

H. Academy 531

Chapter 531 119.1 - Guild

Astron sat on the edge of the bed, letting the softness of the mattress sink under his weight as he leaned back against the pillows. The hotel room was quiet, save for the faint hum of the air conditioning.

After the last few days, the silence was welcome, almost soothing. He stared up at the ceiling, his mind wandering over the events in Shange Town. The mission was done, the report was sent, and now he was back in Riko City with a rare day to himself.

The hotel room was quite fancy. After all, the hotel that he was in was an expensive one. It seemed that when he finished the mission with a good result, he would be rewarded like this. A small desk sat in the corner, a lamp casting a warm, yellow glow over it. His gear was already unpacked and neatly stored away, leaving nothing but time to relax.

As he stared blankly at the ceiling, lost in thought, his smartwatch buzzed on the nightstand beside me. The sudden vibration snapped him out of his reverie, and he reached over to pick it up. The screen lit up with an incoming call.

Astron sat up a little straighter as he answered the call, Reina's familiar voice coming through the speaker. The warmth in her tone was evident, a stark contrast to the often cold and detached demeanor she maintained during missions.

"Astron," Reina greeted, her voice carrying a hint of approval. "I see you've settled in nicely. Enjoying the luxury?"

Astron glanced around the hotel room, taking in the understated elegance of the space. It was a far cry from the bleak and oppressive atmosphere of Shange Town. The soft glow of the lamp, the plushness of the bed, and the quiet hum of the air conditioning were all reminders that he was no longer in the midst of danger.

"Not bad."

Reina's soft chuckle came through the line. "You've earned it, Astron. The organization recognizes talent when it sees it, and you've proven a lot over the last few missions. This is just a small token of appreciation."

"The situation in Shange Town was particularly... delicate," Reina continued, her tone becoming more serious. "But you handled it with the precision and care we've come to expect from you. The higher-ups were impressed. Not many would have managed to bring that case to a close with as little collateral damage as you did."

"Thank you," he said simply, his voice betraying none of the weight he still carried from the mission.

Reina's voice took on a more formal tone, the warmth from earlier replaced by the steely professionalism that Astron had come to expect from her. "Now that you've completed your second mission, we're almost at the end of our agreement. There's only one more mission left, just as we discussed."

Astron's gaze flicked back to the ceiling, his mind already turning over the possibilities of what the final mission could entail.

He had made a deal with Reina not out of a desire for recognition but because he needed time to sort out his own plans and pursue goals that didn't align perfectly with the organization's interests.

"I remember," Astron replied, his voice steady. "This was the arrangement I requested. Three missions in one week, and then the remaining time is mine."

"Indeed," Reina confirmed. "You asked for the freedom to focus on your own objectives, and I agreed on the condition that you complete the three missions we assign to you. But you knew the stakes—each mission would be hard, especially for someone newly promoted to Adept. The higher-ups want to see if you can handle the pressure."

Astron nodded to himself, recalling the conversation they'd had. He knew he was taking on a significant risk with this deal, but he had been confident in his abilities and capacity to see the missions through. The challenges didn't deter him—they were necessary steps toward a greater goal.

"I never make deals that I'm not confident I can fulfill," he said calmly.

"That seems to be the case," Reina acknowledged, her tone indicating that she, too, was confident in his abilities. "Normally, the final mission we had planned for you was going to be significantly harder, something that would truly push you to your limits. But circumstances have changed. The field you were supposed to be sent to encountered an unexpected situation, and the mission was pushed further down the line."

Astron's brow furrowed slightly as he processed her words. This wasn't what he had expected, but he knew better than to question the organization's decisions without cause.

Reina went on, "However, after reviewing your performance in Shange Town, it's clear that the mission you completed there was far more complex and challenging than we initially evaluated. The case's intricacies and the way you handled it—bringing it to a close with such precision—have given me more than enough material to present to the higher-ups. Your work there exceeded expectations."

Astron's expression remained stoic, though a hint of curiosity flickered in his eyes. "So what does that mean for my final mission?" @@novelbin@@

"It means that your last mission won't be as complex as originally intended," Reina explained. "In fact, it's going to be something you're already quite proficient at."

"And what exactly does that entail?" Astron asked, his voice steady but with a trace of intrigue.

"For your final mission," Reina replied, "you'll be sent to a guild that operates under our organization's purview. Specifically, you'll be taking part in raids on gates as a Hunter Intern. The guild needs additional support for its operations, and your skills are well-suited for this task. It's straightforward, but it will allow you to demonstrate your capabilities in a different setting."

Astron considered her words for a moment.

'I had been expecting something more grueling, but it seems that will not be the case.' A raid on gates as a Hunter Intern? That was within his wheelhouse, something he could handle with relative ease compared to the intricate investigations and supernatural dealings he'd been involved in recently.

'Not bad. I also need to warm up against monsters.' It worked for him on both ends, making it

"Understood," he finally said, his voice calm.

Reina's tone softened further, and there was a hint of approval in her voice. "Good. The guild will be expecting you tomorrow. I'll send the details to your device. Complete this mission, and you'll have fulfilled our agreement. After that, you'll have the time you need to pursue your own objectives."

"Understood."

With that, the line went silent as Reina ended the call, leaving Astron alone in the quiet of his hotel room. He placed the smartwatch back on the nightstand, his mind already shifting to the upcoming mission.

'I guess I should be grateful.'

Whether or not he needed to get ready.

'Though I should train a little bit; my hands are itching.' *****

RUFF! The train hummed steadily beneath me, a low vibration that resonated through the luxurious cabin. I sat at a small, elegantly set table, finishing off the last of the meal that had been served—something far more refined than the usual fare.

Here, everything was designed for comfort: plush seating, soft lighting, and even a bed tucked into the corner.

The train ride to Nexoria City would take seven hours, plenty of time to rest, reflect, and prepare for the next mission. The journey was long, but the luxury of this train made it more of a retreat than a commute.

As I sipped the last of the tea, my mind wandered to the upcoming task. Nexoria City, the second-largest city in the Valerian Federation, was a bustling metropolis. It was also a place I had visited once before with the club.

The memories of that visit were rather filled with action, but I could still recall the towering skyscrapers and the constant buzz of activity that filled the air.

This mission felt different, not because of its difficulty, but because it was a return to a familiar place under very different circumstances.

This time, I wasn't a student on a school trip but a Hunter Intern tasked with supporting guild operations during gate raids.

I set the empty teacup down on the small table beside me, the soft clink of porcelain breaking the otherwise quiet ambiance of the luxurious train cabin. The setting sun cast a warm, golden glow over the interior, creating an almost surreal atmosphere of comfort and calm.

But my thoughts were far from restful.

'Nexoria City... the wilderness, the fields... it makes sense that the guild operates there,' I mused, reaching for my smartwatch. The screen lit up as I navigated to the mission details that had been provided.

As expected, the information was sparse—just enough to give me a framework without delving into unnecessary specifics. The name of the guild was prominently displayed: Vanguard Haven.

It is a mid-ranked guild but well-regarded for its efficiency and the skill of its members. They weren't the biggest or the most prestigious, but they had a solid reputation and were known for handling high-stakes missions with a precision that rivaled top-tier guilds.

However, the real reason for my involvement became clear as I read further.

Mission Brief:

Objective: Support Vanguard Haven in maintaining control over their assigned gates.

Guild Status: Under significant pressure from rival guilds.

Purpose: The guild has been struggling to maintain its position due to increasing competition in the area. Your presence as a Hunter Intern from Arcadia Hunter Academy will not only bolster their operational capacity but also enhance their prestige, providing a strategic advantage in the ongoing territorial disputes.

It wasn't just about lending a hand; my participation was as much a strategic move as it was a test of my capabilities.

In a city like Nexoria, where competition among guilds was fierce, maintaining control over gate rights was a matter of survival. The wilderness surrounding the city was filled with 'Fields'—areas teeming with monsters that hunters could clear without the bureaucratic oversight involved in gate disputes.

But these fields were dangerous. Without the structured environment of a gate, the unpredictability of the monsters, the terrain, and even the rival guilds posed significant risks.

It was a different kind of battlefield, one where politics might take a back seat, but the stakes were just as high, if not higher.

'Fields...' I thought, my fingers tapping idly on the screen. 'No legal rights, no restrictions, just survival and the hunt.'

The brief mentioned that Vanguard Haven was under significant pressure, likely from other guilds aiming to seize control of the lucrative gates and fields around Nexoria.

That was why I was being sent there—not just as a temporary support but as a symbol. Being from Arcadia Hunter Academy gave me a certain status, and my presence was intended to send a message to the guild's rivals.

'Makes sense.' Well, in the end, I just needed to kill a bunch of monsters, and that was it. There was no need to complicate it.

Just like that, the train moved on.

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The train began to slow as the first light of dawn peeked over the horizon, casting a soft, golden hue across the landscape. Nexoria City was coming into view, its towering skyscrapers a stark contrast to the wilderness that surrounded it.

The city was waking up, but the atmosphere was already charged with a sense of purpose—a city of hunters, always ready, always on edge.

As the train came to a halt, I gathered my belongings, my mind already shifting gears to the task ahead. The cabin door slid open with a soft hiss, and I stepped out into the brisk morning air. The platform was surprisingly quiet, with only a few early risers moving about.

Standing near the exit, a woman caught my eye. She was dressed in a sharp, tailored suit, her posture rigid and her expression serious. Her dark hair was pulled back into a tight bun, and she held a tablet in one hand, her eyes scanning the crowd with practiced efficiency.

As soon as she saw me, she straightened even further, if that was possible, and approached with a measured stride. "Astron Natusalune?" she asked, her voice calm but carrying an underlying tone of authority.

I nodded, meeting her gaze evenly. "That's me."

"Welcome to Nexoria City," she said, extending a hand in a gesture that was more formal than friendly. "I'm Liana Marcellus, the assistant to the Guild Master of Vanguard Haven. I've been assigned to escort you to the guild and brief you on the situation."

I shook her hand, noting the firmness of her grip and the cool professionalism in her demeanor. "Thank you."

She nodded curtly and turned on her heel, leading the way out of the station. "The guild is expecting you, Mr. Natusalune. We've prepared everything for your arrival. The situation here is tense, as you might have been briefed. We're facing significant pressure from rival guilds, and your presence is intended to bolster our position."

As we walked, Liana continued to provide a succinct overview of the current state of affairs in Nexoria. The streets were beginning to fill with people, most of them hunters and those who supported the hunting industry. Nexoria was a city built on the edge of danger, and its inhabitants were accustomed to the constant threat that came with living so close to untamed fields.

"Our primary concern at the moment is maintaining control over several key gates and fields," Liana explained as we exited the station and made our way toward a sleek, black car parked nearby. "There have been increased movements from rival guilds, and while the Vanguard Haven has held its own, the competition is fierce."

I listened carefully, taking in the details she provided. The car door opened with a soft click, and I slid into the back seat. Liana took the front passenger seat as the driver nodded in acknowledgment and pulled away from the station.

"The Guild Master is looking forward to meeting you," Liana added, her tone slightly softer now that we were inside the car. "Your reputation as the Arcadia Hunter Academy Student will certainly help us; at least, that is what we wish for." @@novelbin@@

I simply nodded in response to that since she was just briefing.

The city's skyline passed by outside the window, a mix of towering buildings and the distant silhouette of the wilderness beyond.

It was a place of contrasts, where civilization met the wild and where survival often depended on the sharpness of one's skills and the strength of one's resolve.

'But still similar to that time.'

The Nexoria City Trip somehow held quite a bit of time in my memories. That attack that happened in the museum, the first Moonstone and seeing Kaya Hartley in action.

In one way or another, this place was where I had experienced my first deviation from the storyline of the game.

"We'll be at the guild shortly," Liana said as the car turned onto a wide boulevard lined with modern buildings. "If you have any questions or need anything, please don't hesitate to ask."

I considered her words for a moment before asking, "What's the general plan? You must have been informed that I won't be able to stay here for long."

Liana nodded, her expression shifting to a more businesslike demeanor. "Yes, we've been informed. You'll be with us for three days only. But that's sufficient for our purposes. Following next week, many other interns from various institutions will also be joining us. Your presence here is actually laying the groundwork for the future manpower that's about to come."

"So you're planning to use me as a face?" I asked, my tone more observant than questioning.

Liana didn't hesitate, and her tone was straightforward. "That's indeed the case. While you might not be one of the most famous students at Arcadia Hunter Academy, simply having a student from such a prestigious institution lends us credibility. It makes others believe that we're capable of attracting top talent, even at the intern level."

She paused for a moment, glancing back at me before continuing, "This will open up the potential for more manpower from the organization. By using you as a figurehead, we can bring in more young Adepts without raising too much suspicion. It's a strategic move—both for the guild and for the organization you represent."

I nodded, absorbing the information. Their plan was sound, leveraging my presence to bolster their standing and attract additional resources. It was a tactic I could respect—efficient, with a clear goal in mind.

"I understand," I replied, my voice calm. "As long as the mission objectives are clear and I can operate effectively, I have no issues with that."

Liana allowed a small smile to tug at the corners of her mouth, perhaps in relief at my straightforward acceptance of the situation. "Good. I think you'll find that our guild operates with a similar mindset. We value efficiency and results above all else."

The car continued its smooth ride through Nexoria City, the tall buildings giving way to a more specialized district filled with facilities clearly geared towards hunters and guild operations. It was evident that this area was dedicated to the business of monster hunting—training grounds, equipment shops, and medical facilities lined the streets.

As we neared our destination, Liana added, "The Guild Master will brief you personally once we arrive. He's eager to meet you and discuss how we can best utilize your skills during your time here."

"Looking forward to it," I replied, my mind already turning to the tasks that awaited me. The next three days would be crucial, both for the guild's immediate needs and for the longer-term strategy they were putting into place.

'At the same time, it can also act as a future station for me.'

If I were to make a good impression here, I could build a reputation. Before, I was not that interested in such things, and I still do not favor fame.

But at the same time, I started thinking about my plans with a little change.

Now that I have good backing and my stats and other things have significantly improved, changing the approach could also prove to be better and more efficient.

As the car pulled up to the guild building, I took in the sight before me. The structure was impressive, a testament to the wealth and resources that even a mid-ranked, B-rank guild like Vanguard Haven could command.

It was a multi-story building, sleek and modern, with large glass windows that reflected the morning sun. The architecture was a blend of functionality and style, designed to project an image of both power and professionalism.

'Befitting of a guild with significant influence in a city like Nexoria,' I thought as I stepped out of the car.

Despite being mid-ranked, the guild clearly had access to considerable capital. The monster-hunting industry was lucrative, and even a B-rank guild could command large sums of money.

This was one of the reasons why many corporations in history had tried to take over the industry—it was profitable, and the potential for growth was immense.

Liana led the way, her stride confident as we approached the entrance. The inside of the building was just as impressive as the outside—polished floors, modern furnishings, and a layout that spoke to both efficiency and comfort.

The reception area was staffed by well-dressed attendants who greeted us with polite nods as we passed.

"This way," Liana said, guiding me toward a set of elevators. "The Guild Master's office is on the top floor."

I nodded, following her into the elevator. The ride up was smooth, and I could feel the subtle shift in pressure as we ascended. My mind was already working through the possibilities of what the Guild Master might expect and how I could leverage this experience for future opportunities.

When the elevator doors opened, we stepped out into a corridor lined with large windows that offered a sweeping view of Nexoria City.

The city sprawled out beneath us, a mixture of towering skyscrapers and the distant, untamed wilderness that surrounded it.

Liana led me down the corridor to a set of double doors, intricately carved with the guild's emblem—a shield with a crossed sword and spear, symbolizing protection and strength.

She knocked once, and after a moment, a voice from within called for us to enter.

The Guild Master's office was spacious, with large windows that let in plenty of natural light. The decor was tasteful, with dark wood furnishings and shelves lined with books, artifacts, and trophies from past hunts. Behind a large, imposing desk sat the Guild Master himself.

He was a man in his late forties, with a strong build and an air of authority. His short-cropped hair was graying at the temples, and his sharp blue eyes assessed me as I entered the room. He stood to greet me, extending a hand.

"Astron Natusalune, I presume," he said, his voice deep and resonant. "Welcome to Vanguard Haven. I'm Guild Master Toren Vanek."

I took his hand, noting the firm grip. "Thank you, Guild Master Vanek. It's a pleasure to be here."

He gestured for us to sit, and once we were settled, he leaned back in his chair, studying me with a discerning gaze. "I've heard a lot about you from Shanks."

"You knew Warden Shanks?"

"Haha..." Toren chuckled, a deep, rumbling sound that seemed to echo through the room. "That's right," he said, leaning back in his chair as he recalled the past. "Shanks and I go way back. We were in the same base when we were trainees, cutting our teeth on missions that were often more dangerous than they had any right to be. We spent years working together as Adepts, and there's no one I trust more in the field."

He paused, his sharp blue eyes locking onto mine, the weight of his words clear. "When I called Shanks, he told me about you and what you accomplished in Veilcroft. I knew I had to bring you here. He spoke highly of your abilities, and coming from him is no small compliment."

I nodded.

When on the mission, Shanks looked serious, so it made sense to me that it was rare for someone like Shanks to vouch for another.

And the fact that he had done so for me must have meant a lot to him. It wasn't just a matter of professional respect; it was a connection forged through shared experiences and mutual understanding.

Toren continued, his tone serious. "According to him, your performance in Veilcroft was impressive, to say the least. That's why you're here now."

I met his gaze, my expression calm. "I appreciate the trust, Guild Master Vanek. I'll make sure it's well-placed."

"I have no doubt you will," Toren replied, his voice steady. "Shanks wouldn't have recommended you if he didn't believe in your capabilities. And from what I've heard, you more than lived up to his expectations. Your work in Veilcroft was top-notch, and it's clear you have a sharp mind for strategy as well as a strong hand in combat. And considering your rank in the Arcadia Hunter Academy, which was recorded before you even went under training, I think I can expect much from you in terms of combating."

He leaned forward slightly, his expression thoughtful. "That's exactly what we need here at Vanguard Haven."

Chapter 533 119.3 - Guild

"That's exactly what we need here at Vanguard Haven."

Toren stood up from his seat, the chair creaking slightly as he moved. He tapped a few commands into the device on his desk, and almost immediately, a detailed hologram of Nexoria City and the surrounding lands appeared in the air before us. The projection was sharp and vivid, with various points of interest highlighted in different colors.

On the map, I could see several locations marked prominently. Twenty-five of them were clearly identified as gates, while six others were marked as fields—sprawling areas of wilderness where monsters roamed freely.

Toren gestured to the hologram, his expression serious as he began to explain. "This is the current state of our operations. Vanguard Haven has control over twenty-five gates at present. As a B-rank guild, we're allocated one slot for a rank-8 gate, two slots for rank-7 gates, four slots for rank-6 gates, eight slots for rank-5 gates, and the remaining ten slots are split between seven rank-4 gates, and three rank-3 gates."

He paused, allowing me to absorb the information before continuing. "As you can already expect, the rank-3 and rank-4 gates are primarily used to train our newer recruits and prospects since they're less challenging and offer a controlled environment for developing skills. But as you move up the ranks, the stakes—and the rewards—increase significantly. That's where the real business is. Especially for us."

I studied the hologram, noting the locations of the various gates and fields. The rank-8 gate was positioned near the outskirts of the city, close to one of the larger fields. It was clear that this gate required the most experienced hunters, given its proximity to the wilderness and the high level of danger it posed. @@novelbin@@

'Most likely, the Guild Master and the high-ranking guild members will be the ones who are responsible for that gate.'

In a way, the formation of the gates and their allocations were made in such a manner. Since most of the time, the stronger person is either the guild master or the guild master's associate.

"The fields," Toren continued, his voice steady, "are where things get a bit more complicated. Unlike the gates, there are no regulations, no restrictions. They're open season for any guild or

hunter willing to take the risk. The monsters there are unpredictable, and the terrain can be treacherous. But the rewards are substantial—rare materials, powerful monsters, and the chance to claim territory."

He pointed to the six marked locations on the hologram, each one representing a different field. "We currently have a presence in all of these fields, but our hold on them is not absolute. Rival guilds are always looking for an opportunity to take over, especially if they think we're stretched too thin. That's where your role comes in."

Toren's gaze locked onto mine, his expression serious. "During your time here, you'll be working with our teams to reinforce our positions in gates."

"For gates."

"That is right. Since neither the organization and the Arcadia Hunter Academy do not permit their students to participate actively in the fields, we will not be able to utilize you in the fields."

I nodded as Toren explained the situation. The restrictions on participating in fields were something that I already knew, and they also made sense.

The fields are much more dangerous and fiercely contested than gates.

For students like me, who weren't officially affiliated with any guilds and were here for internships, the academy and the organization had rules in place to ensure our safety and maintain their own reputation.

"That's fine by me," I said, acknowledging the limitation. "I'm more experienced with dungeons and gates as well. It's where I can be most effective."

Toren seemed pleased with my response. "Good. Given the current climate, with competition growing fiercer, we've had to allocate more of our seasoned personnel to the fields. This leaves us a bit short-handed when it comes to clearing gates, especially the higher-ranked ones. That's where you come in. Your job will be to assist the team we've assigned you to. It's one of our most promising teams, and they've been making significant strides in recent months."

He tapped a few more commands into his device, and a file was sent directly to my smartwatch. "I'm sending you the details of your teammates now. There are five members in total: two tanks,

two vanguards, and one rearguard. Each one of them has been carefully selected for their skills and compatibility within the team dynamic."

I opened the file on my smartwatch and scanned through the profiles. As expected, they were all seasoned hunters, each with their own unique strengths.

The two tanks were:

Kurt Arlen: A heavily armored warrior with an impressive physical defense. Known for his ability to absorb massive amounts of damage and protect his team in the heat of battle.

Gareth Vale: A specialist in barrier magic, capable of both offensive and defensive spells. His barriers were renowned for their resilience and adaptability in chaotic situations.

The vanguards were:

Dorian Lehn: A dual-wielding swordsman with exceptional speed and agility. His fighting style was fluid and unpredictable, making him a formidable force on the front lines.

Elena Saris: A battle mage who combined close-range combat with elemental magic. Her versatility allowed her to adapt to different combat scenarios, providing support where it was needed most.

Finally, the rearguard was:

Lila Faye: A mage who specialized in rapid casting. Unlike some mages who focused on sheer firepower, Lila's strength lay in her ability to cast spells with incredible speed and precision. She was a summoner and a wind magic user, capable of quickly adapting to changing battle conditions. Her primary summon was a golem, a formidable entity that could regenerate as long as it was supplied with enough mana. This made her summon not just a powerful ally but also a resilient one, capable of withstanding prolonged battles.

As I reviewed the profiles, it was clear that each member brought something unique to the team. They were well-balanced, with a mix of offensive and defensive capabilities, and Lila's role as a summoner added an extra layer of versatility to their strategies.

'Indeed. It is rare to see a summoner.'

Maybe one of the rarest types of magic was summoning, though there is dark magic.

'And the fact that she is most proficient in rapid casting must be because of the fact that her mana pool would be smaller for higher firepower spells.'

It made sense, as for someone to be a summoner, they need to have an immense amount of mana pool, but at the same time, since being a mage is mostly looked more favorable, those with higher mana pool would become mages if they could.

And because they can't become mages thanks to the lack of their magical talent, especially in terms of calculations and comprehension, they become summoners.

That is why summoners are rare.

Having a mana pool big enough to supply a summon and having a magic talent is not enough to become a mage.

These two conditions are rather hard to meet.

But from the document alone, I could easily say that the summoner, Lila, was a hard worker. Toren leaned back in his chair, the hologram map still casting a faint glow over the room. He looked at me with a mix of professionalism and understanding.

"The work will start at 7 A.M.," he said, his tone leaving no room for doubt. "You'll have some time before the team arrives at the guild, so if you want, we can arrange for you to have breakfast and then get some rest. Normally, I'd insist on giving you more time to recover, but given the urgency of our situation and your tight schedule, we can't afford to lose any time."

I nodded, appreciating his directness.

'Not bad of a leader. He is good at directing the conversation and also presenting himself as someone light-hearted if things can be.' The stakes were high, and while rest was important, the pressing nature of the mission took priority.

"That's fine," I replied. "I am already used to traveling. And the train was already comfortable enough, so you can count it as resting."

Toren gave a satisfied nod. "Good to hear. I've already arranged for a room in the guild's quarters. It's not as luxurious as the hotel you stayed in, but it's comfortable, and you'll have everything you need to prepare for the mission."

The mention of the guild quarters reminded me that this wouldn't be a leisurely stay. I had chosen this path, knowing that the upcoming days would be filled with action, and I was ready to dive into the work.

"Thank you," I said, rising from my seat. "I'll take you up on that offer for breakfast, and then I'll get settled in."

Toren stood as well, extending his hand once more. "I'm glad to have you on board, Astron. I'm confident that your presence will make a significant difference for the guild."

We shook hands, and with that, the meeting was concluded. Liana was waiting just outside the office, ready to escort me to the dining area. As we walked, she mentioned the different options available, from a light meal to something more substantial. I opted for something simple but energizing—enough to keep me sharp without feeling weighed down.

After breakfast, Liana showed me to the room I'd be staying in. It was modest but functional, with a bed, a small desk, and a window that looked out over the training grounds.

The walls were decorated with a few framed posters, most likely from past guild achievements. It was clear that the room was designed for function over form, a place for hunters to rest between missions rather than indulge in comfort.

"You have one hour before your team arrives," Liana said as she handed me a keycard. "Feel free to rest or prepare however you see fit. If you need anything, just let me know."

I nodded, taking the keycard and giving her a brief nod of thanks. Once she left, I unpacked my belongings, organizing my gear on the small desk. My mind was already shifting into mission mode, running through possible scenarios and strategies for the upcoming gate raids.

"This team... they're promising. It'll be interesting to see how they perform under pressure."

After settling into the room, I quickly gathered a change of clothes and headed for the bathroom.

The shower was refreshing, and the warm water was quite nice. As the steam enveloped me, I allowed my thoughts to settle, focusing on the task ahead.

Once I was done, I toweled off and dressed in my classic gear. After a quick check of my gear and a glance at the time, I decided to have a protein shake, something light to keep me going without weighing me down.

Since I could not use [Celestalith]'s bow form, I was using the bow that I had gotten from the academy.

'Now that I think about it, getting a new bow for the sake of cover is necessary.'

As I finished, there was a knock at the door. I opened it to find Liana waiting outside, her expression professional as ever.

"Your team has arrived," she said, her tone efficient. "They're waiting for you in the briefing room."

I nodded, setting down the empty shaker. "Thank you. I'm ready."

Liana led the way through the guild's hallways, the sounds of activity gradually increasing as we approached the main operational areas.

The atmosphere was one of controlled urgency, a mix of focus and energy that permeated the air. It was clear that everyone here was dedicated to their roles, and the stakes were high.

We arrived at the briefing room, and Liana opened the door, gesturing for me to enter first. Inside, I found the five members of my team already gathered around a large table, their attention shifting to me as I walked in.

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"Here."

As we arrived at the meeting room, Liana opened the door, gesturing for me to enter first. Inside, I found the five members of my team already gathered around a large table, their attention shifting to me as I walked in.

As I stepped into the room, my eyes quickly took in the scene before me.

The five members of the team were all dressed in casual clothes, a contrast to the armor and gear they would don when entering a dungeon.

But even in their relaxed attire, there were subtle signs—small details that gave away more about them than they might realize.

Kurt Arlen, the heavily armored tank, was leaning back in his chair, his arms crossed over his broad chest.

His shirt was slightly wrinkled, and there was a faint scent of cologne still lingering in the air—probably from a late-night shower before he rushed out this morning.

The faintest smudge of lipstick on the collar of his shirt suggested he hadn't spent the night alone. It was clear that he had shared a passionate night, likely with someone he was close to.

Gareth Vale, the barrier mage, sat next to Kurt, sipping from a travel mug that emitted the rich aroma of strong coffee. His eyes were alert, but there was a slight redness around them, the kind that comes from lack of sleep.

The fact that he had his mug and not a disposable cup from a café hinted at a habit—he likely preferred to brew his coffee at home.

The faint white hair on his dark jacket suggested he had a pet, probably a cat, considering how meticulous he seemed otherwise.

Dorian Lehn, the dual-wielding swordsman, was perched on the edge of his chair, his fingers idly drumming on the table. His casual outfit, a loose-fitting t-shirt and jeans, was simple yet practical.

A slight sheen of sweat on his forehead and the dampness of his hair indicated he had just come from a morning workout. The energetic rhythm of his fingers on the table showed he was still riding the high of his training, his body humming with pent-up energy.

Elena Saris, the battle mage, sat with a tablet in front of her, reviewing what I assumed were notes for the upcoming mission. Her hair was pulled back into a neat ponytail, and she wore a fitted jacket over a casual blouse.

The faint scent of herbal tea wafted from a cup beside her, still steaming slightly. A closer look at her hands revealed a faint tremor—possibly from an early start or a lingering exhaustion from late-night preparations. She seemed the type to be thorough, going over every detail before a mission.

Lila Faye, the summoner, sat slightly apart from the others. Her posture was relaxed, but her eyes were alert as she watched me enter. She wore a simple hoodie and leggings, a comfortable outfit that hinted at someone who valued practicality. Her sneakers were clean but well-worn, suggesting she spent a lot of time on her feet, likely running or training.

'Indeed. Someone who trains a lot, a perfectionist.' A small, frayed bracelet on her wrist, barely visible, looked handmade—perhaps a keepsake or a gift from someone close. A faint scent of lavender clung to her clothes, possibly from a lotion or essential oil, indicating a habit of using calming scents to stay centered.

As I moved to take my place at the table, I noticed a subtle shift in the atmosphere. They were sizing me up as well, though perhaps not with the same level of detail. In a team like this, understanding each other's quirks, strengths, and habits could make the difference between success and failure in the field.

Kurt offered a nod of acknowledgment, his gaze steady. "Glad to finally meet you, Astron. We've heard quite a bit about you."

That made sense, considering I would be their teammate for a while.

I returned the nod, my voice calm and measured. "Likewise. I'm looking forward to working with all of you."

There was a brief moment of silence. Soon enough, we'd be donning our gear, ready to face whatever awaited us at the gates.

Elena was the first to break the silence, her tone professional as she glanced at her tablet. "We've got a lot to cover before we head out. I assume you're already familiar with the general outline of the mission?"

I nodded. "I've been briefed on the basics. We'll be reinforcing the guild's position in several gates. My role is to assist and provide support as needed."

"That's right," Gareth set down his coffee, leaning forward slightly as the discussion moved toward the specifics of the mission. "The gates we'll be targeting have seen increased activity lately. We'll need to be precise in our approach, and everyone needs to be clear on their role."

Elena glanced at her tablet again, tapping a few notes before looking up at me. "You've already gone through the team profiles, correct?"

I nodded, meeting her gaze. "Yes, I've read the document."

Kurt, who had been watching the exchange quietly, gave a satisfied nod. "Good. That means you're familiar with the team's formation and how we operate." @@novelbin@@

"Correct," I replied. "I understand the roles everyone plays. My job is to support the team and adapt as needed."

Elena looked pleased with the answer, but she still pressed on, making sure everything was clear. "From the file, it seems you're proficient with both a bow and dual daggers. That gives us some flexibility in how we approach this. How do you usually prefer to position yourself in a team?"

"I'm comfortable in either role," I replied evenly. "I can function as a ranger, providing long-range support, or as a scout, getting in close and gathering information or taking down targets. It depends on what the situation calls for."

Kurt's expression remained thoughtful as he considered my response. "A flexible skill set is valuable, especially in the kind of missions we're running. We'll likely need you to switch between roles depending on the gate. Some of the areas we're heading into will require more precision, while others might need a more hands-on approach."

Dorian grinned, his earlier energy still evident in his posture. "Sounds like you're ready for anything. We'll see how that plays out once we're in the field. It's one thing to be flexible in theory and another to pull it off under pressure."

Lila, who had been quiet until now, finally spoke up, her voice calm but carrying a note of curiosity. "How do you usually handle transitions between those roles? If we're in the middle of a gate, and the situation changes, what's your approach?"

I appreciated the directness of her question. It showed she was already thinking ahead, considering how we'd function as a team. "I keep my gear accessible and make sure I'm aware of the flow of battle. If I need to switch from ranged to close combat, I can do it quickly without losing focus. It's all about reading the situation and knowing when to adjust."

"You are confident?"

"I am."

Lila nodded thoughtfully, seeming satisfied with the answer. The rest of the team appeared to be on the same page, their expressions showing a mix of approval and cautious optimism. It was clear that they were a well-coordinated group, and I'd need to integrate myself into their dynamic seamlessly.

'Well, I doubt that will be hard.'

As long as a team works, I am confident that I can fit myself into every role.

Kurt nodded his head, his expression firm as he leaned forward slightly. "I like your confidence, but I still want to see your skills with my own eyes. However, we don't have much time to spare. We've got a gate scheduled to be cleared at 8 A.M.—that's in about 50 minutes. We should start getting ready."

I nodded in agreement, already shifting my focus to the task ahead. "Understood."

Liana, who had been quietly observing, stepped forward with a small, professional smile. "Mr. Natusalune, your equipment has been prepared."

I raised an eyebrow. "Equipment?"

She nodded, her tone matter-of-fact. "Since we were informed that you'd be joining us, we took the liberty of reviewing your current gear. We noticed that you're using standard equipment provided by Arcadia Hunter Academy. While their gear is certainly functional, it lacks the prestige that we would like you to project as part of Vanguard Haven."

She tapped a few buttons on her tablet, and within seconds, my smartwatch buzzed with incoming data. I opened the file, and a detailed breakdown of the new equipment appeared on the screen.

"The weapons provided for you are [Unique] grade artifacts," Liana explained as I scanned the details. "We've selected them to complement your combat style."

The first item on the list was a pair of daggers named Bloodthirsty Serpent Fangs. These daggers were sleek and curved, designed for dual-wielding with exceptional speed and precision.

Name: Bloodthirsty Serpent Fangs

Effects:

Venomous Edge: Each strike inflicts a venom that weakens the opponent's defenses, stacking up to three times. The venom also induces a brief paralysis after the third stack, making the opponent more vulnerable.

Serpent's Reflex: Increases the user's reaction time and agility, allowing for faster movement and quicker strikes, especially in close combat.

The second item was a bow named Starpiercer Arc. The bow was crafted from a rare wood that shimmered with an inner light, its string humming with latent power.

Name: Starpiercer Arc

Effects:

Piercing Shot: Arrows fired from the bow can pierce through multiple targets in a straight line, with the force of each shot increasing as it travels.

I studied the descriptions, appreciating the versatility and power of the weapons.

'Interesting. Daggers that utilize poison. It has been a while since I used one.'

Inherent poison attribute was something that would not be easily found in a weapon.

'It seems they really have spent quite money.'

Well, considering the plan it made sense.

"These should serve you well," Liana continued, her tone respectful. "They'll also help convey the prestige and skill that we wish to associate with your presence here."

With that, the team began to rise from their seats, each of us mentally preparing for the mission ahead. Liana gave a curt nod, signaling that it was time to move.

"Let's gear up," Kurt said, his voice carrying the weight of a leader who knew the importance of preparation. "We've got a gate to clear, and we'll need to be at our best."

Chapter 535 120.1 - Infernal Nexus

We moved swiftly to the armory, where our gear had been prepped and laid out. The room was spacious, with rows of lockers and racks filled with weapons and armor. Each member of the team went to their designated locker, the mood shifting to one of quiet focus.

I approached my locker, which had been specially prepared for me, and found the Bloodthirsty Serpent Fangs and Starpiercer Arc neatly placed inside.

The daggers gleamed under the artificial lighting, their edges sharp and ready. The bow, with its shimmering wood and taut string, radiated a subtle power that I could feel even before touching it.

As I donned my gear, I felt a sense of familiarity and new energy from the artifacts. The daggers fit perfectly in my hands, their weight balanced just right for quick, fluid movements.

'Not bad.' The bow's string hummed slightly as I tested its tension, promising precision.

The rest of the team was similarly focused, each member adjusting their armor, checking their weapons, and preparing mentally for the mission.

Kurt, in his heavy armor, looked every bit the formidable tank, while Gareth's barrier gear was a blend of light armor with arcane symbols etched into the material.

'An enchanting material. Most likely, adding the attribute that increases the wearer's barrier capabilities.' Dorian's dual swords were strapped securely to his back, and Elena's battle mage attire was both protective and flexible, allowing her to switch between magic and close combat.

Lila, with her summoning gear, had a simple yet effective setup, with various small pouches likely containing her summoning materials.

Once we were fully geared up, Liana led us to the transportation area, where a sleek, armored vehicle awaited.

'This is.....' The transport was quite something—a cross between a military tank and a high-speed train.

It was built for both protection and rapid deployment, with reinforced sides and a powerful engine that could handle any terrain.

We climbed inside, the interior surprisingly spacious and lined with seats equipped with harnesses. Once we were all strapped in, the vehicle hummed to life, and we began our journey to the gate.

The interior lighting was dim, creating an atmosphere of quiet anticipation. The hum of the engine was steady, and a low vibration resonated through the seats. The vehicle moved smoothly despite the rugged terrain we were likely crossing.

Kurt broke the silence, glancing around at the team. "Any guesses on the dungeon type?"

Gareth, still sipping from his travel mug, shrugged. "Could be anything, but given the recent activity, I'm betting it's something involving elemental monsters. We've had reports of increased mana fluctuations in the area."

Elena nodded, her tablet now displaying maps and charts. "I agree. The mana readings suggest a strong elemental presence, likely something related to fire or earth. We should be prepared for environmental hazards as well."

Dorian grinned, his fingers tapping a rhythm on the hilt of his swords. "As long as there's something to cut down, I'm ready for it. Elemental monsters tend to have weak spots—just need to find them and strike."

Lila, who had been quietly observing, added her thoughts. "If it's elemental, my golem will be particularly useful. It can absorb a certain amount of elemental energy and convert it into defensive strength. We'll need to be strategic about how we use it."

I listened, processing their insights. The discussion was practical and focused on preparing for whatever we might face.

'It seems this is somehow a way for them to keep themselves creative. A routine of sorts.' Liana, seated at the front of the vehicle, turned slightly to address us. "You're all on the right track. The dungeon is indeed related to elemental forces, specifically a fire-type dungeon. The gate has been fluctuating between Rank 6 and Rank 5, so we're expecting a tough fight but nothing beyond your capabilities."

She tapped a button on her tablet, and a holographic display appeared in the center of the cabin, showing a detailed map of the dungeon's layout. "This is the intel we have so far. The dungeon is known as the Infernal Nexus, and it's a complex network of lava flows, molten rock, and fire elementals. The core of the dungeon is a powerful fire spirit that we'll need to neutralize to stabilize the gate."

The holographic map highlighted several key areas within the dungeon, showing possible routes and choke points. "Your objective is to clear the dungeon of threats and ensure the fire spirit is contained but not killed."

"Again?" Dorian muttered under his breath, his tone tinged with frustration.

I could understand the sentiment. For guilds that were business-oriented, dungeons weren't just obstacles to be cleared; they were valuable resources.

The materials found within—rare ores, crystals, and elemental essences—were essential to the Awakened industry. From crafting powerful artifacts to enhancing existing gear, these resources could fetch high prices or be used to strengthen the guild's capabilities. That's why closing a dungeon immediately wasn't always the priority.

Normally, there's a reasonable amount of time before a dungeon closes after the boss monster is killed. This allows for the thorough harvesting of materials and ensures the guild maximizes its profits. But this situation was different, and I could sense there was more to it.

Liana, as if reading my thoughts, continued, "Since this dungeon is fire and lava-oriented, mining the materials is significantly more challenging and takes more time. The heat and unstable terrain makes it difficult for mining teams to work efficiently, so the dungeon must not be closed too quickly. However, we can't afford to keep your team tied up here for too long, either. There are other missions waiting."

Her explanation made sense. The balance between securing resources and moving on to the next mission was a delicate one, especially for a guild like Vanguard Haven that operated under constant pressure from rivals.

"That's why you won't be killing the fire spirit," Liana explained. "Instead, you'll leave it in a crippled state—weak enough that it won't be a threat, but not dead. This way, the dungeon remains open, and the mining teams can continue their work. Once you leave, other operatives will take over to ensure everything is handled properly."

It was a practical approach, though it came with its own set of risks. Leaving a boss monster alive, even in a weakened state, required precision and caution.

It also meant that the team couldn't fully relax after the fight, knowing that the job wasn't completely done.

'It's a tiring process,' I thought to myself. 'But it's clear that this team has done it before. Still, it's easy to see why many would prefer a clean, decisive finish rather than leaving loose ends.'

Liana seemed to catch the look on my face and nodded slightly, confirming my thoughts. "This method has been our standard operating procedure for a while now. It's effective but also draining. Many don't like it because it requires extra effort and precision. But it's necessary for the guild's long-term strategy."

She explained, looking at me.

"I have no problem with that," I replied, keeping my tone neutral.

Liana gave a knowing smile, one that hinted at the experience behind her words. "You won't be saying that when you actually do it."

The others in the team nodded in agreement. Kurt leaned back slightly, his expression thoughtful. "It's true. We've all been there. It sounds straightforward, but it takes a toll, especially when you know you could just end it clean."

Elena added, "It's not just about the fight—it's about holding back when every instinct tells you to finish the job. That's where the challenge really lies."

Dorian chuckled, though there was no humor in it. "And that's not even mentioning the environmental hazards. Navigating lava flows and dealing with fire elementals while trying not to kill the spirit? It's like walking a tightrope over a pit of spikes."

As the conversation died down, the transport began to slow, signaling that we were nearing our destination. The tension in the vehicle shifted from discussion to preparation. Everyone was mentally gearing up for what was to come.

The transport came to a halt, and the doors slid open with a hiss, revealing the site where the gate was located. The area was cordoned off, with various pieces of equipment and personnel already in place. The gate itself was a swirling mass of red and orange energy, crackling with the heat and power of the Infernal Nexus beyond it.

The personnel on-site were low-rank Awakened, their gear practical and suited for the task at hand. They were here to mine the valuable materials that could be found within the dungeon, and they would follow us after we secured the initial area.

Kurt took the lead, his voice firm as he addressed the team. "Alright, we've already discussed the formation. Astron, you'll start as our rearguard and ranger. Keep an eye out for any elementals trying to flank us. If the situation calls for it, you'll shift to scouting."

I nodded, falling into place at the back of the formation. The others moved into their positions with practiced ease—Kurt and Gareth at the front, forming the defensive line, with Dorian and Elena

ready to strike from the sides. Lila stayed close to the center, her golem already summoned and standing ready.

With the formation set, we moved toward the gate. The air grew hotter with each step, the ground beneath our feet already warm from the ambient heat seeping through the portal. The personnel waited just behind us, prepared to enter once we had secured the immediate area.

As we passed through the gate, the world around us shifted. The cool air of the outside world was replaced by the stifling heat of the Infernal Nexus. The ground was a mix of solid rock and flowing lava, with the occasional spurt of fire bursting from cracks in the earth. The sky above was a swirling mass of dark clouds, lit from below by the fiery landscape.

We moved quickly, taking up positions to ensure the area was clear before the mining teams could move in. @@novelbin@@

The environment was as hostile as expected, with the heat pressing down on us like a physical weight. But we were prepared, and the barriers Gareth deployed kept the worst of it at bay.

Kurt's voice came through our comms, calm and steady. "Let's keep it tight, everyone. Stay focused, and remember the plan. We cripple the spirit, secure the area, and get out. No heroics—just clean execution."

"Yeah, yeah."

Just like that, the team's first dungeon exploration with me has started.

Chapter 536 120.2 - Infernal Nexus

As we advanced deeper into the Infernal Nexus, the oppressive heat intensified, but Gareth's barriers continued to shield us from the worst of it. The ground beneath our feet was unstable, with molten rock occasionally bubbling to the surface, forcing us to stay alert.

Kurt's voice crackled through the comms again. "Stay sharp. We're about to make contact."

I scanned the area ahead, noting the telltale signs of movement. The first wave of monsters emerged from the lava flows—a group of twelve fire elementals. Their forms were humanoid but made

entirely of molten rock and flame, each one radiating intense heat. Their eyes glowed like hot coals, fixed on us as they moved to engage.

"Here they come," Kurt announced, his voice steady.

As planned, Kurt and Gareth moved forward to take the brunt of the attack. Kurt raised his shield, activating a skill that drew the elementals' attention, a pulsing wave of energy pulling their focus toward him.

TACK!

Gareth, standing beside him, raised his hands, and a translucent barrier flared to life around them, absorbing the heat and deflecting the first few strikes from the fire elementals.

SWOOSH! With the tanks holding the frontline, Dorian and Elena moved in to deal damage. Dorian's dual swords flashed as he engaged the closest elemental, his movements fluid and precise.

He struck with the speed of a practiced swordsman, each blade cutting through the molten exterior of his target.

SLASH! The elemental let out a crackling hiss as Dorian's swords cut through it, molten fragments flying off with each strike.

Elena, the battlemage, was right behind him. She channeled her magic, combining close-range combat with elemental spells.

CRACK! Her hands glowed with a faint blue light as she struck, each blow infused with freezing magic that countered the heat of the elementals. With each hit, steam erupted from the contact point, weakening the creatures and making them more vulnerable to physical attacks.

Lila remained at the rear, her eyes sharp as she focused on the battlefield. She didn't summon her golem immediately; instead, she relied on her rapid casting to support the team.

'Makes sense. Most likely, she does not want to empty her mana reserves immediately. Summoners, while having a huge pool, are rather important.' Small, precise spells flew from her hands, targeting

weak points in the elementals and disrupting their attacks. A bolt of wind magic here, a burst of water magic there—each one carefully aimed to complement the strikes of the vanguards.

I took my position at the back, drawing the Starpiercer Arc and nocking an arrow.

'Let's test this bow, shall we.' With a steady hand, I pulled back the string, focusing on the largest elemental advancing on the group.

With the recent increase in the information that my eyes can perceive, I can see the mana flow of monsters and their organs a lot more clearly.

'Especially such raw energy-filled monsters.' These fire elementals were all energy types of monsters, and that was why I could see the flow more easily.

—SWOOSH! The arrow flew straight and true, piercing through the elemental's core and exiting out the other side. The creature staggered, the force of the shot causing cracks to spiderweb across its body before it collapsed into a pile of molten rock.

'Not bad. Even if this bow is not coated with [Moonstone] like [Celestalith], the energy output is still quite good. It seems having a unique rank weapon is indeed different.' As I thought, another elemental tried to circle around the team, but I was already tracking its movements. I marked it already, and my next arrow struck it dead center, the shot penetrating through its molten chest and dissipating the fire that animated it.

The battle was controlled, with each member of the team executing their roles with practiced precision. Kurt and Gareth held the line, their defenses impenetrable, while Dorian and Elena systematically dismantled the elementals with their combined physical and magical assaults. Lila's rapid casting provided the necessary support, ensuring that no elemental could get the upper hand.

Within minutes, the first wave was reduced to nothing but cooling rock and fading embers.

"First wave down," Kurt reported, his voice calm despite the intense fight. "No injuries. Let's keep moving."

Without a word, the team reformed and continued advancing. There was no need for celebration or excitement—this was just another part of the job.

As we pressed on, the second wave of monsters emerged from the swirling magma ahead—this time, a larger group of fire elementals, their numbers increasing as the dungeon seemed to respond to our intrusion.

There were twenty of them now, their molten forms moving with greater intensity.

"Same strategy," Kurt commanded, his voice even and controlled. "Keep it tight."

Once again, Kurt and Gareth took the lead, drawing the elementals' attention and absorbing their attacks with a combination of shield and barrier.

Dorian and Elena moved in seamlessly, their attacks synchronized as they struck with a mix of physical and magical force. Lila continued to hold back her summon, relying on her rapid casting to disrupt the elementals and support the vanguard.

The team worked like a well-oiled machine, each member executing their role with precision. We cut through the second wave as methodically as the first, reducing the elementals to nothing but fading embers. And then, without pausing, we moved on.

The third wave came, followed by the fourth, fifth, and sixth. Each one brought more fire elementals, their numbers and intensity increasing with every wave, but our strategy remained the same. Lila still refrained from summoning her golem, conserving its strength for the right moment. The rest of us continued to execute our roles, and the waves fell one after another.

As we finished off the sixth wave, the environment around us began to change. The ground beneath our feet started to shift, the stable rock giving way to more unstable terrain. The path ahead narrowed, with jagged, molten cliffs rising on either side, funneling us into a tight, winding passage. The air grew even hotter, the heat almost palpable as it radiated from the walls.

Kurt halted the team with a raised hand, his eyes narrowing as he assessed the situation. "The terrain's changing. We're heading into a choke point."

Elena scanned the narrow path ahead, her eyes sharp. "This is going to be tight. We'll need to be careful—one wrong move, and we could be trapped."

Kurt turned to me, his expression serious. "Astron, we'll need you to scout ahead."

I nodded, already preparing to move. "Understood."

After all, I was already expecting such a thing to happen from the start.

Without another word, I erased my presence. My form seemed to blend into the surrounding darkness, and I moved forward silently, slipping through the narrow passage ahead of the team.

As I advanced, I kept my senses sharp, using the enhanced perception from my [Eyes] to scan the area for any signs of danger.

The flow of mana around me was erratic, pulsing through the molten rock and the air itself.

The path ahead was treacherous, with narrow ledges and unstable platforms that could collapse at any moment.

'No immediate threats,' I noted to myself, but I remained cautious. In a dungeon like this, danger could emerge at any time, especially in such a confined space.

I continued to move silently through the narrow terrain, keeping a close eye on the surroundings. The path twisted and turned, but eventually, it began to open up into a wider chamber. The heat intensified as I approached the entrance to the chamber, and I could sense a powerful concentration of mana further inside.

'Likely the location of the next wave,' I concluded, pausing to assess the situation.

Once I was confident that I had a clear understanding of the terrain ahead, I retreated back to the team, still maintaining my stealth. As I reappeared in front of Kurt and the others, I gave my report in a low voice.

"The path ahead is narrow and unstable, but it opens up into a larger chamber. I didn't encounter any enemies along the way, but I sensed a strong concentration of mana in the chamber. The next wave will likely come from there."

"The types of the monsters?"

"It is hard to tell, but if estimated, I can say they are slightly different from the Elementals. They will most likely have robust bodies and will be of a stone type."

Kurt listened intently as I relayed my observations. His eyes narrowed in thought as I mentioned the likely composition of the next wave.

"Stone type... I see," he muttered, the gears in his mind turning as he considered the implications.
@@novelbin@@

'The team should start going all in now.'

We had been in the dungeon for around one hour now, and we had most likely reached the outskirts of the boss monster's location.

'He can no longer let Lila rest.' After a moment, he turned to Lila, his expression firm.

"Lila, it's time to use your summon. If Astron's estimation is correct, we're dealing with Magma Golems. They're not just raw energy like the fire elementals—we'll need your golem to help tank and deal with their physical resilience."

Lila nodded, her demeanor calm and focused. "Understood. I'll deploy it as soon as we enter the chamber."

Magma Golems were known for their robust bodies, formed from a combination of molten rock and elemental energy.

Unlike the more agile and fluid fire elementals, these creatures were slower but far more durable, their hardened exterior making them difficult to damage with conventional attacks.

Their core was protected deep within their stone bodies, requiring precise strikes to take them down effectively.

That was something that I had already expected, but I did not reveal it on purpose to see if Kurt was knowledgeable about that, and it seemed he was true.

Kurt addressed the team, his voice steady and authoritative. "We're going to need to adjust our approach for these golems. They're not as numerous as the elementals, but they're a lot tougher. First, we will test the waters, and according to the robustness and the level of the golems, we are going to adjust our approach."

'This is where I can have a full grasp of the abilities of the members.'

If I had sent it here, it would have been better for me to show some effectiveness as well. After all, I am not the only one who can fight and act as a rearguard.

My specialty is still observing.

Chapter 537 120.3 - Infernal Nexus

The team moved forward with a quiet, deliberate precision. The narrow path twisted and turned, leading us deeper into the heart of the Infernal Nexus. The oppressive heat and the occasional rumble of the unstable terrain were constant reminders of the environment's hostility, but we remained focused.

As we approached the entrance to the wider chamber, the intensity of the heat increased, and the glow of molten rock illuminated the way. The chamber was vast, its walls shimmering with the heat of the magma that flowed beneath the surface. In the center stood the Magma Golems, six towering figures of molten rock and elemental energy, their presence imposing and unyielding.

Kurt signaled the team to halt just before the entrance to the chamber. "Alright, remember the plan," he said, his voice low but firm. "We'll test their resilience first. Gareth, prepare the barriers. Dorian, Elena—get ready to strike once we gauge their strength. Lila, deploy your golem as soon as we engage."

"Understood," Gareth replied, already beginning to weave the protective barriers around us.

Dorian and Elena readied their weapons, their focus entirely on the looming figures ahead. Lila took a deep breath, her hands already glowing with the energy needed to summon her golem.

With a final nod from Kurt, we moved into the chamber.

The Magma Golems didn't move at first, their massive forms appearing almost statuesque. But as we approached, their eyes—glowing like hot coals—lit up, and they began to stir. The ground beneath us trembled slightly as they shifted, the heat radiating from them intensifying.

Gareth's barriers flared to life, creating a protective dome around us as the first of the golems lumbered forward. Its movements were slow but deliberate, each step causing the ground to shudder.

"Lila, now," Kurt commanded.

As Kurt gave the command, Lila's hands moved with practiced precision, summoning her golem. The air around her shimmered as the earth responded to her call, and in moments, a towering figure of solid rock and stone materialized before us.

TAK! TAK! The golem was massive, nearly as large as the Magma Golems themselves, and its presence immediately altered the dynamics of the battlefield.

"Here we go, baby!"

CRACK! The first Magma Golem lumbered forward, its molten body radiating an intense heat that made the air around it shimmer. Its movements were slow but deliberate, each step causing the ground beneath it to tremble.

RUMBLE!

Gareth's barriers held firm, absorbing the heat and force of the golem's advance, but the strain was visible.

"I am here."

Dorian was the first to engage, his dual swords flashing as he darted toward the golem. He aimed for the joints, targeting the weak points in its stone exterior. His movements were fluid and precise, but as his blades struck the golem, it became clear that these creatures were far tougher than the elementals we had faced before.

The golem's stone body absorbed the impact, and while cracks formed at the points of contact, it barely slowed down.

Elena followed closely behind, her hands glowing with elemental energy. She unleashed a blast of ice magic at the golem, targeting the same area that Dorian had struck. The freezing energy clashed with the heat of the golem's body, causing a burst of steam to rise into the air. The ice managed to cool and crack the outer layer of the golem, but it was still far from enough to bring it down.

Lila's golem moved in to intercept the Magma Golem, raising its massive arms to block the next attack. The impact was immense, the two titans clashing with a force that shook the chamber. Lila's golem managed to hold its ground, but the strain was evident in the way it staggered slightly under the weight of the blow.

As the battle raged on, I stayed at the rear, my bow ready to provide support. I watched the team closely, observing their habits and noting how they adapted to the challenges of the fight.

Dorian's speed and precision were impressive, but I noticed that he tended to focus on direct attacks, relying on his agility to avoid damage rather than seeking alternative angles or approaches.

His movements were efficient, but there was room for improvement in terms of strategy—particularly in finding ways to exploit the environment.

Elena's magic was powerful and versatile, but I observed that she had a habit of relying heavily on her elemental spells. While this made her a formidable force, it also meant that she was more vulnerable when her mana reserves were taxed. She was focused, but there was tension in her movements, suggesting that she was aware of her own limits and the pressure to maintain her effectiveness.

Gareth's barriers were well-timed and strong, but I could see the toll it was taking on him. His focus was unwavering, but the intensity of the golems' attacks was beginning to wear him down. He was managing the energy expenditure carefully, but I noted that his barriers might falter if the battle dragged on for too long.

Lila's golem was powerful, but I noticed that she was constantly adjusting its position, trying to balance between defense and offense. Her focus was split between controlling the golem and casting supportive spells, which meant that her attention was divided. It was a testament to her skill that she managed it so well, but I could see that it was a challenging task.

Meanwhile, I continued to provide support from the rear. Each arrow I fired was aimed with precision, targeting the weak points in the golems' joints and cores.

The Starpiercer Arc proved its worth, the arrows striking true and disrupting the golems' movements, allowing the team to exploit openings.

While I did not want to do too much extra right at the start, it was necessary since the Magma Golems were relentless.

One of them managed to break through Lila's golem's defense, swinging a massive arm down toward Dorian. Gareth's barrier caught the blow, but the force of the impact caused cracks to form in the protective dome.

"Focus fire on the joints!" Kurt barked, his voice cutting through the chaos. "We need to disable their movement before they overwhelm us!"

The team adjusted their tactics, concentrating their efforts on disabling the golems' mobility. Dorian and Elena targeted the legs and arms while Lila's golem continued to hold the line, its stone fists crashing into the golems with calculated force.

I continued to provide covering fire, my arrows piercing through the cracks in the golems' stone exteriors. Each shot was carefully placed, aimed to exploit the damage done by the others and further weaken the golems' defenses. @@novelbin@@

Slowly but surely, the tide began to turn. The first Magma Golem fell; its legs shattered under the combined assault, causing it to collapse into a heap of molten rock. The others followed soon after, their movements growing sluggish as their joints were systematically destroyed.

The battle was intense, requiring every member of the team to perform at their best. However, through coordinated efforts and relentless pressure, we managed to bring down the Magma Golems one by one.

As the last golem crumbled, the chamber grew quiet, the oppressive heat still lingering, but the immediate threat was now neutralized.

Kurt's voice came through the comms, steady but with a note of weariness. "Good work, everyone. Take a moment to catch your breath, but stay alert. We're getting close to the core of the dungeon."

As the dust settled and the oppressive heat of the chamber began to cool slightly, the team took a moment to catch their breath. The battle had been grueling, and everyone was clearly feeling the strain. However, the sense of relief was palpable—at least for now, the immediate threat had been neutralized.

I took this brief pause as an opportunity to address the team. "Everyone, listen up," I called out, my voice cutting through the lingering tension in the air.

The team turned their attention to me, their expressions a mix of curiosity and fatigue. Kurt, who was still catching his breath, gave me a nod, indicating that I had their attention.

"While we were fighting, I took the time to observe each of you," I began, my tone calm and measured. "I now have a sufficient understanding of how you operate as a team."

There was a brief silence as the team absorbed my words. I could see the curiosity in their eyes, but I knew this wasn't the time for a detailed analysis. "I'm not going to give detailed feedback right now—this isn't the place or time for that. But I do believe we need to adjust our strategy moving forward."

Kurt raised an eyebrow, clearly intrigued but waiting for me to continue.

"I think it's better for me to take on the role of giving orders from now on," I said, my voice steady and devoid of any hint of arrogance.

The reaction was immediate. Dorian's eyes narrowed, and he took a step forward, his voice sharp. "What are you saying, Astron? You are suggesting that you take over Kurt's role? That's not exactly something you just decide on a whim."

Elena frowned, clearly displeased. "Kurt's been leading us effectively this whole time. Why the sudden change?"

Lila's usually calm demeanor also showed signs of tension, though she remained silent, waiting to see how the situation would unfold.

I shook my head, holding up a hand to forestall any further objections. "I'm not doing this to feel superior, and it's not a criticism of Kurt's abilities. He's an excellent leader, and his quick judgment and decisive actions have kept us alive. But there's a limitation inherent in his role as a tank."

I paused, letting my words sink in before continuing. "As a tank, Kurt is often at the forefront of the battle. That's his job—to draw the enemy's attention and absorb their attacks. But because of that, it's difficult for him to have a comprehensive awareness of the environment and the overall battle dynamics. Especially because of the limitations of his skill when he uses it. Isn't that right, Kurt?"

"Ah...."

That was indeed the case. When Kurt used his skill to take aggro, I noticed that his spatial awareness became smaller. In a way, the area that he could sense became smaller, making it harder for him to detect the threats.

I could see the gears turning in their minds as they considered my point. "You must have noticed it as well," I continued. "If not for my interventions during the fight with the Magma Golems, we could have been overwhelmed. The golems were moments away from breaking through, and it was only by exploiting the environment and adjusting our tactics in real-time that we managed to avoid disaster."

Kurt's expression shifted as my words sank in. He hesitated for a moment before nodding slowly, acknowledging the truth in what I had said. "You're right," he admitted, his voice calm but reflective. "When I use my skill to draw aggro, my focus narrows, and my spatial awareness decreases. It's something I've always had to compensate for, but in a fight like this, where the environment is just as dangerous as the enemies, it's a real limitation."

The rest of the team exchanged glances, the initial resistance beginning to fade as they absorbed the reality of the situation.

"Most of the time, tanks lead the party because they're the most experienced," I continued, "but as we rise in rank, the roles become more specialized. In higher-ranking parties, the strategist is often someone who can maintain a broad perspective, someone who isn't in the thick of the fight and can observe the entire battlefield."

Dorian's frown slowly eased, replaced by a thoughtful expression. "That makes sense. I guess we've just gotten used to Kurt calling the shots because it's worked for us so far."

"That is understandable," I replied evenly, "and I'm not saying that you all should start trusting me instantly. But let's put this to the test. If it doesn't work, we can reassess. For now, let's see how we do with me calling the shots."

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"That is understandable, and I'm not saying that you all should start trusting me instantly. But let's put this to the test. If it doesn't work, we can reassess. For now, let's see how we do with me calling the shots."

With the team's initial resistance fading and the logic of my proposal sinking in, I saw a shift in their attitudes. They were seasoned fighters, and they understood that flexibility was key to survival, especially in a place as dangerous as the Infernal Nexus.

"Fine by me," Dorian said, crossing his arms but with a more relaxed posture. Elena, who had been one of the more vocal opponents earlier, nodded slowly as well, her eyes thoughtful.

Kurt, who had already accepted the logic of the change, stepped forward, his voice carrying professionalism.

"You've got my support, Astron. If this strategy helps us complete the mission more efficiently, I'm all for it."

'Not bad.'

There is a reason why most of the elites on guilds are chosen by not only in terms of talent but also in terms of soft skills.

They may not be deemed as important for inexperienced people, but that is not the case when you become a hunter who has been in the industry for a while.

Communicating, understanding, and not being directed by your emotions.

These are all things that one needs to possess in this industry.

Lila, who had been watching the exchange quietly, gave a small nod. "Why not try? It's not like we will lose too much. And from what we have heard, you are a quite talented hunter, so we might as well see it ourselves."

With the team's support confirmed, I felt the shift in our dynamic. While they weren't yet fully comfortable with the change, they were willing to give it a chance. That was enough for now.
@@novelbin@@

"Alright," I said, stepping into the role with the calm confidence the situation demanded. "We're close to the core of the dungeon, and the challenges ahead will likely be even tougher. Stay alert, and follow my lead."

As we moved deeper into the dungeon, I scanned the surroundings, detecting the subtle fluctuations of mana that indicated the presence of more enemies. The path narrowed slightly, the walls glowing with an intense heat that made the air shimmer. I could sense the build-up of energy ahead—another wave of fire golems, similar to the Magma Golems we had just faced.

"We're approaching another group of fire golems," I informed the team quietly, my voice steady. "This time, we'll change tactics as needed. I'll direct the formations based on their movements and weaknesses."

Kurt nodded, his expression serious but trusting. "Understood. Just give the orders, and we'll follow."

As we neared the next chamber, the golems began to stir. These ones were slightly different from the previous wave—larger, with thicker armor and a more intense glow emanating from their cores.

'Still, the core of the formation will not change.' They were clearly designed to be tougher and more resilient, their molten exteriors promising a harder fight, but in the end, their being stronger is meaningless in the face of the right strategy.

"Golems ahead," I called out, my voice low but commanding. "Prepare for engagement. Gareth forms a barrier on the left; Dorian and Elena take the right flank. Lila, keep your golem centered and ready to intercept. We'll focus on their legs and joints first to limit their mobility."

The team moved swiftly, following my directions.

As the golems began their slow advance, I observed their movements carefully, analyzing the flow of mana within their bodies.

The mana cores were well-protected, but I could see the faint lines of energy running through their joints and armor—weak points that we could exploit.

"Dorian, target the joints at the knees. Elena, focus on the upper arms with freezing spells to slow their movements," I ordered. "Lila, have your golem apply pressure to their center mass to keep them from advancing too quickly."

The team executed the plan with precision. Dorian's dual swords flashed as he darted in and out of the golems' reach, striking at the knees with calculated strikes. Elena's ice magic crackled in the heated air, her spells connecting with the golems' arms and causing steam to rise as the intense cold clashed with their fiery cores.

I continued to monitor the battle, adjusting our formation as the golems responded to our attacks. Gareth's barriers shifted to block incoming strikes, while Lila's golem took the brunt of the force, holding the line and preventing the golems from pushing us back.

As I observed, I finally found it—a slight flicker in the flow of mana around the golems' cores, indicating a vulnerability.

It was faint, but it was there, just beneath the thick armor.

"Keep them occupied and maintain pressure."

With that, I nocked an arrow, coating it with fire-attributed psions to match the golems' elemental affinity. The Starpiercer Arc hummed with energy as I pulled the string back, aiming carefully at the exposed weak point.

SWOOSH!

The arrow flew true, striking the golem at the exact spot I had identified.

The piercing attribute of the bow allowed the arrow to penetrate the thick armor, embedding itself deep within the golem's core.

A moment later, the fire-attributed psions activated, causing the arrow to explode from within.

'Indeed, it is not as strong as how it would be with [Celestalith], but I can see the change thanks to the increase in my magic power.' If I were to use [Celestalith] here, the destruction would be much more severe. With the golem's mana interrupted, they would just overload themselves with the energy from inside and would just lose themselves.

The golem staggered, its molten body convulsing as the explosion disrupted the flow of energy within its core. The armor cracked, and the golem's movements became erratic, its massive form struggling to maintain stability.

"Gareth, reinforce the barriers around Lila's golem! Dorian – use the uptime."

With the first golem staggering from the internal explosion, I quickly turned my attention to the others. There was no time to waste—each golem needed to be neutralized before they could regroup and pose a greater threat.

"Elena, Kurt, Gareth—focus on the remaining golems!" I ordered, my voice sharp and precise. "Elena, use your magic to keep them off balance. Kurt, hold the line and draw their attention. Gareth, reinforce the barriers and prepare to intercept any retaliatory strikes."

As they moved into position, I nocked another arrow, my Starpiercer Arc humming with energy. I could see the faint flickers of vulnerability in the mana flows of the other golems, just as I had with the first. These weak points were our key to dismantling them quickly and efficiently.

"Lila, keep your golem on the lead target! Dorian, support Elena and hit the joints—keep them occupied while I cripple them."

The team sprang into action.

Elena unleashed a barrage of ice and fire spells, her elemental magic clashing with the heat of the golems' molten bodies. The rapid fluctuations in temperature caused cracks to form in their armor, destabilizing their movements.

"ROOOOAR!"

Kurt, with his shield raised high, taunted the golems, drawing their attacks toward him and away from the more vulnerable members of the team. Gareth's barriers shimmered around us, absorbing the immense heat and force from the golems' strikes while his magic prepared for any counterattacks.

With the others keeping the golems occupied, I focused on the task at hand. I aimed carefully, targeting the weak points I had identified in the mana flows.

One by one, I released my arrows, each one coated with fire-attributed psions to maximize the damage. The arrows struck true, embedding themselves deep within the golems' armor before detonating from within.

The first arrow hit its mark, and the golem staggered just as the first had. The explosion disrupted its core, causing it to lose control of the molten energy that powered it. The once-imposing creature began to crumble, its movements erratic and unstable.

Without missing a beat, I nocked another arrow and aimed at the next target. The piercing attribute of the bow allowed me to strike deep into the golem's core, bypassing its thick armor and causing another internal explosion.

The golem convulsed, its massive form shuddering as it struggled to maintain its structure.

Just like that, within moments, the last of the golems crumbled to the ground, its core shattered by a well-placed arrow. The battle, which had threatened to overwhelm us, was now over. The chamber fell silent once more, the oppressive heat still lingering.

The team members took a moment to catch their breath, their expressions a mix of relief and respect.

Kurt lowered his shield, a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "That was indeed well-executed." He said. "I can no longer complain."

Dorian, still catching his breath, stepped over to Kurt and clapped a hand on his shoulder, a grin spreading across his face. "Well, I guess the saying is true: 'The frog in the well doesn't know about the ocean.' I would've never expected this fight to be over so fast. You've got to admit, Kurt, we've been in the well for a while."

Kurt chuckled, shaking his head but clearly taking the comment in stride. "Alright, alright, I get it. But hey, I'm not too proud to admit when someone else's strategy works better. It's good to learn new things, even if it means stepping out of our comfort zone."

Gareth, always the practical one, nodded in agreement as he lowered his hands, the barriers around us flickering out of existence now that the threat had passed. "I'll admit, we'd have likely spent thrice as long, if not more, in this fight without Astron's quick thinking. Those golems were built to endure, but we didn't give them the chance. Efficiency is key, and we certainly nailed it this time."

Elena leaned on her staff slightly, still glowing from the magic she had used. "I agree. The way you pinpointed those weak spots saved us a lot of time and effort. I'm starting to think we've been working too hard, not smart."

"Working hard is not always the solution." I stood up and looked at the smartwatch. "While Kurt is indeed a good leader, he lacks understanding of other types of classes."

"Understanding?"

"Indeed. It's not just about knowing what they can do; it's about knowing their strengths, their limitations, and how they contribute to the overall strategy. A leader needs to think beyond their own role. They need to anticipate how the other members of the team will move, how they'll react, and how to coordinate those actions to achieve the best outcome."

Elena, still leaning on her staff, looked thoughtful. "So, you're saying that to really excel as a leader, Kurt needs to know more than just tanking. He needs to understand what it's like to be in the shoes of a mage or a swordsman—or even a ranger like you."

"Precisely."

Kurt nodded slowly, processing my words. "I've always focused on my role as a tank, thinking that if I could hold the line, that was enough. But you're right. There are times when I've misjudged a situation because I didn't fully grasp what the others were dealing with."

"Well, that is enough talk. We must move further now."

The time was ticking after all.

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"Well, that's enough talk," I said, standing up and glancing at the time on my smartwatch. "We need to move. The longer we stay here, the more dangerous things get."

The others nodded in agreement, and without further delay, we regrouped and began our advance deeper into the Infernal Nexus. The path ahead was twisted, the heat intensifying with every step as the dungeon's molten core drew closer. The once wide, open areas we had been fighting in narrowed into more treacherous passages, but with the team now moving in unison, we navigated the obstacles smoothly.

Under my direction, we adjusted our formation frequently, depending on the terrain and the mana fluctuations I detected ahead. As a result, we avoided several potential ambushes from smaller fire elementals that lurked in the dungeon's corners.

Each encounter was quick and efficient, with everyone following my lead without hesitation. Gareth's barriers were well-timed, Dorian's quick strikes hit with accuracy, and Elena's spells controlled the battlefield with precision.

Lila kept her golem at the ready, using it strategically to shield us when needed.

We moved with speed and purpose, making sure not to waste any unnecessary energy on distractions or low-priority threats. I kept a close watch on the flow of mana within the dungeon, using my Eyes to anticipate changes in the environment. The deeper we went, the more chaotic the energy became, signaling that we were closing in on the heart of the dungeon—the boss room.

After what felt like only a short time, we finally reached the last chamber. A massive, double-door structure made of molten rock and darkened steel stood before us. The heat radiating from it was almost unbearable, a clear sign that the dungeon's final guardian lay just beyond.

"Looks like we're here," Kurt said, gripping his shield tightly. His tone was calm but ready for whatever was waiting for us inside.

"Not bad," Dorian commented, leaning casually on his swords. "I thought it'd take us longer to get here. We've definitely stepped up our game."

Elena, who had been focusing her mana for the upcoming fight, looked at me. "What's the plan, Astron? This is where things usually get messy."

At this point, their trust in me had been completely fulfilled. They no longer doubted any of my decisions and acted accordingly, and that alone was enough for me at the time.

I studied the door for a moment, sensing the powerful presence behind it. "We go in with the same efficiency we've been using. Once the boss shows itself, I'll analyze its movements and weaknesses. Until then, we stick to a flexible formation. Lila, keep your golem close for defense. Gareth, be ready to adjust your barriers on the fly. Kurt, hold the line as always. Dorian, Elena—you two focus on maximizing damage."

The team nodded, ready and focused.

"Well, let's not waste any more time," I said, signaling the team forward.

Kurt and Gareth took the lead, pushing the heavy doors open. Immediately, we were hit by a wave of scorching heat, even more intense than anything we had faced so far. The chamber beyond was vast, with molten rivers flowing through the room like veins of fire. In the center stood the dungeon's boss, a colossal fire spirit, its body a swirling mass of flames and molten rock. It radiated an overwhelming energy, its fiery eyes locked on us as we entered.

The final battle was about to begin.

As the colossal fire spirit loomed over the team, the tension in the chamber reached its peak. Heat radiated from the creature in waves, distorting the air around it and casting flickering shadows on the rocky walls. The ground beneath their feet trembled slightly as molten rivers flowed beneath the surface, adding another layer of danger to the fight ahead.

Kurt tightened his grip on his shield, eyes locked on the fire spirit. His thoughts were steady but cautious, fully aware of the power they were about to face. 'This guy has been really sharp so far. I'll trust his call. This thing is stronger than any elemental we've faced, but if anyone can spot a weakness, it's him.' @@novelbin@@

The fire spirit's burning eyes glowed brighter as it began to move, its massive form shifting with the sound of crackling flames. A pulse of intense heat hit them as it took its first step, molten rock trailing behind it.

"Astron," Kurt called, his voice firm, "What's the plan?"

Astron narrowed his eyes, scanning the fire spirit's body, his [Perceptive Insight] already analyzing the creature's mana flow. The spirit's core was deep within, surrounded by layers of molten rock and energy. He could sense its movements, the fluctuating pulses of mana that fueled its attacks. "We focus on mobility first," he said, his tone calm. "It's slow but powerful. Dorian, Elena—target its legs. Cripple its movement, and we'll gain control of the battlefield. Gareth, keep the barriers tight around the front line. Lila, prepare your golem to block any major attacks."

The team sprang into action.

Dorian darted forward, his dual swords flashing in the light of the molten chamber. His thoughts raced as he moved. 'I've gotta admit, Astron's calls have been on point. He reads the fight like a damn book.'

SWOOSH! He struck at the spirit's legs, aiming for the joints where the molten rock shifted most. The spirit's heavy limbs moved slowly, but each swing carried immense force, and Dorian dodged with precision, barely avoiding the crushing blows.

Elena followed closely behind, her magic crackling at her fingertips. She focused her ice magic, aiming to cool the fire spirit's legs and make them brittle.

But at the same time, even while they were right in the midst of the fight, her thoughts still wandered.

The whole team had been informed that someone would be added to them. That was something that they did not receive well, as they were also informed that he would not be here for too long.

After all, it was said that he would be staying on the team for only one weekend. That alone made things weird as they had a layout of their own, which they had been practicing. Adding someone new to the party in such a short time sounded bullshit.

But Elena could bet that none of the team members were expecting such a performance.

'Astron saw the weak points before I even noticed them. He's not just quick—he's thinking ahead, always planning.'

The fact that someone like him was just in the middle ranks of the academy made things even more scarier for her. She had been pursuing the academy life, but her lack of talents, as well as her lack of finances, made it impossible.

'Maybe I should be glad that I could not join the academy. If everyone is a monster like him, I wonder what would the strongest of those look like?' Her icy blasts hit their mark, steam rising as the freezing energy clashed with the spirit's heat, and her thoughts clashed with herself.

But in the end, one thing was clear.

This guy was good, and they were really blessed.

At the back, Gareth raised his hands, casting a shimmering barrier in front of the advancing party. The heat from the fire spirit was intense, but his barriers held firm. He glanced at Astron, noting the way he calmly observed the battle even while firing arrows. 'He's different from any leader we've had before. Strategic... detached.....Now, in a good way, but it is scary. He doesn't hesitate. No ego, just results.'

The fire spirit roared, raising one massive arm to bring it crashing down on the party. "Lila!" Astron called sharply.

Lila's hands glowed with mana as her golem surged forward, intercepting the blow. The impact shook the chamber, but the golem held, its stone body absorbing the force. Lila winced at the strain but kept her focus.

Since she knew something was coming.

SWOOSH! BOOM!

And it came.

Another arrow had already been knocked, Astron's eyes following the fluctuations of the spirit's energy. He aimed carefully, targeting a small point near its torso where the mana flow was more chaotic.

"Aim for the core. It's deep, but if we destabilize the mana flow, we'll weaken it."

The arrow flew straight, piercing through a gap in the spirit's molten armor. A burst of energy flared from the impact point, and the spirit staggered for a moment, its movements becoming less coordinated.

'He's something else... commanding like he's done this a hundred times. It's almost unsettling how sure he is.'

Whether this was possible just by only observing once or by Astron referring to his knowledge was something that Lila did not know, nor could she ever confirm.

Kurt, in the thick of the fight, kept his shield raised, deflecting the spirit's wild swings. He caught a glimpse of Astron out of the corner of his eye, and for the first time in the battle, he allowed himself a moment of reflection.

'If this is what I need to become a good leader, I am really lacking.'

Kurt thought as he deflected another wild swing from the fire spirit with his shield, the force of the impact vibrating up his arm. His attention flickered briefly to the rest of the party, each member moving with precision under Astron's direction.

It wasn't just Astron's ability to command in the heat of battle that struck Kurt; it was the way he saw things, the way he read the battlefield and reacted in real-time. Kurt had trained hard to be the best leader he could for his team, overseeing their progress and making sure they were well-prepared for challenges like this. He wasn't neglectful—far from it. But the more he watched Astron, the more he realized something unsettling.

'Have I been too satisfied with where we are?'

For months, Kurt had been confident in his leadership. He'd trained rigorously with the team, ensured their gear was optimized, and had them running drills to hone their skills. But somewhere along the line, he'd grown comfortable, complacent even. He was satisfied with their progress and didn't push as hard as he could. They were good, and they won their fights. But watching Astron now—an outsider, a temporary addition to the party—Kurt realized he'd missed something vital.

'I've been satisfied, and that's the problem.'

Astron's leadership wasn't just natural talent; it was knowledge, preparation, and constant refinement. He wasn't just reacting to the fight in front of him—he was anticipating it. Kurt had seen Astron refer to some information in his mind multiple times during this fight, whether it was recognizing a weakness in the fire spirit or knowing exactly how the molten environment would affect their positioning.

That wasn't something that came naturally. It was a result of research, experience, and, most importantly, never feeling like you knew enough.

'I've been leading based on what I know works,' Kurt admitted to himself, 'but Astron leads based on what might happen. He's prepared for possibilities I never even considered.'

The realization hit him hard. While he'd been content overseeing the team's growth and making sure they were progressing, he hadn't pushed beyond the boundaries of what he already knew. He hadn't researched new tactics, he hadn't considered how the team would fare in extreme conditions beyond their usual missions, and he certainly hadn't questioned whether they could be doing better. He trusted his experience, but experience alone wasn't enough to grow further.

'Astron's not just better because he's talented,' Kurt thought, gritting his teeth as he blocked another strike. 'He's better because he refuses to be satisfied. He's always looking for what's next.'

Kurt had watched Astron adapt to the fight, adjusting strategies based on the fire spirit's movements, the terrain, and the team's capabilities. His calls were sharp, precise, and ahead of the curve. And all the while, Astron kept his mind open to new information, never assuming he had the complete picture.

'I need to learn from this,' Kurt realized, his jaw tightening with determination. 'If I want to be the leader my team needs, I can't just be satisfied with what we've already achieved. I have to keep pushing, keep learning. There's always more to prepare for, always more to know.'

Kurt's shield took another powerful hit, but this time, he wasn't just holding the line—he was learning. His mind was racing, already considering what he needed to do after this mission, how he needed to approach the team's training differently.

He couldn't just oversee them anymore. He had to challenge them and himself more than he ever had before.

And that was the start of his own reflection and when one of the newly rising stars would be born.

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As the battle raged on, Astron's eyes remained locked on the Fire Spirit, analyzing every detail of its movements. The monster towered over the team, its body a swirling combination of molten rock and fire energy, shifting with every step.

Each pulse of its core sent waves of heat through the chamber, distorting the air and making it difficult to focus. Despite this, Astron's [Perceptive Insight] filtered through the chaotic mana, providing him with a clear view of the spirit's strengths and weaknesses.

'This thing's mana level is definitely at the peak of Stage 5. Not quite Stage 6, but close enough to make this a real challenge.'

Astron could see the immense concentration of mana flowing through the Fire Spirit's core. The energy was dense, pulsing rhythmically as if it were a living heartbeat.

This wasn't just any elemental creature—it was a manifestation of pure elemental power, born from the dungeon itself. Its movements, while slow, were deliberate, and the sheer weight behind each attack was enough to cause the ground to shudder.

'Fire Spirit is a being of raw elemental energy. Its body doesn't have a skeleton to target. Instead, the molten rock and fire are holding it together. That means physical attacks will have little effect, and those solid parts... they're about as tough as Stage 6 material.'

His mind raced as he considered their options. The Fire Spirit's molten exterior was resistant to conventional strikes; Dorian's swords would find little purchase against it. Elena's ice magic was effective in creating cracks, but it wasn't enough to bring down something of this magnitude on its own.

'Even if we can chip away at the molten rock, its core is still protected. The core is its life force, and we can't destroy it. The mission's clear: subdue, not kill. That complicates things.'

He nocked another arrow, his eyes following the flow of mana within the spirit's body. The solidified parts of the Fire Spirit were where the energy was most concentrated, particularly around its legs and arms, acting as armor.

That armor was strong, but Astron could see the fluctuations of mana underneath, areas where the molten rock shifted and exposed weaknesses.

'We can't just keep hacking away at the solid parts. The material's too dense for that. And the core is too volatile—taking it out completely would kill the spirit and close the dungeon.'

The Fire Spirit roared again, raising one of its massive arms to strike. The chamber shook with the force of its movement, and Kurt braced himself, his shield absorbing the brunt of the impact. Dorian darted in, slashing at one of the spirit's legs, but his blades only caused small cracks to appear before molten rock quickly filled the gaps.

11:00

"Dorian, fall back!" Astron called, his voice sharp. "Those cracks won't hold. We need to weaken it another way." @@novelbin@@

Dorian retreated, frustration flashing in his eyes. 'Damn, this thing's tough,' he thought, his gaze shifting toward Astron. 'If he's got a plan, I hope he pulls it out soon.'

Astron's mind was already working through the possibilities. The fire energy that composed most of the spirit's form was highly unstable, but it was bound to the solidified rocks, keeping the creature's shape intact. To destabilize the spirit without destroying it would require a precise approach.

'I really did not want to rely on this, but I guess I have no choice.'

To broaden his horizons and open himself up to different strategies, Astron wanted to explore new ideas.

But that was something that would not work every time.

'And the mission's nature does not allow that.'

In the end, they needed to subdue, which limited them a lot more.

'Let's just disrupt its mana flow and call it an end.'

If possible, he wanted to get some practice against a strong monster like this using his martial arts and his recently updated stats, but for the time being, doing such a thing would be too selfish and delusional.

Astron quickly formulated a plan, one that would utilize the strengths of his team while allowing him to take the final shot. His eyes flickered to his teammates, and he began issuing orders.

"Dorian, Gareth, I need you to keep up the pressure. Hit the weak points Elena and I will expose. Lila, I need your golem on defense—block the spirit's attacks and give me a clear line of fire."

Dorian, still frustrated from his earlier attempts, nodded. 'He's got a plan, finally,' he thought. 'Let's hope this works.'

The team sprang into action as Astron's orders cut through the tension of the battlefield. Dorian moved first, darting forward with his dual swords flashing in the dim, molten-lit chamber. He aimed for the Fire Spirit's legs, targeting the spots where Astron and Elena would expose the weak points.

Astron, meanwhile, was steadying himself, his [Eyes of Hourglass] fully active. He watched the battle unfold, monitoring the flow of mana within the Fire Spirit and the precise placement of his teammates. Every movement, every crack that Dorian and Elena exposed, was adding up.

"Dorian, pull back slightly," Astron called out. "Keep your strikes light but fast—we need to keep it distracted without damaging the core."

Dorian nodded, adjusting his approach. He slashed at the creature's legs with quick, nimble strikes, keeping it off balance but ensuring not to overcommit.

"Elena," Astron continued, "focus your ice magic on the joints. We need to slow it down even more."

Elena shifted her aim, sending concentrated blasts of ice at the creature's knees and elbows. The freezing energy seeped into the cracks Dorian had made, forcing the Fire Spirit's molten armor to solidify further. Each hit slowed the creature's movements, buying the team precious time.

"Gareth, get ready to reinforce Lila's golem," Astron said calmly, his eyes tracking the Fire Spirit's movements. "The next strike will be heavy."

Gareth nodded, raising his hands to prepare an extra layer of barriers. The Fire Spirit, enraged by the team's assault, swung one massive arm at Lila's golem with even greater force. The golem blocked the attack, but the sheer power of the strike caused cracks to form in its stony exterior.

Gareth's barriers shimmered to life just in time, absorbing the remaining energy of the strike and preventing the golem from collapsing. 'Damn,' he thought. 'Astron called that perfectly. Without the reinforcement, we'd be in trouble.'

As the team continued their coordinated assault, Astron traced the flow of the battlefield just to find the perfect moment.

'Now!' And he found it after a while.

He took a deep breath, centering himself as he focused his energy. A faint green glow began to emanate from his body, his Lunar mana swirling in the air around him.

His mind locked onto the seven key points where the Fire Spirit's mana was weakest—joints where the molten rock shifted and exposed the raw fire energy underneath. Those points were the target.

With a fluid motion, Astron nocked seven arrows in rapid succession, each one glowing faintly with green Lunar mana. These arrows weren't designed for raw power but for precision and control. They would serve as markers, locking down the weak points and creating a path for his next move.

'Even without Celestalith, this should be fine for now.' While he was much more efficient when using Celestalith, he did not forget all the training he did before he got the weapon.

Those memories of how he used the bow provided by the academy were still there.

Eyes of Hourglass. The world slowed as he locked onto all those targets.

SWOOSH! He released the arrows, one after another, each glowing projectile flying toward its intended target. The arrows lacked strength, but they struck true, embedding themselves in the weak points with a faint hum of energy. The green glow intensified, creating a shimmering thread of Lunar mana that connected each arrow to Astron.

In his mind's eye, he saw it clearly—seven distinct threads of mana, each one linked to a critical point on the Fire Spirit's body. The threads glowed with a soft green light, forming a web of connection between him and the spirit.

'There. The path is set.'

With his [Eyes of Hourglass], Astron's vision sharpened, and the threads of mana became even more defined. Each thread represented the exact location where the Fire Spirit's mana flow was weakest, a roadmap that would guide his next attack with precision.

'Now, for the real strike.'

Drawing his bow once more, Astron began charging his next set of arrows. This time, the green glow was replaced by a brilliant blue, his destructive and unstable Lunar mana surging through the bowstring.

The blue Lunar mana crackled with energy, wild and volatile, but Astron's [Eyes of Hourglass] kept it in check.

The special armor-penetrating property of the bow, combined with the blue Lunar mana, would be enough to break through the Fire Spirit's tough exterior.

Normally, the unstable energy would make the arrows unpredictable, their paths erratic and difficult to control, especially if he was not using [Celestialith] as a medium.

But if he locked it with green threads, then the green threads would guide the arrows, ensuring they followed the exact trajectory needed to hit the weak points.

The green and blue Lunar mana worked in tandem, and the precision of the green counterbalanced the volatility of the blue.

'Everything is lined up.' Astron released the arrows, each one blazing with blue Lunar mana. They flew through the air, following the paths set by the green threads, moving with deadly accuracy. One by one, the arrows struck the Fire Spirit's weak points, each impact accompanied by a surge of energy that disrupted the creature's mana flow.

—BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

The Fire Spirit roared in agony, its form shuddering as the precise strikes caused the molten rock to crack and splinter.

The unstable blue Lunar mana destabilized the spirit's core, but the green mana ensured that the damage didn't go too far. The Fire Spirit wasn't killed—its core remained intact—but its ability to reform was severely weakened.

The chamber fell into silence, the oppressive heat still lingering, but the immediate threat now neutralized.

Astron lowered his bow, his expression calm but focused. "It's done. The Fire Spirit's subdued."

The rest of the team let out a collective sigh of relief.

"Damn.....That was tough."

And, in fact, that was.

But at the end, the battle was finally over.