

H. Academy 611

Chapter 611 136.1 - The Hunt

Zharokath's residence in Ardmont City was quiet, the kind of silence that only comes with true isolation. He preferred it that way—his refuge from the human world. As he stepped deeper into his quarters, his thoughts immediately began turning to the night's events, particularly the unexpected revelation about Maya Evergreen.

'The daughter of the Evergreens, carrying demonic energy...' Zharokath mused, his lips curling into a small, self-satisfied smile. 'A gift I hadn't anticipated.'

He moved to a chair by a low-burning hearth, the shadows dancing across the room's dark stone walls. His mind churned with possibilities. Initially, he had only planned to solidify his influence with Gerald, Vivienne, and Argen. Simple business deals cloaked in demonic manipulation, pushing them further into his control. But now, this new development presented an opportunity far beyond what he had anticipated.

'Maya Evergreen...' Zharokath thought again, leaning back in his chair. 'A demonic presence within her, though faint. Someone has already begun weaving threads of darkness into her soul, but whoever it is has been careless. They have left her vulnerable to external influence, and now I can use that vulnerability to my advantage.'

He considered the ways in which he might exploit this newfound information. If he could further manipulate the demonic energy within her, it would be easy to steer her into a path that aligned with his goals. The Evergreens held considerable influence in the Federation. With Maya in his control, it wouldn't be long before the entire family could be brought under his sway.

'And once I have the Evergreens... the doors to greater power will open,' Zharokath thought, a gleam in his eyes. 'The Federation itself could fall, piece by piece.'

His mood brightened at the prospect. The evening had gone better than he could have hoped, and now, with this discovery, his plans were expanding rapidly.

'Yes... this was a fortunate turn of events. I thought this would merely be another step toward cementing my influence in the human world, but now... now I have a new piece on the board.'

Feeling the weight of his success, Zharokath allowed himself a rare indulgence. He reached for the small bell beside his chair and rang it with a sharp flick of his wrist. The chime echoed softly through the room, signaling his servants to attend to him.

'A fitting end to a productive night,' Zharokath thought, still pleased with the evening's gains. He would treat himself now.

Zharokath leaned back in his chair, the faint flicker of firelight casting dancing shadows on the walls. As he let his thoughts drift, his mind returned to the image of Maya Evergreen—the way her features had twisted with discomfort under the influence of his demonic energy. A faint smirk tugged at the corners of his lips as he recalled the moment, her vulnerability.

'Soon enough, you'll serve me,' he thought, his tongue flicking over his lips in a slow, deliberate motion. The thought of Maya fully under his control, her body and soul enslaved to his will, sent a thrill of satisfaction coursing through him.

'The Evergreens, those arrogant fools, thinking their influence and power could shield them...' Zharokath's smile darkened, his eyes gleaming with a cruel light. 'I'll make them witness it. One by one, they'll watch as she submits to me, completely. Their downfall will be at her hands, and I'll ensure that each of them understands just how futile their resistance was.'

His mind spun with vivid images of Maya kneeling before him, her once-proud demeanor shattered, her family powerless to stop it. It wasn't just the power that excited him—it was the utter degradation of someone so highly esteemed, broken and bent to his will.

A soft knock interrupted his reverie, and Zharokath's smile slipped into something more composed. The door to his chambers opened, and one of his personal servants entered, head bowed, eyes lowered in respectful submission.

"What does Master desire?" the servant asked, voice smooth and deferential.

Zharokath's eyes gleamed with the aftertaste of his wicked thoughts. "Bring me one of the fresh ones," he said, his tone laced with an underlying command. He didn't need to explain further—his servants knew precisely what he meant. The fresh ones were the newly acquired, unbroken, and untouched—delivered for him to indulge his pleasures.

The servant bowed lower, his expression unwavering. "At once, Master." Without hesitation, the servant turned and swiftly exited the room, leaving Zharokath in the dim glow of the firelight once more.

As he waited, the gleam never left his gaze. Zharokath savored the thought of what was to come—both tonight and in the days ahead.

CREAK!

Then just at that moment, his door creaked open, and a figure appeared in the doorway—a young man...

No, not even a young man, but barely a boy, trembling visibly.

His wide, fearful eyes darted around the room, taking in the dim firelight, the shadows that seemed to cling to every corner, and finally, landing on Zharokath himself.

The sheer presence of the demon, the oppressive weight of his power, held the boy in place, his legs too weak to flee even if he wanted to.

The young boy's pale skin glistened with sweat, his body shaking as if he could feel the darkness radiating from Zharokath, even though he couldn't truly comprehend the source of his terror. He had been chosen, handpicked by Zharokath's loyal servants, and brought here like a lamb to the slaughter.

Zharokath's eyes gleamed with a predatory hunger as he observed the boy, watching the fear ripple through him, savoring it. It wasn't just the physical domination he craved, but the utter submission

of mind and soul. He enjoyed watching the realization sink in, the slow, dawning horror that there would be no escape.

"Come closer," Zharokath commanded softly, his voice smooth but carrying an irresistible weight of authority.

The boy's legs wobbled beneath him, but he obeyed, taking small, hesitant steps into the room. His eyes were wide, filled with dread as he approached the demon who sat waiting like a king upon his throne.

Zharokath's lips curled into a dark smile, watching the young man struggle to keep his composure. He could see the fight in his eyes, the desperate hope that somehow, this was all a nightmare. But there would be no mercy here, no waking from the reality of what was to come.

"You're afraid," Zharokath said, his voice almost a purr as he studied the boy's face. "Good. Fear will make this more enjoyable."

The young man swallowed hard, his throat bobbing as he tried to find his voice, but no words came. He stood frozen before Zharokath, unable to move or speak, completely under the demon's thrall.

Zharokath leaned forward, his dark eyes glowing faintly in the firelight. He could feel the boy's terror like a tangible thing, radiating off him in waves. It was intoxicating, a delicious prelude to the indulgence he was about to savor.

"Tell me," Zharokath whispered, his voice like silk wrapping around the boy's mind. "Do you know why you're here?"

The boy's breath hitched, his voice barely a whisper as he shook his head, his body trembling more violently under the demon's gaze.

Zharokath chuckled softly, his smile growing darker. "You're here to serve. To please. And you will do exactly that."

With that, Zharokath rose from his seat, towering over the boy, his presence suffocating and absolute. The young man's legs gave way, and he collapsed to the floor, his body wracked with fear, completely at the mercy of the demon who stood above him.

Zharokath's smile never wavered as he reached out, his fingers brushing against the boy's cheek, cold and unnervingly gentle. "Don't worry," he murmured. "You will soon start to like it."

Saying that he leaned in closer, his cold, predatory smile never leaving his face.

–SLURP!

He licked the young boy on the face.

'Ah.....So good...'

The salty sweat stemming from the fear, cold skin shivering.....

The heart that was beating so fast...

Everything was to his taste.

The young boy's breath quickened in fear, his wide eyes reflecting pure terror. Zharokath's presence was overwhelming, his aura suffocating, making the air feel thick with malice.

The boy's trembling grew more violent as Zharokath's face drew near, his sharp, glowing eyes staring deep into the boy's soul.

—STAB!

Without warning, Zharokath's otherworldly claws extended from his hand, gleaming darkly in the dim light.

He moved with unnerving slowness, almost as if he were savoring the moment before the inevitable agony.

The young boy, paralyzed by fear, could only manage a stifled whimper as Zharokath's claws plunged into his shoulder, piercing flesh and bone with terrifying ease.

"AAAAAAAH!"

The boy screamed in pain, his body jolting violently, but Zharokath held him in place with an iron grip.

The searing heat of fire-attributed mana flowed through Zharokath's claws, burning the young man's skin from within and causing it to blister and crack.

The smell of charred flesh filled the room as the flames licked the boy's skin, melting it away like wax.

As Zharokath watched the young man writhe in agony, his lips curled into a wicked smile, a dark thrill coursing through him. The boy's desperate screams and the crackling of his seared flesh filled the room, creating a symphony of suffering that Zharokath savored with twisted delight.

'Ah... the sounds of pain,' he thought, his glowing eyes gleaming with sadistic pleasure. 'There is nothing quite like it. So pure, so primal. It's the only true form of expression these fragile beings possess. No lies. No pretense. Just raw, unfiltered agony.'

The boy's body convulsed under Zharokath's grip, his cries growing weaker as the fire gnawed at him from the inside. His skin bubbled and blackened, the smell of burning flesh intoxicating to Zharokath's senses.

'Look at him,' Zharokath mused, his claws still embedded in the boy's shoulder, sending wave after wave of searing heat through his body. 'So weak, so powerless. These humans think they understand pain, but they know nothing of true suffering.'

He leaned in closer, his voice a soft, mocking whisper as the boy gasped for air. "Does it hurt, little one?" Zharokath asked, his tone dripping with false concern. "This is just a taste of what's to come."

The boy's eyes, wide with terror, flickered with desperation, but his voice was lost in the overwhelming pain that consumed him. He couldn't even muster the strength to beg for mercy—his body was too broken, too overwhelmed by the flames that were slowly devouring him.

'Ah, yes... this is ecstasy,' Zharokath thought, his smile widening as he felt the boy's life force flicker under the weight of his torment. 'To see them reduced to this—nothing but trembling, broken creatures begging for release. This is the power we were meant to wield.'

Zharokath slowly withdrew his claws, the sickening squelch of torn flesh accompanying the motion. The boy collapsed to the ground, his body twitching as the last remnants of the fire-attributed mana sizzled under his skin.

The demon stood over him, relishing the sight. The boy's chest heaved, his breaths shallow and labored, his eyes glazed over in pain. He was on the edge of consciousness, clinging desperately to life.

Zharokath knelt down, bringing his face close to the boy's ear. "This is the fate of all who serve me," he whispered, his voice low and filled with cruel promise. "But you should consider yourself lucky. You get to feel it firsthand."

The boy's body shuddered, another whimper escaping his lips, but he was too far gone to respond.

Zharokath rose to his feet, looking down at the broken creature before him. 'Pathetic,' he thought, though there was no anger in his mind—only cold satisfaction. 'They break so easily. But it's the breaking that makes it so sweet.'

His tongue flicked across his lips as his fangs elongated, sharp and gleaming in the dim light of his chambers. The sight of the boy lying before him, broken and defeated, stirred something deeper within—the primal hunger that came with his true nature.

He crouched again, his gaze fixated on the trembling form beneath him. The boy, barely conscious, was too far gone to even realize what was coming next. His glazed-over eyes reflected the demon's towering form, a pitiful sight that only heightened Zharokath's twisted pleasure.

'Yes...' Zharokath thought, his fangs glistening in the faint glow of the fire. 'This is what humans are meant for. To be consumed, to fuel my power.'

He leaned in as his demonic form started showing up to consume his meal.

SWOOSH!

But just as he was about to take a bite, suddenly he sensed something.

STAB!

"Huh?"

On the right side of his heart, a hole was there.

Chapter 612 136.2 - The Hunt

As the airship soared quietly through the night, the cool air of Ardmont City finally came into view, its lights twinkling like a sea of stars below them. The atmosphere inside the ship was calm, but the tension between Maya and me still lingered from what had happened earlier.

Maya leaned against the window, her expression thoughtful, though the weight of the evening's events was clear in her eyes. After the incident, I could tell she was still grappling with her loss of control, the demonic energy that had surged through her, and the vulnerability it exposed.

"Did you really not need anything? Any help back there?" she asked quietly, her voice breaking the silence, though there was an edge of concern behind it.

I turned my gaze toward her, shaking my head slightly. "No," I replied simply, my tone steady and assured. "I will handle it on my own."

Maya exhaled softly, a sigh that carried more than just frustration. There was an unspoken heaviness in the air, and though she didn't argue, her eyes reflected a mix of lingering doubt and gratitude. She wanted to say more; I could feel it, but instead, she settled for a small shake of her head, her lips pressed together in thought.

The subtle tremor in her posture, the way she seemed to war with herself internally—it wasn't something I was unfamiliar with.

Maya looked over at me again, her eyes searching mine, perhaps hoping to find some sign of weariness or even guilt, but I offered her none. I remained as calm and composed as always, not allowing any of my own thoughts to seep through.

"Sigh..." Maya let out another small sigh, the sound barely audible over the hum of the airship's engines. She leaned back into her seat, gazing out the window again, the lights of Ardmont drawing closer as the ship began its descent.

The airship touched down smoothly on the landing pad, and the moment the doors opened, the cool night air of Ardmont swept into the cabin.

The city lights flickered in the distance, but my focus was already elsewhere. My mind was on the path ahead—what needed to be done. Zharokath would die, and there was no going back from this.

Maya stayed quiet beside me, her posture tense, her eyes still carrying the weight of the evening's events.

I could feel her wanting to say something, but she didn't.

She was waiting, perhaps for me to acknowledge her, to offer some kind of reassurance. But I had nothing to say.

As we reached the edge of the landing pad, I stopped, turning to face her. "You should head back to the mansion," I said, my tone cool and distant. "I'll take care of the rest."

Her eyes widened slightly, a flicker of helplessness crossing her face. She knew exactly what I meant. I was leaving her behind, and this time, I wasn't asking for her help. She had no place in what was about to happen next.

I turned away, ready to leave without further explanation. But just as I took my first step, I felt a sudden tug on my sleeve. Her hand, small and trembling slightly, clutched the hem of my clothes, stopping me in my tracks.

"Please," she whispered, her voice strained. "Come back safely."

I paused, the words hanging in the air between us. Slowly, I turned to face her again, my gaze meeting hers. There was warmth in her eyes.

But at that moment, I couldn't allow myself to feel it.

I paused, the words hanging in the air between us. Slowly, I turned to face her again, my gaze meeting hers. There was warmth in her eyes.

But at that moment, I couldn't allow myself to feel it.

Not now.

"I will."

Her hand lingered on my sleeve for a moment longer before she slowly let go, her eyes searching mine for something.

"Sigh..."

With a final glance, I turned and walked away, leaving her standing there as the cold wind of Ardmont swept through the night, her whispered plea still lingering in the back of my mind, but I pushed it aside.

There was no room for distractions, no place for sentiment right now.

I spotted the car waiting at the edge of the landing pad. The driver, arranged by Maya, stood beside it, ready and waiting. She had known all along that I wouldn't stay, that I would go through with this. The airship landing pad wasn't close to the city, and she had made sure everything was in place for my departure.

The driver gave a respectful nod as I approached, opening the door without a word. I stepped inside, settling into the backseat. The silence in the car felt heavy, but I didn't mind it. The soft hum of the engine kicked in as the car began to move, taking me toward Ardmont City.

The driver, as professional as expected, didn't ask any questions. He focused solely on the road ahead, maneuvering through the winding streets as we made our way into the heart of the city. I stared out the window, watching as the towering buildings of Ardmont grew larger in the distance.

The whispered plea from Maya echoed in the back of my mind, but I pushed it aside. This was my path, and nothing—not even the warmth in her eyes—could change it now.

The city lights reflected off the car's windows, illuminating the road ahead as we neared our destination.

Then, as we reached the heart of the city, the car slowed, eventually pulling up to a secluded side street. The driver parked smoothly, his demeanor calm as he turned slightly toward me. "We've arrived, sir," he said in a low, respectful tone, offering no further commentary.

Without a word, I opened the door and stepped out into the cool night air. The city was alive with distant sounds, but in this quiet corner, there was only the soft rustle of the wind and the steady pulse of my own resolve. I adjusted my coat, my eyes scanning the surroundings as I mentally prepared myself for the next steps.

The driver remained in the car, awaiting further instructions.

"You may return to your post now."

"Understood sir."

With that, he pushed the pedal and left me alone in the street.

'It starts now.' I walked further into the cool night air of Ardmont, the lights of the city surrounding me, and I quietly activated my spatial bracelet.

In an instant, I felt the familiar weight of my banquet clothes vanish, replaced by the subtle form of my [Unknown's Armor].

It shifted smoothly around me, morphing into a black hooded cloak that concealed my presence in the night.

The cloak seemed to blend with the darkness itself, rendering me a mere shadow, a wraith among the city lights.

I activated the spell I had learned, feeling the mana surge through my legs.

My body shot forward, leaping from the ground with a fluid grace. My hands gripped the ledges with precision, my feet barely touching the surface as I scaled the building with rapid ease.

I scanned my surroundings, locking onto the building ahead. Twenty-five floors. Not much of a challenge.

Floor after floor, I ascended, the wind rushing past me as the height increased. In less than a heartbeat, I reached the top, my feet landing soundlessly on the roof. The city stretched out before me, the glowing lights of Ardmont flickering like stars beneath my gaze.

This high above, the world below seemed distant—insignificant. My mind focused only on one thing: Zharokath.

'This chance can not be wasted no matter what.' The method that I had used to track him down would not be effective for a long time.

Zharokath—always cautious, always hiding in the shadows, like the rat he was. His movements were calculated, his every step shrouded in layers of protection.

His demonic nature, combined with his clan's resources, made him slippery—impossible to track through conventional means.

But I had learned long ago that nothing was invincible, and no shield was without its cracks.

I crouched low on the roof, feeling the cool night breeze brush against my skin as I peered out over the cityscape.

Zharokath was careful.

His clan's artifacts, a complex web of magical protections, surrounded him at all times. They masked his presence, deflected attention, and made him almost impossible to pinpoint.

Almost.

'Everything has an opening.'

Zharokath's defenses were like the most intricate systems, not just built on raw power but on precision and understanding. He wasn't just cautious; he was meticulous. His entire existence was surrounded by artifacts and spells that constantly monitored the world around him, sensing any disturbances or attempts to track him.

But like any system, his protections had a vulnerability—a flaw rooted in a principle Astron had studied many times in his own research: signals and noise.

'Every person in this world emits mana,' I thought as I crouched on the rooftop, my eyes scanning the city below. 'Every human, elf, demon—anything alive that has evolved under mana's influence—has a unique emission.'

But Zharokath's devices were designed to ignore these emissions, to separate the signal from the noise. Noise.

That was the key. All living beings in this world emitted a constant stream of mana, a kind of background hum in the environment. For a tracking spell to work, it had to ignore this noise, focusing only on the specific signature of its target.

Zharokath had taken advantage of this concept, surrounding himself with enchantments that disguised his true signature, blending it into the background, filtering him out like static in a field of signals.

But I know that no system can filter out everything.

Every filter has its limits. Even the most complex devices had to balance sensitivity with practicality.

If they filtered out too much, they'd miss real threats; if they filtered too little, they'd be overwhelmed by the constant flood of mana emissions from the world around them.

I leaned forward, the wind carrying the cool night air across my face as I analyzed the patterns of mana around me. Noise. That's what most detection methods saw—a constant buzz of mana from every living being.

The trick was to slip through that, to make the transmission a part of the noise by the detector formations that Zharokath surrounds himself with, yet at the same time being a receivable signal that I can track myself.

Yet, was this a really easy thing?

For most people, it would not be.

'You are here.'

But for me, it was achievable.

'Since I could see the faint thread connecting me and him at this moment.'

Chapter 613 136.3 - The Hunt

The idea of tracking a slippery bastard like Zharokath was a delicate game—one that required more than just skill. It was a test of precision, a dance between noise and signal, and a single misstep could mean losing Zharokath for good.

Zharokath had layered himself in defenses, protections that monitored every inch of the surrounding area for disturbances in mana. The filters that surrounded him were complex, weaving through the ambient mana to detect anything out of place. The problem was, I couldn't know exactly how they worked. Without seeing the specific enchantments and artifacts, there was no way to be absolutely sure what would trigger them.

I had to rely on what I knew, what I had studied. Tracking spells, detection methods—they all functioned on similar principles. They sifted through the background noise of mana emissions, separating out anything that didn't fit the expected patterns. But, as I had learned, no filter was perfect.

'It's all about the threshold,' I thought, my mind racing as I prepared to move again. 'Every filter has to be set to a certain level of sensitivity. If it's too sensitive, it picks up everything, overwhelming the system. If it's too strict, real threats slip through. There's always a middle ground.'

And that was where I could strike.

The transplant I had placed onto Zharokath—a tiny seed of mana that I had woven into his defenses—was barely detectable. It emitted just enough energy to be recognized by my own spell, but it was buried within the ambient noise of mana that surrounded him. To Zharokath's filters, it would seem like just another part of the environment, lost in the sea of mana emissions.

But there was always the risk. There was no way to know for certain what kind of filters Zharokath's devices were using. If they detected even a slight irregularity, the signal could be disrupted, and the whole plan would fall apart.

I clenched my fists, focusing on the intricate web of mana flowing around me. 'How can I be sure that what I've planted will remain undetected?'

The answer was simple: lowering it enough to make sure that it is on the same level as the natural emissions.

But then, that implied something else.

How would I myself be able to transmit the signal? If such a low-level signal could be transmitted, wouldn't it already be done?

The question weighed heavily on my mind: If the signal was so low that it blended perfectly with natural emissions, how could I transmit it without losing it entirely? By normal physical rules, such a weak signal shouldn't be able to cover the distance I needed.

But then again, this wasn't just a world bound by physical rules.

Mana was different—mana had properties that could be manipulated in ways that defied the natural laws of the world. A fire-attributed mana would carry heat, while ice-attributed mana would radiate cold. Even lightning-attributed mana could carry electrical impulses, mimicking signals in the physical world. And I had been studying these properties long enough to understand how they could be applied in unconventional ways.

'The answer lies in mana's ability to contain and change properties,' I thought. The world of mana was vast, far more flexible than any simple signal system. And that was when my method began to take shape, the plan I had crafted from the very start.

There existed a type of plant—rare—that emitted a peculiar kind of mana to reproduce.

[Hiveshine]

Its mana worked like pollen, spreading over vast distances, carried by the wind. But what made it fascinating was how it absorbed the raw mana from its surroundings as it traveled. This allowed it to not only maintain its strength but expand its reach, amplifying its own signal the farther it moved.

'Pollen mana,' I had called it during my research. Its natural ability to absorb and grow, much like how plants spread their seeds, was the perfect method for transmitting a low-level signal over long distances.

As it traveled, it would draw mana from the surrounding environment, subtly amplifying itself without raising suspicion. It blended with the ambient noise, growing stronger without ever crossing the threshold that would trigger Zharokath's filters.

And this was the essence of my plan.

When Maya had fallen and lost her balance thanks to the demonic energy at that time, I had greased a slight amount of such pollens right onto Zharokath's body.

And now the mana had such property.

It was a tiny seed, so faint it barely registered as a disturbance. But as it moved, as it traveled through the air with him, it would begin to absorb the raw mana around it, expanding its range and signal amplitude without ever drawing attention. To Zharokath's devices, it was just another part of the environment, harmless and indistinguishable from the background noise.

'And now I can see it.'

Thanks to the rigorous training I had undergone with Reina, my [Eyes] had become far more than just a tool for perception—they were a finely tuned instrument. Every type of mana had its own signature, and I had learned how to filter out the irrelevant, focusing only on what mattered. The moment I applied the pollen mana to Zharokath, I knew it would leave behind a trail—one that only I could see.

I closed my eyes for a moment, allowing my senses to adjust, focusing on the ambient mana around me. Then, as I opened them again, the world shifted. The familiar patterns of the city's mana flows faded into the background as I honed in on the specific signature of the pollen mana I had planted.

'There it is,' I thought, my gaze locking onto the faint but distinct trail.

It spread out across the city, like delicate threads of light that only I could see, winding through the streets and alleyways. The mana had already begun to spread, absorbing the raw energy from its surroundings, amplifying itself just as I had anticipated. It was subtle, nearly invisible to anyone without my training, but to me, it was as clear as day.

I stood on the rooftop, tracking the trail with precision, my eyes scanning the city below. The threads of mana converged, all pointing toward one location—a building in the distance. That was where Zharokath was hiding. The source of the pollen mana pulsed faintly, marking his exact position.

'No more running.'

With my [Eyes] focused on the trail, I leaped from the rooftop, moving swiftly and silently through the city.

SWOOSH!

Thanks to the [Grapple] spell that I had learned from Tianna, the speed of traveling at this point became much and much faster.

Zharokath's protections were formidable, but this time, they had failed him. The pollen mana had spread without resistance, and now, with my ability to filter and focus on the exact signature, he was exposed.

As I approached the building, the intensity of the mana trail grew stronger and more concentrated. The raw mana from the city had fed it, amplifying the signal to a level that made it impossible for me to lose track. Zharokath was here, just within reach.

I landed silently on the rooftop of the adjacent building, my cloak blending into the night. Below me, the high-rise building where Zharokath was hiding loomed, its polished exterior masking the layers of defenses that lay within. The neighborhood was one of the more affluent districts of Ardmont, each building outfitted with advanced security measures. But Zharokath's setup was far more than just physical.

Countless artifacts and formations surrounded the structure, each one carefully designed to distort, mask, and confuse. They worked in tandem to hide what was inside, projecting false signals, blurring mana trails, and disrupting even the sharpest senses. It was clear that for Zharokath, staying hidden was his highest priority. If he remained unseen, he could continue his operations safely. If discovered, he would simply abandon the place and vanish into the night.

But as I crouched on the rooftop, my [Eyes] cut through the illusions and distractions, revealing the truth behind the layers of defenses. The walls might as well have been transparent to me. I could see beyond the false mana signatures and scrambled signals, zeroing in on Zharokath's presence.

'So this is where you're hiding,' I thought, my eyes narrowing as I observed the building's defenses.

He had gone to great lengths to shield himself, but none of these tricks would stop me. The artifacts were primarily defensive, focused on misdirection and masking rather than direct combat. That told me something important—Zharokath wasn't expecting a fight. His whole strategy revolved around staying hidden and running when necessary.

But now he had nowhere to run.

I could see his figure inside, cloaked in layers of magic, seated comfortably as if unaware that his time was running out. The mana that surrounded him pulsed with demonic energy, but through the distortions, I could make out his form clearly. He was waiting, confident in his protections, unaware that they had already failed him.

'He's overconfident,' I realized, watching how relaxed he seemed. 'He doesn't think anyone can find him here.'

That was his mistake.

I took a moment to analyze the formations.

'Total of 3 shield formations and 5 sound alarms.' The mana flows were complex but predictable, each formation designed to deflect or warn, not to attack. Zharokath's focus was clearly on keeping himself hidden and safe, trusting in these layers of defense to keep intruders out.

'That will make things easier,' I thought.

With a deep breath, I activated my [Shadowborne] trait. My presence faded into nothingness, my form blending seamlessly with the surrounding shadows. The night itself seemed to swallow me, and in an instant, I was a ghost—a wraith moving unseen through the city.

SWOOSH.

I moved swiftly and silently, leaping from the rooftop and approaching the building. The patrols were predictable, their patterns designed to cover every angle, but to my [Shadowborne] form, they were irrelevant.

I slipped past the guards, their eyes never once landing on me as I weaved through the shadows of the high-end neighborhood.

As I neared the building, I extended my vision, feeling the flow of mana around me. The shield formations pulsed faintly, and I could see the alarm systems ready to trigger at the slightest disturbance. But the weakness of any defense was its core—the place where the formation drew its power.

I reached out with my mana, my fingers tracing the invisible lines of energy that connected the formations to their source. 'There,' I thought, pinpointing the locations of the cores within the building. Each one would have to be disabled if I wanted to avoid an alert.

Carefully, I approached the first core, hidden behind a stone pillar near the entrance. My fingers brushed lightly against the formation, and I channeled a small pulse of mana into the weak point, disrupting the flow without triggering any alarms. The shield flickered for a moment, then disappeared entirely.

One down.

I moved deeper into the building, slipping past more patrols and guards as I made my way through the hallways. The second shield formation was hidden inside a small room just off the main corridor. Once again, I applied the same technique, carefully severing the mana flow without raising any alarms.

As I moved from formation to formation, I dismantled each one with precision, cutting through Zharokath's defenses like a knife through cloth. With each core disabled, the building became more vulnerable, and soon there was nothing left to protect him from the storm that was about to come.

With the defenses out of the way, I stood in the dimly lit hallway, my presence still cloaked by [Shadowborne]. Zharokath had no idea that his protections were gone. No alarms had sounded. No guards had been alerted.

I was in complete control.

Now, all that was left was to strike. The fight would be clean, efficient, and without interruption.

The trailing was over, and it was not the time to hunt.

Chapter 614 136.4 - The Hunt

With all the alarms and formations neutralized, I silently made my way back to the nearest rooftop, taking care to avoid any remaining patrols. The high-rise building loomed before me, its windows gleaming in the dim light of the city. To most, those windows would reveal nothing—a blank, impenetrable surface. But to me, with my [Eyes] and my understanding of mana, the truth was laid bare.

I crouched low, peering through the barrier that concealed the room. There, beyond the layers of deception, I saw two silhouettes.

One was unmistakably Zharokath—his demonic aura pulsed faintly around him, his form seated comfortably as if he were in control of his world. But the second figure was smaller, more fragile.

A young child.

The sight of the small form sent a surge of anger through me. It was clear what Zharokath intended to do. The child, likely one of his victims, would soon be consumed.

And that sight....

It made me remember something.

A certain moment.

'Calm down.'

But right now, I must keep myself calm. This rising feeling of anger must be kept under control.

'Calm down.'

I took my position on the rooftop, the distance between me and the window providing the perfect vantage point. The wind was calm, the night still. There was nothing to distract me from the task at hand.

I reached into my spatial space, summoning [Celestalith]. The weapon responded instantly, shifting into its rifle form with a soft hum of mana. Its sleek, elongated barrel gleamed faintly in the moonlight, its power coiled within, ready to be unleashed.

The compressed mana surged through the Celestalith's barrel, glowing faintly as I focused all my intent on the target. Zharokath, oblivious to his impending doom, leaned in closer to the trembling child, his demonic form beginning to show.

'Not today.'

-PIU!

The mana-infused shot ripped through the air, piercing the window in an instant. The barrier shattered like glass, and the bullet found its mark. Zharokath jerked violently as the shot hit his chest, tearing through the right side of his heart.

"AAAAAH!"

A bellow of pain echoed through the room, and for a brief moment, Zharokath's gaze flickered in shock.

But I wasn't done yet.

Before the demon could recover, I fired again.

-PIU!

This time, the shot drove through his right shoulder, throwing him off balance. Blood sprayed from the wound, but even as the pain contorted his face, Zharokath's eyes narrowed in furious realization.

He was ready.

-WHOOSH!

[Shadow Leap].

Zharokath's form blurred as he vanished, melding into the shadows of the room. But I had already anticipated it. Without hesitation, I activated my own skill, teleporting into the room in an instant.

The shadows welcomed me as I materialized amidst the flickering light. The room was small, the air heavy with the scent of blood and fear. The child lay crumpled on the floor, shivering, but I couldn't afford to check on him yet. Zharokath was the priority.

Without a sound, I shifted Celestalith into its chakram form, the sleek blades humming with energy as they began to orbit around me, ready to strike at my command. But before I attacked, I reached into my belt and activated the artifact—the one I had taken from the assassins who had assaulted Ethan and Emily.

It clattered softly onto the ground between us. Zharokath's eyes flickered toward it, a scowl crossing his twisted features. He didn't have time to react.

-SNAP!

With a sharp click, the gadget activated, creating a small space where now everything would remain in this place and no one outside would be able to sense what was happening inside.

'You are isolated.'

He no longer could rely on any outside help. Unless he left this place, he would be mine.

'You are my prey now.'

-CLINK!

Zharokath's body jerked violently as the shot pierced through him, but his reaction was almost instantaneous. The pain twisted his expression for only a fleeting moment before his eyes narrowed in rage. His chest, now bleeding, heaved as he struggled to stay composed. With a guttural roar, he launched to his feet, his demonic energy erupting from him like a dark flame.

"Who dares?!" Zharokath bellowed, his voice booming throughout the chamber. His demonic energy surged, causing the very walls of the room to tremble. "Who dares attack me?!"

I remained silent, my eyes focused on him, unwavering. The atmosphere thickened as Zharokath's mana flared, his physical form now shimmering with the oppressive aura of a Void Clan demon. His

towering frame grew even more menacing as his muscles bulged, rippling under the dark energy wrapping around him like a second skin.

"You... You insolent worm," he snarled, his voice dripping with malice. "Do you know what I am?"

Without warning, he lunged at me, the floor cracking beneath his feet as his sheer speed sent him barreling through the room. I barely had time to shift Celestalith into its dagger form, blocking his initial strike.

His strength was overwhelming—his raw power sent vibrations through my arms, threatening to shatter my guard.

I grit my teeth, pushing against his force, but he was relentless.

"You're nothing!" Zharokath roared, his claws slashing with terrifying speed. His strikes came fast and precise, each blow leaving trails of void energy in their wake. My body screamed in protest as I dodged and deflected, the impact of every blocked strike numbing my arms.

Despite his wounds, Zharokath was an experienced warrior—physically more powerful than me. Every move he made was calculated, ruthless, a display of his mastery over his demonic form.

I could feel the weight of his centuries-old experience pressing down on me. He wasn't just a demon; he was a predator, hunting with precision and savagery.

I activated [Shadow Leap], slipping into the shadows just as his claws slashed through the space where I had been standing. Reappearing behind him, I swung my dagger at his exposed back.

But Zharokath was faster.

In an instant, he twisted, his hand catching my wrist mid-strike. His grip was iron, unyielding, and he yanked me forward, his other hand already poised to strike.

"Foolish human," he spat, his eyes burning with cruel delight. "You think you can match me?"

I could feel the void energy gathering in his claws, dark and malevolent, ready to tear through my flesh. But I wasn't done yet.

-BOOM!-

The chakrams I had released moments earlier came crashing down on him, their celestial energy slicing through the void mana. Zharokath let out a snarl as they collided with his body, forcing him to release his grip and stumble back.

I landed, breathing heavily, my body aching from the brief clash. He was quite strong, just as I had expected.

But strength alone never mattered in a fight.

I spat onto the ground, my eyes narrowing as I locked onto Zharokath. In that brief exchange, I had already begun to piece together his fighting style—the way his body shifted, the precise, predatory movements.

His instincts were honed, his reactions too quick for simple muscle memory. This demon had seen countless battles, and his fighting psyche was wired to react, to adapt swiftly.

But that didn't mean he was unbeatable.

Zharokath's eyes burned with fury as he wiped the celestial energy from his chest, his injuries already beginning to close, the dark void energy mending his flesh with disturbing speed. Being a demon, his physical capabilities were top-notch, and it showed.

His wounds knitted together as if they were never there, leaving only faint traces of where my chakrams had struck him.

"HOW DID YOU ENTER THIS PLACE?!" he bellowed, his voice thick with rage as he launched himself toward me, claws outstretched. "WHO SENT YOU?!"

He was fast—faster than before. His body blurred with demonic energy, the sheer power radiating from him making the air around us heavy and oppressive. The walls of the room trembled from the force of his movements, the shadows deepening with each pulse of his void energy.

But I was ready.

While my physical stats were much lower than him, that did not mean I was slower. Thanks to the footwork of [Cyclone Stance] and the way that I had figured out to circulate my mana all around my body, the enchantments around me were much more effective. As Zharokath descended on me, I shifted my weight, calculating his trajectory. His strikes were precise and lethal but predictable in their aggression. I could see the opening—the moment he overextended, banking on his raw strength to overpower me.

-CLANG!-

I parried his strike, the force of the impact jarring my arms. His claws scraped against the celestial metal of my dagger, sending sparks flying. But I didn't stop there. As his momentum carried him forward, I twisted, ducking under his arm and driving my knee into his ribs. The blow landed hard, though his thick demonic hide absorbed most of the impact.

Zharokath snarled, his claws swiping at me again, but I was already gone, slipping into the shadows with [Shadow Leap].

"SHOW YOURSELF!" he roared, his eyes scanning the room, searching for me. His frustration was palpable, his pride wounded by the fact that I had slipped from his grasp again.

I reappeared behind him, close enough to feel the heat of his demonic energy radiating from his form. But instead of attacking immediately, I stayed low, analyzing his stance, the way his muscles tensed and his head jerked with every sound.

'He sensed.'

I felt the shift before it happened. Zharokath's demonic energy surged, twisting unnaturally as the mana around him condensed into a focused, dangerous mass. His muscles tensed, and I could see the void energy coiling around his hands, warping the space ever so slightly.

'A void attack.'

I knew exactly how deadly those were. The void didn't just cut—it devoured, and if I allowed myself to get caught in it, I wouldn't just take damage; I'd be erased, piece by piece. It wasn't something I could afford to take head-on.

Zharokath's lips curled into a predatory grin, his claws glowing with dark energy as he prepared to unleash the strike.

No matter what, I couldn't let him hit me with that.

As the void energy crackled ominously around him, I reacted instantly, my instincts screaming at me to move. I braced myself and activated [Typhoon Burst], the technique from the [Storm Stance] designed for moments just like this. The air around me exploded with a burst of mana as the ground beneath my feet cracked from the sudden force.

-BOOM!-

The blast of wind from [Typhoon Burst] propelled me into the air, launching me backward with incredible speed. The sheer force of the move carried me high above the ground, and I could feel the rush of air as I gained distance, twisting in mid-air to avoid the void strike.

Zharokath snarled in frustration as his void attack missed its mark, the space where I had been seconds earlier distorting violently. Dark tendrils of void energy tore through the air, consuming everything in their path as they lashed out blindly.

I landed several meters away, skidding to a halt as the wind settled around me. My breathing was heavy, and the blast had drained a fair bit of my mana, but it was worth it—I had avoided the void attack.

Zharokath's eyes narrowed, his frustration now fully apparent. He wasn't playing around anymore. His stance shifted, his body now radiating raw power as he took the fight seriously.

"So, you've got some tricks up your sleeve," he growled, his voice low and dangerous. "But dodging won't save you for long, human. I'll rip you apart, piece by piece."

"Heh...We will see about that..."

This low-born demon was as shallow as ever.

Chapter 615 Chapter 136.5 - The Hunt

What is the thing that differentiates the demons from the other Awakened species?

From Elves or Dwarves, for instance.

What is the main difference between them?

They're different from the rest of the Awakened species. Elves, Dwarves, and even humans... We all use mana.

But demons? They have something far more corruptive: demonic energy.

The difference between them and the other species is stark, almost fundamental.

For most Awakened—whether Elf, Dwarf, or Human—mana was a pure force, a neutral energy that could be shaped and wielded according to one's will. It was balanced, allowing the wielder to create magic and control elements with precision. Even with years of practice, it required discipline, refinement, and a deep connection to nature or the world around them. But it never twisted the soul.

Demonic energy, on the other hand, was an entirely different beast.

It wasn't just a form of mana—it was violent, corrosive, and filled with malice. Unlike the natural flow of regular mana, demonic energy raged like a storm, constantly threatening to spiral out of control. It corrupted, sinking into its wielder's very core, twisting their thoughts, desires, and emotions.

Most demons who continued on their path of awakening and embraced this energy became vile creatures, consumed by darkness. The more they wielded this energy, the more it ate away at their humanity, leaving nothing but a lust for power and destruction.

But that's not the only difference.

Demons, unlike the other Awakened species, don't rely on external resources as much to get stronger. While Elves required centuries of growth, honing their connection to nature, and Dwarves needed rare ores and years of meticulous crafting to reach their full potential, demons advanced quickly. They didn't need the same refinement or patience. Instead, they accumulated their power directly into their demonic core, a vessel that allowed them to absorb and store energy at an accelerated rate. They grew in power faster, quicker, and more explosively than any other species.

But that speed came with a cost.

While their ability to accumulate power quickly made them dangerous, it was also their greatest weakness. The more demonic energy they absorbed, the more their desires—whether for blood, dominance, or destruction—began to take over. It made them arrogant, reckless, and prone to losing control. Their emotions, their primal urges, all fed back into the very energy they wielded, creating a cycle of corruption.

And that is their main weakness.

"So, you've got some tricks up your sleeve. Dodging won't save you for long, human. I'll rip you apart, piece by piece."

"Heh... We will see about that..." I muttered, my eyes still locked on Zharokath as his void energy pulsed dangerously around him. He stood there, brimming with power, every muscle tensed.

'At the end, nothing but a low born.'

Void energy is indeed dangerous, as it can distort the space and the fundamental property of the mana itself.

The energy.

His muscles tensed, his eyes burning with intent as his void energy crackled around him, distorting the very air. His frustration had given way to cold calculation, and now he was ready to end this fight.

He wasn't the type to drag things out—he knew his location was compromised. If I had found him, others might be on their way.

And a demon like Zharokath didn't enjoy loose ends.

With a savage snarl, he launched himself at me again, this time even faster than before. His speed was immense—far beyond anything I could match physically. His claws, now coated with demonic energy, shimmered.

The air seemed to warp as he tore toward me, each step a calculated movement designed to end the fight as quickly as possible.

I barely had time to react.

-CLANG!-

I deflected the first strike with my dagger, the impact sending tremors through my arm. His strength was overwhelming, far more than I could handle in a direct clash. The force of the blow sent me skidding backward, my boots digging into the ground as I fought to maintain my balance.

But Zharokath wasn't letting up. He pressed the attack, his claws slashing through the air with terrifying speed, each strike emitting dark tendrils of void energy that threatened to tear me apart.

-CLANK! CLANK!-

I parried and dodged as best as I could, the wind from his attacks cutting through the space around me. Every time our weapons met, the sheer power behind his strikes sent shockwaves through my body. His speed was relentless, his movements precise and controlled. There was no hesitation in him now—he wanted me dead, and he was going to make it happen fast.

'Too strong... too fast...'

I couldn't afford to stay on the defensive forever. His raw power would overwhelm me eventually.

But that was the difference between us—I had patience, and I knew how to exploit his weaknesses.

Demons, especially ones like Zharokath, always became reckless when they thought victory was in sight.

He slashed at me again, this time aiming for my throat, but I twisted my body, ducking under his arm just in time. His claws ripped through the air above me, missing by mere inches.

As I moved, I summoned the storm within me again, activating [Typhoon Burst] in a controlled, precise manner.

-BOOM!-

The burst of wind exploded from my feet, propelling me backward, gaining distance from his relentless onslaught.

The force of the maneuver sent me into the air, twisting away from his lethal claws. But this time, I didn't stop to retreat.

As I landed, I immediately unleashed a barrage of mana-infused projectiles; each one imbued with the full power of [Celestalith] in its ranged form.

-PIU! PIU! PIU!-

The mana bullets tore through the air, heading straight for Zharokath. He snarled, raising his arms to block, the dark energy of the void swirling around him to shield his body.

The projectiles collided with his defenses, exploding in bursts of energy that rocked the room, but he barely flinched.

His demonic aura absorbed the brunt of the impact, but the blasts slowed him down, forcing him to stop his charge for just a moment.

'Now!'

I activated [Shadow Leap], slipping into the darkness just as Zharokath recovered from the explosions. He blinked, his eyes scanning the room, but I was already behind him.

Reappearing in the shadows, I swung my dagger in a low arc, aiming for the back of his legs where his armor was thinnest.

-CLANG!-

The blade struck true, slicing through the tendons just above his knee. Zharokath let out a roar of pain as his leg buckled beneath him, his speed faltering for the first time.

"ARGH! You... insect!" he snarled, spinning around with a vicious backhand swipe, but I was already gone, vanishing into the shadows again.

'Now a wide area attack.'

Surprisingly, it is really easy to predict what your opponent will do when they are agitated, especially if you know what type of character they are.

A snarl was let out first.

BOOM!

Followed by a sudden surge of demonic energy as the hands were slammed into the ground. Dark tendrils of void energy exploded outward, warping the space around him as they snaked in every direction.

The sheer force of the attack cracked the stone floor, sending a wave of destruction through the room. The tendrils moved fast, tearing through walls, floors, and anything in their path. He was trying to force me out, hoping his void energy would either catch me or flush me into the open.

But, well, it was obvious.

SWOOSH! As the void tendrils shot toward me, I slipped into the shadows, avoiding the attack with [Shadow Leap]. The dark energy passed harmlessly through where I had been standing moments earlier, destroying the walls and leaving deep gashes in the stone.

From the shadows, I pulled out a small, shiny marble—one of the tools I had prepared specifically for this fight. A blinding flash bomb, designed to disorient even the most powerful foes for a brief moment. Zharokath's senses were sharp, but this would be enough to blind him temporarily.

I waited, timing it perfectly. Just as his wide area attack began to slow, I activated the marble and tossed it into the air right in front of him.

-FLASH!-

The marble exploded in a brilliant burst of light, blinding him instantly.

He staggered back, his hands instinctively going to his face as he tried to shield his eyes from the sudden assault.

That was my cue.

Without wasting a second, I darted forward.

From all of the virtual meridians that I had formed in my head, the mana circulated all across my body, taking the [Storm Stance] form within, enhancing my speed as I circled around him.

I lashed out with my dagger, carving shallow cuts along his exposed skin. One slash across his arm. Another across his ribs. A third across his back.

-CLANG! CLANG!-

Each strike was precise, and none ever missed.

Zharokath's demonic hide was tough, but my celestial blade cut through it like butter, leaving glowing red trails where the wounds began to form.

He let out another roar of pain, swinging wildly. But his attacks were blind and frantic. He couldn't see me. He couldn't catch me.

'Time is over.'

But then, the time was over. And this trick would no longer work. Most of the superhumans were all monsters, after all, and they evolved and adapted fast.

Their bodies were all enhanced, and a mere trick of nerves would no longer work a second time.

And just like that, Zharokath's eyes snapped open, burning with renewed fury. His demonic energy pulsed outward, crackling as it rippled through the air, distorting the space around us.

"ENOUGH!" he bellowed, his voice filled with raw, unbridled rage. His body shifted as he stood tall, the void energy swirling around him, darker and more potent than before. The air grew thick with his malevolent aura, warping and twisting reality itself.

Then, without warning, he moved—faster than before. His massive frame, despite its wounds, shot toward me with terrifying speed. I barely had time to react as his claws swiped at me, glowing with a deadly void energy that could tear through anything.

I activated [Shadowborne], slipping into the shadows to evade his attack, but something was wrong.

The shadows... they didn't respond.

'Tssk.'

He had used his ability.

And a sharp pain flared in my chest.

Chapter 616 136.6 - The Hunt

Zharokath stood amidst the destruction, his towering figure emanating pure malevolence as he surveyed the room. The void energy pulsed around him like a living thing, warping the air and distorting reality in his immediate vicinity. His eyes, burning with void energy, locked onto the human who had dared challenge him.

At first, Zharokath had considered this fight little more than a minor inconvenience. He had been so certain of his superiority, so convinced that this "worm" of a human would be crushed beneath the weight of his power.

'Heh, another fool who believes they can stand against a demon of the Void Clan,' Zharokath thought, watching as his opponent maneuvered with surprising speed, using tricks and strategies that, while impressive, were ultimately insignificant in the face of his overwhelming might. 'How tedious. I've wasted enough time here already.'

But as the battle wore on, Zharokath began to feel something he had not expected—pain. It was faint at first, a dull ache in his leg where the human's blade had struck.

He brushed it off as nothing more than a minor wound, the result of carelessness on his part. After all, this human had only managed to land a blow due to tricks and shadow-based abilities.

But then, the pain intensified. More cuts appeared along his arms, his ribs, his back. His demonic hide, though tough and nearly impenetrable, had been sliced by the human's celestial weapon.

Zharokath's eyes narrowed as he staggered, momentarily taken aback by the realization that this insignificant creature had managed to injure him—not just once, but several times. Each wound burned, and with every passing second, the pain became harder to ignore.

'How dare he,' Zharokath thought, his mind swirling with anger. 'How dare this worm inflict harm on me. I'll tear him apart for this insolence!'

But just as he prepared to unleash his full fury, something more disturbing began to set in. His vision blurred for a moment, and the air around him seemed to thicken. The void energy swirling around him, usually a potent force of destruction, wavered for just a second. He could feel the burning cuts on his body, the celestial energy from the human's blade lingering in his wounds, preventing them from healing as quickly as they should have.

Zharokath's eyes widened with shock, though he quickly masked it with a snarl of defiance. He was a demon of the Void Clan.

How could a mere human inflict such damage?

Especially such a young one at that.

This bastard.....He didn't even look 20 years old or whatever.

His pride seethed at the thought. He had miscalculated. This human wasn't just another insignificant insect.

'Damn this human...' Zharokath thought, his body tense as he tried to push through the pain. He could feel the celestial energy disrupting his void abilities, making it harder to fully tap into the depths of his power. 'I underestimated him.'

Zharokath's arrogance had blinded him to the real threat, and now, he was paying the price. His breathing grew heavier, each breath filled with a mixture of rage and disbelief. How had he allowed this to happen? How had this creature managed to land so many blows?

The human, however, wasn't giving him a moment to recover. From the corner of his eye, Zharokath saw his opponent darting through the shadows, using his speed and precision to stay out of reach while delivering more precise strikes.

Zharokath's fury boiled over. "ENOUGH!" he bellowed, his voice shaking the air. His demonic energy pulsed outward, dark tendrils of void magic ripping through the space around him.

'Tssk.....The fact that I am forced to use this against a mere bastard...' Through the haze of pain and anger, Zharokath decided to use one of his clan's most potent abilities, one that few outside the Void Clan had ever witnessed.

「Void Nullification」

With a sharp gesture, he focused his power on the shadows surrounding the human. A pulse of dark energy rippled out from Zharokath's hand, moving faster than the eye could see, latching onto the shadowy mana that had been shielding and empowering the human.

The air around the battlefield grew unnaturally still for a moment, the atmosphere charged with a sense of foreboding.

The effect was instantaneous. The shadows that had been curling protectively around the young man suddenly dissipated, vanishing as though they had never existed. The human faltered, clearly

feeling the absence of his abilities as the shadows—his primary tool for evasion and stealth—were rendered useless. His eyes widened in shock as he attempted to summon the shadows once more, but they no longer responded to his will.

Zharokath's smirk returned, his confidence slowly reestablishing itself as he saw the momentary panic flicker across his opponent's face.

"Annoying shadows," Zharokath muttered under his breath, before raising his hand once more. He wasn't done. The human might have been stripped of his shadow abilities, but Zharokath intended to crush him entirely.

「Void Suppression」

"Void Suppression," Zharokath intoned, his voice filled with cold malice.

With this second art, the air around the young man began to ripple, almost imperceptibly at first, but quickly growing in intensity. The space surrounding him distorted, bending as the void energy expanded outward from Zharokath. The ripple effect drew the very air away, creating a vacuum-like pressure that compressed the atmosphere around the human, pulling and dragging him inward. It was as though the very space he occupied was collapsing, folding in on itself.

The young man gasped, his limbs growing heavy as the pressure increased.

'Time to finish this,' Zharokath thought, his gaze darkening as he dashed forward, his form a blur of dark energy. He aimed straight for the young man's face, his claws gleaming, ready to tear through flesh and bone.

But just as Zharokath closed in, the human's legs suddenly moved, charged with mana. In a split second, the young man kicked off the ground, propelling himself upward with an explosive burst of energy.

—SWOOSH!

It was the same maneuver Zharokath had seen earlier—the one where the human used a burst of force to propel himself backward, gaining distance.

But Zharokath had already seen this trick once. His eyes narrowed in anticipation, and this time, he was prepared. As the young man's leg lashed out toward him, Zharokath dodged to the right, avoiding the kick with ease.

'Foolish,' Zharokath thought, his smirk widening. 'You should have learned by now. I am beyond you.'

With a cruel smile, Zharokath positioned himself to strike, his hand crackling with void energy. "Die," he muttered, his voice cold and final. He prepared to tear into the human's exposed flank, confident that this battle was over.

But just as he was about to strike, something caught his attention. The young man—who should have been off-balance after his failed kick—was already looking right at him. Zharokath's smirk faltered for a brief moment, his eyes catching a faint glow from the human's arm.

'Wait... what?'

Before Zharokath could react, the young man's arm shot forward, a concentrated blast of mana erupting from his hand. The energy rippled through the air, not from his legs as Zharokath had anticipated, but from his arms—an entirely different technique than what Zharokath had expected.

—BOOM!

The mana blast struck Zharokath's face with brutal force, sending a shockwave of pain radiating through his skull. The impact was so sudden, so precise, that Zharokath stumbled backward, momentarily dazed. His vision blurred, the world spinning around him as the stinging pain seared across his face.

"Grrraaaaah!" Zharokath roared, clutching his face as the pain coursed through him. He hadn't anticipated the human's quick thinking, nor the redirection of his mana to his arms. The attack had caught him off guard, and the force of the blast had been enough to momentarily knock him off balance.

'Damn it... how did he...' Zharokath's thoughts raced, his pride burning as he reeled from the unexpected blow.

But that was not the end.

SWOOSH!

Suddenly, his eyes captured a bunch of shiny grey objects flying at him.

'This....'

SLASH! SLASH! SLASH! Zharokath's snarl of pain twisted into a furious growl as the sting of the chakrams cut across his body. Each spinning blade, formed of grey-colored mana, slashed through his skin, leaving trails of pain in their wake. His demonic hide, though resilient, was not immune to the concentrated strikes. Blood dripped from the shallow wounds as Zharokath's fury boiled over.

'This... insolence!' he thought, his pride seething. The human had dared to hurt him, to make him bleed. His body ached from the unexpected blows, his mind reeling at the speed and precision with which the young man had acted.

Without hesitation, Zharokath tapped into his reserves of void energy. His eyes glowed with malevolent power as he activated another one of his clan's fearsome techniques.

「Void Veil」

A shimmering dark barrier of void energy enveloped his body, absorbing the remaining chakrams as they collided with the protective field. The chakrams spun violently against the barrier, but they couldn't penetrate it, deflecting harmlessly into the distance. The swirling void shield shimmered as it absorbed the impact, but Zharokath knew that this technique came with a price—high mana consumption and a long cooldown period. Still, it was necessary.

'Enough of this game,' Zharokath thought, his fury mounting. Though his Void Veil had saved him from further harm, it had drained a considerable amount of his energy. The pressure was building, and now, his mind was set on one thing—ending this human once and for all.

With the barrier still flickering around him, Zharokath gritted his teeth, his eyes blazing with rage. The cuts on his body only fueled his anger, and he could no longer contain the seething hatred within him.

'You've forced my hand, worm,' Zharokath thought, his gaze darkening.

He had one more technique up his sleeve, one that consumed an enormous amount of energy and that he had not yet mastered.

The power of Void Cage was something that only the most ancient and powerful demons could wield to perfection, and though Zharokath couldn't yet fully control it, he didn't need perfection, not against this human.

With a deep growl, he activated Void Cage.

The air around them warped, and for a brief, almost imperceptible moment, everything froze. A dark pulse of void energy spread from Zharokath's outstretched hand, enveloping the area in a shimmering, distorted field. The young man, in the middle of preparing for his next move, suddenly found his body locked in place. His limbs refused to respond as the space around him twisted, locking him in a temporal stasis for a split second.

It was subtle and quick—barely a fraction of a second—but that was all Zharokath needed.

The void energy crackled violently as Zharokath rushed forward, closing the distance between them in an instant. His claws gleamed with dark energy as he prepared to strike. His fury, his hatred, and his demonic power all coalesced into one savage blow aimed at the human's exposed chest.

"This is the end for you," Zharokath growled, his voice filled with cold malice. The void pulsed around him, and he slashed downward, ready to finish this once and for all.

But then something happened.

—THUMP! A thump of heart reached his ears.

Chapter 617 136.7 - The Hunt

Zharokath's claws were inches away from the human's chest when it happened—an unfamiliar, unsettling sensation rippled through his body.

—THUMP!—

A strange thump, like the beat of a heart, echoed in his ears. It reverberated through his skull, and with it came a wave of weakness that spread from his core, stealing the strength from his limbs.

'What... is this?' Zharokath's mind raced as his body began to falter. He could feel it—his power was slipping away. The void energy that surged through his veins, the raw strength that had carried him through countless battles, was suddenly vanishing, leaving him hollow.

Or was it vanishing?

It was a sensation that he had never experienced.

His vision blurred, the once razor-sharp focus clouded by an overwhelming sense of 'fatigue.' He tried to push through it, to summon the last reserves of his demonic energy, but nothing responded.

His body refused to obey. His legs buckled beneath him, and he stumbled forward, his claws missing their mark by a wide margin.

—THUD!—

Zharokath collapsed to the ground, gasping as he tried to understand what had just happened. His eyes, wide with disbelief, scanned the space around him. How could this be? His power, his very essence.....

And it was happening so quickly, so completely, that he couldn't fathom what had caused it.

He forced his gaze upward to lay eyes on his opponent. The human was standing still, his posture calm, his expression unreadable.

Zharokath's head pounded with the sound of that strange heartbeat, growing louder and louder, but something else caught his attention.

The human's mask—a simple facade that had concealed his face throughout their fight—was no longer there.

'Huh?'

Zharokath's breath hitched as his gaze locked onto the face beneath the mask. His eyes widened in shock, the burning anger momentarily replaced by confusion and, for the first time in this battle, fear.

The human was.....

'What?'

Smiling.

A smile that felt like it was mocking him.

THUD! And then Zharokath's body hit the ground hard, his muscles stiffening as if every fiber of his being was rebelling against him. The smile on the young man's face still haunted him, mocking his arrogance, mocking his defeat. The moment his body collapsed, a sharp, searing pain exploded in his gut, spreading like wildfire through his veins.

THUD!

'What... what is this?' Zharokath's thoughts scrambled as his body convulsed uncontrollably. His stomach churned violently, the burning sensation growing with every passing second. The pain was unlike anything he had ever experienced—it was deep, corrosive, as though something was eating away at him from the inside out.

His heartbeat grew louder, pounding in his ears with terrifying intensity.

THUMP! THUMP!

The rhythm was erratic, racing faster and faster, each pulse sending shockwaves of agony through his body. His breath grew shallow, his vision blurring at the edges as his body trembled. The sensation was unmistakable now—he had been poisoned. And not just with any ordinary toxin.

'How... How is this possible?' Zharokath's mind screamed as he struggled to regain control of his body. Demons were naturally resistant to poisons. Their mana, infused with corrosive, dark energy,

made them almost immune to the toxins that would kill others. Demons frequently used poison themselves, and over time, they had developed an extraordinary tolerance to it.

But this... this poison was different.

His void energy, which should have been combating the effects, seemed to do nothing. The more he tried to summon it, the more his body rejected the command. The burning in his muscles intensified, his veins feeling like they were being scorched from within.

His vision blurred, but he forced his gaze up to the young man who still stood there, watching him, unmoving.

But there was something inside his eyes.

And that human also felt familiar, like he had just recently seen him. But at that moment, he did not have the mind to recall who it was.

Zharokath's eyes widened in disbelief. 'How could a human... poison me?' He growled, the sound weak and guttural, filled with both rage and fear. His mind reeled as he fought against the poison's grip, trying to piece together how this was even possible. No mere human could craft a toxin capable of grounding a demon of his caliber.

But this human wasn't mere.

In that smile, in those purple eyes.

There was something eerie....

Something...

Zharokath could feel it now, something dark and unnerving emanating from him.

'I am feeling fear?' His heart continued to pound erratically in his chest, each beat sending a new wave of agony through him. His limbs convulsed, his muscles burning, and yet, despite the overwhelming pain, Zharokath forced his body to move.

'No way!' With immense effort, he managed to lift himself slightly off the ground. His vision swam, the world around him tilting as if reality itself was slipping away. But he couldn't afford to give in. Not yet.

'If I can still move... then there's time,' Zharokath told himself, clenching his teeth against the pain. He had to act fast.

'Antidote.' Zharokath's eyes narrowed as he fought through the searing pain tearing through his body. His muscles spasmed, and the poison felt like fire coursing through his veins, but there was no panic in his mind. Not anymore.

'This... this is nothing but poison,' Zharokath reminded himself, a grim smirk forming on his lips despite the agony. His body may have been reeling from the attack, but he wasn't unfamiliar with poisons.

Demons, especially those of his rank, had encountered all manner of toxins in their lives, each more dangerous than the last. And no matter how strange or potent this one seemed, it was still an external threat—something he could counter.

"Even if you've played your tricks, human," Zharokath growled through gritted teeth, his voice laced with a venomous arrogance, "you're still nothing more than that... a mere human. What can you truly do against me?"

His smirk widened, even as the poison continued its assault on his body. The young man was standing still, unmoving, which could only mean one thing—he was still trapped in the confines of Void Cage. Zharokath's technique had rendered him immobile, buying him the precious moments he needed to rid himself of this cursed poison.

"When I get rid of this poison, I will personally make you food for dogs."

With a grunt of effort, Zharokath reached toward his waist, his fingers twitching as he called upon his spatial storage. His vast collection of artifacts, gathered from across countless realms, contained the answer to every problem he had ever faced, and this situation would be no different.

'Antidote... I just need the artifact,' Zharokath thought, his smirk growing as he searched through the spatial void for the item he needed. The pressure in his chest, the burning in his veins, all of it would soon be purged once he found it.

As he focused on his storage, his mind swirled with confidence. The human, despite his tricks and this strange poison, was still powerless. Void Cage had trapped him, and Zharokath had the upper hand. He still had time. He could cleanse himself, recover, and crush this insolent fool beneath his heel.

Finally, his hand closed around the familiar shape of the artifact. A twisted, black amulet with a glowing red gem in the center—an ancient relic capable of cleansing any poison or foreign substance from his body. He pulled it from the spatial void, his eyes glinting with satisfaction.

"Did you truly think you could defeat me, human?" Zharokath muttered, his voice dripping with contempt as he prepared to activate the artifact. "You've underestimated—"

SWOOSH! Zharokath barely had time to react before something sharp sliced through the air. His fingers, which had been tightly clutching the amulet, were suddenly severed cleanly at the knuckles.

"ARGHHH!" Zharokath howled in agony, his eyes widening in shock as the twisted, black amulet slipped from his now-maimed hand and fell to the ground, clattering against the stone floor. His heart raced, panic flooding his senses as he stared at his bleeding fingers, unable to comprehend what had just happened.

But before he could process the pain or the loss of the artifact, another sharp whistling filled the air.

SLASH! SLASH! SLASH!

Countless chakrams, swirling with grey mana, flew from all directions, slicing into his body with terrifying precision. Each spinning blade cut deep, leaving trails of crimson blood in their wake. Zharokath's body convulsed as the pain surged through him, his demonic form struggling to withstand the onslaught.

His heartbeat roared in his ears, a frantic rhythm that seemed to mock him with every thud. The poison, still coursing through his veins, combined with the relentless slashes from the chakrams, was too much for even his hardened body to endure.

More blood splattered across the ground, and Zharokath fell to his knees, gasping for breath. His once-commanding form now reduced to a trembling, broken mess. He coughed violently, blood spraying from his mouth as he tried to rise, only to find his strength slipping away.

Through the haze of pain and the crimson mist clouding his vision, Zharokath's gaze fell on the young man.

Still unmoving. Still in the same position.

The young man hadn't done anything—at least, not visibly. But Zharokath's eyes, wild with confusion and pain, shifted to the young man's fingers.

It was there he saw it.

The subtle flicker of movement. A quiet, controlled motion.

'No...' Zharokath's mind screamed, but his body betrayed him, sinking lower as the poison and wounds drained the last of his energy. He had been watching all this time, confident that his Void Cage had rendered the human powerless, but the truth was far more horrifying.

The young man had been waiting. Not trapped. Not helpless.

He had been in control all along.

Zharokath's breath came in ragged gasps, the taste of blood thick in his throat. His vision began to blur, darkness creeping in from the edges as the weight of his injuries pulled him down.

His pride, his arrogance, had led him to this moment.

"How...?" Zharokath choked out, his voice barely a whisper, filled with disbelief and fear. His eyes remained locked on the young man, who stood calmly, his gaze unwavering.

And at that moment, the young man finally turned his head to his face, his purple eyes meeting his.

"What do you mean how? You are just inferior."

Chapter 618 136.8 - The Hunt

What does it mean to have your vengeance? Why do some of us, after everything has been taken, chase after it like it's the only thing keeping us alive?

For those who have never lost anyone, revenge might seem like an obsession born out of selfishness. A futile pursuit. They see someone consumed by anger and destruction, and they shake their heads, wondering why anyone would sacrifice so much for something as intangible as vengeance. But they don't understand.

For those who have never tasted that particular brand of agony—of having your world torn apart—vengeance seems pointless. An act born from pride or ego, maybe. A pursuit for closure, when closure doesn't exist. They are the ones who can walk away, the ones who can turn their backs and say it's over.

'But it feels so good.....'

I looked down at Zharokath, wriggling beneath my foot, his once imposing form now reduced to a pathetic, broken shell. His void energy, once so oppressive, flickered weakly around him.

My breathing was steady, but my heart?

My heart was pounding with fury, a fury that had been burning inside me for as long as I could remember.

Or was it fury?

No, it was not.

'Filth. That's all you demons are...'

It was something else.

Something different.

'Ecstasy.' As I stared down at Zharokath, the demon who had once stood so arrogantly, so confident in his power, I felt an overwhelming surge of ecstasy.

'Filth. That's all you demons are...'

I could feel a smile tugging at my lips, the corners curling as the realization settled over me. This moment, seeing a demon writhing under my boot, helpless, was something that could never be replicated. It wasn't just satisfaction; it was rapture. It was the culmination of years of hatred, of burning, seething rage that had festered within me.

This was the same breed of creature that had taken everything from me. The same demons that had brought death to my sister. And now, here I was, towering over one of them, watching as he struggled, as he looked at me with wide, desperate eyes.

'Look at you. You feel like a worm, don't you?'

I felt my smile widen as I pressed down harder with my boot. Zharokath let out a strangled gasp, his body jerking in pain as I applied pressure. His eyes, once filled with fury, now reflected only terror. The fear of death. The fear of knowing that he was completely at my mercy.

"You are just... inferior," I whispered, my voice dripping with satisfaction. The words felt perfect, rolling off my tongue as if they had been waiting for this moment. Zharokath's body twitched at the sound, his panic growing, but there was nothing he could do. He was mine now.

I bent down, bringing my face closer to his, just enough to watch the flicker of despair grow in his eyes. "Do you know why?" I asked, my tone almost mockingly soft. "Do you know why you're so beneath me?"

He tried to speak, his lips quivering, but nothing came out except a ragged gasp. His body was broken, his strength gone. He had nothing left but the pathetic shell of what once was.

I couldn't hold my laugh while gripping Celestalith tighter.

"I'll tell you why," I said, lifting the blade and driving it into his leg with a slow, deliberate motion.

"AAAAAAARGH!"

Zharokath screamed, his body convulsing under the pain, but I only leaned in closer, reveling in it. The sound of his suffering was music, and I drank it in, feeling it pulse through me like a drug.

"You," I continued, my voice calm and steady despite the cruelty of my actions, "you thought your void made you powerful. That it gave you some right to take whatever you want, to destroy whoever you please." I twisted the blade, watching his eyes roll back in his head, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

"But you were wrong," I whispered, pulling the blade free and slashing it across his other leg, severing the tendons. He howled in agony, his body jerking, but there was no escape. Not from this.

'But you will believe.'

For starters....The thing before me is a demon.

Something who does things like this thinks like this.

In this situation, when I have yet to kill it when I am looking down on it like this, it will believe.

Its cunning mind will continue working, its gears spinning.

Survival instinct will take its place, its innate nature revealing itself.

The desire to survive.

Every sentient being has it imprinted on their minds.

And the thing before me is no different.

I yanked the blade free from Zharokath's leg, the blood spurting from the fresh wound as its body convulsed beneath me. The way it screamed, the way its form writhed in agony—it was a sight I couldn't help but savor.

Its pain, its suffering, was intoxicating, sending waves of pleasure through me. This thing—this creature—was at my mercy, and the ecstasy of it all was overwhelming.

I smirked, looking down at it, my fingers tightening around the hilt of Celestialith. "Do you know why?" I asked. "Do you know why you were wrong?"

Without waiting for an answer, I knelt down, gripping one of its hands. Its claws twitched weakly, coated with its own blood.

I lifted the blade, holding its hand firmly as I positioned the sharp edge just beneath its claws. "Let me show you why," I whispered, my eyes locking onto its gaze, drinking in the terror reflected there.

Then, with slow, deliberate pressure, I pushed the blade forward, stabbing it directly under its claws, piercing the quicks. The response was instant.

"AAAAAHHHH!" It shrieked, its body thrashing violently as the blade dug deeper, tearing through sensitive nerves and sending waves of excruciating pain through its form. I could see its eyes rolling back, its chest heaving, its breath coming in desperate gasps.

But I didn't stop. I pressed harder, twisting the blade under its claws, feeling the satisfying crunch of bone and tendon giving way.

"You were wrong," I hissed, leaning in closer. "Because you thought that your disguise was perfect. Because you could just come into the human domain and infiltrate this place. You think you can restore your 'Void Clan' to its former glory."

The moment I spoke those words, I felt it. The thing beneath me—Zharokath—shuddered. Its entire body trembled violently, as if the weight of those revelations hit it like a physical blow. I looked down, my eyes narrowing, and there it was—pure, unadulterated terror gleaming in its widened eyes.

It knew that I knew.

For the first time in this entire battle, it wasn't just fear of death that filled its gaze. No, it was something much deeper. Panic. Desperation. The last shred of hope it had clung to had been ripped away.

Zharokath's lips quivered, its breath coming in ragged, uneven bursts. The once-mighty demon, now broken and writhing under my boot, struggled to speak. Finally, it managed to choke out the words, barely audible through its gasps of pain.

"H-how... how can you... know?" It breathed heavily, its voice filled with disbelief, the weight of the truth crashing down on it. "How do you know about...?"

I felt a slow grin spread across my face, savoring the look of sheer horror in its eyes. My smirk widened, and I leaned in closer, driving the blade just a fraction deeper under its claws, eliciting another choked cry of agony.

"I know everything," I whispered, my voice cold and dripping with satisfaction. "Everything about you... and everything about your pathetic clan."

Zharokath's body jerked, the pain surging through it, but its eyes—those wide, terrified eyes—never left mine. I could see the desperation growing as I continued, my words slicing through it like the blade in its hand.

"You thought you could rebuild your clan? That you could restore the 'Void Clan' to its former glory? After you lost the Primordial of Void?"

Zharokath's body tensed at the mention of the Primordial, a look of disbelief flashing in its eyes. I could see it now—the cracks forming, the last pieces of its arrogance crumbling away.

"Oh, yes," I said, my voice filled with dark amusement. "I know how your clan scattered like rats after that defeat. How you've been hiding in the shadows, clinging to whatever scraps of power you could find, feeding on whatever remains of your former strength."

Zharokath's breath hitched, the weight of my words sinking deeper with every passing second. I could feel it—the sheer panic that gripped it now. It knew there was no escaping this. No denying what was about to happen.

"And you," I continued, pressing the blade a little harder under its claws, twisting it ever so slightly, "you've been working under the shadows, haven't you? Sending countless humans as sacrifices... as meals... to feed the Primordial."

I leaned in closer, my voice barely a whisper, but the weight of my words was deafening. "All to make it reborn."

Zharokath's body convulsed beneath me, its eyes wide with horror as the truth spilled out. Its breath came in ragged gasps, but it couldn't speak.

But at the same time, I could also feel something else underneath.

'Heh.....Now you are doing it....'

A small current of mana, subtle and carefully controlled, was flowing through Zharokath's body, pooling into something just beneath the surface. Even in his broken, helpless state, this thing still had the gall to try and pull off a last-ditch effort. A final act of desperation.

I almost laughed. It was pathetic, really.

Zharokath's body trembled beneath me, and as I caught sight of the faint glow of mana, the demon began to speak again, his voice weak and broken, but deliberate. "You... you can't understand," he rasped, his voice barely above a whisper. "We... we're... destined for greatness... the Void Clan... we... we will rise again."

I eased my grip on the blade just a little.

"Destined for greatness?" I mused, my voice low and taunting. "Is that what you believe? That your scattered clan, hiding like rats, can ever regain what it's lost?"

Zharokath gasped, his body twitching as he tried to summon more of his strength. "You... don't understand... we have... we have plans... the Primordial... it will rise... and when it does... nothing will stop us..."

I leaned in closer, my smirk widening. "Go on," I whispered. "Tell me all about it."

Zharokath's breaths were ragged, and his voice grew weaker with every word. "You can't stop it... no one can... we've been working... for centuries... for this moment... the sacrifices... all of them... for the Primordial's return..."

"And then what?" I asked, my tone mocking. "You'll rule again? You'll destroy everything and rise from the ashes?"

Zharokath's lips quivered, its eyes darting between me and the artifact, the panic barely concealed beneath his strained expression. "Yes..." he breathed. "Yes... we will... and you... you won't stop it..."

But then.

'There it is.'

The room flashed in a sudden burst of light. For a split second, the air around us crackled with energy, and then, with a sharp hiss, Zharokath's form flickered, and in an instant—

WHOOSH!

It was gone.

Or was it?

I stood there for a moment, the space where he had been lying now empty, the faint traces of its mana still lingering in the air. And then, slowly, I began to laugh.

'Pathetic.'

And then clenched my hand.

—Umbralith. Following that, [Celestalith] gleamed purple with the rings forming a sphere of gravity right in my hand.

And then....

'Bam!'

–BOOM!

Here it was. Returned.

"Huh?"

The face of surprise that he had just made.

It was pure delight.

Chapter 619 136.9 - The Hunt

Zharokath's vision blurred as he struggled to focus. Pain coursed through his body, but it was nothing compared to the crushing realization settling in his mind. His plan, his entire existence, had been played. The human before him hadn't been trapped in the Void Cage; no, he had been waiting. Watching. All along, Zharokath had been the one dancing to the human's tune, thinking he was in control.

'How...?' Zharokath's mind screamed, his body trembling with both pain and disbelief. He had seen countless humans in his time—arrogant, naive, and inferior. They all died the same, broken and powerless beneath his might. But this one...

As the human's voice echoed in his ears, the truth hit him like a hammer. This wasn't just any human. This was someone who knew everything.

The words stung. "Do you know why you're so beneath me?"

Zharokath's pride, the one thing that had sustained him through centuries of existence, cracked and shattered with every mocking word. The young man didn't just know his name. He knew about the Void Clan, the Primordial of Void, the sacrifices, the carefully orchestrated plans that had spanned

centuries. Every dark secret Zharokath had sworn to protect lay bare before this human like an open wound.

'No... this can't be,' Zharokath thought, his mind racing as he felt the last threads of control slipping from his grasp. He tried to rise, to muster the last dregs of his strength, but his limbs refused to respond. The poison, combined with the damage inflicted by the chakrams, rendered his body useless.

The human's voice continued, every syllable dripping with venomous satisfaction. Zharokath winced as the blade twisted under his claws, sending another wave of excruciating pain through his form. But the physical torment was nothing compared to the psychological one.

'He knows... about the Primordial... about everything...'

Zharokath had been careful. Meticulous. He had spent years operating in the shadows, building alliances, gathering sacrifices, and feeding the Primordial in secret. His entire existence had revolved around reviving the glory of the Void Clan, preparing for the day when they would reclaim their rightful place in the realms. He had manipulated humans, bending them to his will, making them puppets in his grand scheme.

But this human... this boy... how could he really?

'I need to escape here. I can't afford to waste any time....I need to leave.'

The mission that had been left to him, he needed to complete that. He could not afford to waste any second.

Zharokath's vision swam, his body aching with the cuts and the relentless poison coursing through him. The shock of the human's knowledge had rattled him, but as his mind fought to clear through the haze of agony, something else stirred within him—a twisted, desperate resolve.

'No... not fear,' he thought. He was a demon of the Void Clan, destined for greatness, a demon who had manipulated, bent, and broken countless beings. This human... this boy... no matter how clever, was still beneath him. There was still a way out of this, a way to turn this to his advantage. After all, humans were driven by emotion—hatred, vengeance, and arrogance. And he had seen all of it in this boy's eyes.

'You think you've won?' Zharokath's thoughts churned with scorn, even as his body continued to tremble. 'I've dealt with your kind before. You're consumed by your emotions. You're no different from the others.'

The human's smile, cruel and confident, only confirmed Zharokath's suspicion. He could see it—the hatred burning behind that mask of composure. It was a weakness, one Zharokath could still exploit.

"You... you can't understand..." Zharokath rasped, letting his voice tremble with just the right amount of desperation. "We... we're destined for greatness... the Void Clan..."

It was a lie, but a calculated one. Zharokath had always been a master of manipulation. He needed the human to believe that he was broken, that he had given up. This boy, for all his knowledge, was still arrogant, still emotional. Zharokath could see the human's desire for vengeance, the personal satisfaction in watching him suffer. And that was his opening. If the boy believed he had already won, that Zharokath was on the brink of submission, he would let his guard down. Just for a moment.

'That's all I need,' Zharokath thought, his mind racing even as his body burned with pain. 'A single opening, and I'll turn this around.'

The human leaned closer, mocking him, feeding his own ego. "Greatness? Your clan lost everything when the Primordial fell. You've been hiding like rats ever since."

Zharokath's breath hitched, but not from fear. The boy's arrogance was palpable now, and Zharokath could practically taste the rage that fueled him. It was intoxicating. The demon's lips twitched in the faintest ghost of a smile, hidden beneath the mask of pain he wore.

'Yes... keep underestimating me. Keep believing you've already won.'

He would play along, let the human believe he had the upper hand. But deep within, Zharokath's mind was working. His fingers twitched as they neared his artifact, the one hidden deep within his spatial storage, the one that could cleanse this accursed poison. If he could just get his hands on it...

The human's blade twisted deeper into his leg, and Zharokath let out a strangled gasp. But inside, he was already plotting. His mana flickered weakly, pooling into the artifact. He would escape. He would recover. He would tear this arrogant fool apart piece by piece.

Summoning the last of his strength, Zharokath activated the teleportation spell within the artifact, his body flickering as it phased out of existence.

For a brief, glorious moment, hope surged through him.

'I'll kill him. I'll show him what it means to cross the Void Clan.'

Zharokath's heart pounded with hatred, his every thought consumed by the desire for vengeance. The human had pushed him to the brink, humiliated him, but that would all change soon. Once free, Zharokath would rip him apart—piece by piece. His mind raced with thoughts of how he would break him.

'I'll crush every bone in his body,' Zharokath seethed. 'I'll tear his muscles apart, inch by inch. I'll rip his fingernails from his hands one by one and stab him until he begs for death. I'll pluck his eyes out and watch him suffer in the dark.'

His hatred burned hotter with every passing second. The image of the boy's smug face as he suffered filled his mind, fueling the dark fire of his vengeance.

But just as the teleportation spell took hold, something shifted. Zharokath felt the familiar pull of the void energy lifting him from the room, the sensation of being transported away, the relief of escape beginning to wash over him.

And then it all stopped.

Time seemed to slow, the world around him warping, bending in ways it should not. Zharokath's breath hitched, his body still mid-transit, but something was wrong—terribly wrong.

He felt it.

A pull. A drag, as though the very fabric of space and time was reversing. His body was yanked violently backward, the sensation jarring, unnatural. His vision blurred, the edges of reality distorting as the world around him twisted and pulled him back toward the room he had just left. It was as if the universe itself was refusing to let him go.

'What...?' Zharokath's eyes widened in disbelief as the familiar surroundings of the room—the cold stone floor, the dim lighting—came rushing back into view.

No.

The room spun, snapping back into place with a sickening jolt, and before Zharokath could comprehend what had happened, he was back where he started—lying on the ground, broken and bleeding.

He gasped, his body convulsing as he struggled to process the impossibility of what had just occurred. His mind, sharp and calculating, raced to understand. Had the human... reversed time? No, that wasn't possible. Was it? How could this be?

He was supposed to be free, supposed to be away, recovering, plotting his revenge. And yet, here he was—right back in the clutches of the one he hated most.

The human stood before him, completely still, the faintest trace of a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. He hadn't moved, hadn't done anything, but Zharokath felt the overwhelming weight of control emanating from him. This boy, this human, had somehow bent reality to his will, undone Zharokath's escape as if it were a mere inconvenience.

'What... what kind of power is this?' Zharokath thought, his mind reeling.

Panic, for the first time in centuries, began to creep into his chest, but he refused to give in to it. He would not let this human see him break.

'No... no, this isn't over.' Zharokath forced himself to focus, to think. 'I can still escape. I can still turn this around.'

Zharokath's mind screamed for survival. He could feel the poison coursing through his veins, the pain lancing through his body, but his will refused to yield. His hatred for the human standing before him burned brighter than the agony, fueling his desperate need to escape.

'This isn't over. I won't fall here,' he told himself, his mind racing as he activated the artifact once again. His body convulsed with the last dregs of his mana, pouring everything he had into it, focusing on the one goal—to escape.

The artifact pulsed in his hand, responding weakly at first. His reserves of demonic energy were running dangerously low, and he knew it wouldn't be enough. His eyes flicked toward the human, whose expression remained infuriatingly calm.

'I just need more power. Just enough to get away,' Zharokath thought, his desperation rising.

Without hesitation, Zharokath made the decision to sacrifice part of his core. A dangerous gamble, one that would weaken him significantly, but survival was all that mattered. If he lived, he could recover. He could rebuild. But for that, he needed to escape.

His core, the very essence of his being, began to crack as he siphoned energy from it. The sharp pain that followed was nearly unbearable, but Zharokath pushed through it, his thoughts singularly focused. The artifact flared to life, glowing brighter with the stolen energy, and he felt the familiar pull of the void beginning to surround him once more.

'Yes... this will work. He can't stop me twice,' Zharokath thought with renewed confidence. His body began to phase out of reality, the edges of his form blurring as the void energy enveloped him.

But then, just as the pull of the void reached its peak, something went wrong.

The room didn't disappear. His body didn't dissolve into the ether. Instead, the sickening sensation of being dragged backward hit him again—harder this time. His form, already halfway into the void, was violently yanked back into the physical world. The backlash of the failed teleportation hit him like a hammer, sending waves of excruciating pain ripping through his already broken body.

Zharokath's eyes widened in disbelief, horror flooding his mind as he realized what had happened. He had used everything—his mana, a piece of his core—and still, it wasn't enough. He couldn't escape.

He couldn't even flee.

"AHAHAHAHAHA!"

And the maniacal laugh hit the final nail on the coffin.

Chapter 620 136.10 - The Hunt

Everything had played out exactly as I wanted.

Zharokath's desperate attempt to escape, the way he clung to that pathetic shred of hope—it was all so predictable. These demons, for all their arrogance and cruelty, were always the same when their lives were on the line. They scrambled, they begged, they tried to run, thinking that somehow, they could slip away from the inevitable. And every time, it filled me with an intoxicating thrill.

I watched as his body began to phase out of existence, the artifact glowing with the last dregs of his demonic energy. He had given everything to power that spell. He really thought he could get away. But I had anticipated it—planned for it.

Just as he began to vanish, I activated Umbralith. The sphere of gravity formed in my hand, crackling with power, tethering him to this room. The void energy that should have carried him to safety was dragged back, collapsing in on itself. And there it was—the moment I had been waiting for.

BOOM!

Zharokath reappeared with a violent crash, his body slamming back into the cold stone floor, broken and bleeding. His eyes—those wide, terrified eyes—looked up at me, filled with disbelief, pain, and the most delicious kind of fear. He couldn't understand what had happened, how he had been ripped back from the edge of escape.

"Huh?" he muttered, confusion clouding his features. That face, that precious expression of shock—it was pure delight to me. He had no idea how much I relished it.

"AHAHAHAHAHA!" The laugh spilled out of me, manic and uncontrollable. I couldn't resist it. Watching him struggle, watching him crumble—it was intoxicating. Every single time.

They were all the same, these demons. When their power failed, when their lives were truly at risk, they all resorted to the same pathetic tricks. They always tried to escape. It didn't matter how strong they were, how mighty they thought themselves to be—when faced with death, they all broke down the same way. And I couldn't get enough of it.

'You can't resist it, can you? You always try to flee when it's too late.'

The thought surged through me as I stared down at the crumpled form of Zharokath. His body twitched weakly, his breaths ragged, his pride shattered into a thousand pieces. I could feel the desperation emanating from him—the frantic, wild hope that maybe, somehow, he could still escape.

But there was no escape.

Not from me.

I leaned in, my eyes fixed on his trembling form. "Did you really think you could get away, Zharokath?" I whispered, my voice dripping with satisfaction. "Did you think you could just vanish, disappear like all the others?"

His eyes flickered with the last glimmers of hope, but I crushed it with my next words.

"You're not going anywhere."

The despair that washed over him, the way his face twisted in realization—it was euphoric. I watched as the hope drained from his eyes, replaced by something far more satisfying. Helplessness.

I needed him to feel it. That crushing weight of knowing there was no escape. That no matter how hard he tried, no matter what power he called upon, it was useless. I needed him to understand the same helplessness that so many had felt at his hands. The same helplessness I had felt when I lost everything.

He coughed, blood splattering from his mouth as his body convulsed. "You... you can't... do this..." he muttered weakly, but there was no strength in his words. Only desperation.

I crouched down, gripping his chin and forcing him to look at me. "Oh, but I can," I said, my smile widening. "And I will. You see, Zharokath, I don't just want to kill you. No, that would be too easy. Too quick. I want you to understand what true despair feels like. I want you to lose everything."

His eyes widened in horror as he realized what was coming. I could feel it—the crumbling of his will, the way his spirit shattered bit by bit under the weight of my words. It was intoxicating. I needed more.

'You're going to lose hope, Zharokath. You're going to feel so much pain, so much helplessness, that even if you're reincarnated, you'll never be the same. You'll never have the strength to be what you once were. I will make sure of that.' I let go of his chin, watching as his head slumped forward, his body trembling uncontrollably. He was breaking, and I could feel it—feel the despair sinking into him like a poison.

And I couldn't stop. I didn't want to stop. I needed to see him crumble completely, to see him reduced to nothing but ashes.

"So go on," I said, standing back up. "Feel it. Let it consume you. The despair. The helplessness. The understanding that no matter what you do, you will never escape this."

I smiled as I watched him writhe on the ground, his body too broken to fight back, his mind too shattered to hold onto any shred of hope.

This was what I needed. This was what I lived for.

And it felt like ecstasy.

I smiled as Zharokath lay trembling at my feet, his body broken, his will shattered. His silence was almost amusing now, the way he tried to glare at me with what little defiance he had left. But I knew better. The hatred, the desperation—it was all a mask for the sheer helplessness he felt inside.

I crouched down again, tilting my head as I looked at him. "Tell me, Zharokath," I said, my voice almost playful. "For what reason do you live now?"

His only response was a venomous glare, his eyes burning with hatred. I chuckled, watching him try to muster even a fraction of the strength he once had. But he didn't speak. He couldn't. There was nothing left for him to say.

'Still holding on, huh? Even when you know it's over.'

I straightened up, my hand slowly reaching into my cloak. "You know," I continued, "I've been preparing for this moment for quite some time. And I made something special. Just for you."

His eyes flickered with confusion, a brief flash of uncertainty breaking through the hatred. I pulled out a small, rolled-up parchment, and as I unfurled it, the illustration came into view. It was a dragon, its massive wings stretched wide, its scales gleaming in dark, almost otherworldly hues. A long, sinuous tail coiled beneath it, its eyes burning with a cold, ancient power.

For most people in this world, it was just a legend, a mythical beast whispered about in old tales. But I knew what it truly was. And more importantly, I knew he would recognize it.

Zharokath's eyes widened as they locked onto the illustration. His breath hitched, his body momentarily freezing as the realization sank in. "Huh...?" he whispered, his voice weak, trembling with shock.

I grinned, holding the drawing up so he could see it more clearly. "What do you think?" I asked, my voice soft and taunting. "Isn't it magnificent? I spent quite a bit of time learning how to draw this, how to model it exactly as it once was... just so I could show you."

When I see something for once, I never forget it. This was something both a curse and a blessing all the time.

When I saw the primordial in the game, the Void Dragon, I never forgot it either. I remembered, and I had prepared for this very moment.

Zharokath's gaze was fixed on the dragon, his body still trembling, but now for a different reason. His eyes darted from the wings to the scales, to the sharp, predatory eyes of the beast. The realization hit him harder than any blade ever could.

This wasn't just any dragon. This was it. The Primordial. The creature he had devoted centuries to reviving. The being whose return would supposedly restore the Void Clan to their former glory.

"You recognize it, don't you?" I asked, my smirk widening. "Of course you do. The Primordial of Void... when it was at its peak."

His mouth opened slightly, but no words came out. The shock, the fear—it was all etched into his face.

And it was perfect.

"How is it? Was it worth it?" I asked, my voice dripping with satisfaction. "All that time, all that effort, just for this moment. For you to see it up close. For you to realize just how far you've fallen."

Zharokath's eyes flickered between the drawing and me, his breathing ragged, his mind clearly struggling to comprehend what was happening. The dragon—the Primordial he had sacrificed so much for—was now nothing more than an illustration in my hand. A mockery of everything he had worked for.

"I wanted you to see it," I whispered. "I wanted you to know that no matter how hard you try, no matter how many lives you sacrifice, it will never return. Your efforts are meaningless."

Zharokath's body shook with rage, his eyes burning with fury, but there was nothing he could do. He had lost. And I had made sure he understood that, down to the very last detail.

I rolled the parchment back up, tucking it away, but the image lingered in his mind. I could see it—the horror, the helplessness. It was all sinking in now.

"Tell me," I said, leaning down once more, my voice barely above a whisper. "Was it worth it?"

His silence was all the answer I needed.