

H. Academy 621

Chapter 621 - 136.11 - The Hunt

"Tell me. Was it worth it?"

I raised my hand slowly, watching Zharokath's broken form with a smile creeping across my face. The shadows around me began to stir, swirling as if they were alive, forming a small, protective shield that wrapped itself around my outstretched hand. The darkness pulsed with power, responding to my will as if it had always been mine to command.

"But still..." I said, my voice laced with amusement. "You know, it's quite ironic."

Zharokath's eyes followed the movement of my hand, and for a moment, confusion flickered across his face. I watched him carefully, waiting for the moment he'd realize. And when I saw that spark of recognition, I couldn't help but grin wider.

"Do these shadows feel familiar to you?" I asked, my voice soft, taunting. The words hung in the air, and I could see it—his body tensing, his eyes widening as the reality dawned on him.

"This..." Zharokath muttered, his voice weak, but filled with disbelief. His gaze locked onto the swirling shadows, and I could feel his shock, his fear growing.

I leaned in, letting the shadows wrap tighter around me, their presence palpable. "Indeed," I said, my smile widening. "It is the power of the Primordial of Shadows."

Zharokath's expression was priceless—the way his face twisted with horror, the way his mind tried to process what he was seeing. He had lost everything, and now, here I was, wielding the very power of a Primordial in front of him.

"But there's something special about me," I continued, my tone filled with satisfaction. "You see, I have the ability to absorb the power of demons. And what you see now... is just one of the many gifts I've taken from your kind."

His body trembled as he looked at me, disbelief flooding his face. "No..." he muttered, his voice shaky. "That's... impossible."

I laughed, low and cold, watching the despair deepen in his eyes. "Oh, it's very possible," I whispered. "I've taken the power of the Primordial of Shadows for myself, just like I will take yours."

The realization hit him like a hammer. Zharokath had spent centuries working to revive the Primordial of Void, pouring everything into a desperate attempt to restore his clan's glory.

"And then, I will use this power of yours to get rid of the primordial of Void."

Now, here I was, wielding the power of another Primordial as if it were nothing, reducing all of his efforts to dust.

"Do you understand now?" I asked, my voice filled with dark amusement. "You will be the one contributing to the death of your own ancestor. No matter what you do, no matter how much power you think you have... I will always be one step ahead of you."

The horror in his eyes was all the confirmation I needed. He knew, deep down, that his time was over. And that everything he had sacrificed would amount to nothing.

I let the shadows swirl around me for a moment longer, savoring the look of despair on his face. "And now," I said, stepping closer, "I'll make sure you never forget this feeling. Even if you're reborn, even if you come back, you will never be the same. You'll always remember what happened here, what you lost."

Zharokath's breath came in shallow gasps, his mind barely able to process the gravity of his defeat. I smiled again, satisfied, knowing that this moment would haunt him for the rest of his existence—however short that might be.

The shadows pulsed around me, a reminder of the power I had taken. And as I stood over him, watching him crumble, I knew that this was exactly what I had been waiting for.

Complete and utter destruction.

And it felt glorious.

Zharokath's body shook violently, his eyes wide, his lips quivering as the horror of his situation sank in. The once-proud demon, the being who had spent centuries crafting his plans, was now reduced to a trembling wreck at my feet. His mind was shattering, the realization of his failure hitting him with the force of a tidal wave.

"No... no... no..." he muttered, his voice barely a whisper, but the fear and disbelief in it were undeniable. His body convulsed, his muscles twitching uncontrollably as if trying to reject the truth.

I stood over him, watching with satisfaction as he crumbled. His breaths came in shallow, rapid gasps, his gaze unfocused, his mind spiraling into hysteria.

"No... that can't be... this can't be..." Zharokath repeated, his voice growing more frantic, more desperate. He shook his head violently, as if denying the reality would somehow change it. "No... no... the Primordial... it can't... be..."

I watched, smiling as his mind unraveled, his once ironclad will reduced to a fragile, broken thing. Every second of his denial only deepened my satisfaction. This was the true power I held over him—not just physical dominance, but the complete destruction of his spirit.

"It is," I said softly, my voice cutting through his muttering like a knife. "This is the end, Zharokath. Everything you've worked for... all the sacrifices... all for nothing."

He flinched at my words, his body trembling violently. "No... no... it can't... it can't end like this... the Primordial... it has to return... it has to..."

I crouched down, bringing my face close to his, so close that he couldn't avoid the reality I was presenting to him. "It won't," I whispered. "Because you will never live to see it. And even if you did... you would be powerless to stop what's coming."

Zharokath's eyes were wide with terror, his pupils dilated as his mind raced to make sense of his unraveling world. His body shook harder, his claws scraping weakly against the floor as if trying to pull himself away from this nightmare. But there was no escape. Not from me.

"Everything you are," I continued, my voice cold and merciless, "will contribute to the destruction of the very thing you sought to revive. You will be the one to kill the Primordial of Void, Zharokath. You will be the reason your clan never rises again."

The words hit him like a final blow. His breath caught in his throat, and for a moment, his body went rigid, his mind too overwhelmed to process what I had said. But then, slowly, the trembling started again, worse than before. His entire body shook with uncontrollable spasms as the weight of his defeat crushed him from the inside out.

"No... no... no..." His voice cracked, barely above a whimper. "That can't be... that can't be..."

'Ah.....he is broken now....'

I stared down at Zharokath, his body convulsing, his voice a pitiful whisper as he muttered denials over and over. The trembling grew worse, and his eyes—those once-burning, defiant eyes—were now hollow, devoid of any life. There was nothing left inside him.

The ecstasy, the thrill that had surged through me moments before, began to fade. The pleasure I had drawn from watching his despair, from seeing him crumble piece by piece, vanished. And as I looked into those empty, broken eyes, the coldness returned.

It was over.

Just like every moment of elation, every high I had ever chased, this one had come to an end. The agony in his gaze no longer affected me. The satisfaction that had filled me to the brim had drained away, leaving behind... nothing. An empty void where the exhilaration had once been.

I stood there, watching him tremble, and all I felt was a growing sense of cold emptiness. The game was finished. Zharokath was no longer a challenge, no longer something to torment. His spirit was shattered beyond repair. And now... there was nothing.

The silence stretched between us, the only sound his ragged, broken breaths. The room felt still, lifeless, just like him.

I reached into my cloak, pulling out a dagger. Its cold steel caught the dim light of the room as I turned it in my hand.

CLANK! Without a word, I tossed it toward him, watching as it clattered across the stone floor, stopping just inches from his trembling hand.

"Kill yourself."

Zharokath's eyes flickered weakly to the blade, but there was no recognition in them. No fight, no resistance. Just emptiness.

I felt the cold settle deeper in my chest. The thrill was gone, and what remained was nothing.

"Ah...."

Zharokath's eyes flickered to the dagger lying in front of him, his gaze wide and unfocused. His trembling hands twitched, inching toward the blade, but hesitation rippled through his body. I could see it—the battle raging inside him, the primal instinct to live clashing with the overwhelming weight of defeat.

"No... no... no... I can't... I can't..." he muttered, his voice shaky and filled with desperation. His fingers hovered over the dagger's hilt, but he couldn't bring himself to grasp it. The fear of death, the fear of losing everything, still gripped him tightly, despite everything.

But there was something deeper at play here. What if that self-identity—everything that made someone who they were—was shattered beyond recognition? What would happen when they no longer saw themselves as worth saving? When they no longer believed in their own existence?

The answer was unfolding before me.

I watched silently, my mind strangely detached as I observed his struggle. It was a curious thing, really—how hard it was to break someone's will to live. No matter how much suffering they endured, no matter how much they had lost, that instinct to survive clung to them, even when all hope was gone.

'Every being with a sense of identity fights to stay alive,' I thought, watching Zharokath's trembling hands. 'No matter how broken, how defeated, they always want to keep existing.'

But there was something deeper at play here. What if that self-identity—everything that made someone who they were—was shattered beyond recognition? What would happen when they no longer saw themselves as worth saving? When they no longer believed in their own existence?

The answer was unfolding before me.

Zharokath's eyes darted between the dagger and the floor, his breath ragged, his body twitching with the effort of fighting the inevitable. He whispered to himself again, "I can't... I can't..." His mind was still clinging to the desire to live, but it was a fragile, flickering thing. The cracks in his resolve had deepened.

And then, slowly, it began to change.

The trembling of his hands grew worse, but not from fear this time. It was something else. Something more insidious. His eyes, wide with terror moments ago, began to dull, the light in them fading as the weight of his defeat truly sank in.

'I can see it now...' I thought, watching with detached fascination. 'He's losing the fight with himself.'

Zharokath's breath hitched, his hands slowly curling into weak fists. "Maybe..." he whispered, his voice barely audible, as if speaking only to himself. "Maybe it's better... to just end it... to forget..."

His gaze flickered back to the dagger, and this time, there was no hesitation. The fear of death was still there, but it had begun to wither, overtaken by a greater force—the desire to escape. To be rid of the pain, the shame, the endless torment that had become his existence.

His lips quivered, his body slumped forward as the last threads of resistance slipped away. "I... I don't want to remember anymore..."

And just like that, the battle was over.

Zharokath reached out, his fingers trembling as they curled around the hilt of the dagger. His eyes were distant, hollow. The fear was gone. The fight was gone. All that remained was the broken shell of what he had once been.

He was no longer fighting to live.

SPURT!

He just wished to disappear.

Chapter 622 - 136.12 - The Hunt [Interlude]

The moment Zharokath's trembling hand drove the dagger into his chest, a sickening spurting sound filled the air as blood erupted from the wound, dark and viscous, staining the floor beneath him. His body jerked violently for a split second, and then, as if all the life had been drained from him in an instant, he collapsed.

The blade had pierced his heart. His eyes, once filled with terror, now stared lifelessly ahead, dull and empty, like glass marbles that had lost their luster. His body lay motionless, a grotesque reminder of his final, pitiful act of surrender.

I stood over him, watching as his blood spread across the stone floor in slow, creeping tendrils. The sound of his labored, fading breath echoed faintly in the room.

"Hrrrr...Hrrr..."

His breath, filled with a hurling sound echoed.

Zharokath's body twitched as he lay in a growing pool of his own blood, his breath coming out in ragged, wheezing gasps. His eyes—glassy and empty—stared up at me, his life slowly ebbing away. But even in this final moment, he clung to a sliver of existence, his broken body refusing to give in completely.

"Hrrrr... Hrrr..." the hurling sound echoed in the chamber, his chest heaving weakly with each shallow breath.

I watched him, my mind eerily calm, detached even, as I observed the once-proud demon's final moments. There was no victory here, no triumph in watching him suffer—just a slow, inevitable end. The same end that awaited all creatures who overreached, who believed they were above fate.

But it doesn't end here, I thought to myself, my gaze drifting to the faint glow pulsing beneath Zharokath's chest. His Demonic Core. The true source of his power. The heart of his existence.

For a moment, I stood still, letting the weight of this moment sink in. Then, without a word, I began to channel mana into my hands, the energy swirling around my fingers, amplifying with each passing second. The shadows around me pulsed in response, a reflection of the power I had claimed.

I stepped closer, standing over Zharokath's barely living form. With my enhanced vision, I could see it clearly now—the glowing core hidden within his chest, pulsing weakly with the remnants of his demonic energy. It was fragile, flickering like a dying flame, but it still held the last of his essence.

I knelt beside him, my fingers crackling with energy. I didn't bother with words or explanations; there was no need. Zharokath was beyond hearing, beyond understanding. He was nothing now, just a shell of what he had once been.

With precision, I thrust my hand into his chest, feeling the resistance of his body for only a moment before my fingers wrapped around the Demonic Core. It was cold, pulsating weakly against my hand, its once immense power reduced to a faint flicker.

Zharokath's body jerked at the intrusion, his breath hitching, but there was no fight left in him. His eyes fluttered, unfocused, barely aware of what was happening.

I tightened my grip around the core, feeling the raw, corrupted energy coursing through it. It was weak now, but I could still feel the immense potential it once held—the power that had driven him, the strength he had relied on.

With a cold finality, I crushed the core in my hand.

CRACK.

The core shattered, and for a split second, Zharokath's body convulsed violently, his eyes widening in shock. Then, with one last gasp, his form went limp, the remnants of his demonic energy exploding outward in a burst of dark light before dissipating into nothingness.

It was over.

I stood up slowly, watching as the last traces of Zharokath's essence faded into the air, leaving only his lifeless body behind. His Demonic Core, the source of his power, was gone. And with it, the last vestiges of his life.

"This...." But then, just as he had died, following that, a sudden rush of energy, dark and twisted, surged into me.

My body tensed as I felt the demonic energy seep into my veins. It was faint at first, but quickly intensified, spreading through me like wildfire. My breath hitched as the power coiled within me, merging with my own mana, integrating itself into every fiber of my being.

I instinctively activated my [Eyes], and in an instant, I saw it—the demonic energy, swirling inside me, flowing into my core and melding with the essence that already resided there. It was different from anything I had felt before—dark, raw, yet somehow... invigorating.

'So, this is how [Vengeful Bane] feels when a real demon is killed,' I mused, feeling the power settle within me. It wasn't just energy. It was more than that. My entire body felt stronger, and sharper. My senses heightened as if my muscles had been reinforced, my bones tougher, my vitality surging with newfound strength.

I clenched my fists experimentally, feeling the ripple of power just beneath the surface of my skin. Every movement was more fluid, and more responsive, as if my body had been revitalized from the inside out. And beyond that, there was a strange clarity, a heightened awareness that accompanied this demonic energy now woven into me.

'Killing a fully-fledged demon...' The nature of [Vengeful Bane]—to absorb the strength of demons upon their death—was something I had known, but experiencing it firsthand was something that had not happened.

Previously, all the times that I had killed a demon, either MistWraith, the Primordial of Shadows, the Vampire, or Belthazor, I fell unconscious following that.

But this time I was fully conscious of everything that had happened here.

'This power... it's intoxicating,' I thought, feeling the pulse of energy in my body. But I pushed down the sensation, forcing myself to remain composed.

The surge of power coursing through me was undeniable, but it wasn't the reason I had come here. My true purpose remained. Zharokath had been nothing more than a stepping stone, a necessary piece in a much larger game.

As the last remnants of his demonic essence faded, my gaze shifted to his neck. There, barely visible in the dim light, was a necklace—a thin chain that had gone unnoticed until now. It pulsed faintly, the glow almost imperceptible, but to my [Eyes], it was clear. This was no ordinary trinket.

'So, there it is...' I thought, narrowing my gaze. The faint shine emanating from the necklace was the key to something far greater than Zharokath. The entrance to the location of the Primordial Demon of the Void Clan—the Void Dragon itself.

The Void Dragon, is a creature of legend, a being of immense power tied to the Void Clan. Zharokath had been working toward its revival for centuries, but all that time, the path had been hidden. Now, as I stared at the glowing necklace, I knew it was within my grasp.

I knelt down, careful not to disturb Zharokath's limp form any more than necessary, and reached for the necklace. As my fingers brushed against the chain, I felt a surge of energy, different from the demonic power that had just been absorbed. It was... colder. Darker. A void, much like the entity it was linked to.

'This is the key to the entrance,' I thought. 'The gateway to where the Void Dragon sleeps.'

That was indeed the case.

The entrance to the gateway where the Void Dragon slept.

I pulled the necklace from his neck, and as it left Zharokath's body, the faint glow grew stronger. The air around me seemed to shift, a subtle disturbance in the mana as if the space itself was reacting to the presence of the necklace.

Holding it in my hand, I could feel the immense power tied to it. This was no ordinary artifact. It was a key—a key that would lead me to the heart of the Void Clan's legacy, the place where the Primordial of Void, the Void Dragon, awaited.

The weight of the task ahead settled on me, but I remained composed. There was no room for hesitation. This was the next step, the next challenge in a journey that had already taken me further than I could have imagined.

With the necklace secured, I stood up, glancing once more at Zharokath's lifeless body. His defeat was only a prelude. The real battle was yet to come.

CREAK!

Just at that moment, I sensed a small movement from the side.

That faint sound of movement caught my attention, pulling me from the dark thoughts swirling around the Void Dragon and the legacy of the Void Clan. I turned my head sharply toward the source, my [Eyes] already focusing, instincts honed from years of battles kicking in.

There, emerging from the shadows at the far end of the chamber, was the same young child I had seen when I first entered this place. The one Zharokath had been about to devour. His small frame trembled, his eyes wide and filled with a mix of fear and confusion.

I had almost forgotten about him in the chaos of the battle.

At that time, Zharokath had been distracted, giving me the opening I needed to strike. The boy had served as an unintentional shield.

'But...'

But, even then, there was nothing in that kid's eyes.

Pure emptiness, devoid of anything.

'It is familiar.'

The gaze of someone who had lost everything and had no reason to live.

The gaze of someone who was tormented for just living by.

The boy's eyes—those hollow, empty eyes—stared at me, trembling but unresponsive. There was no spark of life in them, no flicker of hope.

Just a void.

A gaze I knew all too well.

He was just like me.

Chapter 623 - 137.1 - The Kid

'He's lost everything,' I thought as I studied him. 'There's nothing left for him.'

That empty look was familiar.

It reminded me of myself, of the days when I had wandered with no purpose other than to die—when I had clung to vengeance, but without the strength or means to do anything about it. Back then, my eyes had been just like his.

Dead, but still walking.

The boy hadn't flinched when Zharokath was about to devour him. He had stood there, accepting his fate without question.

No fear, no resistance—just the quiet acceptance that death was inevitable.

That kind of resignation only came from a life of suffering, from being ground down until the will to live was crushed completely

I could already imagine what kind of life he had lived. An orphan, most likely, raised in a place where hope had long since died. An orphanage, perhaps, tied to demons, where children were nothing more than livestock. Raised not as individuals with futures, but as prey for beings like Zharokath. Used, discarded, forgotten.

'He doesn't even have a reason to run,' I thought, watching the boy's frail form as he stood there. There was no escape for him in his mind, no place to go that would offer anything different from what he had already endured.

I could understand that emptiness. I had been there. It was a suffocating void, where the only solace came from the idea that everything might end soon.

For a moment, I wondered what would become of him now. Freed from one predator, but left alone in a world that wouldn't offer him much more than the same cruelty. I couldn't help but feel the weight of that thought, knowing the fate that awaited him if I simply let him go.

'But what am I supposed to do?' I thought, the question hanging in the back of my mind. I wasn't a savior, and this world wasn't a place for second chances. The same truth that had shaped me would shape him, one way or another.

Yet, as I stood there, staring into the boy's empty eyes, I knew one thing for certain. He didn't deserve to die like this. Not without a fight.

"You..." I said quietly, my voice calm but firm. "Do you want to live?"

Eryon had never knew how would it feel to be in a mother's embrace.

He opened his eyes for the first time without any memory of parents, family, or warmth. His first memories were of the orphanage, a place that felt more like a cage than a home. The walls were old and cracked, paint long faded from neglect. Every corner seemed worn down by time, as if the building itself was tired of housing children who had no futures.

Eryon's bed was a hard, wooden frame with a thin, lumpy mattress that barely cushioned him from the cold, unforgiving floor. Each night, as he lay down, he could feel the sharp springs pressing into his bones, a reminder of how little comfort this place offered. The blankets were threadbare, unable to ward off the chill that seeped through the broken windows, which rattled with every gust of wind.

The other children around him were just as worn and hungry as the walls that surrounded them. Resources were always scarce. Meals consisted of meager portions of stale bread and watery broth, never enough to satisfy their constant hunger.

Their clothes, often hand-me-downs from previous orphans, were patched together and always too small or too big, offering little protection from the biting cold.

Days were filled with monotonous tasks: cleaning, carrying water from a distant well, and tending to the few crops that the orphanage tried to grow.

Eryon's small hands grew calloused from the work, his body thin and weak from years of malnutrition. There was no joy here, no play, no laughter. Only the silent acceptance of their shared fate—a life of toil and hardship, with no promise of a better future.

Yet, even in this place, the cruelest part of Eryon's life was not the lack of food, warmth, or care. It was the lack of purpose. From the moment he could understand, he knew the orphanage wasn't a place of hope.

The caretakers rarely spoke, and when they did, it was with cold, distant voices, as if they, too, were trapped in this life of despair. The children were never told of the outside world, never given a reason to dream. They were raised to endure, not to live.

As time passed, Eryon stopped wondering about his origins. He didn't know who his parents were, and he never asked. It didn't matter.

All that existed was the orphanage—the walls that confined him, the beds that sagged beneath his growing body, and the other children who stared at the floor with the same lifeless gaze he carried.

For the children of the orphanage, the feeling of a full stomach was a distant dream—something they heard about but never experienced. Hunger gnawed at them constantly, a dull ache that never left. Meals were nothing more than meager scraps, and the concept of satisfaction was foreign. Eryon had long forgotten what it felt like to eat until he was full, if he ever even knew.

The orphanage stood on the outskirts of a bustling town, and though the children rarely ventured beyond its walls, they could see other children from the town, walking with their families, holding hands with their mothers and fathers. Those children laughed, carefree, their faces glowing with happiness, unaware of the hollow stares from the orphans who watched them from afar.

But for Eryon and the others, there was no such thing as family. Those who had known their parents had long since forgotten their faces, and the few who still remembered held no hope of reunion. Any family they might have had wanted nothing to do with them. They were cast-offs, forgotten, and left to endure life in the orphanage alone.

They were all alone.

But one day, everything changed.

It was a rare sunny afternoon when the doors of the orphanage creaked open, and a group of people entered—strangers unlike any Eryon had ever seen before. They were dressed in fine, clean clothes that shimmered in the sunlight, the fabric so smooth and rich it seemed unreal to the orphan's eyes. Their skin was bright, their faces flawless, as if they had stepped out of a dream.

Eryon's breath caught in his throat. He had never seen such beauty in his life. The contrast between these people and the drab, decaying world of the orphanage was almost too much to bear. The children, used to seeing nothing but their own reflection of hopelessness, were mesmerized by the elegance and grace of the strangers.

The leader of the group, a tall man with a striking, almost ethereal appearance, stepped forward. His voice, when he spoke, was warm and soothing, filled with kindness that felt foreign to the children's ears.

"We are here to help," he said, smiling gently at the children. His teeth were white, gleaming in the dim light of the orphanage. "We've heard about the conditions here, and we want to offer a solution. We can provide you with food, warmth, and care—everything you've been missing."

A murmur of disbelief ran through the orphans. Help? Real help? It seemed impossible, too good to be true.

Eryon, standing near the back, felt something stir within him—a spark of hope, though small and fragile. Could this be real? After all the years of suffering, could someone truly want to help them? He had long since stopped hoping for a better life, but the sight of these strangers made that long-dead hope flicker in his chest, just for a moment.

The group's leader continued, his gaze sweeping across the room, taking in the ragged children and the crumbling walls. "We can give you all a better life. A chance to leave this place, to escape the hardships you've endured. We can offer you a future."

The children were silent, unsure how to respond. The caretakers stood in the shadows, their faces impassive, neither endorsing nor rejecting the proposal. They had long since given up on promises of hope themselves.

The man's smile widened, his voice softening. "All we ask in return is a small commitment. We have a place where children like you can thrive, where you can grow strong and learn valuable skills. In exchange for your cooperation, you will be taken care of, as you deserve."

The room was filled with hesitant glances. No one dared to speak, too afraid that it might all disappear if they voiced their thoughts.

Eryon's heart raced. It was the first time in his life that anyone had offered him anything beyond survival. He had never known what it felt like to be wanted, to be seen as something more than just a body to toil. But these people, with their kindness and beauty, were offering him a way out—a chance to escape the confines of the orphanage, to leave behind the hunger and the hopelessness.

The other children began to whisper, their eyes wide with a mixture of fear and excitement. Could this be the opportunity they had all been waiting for? Could this be their way out?

Eryon clenched his fists, uncertainty swirling in his mind. Something deep within him warned him to be cautious, but the pull of the strangers' promise was too strong. He had spent his entire life in the darkness of the orphanage, and now, for the first time, there was a glimmer of light. It was impossible to ignore.

The man noticed the hesitation in the room and spoke again, his voice like honey, smooth and persuasive. "I understand your fear. But I assure you, this is no trick. We only wish to help you, to offer you a life of comfort and safety."

Eryon, like the others, was torn. On one hand, the orphanage was all he had ever known, and it had taught him not to trust too easily. But on the other hand, the possibility of escape, of a life beyond these crumbling walls, was too tempting to pass up.

The decision weighed heavily on him, but as he looked into the eyes of the strangers, their beauty and confidence radiating in the gloom of the orphanage, he felt his resolve waver. Perhaps, just this once, hope wasn't a lie. Perhaps these people truly were his way out.

Yet, little did he know that this was when everything had changed.

When they arrived at their destination, the air buzzed with anticipation. Eryon, along with the other children, could hardly contain the mix of awe and excitement as they gazed out of the windows of the carriage. The city was unlike anything they had ever imagined. Towering buildings scraped the sky, their glass surfaces shimmering under the sunlight, reflecting a world of prosperity and grandeur that seemed foreign to the orphans. The streets were wide, clean, and filled with people dressed in elegant clothes, moving with purpose and confidence.

Eryon's heart pounded in his chest as they continued deeper into the city. The buildings seemed to grow even taller, even more impressive, and the world they had left behind—the crumbling orphanage with its cold walls and empty promises—felt like a distant memory. For the first time, he saw what life could be like beyond the broken walls of the orphanage.

Finally, they arrived at their destination—a massive building in one of the most luxurious parts of the city. It was grand, with towering pillars and intricately designed windows that gleamed in the light. The building stood proud, surrounded by lush gardens, fountains that trickled with clear water, and paths made of smooth stone that led to the enormous entrance.

The children were led through the gates, their eyes wide with wonder. They had never seen anything like it before. The air here was different—cleaner, lighter, and filled with a sense of possibility. Eryon couldn't help but stare at the beautiful surroundings, his mind struggling to comprehend the wealth and elegance before him.

"This... this is where we're going to live?" a boy whispered beside Eryon, his voice filled with disbelief.

Eryon didn't respond. He couldn't find the words. He was still trying to take it all in, his heart racing with both excitement and an underlying sense of uncertainty.

The adults who had brought them here led the way, their footsteps echoing against the stone as they walked toward the grand entrance. The group of children followed in silence, too stunned by their surroundings to speak. Inside, the building was just as impressive. High ceilings adorned with ornate chandeliers, polished floors that reflected the light, and large windows that let in streams of golden sunlight—it was a world of wealth and beauty that none of them had ever known.

The caretakers of the building, who greeted them with polite smiles and kind words, only added to the sense of wonder. They spoke softly, their voices calm and reassuring, as they led the children deeper into the vast halls. The children, who had been used to cold stares and harsh words, were overwhelmed by the warmth and kindness that seemed to radiate from these new caretakers.

Eryon glanced around, trying to catch every detail. His mind raced with questions, but the excitement of the moment drowned them out. It was hard to focus on anything other than the sheer magnificence of the place. He could see it in the faces of the other children too—this was the start of something new, something better.

For the first time in his life, Eryon felt a spark of hope that maybe, just maybe, their lives were about to change for the better.

But what none of them knew was that behind the smiles and the grandeur, something far darker was waiting. This was the beginning of a new chapter, but not the one they had hoped for. The beautiful walls and elegant surroundings would soon reveal their true nature, and the price for this new life would be far greater than any of them could have imagined.

As time passed, Eryon began to notice something strange. The children who had arrived with him, one by one, started to disappear. At first, it was subtle—a few names here, a few empty beds there. The adults would tell the remaining children that their friends had found families, that they had been adopted and were now living happy lives in beautiful homes, with parents who loved them.

The idea seemed plausible, even comforting. After all, wasn't that the dream for every orphan? To finally be chosen, to be part of a family? The children accepted the explanations without question, their innocent minds clinging to the hope that maybe their turn would come next. Maybe they too would be taken to a new home, filled with love and warmth, far away from the life they had known.

But for Eryon, something felt off. The excitement he had first felt upon arriving in this grand new place had slowly given way to unease. He couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. He noticed how the adults' smiles didn't quite reach their eyes, how they dodged questions about the other children's whereabouts with practiced ease. The disappearances became more frequent, and yet the rooms never stayed empty for long. New children arrived, from different orphanages, each with the same wide-eyed wonder that Eryon had once felt.

As more children disappeared, Eryon grew quieter, more observant. He watched as his friends left, always with promises of a better life, but they never returned, never sent letters or any signs that they were truly happy. Eryon wanted to believe the adults, but doubt began to take root in his heart.

It was during this time of growing uncertainty that Eryon met her.

She was a shy girl, quiet and unassuming, but always with a soft, innocent smile on her face. Her name was Emily. She had arrived not long after Eryon noticed the first wave of disappearances, and unlike the other children, there was something different about her. She wasn't as excited or

overwhelmed by the grandeur of their new home. Instead, she seemed content, quietly observing the world around her with wide, innocent eyes.

Eryon found himself drawn to her. She was kind in a way that was different from the other children. She didn't speak much, but when she did, her words were gentle, filled with a strange sort of calm. Despite her shy nature, there was a warmth about her, a quiet resilience that made Eryon feel a little less alone in this strange new world.

They spent time together, mostly in silence, but it was a comfortable silence. They didn't need to say much to understand each other. Emily, with her innocent smile, became a small beacon of light in Eryon's increasingly uncertain life. But even as they grew closer, Eryon couldn't ignore the growing sense of dread that hung over the place.

Children continued to disappear. And with each passing day, Eryon's unease deepened. He began to wonder how long it would be before it was Emily's turn—or his.

The day came sooner than Eryon had hoped. Emily, with her soft smiles and gentle presence, was called. It had been happening for weeks now—children disappearing one after another, each time with the same story of being adopted into a loving family, never to return. Eryon had dreaded this moment, but there was no stopping it.

Emily had been reading quietly, as she always did in her free time, sitting by the large window that overlooked the manicured gardens. She had a certain stillness about her, as if nothing in the world could disturb her peace, not even the dark shadows that lingered around them.

When the adults called her name, she closed her book and looked up, her innocent smile still in place. There was no fear in her eyes, only a calm acceptance that tugged at Eryon's heart. It was as if she had always known this day would come and was ready for it, in the way only Emily could be.

Before she left, she found Eryon standing by the door, watching her with an intensity he couldn't hide. She gave him a soft look, her innocent eyes full of warmth and understanding.

"I'll remember you, Eryon," she said, her voice steady but quiet, as though they were sharing a secret. "No matter where I go, even in my new family, I'll never forget you. Maybe, if the world allows, we can meet again someday."

Her words were so hopeful, so full of light that for a moment, Eryon wanted to believe her. He wanted to believe that this wasn't the last time they would see each other, that somewhere, somehow, they would cross paths again in a world where everything made sense.

But deep down, he knew. He knew something was wrong with all of this. He knew that the children who left this place were not going to loving families, and the chances of seeing Emily again were slim—if not impossible.

Emily, always the optimist, smiled at him once more before walking away. She didn't look back, but Eryon stood there, his heart heavy with a weight he didn't fully understand. He wanted to stop her, to say something, but the words wouldn't come. All he could do was watch as she walked through the grand hall, disappearing from sight just like the others.

Days passed after Emily was taken, but she never returned. Just as the adults had promised, they said she was living happily with her new family, and that she was finally free of the orphanage's walls. But Eryon didn't believe it. The empty space she left behind felt too final, too permanent.

He found himself spending more time in the spots where they used to sit together, the silence now oppressive in a way it hadn't been before. The place that had once seemed full of possibility now felt like a prison, and Eryon couldn't help but feel that something terrible was hiding just beneath the surface.

Emily had always been hopeful, always reading when she was free, always believing that the world had something good in store for her. Eryon remembered her last words to him, the way she had promised never to forget, and he clung to that memory

But it all changed when he discovered the secret hidden behind the doors.

That smell of iron that he would never forget in his life.

It was that time when his entire life was changed.

Chapter 625 137.3 - The Kid

One day, Eryon heard the words he had been waiting for: they had found him a family. The adults told him he would finally be leaving this place, that he would now go to a home where he would be cared for, loved, and—most importantly—free. The moment filled him with a strange, unfamiliar

sense of excitement. His heart fluttered with hope, the same hope Emily had carried with her when she left.

As they led him through the same grand hall Emily had walked months earlier, Eryon allowed himself to dream. Perhaps this was his chance, his opportunity to meet Emily again, to find her in the outside world where the promise of a better life awaited them both. He would finally see what lay beyond the orphanage's walls, finally understand the life he had been denied for so long. His future seemed brighter than it ever had before.

With a group of other children who had also been chosen, Eryon boarded. He shared in their nervous excitement, each child wondering what awaited them at their new destination. The journey took them far from the orphanage, and the farther they went, the more Eryon's anticipation grew. He told himself that he was one step closer to finding Emily, that their paths would surely cross again once he settled into his new life.

The destination was Ardmont City, a bustling metropolis much like the one he had first seen when he arrived at the new home. It was filled with towering buildings and busy streets, but there was something darker about this place. The energy wasn't as vibrant, and the air was heavier, as if something sinister lurked beneath the surface.

When they arrived at the gates of a large estate, the children were told they would be under the care of a man named Silas Vayne. Silas was described as a benefactor, a powerful figure who had taken an interest in helping children like them. He was the one who had "taken them under his wings," as the adults said, and now he would guide them into their new lives.

Eryon couldn't help but feel a surge of hope. Silas Vayne's name sounded important as if being under his care meant something grand. Perhaps this was his destiny—a new start, a new path. He glanced around at the other children, who were just as wide-eyed and hopeful as he was. They had no reason to doubt the adults' words. After all, wasn't this what they had always wanted?

But that sense of hope, of freedom, was soon to be shattered.

As Eryon entered the building something felt off. The grandeur of the place, while impressive, seemed hollow, almost too perfect. The servants who greeted them did so with polite smiles, but their eyes were distant, empty.

And then it was in that time, that the real purpose for their being there was revealed.

The first few days in Silas Vayne's estate passed in a strange blur. Eryon and the other children were fed lavish meals—strange dishes they had never seen before, rich and flavorful, unlike the meager food they had grown up with in the orphanage. But as time went on, the food began to feel less like nourishment and more like something else. The meals were served in the basement of the estate, an expansive, dimly lit space that felt more like a dungeon than a dining hall.

At first, Eryon didn't question it. He was too overwhelmed by the change in his life, too caught up in the false promises of freedom and care. But the unease that had been gnawing at him since his arrival grew stronger with each passing day.

Then the torment began.

It started subtly, with some of the children being given less food than others. Eryon noticed how some of his peers, those who were already thin and frail, began to wither even more. They were left hungry, deliberately starved, their bodies growing weaker and more emaciated with each passing day. No matter how much they begged, the servants gave them nothing.

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Other children, stronger ones, were subjected to something different. The violence came quietly, without warning, as they were taken to another part of the basement and returned with bruises, cuts, and broken bones. Their eyes hollowed out with fear, but they said nothing. Whatever happened to them in that part of the basement was too horrific to speak about.

And then there were the children who didn't return at all.

Eryon's dread grew as he watched, powerless, while those around him suffered. He tried to blend in, to go unnoticed, hoping that if he kept his head down, he might be spared whatever fate awaited the others. But he couldn't ignore the truth forever. The meals they were given, once a source of comfort, became more twisted as time went on. The food took on strange, unsettling qualities—an unnatural richness that made his stomach churn. He knew, deep down, that it wasn't meant to sustain them. It was something else, something far darker.

One night, after a particularly gruesome disappearance, the truth of their situation was revealed.

The basement was not just a place where they were fed—it was a place of preparation. The children weren't being taken care of; they were being cultivated, their bodies prepared for consumption. They were food.

Eryon felt a wave of horror crash over him as he realized what was happening. The torment, the starvation, the violence—it was all part of some grotesque process. Some children were left malnourished, their bodies withering until they could barely move, while others were beaten and tortured, their flesh bruised and broken. The cruelest part was that some of them, the ones who showed promise, were given just enough food and care to survive, only to be fed to a fate far worse than death.

Eryon's heart pounded in his chest as he pieced it together. Silas Vayne was no benefactor. He was a monster, and the children were nothing more than livestock in his eyes. They were being fattened, starved, tortured—all to serve some unspeakable purpose.

He thought of Emily. Was this her fate as well? Had she too been fed these same lies, only to meet a cruel end in this cursed place?

The weight of it was unbearable, especially for a child.

His hopes were shattered, and the life that he was living suddenly became a hell.

Something that he could have never expected in his whole life.

16:51

Eryon's initial reaction to the truth was desperation. He tried to escape, to find a way out of the hell that had once promised him salvation. Each night, as the other children slept, he would lie awake, heart racing, mind spinning as he tried to formulate plans—any plan—to free himself from the clutches of Silas Vayne.

At first, the ideas seemed simple: wait for an opening, slip away unnoticed, perhaps blend into the bustling streets of Ardmont City and disappear. But every attempt was met with failure. The estate was guarded far more heavily than he had realized. Every corner, every hallway, was watched. There was no slipping away unnoticed, no crevice to exploit. Each time he tried to make a move, it was as if the estate itself conspired against him, closing in tighter and tighter.

As days bled into weeks, Eryon's hope began to erode. His mind, once filled with desperate thoughts of escape, now ran hollow. He saw others who had tried to flee—children whose faces had once glimmered with hope like his. They had been dragged back, beaten, broken. They were no longer the same. Their spirits had been crushed, just as his would soon be.

He thought of Emily often, wondering what had happened to her, what fate she had met in this cruel place. He had once dreamed of finding her, of escaping with her to a life where they could both be free. But now that dream seemed distant, unreachable, as though it had never existed at all.

Eryon soon realized that the time for his end was drawing near. It was in the way the servants watched him with cold, calculating eyes, in the way the meals became smaller, less nourishing, as if they were preparing him for the inevitable. And then came the training.

The training was brutal, both physically and mentally. It was designed to strip away any remaining resistance, any hope, any individuality. They broke him down, day by day, forcing him into submission. He was no longer allowed to think for himself, no longer allowed to dream of escape. Every ounce of his energy was focused on one thing: obedience.

He became obedient, just as the others had before him. The hopeful boy who had once looked to the future with wide eyes and wonder was gone, replaced by a hollow shell that existed only to survive the torment. His thoughts of escape disappeared, his dreams of finding Emily faded into the background. There was only the present—the endless cycle of pain and control, the knowledge that his life no longer belonged to him.

And then, the day came.

Eryon was taken to Silas Vayne. He didn't resist. He didn't fight. The once-vibrant child who had walked through the grand hall with hope in his heart now stood before his master, silent and still. His eyes were empty, his mind quiet. The boy who had dreamed of freedom was no longer there.

He had become what they had always intended him to be—obedient, docile, ready to be served.

Eryon had given up hope. There was nothing left for him now, nothing but the cold, empty reality of his fate.

"You.....Do you want to live?"

And now faced with this question, he did not know what to answer at all.

Chapter 626 137.4 - The kid

The boy stood there, trembling slightly as he looked at me. My words hung in the air, unanswered, as his hollow eyes stared back with that same vacant emptiness. "Do you want to live?" I had asked, but he seemed unable to grasp the meaning of the question.

For a child like him, the concept of living had long since become an abstract idea. His life had been one of survival, of existing in a world that offered nothing but cruelty and suffering. In his mind, there was no difference between life and death—both were inevitable conclusions to the same grim reality. And so, he said nothing.

His gaze flickered, but not with recognition or understanding. It was the look of someone who had long ago forgotten how to hope, someone who had been trained to accept whatever fate awaited him, without question, without resistance. He had become what I once was—just a body, moving through the motions of existence, waiting for the end.

I knelt down in front of him, my eyes scanning his frail form. His clothes hung loosely on his small frame, and his skin was pale, almost ghostly in the dim light of the chamber. The fear that should have been there wasn't. He had nothing left to fear.

"I know what you're thinking," I said, my voice quieter now. "You've given up. You don't even know what it means to live, do you?"

The boy didn't flinch, didn't respond. He simply continued staring, his expression devoid of any emotion.

I could feel the weight of his despair pressing against me, like a mirror of my own past. He had been pushed to the edge, just as I once had, and had finally fallen into the abyss where life and death became meaningless concepts. The difference between us, however, was that I had found something to pull me back—vengeance, the raw desire to destroy those who had wronged me. But this boy... he had nothing.

I stood, the faint pulse of demonic energy from Zharokath's core still simmering within me. I knew what that kind of emptiness could do to someone, how it could turn them into a shell, a slave to their fate. But this boy didn't deserve that. He didn't deserve to be a casualty of a world that had never shown him mercy.

"You've lost everything," I continued, my voice steady, "but that doesn't mean you can't choose something for yourself now."

The words sounded foreign, even to me. I wasn't in the business of offering hope. That wasn't who I had become. But at this moment, standing over this broken child who reminded me so much of my former self, I couldn't help but feel the weight of it all—the burden of a world that crushes the weak, the forgotten, and the lost.

The boy's eyes flickered again, a faint shift of recognition in the depths of that hollow gaze. But still, he said nothing. Perhaps he had no voice left with which to answer. Or perhaps, he didn't know the answer himself.

And yet, I stood there, waiting.

Would he choose to live, even if he didn't know what living truly meant?

"Let me tell you something," I said after a long pause, my voice rougher now, as if the words themselves were difficult to force out. "Living isn't easy. You won't find hope handed to you, not in this world. But it's a choice you have to make, and once you make it, you fight for it. No one's going to give it to you, but if you want it badly enough, you'll find a reason."

The boy's lip twitched, just slightly, as if trying to form a response. But the words were still stuck somewhere deep inside him, buried beneath years of torment and hopelessness.

I turned away from him, glancing at the lifeless body of Zharokath, the remnants of his dark power still fading from the air. It had been the end for Zharokath, just as it could have been the end for me. But I had made my choice. I had decided to live, even if it was a life consumed by vengeance.

As I turned to leave, my steps were slow but deliberate. The air around me was still heavy, thick with the lingering energy of Zharokath's death. His demonic essence was gone, and with it, the weight of this place seemed to lift, but only slightly. The chamber, once alive with malevolent power, now felt cold and hollow—like a corpse slowly decaying.

There was nothing left for me here.

I had done what I came to do. Zharokath was dead, his Demonic Core shattered, and his plans destroyed. The Void Dragon's revival was thwarted for now, and I had gained the power I needed

through [Vengeful Bane]. Yet, as I made my way toward the exit, I could feel the structure itself beginning to groan and shift. The walls creaked under the strain, as though the very foundation of this dark fortress was unraveling now that its master was gone.

It would all come crashing down soon.

Good. Let it burn.

I moved forward, ready to leave this place behind. But just as I reached the threshold of the chamber, something stopped me. The faint sound of a crumbling stone echoed in the background, but that wasn't what made me pause. It was the memory of the boy—those empty, hollow eyes that had stared at me without understanding, without hope.

I could still see him, trembling and lost, a reflection of the person I had once been. His life had been stripped of meaning, his spirit broken before he had even been given a chance to fight for it. And now, with Zharokath gone, what would happen to him?

I could just leave. There was nothing tying me to that child, no reason to concern myself with his fate. He had survived this long in a world that didn't care for him, and he would either find a way to continue or he wouldn't. That was the way of things.

But those eyes...

They haunted me. I couldn't shake the feeling that I had looked into a mirror, that I had seen a part of myself in that child's broken gaze. The same emptiness, the same resignation to a fate he believed was inevitable. I knew that feeling all too well.

I released a sigh, the sound heavy in the cold, damp air of the chamber. "Damn it."

What would happen to him if I left now? With the structure collapsing around us, he'd be buried here. He wouldn't fight. He couldn't resist. He would simply lie down and accept whatever came. And I couldn't say I blamed him—after all, what did he have left to fight for? There was no one waiting for him, no place of safety or comfort outside these walls.

I ran a hand through my hair, feeling the weight of the decision pressing down on me. It wasn't my responsibility. This world wasn't made for saviors, and I wasn't one. I had my own path, and my own goals to pursue.

But...

I glanced back over my shoulder, looking into the dark chamber where the boy still stood. His small frame was still trembling, still rooted in place, as though he hadn't moved since Zharokath fell. He was alone, just as I had been once.

"Why do I even care?" I muttered under my breath, frustrated with myself. But the answer was already there, buried beneath layers of my own past.

I took a deep breath and turned back, walking slowly toward the boy. The structure was falling apart, and time was running out, but something inside me had shifted. Maybe it was the boy's eyes, maybe it was the echo of my own past, or maybe it was the faintest sliver of something I didn't want to admit—something like compassion.

"You," I said, my voice firm as I approached him again. "Come with me."

The boy didn't move at first, his gaze still distant, as if he hadn't processed what I was saying. I knelt down in front of him, locking eyes with him once more.

"You don't have to die here," I said, my voice quieter now. "You don't have to give up."

He blinked, just once, and for the briefest moment, I saw something flicker in those hollow eyes—something fragile, barely there, but it was enough.

I reached out my hand. "Do you want to take it, or not?"

For a long, tense second, I wasn't sure if he would move. But then, slowly, hesitantly, his small hand reached up and grasped mine.

"..." As I felt that small hand, I couldn't help but shake my head.

'What am I doing?' I asked myself.

If I wanted to get out of here silently without alerting anyone else, it was better if I was alone. Since [Shadowborne] will be covering for me,

'Tsk.'

But looking at the kid, I couldn't help but shake my head. How could I just leave him here?

I turned my gaze back to the boy, his small hand still gripping mine, though his eyes remained distant, clouded with years of trauma and uncertainty. The weight of the situation settled heavier in my mind. I wasn't meant to be responsible for anyone. Not anymore. But here I was, standing with a broken child who hadn't asked for this, just as I hadn't.

"You," I said, my voice quieter now but firm. "What's your name?"

He didn't respond at first. His silence hung between us, his eyes flickering with some invisible struggle. I could see him withdrawing again, slipping back into the emptiness that had defined him for so long. His grip on my hand tightened slightly as if he wasn't sure whether to let go or hold on.

I sighed, repeating the question. "What's your name, kid?"

His lips parted slightly, but no sound came out. I could see him fighting to find the words as if he hadn't spoken in a long time. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, he whispered, "Eryon."

The name came out soft, barely more than a breath, but it was there. A small fragment of who he was, a piece of his identity that hadn't been completely erased by the cruelty of this world.

"Eryon," I repeated, nodding as I processed it. "Alright, Eryon. Let's get out of here."

His grip loosened slightly, but he still held on as if afraid that letting go would mean being left behind. I couldn't blame him. This place had consumed everything around it, leaving nothing but fear and despair in its wake.

Chapter 627 137.5 - The kid

I reached down, grabbed the kid, and pulled him up into my arms. The boy didn't resist, his body limp and unresponsive as I lifted him effortlessly. His small frame was frail, lighter than I had expected, a testament to the harsh conditions he had endured.

Without wasting any time, I reached into my spatial storage and retrieved a small mask.

I placed it over the kid's face, the mask fitting snugly, immediately dampening any trace of his breathing or body functions.

"Hold on," I muttered, more to myself than to him, as I felt the shift in the air around us.

My eyes scanned the area, flicking over every corner of the chamber. The walls groaned under the weight of the structure's impending collapse, but before anything else could go wrong, I used telekinesis to retrieve the artifact that had been serving as an isolator. The subtle hum of magic flickered as I pulled it free, letting the isolator deactivate as I kept my attention focused on the exit.

With the kid secured in one arm, I bent my knees and, without a second thought, leaped high into the air.

The building blurred beneath me as I propelled us upward, my movement precise and calculated, and I reached the place where I had entered Zharokath's room.

'Now....' The moment I cleared the chamber, I activated [Shadowborne], shrouding both myself and the kid in complete darkness. My presence vanished from the physical realm, the shadows enveloping us like a cloak as I masked every trace of sound and movement. It was more than just hiding mana signatures—I was covering every aspect of our existence.

I had already scanned the kid with my [Eyes], ensuring there were no marks or traces that could lead anyone to us. No signals, no embedded spells—he was clean. They had raised him as livestock, not as an asset worth tracking.

Still, I knew better than to underestimate the persistence of those who could possibly be trailing me, though that possibility is really low. Even if they could trail us through other means, it wouldn't matter. I was confident in my ability to escape, and with [Shadowborne] in effect, no one would detect us.

Without hesitation, I sent a thin mana thread from my hand, the spell [Grapple] activating smoothly as it latched onto the top of the crumbling building. The thread pulsed with energy, taut and strong, and with a fluid motion, I pulled us upward, swinging through the air.

The darkness of the night wrapped around us, concealing our presence further as I moved swiftly through the collapsing structure. The kid remained limp in my arms, completely unaware of the movements, his breathing masked by the small device I had placed on him.

I swung through the shadows. My body moved like a blur. The cityscape shifted around us as I continued to swing from one structure to the next, my movements fluid as I created more distance between us and the wreckage of Zharokath's lair.

After several more swings through the shadows, I finally descended toward the ground, landing softly in a narrow, desolate alley. The faint moonlight barely illuminated the area, casting long shadows against the weathered walls of the surrounding buildings. The kid remained motionless in my arms, the quiet hum of the small mask still doing its job, and I set him down gently on the cold ground, taking a moment to inspect him.

As I looked him over, I noted that his clothes were only slightly wrinkled, and his hair a bit sparky from the wind, but otherwise, he seemed unaffected by the rapid movements we had just gone through. His small chest rose and fell steadily, his breathing calm and even.

I nodded to myself, satisfied. The mask was doing its job perfectly. It was designed with situations like this in mind, knowing that a normal person couldn't possibly keep up with the speed of an Awakened without suffering severe consequences.

They wouldn't be able to breathe properly, let alone endure the sheer force exerted on their body during such movements. But the mask... it alleviated the pressure, regulating the flow of air and reducing the strain on the body. It was efficient and discreet—perfect for ensuring the boy's safety during our escape.

I crouched beside him, my eyes scanning the alleyway. It was empty, as expected. This part of the city had been abandoned long ago, and there were no prying eyes to worry about. Still, I remained cautious. I couldn't afford to let my guard down, not when we were so close to getting out of this mess cleanly.

The boy lay there, his body limp but stable, his face serene despite everything he had been through. It was almost eerie how calm he looked—like he was already used to being treated as little more than an object, something to be moved, used, and discarded.

'Sigh.....'

I couldn't help but shake my head a little, somehow understanding how Aaron must have felt at that time.

It was quite interesting.

'Though, not long after this will not be my problem.'

Now that I had hunted Zharokath, I could just contact the organization for a clean-up. I doubt that they are afraid of antagonizing demons.

I looked down at the kid, and controlling my strength, I removed the mask from his face. His breathing remained steady, and the faint tension that had been present earlier seemed to melt away. Just moments ago, I had already called for a taxi; it would be here soon. Time was still on our side.

I crouched next to him again, my eyes searching his face. "Are you feeling any pain?" I asked, my voice low but clear.

The boy blinked slowly, his expression blank, almost devoid of any reaction. After a moment, he shook his head, but there was no conviction in the gesture. His eyes were still vacant, as if he wasn't fully here, his mind elsewhere—probably still trapped in the remnants of the hell he had endured.

I sighed inwardly, my thoughts drifting as I studied the faint bruises and marks that marred his small frame. The abuse he'd suffered left visible signs, but it was the unseen damage that concerned me more. Physically, he might not be showing the pain he was feeling right now, but undoubtedly unless he had a special ability, those wounds could not have been possibly healed.

I stood up, keeping my gaze on the boy for a moment longer, then reached into my spatial storage and retrieved a coat. Without a word, I tossed it to him. "Cover yourself."

The boy caught the coat clumsily, his small hands trembling as he slowly draped it over his frail body. He moved mechanically, as if going through the motions without fully understanding why. His vacant stare remained, still locked in the mental prison of everything he had endured.

I turned my back to him, already pushing aside any lingering emotion. Whatever he had gone through wasn't my concern. Not anymore. My job was done, or it would be once I handed him off to the organization. I didn't need to get attached or involved any further. That was how it needed to be.

Still, the bruises and cuts on his skin were something I couldn't ignore. Those would need to be treated before we got to the hotel. At the very least, I couldn't let him remain in such a state until someone else arrived. Basic first aid was something I could handle without getting too close. That much I could do.

And he'd need food. I hadn't seen him eat anything, and given the conditions he was held in, there was no telling how long it had been since his last meal. I'd make sure he had something to eat once we got to the room. It wasn't about care—it was about making sure he was in a stable condition until he was out of my hands.

I began to walk toward the end of the alley, my steps measured and purposeful. As I moved, I activated the [Unknown's Armor], allowing it to shift and morph, reshaping my clothes into a more casual appearance. In mere seconds, the sleek combat attire was replaced with a dark, nondescript jacket and pants, the perfect disguise for blending into the city's background.

The boy followed quietly behind, his movements sluggish, but at least he was able to walk. I didn't bother looking back at him. There was no need. He'd keep up, or I'd pull him along if necessary.

I felt the weight of the situation settle back into place, but it no longer affected me.

'Focus, and don't forget the reason you are here. You are not a hero.' I wasn't here to be his savior. I was just getting him out. Nothing more.

As we approached the main street, I could already see the taxi waiting at the curb.

The taxi was already waiting by the curb, just as I had arranged during our swift escape. Its headlights cast a soft glow on the deserted street, and I could make out the silhouette of the driver inside, his hands resting on the steering wheel.

I opened the back door and gestured for the boy to get in. He hesitated for a brief moment, but then, as if by some automatic response, he shuffled forward and slid into the seat. I followed, settling in beside him, keeping a close eye on our surroundings even though the immediate threat had passed.

The driver glanced at me through the rearview mirror, his professional demeanor unwavering, though I could tell he was curious. "Where to?" he asked, his voice steady.

"The Meridian Hotel," I replied calmly, giving him both the name and location.

He nodded without a word, shifting the taxi into gear and pulling smoothly into the road. The hum of the engine filled the car as we began moving through the quiet streets. The city lights reflected off the windows, casting fleeting shadows across the boy's face.

Though the driver kept his focus on the road, I noticed him glance at the boy from time to time. He didn't ask any questions—likely out of professionalism—but I could see the subtle curiosity in his eyes. The kid's blank expression and disheveled state must've raised some suspicions, but to the driver's credit, he said nothing.

I stared out the window, keeping my thoughts contained. There was no need for conversation. The boy sat beside me, silent, still wearing that distant, empty look. I wasn't concerned about what the driver thought or what conclusions he might draw. He wasn't involved. He didn't need to know.

As we continued down the road, I kept track of the route, ensuring we were moving toward the hotel as planned. The sooner we arrived, the sooner I could treat the boy's injuries and hand him over to the organization.

Chapter 628 137.6 - The kid

The building was sleek and modern, with its polished glass doors and clean architecture standing in sharp contrast to the dim, empty streets outside. The driver pulled up to the entrance, parking quietly, and I slipped him the fare, giving a curt nod of acknowledgment. He took one final glance at the boy, his eyes lingering for just a second longer, but then he drove off, disappearing into the night.

I pulled the hood of my jacket over my head, adjusting the face mask I had put on earlier to ensure it covered my features fully. There was no need for anyone here to see or remember my face. The registration and payment for the room had already been made in advance under a fake name and ID, and everything was set up for a smooth, untraceable stay.

With the boy trailing behind me in silence, I walked into the lobby. The bright, well-lit interior of the hotel contrasted sharply with the worn streets outside.

"Mister, can I help you with your bags?" The voice of the hotel bellhop caught my attention as I stepped into the lobby. His polite smile seemed rehearsed, but his eyes flicked between me and the boy.

"No need," I said, keeping my voice low and even, avoiding any eye contact. The less attention, the better.

The bellhop nodded and stepped back, his expression neutral, though I could sense the brief curiosity in his gaze as he looked at the boy again. I moved swiftly past him, not giving him the chance to linger, heading straight for the front desk.

The receptionist greeted me with a professional smile. "Good evening, sir. Welcome to the Meridian Hotel. May I—"

I cut her off, sliding the reservation details across the counter, my gloved hand ensuring there was no unnecessary exposure. "I've got a booking under Tanner Wells," I said, using the fake name I'd registered with. My voice remained steady, emotionless.

She scanned the details, nodded, and processed everything without so much as a raised eyebrow. "Your room is ready, Mr. Wells. Here's your keycard," she said, handing me the card. "Room 312 on the top floor. Let us know if you need anything."

I nodded, taking the card. "That's all," I replied curtly, already turning toward the elevators. The receptionist seemed used to late-night check-ins and didn't push any further.

As I walked to the elevator, I could feel the boy's presence behind me—silent, compliant. He was likely exhausted from the ordeal, both mentally and physically. But I didn't need to focus on that. My job was to get him out and keep him safe until I handed him off.

The elevator doors slid open with a soft chime, and we entered, the quiet hum of the machinery filling the silence. I pressed the button for the third floor, glancing briefly at the boy, who stood beside me, staring at the floor.

"312," I murmured as the doors opened again. We stepped out, and I led the way down the quiet hallway. A swipe of the keycard, a click of the lock, and we were inside the room.

"Mister..." The boy's voice, small and hesitant, broke the silence just as the door closed behind us.

I paused, turning slightly. His face was still blank, but there was a faint glimmer of confusion in his eyes, maybe even fear.

"You'll be safe here," I said, cutting off whatever he might have wanted to ask. There wasn't time for questions. "Sit down. I'll treat those injuries, after a quick call."

The boy obeyed, lowering himself onto the bed without another word.

The soft hum of mana-infused lamps cast a muted glow across Reina's private office, illuminating the piles of documents scattered across her sleek, dark wood desk.

The intricate runes carved into the walls pulsed faintly, a reminder of the magic woven through the very fabric of the Watchers' headquarters.

Behind her, the tall windows revealed the sprawling complex outside, but tonight, Reina was too tired to care.

She sighed, leaning back in her chair, her fingers brushing through her hair, trying to smooth out the tension coiling in her muscles. Her recent mission had been a draining one—dealing with rogue magic users, layers of hidden agendas, and the subtle manipulations of powers she couldn't afford to underestimate. Even someone like her, who thrived on precision and control, had limits.

On the corner of her desk sat an open bottle, the rich amber liquid inside catching the dim light. It was no ordinary bottle, either. Reina had spent a significant amount to acquire it, a rare blend known for its mana-infused distillation process.

The alcohol was supposed to ease tension and replenish her reserves, though right now, she was just hoping it would dull the weariness clinging to her bones.

She poured herself another glass, watching the liquid swirl before taking a slow sip. The warmth spread through her, a comforting burn that matched the exhaustion pulling at her. For a moment, she allowed herself to relax, letting her shoulders slump as she gazed at the documents spread before

her. Reports from her mission, evaluations of new recruits—including Astron—and endless intelligence briefs on emerging threats. There was always more to do, more to plan for.

But tonight, Reina wasn't rushing.

She lifted the glass to her lips again, savoring the flavor. It was exquisite, smooth with a lingering complexity, much like the layers of the world she navigated daily. She closed her eyes, letting the alcohol work its magic. A faint smirk crossed her lips as she thought of the price she had paid for it—extravagant, perhaps, but a necessary indulgence after the week she had endured.

Her fingers idly tapped one of the documents as she stared at it without really seeing. Her mind drifted back to the mission. The success, the strategic brilliance she had deployed... and then that woman.

"Useless bitch," she muttered, the words slipping out before she could stop them.

Her grip tightened around the glass as she recalled the insufferable woman who had caused her endless headaches. High-standing in the government, untouchable by any practical means, and yet utterly incompetent. A stumbling block in every negotiation, a thorn in every plan. Reina had tolerated her because she had to, but the rage still simmered beneath the surface.

'If it weren't for her position, I would've snapped her neck and left her in a ditch.'

The thought brought a dark satisfaction, but she dismissed it with a sigh. Power, after all, was a game of patience and restraint. Sometimes the pieces you most wanted to remove from the board were the ones you had to keep in play.

Her eyes flicked back to the documents, but her mind lingered on the infuriating memory. The woman's condescending voice, her pathetic attempts to exert control over situations she couldn't begin to understand. Reina's jaw clenched as the tension began to return, and she took another sip of the expensive liquor to steady herself.

Just then, her smartwatch buzzed, pulling her from her thoughts. She glanced down, half-expecting another report or briefing.

But the name on the screen made her pause.

Astron.

Reina raised an eyebrow, her fingers stilling on the glass. 'Astron? Why would he be contacting me now?' After all, he had requested time for himself—time she had granted without hesitation. She assumed he'd be focused on his own training, preparing for what lay ahead. It wasn't like him to reach out unless there was something significant.

A flicker of curiosity tugged at her.

'What could he possibly want?'

She tapped the screen, answering the call but kept her silence, waiting to hear the reason for his unexpected contact.

'Don't tell me?'

She thought of the name, Silas Vayne. She did not know why Astron had wanted to investigate that name, or what he wanted to do.

But she knew one thing.

Astron wasn't the type to call for trivial matters. Whatever it was, it had to be something related to the organization.

Reina leaned back in her chair, the glass still in hand, her sharp eyes narrowing as she waited for him to speak, the lingering tension from earlier replaced by a quiet anticipation.

Reina tapped the screen, her curiosity rising as she answered the call. The holographic interface flickered to life, casting a soft blue light across her desk. She leaned back in her chair, eyes half-lidded, still holding the glass of alcohol in her hand.

Astron's face appeared, his expression calm but focused. "Miss Reina," he greeted her, his voice polite yet direct, as always.

Reina let the silence stretch for a moment before responding, her tone cool but probing. "Astron," she said slowly, "I wasn't expecting you to call, especially since you specifically requested to be left alone." She set the glass down on her desk, her fingers drumming lightly against the wood. "What changed?"

Astron nodded slightly, as though acknowledging the accuracy of her observation. "Yes, just as you expected, I didn't plan to contact anyone. I needed time to focus," he said, his words measured. "But something's come up. I need... assistance."

Reina's gaze sharpened. She leaned forward slightly, her fingers now steepled together on the desk. "Assistance? Well, you can ask, and I'll decide if it's worth giving."

Astron paused for a fraction of a second, his face unreadable, and then he dropped the news, his tone still even but with a weight behind it. "Silas Vayne is dead."

For a moment, Reina said nothing. Her mind, ever calculating, processed the information at lightning speed. Silas Vayne—one of the most elusive and dangerous figures she had kept tabs on, a man who held far too many secrets and power. His death would send shockwaves through the underground and every political structure tied to his influence.

Reina's expression remained neutral, but inside, her mind raced. 'Dead? How? This changes everything...'

She narrowed her eyes, her voice dropping in tone, probing once more. "Silas Vayne? You're certain?" Her fingers itched to reach for the glass, but she resisted, keeping her full attention on Astron.

"That is right. I killed him."

Reina's eyes widened at Astron's words, the neutral mask on her face cracking for a split second. "You killed him?" she repeated, incredulous.

Astron nodded, his expression calm and resolute. "Indeed. Silas Vayne is dead. He was a demon."

The weight of his statement hung in the air, and Reina felt a headache creeping in, the tension at her temples pulsing. She lifted a hand and massaged her forehead, closing her eyes for a brief moment.

Of all the people to eliminate Silas Vayne, she hadn't expected it to be Astron. And the fact that Vayne had been a demon only made things more complicated.

"Then why," she said slowly, her tone sharp but weary, "do you need my help, Astron?" She lowered her hand from her forehead, her gaze steady but her patience thin.

In response, Astron shifted slightly and moved out of the way to reveal something on the screen—no, someone. A small child came into view, his eyes wide with an emptiness that Reina recognized too well.

"I found him in Silas Vayne's room," Astron said, his voice still calm but carrying a hint of something deeper—perhaps guilt, perhaps responsibility. "The boy was about to be eaten. I couldn't just leave him there."

Reina's eyes flicked between Astron and the child. Her headache worsened, and she pressed her fingers against her temples again.

"A child...?" she murmured, half to herself. Of course, it had to be more complicated than just Silas Vayne's death. She exhaled slowly and looked back at Astron. "And you want me to take him?"

Astron nodded, his face betraying no emotion. "Yes. I don't think leaving him here is an option. He has no mana presence, but I'm sure you can find a place for him to stay."

Reina leaned back in her chair, staring at the screen as she considered the boy.

"This can be done," she said at last, her voice quieter now. "I'll arrange something." She paused, her mind working through the logistics. "Someone will take the boy soon." Astron gave a short nod. "I understand."

Reina stared at the boy for a moment longer, then sighed, her fingers reaching for the glass of alcohol she'd set aside. She took a long sip, already calculating the next steps.

'Interesting.....If we can get something from the boy, that would be quite fine.'

A witness was a witness as well, regardless of the age.

Chapter 629 138.1 - A realization

After the call ended, the faint glow from the holographic interface on my smartwatch faded, leaving the room in relative silence, save for the soft hum of the mana-infused lamps. I leaned back slightly, letting out a quiet exhale, my thoughts briefly lingering on Reina's reaction.

Silas Vayne, dead—and a demon, no less. That would cause ripples, and I had no doubt that Reina would be working behind the scenes to ensure things went as smoothly as possible.

After all that was the reason why I had mentioned this directly to Reina herself. I could have kept it hidden as well if I had wanted but with the information-gathering capacity that the organization had, it wouldn't be too long until they would find he was dead even if the demons tried to cover it.

After finding it out, it wouldn't be hard to suspect me as I had recently just requested the information regarding Silas Vayne from them. And the fact that I did not mention that could mean I did not trust them and sufficiently that would make them not trust me either.

So eventually, talking about this would be more beneficial in the long run, and at the same time, the boy would also be taken care of soon enough.

Until then, there were still things to be done.

I glanced at the boy, who sat obediently on the bed, his blank stare still fixed on the floor. He hadn't moved since the call and hadn't uttered a word. His small frame seemed even more fragile in the dim light of the hotel room, the bruises and cuts standing out in stark contrast against his pale skin.

With practiced efficiency, I retrieved the first aid kit from my spatial storage. It wasn't anything extravagant—just basic supplies, but more than enough for the task at hand. I knelt in front of the boy, pulling out gauze, antiseptic, and some bandages.

My hands moved with precision, already well-versed in the art of treating wounds manually. Potions were faster, sure, but sometimes it was better to do things the old-fashioned way.

Besides, I doubted the boy would handle the sudden shock of a mana-infused potion in his system right now.

"Hold still," I said quietly, not bothering to wait for a response. I doubted I'd get one anyway.

I gently lifted his arm, inspecting the bruises along his forearm. The injuries were minor compared to what I'd seen before, but they still needed attention. I worked quickly, cleaning the cuts and applying antiseptic. The boy winced slightly but didn't make a sound. His eyes remained unfocused, staring past me, lost in whatever dark place his mind had retreated to.

I moved on to his other arm, then his legs, working methodically. The bruises on his ribs were deeper, and I could tell he'd been struck there more than once. It made me pause for a second, but I pushed the thought aside and continued. The soft rustling of bandages and the quiet clinking of tools were the only sounds that filled the room.

Once I finished wrapping the last bandage, I stood up and put the kit away, my movements efficient and purposeful. The boy hadn't moved an inch. He remained silent, still staring at nothing.

"You're done," I said, pulling off my gloves and tossing them aside. "Get some rest. Someone will come for you soon."

The boy blinked slowly, his gaze briefly flickering toward me before it drifted back down to the floor. He didn't respond, but I hadn't expected him to.

'The organization will take care of him anyway. And there is a high chance that they will also get some information from him as well.'

There were countless professions in this world, each with its own unique set of skills, spells, and abilities. I'd come across many of them in my time, from elemental mages to artifact forgers, but one particular field had always piqued my interest: mind magic—or more precisely, psychic magic.

It was a rare art, one that allowed its practitioners to delve deep into the recesses of the mind. And at its highest levels, it gave the ability to peer into another person's memories, extracting information as easily as pulling a book from a shelf.

[Memory Mining], they called it.

I had no doubt that the organization had at least one expert who could perform this feat. They wouldn't waste an opportunity to gather useful information from the boy, especially given the circumstances.

He had been raised by demons, or at least demon contractors, that much was clear. His blank stare, his mechanical obedience—it all pointed to conditioning, to the kind of treatment that would leave his mind ripe for such exploration.

They'd probe his mind, look for anything useful—like the location of the facility where he had been raised, or any information about those who had kept him. Demons didn't just abduct children for no reason. There was always a plan and a structure to their methods. And demon contractors were even more methodical, their operations shrouded in secrecy but driven by the insidious hunger for power and control.

I knew this well. I had studied them extensively.

They took people, usually children, and molded them into tools. It was rare for someone like the boy to survive without any trace of mana in their body, but that only made him more interesting—more valuable to those looking for leverage against the demons.

The organization wouldn't miss that.

As I stood by the window, gazing out at the darkened city, I thought back to my own research into psychic magic.

It was a field I had only touched the surface of, but I understood its potential. In the hands of someone skilled enough, memories weren't just fragments of the past—they were weapons, they were secrets. And in this world, secrets held power.

'But well, even if they don't find anything, I doubt that they will not find any use for him. He can become a clerk or some sort of normal personnel either.' I glanced at the boy one last time. His small figure was hunched slightly, his gaze still fixed on nothing.

'From here, it's the organization's responsibility,' I thought. Whether they found something useful in his memories or not, he would end up with a purpose—maybe just a clerk or some other low-level personnel, but he'd be taken care of in one way or another. That was their way of doing things.

"Are you hungry?" I asked, my voice cutting through the silence.

The boy didn't respond, and I wasn't surprised. He was still too far gone, too disconnected. But then, as if his body had decided to answer for him, a loud gurgling sound echoed through the room, the unmistakable growl of an empty stomach.

I raised an eyebrow, taking note of the faint flicker of surprise in his eyes as the sound filled the air. His hand instinctively moved to his stomach, and for the first time since we'd entered the room, I saw a small glimmer of awareness.

Without another word, I stepped away and reached for the phone on the nightstand. The room service menu was standard enough, and I quickly placed an order for a meal—something simple but nutritious. The boy needed food, and it was clear he hadn't eaten properly in a while.

After confirming the order, I hung up and pulled out my communicator. There was one more call I needed to make before the night was over. Reina had already been informed, but now it was time to check in with someone else.

Senior Maya.

Now that everything was over, I needed to inform her that I was safe either since I could visualize how restless she would be for the time being.

Maya sat on her bed, her knees pulled up slightly, her back leaning against the soft headboard as she stared out the large window. The cool moonlight filtered through the curtains, casting gentle silver rays across the room, giving it an almost ethereal glow. The scene outside was serene—calm and quiet, the city of Ardmont resting beneath the night sky.

But inside, Maya was anything but calm.

Her hands, resting lightly in her lap, trembled ever so slightly, and her heart beat a little too quickly for her liking. The events of the evening replayed over and over in her mind—the way the hunger had nearly consumed her, the sudden surge of demonic energy, and then the last moment when Astron had walked away into the night.

She leaned her head back, exhaling softly, willing herself to focus on the rhythm of her breath, trying to regain some sense of control. She needed to calm down, to stop thinking about him, about

what he might be facing right now. But the thought of Astron—alone, potentially in danger—gnawed at her, twisting her insides with a quiet, persistent anxiety.

'He'll be fine,' she told herself. 'He always is.'

But that wasn't enough to soothe the worry that gripped her.

Her gaze drifted back to the window. She couldn't shake the feeling that she should be doing something. Anything. The restless energy inside her wouldn't settle, not when she knew that Astron was out there, possibly walking into the jaws of danger while she was here, safe in her mansion.

Her hand twitched toward the bedside table where her phone rested, the urge to call him growing stronger. She wanted to hear his voice, to know that he was okay. But she hesitated, biting down on her lip.

'No,' she thought, her eyes narrowing slightly. 'He wouldn't appreciate that. He'd see it as a distraction.'

Astron had been clear. He needed to do this alone, and Maya didn't want to seem like she was second-guessing him or hovering too closely. She knew how much he valued his independence, how much he hated anyone interfering with his plans. Calling him now would only make it seem like she didn't trust him to handle things on his own.

Still, the silence of the room pressed down on her, and her fingers twitched again, her heart warring with her mind. The truth was, she did trust him—completely—but that didn't stop her from worrying.

'I hate this,' she thought bitterly, a sigh escaping her lips. 'I hate feeling helpless.'

Maya shifted, her gaze still fixed outside. The moon hung high in the sky, full and brilliant, casting its pale light over the land. She found some small comfort in the quiet, in the steady rhythm of the world moving on despite her inner turmoil.

Her mind wandered back to Astron's final words before he had left—how distant he had been, how cool his tone had sounded. She knew he was shutting himself off, preparing for whatever he had to do, but that didn't make it any easier to accept. She didn't like being left out, especially when she felt like she could help.

Another thought tugged at her—a darker one. Zharokath. The demon's influence had nearly overwhelmed her tonight. She had felt the demonic energy pulse through her, amplifying the hunger she had long struggled to control. The thought of what could have happened if Astron hadn't been there to ground her, to pull her back... it chilled her.

What if the next time she couldn't stop herself? What if Zharokath—or any demon—found a way to exploit that part of her again?

'This is another reason.' Overly being dependent.

That was not something healthy and she knew it as well.

'I need to get better.'

Today opened her eyes much more, more clearly.

'I am still too weak.'

Chapter 630 138.2 - A realization

Maya sat up straight, her gaze still on the moon, but her thoughts began to sharpen, shifting away from the emotional turmoil and into something more calculated. She was a mage, a genius elemental mage, and her mind worked best when it was focused. The ability to think through problems analytically had always been her strength, and tonight, she needed that clarity more than ever.

As her mind worked, she reviewed the past week, playing through each memory in meticulous detail. The moments with Astron, their time spent navigating the complexities of the banquet, the subtle challenges they faced together. She thought back to the small moments between them—the quiet exchanges, the tension that lingered in his eyes whenever she was close. It wasn't just attraction or the pull of her vampiric instincts. It was something deeper, something more dangerous.

She began to dissect the patterns, drawing connections between her own actions and his responses. She was excellent at this—taking emotions out of the equation and seeing the raw data, the facts laid bare. It was the same approach she used with her magic, the same one that had made her the top student at Arcadia Hunter Academy. Her talent wasn't just in her ability to control mana; it was her analytical mind that had also set her apart.

After all, being a mage was not something like being a Warlock.

Mages were mages for a reason.

'What have I been doing wrong?' she asked herself as if solving an equation. Her thoughts sifted through the memories, her mind calculating every interaction with precision. The late-night talks, the subtle glances, and the way her body reacted when she fed from him.

Her breath hitched as she came to a painful realization: she had been too dependent on Astron.

The evidence was clear now, cold and undeniable. She had allowed her need for him to cloud her judgment—whether it was the draw of his blood, his calm strength, or simply the sense of safety she felt in his presence. She had been leaning on him too much, more than she should have. And for someone like Astron, who already carried the weight of his own burdens, this was the last thing he needed.

Her fingers tightened against the fabric of her bedspread as she forced herself to face the truth. 'This isn't just about him,' she thought, her mind working through the logic. 'It's about me too. My weakness, my lack of control.'

She exhaled slowly, steadying herself. She was an accomplished mage, top of her class for a reason. She had always been able to solve problems—this was no different. She needed to fix this, to regain control over herself. The dependency, the obsession she had been feeling, whether it was fueled by her vampiric instincts or something else, was unhealthy. And if she kept letting it spiral, she would lose more than just her sense of self.

Her brow furrowed slightly as she recalled the way Astron had looked at her tonight—the quiet distance in his eyes, the way he carried himself with such careful control. He needed someone who could stand beside him, not lean on him constantly. If she wanted to truly help him, if she wanted to be the person he could rely on, then she had to be stronger.

'I need to be better,' she thought firmly, her mind clearing.

She couldn't let her emotions dictate her actions anymore. She had to focus, to improve. Not just for Astron, but for herself.

'That is right.'

Of course, this was not something that she could just change in a split second. It didn't work like that and she was very well aware of this fact.

If it worked in such a manner, everyone would change easily.

RING!

Just then, at that exact moment the sudden sound of her smartwatch ringing startled Maya, breaking through her thoughts and pulling her back to the present. Her heart skipped a beat as she quickly reached for it, her fingers brushing against the cool surface of the device as it vibrated softly on the nightstand. She glanced at the name flashing across the screen.

Astron.

Her heart raced again, but this time for a different reason. She hoped—prayed—that this was the call she had been waiting for, the one that would tell her everything was fine. Her hands trembled slightly as she tapped the screen and brought the watch closer to her ear.

"Hello?" she answered, trying to keep her voice steady despite the whirlwind of emotions coursing through her.

There was a brief pause, just enough time for her heart to thud loudly in her chest, and then she heard it—Astron's voice, calm and composed as ever.

"Senior," he said, his tone even, without a hint of distress. "I just wanted to let you know that I'm safe. Everything went according to plan."

A rush of relief flooded through her, and she exhaled a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. The tension that had gripped her for hours began to unravel, and she sank back onto the bed, her body finally relaxing as she processed his words.

"You are safe," she repeated softly, more to herself than to him, but she couldn't hide the small smile tugging at her lips. "I see."

"I'm fine," Astron assured her, his tone steady. "There was no trouble. Everything was handled smoothly."

Maya closed her eyes for a moment, letting the relief wash over her fully. For all her strength and composure, she had still been worried—more than she wanted to admit. But hearing his voice now, knowing he was unharmed, brought her back to herself.

"Thank you for calling," she said quietly, the sincerity clear in her voice. "I was... worried."

"I know," Astron replied, his tone softening slightly, though he kept the conversation practical. "I didn't want you to spend the night wondering. I knew you'd be thinking about it."

Maya couldn't help but smile again, her chest feeling lighter. He was right, of course. She had been worrying, even though she had tried so hard not to. But now, with this call, she could finally let go of that fear.

"Well, I'm glad you did," she admitted, leaning back into her pillows as she gazed at the ceiling. The moonlight still bathed her room in a gentle glow, and the serenity of the moment finally started to reach her. "I'm... relieved."

There was a brief pause on the other end and then Maya opened up her mouth. "Junior. Get some rest. We can talk about it tomorrow."

Maya waited, her heart still lightened by the calmness in Astron's voice. After a brief pause, he replied, "I will."

Maya smiled, the tension of the night fully easing out of her as she lay back on her pillows, comforted by his words. "Good. Just... make sure you do."

There was another small silence before Maya felt compelled to ask, "Do you need anything, junior? If you do, I can send someone over."

Astron's response came swiftly, his voice steady but with that familiar tone of quiet independence. "I don't need anything, Senior. I'll be fine."

She knew he meant it, and she had expected the answer. Astron wasn't one to ask for help easily, and even though she still had the urge to make sure everything was perfect for him, she respected his space. She understood him enough to know when to step back.

"Alright," Maya said softly, her voice carrying both her care and her acceptance of his need for solitude. "Then get some rest. Goodnight, Junior."

"Goodnight, Senior," he replied simply, and with that, the call ended.

Maya lowered her hand, placing the watch back on the nightstand, the lingering warmth from their conversation still in her chest. She lay back once more, gazing at the moonlit sky outside her window, the peacefulness of the night finally reaching her.

For the first time that evening, her mind felt at ease. With a small, contented sigh, she closed her eyes, letting the serenity of the moment lull her into a restful sleep.

After ending the call, I slipped my communicator back into my pocket and turned toward the boy. He was still sitting on the edge of the bed, quietly eating the meal I'd ordered for him. His movements were slow, almost mechanical, but at least he was eating. That was something.

I leaned against the wall, arms crossed, watching him for a moment longer.

Though the thought barely lingered before my mind shifted back to more practical matters.


'Let's see today's hauls.'

Now that I had a free time finally, it was time to check the hauls that I had gotten from today's hunt.


'Status.'

I called in my head and immediately following that, the panel showed up right before me.

 Name: Astron Natusalune

 Occupation: Weapon Master (Level 4)

 Talent Limit: 12

 Passives:

Vengeful Bane

Bloodline Resonance

Psychic Cognizance

 Attributes:

Variable Attributes:

Strength: 6.02 (previously 5.79)

Dexterity: 6.04 (previously 5.81)

Agility: 6.12 (previously 5.89)

Constitution: 6.03 (previously 5.80)

Intuition: 6.20 (previously 5.96)

Magical Power: 6.61 (previously 6.36)

Mana Capacity: 6.70 (previously 6.44)

Invariable Attributes:

Charisma: 11

Vitality: 10

▶ Traits:

Perceptive Insight (Epic)(Unchanging)

Lunar Enigma (???)(Growth Type)(Stage 1)

Shadowborne (Legendary)(Growth Type)(Stage 3)

▶ Arts:

Lethal Arsenal Ascendancy (???)(35%)

▶ Skills:

Eyes of Hourglass

▶ Body Imprints:

Everchanging Glyph

▶ Bonds:

Aurora Raven (Rare)(Growth Type)

Celestialith, The Transcendent Eclipse

'Not bad,' I thought as I observed the numbers, noting the increase in my variable attributes. The boost was small, but noticeable—expected, considering the intensity of today's battle. The passive [Vengeful Bane] had likely contributed to the growth, siphoning strength from the demons I'd killed and amplifying my capabilities as a result.

The most significant gains, of course, came from my magical power and mana capacity. They had climbed steadily thanks to the nature of Zharokath's demonic essence. With a powerful opponent like that, absorbing traces of his mana always yielded results, especially when combined with my own talent and growth path.

'6.70 for mana capacity... that's higher than I expected.'

I felt the familiar hum of magic within me, stronger now than it had been before the hunt. My progression through the levels was steady and methodical. There was still much to unlock, especially with traits like [Lunar Enigma] and [Shadowborne]—growth-type traits that I knew would only reveal their true potential in due time.

But patience had always been part of the game. Every step, every victory, was another piece added to the larger puzzle.

'Though, this time, there was no passive ability.'

Looking at it back, it partially made sense.

'Zharokath was not a high-ranking demon.'

While a demon is a demon, at the end of the day, even demons do have their own hierarchy amongst themselves and Zharokath was not the strongest amongst them.

Even though he belonged to the Void Clan, his void abilities were not even that strong, thus it made sense that I wouldn't get any passive ability from him.

'But the increase in the stats is much more.'

From how it looked, it seemed that it rather increased my stats which was something that I did not mind.

Satisfied with the numbers for now, I closed the status window with a thought, the glowing panel fading from view.

'Now the second part.'

The most important part did not even start.