted to kill us, we would already be dead."

I feel the activation of Ava's skill ripple through my Rising Emperor's Domain interface, and a second later, she steps forward with full confidence to grab my hand.

Both of us turn and step onto the Wyvern's tail and walk up it while the monster stretches its wings, preparing to fly.

As my footsteps move up its scales, concentrated Ether moves to match my movements, and it lifts its tail upward, withstanding the immense mass I carry with ease.

We make it to the middle of the monster's back, and it flaps its wings hard enough to bring us off the ground, trailing thick streams of divine energy, mana, and Ether behind as we begin moving in the same direction we were traveling before.

—

Flying right above the surface of the Exile Mines, less than 300 meters off the ground, I can still sense faint signatures of Lizardmen and hundreds of Fourth-Class Ether Stones flying by beneath us.

I try to visualize and pinpoint where we are heading in relation to the crude mental map I've pieced together from the Goblin King's memories, but this entire area of land in the Exile Zones is a complete unknown to me.

The only memories I have are of taking a long winding path around these zones, and my curiosity only grows the further in we fly.

Minutes pass, and our speed only increases, making me believe the stalling I've done fighting these past hours will probably be overcome. Entire plots of Exile Zones fly by beneath us, as Ava continues updating me through our internal telepathy link every time we pass through a barrier that is impossible for me to see.

The Wyvern stays silent, just flapping its wings and cycling dense Ether through its body; using up more stores with every flap of its wings than I've ever used up in my entire life.

I can't get a proper read on this mystical creature at all. As confused as it is about my existence, I'm equally confused about his. The wise, resounding voice breaks me out of my pondering after over half an hour passes.

"We should be nearing the edge of my claim soon. It borders the edge of the middle ring and the bottom of the Central Peak. My current avatar contract forbids me from leaving, so I must watch you complete my test from the sidelines."

I raise an eyebrow at its words, and simultaneously, the Wyvern's body tilts upward with its next wing flap, reacting to the shift in the ground's tilt.

Instead of flat mines with occasional pits, now we're flying up a steep incline that looks like it will never end.

Sounds of large amounts of stone moving hit my ears, along with the echoing vibrations of teeth grinding.

Loud thuds of footsteps fill my senses as well, along with grunts and screeches that vibrate through the air for all to hear.

An eerie cold, demonic presence radiates from in front of us, but it doesn't feel like it's coming from a single point.

The Wyvern keeps flying upward, and a bright light shines through the dense green fog far away, high in the sky.

Soon after it appears, the Wyvern's flight path shifts to begin flying in circles rather than moving forward.

"We're on the backside of the mountain. While you could pass through the zone barrier and leave my claim without ever fulfilling my test, you will have the Wyverns as an eternal ally if you do. Your appearance has been the first that has truly piqued my interest since the fall of the grand Citadel."

It pauses as my mind fills in the imagery of what my imagination hears.

An enormous mountain of Ether stones and dead, drained black rocks is before us.

It is thousands of kilometers wide.

The bright, glowing white light in the fog is the underside of the power plant.

Once a month, many Lords dump their worlds into the incineration artifact, and many dead stones are dropped down here. It stays open for many hours, and a black-market business formed to create opportunities for Lords to use this as an access point to and from the Citadel.

While a gang of Orcs mostly runs the Exile contract business and covers the logistics of renting out plots to lower-class Lords, like the Goblin King for example, the true owners of this Citadel are still the Demons, and they want to be in control and get a piece of every profitable avenue they can.

The Central Peak, a wide mountain rich with Third-Class Ether Stones and above, is now covered in Green-Cored Ascended Demonic Beasts.

I've only seen similar creatures once before in my life. That was within the Abyss that surrounded the throne on my homeworld.

However, memories of a long-lost past of Drako Vermilion, on his homeworld when he was a young fledgling Demon, come to mind. He fought off Ascended Demonic Beasts that covered his planet.

The Goblin King has seen what covers this country sized mountain, and I can instantly visualize the enormous Demonic Sand Worms churning through the rocks at the base of the mountain. They are surrounding it to make sure no illegal intruders come from unauthorized zones, making these grinding sounds ring through the air.

The heavy thuds, grunts, and screeches are the Demonic Orcs and Ogres that circle the higher, well-carved-out paths of the mountain near the middle area. They overlook and guard the areas above where the Demonic Sand Worms make their nests, circling the peak and making sure all approaching Lords take the single neutral path on the opposite side of the mountain that we're on to make it to the access point.

Lastly, right beneath the blinding white light, standing at the top of the peak, a 250-meter-tall Ascended Demonic Cyclops holds a Soul Weapon with a ball on a chain, overlooking the entire peak as its guardian.

Creatures like this are mindless and feral, infected by darkness and only good for war and destruction. The Demons often only use Demonic Beasts for training in the Lower Realm.

However, exceptionally strong ones are forcefully ascended to the Upper Realm, as there is always a use for tools like this.

As this visual comes to life in my mind, the Wyvern descends and slows its circling until it comes to a thud on the ground right in front of the final zone barrier between its land and the Demon-Owned Central Peak.

"This is your test. If you are truly an enemy of the Demons, and have killed the Vermillion family demon as you claimed, I want you to fight your way to the top of this peak. Surely, killing another Noble Demonic being shouldn't be a problem for you."

Chapter 717

"Another Noble Demonic Being??" I reply as the slope of the wyvern's back makes it easy for Ava and me to slide down, coming to a thud on the slanted rocky ground beside the large monster.

It replies while looking up at the bright white light.

"That's right. The guardian of the Exile Zones comes from a Noble Grade World. No one but the Noble Demons can control it... Perfect to keep Lords that indulge in illegal business in line down here."

I consider its words and compare them to the knowledge I already have. As far as the Goblin King was aware, 2nd and 1st Class Lords rule the business world in the Citadel Above.

On top of that, certain races live longer and have far higher innate talent and strength. Long-lasting power in the Upper Realm leads to greater family backing as well, which can lead to the inheritance of higher-grade worlds to stack the buffs within one's avatar.

For the average Lords, having a few 3rd Class worlds is enough for most of the Citadel to show respect. However, once a Lord steps into the limelight of having even one 2nd Class world, the true pinnacle of power becomes far clearer.

The Ogres, High Orcs, and Berserker Giants are the highest private holders of 2nd and 1st Class worlds in the Citadel, their leaders being the only ones allowed to hold the 1st Class worlds.

The Goblin King's memories contain no knowledge of Noble Grade worlds ever being traded on any market. However, whispers of the Demon Citadel Lord coming from a Noble world did pass by whenever its subordinates roamed the streets.

My memories of Drako Vermillion coming from a Noble Grade world are quite foggy. It was only a fledgling demon for a few short years before it was taken from that hellscape. However, if this Wyvern says the Demonic Cyclops Guardian atop this peak comes from a Noble World, it must be a similar strength as Noble Demons...

—

As I stare off into the green fog, I know there is a neutral zone between the middle ring and central peak.

If Ava and I ran forward right now, we could walk around the mountain's base and attempt to go through the access point the legal way.

However, the Wyvern's ancient and wise gaze burns through my back.

If the Goblin King had no knowledge of what Noble Worlds even were, and also had never heard of Wyverns, my guess is this being that has brought me here could certainly be a powerful ally—if I accept its test.

On top of that... the many thuds of footsteps and churning teeth sound like more power just waiting to be absorbed in my ears. If this Wyvern hadn't saved us all this travel time by flying, I'd be disappointed to not have the chance to fight the Demonic Beasts before me.

From its confidence and its tone, it sounds as though it wants to leave this zone and even challenge the Exile Guardian itself—but it cannot for some reason.

I speak while taking a step forward.

"Very well. Noble or not, I'll kill that Cyclops if it means you'll be an ally. Enjoy the show."

Before my words even finish, I walk right through the zone barrier, and Ava follows behind with wide nervous eyes.

—

I stop walking about two dozen steps in, bend down, and pick up an Ether stone glowing with far more hot light than any I've seen before. I throw it to my side, where Ava follows.

"I owe you 10 Ether, right? How much is in that?"

Her eyebrows raise, and she scans the stone before the mechanical instant drainage command pulls all of the Ether from it.

"2.09... There was over two Ether in that... a 3rd Class Ether Stone... I've never seen one before."

I smirk while moving higher up the inclined slope across the neutral zone, looking left and right to see the ground littered with 5th and 4th Class stones. R◆

Every few dozen meters, another 3rd Class pops up, and I throw it to Ava.

By the time we cross the kilometer-wide neutral zone, and the movement of rocks and grinding of Demonic Sand Worms' teeth gets extremely close, I've thrown Ava over 20 3rd Class Ether Stones.

They range from 1 to 3 Low Quality Ether in each one, far surpassing the amount I owed her for buying that storage command.

"There! You're paid back, with interest. You'll need it."

She replies with a thanks, but finishes her words by telling me to stop, as I'm less than 10 meters away from the invisible zone barrier that restricts demon-owned land from the central peak.

I wait a few seconds for her to catch up.

While doing so, I replicate the pulse of perception the Wyvern showed me when we first met and send it out into the unknown to get a better feel for the sheer intensity of the Ether flowing through a Sand Worm rumbling by underground. I can't see it, but I can feel its power—certainly stronger than the Lizardmen in the plots we just left by a long shot.

Its Ether is consolidated in its Avatar, so I'm quite confident that given enough time, I could defeat it. It doesn't have advanced ether properties to be wary of; carefully placed mental attacks would most likely be enough to take them out if I fight them solo.

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However, the vibrations and echoing sounds that fill the air reinforce the fact that there is far more than just one opponent before me, and many of their capabilities are still a mystery to me.

I speak up as Ava walks up beside me.

"You know what you told me when I first landed here that stuck with me? We're Lords. We fight to protect our home worlds no matter the cost. Right?"

The hobgoblin's grip on her hammer is tight, and the nervous gaze she had when we stepped into this neutral zone has grown even more. Though, she resolutely stares forward, following my lead.

"Of course."

I stare up at the peak and continue as the ground shakes, a Sand Worm churning through the rocks extremely close by.

"We're granted abilities because they're meant to be used..."

She nods, keeping a straight face, while I picture her jumping above the Lizardmen far stronger than herself with no fear—then again, facing the Goblin King to save her fellow mining squad mates despite its overwhelming power.

"Right."

While I open up my Rising Emperor's Domain interface in my mind, I recall the days of training we went through—helping me assimilate to this foreign land when she was far stronger than me but helped me surpass her with ease.

I grant Ava a slot as my 5th General and reply.

"Well, we have a long fight ahead of us. We might as well start off giving everything we've got."

Her eyes widen as a notification rings in her inner ear, and a new function of the buff on her status shifts to allow her to pull a maximum of 3% of the stats available on all of the residents of my many worlds.

I watch her Avatar burst with a bright green light and see the divine energy around us curving toward her. She only pulls a small fraction of the stats available. Without opening up my purple barrier, I can't feel the true extent of the power increase these stats she's taken has translated to. They are merely numbers on a screen, and to test out the power I've granted her, she's pulled less than 0.1%.

No words come back as a reply, but her face is now filled with awe and excitement instead of worry and unease.

"Come on, I wouldn't have accepted this test if I didn't think we had a chance of passing it. Let's kill some Demonic Beasts," I say while walking forward through the zone barrier into the territory of the Central Peak.

Ava doesn't hesitate to walk by my side, glowing brighter and brighter with a visible green aura.

—

Once we both pass through, the constant grinding of teeth and moving stones halts.

I feel many presences shift and stop what they're doing; then hot Ether signatures begin rushing our way from above.

In response, Ava's brightly glowing Avatar rushes forward so fast it's hard for my eyes to track.

Trailing green light is left behind, and I follow upward while powering my footsteps with Ether, readying my fists with layers of condensed mental-infused attacks.

The upward slope has flat ledges and deep ravines, pits where worms must have traveled before. I wrap my way around them, making sure not to fall in the deep holes scattered about, and hear a guttural screech as streaks of flashing green light fills my foggy vision.

Ava's figure stepping through the air, flying while holding her bright white hammer, is all I see at first. But as soon as my vision catches up with my Ether senses, I see an enormous Demonic Sand Worm emerge from the fog, bursting out from the rocky ground.

It's covered in green divine energy and infused with dark purple demonic energy. Its teeth churn massive amounts of black stone, spinning in circles, with countless rows of them stacking back into its demonic maw.

It looks to be easily 25 meters wide, and it's impossible to tell how long just by sight, but my Ether senses track its Avatar back hundreds of meters.

Ava tests out her new, absurd rise in stats, jumping back and forth through the air while the Demonic Beast attempts to track her movements. But its speed falls short.

Her white hammer, filled with Ether, slams down on the monster's tough flesh all around its head as it emerges from the ground. However, automatic Avatar shielding appears in bright white blotches wherever it's hit.

Despite her increased speed, the system's reaction time protects this beast from injury.

Though, her boost in raw power still packs a blow, sending the monster's body flying backward from the pure force of the mana imbued attack.

This is the result of the screech I hear.

Though it only makes the beast angry. Ava flies forward, charging her hammer again, trying to get a feel for this new increase in stats.

I run along the ground, following as the earth shifts, erupting upward as more of the worm's body is pulled from the ground, creating avalanches down the side of the mountain.

When I see the Demonic Worm attacking back, Ava easily dodges mid-air. But two more enormous heads of Demonic Sand Worms emerge from the sides of the mountain to our left and right as well.

I can't even sense where their bodies end, nor can I pinpoint their world tokens. The dense fog still hides many mysteries.

Flashes of green light fill my vision as the two heads of the monsters dive down to get a piece of the action, attacking Ava. But she becomes faster and faster, pulling more stats as her senses and instincts grow more used to the shared power.

I run upward toward the scene, jumping onto large areas of stone that slide down the mountain behind me while I Ether-step upward, until I finally jump straight into the fight.

The rightmost Sand Worm senses me coming and plunges its open demonic maw right in my direction.

While I'm not quick enough to dodge, Ava is fast and strong enough to hit it across the side, making its flight path miss me and plunge into the rocks beside me. It gives me enough space to concentrate and land a punch on its hard outer layer of skin.

I get blowback from even touching its hide, as the automatic physical Ether defenses send shockwaves of pins and needles through my hand and up my arm. Additionally, I'm sent flying back into the air, but a grin is plastered across my face as I feel the mental attack leave my right fist and seep straight through its automated defenses, moving right toward its psyche.

I take advantage of being thrown in the air, twisting my body around as another enormous Sand Worm dives down my way.

Ava slams its neck with her hammer and gives me a shot at punching it with all the stored potential in my left fist, releasing another mental attack straight through its Avatar to attack its true mind.

Physically, again, I'm far weaker and am sent flying backward with vibrations of sharp physical Ether attacking my wrists, arms, and shoulders.

It feels far more intense than the direct blow I received from the Goblin King in the chest, shocking my physical senses and making both of my fists, which I used for these attacks, go completely numb with pins and needles as I flood the impacted areas with more Ether to heal them.

I'm sent hurtling into the hard mountainside while two of the worms let out ear-piercing, ground-shaking roars of agony as their minds are taken over by foreign Ether attacks with unique deadly properties they've never felt before.

Ava contends with the middle worm, pushing it back into the fog even further away from my senses.

I push myself up out of the crater I've been thrown into and raise my fists to create identical attacks, while the sharp tingles in my arms fade away.

The two Dark Purple Sand Worm heads wave back my way. Their minds may be burning with hot, searing pain, but as mindless war beasts, their fighting instincts still allow them to battle—even now, with fractured psyches.

I run forward. "Looks like these worms are pretty durable. Just one hit won't be enough..."

—

The Wyvern, watching from the base of the peak, doesn't change its expression. The ancient dark blue eyes stare up and reflect the white light of the power plant. Behind its gaze, it is reminiscing a past battle involving hundreds of its fellow Noble Wyvern that died in the Grand Citadel's Clan War many years ago.

Chapter 718

The two massive Demonic Sand Worms dive down toward me, and my fists glow with bright white light.

Behind their heads, zigzag patterns of flashing green mana and divine energy fill the sky as Ava slams the worm that followed her down to the ground while coming back to throw off the course of the worms heading my way.

The stats she's pulling from my many worlds are steadily rising as her avatar acclimates to the new power.

This is clear to see because instead of just changing the worm's general direction by a few meters like her first hits, they get pushed around helplessly, slamming into the sloped side of the mountain while screeching as they don't understand where or how they've been hit.

Their ether defenses block the physical damage, but Ava is moving too fast for them to see.

This disorientation gives me enough time to land two punches filled with condensed mental ether into one of the worms and use the force of the blowback of the automatic defenses to send me flying into the side of the other worm to land my first mental ether-infused kick.

While I'm sent flying again, I feel Ava pull even more power, creating a dense gravitational field around her, and channeling it all into her Soul Weapon to strike it across the side of the head as it tries to get up and strike us down the middle.

While I land on the ground with sharp ether pains all over my body, my eyes widen at the sight of Ava's hammer's impact.

Her ether imbued into the strike is quite basic, not greater than the amount she used in sparring with me.

However, the surrounding glow of dense green power is so great, it blows all of the dark black and purple demonic energy shielding away from the worm's tough hide, and the brutal impact force of this blow tears the entire worm out from the ground.

Hundreds of meters of black stone fly into the air along with the worm's entire body, and deep green cracks in its avatar vibrate outward from where it was hit. The raw force of this attack is too overwhelming for mere automatic ether defenses to fully contain.

On top of this development, the two Sand Worms I've struck with more high-powered mental attacks try to screech, but their minds give out before either of them can let out their entire cries.

Their heads go limp, twitching and shaking the ground, unable to even support their battle instincts.

In seconds, they've been overpowered.

Even though victory seems imminent, I don't hesitate to go back in with just as much vigor as my first strike.

The knocked-out head of the sand worm slowly slides down the mountain's side while I ether step on top of it and continue pummeling away at its thick hide.

The first two dozen punches are filled with mental attacks to make sure it's not waking up any time soon, and the next two dozen are to break through its automatic defenses.

There is some blowback at first, sending more sharp pains through my arms, but after a portion of its avatar is shattered, I'm tearing through its inner flesh and aiming straight for its divine core.

Violent waves of demonic energy and divine energy surge out from its body, but my purple barrier makes it feel like a warm breeze while I shatter its core.

I only have to keep my barrier open for a fraction of a second for all of its energy to flow in; I don't even stop what I'm doing, repeating the same ruthless process with the second downed sandworm, shattering its core and absorbing its power.

While I jump out from the second worm and look up toward the top of the peak, I watch Ava zipping through the sky, slowly shattering the avatar of the final worm.

It puts up a far greater and primal fight, as its mind is still intact while Ava battles it to the death.

My own mind begins to receive two pairs of memories as my Divine Core fills up with far more green threads, my Demon Lord's Core drains all of the strange black and purple energy from these beasts, my ether stores increase by over twice as much—surpassing 1000 according to my rough calculations—and on top of it all, system notifications ring in my ears.

Two new dark planets float in my mind's eye, and hundreds of years of mindless battles and killings flash by on both of these worlds as I watch the lives of these sand worms play out. RÃ

They're both small worlds, with a few hundred thousand demonic beasts on each of them. However, the pure boost in base stats per demonic beast that these new links of loyalty have activated is similar to the average citizen on the Goblin King's world. This is roughly equivalent to level 250 on average.

Stolen story; please report.

These were two Second-Class Demonic Sand Worms.

More and more memories flash by, as these worms lived quite similar lives in the desert regions of their worlds that were shrouded in the darkness of demonic energy. Similar to living within the abyss.

All of the monsters that show up as links of loyalty now in my system have their names tinted purple, and a complicated conversion of stat points takes place.

Some of the beasts on these worlds have never wielded mana, yet the buff they're forcefully acquiring is a mana-based one, and their strength in demonic energy is being automatically converted to a mana-leveling-based system before my eyes.

I cannot tell if this is a normal system feature that has to do with the world token, or if I'm actively mutating monsters and their systems as they come into contact with me. I've never looked into the status interfaces of demonic beasts before, nor have I ever had one swear loyalty to me.

Demons themselves are linked to the mana systems because they make contracts with dragons to use labyrinths. It is quite unclear to me whether their ability to level up was always an underlying ability, or if tapping into the mana-based system is not naturally possible without external help.

Sifting through the worms' memories doesn't give me any additional information on these ideas either.

No intelligent thoughts from these mindless war beasts are transferred to me, so it is quite easy for me to digest these memories and push them to the back of my mind.

I watch a bright [169] in green text glow on my palm while witnessing Ava deal an incredible finishing blow on the worm before me.

Its avatar is shattered in half, and Ava crushes its Divine Core with a single hammer swing before landing on the ground.

She raises her hammer in victory, and at the same time, I fall to my knees in order to fully process the new threads that have entered my body in the few fractions of a second I've opened my barrier.

The remains of all three worms dissolve away, leaving deep tunnels in the mountainside that cave in while Ava flies back down my way.

It only takes two minutes for me to fully heal and feel ready for another battle.

—

The Blue Wyvern's eyes below the mountain do not change their solemn state, but they do track Ava and me as we zigzag up the mountain to clear out as many Sand Worms as we can get our hands on.

My ether steps become far more powerful as I drain more and more ether from these worms, and my punches and kicks increase in strength as well.

By the time we've traveled almost 50 kilometers up the mountainside, my fists don't even feel pain as I strike the tough outer hide of these demonic creatures.

What took minutes of waiting for me to heal and process the divine threads in between battles before has now turned into seconds. I even open up small amounts of my barrier between fights to expose myself to more threads willingly in order to adapt faster.

Imbuing mana and divine energy into my strikes gives me even more damage than Ava's hits, shattering their Avatars in half from the pure raw force; but I'm not able to maintain these attacks for long. Doing so mid-battle, and having to adapt to the influx of threads from opening my barrier leaves me open to more attacks.

I stick with the basic Ether infused attacks for now.

A bright [203] shines on my hand as I've collected another 34 Second-Class Demonic Sand Worm worlds with nearly identical pasts.

I can piece the memories of these sand worms together and find that many of them are watched by demons, waiting for large-scale battles to break out on small planets with high demonic energy signatures.

Second-Class worlds of this size are not great places to nurture demons, but usually, there are monsters that show dominance over their worlds given enough time. Green rifts are placed before their planet's strongest warriors, and they're all brought here to guard this mountain.

None of the sand worms are more than 1,000 years old. They must not have lifespans that last very long. Some are even younger than 200 years. The churn rate on these guardian beasts must be fairly quick.

Every new world I gain, hundreds of thousands of demonic beasts have their systems mutated, converting their stored demonic energy into an equivalent level, even granting some of them new skills and mana-based buffs and forms they've never had before.

I, however, have not received any unique benefits like this yet. Though, that does not mean I haven't gained significant strength.

I have over 10,000 Low-Quality Ether now, a hot green True Core, a saturated Demon Lord's Core, and now enough strength to withstand the pressure outside for a few seconds at a time if need be.

—

As we approach the middle portion of the mountain, I sporadically open up my barrier to send out long-range pulses of perception.

The demonic orcs and cyclopes that roam the walkways spiraling up to the top of the peak walk about in far more order. I hope that I can gain more insightful details of their existence and system interfaces than the mindless worms.

They give off far stronger ether signatures too, and some of their palms have more than just one planet on them.

Ava floats down from the sky after killing a final stray sandworm and makes a comment as we step onto a ledge of flat ground.

"We've entered the middle zone of the Central Peak. I received an Avatar Notification of our entry."

Once these words leave her lips, many of the nearby marching orcs and cyclopes turn our way as they've received notifications of illegal entry into their zone.

While processing the information from the last pulse of perception, I find that not all of these guards are solely demonic beasts...

Some of them come back with levels and mana-based skills, a few of them with levels even higher than my own, putting a smile on my face as I reply.

"Well, get ready for another fight... maybe you'll reap some rewards this time as well. Kill a few orcs, and you'll rank up."

In the back of my mind, I still try to process the Noble Guardian's levels at the top of the mountain, but it wears thick black armor, and its avatar gives off extremely strange blocked readings. I can scan many of the Lords circling the peaks with ease, but my inspect and appraisal skills are useless when I try to examine the Guardian.

It is hard to tell if it is just that we are too far away, and the divine energy in the air is too thick for me to send a proper scan out that far, or possibly our strength gap is really that wide.

The latter may be the case. I come to this conclusion because the only reading I can get a decent feel for is its Ether stores, and it has a similar overwhelming bright white intensity as the Wyvern at the base of this mountain.

Chapter 719

High above the green clouds, a meeting between 4 Elder Warlords plays out.

Now, with all of the pieces of the past lining up, Ember begins outlining a plan for them to follow through with in order to take back control of this Citadel.

Torvak's eyes are wide as Ember finishes his last words. "Genius... the Demons will never see it coming..."

Zashen, the Berserker King, starts swinging its blades about, and can't stand still, moving in and out of the hologram's view. "Oh, I can't wait! It's always a good time when you come back!"

Asic, the High Orc, nods and keeps a straight face as he replies in a calm tone. "Very well, I will notify my men of what's to come. Quite an interesting plan. Many will be fooled, but it will be for the greater good."

At this, Ember's gaze shifts over to a surveillance system and sees the main elevator bringing up 6 strange-looking avatars to the top floor where the duel between the Demons and Warlords played out just a few hours ago.

Since then, the entire inner portion of the Citadel has been extremely busy.

Many Lords that have been in hiding for thousands of years have decided to show their faces in support of the Ogre Conglomeration to celebrate their victory against the two 1st Class Demons.

Some are old business partners that want to genuinely congratulate Torvak on his win by making a few trades and adding to the Volterra district economy, while others are cockroach Lords that want to stay in the know and contribute to any forces that show hints of rising power.

In addition to this, more 4th and 5th Class customers take the risk and come to the Volterra district because of the sight of a human being publicly accepted by a 1st Class Ogre.

This scuffle even inadvertently boosted the business of the High Orc's trading district two blocks away and has many new calls rolling into the Berserker Kings, wondering when they'll host more fighting tournaments or show up in the Grand Citadel next so

they can place their bets or contribute extra worlds to their favorite fighters in return for ether dividends indefinitely.

Throughout this commotion and the long meeting taking place, scheming, the Citadel Lord has been taking in the scene of the public's perception and has crafted a plan of his own.

As the 6 strange avatars walk out into the middle floor, Ember speaks up.

"It looks like they've made their move. The Servants are here to collect their Demons. Let the second phase begin."

He looks back at the holograms, and the two Lords reply.

"Understood, we will meet you there," are their last words as the holograms deactivate.

Ember gets up from his seat and moves toward the door, and his world token ticks up from 167 to 169.

The exact cause of this being the death of the first two demonic sandworms below the Citadel is unknown to him, but a grin shows on his face as he walks toward the door.

"Grab two more elixirs for Asic and Zash, they're going to need it," Ember tells Torvak as he walks out the private room's doors and down the hall toward their visitors.

—

A few Red Ogre sales associates greet the incoming 6 Avatars, but Ember and Torvak burst out from the back rooms before their conversation starts.

Their figures resemble demons, about 5 meters tall, but they are merely servants of the Vermillion family.

A large V logo is on each of the strange avatars' backs, and their entire being is glowing a bright green.

No real skin or defining facial features are shown on these avatars, and each of them has [25] worlds on their world token, as this is the maximum needed for custom basic avatars like these.

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Each of them is a lesser lord from 4th and 5th Class worlds that the Demons have contracted into slave contracts and given branded avatars to wear and do their bidding.

Inside the minds of these identical green demonic forms, one of many races could be at its core. It could be a human, a goblin, an orc, ogre, kobold, wolf beastman, lizardman, really anything...

Even their voices are all the same, using a default demonic avatar voice, so it is truly impossible to know.

One of them up front is asking for Torvak, as they want their two warriors back and have an urgent message to convey.

The Blue Ogre and red-haired human walk over in a calm manner, and the sales associates step aside while the faceless demonic servant opens up its system interface. Torvak opens his in return to share a secure link for the servant to relay this message.

Simultaneously, he sends out requests for the two demons to be brought out of their containment rooms and shares the secure message with Ember for him to read as well.

Both of them read its content with straight faces, but inwardly excitement builds.

Torvak sends Ember a private chat.

"I don't know how you predicted it, but this is exactly right."

Ember nods and closes his status while his world token continues slowly ticking up as more battles continue in the mines below.

"Indeed, we're going to the center of the Citadel. It's time to visit the Lord at the Vermillion Tower."

—

A civil exchange for this invite to the Vermillion Tower and the return of the shattered avatars and melted minds of the two 1st Class Demons is followed through.

The 6 Servants take a fast travel orb away as soon as they've received what they wanted, and not long after, 4 more white orbs of light travel from major Districts to land themselves in front of the largest and tallest tower on the entire Ellipsia Citadel.

An enormous glowing V, kilometers tall and wide, shines bright on the building's entrance above an archway that opens up automatically as 4 flashes of white light arrive.

The inside of the Central Tower shines a bright white light as it opens, illuminating the High Orc, Berserker Giant King, Blue Ogre, and Human that stand before it.

As the vibrance of the white light fades, rows and rows of lined-up Demonic Servants line the walls of the entrance with a clear walkway in the middle.

It is clear the Citadel Lord wants them to walk forward and follow the designated path.

All 4 of them do exactly that, walking into the bright archway and into the Central Tower.

The semicircle doorway closes behind them, and in front of them a few kilometers ahead, the 6 servants holding the large containment cases with the 1st Class Demon Avatars walk as well.

The white floor moves forward on its own in the center of the room, making each step forward they take tens of times faster than it really feels.

In just a few minutes, they've traveled a few dozen kilometers into the tower and left the welcome displays of guards behind. It is truly a massive tower; it's clear they're nowhere near done walking.

Despite knowing there is heavy surveillance in this tower, Torvak does as Ember says and tosses both of the 1st Class Lords the elixirs from the black box he pulled from storage earlier, and both drink them in an instant upon realizing what they are.

Another ten minutes or so go by as another hundred kilometers pass walking forward into a seemingly white void of an empty room, and the Orc and Berserker allow the clear liquid they just drank to seep into parts of their minds that haven't been used in over ten thousand years.

Eventually, the 6 servants disappear in a flash of light, disappearing from their vision entirely.

None of the Lords react, and about 2 minutes later, they too disappear in a flash of white light as they hit a transport zone within the Tower and are brought up a few floors into another room that was programmed to welcome guests.

—

As a new massive room with walls and ceilings surpassing hundreds of kilometers in height and width comes into view, near the center of the tower, those within it appear too.

The 6 servants they've been following appear a few hundred meters in front, as the walkway beneath them is no longer moving on this floor.

The two damaged Avatars are being inspected by a tall shadowy figure.

Three black and purple Demonic Dragons flap their wings and fly about in the open air of the white room.

The servants disappear in flashes of white light again, and two of the demonic dragons flying high above dive down spewing dark black and purple energy from their mouths directed at the remains of the avatars that have been brought back.

The dragons grab their soul-bonded pairs with their front claws and swoop back up into the air.

Through the clouds of Demonic Energy, however, Andras Vermillion walks out with a jaded expression on his face to stand before the 4 Warlords. The majority of his avatar stays concealed by a growing dark cloud of Demonic Energy that seeps out from his being.

None of them speak for a full 30 seconds, nor do they make a move.

All that can be heard is the slow flapping wings of the largest Demonic Dragon in the air.

However, the Noble Demon breaks the silence.

"The human and the Ogre I certainly expected to accept my duel... but to have all of the Citadel's troublemakers in one place..."

Andras takes another step forward, and the cloud of darkness shrouding his figure follows while he looks each of the Warlords up and down.

"You lower lifeforms who believe you can challenge the Demons will finally know your place. This Citadel power struggle will be over far faster than expected... the Family Head will certainly look past my minor blunder once I relay the news of your deaths."

