

H. Academy 541

Chapter 541 Chapter 121.1 - Another One

As the team began to catch their breath and gather themselves after the intense battle, the atmosphere in the molten chamber shifted. A soft hum filled the air, followed by the flicker of a glowing rune that appeared near the entrance. It was the special signal, a direct message from Liana.

Moments later, the rune flared, and Liana stepped through the door. She moved with her usual composed grace, her eyes immediately scanning the area.

The molten fragments of the Fire Spirit still smoldered, and the oppressive heat lingered, but the massive creature had been effectively neutralized, just as Astron had planned.

Liana's sharp gaze fell upon the dormant core of the Fire Spirit, now significantly weakened but still intact. She raised an eyebrow, clearly impressed by what she saw. The team watched as she approached, the faint glow from the molten rivers casting shadows on her face. She took a moment to observe the state of the chamber, her expression thoughtful.

"Impressive," Liana remarked, her voice calm but with a hint of approval. "Not killed, yet no longer a threat. Exactly as the mission required."

She knelt by the Fire Spirit's core, reaching out to inspect it closely. The mana flow within the core was faint but stable, and the creature's molten body had collapsed completely. It would take time for the Fire Spirit to recover, and by then, the mining teams would have extracted the valuable resources they needed.

Liana stood up, her attention turning to the group. Her eyes briefly met Astron's, acknowledging the precision of his plan without needing to say a word. She folded her arms and gave a slight nod of satisfaction.

"This was earlier than I expected," she said, glancing at the team with a knowing smile. "You've outdone yourselves. I was informed to come once the Fire Spirit was neutralized, but I didn't think it would be this soon."

Dorian let out a small chuckle, clearly pleased with the outcome. "Yeah, we don't mess around when we've got a plan."

Gareth, still maintaining his stoic demeanor, added, "Astron's strategy sped things up."

Liana's gaze shifted back to Astron, her expression thoughtful. "That must be the case." Since he was the addition to the team, something like this was bound to happen. That was what everything was about, after all. "The Fire Spirit was a formidable opponent, but you neutralized it without any unnecessary damage to the core or the environment. That's no small feat."

Astron remained composed, nodding slightly in response. "The mission was clear. We had to subdue, not destroy."

Liana smiled, her approval evident. "Precisely. That balance is difficult to maintain, especially under pressure. But you all worked together and executed the plan efficiently." She turned to the rest of the team. "Each of you played your part perfectly. You should be proud of the result."

Kurt, standing nearby with his shield still raised, couldn't help but feel a sense of accomplishment, though his thoughts were already reflecting on how he could improve.

Elena gave Liana a slight bow, her expression showing her pride in the team's success. "We just followed the plan."

Liana nodded, her demeanor still professional but clearly pleased. "That's exactly what makes a successful team—understanding your roles and trusting the strategy."

She took a step back and surveyed the room once more, her eyes landing on the team's formation and the remnants of the battle. "I'll inform the mining teams that it's safe to begin. You've cleared the way perfectly."

With that, Liana's expression softened slightly, a rare moment of warmth in her otherwise composed exterior. "Well done, all of you. Guild master will be pleased with this result."

The team exchanged glances, the weight of the mission lifting slightly as they felt the satisfaction of a job well done. Liana's approval carried weight, and knowing they had met her expectations, and more, was a victory in itself.

Liana's eyes swept over the team once more, her expression settling into its usual composed demeanor. "You've done well here, but as per the schedule, there's more to come today. You'll have a short break, but be prepared—there are additional expeditions later."

The team exchanged a few knowing glances but didn't protest. Though the battle had been mentally taxing, the members weren't overly fatigued physically. They had executed their roles with precision, and the efficient use of their skills had left them with enough energy to continue.

Kurt rolled his shoulders, the weight of his shield now a familiar presence rather than a burden. "Not much of a breather, but we're ready for whatever's next."

Dorian, leaning casually on his swords, smirked. "Tiring, sure, but nothing we can't handle. Besides, it's better to stay warmed up."

Elena nodded in agreement, her staff resting at her side. "We've had tougher days. This is just part of the job."

Gareth, as stoic as ever, simply gave a small nod. "I'm good to go when needed."

Lila, with her golem now deactivated and floating back into her summoning device, smiled lightly. "Let's make the most of the break, but I'm with them. We're in good shape."

Liana observed the team's relaxed attitude with a small hint of approval in her eyes. This group had proven itself capable and resilient, adapting to whatever was thrown their way. She could see why they were trusted for such high-pressure missions.

"Very well. Take your time to recover and refocus," Liana instructed. "The next expedition won't be as intense as this, but stay sharp. We'll reconvene soon, and I'll guide you through the next steps. I'll be assisting you for the remainder of the week, so if there's anything you need, don't hesitate to let me know."

The team nodded in unison, appreciating the brief respite before the next phase of their work.

As they began to file out of the chamber, Liana moved to the side, guiding them through the molten pathways with the same efficiency she had shown since their first briefing.

Despite the looming pressure of the upcoming missions, the atmosphere among the team remained relatively relaxed. They trusted each other, and their bond was forged through the shared intensity of battle.

Walking alongside the team, Liana remained a quiet but ever-watchful presence, her role as their assistant clear. She would be with them for each upcoming expedition, and her responsibility went beyond just logistical support—she would ensure that everything flowed seamlessly, allowing the team to focus on the tasks ahead.

'The Guild Master.....He needs to see this.'

The footage of the fight especially needed to be analyzed.

'We really need to keep him with us.'

Even if he was sent by the organization, they had found a gem here, and her developed sense of business in this industry was screaming at her.

In a quiet briefing room that overlooked the barracks, the team was gathered.

The air was cooler now, a welcome change after the sweltering heat of the Infernal Nexus. Each member of the team was seated, still relaxed but attentive, waiting for Liana to begin the next mission briefing.

The room was dimly lit, with a holographic table in the center displaying the layout of their next dungeon. Liana stood at the head of the table, her demeanor professional, as always. She tapped her tablet, and a 3D model of the dungeon appeared above the table. It depicted a long, winding path that led deeper into a dark, cavernous expanse.

"This next dungeon," Liana began, her voice clear and calm, "is what we refer to as a 'Linear Gate.' It's relatively straightforward compared to the Infernal Nexus—no complex terrain or unstable environments, but the challenge lies in the sheer number of enemies."

She gestured to the map, which now zoomed in to show various points of interest along the dungeon's path. "The estimated strength of this dungeon is around peak stage-5. Unlike the Nexus, where you dealt with a powerful singular entity, this dungeon is populated by a large number of creatures. They aren't as individually strong, but their numbers will be your main challenge."

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Kurt leaned forward, studying the map. "What kind of monsters are we dealing with?"

Liana tapped another button, and several holographic images of the monsters appeared. They resembled twisted, reptilian creatures with elongated limbs and thick, scaled skin. Their claws were long and sharp, and their eyes glowed faintly with mana.

"These are called Vaurask Reapers," Liana explained. "They operate in packs and are known for their relentless hunting tactics. Individually, they aren't too difficult to take down, but in large groups, they can become overwhelming."

Elena narrowed her eyes, her fingers tapping rhythmically on the arm of her chair. "How large are we talking?"

"Based on our scout reports, you can expect waves of 10 to 20 at a time. The deeper you go, the larger the packs will become. Towards the final section of the dungeon, they'll likely come in waves of 30 or more."

Gareth, who had been silently watching the briefing, spoke up. "Any special abilities we need to watch out for?"

"They have a pack mentality," Liana continued, "which means they work together to flank and corner their prey. They rely on speed and coordination, so be prepared for ambushes. They also possess minor mana resistance, particularly to fire, but their bodies are weak to piercing and slashing attacks."

Dorian's eyes gleamed with excitement. "Sounds like I'll be busy."

Liana allowed herself a small smile at Dorian's enthusiasm. "Indeed. Your blades will be particularly effective against them. However, keep in mind that they're fast. It's easy to get overwhelmed if you're not careful."

"I see." The team nodded their heads as they looked at the dungeon, while Liana continued. The map zoomed out, showing the entire dungeon route again. Liana pointed to the end of the path, where a larger chamber awaited. "The final room contains the dungeon's boss—a Vaurask Alpha. It's larger, stronger, and more intelligent than the others. It commands the packs, and if you defeat it, the rest of the creatures will scatter."

She paused, letting the information sink in. "However, the Alpha has thick armor-like scales and a high level of mana resistance. It's not like the regular Reapers."

Kurt leaned back, arms crossed, deep in thought. "So, lots of small fights leading up to a big one. Any intel on the Alpha's abilities?"

"It's a physical powerhouse," Liana replied. "But it also has a form of mana-based roar that can disrupt your senses. The scouts noted that it can temporarily interfere with mana perception, so be careful."

Elena raised an eyebrow. "A roar that disrupts mana? That's rare."

"Indeed," Liana agreed. "You'll need to time your attacks carefully to avoid being caught off guard. The good news is, we've scouted this gate thoroughly, so there shouldn't be any surprises beyond what I've briefed you on."

The team nodded, processing the briefing. While the mission was different from the last, they were ready. This dungeon might not have the overwhelming power of a fire spirit, but the numbers they were facing posed a different kind of challenge.

"Any other questions?" Liana asked, looking around the room.

Kurt shook his head. "No questions. We're ready."

"Good," Liana said with a satisfied nod. "We'll head out in an hour. Get your gear ready and mentally prepare for the fight ahead."

With that, she dismissed the team, leaving them to gather their thoughts and prepare for the next battle. As they filed out of the room, Liana remained behind, watching the holographic map.

'They handled the Infernal Nexus flawlessly,' she thought. 'Let's see how they deal with a different kind of pressure.'

This would be a crucial test of their endurance and adaptability, and Liana was confident they'd rise to the occasion.

Chapter 542 121.2 - Another one

The team entered the dungeon at a steady pace, the air growing colder as they disappeared into the linear gate. Liana stayed at the entrance for a moment longer, ensuring the team moved safely into the dungeon's depths. Her eyes swept over the layout displayed on her tablet. She nodded to herself, confident in their ability to handle the incoming threats.

Once she was satisfied, she turned and left the dungeon, heading back to the guild headquarters to deliver her report to the Guild Master, Toren.

Liana arrived at the Vanguard Haven Guild's main hall, a sleek, futuristic building that stood out among the older structures of the city. The guild had a reputation for taking on high-risk, high-reward dungeons, and its resources reflected that—backed by the powerful organization that sponsored them, they had access to cutting-edge technology.

As she entered the Guild Master's office, the cool, metallic sheen of the room gave off a professional and efficient atmosphere. Guild Master Toren sat behind a large desk, his sharp eyes scanning through several mission reports. He was a tall, imposing figure with dark hair peppered with gray and a presence that demanded respect.

Liana approached, giving a respectful nod. "Guild Master."

Toren looked up from his reports, his gaze settling on Liana with keen interest. "Liana. How did the team perform in the dungeon?"

"They've entered the Linear Gate as planned," she began, handing him her tablet with a detailed map of the dungeon. "It's a straightforward layout, and the enemies are numerous but manageable. I have no doubt they'll handle it."

Toren nodded but didn't look entirely surprised. "Good. I expected as much. But I imagine there's more?"

Liana's expression shifted slightly, a glint of something deeper in her eyes. "Yes, Guild Master. The Infernal Nexus mission was completed earlier than expected."

Toren raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "Earlier? That's impressive. I assume you're going to show me why."

"Indeed," Liana said, tapping a few buttons on her tablet. A large screen on the wall behind Toren lit up, displaying footage from the Infernal Nexus.

They were able to capture footage thanks to the advanced tech provided by the organization. These devices adapt to the mana wavelengths within the gates, allowing the users to record their performance.

Toren leaned back in his chair as the footage played. The screen showed the team in action—Astron issuing commands with precision, Dorian and Elena working in perfect tandem to strike at the Fire Spirit's weak points, as well as the coordination of the entire squad.

The footage highlighted Astron's critical moment when he unleashed his seven green arrows, each one striking with impeccable accuracy as they followed the trails of mana threads he had laid down earlier. The scene captured the controlled chaos of the battle, with Astron directing the fight in a way that was both methodical and devastatingly effective.

Toren watched the footage closely, his keen eyes narrowing as Astron's performance played out on the screen. He had expected to see the typical hallmarks of an exceptional Hunter candidate from the Arcadia Hunter Academy—overwhelming strength, raw power, or sheer aggression. Yet, what he witnessed was far from the usual spectacle of brute force. It was something else entirely.

"This..." he murmured, leaning forward slightly in his chair, eyes fixed on the screen. Astron's seven green arrows were precise, but it wasn't the physical feat that caught Toren's attention—it was the strategy behind it. Every arrow, every movement, and every command was calculated as part of a larger plan that orchestrated the entire battlefield like a well-oiled machine. The Fire Spirit, a formidable opponent in its own right, was systematically dismantled, not by overwhelming power, but by meticulous planning and flawless execution.

Toren's expression shifted, a mixture of intrigue and respect. "I had expected overwhelming strength—something explosive, something that would display raw power and dominance." He spoke softly, more to himself than to Liana, his voice tinged with surprise. "But this... this is different. This is profound."

He sat back, folding his arms as the footage continued, showing Astron directing his teammates with an unshakable calm. Every command was issued with precision, guiding them through the chaotic environment of the Infernal Nexus. It was clear that Astron's strength didn't come from overpowering his enemies alone. It came from understanding the flow of battle in a way that left no room for error. There was no waste of movement, no unnecessary action—everything served a purpose.

"This is why an agent like him was sent," Toren continued, his voice now carrying a note of realization. "Astron's strength isn't in his individual capabilities as a Hunter. It's in his ability to command, to lead a team through even the most perilous situations without faltering." He nodded to himself, the pieces falling into place. "He doesn't overwhelm his enemies with power—he dismantles them with strategy."

Toren's gaze returned to Liana. "This is the kind of talent that's almost impossible to teach. You either have it or you don't. And Astron... he's a natural."

Liana, standing nearby, gave a small nod of agreement, her expression as professional as ever. "Indeed, Guild Master. His approach is unlike anything we've seen recently. He operates with a level of foresight that makes him not just a valuable asset but a tactical mastermind in the field."

Toren sighed, though the smile tugging at the corners of his lips betrayed his satisfaction. "I see now why the organization placed such high expectations on him. This one isn't just another rising star—he's a game-changer."

He turned back to the footage.

Liana, standing beside him, broke the silence, her voice measured but carrying a note of urgency. "Such an individual must not be missed, Guild Master. Even if he is a member of the organization, his talent in this field is immense. This level of tactical awareness and foresight is rare. He's more than just a skilled Hunter—he's someone who can shape the future of any guild he joins."

Toren didn't look away from the footage, but he nodded slowly, clearly considering her words. "You're right," he said, his voice thoughtful. "Astron is too valuable to let slip through our fingers. But even if we see his potential, my authority alone might not be enough to bring him under our

wing. The organization has its own plans for someone like him, and I would need more than just admiration to justify making a move."

He leaned back in his chair, folding his arms. "I'd need a reason—something concrete. And considering his current position at Arcadia Hunter Academy, if he continues to perform like this, he won't lack offers. He could easily enter stronger guilds, ones with more resources than we can provide. Or worse, he could be recruited by families like the Thornhearts. They're always on the lookout for talent, and someone like Astron would be a prime target for them."

Liana nodded, understanding the gravity of the situation. "It's true, Guild Master. His talents would appeal to any of the top families, especially those looking to strengthen their influence. But that's why we need to act sooner rather than later. If we wait until he's fully graduated, the competition to recruit him will be fierce."

"That's right...." Toren let out a low sigh, though there was a hint of desire in his eyes. "Well, I will talk with the organization. We will see if we can do anything or not. For now, let's just focus on what we have. Make sure that he has at least a hospitable experience here. At the very least, we should give him some good reasons to stay with us."

"Understood."

Toren leaned back in his chair, and as the moment hung in the air, Liana, always quick to redirect the conversation when needed, smoothly shifted the topic.

"Speaking of operations, Guild Master," Liana began, tapping her tablet to bring up another set of data, "the dungeon clearing progress is moving at a remarkable pace. I've reviewed the preliminary reports from the team. The dungeon at the Linear Gate was cleared efficiently, but I've also included footage of the Infernal Nexus, which shows a similar pattern. The report from the analyst team should be arriving soon."

Just as she finished speaking, there was a firm knock at the door.

"Enter," Toren said, his voice steady as he glanced toward the entrance.

The door opened to reveal a man in his mid-thirties, tall and lean, with sharp eyes that conveyed intelligence and focus. He wore the formal attire of the guild's analytical department and a small holographic display projected from his wrist. This was Alric, the head of the analysis team.

"Guild Master, Liana," Alric greeted them with a respectful nod before stepping forward. "I have the data you've been waiting for."

Toren motioned for him to continue, and Alric tapped a few buttons on his device, causing a series of holographic charts and graphs to materialize above the desk.

"As you can see," Alric began, his voice steady and confident, "the Infernal Nexus was cleared 40% faster than projected. The team worked in perfect coordination, which drastically reduced downtime between engagements. According to our calculations, if the team continues at this pace, all of the dungeons assigned to Vanguard Haven could be cleared by Sunday—three days from now."

"All of the dungeons?"

Alric nodded; his expression was neutral but professional. "Indeed. This level of efficiency has accelerated the rate at which we can clear these high-level dungeons. The teamwork on display was exceptional, and the lack of significant delays during combat operations allowed them to maintain a pace we haven't seen in recent months."

Alric was not aware of the footage inside the gate as such members did not have access to such data. After all, there were many spies in the guilds who would leak important information, and the organizations would prefer their agents to stay undercover.

Toren's eyes flickered with a hint of excitement as he processed Alric's report. The speed at which Astron and his team were clearing dungeons wasn't just impressive—it was an opportunity.

"All of the dungeons cleared by Sunday..." Toren repeated thoughtfully, his gaze shifting back to Liana. "That leaves us with a lot of leeway, not just in operations but in perception as well. This efficiency can be turned into more than just a number on a report. It can be a message—a marketing strategy."

Alric raised an eyebrow slightly, clearly intrigued but unaware of the full scope of what Toren had in mind. His access to the intricacies of the footage was limited, but he understood the implications of what the Guild Master was hinting at.

Toren leaned forward, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"We shall make this a cornerstone of our next campaign. The speed and precision at which Vanguard Haven operates—highlight the team's ability to clear high-level dungeons with efficiency and minimal delay. As you know, reporters and officers from the Hunter Association are present at every cleared dungeon. They see it all, and they'll report on it."

That was already the plan from the start, but Liana was not informed about that for the time being.

But she was still fast to catch onto his thought process, and she gave him a small nod.

"Indeed, Guild Master. If we position this correctly, it will not only solidify our reputation but also attract higher-caliber recruits and possibly even additional resources. We can leverage the presence of the Hunter Association's officers to verify our claims. Their involvement adds credibility."

Toren turned to her fully, his expression one of a clear one. "Contact Rong Shin Media Company. I want them on this immediately. Let's make sure the right people are talking about Vanguard Haven's success by the time the final dungeon is cleared."

The plan was on the motion now.

Chapter 543 122.1 - Fame

<Inside the Dungeon>

The team moved swiftly through the Linear Gate, the dark, winding corridors of the dungeon stretching before them. The atmosphere was tense but focused, with each member falling into their respective roles. It was a stark contrast from their earlier expeditions—now, their movements were sharper, more synchronized, with an unspoken trust beginning to form under Astron's guidance.

The first wave of monsters came quickly—Vaurask Reapers, twisted, wolf-like creatures with glowing eyes and jagged teeth. Their fur was matted, and their bodies exuded a dark, corrupted energy that filled the narrow passage with a foul stench. They were fast and vicious but not overwhelmingly strong. However, their numbers were significant.

Astron signaled to the group without missing a beat, his voice calm yet commanding. "Kurt, Gareth—hold the line at the front. Dorian, Elena—flank them. Lila, keep your golem on defense for now; we don't want to get overwhelmed."

Kurt and Gareth stepped forward, their combined defenses forming a solid wall against the Reapers' initial charge. Kurt's shield absorbed the impact of the creatures' snapping jaws while Gareth's barrier flared up, deflecting their claws.

"Dorian, now," Astron called, his sharp eyes tracking the flow of the battle.

Dorian moved swiftly, his dual swords flashing in the dim light as he slipped around the side of the Reapers, targeting their exposed flanks. His strikes were precise, severing tendons and limbs with efficiency.

Elena was right behind Dorian, her magic already charged. She unleashed a burst of lightning, arcing through the pack of Reapers and stunning several of them. Their bodies convulsed as the electricity coursed through them, leaving them vulnerable to follow-up attacks.

Meanwhile, Lila stood back; her eyes focused as her golem held the rear, ready to intercept any stragglers. She could see the difference in how they operated now. 'It's subtle,' she mused, watching as the team moved almost seamlessly. 'But there's a rhythm now—a flow that wasn't there before. Astron's control is subtle but undeniable.'

Astron, standing at the back, nocked another arrow and scanned the battlefield. The Reapers were relentless, but their chaotic movements were predictable to him. His [Eyes of Hourglass] allowed him to see the weak points in their formations, the areas where they were most vulnerable. He could see the threads of mana that connected the monsters, and he used that knowledge to direct the team's strikes.

"Kurt, step left! Dorian, cut off the Reaper on the right before it circles back!" Astron's voice was steady, and each command was given with precise timing.

Kurt shifted his stance just as a Reaper lunged at his shield; the force of the creature's impact redirected as Kurt used his bulk to push it off balance. Dorian moved in, slicing through the beast's exposed flank with ease.

The coordination was seamless now. The team had always been competent, but now, under Astron's watchful eye, they were more than that—they were a unit, their movements sharp and efficient, with each member trusting the other to handle their role.

As the last of the Reapers fell, its body dissolving into dark mana, the team paused for a moment to catch their breath. The passage ahead was quiet for now, but they knew more monsters were lurking deeper within.

"Good work," Astron said, lowering his bow as he surveyed the battlefield.

'This team.....They really have quite a potential.' He did not remember their names from the game, nor did he have any information about them. But, one thing was becoming more and more clear as he saw their progress.

While their talent as a singular Hunter or as an Awakened was not top-notch, they were talented at working together.

'They can act as a good proximity.' *****

Liana stood before the team once again, the holographic map of the next gate displayed on the table. The blue and white hues of an icy landscape illuminated their faces, a stark contrast to the fiery Infernal Nexus and dark corridors of the Linear Gate.

"This next gate is known as Frostfang Lair," Liana began, her voice crisp and efficient. "A winter-themed dungeon. Expect low temperatures, ice hazards, and creatures that rely on speed and cold-based attacks. The monsters here are mid-stage-5, mostly Frostfang Wolves. They move in packs like the Reapers, but they're much faster and harder to detect due to their ability to blend with the environment."

She pointed to the final chamber on the map. "At the end, you'll face an Ice Revenant. It's resistant to physical attacks, but vulnerable to fire and earth-based magic. Elena's magic will be crucial here, as well as any fire-based attacks you can use. Don't let the cold slow you down—timing will be everything."

The team listened closely, already mentally preparing for the next challenge. Astron simply nodded. 'Ice environment—easy to predict their movements. Let's see how they adapt.'

<Inside the Frostfang Lair>

The team moved swiftly through the icy caverns of Frostfang Lair. Cold mist filled the air, making visibility low, but the team was undeterred. The Frostfang Wolves attacked in packs, their white fur blending seamlessly with the snow-covered ground.

Astron remained at the back, eyes focused on the battlefield. His green-tinted arrows glowed briefly before disappearing into the mist, taking down wolves before they could even get close. The team followed his cues, moving in sync to take down the fast-moving creatures.

"Elena hit the next wave with fire! Dorian, be ready for flanking," Astron directed.

With each command, the team executed with precision, and soon, the final chamber loomed ahead, the Ice Revenant waiting in the distance.

The battle was intense, the cold biting at their movements, but Elena's fire magic, combined with Astron's pinpoint strikes, quickly shattered the Revenant's icy defenses. Within minutes, the lair was cleared, the cold slowly dissipating as the team gathered near the exit.

Liana met them outside the gate, her eyes scanning the group with satisfaction. "Well done. We'll move on to the final gate of the day."

Liana pulled up the final map for the day. This time, the holographic display showed a dark, eerie forest. "This is Shadowed Hollow," she explained. "It's a stage-5 dungeon, but the main difficulty comes from the terrain and the creatures' ability to cloak themselves in shadows. Expect ambushes from Shadow Stalkers and Wraiths. They're weak to light and mana-infused attacks."

<Inside Shadowed Hollow>

As they ventured deeper into the dense, shadowy forest, the atmosphere was thick with tension. The trees cast long, eerie shadows, and the sound of rustling leaves masked the creatures' movements. Shadow Stalkers lunged from the darkness, but Astron's arrows found them before they could even make their presence known.

"Gareth, reinforce the barriers—Dorian, don't stray too far!" Astron commanded, his tone sharp but calm.

The Wraiths, almost invisible to the naked eye, tried to encircle the group, but Astron's Eyes caught the faint traces of mana they left behind. One by one, he directed the team to their positions, disrupting the Wraiths' attempts at an ambush.

With his arrows glowing faintly in the dim light, Astron took out the Wraiths with precise shots, leaving the creatures disoriented and exposed to the team's attacks. Within minutes, the forest was cleared, and the team regrouped.

Liana appeared at the gate's exit once more, her expression satisfied. "You've completed today's expeditions ahead of schedule. Excellent work."

As the day came to a close and the team entered the guild building, their spirits remained high despite the physical toll of the grueling expeditions. The air was filled with the quiet chatter of camaraderie as they moved through the main hall, their confidence bolstered by the success of the day's dungeon clears.

Liana walked alongside them, her expression calm yet focused, a constant reminder of the support and guidance they were receiving from the guild's leadership. She maintained her professional demeanor, but there was a subtle pride in her gaze as she observed the team.

"You'll have a brief rest before tomorrow's assignments," Liana said, addressing the group. "Same format—with five gates this time, increasing in difficulty. Get some rest; you've earned it."

The team dispersed, each member heading toward their respective quarters. As the group thinned, Liana turned her attention to Astron, her voice carrying a sense of purpose.

"Astron," she said, her tone polite but direct. "The Guild Master has requested to speak with you. If you don't mind, I'll escort you to his office."

Astron nodded, his expression neutral, though the slight raise of his brow indicated he wasn't entirely surprised by the request. "Understood."

With a brief glance at his teammates, Astron fell into step beside Liana, and they made their way toward the elevator. The faint hum of activity around the guild hall slowly faded as they moved deeper into the building.

As they walked, Liana turned slightly toward him, her voice softening just enough to convey her sincerity. "You did exceptionally well today, Astron. Your leadership was clear from the way the team performed in the dungeons. It's not easy to maintain such efficiency in back-to-back clears, but you made it seem almost effortless."

"You seem well informed," Astron said, suddenly looking at Liana. His purple eyes contained a certain edge that he did not exclude normally.

As they walked, Astron's gaze shifted toward Liana, his sharp purple eyes locking onto her with an intensity she wasn't used to seeing from him. "You seem well informed," he said, his tone measured but carrying an unmistakable edge.

Liana felt a brief tension rise in the air, and for the first time during their walk, she hesitated. She cleared her throat lightly, her composure briefly faltering. It was clear Astron had picked up on something, something about the footage or the meticulous observations of his performance.

Before she could offer an explanation, Astron continued, his voice cold but controlled. "I allowed the footage to be recorded this time for your analysis. But understand this—if it happens again without my explicit consent, I will not act the same."

The warning hung in the air between them, and though his tone wasn't aggressive, it carried a weight that chilled Liana to her core. It wasn't a direct threat, but the coldness in his words made it clear that Astron had no intention of letting such an oversight slide a second time.

Liana nodded, swallowing the sudden tension she felt. "I understand," she said quietly, her voice steady despite the discomfort that lingered in the back of her mind.

"Good," Astron replied, his tone neutral once again as they stepped into the elevator.

The doors closed, and the soft hum of the elevator rising filled the brief silence between them. As they ascended, Astron's voice broke through the quiet. "Did you contact the media?"

Liana's eyes widened slightly in surprise, catching Astron's calm gaze as his question about the media hung in the air. "How did you know?" she asked, her voice betraying her surprise.

Astron glanced ahead, his expression unreadable. "It was obvious," he said simply, offering no further explanation.

Liana stared for a moment, digesting his response, before regaining her composure. She realized quickly that Astron had an uncanny ability to piece together the guild's strategies without being directly informed—a testament to his sharp mind.

"We've contacted Rong Shin Media," she confirmed, her tone professional once again. "They're a company with which we have a long-standing agreement. They'll begin the marketing campaign soon, focusing on the efficiency and speed of the dungeon clears."

Astron nodded, his gaze steady as ever. "Good."

The elevator came to a smooth stop, and the doors slid open with a soft hiss. They stepped out into the corridor, the air in this part of the building quieter, more private. As they walked, the imposing double doors to the Guild Master's office loomed ahead.

Liana gestured toward them. "The Guild Master is waiting."

Astron gave a brief nod in acknowledgment before they reached the doors, preparing for the conversation that awaited him with Guild Master Toren.

Chapter 544 122.2 - Fame

The doors to the Guild Master's office opened smoothly, revealing the spacious room bathed in the soft glow of the overhead lights. Guild Master Toren sat behind his large desk, his presence as commanding as ever. As Astron and Liana entered, Toren greeted them with a welcoming smile, his eyes sharp with a mix of anticipation and approval.

"Astron," Toren said, his voice carrying a warm yet authoritative tone. "Good to see you."

Astron returned the greeting with a nod, his expression neutral but focused. Without wasting time on pleasantries, he stepped forward and asked directly, "What are your expectations for me, Guild Master?"

Toren's smile widened slightly, clearly pleased by Astron's straightforward approach. He leaned back in his chair, studying Astron for a moment before responding. "Straight to the point, as always," Toren remarked, his tone carrying a note of appreciation. "I expected nothing less from you."

He placed his hands together, leaning slightly forward as he spoke. "My expectations for you are simple. We will be using your name for marketing to gather more talented Hunters who will be working for us, and to do that, we need your face to be seen on the media."

Toren's eyes gleamed with a mixture of satisfaction and anticipation as Astron acknowledged the underlying strategy. "I had expected that much," Astron said, his tone calm and matter-of-fact.

The Guild Master nodded, leaning forward slightly, his fingers steepling as he spoke. "Good. Then you'll also understand the next part. The plan is to intentionally leak the performance of your team to media companies through our connections with the Hunter Association."

Astron's gaze remained steady, but there was a flicker of interest. Toren continued, clearly enjoying the reveal of the carefully crafted strategy. "I've already set things in motion, with someone in place to make sure the right details reach the right people. Once that happens, the media's attention will naturally shift to your team. They'll want to know more about how Vanguard Haven is clearing dungeons so efficiently."

Toren's smile widened, his voice carrying a tone of confidence. "As the news spreads, interview requests will start rolling in. It won't be on a global scale—at least, not yet—but considering Nexoria City is the second-largest city in the Valerian Federation, the attention from news companies here will be significant. The hunters, guilds, and corporations all keep a close watch on developments in this city. It's a hub for information and opportunity."

He leaned back in his chair, his eyes never leaving Astron. "The more organic the media coverage, the more credibility it gives us. That is where you will step in."

Toren's words hung in the air, and Astron took a moment to consider the implications before speaking. "So, my face as a member of the Arcadia Hunter Academy will be the one representing the team," Astron stated, his tone thoughtful. "Someone will need to present us, and none of the other team members can do that."

Toren nodded, clearly expecting this conclusion. "Exactly. While your teammates are talented in their own right, none of them carry the weight that the name 'Arcadia Hunter Academy' does. That kind of prestige makes a difference, especially in a city like Nexoria. And beyond that, they're new to this sort of thing. Even with their skills, they could make mistakes in a high-profile setting."

Astron's gaze shifted slightly as he weighed his next words. "I'm not that different. This will be the first time I've stood in front of this many people as well."

Toren nodded, acknowledging Astron's point. "I know you haven't had much exposure to the media," he admitted, "but you're also affiliated with the organization. If you've reached this stage of your training, I'd wager they've prepared you for situations like this, whether directly or indirectly. You're not completely untested in handling pressure."

Astron remained quiet for a moment, processing Toren's words. He had been through many trials and had navigated complex situations, but this would be a different kind of challenge—a performance in the public eye. However, he understood what was at stake for the guild.

"As expected from a Warden." Astron nodded as he listened. It was something that was expected from a warden, and he was not surprised.

Toren leaned back, clearly pleased with Astron's calm acceptance. "Then, if that is the case," Astron continued, "when will the first interview be?"

"For now," Toren began, his voice steady, "we are expecting it to take place tomorrow evening. Once you've cleared all the dungeons and the data has been officially registered into the Hunter Association's database, my contact will leak the news. The media attention will follow shortly after."

"I see," Astron replied, his gaze unwavering. "Then I'll be ready."

Toren smiled, the confidence in his voice matching Astron's calm resolve. "That would be nice. We'll handle the rest, but you'll be the face of our success. I know you won't disappoint."

Memory updated

Astron's gaze shifted slightly as he considered another angle of the plan. "Will the other team members be informed about this?" he asked, his voice calm but inquisitive.

Toren leaned forward with a small, knowing smile. "What do you think?"

Without hesitation, Astron replied, "They won't be informed. Their reactions of surprise need to be organic to avoid raising any suspicions. If they know beforehand, it could compromise the credibility of the narrative we're trying to build."

Toren nodded, clearly pleased with Astron's insight. "Exactly. Their genuine reactions will add authenticity to the media coverage. We need it to appear as natural as possible—like the attention came from an external source, not something orchestrated by us. That way, it erases any doubt that this is anything other than a genuine display of Vanguard Haven's growing reputation."

Astron gave a slight nod in acknowledgment.

"Understood," Astron replied, his voice steady. "It makes sense to keep them in the dark. Their reactions will sell the story."

Toren's smile widened slightly, clearly impressed by Astron's ability to grasp the subtleties of the situation. "You're proving to be as perceptive as ever, Astron. That's why we're confident you're the right person for this."

Astron remained composed, though his gaze sharpened slightly. "As long as the focus stays on the team's success and not just on me."

There was one thing that he would refuse to do.

Gaining too much attention. As a member of the Arcadia Hunter Academy, he could already be perceived as a privileged and strong Hunter; at the same time, if he were to make a huge name even among the students of the Academy, that would have hurt his freedom.

'Association....The corruption must be getting deeper and deeper.'

For his following plan, he needed to keep his name under control.

Toren raised an eyebrow, recognizing the underlying concern in Astron's words. "Of course. While your participation will be highlighted, what is important is that the entire team gets recognition. The stronger the team appears, the more credible Vanguard Haven becomes. You'll be the focal point, but the narrative will reinforce the strength of everyone involved."

Astron nodded in approval. "Then I'll continue to lead them through the next clears. We'll make sure the performance speaks for itself."

Toren stood, extending his hand. "Good. That's all I can ask for."

Astron shook his hand, the agreement sealed. He turned to leave, knowing tomorrow's clears would be crucial—not just for the guild's reputation but for the narrative they were shaping.

"Be prepared," Toren added as Astron headed for the door. "Tomorrow is just the beginning."

Astron gave a final nod before stepping out of the office, fully aware of the weight of the expectations placed upon him.

The morning sun barely crept over the horizon as the team stood at the entrance of the first dungeon, "Crimson Ridge." Its jagged cliffs stretched high into the sky, casting deep shadows over the pathway that led into the heart of the dungeon. The air was still, a sharp contrast to the day that lay ahead of them. Astron stood at the front, his eyes scanning the terrain, noting the small shifts in mana flows and the distant signs of activity.

The others waited in silence, but there was a calm intensity to their presence, each member mentally preparing for the grueling schedule ahead. Liana, as always, was nearby, giving her final instructions before they entered.

"This is the first of five," Liana said, her tone even. "You've done well so far, but today's pace will push you harder. We'll need precision and efficiency."

Astron nodded, turning toward his team. "Same strategy as before. Clear each wave, minimize damage, and keep moving. We're on a time limit, so no unnecessary engagements. Everyone knows their roles."

Kurt adjusted his shield, the familiar weight settling into place. "Understood. We'll keep the pace."

Dorian smirked, twirling his swords as he readied himself. "As long as I get to slice through something, I'm good."

Elena gave a small nod, her staff glowing faintly as she prepared her magic. "Let's not waste time. We'll follow your lead."

With the brief exchange over, the team moved forward, slipping into the mouth of the Crimson Ridge with practiced ease. The first waves of enemies—a group of flame-wreathed ogres—charged at them with brutish force, but Astron's quick commands sent the team into motion.

"Kurt, left flank. Elena, fire suppression. Dorian, hit the gaps."

The group moved like clockwork, cutting through the ogres with speed and precision. The ground beneath them cracked with heat, the oppressive environment threatening to slow them, but the team barely faltered. Within minutes, they had reached the core of the dungeon, where a larger, more formidable ogre waited.

"Elena, focus your magic on its legs. Dorian, flank it from the right," Astron ordered, his voice steady.

The fight was swift, their coordination flawless. By the time the creature fell, its body crumbling into molten debris, they had cleared the dungeon in record time.

"On to the next," Astron said without hesitation.

The second dungeon, "Azure Hollow," offered a different challenge—its deep caverns filled with mana-infused water that shimmered beneath the dim light. The atmosphere was cold, the air thick with moisture, but the team didn't slow.

As they descended into the depths, ghostly water serpents emerged from the mist, their long bodies moving swiftly through the flooded corridors. But Astron's eyes caught their patterns, tracking their movements through the mana flows.

"Lila, use your golem to block the water channels. Kurt, stay on defense—don't let them corner us. Gareth, prepare barriers. We'll force them into a trap."

With precise coordination, the serpents were herded into narrow passages where they were swiftly dispatched by Dorian's blades and Elena's magic. The icy waters didn't slow them, and soon, the second dungeon was behind them.

Liana met them at the exit, a faint look of approval crossing her face. "Two down. The third dungeon awaits."

By the time they reached the third dungeon, "Obsidian Peaks," the pace had become grueling. The dungeon was a twisting labyrinth of jagged black stone, where shadowy creatures lurked in the narrow corridors. The oppressive darkness would have unsettled most teams, but Astron's eyes saw through the gloom.

The fourth dungeon, "Emerald Grove," was a forest brimming with vibrant life. But beneath its lush exterior, deadly plant creatures lurked. The thick canopy overhead filtered the sunlight, casting eerie green shadows across the ground.

"This one will be tricky," Astron murmured as they entered the grove.

The plant creatures moved silently, their roots and vines blending into the environment, making them difficult to detect. But Astron's eyes caught the subtle distortions in mana.

"Elena, use fire magic to clear the path. Kurt, stay in the center to defend."

They moved methodically, cutting through the dense vegetation with practiced strikes. The creatures, though numerous, posed little threat against the team's combined strength.

At the heart of the grove, a massive plant creature awaited them, its roots digging deep into the earth. Astron's eyes narrowed as he calculated its weaknesses.

"Elena, burn the roots. Dorian, sever its main vines."

With flawless precision, they executed the plan, and soon the creature was reduced to ash.

"Last one," Astron said as they exited the grove, Liana already waiting to guide them to the final dungeon.

The fifth and final dungeon of the day, "Ironclad Bastion," was a fortress-like structure carved into a mountainside. It was filled with heavily armored constructs, their movements slow but powerful.

"Their armor's tough, but we'll focus on their joints," Astron said as they entered the dungeon.

The constructs moved in unison, their heavy footfalls echoing through the stone corridors. But Astron's commands kept the team moving, striking at weak points and dismantling the constructs with brutal efficiency.

"Dorian, hit the joints. Elena, charge up for the core guardian."

At the end of the dungeon, a massive armored guardian awaited them. Its thick, mana-infused armor was nearly impenetrable, but Astron had already identified the weak points.

"Kurt, block its strikes. Dorian and Elena, hit the exposed joints."

The guardian's massive sword struck the ground with deafening force, but Kurt's shield held firm. Dorian's blades flashed as he struck at the joints, while Elena's magic shattered its defenses. In a matter of minutes, the guardian fell.

As the final construct crumbled, a sense of completion washed over the team. They had cleared five dungeons in record time, just as planned.

Liana appeared at the exit, but this time, she wasn't alone. A woman with a sleek, professional appearance stood beside her, holding a notepad and a hovering drone camera recording the scene.

Finally, someone from the media was here.

Chapter 545 122.3 - Fame

As the dust settled from the final clash, the team members began to catch their breath. The sound of clanking armor from the shattered constructs still echoed faintly through the massive stone hall. Before anyone had a chance to fully recover, the sharp hum of a hovering drone cut through the silence, followed by the quick tap of footsteps against the stone floor.

A woman with an air of excitement surged forward, her professional appearance and sharp eyes gleaming as she positioned herself in front of the team. She had a notepad in one hand, though

it seemed more for the show, as her attention was locked onto the drone, which was now recording the entire scene. Her face broke into an enthusiastic smile, and her voice rang out, clear and energized, as if she had just uncovered a major scoop.

"Good evening, viewers!" she announced, her voice brimming with energy. "I'm Shira Fenn, reporting live from the depths of the Ironclad Bastion, where Vanguard Haven's elite team is rumored to be here."

The drone zoomed in on her face and then panned dramatically over the battle-worn but still-standing team, capturing each of their puzzled expressions as they tried to process the sudden intrusion. The shift from the intense battle to this unexpected media ambush left most of them caught off guard, though they maintained their composure.

"Cough."

Shira's excitement visibly faltered at the sound of Liana's polite cough. She turned her head, her sharp eyes meeting Liana's amused but knowing gaze. For a split second, the hovering drone seemed to pause, its lens shifting between Shira and the team as if trying to capture the unfolding tension.

"Ah..." Shira's smile wavered, and she gave a slight, embarrassed chuckle. "It seems I may have gotten a bit overexcited."

She quickly straightened up, smoothing down her jacket, and the eager brightness in her eyes softened. The enthusiasm remained, but there was now a more controlled professionalism in her demeanor. She took a step back, clearing her throat softly before addressing the team directly.

"My apologies," she said, her voice calmer, more measured. "I realize I barged in without much explanation. Allow me to properly introduce myself. I'm Shira Fenn, a reporter for Rong Shin Media." She gestured toward the hovering drone as it zoomed out to encompass the whole team again. "We've been covering the latest developments in the Hunter community, and recently, there's been a lot of buzz surrounding your team. Rumors have been circulating about your impressive performance in recent dungeons."

The team exchanged puzzled glances. Dorian raised an eyebrow, while Kurt shifted his weight, still holding his shield, clearly unsure how to react. Elena looked slightly uncomfortable, while Gareth maintained his usual stoic expression, though a flicker of curiosity crossed his face.

Shira noticed their hesitation but pressed on with an encouraging smile. "I wanted to get the story from the source, directly from the people who made it happen. I'm here to understand your process, your teamwork—what makes Vanguard Haven's elite team so effective. Rumors can only tell so much, after all."

Dorian let out a small, awkward chuckle, clearly not used to being thrust into the media spotlight like this. "Uh, yeah, rumors can be a bit much," he said, scratching the back of his head.

Kurt glanced at Astron, his brow furrowed as if waiting for him to take charge of the situation. Astron, who had been watching silently from the back, finally stepped forward, his calm gaze locking onto Shira. His posture was relaxed, but there was a clear weight to his presence.

Shira's eyes brightened slightly as Astron moved toward her. It was clear she recognized him as the team's leader, the one who would give her the answers she needed.

"You wanted to hear directly from us," Astron began, his voice cool and composed. "We're just doing our job, but if you're asking about today specifically..." He paused for a moment, allowing the weight of his words to sink in, then continued, "We've cleared five dungeons."

Shira blinked, her eyes widening in genuine surprise. "Five dungeons?" she repeated, her voice raising slightly. She hadn't expected that, and her enthusiasm flared up again, though she tried to

keep it in check. "That's... incredible! I knew there was talk about your success, but I had no idea it was on this scale."

The rest of the team stood silently, their expressions varying from awkwardness to subtle pride, but none of them spoke up. Shira's attention, however, was focused solely on Astron, who remained unruffled by her reaction.

"How did you manage it?" she asked, taking a step closer. "What's the secret to moving through so many dungeons so quickly?"

Astron's expression didn't change. "Preparation. Planning. Trust in the team. We all know our roles and execute them without hesitation."

Shira nodded, her eyes gleaming as she scribbled something on her notepad, even though it was clear the drone had captured everything. "It sounds like a well-oiled machine," she said, glancing around at the rest of the team. "And from what I've heard, that's exactly what the Hunter community has been buzzing about—your efficiency, your coordination."

She turned back to Astron, clearly wanting to delve deeper. "Clearing five dungeons in a day is no small feat. It must have taken a lot of preparation, mentally and physically. How do you handle the pressure?"

Astron's gaze remained steady. "We handle it because it's what we're trained for. Pressure is just part of the job."

Astron's eyes remained steady, his posture unchanged as he continued, "The equipment provided by the guild, as well as the attention to detail each member receives, is why we can prepare this well. Vanguard Haven ensures that we have everything we need to succeed."

Shira nodded, her eyes gleaming with interest. "That makes a lot of sense. Equipment and preparation are key, after all." She paused for a moment before tilting her head, her smile widening slightly as she asked, "But as a student of the prestigious Arcadia Hunter Academy, why did you decide to join Vanguard Haven? What can you say about your experience with the guild?"

Astron's gaze didn't waver, though there was a brief moment of consideration before he spoke. "I haven't been with Vanguard Haven for very long. This is just a short internship as part of my academy training." He glanced at the rest of his team before continuing. "But during my time here,

I've gained a lot of insight. The Guild Master and the structure of the guild have shown me how different the Hunter Industry is compared to the Academy."

He paused, his voice carrying a note of unexpected sincerity. "At the Academy, it's all about honing individual talent, focusing on personal progress. But here... being with professionals, working together toward common goals, it is more than just training. It feels like we're a family. I wasn't expecting that."

Shira's eyes lit up, clearly pleased with his response. "A family, you say? That's high praise for a guild. It sounds like Vanguard Haven has made quite the impression on you."

Astron gave a slight nod. "They have. It's been an eye-opening experience, and I've learned a lot from being here."

Shira smiled warmly, clearly satisfied with the interview's direction. "Thank you for sharing that, Astron. It's not every day that we hear such genuine praise from someone coming from a place like Arcadia Hunter Academy."

The drone hovered nearby, capturing Astron's calm demeanor as Shira turned slightly toward the rest of the team, giving them a brief nod of acknowledgment. "It seems like you're all in good hands here. I think it's safe to say Vanguard Haven is making waves, not just with its results but with how it brings people together."

Kurt, always the solid presence of the group, cleared his throat first, though his large frame seemed almost too imposing for the camera's lens. "Uh, well... It's been good. Really good, actually," he began, his voice rough but genuine. "The training here is top-notch. I've learned a lot, and it's been great working with professionals who know their stuff. It's... it's different from what I expected, but in a good way. Everyone here pushes each other to be better."

Shira nodded encouragingly. "Sounds like the team dynamic really strengthens your progress."

Kurt gave a slow nod. "Yeah. It's like Astron said. It feels like a family. We've got each other's backs."

As Kurt finished, he glanced toward Dorian, clearly indicating it was his turn. Dorian, ever the one to maintain a confident front, twirled one of his swords absentmindedly before shrugging with a grin.

"Well, what can I say? It's been great. Vanguard Haven's got everything you need to succeed—equipment, support, you name it. But honestly, it's the people. You work alongside some of the best, and it pushes you to keep up. I've grown more here than I thought I would. When I started as a Hunter, I was just a freelancer who was not affiliated with any guild. At that time, I was just joining parties and clearing dungeons. My life was stagnant, and I had always thought that I would never be able to rise as an Awakened, yet Vanguard Heaven proved me wrong."

Elena stepped forward next, still looking slightly hesitant but finding her voice as she heard Dorian's words. Her fingers gripped her staff a little tighter as she began to speak, her voice soft but filled with conviction.

"I... I feel the same," she said, glancing at Dorian and Kurt. "Before Vanguard Haven, I wasn't sure if I was really making progress. I knew my spells, but it felt like I was just going through the motions, you know? But here... the training, the teamwork, it's pushed me to a place I didn't think I could reach." She paused, gathering her thoughts. "I've learned to trust not just in my abilities but in the people around me. And that's changed everything."

Shira smiled, nodding as she absorbed Elena's words. "It sounds like this guild has helped unlock something in all of you. Finding that kind of support must be rare."

Gareth also finally stepped forward. His tall frame loomed over the group, but his voice was calm and measured. "I wasn't sure about joining a guild at first," he admitted. "I've always preferred to keep to myself, relying on my own skills. But Vanguard Haven showed me that working with others doesn't mean giving up your independence. If anything, it's helped me discover more of my potential."

He looked at Astron briefly before continuing. "I never would've thought I'd be able to clear five dungeons in a single day or that I'd be part of a team like this. The guild's structure, the resources, the training—it's all designed to push you further than you ever thought possible."

Shira's eyes gleamed as she looked at the team, her excitement palpable. "It seems like Vanguard Haven has not only given you the tools to succeed but has also helped you realize your own potential."

Elena, feeling more confident, nodded in agreement. "Exactly. I've learned things here that I could never have figured out on my own."

Kurt crossed his arms, nodding along. "Yeah. I've been in other groups before, but nothing like this. It's the kind of place where you grow—because you have to, but also because you want to."

Dorian grinned, a glint of pride in his eyes. "Yeah, when you're surrounded by people who push themselves every day, you can't help but level up yourself. Before this, I didn't think I could compete with the top-tier Hunters. Now, I know I can."

Shira's gaze swept over the team once more, clearly impressed by the unity and confidence they exuded. She was about to press further, to ask more about the specific challenges they'd faced, but as her eyes caught Astron's in the background, she saw him give a subtle shake of his head—just enough for the team to notice.

It was a quiet signal, one that told them to keep things in check. They had spoken their truths, but there was no need to inflate their accomplishments or let the spotlight linger too long. The team, in their own ways, picked up on his cue.

"I'm sure you all have plenty more to share," Shira said, her voice warm but understanding the subtle shift in tone. "But I think we've covered a lot already. It's clear that Vanguard Haven is a place where talent grows, where potential is realized, and where teamwork truly makes a difference."

She gave one last smile, her eyes sparkling with satisfaction at the story she'd gathered. "Thank you all for your time. I know the Hunter community is going to be eager to hear more about what you're accomplishing here."

With that, the interview began to wind down, the hovering drone slowly retracting its camera as it captured a final wide shot of the team standing together, unified yet composed.

As Shira prepared to leave, the team exhaled collectively, the weight of the interview finally lifting. The praise they had shared about the guild, about themselves, and about one another lingered in the air, but none of them had stepped out of line.

"You handled that well."

Chapter 546 122.4 - Fame

Liana stepped forward, her usual composed demeanor softening slightly as she looked over the team. "You handled that well," she said, her voice carrying a rare hint of warmth. Her eyes moved

from one member to the next, nodding in silent approval. "I know the situation was unexpected, but you kept things focused and professional."

The team exchanged smiles, the praise from Liana clearly boosting their spirits. It wasn't every day they received such direct commendation from someone as respected as her.

Dorian was the first to speak up, still grinning as he twirled his sword. "I can't believe that actually happened! A reporter came all the way down here just to talk to us."

Kurt chuckled, shaking his head in disbelief. "Yeah, I wasn't expecting that. Feels surreal, doesn't it?"

Elena smiled shyly, her earlier nerves now replaced with a sense of pride. "I've never been interviewed before. That was... different."

Gareth, as stoic as ever, allowed a small smirk to cross his face. "First time for everything, I guess."

The team, still buzzing from the experience, turned their attention back to Liana, who was already gesturing for them to head toward their transport. But before they moved, the questions started flowing.

"So, Liana," Dorian began, his curiosity getting the better of him. "Is this what happens all the time? Do reporters just show up like that?"

Kurt chimed in before she could answer. "Yeah, seriously. Is this how it goes for the top-tier Hunters?"

Liana smirked, clearly amused by their sudden barrage of questions. "It's not always like this," she replied, her tone patient. "The attention comes when you start making waves. Right now, Vanguard Haven is gaining recognition, and you're part of the reason for that. But no, not every mission ends with a live broadcast."

Dorian raised an eyebrow, still pressing. "So, how often do we have to deal with that kind of attention?"

Liana tilted her head slightly, considering her response. "It depends. The more successful you are, the more attention you'll get. But you won't always have a camera following you into battle. Today was special."

Elena, always more introspective, asked quietly, "Does that mean we'll be seeing more of her? More media?"

Liana gave a small nod. "Possibly. Shira Fenn is actually quite a famous streamer and reporter who has made a name for herself just recently. If she's interested in your team, it means others will be too. But for now, let's focus on getting back. There's still more work to be done."

As they walked toward the transport, the team continued to chatter excitedly among themselves. Dorian was already imagining how they'd look on the live broadcast while Kurt kept shaking his head, still in disbelief. Even Gareth allowed himself a rare chuckle at the absurdity of it all.

Liana, ever the steady presence, led them with calm authority, keeping them focused despite the excitement. "Alright, enough questions for now," she said, her voice firm but not unkind. "We've got a schedule to keep, and the sooner we get back, the sooner you can process everything that's happened today."

The team, still smiling and buzzing with energy, followed her lead, climbing into the transport one by one. As they settled into their seats, the mood was lighter than it had been in a long time. The weight of the missions was still there, but for now, they had something new to celebrate—a small but meaningful victory in the eyes of the Hunter community.

In Liana's office, the atmosphere was more subdued than the whirlwind of activity that had followed the team's media spotlight. The room was minimalist, with sleek designs and a large screen at the center of the wall. Astron stood quietly as Liana adjusted the holographic display, showing the aftermath of the live broadcast by Shira Fenn.

Liana tapped a few buttons on her tablet, and the screen flickered to life. A series of video clips and social media feeds appeared all filled with images and commentary about Vanguard Haven's recent dungeon clears. The footage of the team, highlighted by Shira's interview, was front and center.

"As you can see," Liana said, her voice calm but carrying a note of satisfaction, "Shira's video is spreading quickly. It's exactly what we expected, though perhaps a bit faster than anticipated. Vanguard Haven is receiving a lot of recognition for your team's success."

Astron studied the screen, his gaze sharp but unreadable. The clips showed Shira's enthusiastic coverage of their dungeon clears, followed by a series of articles and comments praising the guild's efficiency and teamwork. The reactions were positive, with most viewers impressed by the team's ability to clear five dungeons in a single day.

"It's at the level we anticipated," Liana continued, scrolling through more headlines. "Nothing beyond what you'd expect for a B-rank guild like Vanguard Haven, but still, it's clear we're gaining momentum."

Astron nodded slightly, absorbing the information. The attention was welcome, but there was a measured calm in his demeanor. "This should be enough with recruiting and strengthening our position."

Liana glanced at him, her expression thoughtful. "Exactly. This kind of recognition opens doors for us, especially with potential allies and partnerships. The guild's reputation is solid, and this gives us a foothold to expand."

Astron's gaze flicked back to the screen, watching as comments and discussions about Vanguard Haven continued to flood in. It was all positive but controlled—just as it should be for a guild of their rank.

"What about Guild Master?" Astron asked, his voice steady. "He's still handling the rank-8 gate, correct?"

Liana gave a small nod. "Yes, he's leading the expedition there. It's a high-stakes mission, so his presence is necessary. The gate is under Vanguard Haven's control, and the team assigned to it is one of our most capable. The expedition is expected to conclude around noon tomorrow."

Astron's expression remained neutral as he processed the information. The rank-8 gate was significant, and Toren's involvement was critical to maintaining the guild's influence over it.

Toren was most likely the strongest person in this guild, and this made his presence necessary for the highest dungeons that the members would explore.

Liana leaned back slightly in her chair, her gaze lingering on Astron for a moment longer. She knew better than to pry too deeply. Astron's affiliation with the organization was well known within certain circles, and she understood the need for discretion. Still, she couldn't help but comment on how smoothly things had gone.

"You handled that interview exceptionally well," she remarked. "But it's clear you don't want to show too much of your abilities to the media."

Astron gave a slight nod, his expression as composed as ever. "It's the natural procedure," he said calmly, keeping his tone neutral.

"I see..." Liana trailed off, letting the conversation drop there. She knew better than to push further on that topic. Instead, she tapped a few more buttons on her tablet, bringing the video feed from the interview back onto the screen. As the footage played, she scrolled down, showing Astron the influx of comments and reactions from viewers.

"Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, as expected," she said. But then a teasing smile began to spread across her lips as she clicked on the comments section, highlighting a specific trend. "Though, I thought you might find this part interesting."

She turned the screen slightly, revealing a flood of comments from viewers, many of them fangirls, gushing over Astron's appearance.

""Who is that guy with the purple eyes? He's gorgeous!"" Liana read aloud, her voice playful.
""Astron is so cool and mysterious. I can't stop staring at him!""

More comments scrolled by, each one more flattering than the last. ""Those eyes! I've never seen anything like them!"" Liana chuckled, glancing at Astron, waiting for his reaction. "It seems you've gained quite a few admirers, not just for your skills but for your looks as well."

Astron's expression remained stoic, though there was the faintest flicker of something in his eyes. "It was bound to happen," he said flatly, though the corner of his mouth twitched slightly. "Not exactly relevant to the mission."

Liana chuckled, clearly enjoying the situation. "Perhaps not relevant, but certainly entertaining. And who knows? A little popularity can't hurt when it comes to recruitment."

–SHIVER!

Yet, something....

There was something that made Astron shiver in the process.

'This.....Why do I feel this way?' He had a feeling that something nagging was bound to happen. The instincts that he had developed in the face of danger were now screaming at him.

Yet, Liana, oblivious to his reaction, scrolled through a few more comments, most of them focused on Astron's chiseled face, pale skin, and striking purple eyes. It was clear his unique appearance had caught the attention of a significant portion of the viewers.

"Still," Liana added with a grin, "it's not every day a Hunter garners this kind of attention. You're becoming something of a sensation."

Astron gave a small shrug, unbothered by the attention. "It won't change the work we need to do."

"Well, I guess you must be used to it. There quite a lot of guys like you in the Arcadia Hunter Academy, aren't there?"

Astron nodded slightly at Liana's comment, his mind briefly drifting to the Academy. "Yes, there are quite a few," he admitted, his voice measured. "The Academy is full of Awakened with... notable appearances. It's one of the advantages of being Awakened—the stronger your rank, the more your body refines itself. Impurities are removed, making everyone appear more physically ideal over time."

Liana smiled knowingly. "Ah, so that explains it. The Awakened tend to stand out in more ways than one."

Astron nodded again, though his thoughts were elsewhere. He knew that in the Academy, it wasn't just about physical appearance. Strength, power, and the ability to master one's abilities were the true marks of status. But there was no denying that the higher one climbed, the more these physical changes became apparent. Handsome male students and incredibly beautiful girls were common

sights, and they carried themselves with an air of superiority, their very presence demanding attention.

But even as he acknowledged this, that strange feeling—the nagging sense of unease—didn't leave him. Astron's instincts were rarely wrong, honed from countless encounters with danger.

He pushed the thought aside for the moment, focusing on Liana, who was still scrolling through the comments with mild amusement. She hadn't noticed his brief lapse in attention, and he wasn't about to bring it up—not yet.

"Looks like the media attention is here to stay," Liana said, her tone light. "But I suppose that's just another aspect of being an Awakened, too. Whether you like it or not, people are going to notice you."

Astron shrugged again. "Let them notice. As long as it doesn't interfere with the mission, it's irrelevant."

Liana nodded in agreement, her eyes flicking to him for a moment longer before she closed the display. "Well, at least you're not the type to let it go to your head. And don't worry, it won't stay like this for too long."

Astron remained silent, his mind already shifting back to the upcoming tasks.

'One final day and this mission is over.'

He needed to plan for his next action, as it was really important.

Chapter 547 123.1 - Rank-6 Gate

The next morning brought a palpable shift in the atmosphere around Vanguard Haven. The team gathered in the guild's briefing room, their usual energy more focused, more tense. The holographic display in the center of the room glowed faintly, showing two gates marked on the map. Unlike the previous days, the number of gates scheduled was fewer—just two—but that was by design.

Astron stood at the front with Liana, listening as she laid out the day's plan.

"You've done well with the rank-5 gates," Liana began her tone professional but carrying a note of caution. "But as you know, those are all behind us now. Vanguard Haven has filled its quota, and we no longer have access to any rank-5 gates under our jurisdiction."

That was to be expected as the guild, being a B-rank one, only had 8 rank-5 gates under its authority, and all of them were now cleared with yesterday's schedule.

She tapped the screen, zooming in on the two gates marked for the day. "That means, starting today, you'll be clearing rank-6 gates. The number of gates will be fewer, but the difficulty level will be significantly higher. You'll face more complex environments, stronger monsters, and greater risks."

The team exchanged brief glances, each member understanding the gravity of what was coming. Dorian's usual cocky grin had faded into a more serious expression, while Kurt's jaw was set in determination. Elena's grip on her staff tightened slightly, and even Gareth, stoic as always, had a more focused look in his eyes.

Liana continued. "This was part of the guild's long-term plan. Once Astron had integrated fully into the team, we intended to push you toward rank-6 gates for training and greater challenges. Today, we put that plan into action."

Astron nodded slightly, already mentally preparing himself for the day ahead. While the rank-5 gates had been tough, they hadn't posed a real, life-threatening danger. Today, however, that would change.

"The first gate is called 'Frostbound Ascent,'" Liana said, bringing up an image of a jagged, icy mountain peak. "It's an ice-based dungeon with a heavily fortified environment. The monsters are primarily frost elementals and ice trolls, known for their resilience and pack coordination. The terrain will be your biggest obstacle—slippery surfaces, freezing temperatures, and limited visibility. You'll need to be cautious."

She tapped the screen again, bringing up the second gate. "The second gate is 'Howling Abyss,' a wind-based dungeon filled with aggressive, airborne creatures known as Gale Serpents. These monsters are fast and unpredictable and rely on the dungeon's intense winds to disorient their prey. You'll need to maintain your formation and ensure no one gets separated."

Dorian let out a low whistle, his expression serious. "Looks like we've got our work cut out for us today."

Kurt nodded in agreement, his brow furrowed. "We've handled worse, but these sound... different."

Liana's gaze swept over the team, her expression steady. "These are rank-6 gates. The challenge is real, and the risk is higher than anything you've faced so far. But I trust that each of you is ready. You've proven yourselves capable."

Most of the team members had at least three parameters that reached the six basepoints. That was a necessity for most Hunters, as most of the time, Hunters tended to play it safe.

Rarely would people go for the dungeons of their own level until they accumulated enough experience.

That was the reason why this team was also constantly performing in Rank-5 dungeons up to this point despite having the necessary parameters to at least face the rank-6 dungeon on paper.

The atmosphere in the room grew tense as the weight of Liana's words settled in. Dorian, usually the first to break the tension with a joke or a grin, was silent for a moment before speaking, his voice quieter than usual. "We've never been in a rank-6 dungeon before. Why are we starting now?"

Kurt's brow furrowed even deeper as he echoed Dorian's concern. "Yeah, we've trained hard, but we've always stuck to rank-5 gates, even though our stats are ready. Why the sudden jump?"

Liana's gaze swept over the team, her usual composed demeanor carrying a hint of gravity. She paused, then turned her attention to Astron before speaking.

"As you all know, today is the last day that Astron will be with you," she began, her voice calm but steady. "He'll be leaving the guild after this, returning to his duties. His presence here has accelerated your growth, both in terms of efficiency and in how you've worked together as a team."

Dorian's eyes flicked toward Astron, and Kurt's expression softened as they processed the news. None of them had expected today to be Astron's last day.

Liana continued, "With Astron on your team, you've learned things you didn't even realize you were lacking. His strategic mind, his ability to plan and execute, has raised your level. It's why the guild made the decision to push you forward. With his presence, we believe this team can handle more than it could before."

There was a moment of silence as the team absorbed this, realizing the truth in Liana's words. Even though they hadn't voiced it, each of them knew they'd grown in the short time Astron had been with them.

"And," Liana added, her eyes scanning each of them carefully, "there's another factor. The media's attention is now on you. The guild sees this as an opportunity to show what Vanguard Haven is capable of—training newer Hunters to the point where they can handle rank-6 gates. If you succeed today, not only will the guild's reputation soar, but so will your individual careers."

Elena, who had been quiet until now, glanced up, her voice soft but steady. "So, we're pushing ourselves not just for the guild, but for our futures too."

Liana nodded. "Exactly. It's a chance to prove yourselves on a larger stage. And the guild recognizes the risk you're taking. That's why I've been authorized to offer an increase in your pay, along with a bonus for completing these higher-risk dungeons."

Dorian raised an eyebrow, a small grin returning to his face. "Well, if there's a bonus involved, I guess we can't say no."

Kurt let out a breath, his tension easing slightly. "It's a challenge, but it sounds like the right step for us."

Astron remained quiet throughout, watching the team as they processed the information.

He hadn't expected to have such an impact on them, but it was clear that his presence had changed things.

Or had he?

At the end, it did not matter.

Liana gave the team a reassuring smile. "You've all grown a lot, and this is your chance to prove it. Today will be tough, but I believe you're ready. And if you succeed, you'll all be that much stronger."

The team exchanged looks, their resolve hardening. While the shift to rank-6 gates was sudden, there was a shared understanding that this was their moment to rise to the challenge—and with Astron still with them, they felt a sense of confidence they hadn't had before.

Dorian gave a final nod, his grin returning in full. "Well, I guess it's time to show everyone what we're made of."

As we rode toward the first gate, the weight of the day's challenge settled over the team. The air in the vehicle was quiet but charged with a sense of focus. Kurt and Dorian were checking their gear, while Elena and Lila quietly reviewed their strategies. Everyone was mentally preparing for what was to come.

I pulled up the file provided by the analysts, skimming through the details of the monsters we'd face in the "Frostbound Ascent" gate. As expected, the frost elementals and ice trolls were strong opponents, each with their own unique abilities.

The frost elementals were highly resistant to physical attacks and could regenerate in icy environments, while the ice trolls were large, durable creatures with brute strength and pack coordination.

'Rank-6 monsters...' I thought to myself. 'They're not going to be easy to deal with, especially since I'm not using my full power.'

I knew that I had the raw ability to overpower these monsters if I pushed myself, but I had chosen to limit my use of [Celestialith]. It was a conscious decision, one that made sense given the circumstances of my current mission.

Drawing too much attention to myself—or to powers that were not well understood—proves to be dangerous in this world.

I have seen it quite a lot of times.

Because of that, I was holding back. While my stats and combat proficiency had improved significantly, I couldn't fully unleash my true potential. It left me in an interesting position. I was

strong enough to challenge the monsters in the gate, but I couldn't afford to be reckless. I'd have to rely on my strategy and adaptability to compensate for the power I wasn't using.

'In a way, this is good practice,' I mused. 'It's not unlike the situation I'll face next week.'

After all, the following day, when I face that guy.....Even with [Celestalith], I will not be stronger than it.

And this gate, with its rank-6 monsters and harsh environment, would give me a chance to test myself—facing against an opponent stronger than myself.

'Not that it was ever different.'

Looking at it back, it has always been like this. Never, ever had I faced someone who was significantly weaker than myself.

'Yet, I am still here.'

That alone showed that strength was never everything in this world.

WROOM!

The vehicle hummed along the snowy road, its windows fogging slightly from the cold outside. The analysts' report went into further detail about the terrain. The freezing temperatures and slippery surfaces would limit our movement, and the limited visibility could make it easy for the ice trolls to ambush us. Coordination and timing would be crucial.

I closed the file and looked up. The rest of the team seemed ready, their earlier nervousness replaced with quiet determination. Dorian's cocky grin had softened into a more focused expression, and Kurt was double-checking his armor, making sure every piece was secured. Elena and Lila were reviewing some magical formations, quietly discussing how they would sync their spells during combat.

'They've come a long way,' I thought, observing the team. While they had some concerns earlier, they seemed to be rising to the challenge now. They had a strong foundation, and today would push them further.

The cold mountain gate, with its relentless frost elementals and brutal ice trolls, would serve as a testing ground for what I could achieve with these limits in place.

I glanced out the window as we neared the gate. The towering, icy peaks of "Frostbound Ascent" loomed ahead, shrouded in a thick blanket of snow and mist. The jagged cliffs looked treacherous, and even from this distance, I could feel the temperature drop.

The vehicle came to a slow halt, and Liana turned from the front seat. "We're here. I'll stay in contact with the base camp and monitor the situation from the outside. Stay sharp and work together. The gate's been quiet recently, but that could change the moment you step inside."

Kurt was the first to step out, his boots crunching into the snow. "Let's do this," he said, his voice steady.

Dorian followed, spinning one of his blades idly as he glanced up at the icy peaks. "Yeah, no turning back now."

Chapter 548 123.2 - Rank-6 Gate

The landscape of Frostbound Ascent was as unforgiving as the analysts had described. Snow-covered cliffs rose high above us, the icy winds howling through the jagged rocks, cutting through our gear and chilling us to the bone. Each step we took left deep impressions in the snow, and the biting cold was a constant reminder of the harsh environment we were about to face.

Our team moved cautiously through the treacherous terrain, the crunch of our boots muffled by the wind. Kurt and Gareth took the lead, their massive frames cutting through the worst of the wind as they scouted for any signs of danger. Dorian followed closely, his twin blades gleaming faintly in the low light, ready for a quick draw. Elena walked beside Lila, the two of them quietly exchanging strategies on how best to combine their magic in the upcoming fight.

The analysts had made it clear: frost elementals and ice trolls would be our primary threats, and both were formidable. But my concern wasn't with the monsters themselves—it was with my ability to deliver the kind of damage the team would need from me, especially with a bow.

'My arrows might not be enough,' I thought. Even with Starpiercer's Arc, it still might fall short against creatures with such high durability and elemental resistance.

The frost elementals, in particular, were known for their resilience to physical attacks, and while I could adjust my shots to exploit their weaknesses, there was no guarantee that my arrows would pack the punch needed for a prolonged battle.

That was especially a concern since the conductive material was not simply suited for my moon mana. In a way, the power that I could display was limited just as I had mentioned. That alone made things a lot more harder.

As we moved further into the frozen landscape, I spoke up, my voice cutting through the wind. "There's something I want to bring up before we go any further."

The team slowed their pace, turning to look at me with raised eyebrows. Kurt, ever the practical one, was the first to respond. "What's on your mind?"

I met his gaze, my expression serious. "It's about my damage output with the bow. Against the frost elementals and ice trolls, my arrows might not be enough to deal significant damage. Even with Starpiercer's Arc, there's a possibility that my ranged attacks won't be as effective as we'd like."

Dorian quirked an eyebrow, a small smirk forming on his lips. "And you're telling us this now?"

Elena frowned slightly, glancing at my bow. "Why didn't you mention this earlier? We could've adjusted our plans."

I shook my head. "I didn't bring it up before because I didn't want to disrupt the team's focus. We've all been preparing for this gate, and I didn't want anyone to lose confidence or feel like they had to worry about my role."

Kurt crossed his arms, studying me carefully. "So what are you suggesting? We change the formation on the fly?"

"If necessary," I replied. "If I find that my arrows aren't doing enough damage, I might need to switch roles mid-combat. I would be more effective as a close ranged combatant."

"Right, Liana. You have also mentioned that your other primary weapon was a dagger."

"That is right."

Kurt's eyes narrowed as he crossed his arms, clearly considering the implications of my words. "So you're telling us you're proficient in close combat too? With daggers?" he asked, his tone more curious than skeptical.

I gave a short nod. "That's correct. I haven't had to use them during our previous gates because our formation has been working efficiently. As a ranger, I've been able to cover you all from a distance, and there hasn't been a need for me to switch roles. But in rank-6 gates, where the monsters are stronger and more resilient, it's possible that ranged attacks won't cut it."

Dorian tilted his head, his usual grin returning. "So, what are you saying? That you're better with daggers than with a bow?"

I paused for a moment, weighing my words. "Not exactly," I replied. "I'm proficient with both, but the real difference comes from the equipment. Serpent Fangs, the dagger that was issued to me by the guild, is more suited for close combat against stronger enemies. It has a passive ability that increases its effectiveness against tougher targets."

Elena raised an eyebrow, clearly intrigued. "A specialized weapon, then. Why haven't you shown us your dagger skills before?"

"There was no need," I said simply. "Our current formation was functioning well, and we didn't face enemies that required me to switch roles. But now that we're in rank-6 gates, the situation might be different. The monsters here will be stronger, and the terrain could make ranged combat less effective."

Kurt nodded thoughtfully. "Makes sense. If your bow isn't doing enough damage, switching to close combat could give us the edge we need. But we'll need to be prepared for that shift."

Dorian chuckled, giving me a playful nudge. "So, you've been holding out on us, huh? Guess we'll finally get to see what those daggers can do."

I didn't rise to the bait, instead keeping my tone level. "If the situation calls for it, I'll switch to daggers. But only if it benefits the team."

Lila, who had been quietly listening, chimed in. "The passive ability you mentioned—does it work in a way that boosts your damage output against stronger monsters?"

"Similar. It has a stacking corrosive ability. It lowers the defense of the enemy and also introduces paralysis."

"Paralysis. I see."

The team exchanged glances after I explained the dagger's abilities, and it was clear that they trusted me. Over the past two days, I had led them through tough fights, and we had come out stronger for it. They knew I wouldn't make a suggestion unless it was necessary.

Kurt was the first to break the silence, his tone steady. "You've earned our trust, Astron. If you think switching to close combat will give us an edge, do it. We're used to adjusting on the fly anyway."

Dorian shrugged, grinning slightly. "Hey, we've been taking your orders for the last couple of days. You've been right so far, so I'm not complaining. Do what you need to do."

Elena nodded in agreement, her staff glowing faintly in the cold light of the dungeon. "You've proven you know what you're doing, Astron. If the formation needs to change, we'll adapt."

Even Gareth, who typically kept quiet, gave a small nod. "We'll make it work. We've already seen how flexible our approach can be with you leading."

Lila, looking thoughtful, simply said, "Just give the signal if you need to change roles."

I appreciated their confidence in me and gave a slight nod. "Thank you. We'll stick to our current formation until the situation demands otherwise. If I switch to close combat, I'll give the signal, and we'll adjust accordingly."

With that, the team resumed moving through the icy terrain, our steps cautious but determined. The cold winds howled around us, and the path ahead was steep and treacherous. Frost clung to every surface, making footing precarious, but the team moved with purpose. I kept my eyes trained on the environment, scanning for any sign of movement or mana fluctuations that could indicate the presence of enemies.

It didn't take long before we encountered our first wave of monsters.

GROWL! A low growl echoed through the icy cliffs, followed by the unmistakable sound of cracking ice. From the jagged peaks above us, a group of frost elementals descended, their bodies made of swirling snow and ice. Their cold, glowing eyes locked onto us, and the temperature around us seemed to drop even further as they approached.

Behind them, I could hear the heavy footsteps of the ice trolls—massive, hulking creatures covered in thick layers of frost and ice. Their brutish forms lumbered through the narrow pass, their breath visible in the cold air as they prepared to charge.

"Frost elementals and ice trolls," I called out, my voice calm but firm. "Remember the plan. Stick to the formation for now."

Kurt and Gareth immediately moved to the front, raising their shields to brace for the incoming charge. Dorian unsheathed his twin blades, his grin replaced by a look of focused determination as he took his place at the vanguard. Elena began channeling her magic, preparing to unleash a barrage of elemental spells to counter the frost elementals. Lila's golem moved forward, acting as an additional line of defense, ready to intercept any threats.

The frost elementals moved swiftly, gliding over the icy terrain with unnatural speed. Their forms shifted and reformed as they closed in on us, and the air around them crackled with freezing energy. At the same time, the ice trolls charged forward, their massive fists raised to crush anything in their path.

"Focus on the elementals first," I ordered, drawing my bow and nocking an arrow. "Elena, hit them with fire-based spells. Gareth, keep the barriers up."

The team responded instantly, falling into the rhythm we had developed. Elena unleashed a burst of fire magic, her spells cutting through the cold air and slamming into the frost elementals. The flames caused the elementals to shudder and falter, their icy forms momentarily destabilized by the heat.

I released an arrow, aiming for the core of one of the elementals. The Starpiercer Arc hummed as the arrow struck true, piercing through the elemental's swirling body. The fire-attributed psions I had imbued into the arrow exploded on impact, shattering the elemental into shards of ice.

The ice trolls were slower but no less dangerous. Their massive fists came crashing down, but Kurt and Gareth held the line, their shields absorbing the impact. Dorian darted in and out of the trolls' reach, his blades flashing as he struck at their joints, weakening their movements.

As the battle raged on, I kept a close eye on the frost elementals, analyzing their patterns and movements.

'As expected. The arrows are not enough.'

It was not something that I could not understand. Thus, I just adapted. Even if the fire-based psions helped, but it wasn't enough to bring them down quickly.

After assessing the situation, I made a quick decision. "I'm switching to close combat," I called out, slinging the bow to my spatial bracelet and drawing the Serpent Fangs.

It was about the time when I started cutting things.

'It has been a while.'

Chapter 549 123.3 - Rank-6 Gate

However, even if I were to change my position, there were things I needed to consider.

Before making the switch to close combat, I quickly assessed the team's positioning. If I moved to the front, someone needed to cover Lila, and the formation would have to adjust accordingly. "Everyone, shift the formation," I ordered, my voice steady but urgent. "Elena, take the rearguard position and cover Lila. I'll take your spot in the front. Gareth, support Kurt more closely."

There was no hesitation in their response. The team had grown accustomed to making these adjustments on the fly. Elena nodded, stepping back from her mid-range position. As a battlemage, she was versatile and could adapt to both offensive and defensive roles. She moved to cover Lila, her staff glowing with energy as she prepared to cast defensive and support spells from the rear.

With Elena falling back, I moved to take her position at the front, now just behind Kurt and Gareth. The Serpent Fangs gleamed in my hands, and I activated their corrosive ability as I charged forward, ready to take on the trolls directly.

Gareth, understanding the new dynamic, shifted closer to Kurt. His barriers flared up to absorb the ice trolls' heavy blows, providing an extra layer of defense. Meanwhile, Dorian, already engaged

with the trolls, adjusted his movements to complement mine. His swift strikes kept the trolls distracted, leaving openings for me to exploit.

As I closed in on the nearest ice troll, I felt the cold bite of the environment, but the heat from the battle was enough to keep me focused.

'Three strikes, each of them has a stacking corrosive ability. And after the third strike, it introduces paralysis to the enemy. Each of the strikes has a poisonous attribute, and if struck deep enough, the dagger will corrupt the mana from inside. But, it is slow.' I thought about the information that I had gotten from Liana about the dagger.

At the same time, as my hand gripped the hilts of the Bloodthirsty Serpent Fangs, I felt a surge of energy rush through my body. There was an undeniable shift in my senses—a sharpening of reflexes, an increase in speed that felt both subtle and potent.

My movements were faster and more fluid, as if the daggers themselves were enhancing my agility. I could feel the effect of the Serpent's Reflex kicking in, heightening my awareness of the battlefield and allowing me to react with greater precision.

'This is why it's called the Bloodthirsty Serpent Fangs,' I thought, feeling the boost in speed as I darted forward, weaving between the ice trolls' massive fists.

SWOOSH! Each strike I delivered was swift, the daggers cutting deep into the troll's thick hide.

—SLASH! The first strike left a faint trace of venom that began to eat away at the troll's defenses.

—SLASH!

The second followed just as quickly, compounding the damage and weakening the creature's icy armor. I could feel the venom taking effect, softening the creature's outer layer.

—SLASH!

With the third strike, the venom reached its peak. The troll's movements slowed as the paralysis set in, its body locking up just long enough for me to exploit the weakness. The corrupted mana from the dagger spread through the troll's veins, further disrupting its natural energy flow.

As the troll's body locked up from the paralysis, I didn't waste a moment. The window was small, but it was enough. I moved swiftly, targeting the troll's legs with a precise strike aimed at its tendons.

The Bloodthirsty Serpent Fangs sliced through with ease, severing the tendons and ensuring that even when the paralysis wore off, the troll would be crippled.

–SWOOSH! Just as I finished the move, the paralysis began to fade, and the troll attempted to regain its mobility.

THUD! Its hulking frame shifted, but its legs betrayed it. The creature staggered, its weight unbalanced, and it let out a low, frustrated growl as it struggled to stand. Its massive arms flailed, but its footing was already lost.

Now was the time to strike.

With a quick dash, I leaped above the troll's head, positioning myself for the final blow. My daggers gleamed in the cold light as I aimed directly for its eyes. The first dagger pierced through the troll's left eye with a sickening squelch, and the second followed just as quickly, sinking into the right. The troll's body convulsed as the pain registered, and its roar echoed through the icy landscape.

"ROOOOAR!"

I flipped backward, landing a safe distance away, just as the troll's roar escalated into a maddened, primal scream. Blinded and in pain, the creature thrashed wildly, swinging its massive arms in every direction.

"Everyone, fall back!" I called out, my voice sharp as I moved further back. "It's going berserk—watch your distance."

The team responded instantly, retreating out of the troll's immediate reach. Kurt and Gareth reinforced their defenses, raising their shields to protect themselves from any stray blows. Elena and Lila stepped back, keeping their distance as they prepared for the troll's rampage.

The troll's blind rage was uncontrollable. It slammed its fists into the ground, sending tremors through the icy terrain, and in its frenzy, it swung wildly at everything around it. Its massive arms crashed into the remaining trolls, causing them to stumble and shift their focus from us to their rampaging ally.

Dorian, always quick on his feet, grinned as he observed the chaos. "Looks like our friend here is helping us out now."

The blinded troll, in its desperate attempt to strike anything within range, collided with one of the other trolls, knocking it off balance. The impact sent both trolls crashing into the ground, their combined weight causing cracks to form in the ice beneath them.

"Let it tire itself out," I instructed, keeping a safe distance while observing the battlefield. "Once it's done rampaging, we'll move in."

The troll's roars continued to fill the air as it flailed, but with its tendons severed and its eyes destroyed, its movements grew more erratic and less controlled. It struck another troll in the process, further weakening its allies.

The team held their ground, waiting for the berserk troll's energy to burn out. Its thrashing became slower, more labored, and as its strength finally began to wane, it collapsed to its knees, breathing heavily.

'It seems fine enough.' *****

We had been exploring the frozen depths of the Frostbound Ascent for nearly three hours. The frigid air gnawed at us, each breath coming out as a visible mist, while the cold bit into our bones despite the protective gear we wore. The relentless battles with the frost elementals and ice trolls had taken their toll, and the tension in the group was palpable.

The cold was unforgiving, making every movement feel heavier and slower. The team's nerves, already worn thin by the constant threat of attack, were beginning to harden with the fatigue and icy environment.

Elena's breaths were shallow, and I could see her rubbing her gloved hands together to keep the circulation going, her magic staff glowing faintly as she conserved her strength. Kurt kept his shield raised, but his usually firm posture had started to droop slightly.

Gareth's barriers were flickering more often now, and I could see his shoulders rise and fall heavily with exhaustion.

Dorian, despite his usual grin, wasn't immune to the cold. His movements, once fluid and sharp, had grown more measured, his dual blades striking with less vigor.

Lila, who had been keeping a low profile while supporting us with magic, was breathing heavily, her face pale from the extended use of mana and the biting cold that refused to relent.

'That is to be expected.'

Thanks to the rune, Everchanging Glyph, my body adapted to every situation that I was in. Regardless of how extreme it was, my body would change itself effectively.

'The mana consumption is quite high this time. The conditions look more severe, and it also hurts quite a bit.'

Now that I was in such extreme conditions, I started to realize why Dakota wanted me to train for these extreme conditions as well.

'Slowly, the mana consumption is getting less and less. My body is adapting, but because it is the first time such a thing is happening, it took a lot.' I scanned the icy landscape ahead, my senses picking up a subtle but distinct increase in mana fluctuations. The cold, combined with the constant pressure of the dungeon's challenges, was wearing the team down fast, and while my Everchanging Glyph was keeping me in peak condition, the others weren't so fortunate. They needed a break before pushing any further.

Spotting a vantage point—a sheltered spot beneath a large, frozen overhang—I raised my hand, signaling for the team to stop. "Let's take a break here," I said, my voice cutting through the howling wind. "We're getting closer to the boss area. You all need to rest and recover your strength."

The team exchanged glances, their brows furrowed in confusion. "The boss area?" Kurt asked, his voice carrying a mix of surprise and weariness.

I nodded. "The mana fluctuations are getting stronger and more concentrated the further we go. From what I can sense, we've got about an hour of exploration left before we reach the core of the dungeon. But pushing forward without resting will wear you out. Take this time to recover."

Elena let out a tired breath, her relief palpable as she slumped down onto a nearby rock. "An hour left... I can't believe we've been going for three hours straight."

Dorian, wiping the frost from his brow, shook his head with a tired chuckle. "I didn't think a one-rank difference would hit us this hard. Rank-6 gates are no joke."

Kurt sat down beside Elena, his shield resting against the ice, and nodded in agreement. "It's not just the monsters; it's the environment. The cold is sapping our strength, and we've been fighting non-stop. I didn't expect it to be this tough."

Gareth, who had been silently maintaining the protective barriers, let his shoulders relax as he allowed the magic to fade. "We knew it would be harder, but this... it's like everything's fighting against us—the monsters, the terrain, even the air we breathe."

Lila sat down beside Gareth, her pale face showing signs of relief. "It's exhausting just keeping up. I've been struggling to maintain my mana flow in this cold."

I stood nearby, keeping watch as the team caught their breath. "Rank-6 gates aren't just about the monsters," I said. "The environment plays a bigger role than most realize. That's why we need to be prepared for everything—including harsh conditions like this."

The team nodded, clearly grateful for the rest. They had been pushing hard, and the weight of the dungeon had become more apparent with every step. Even if it was just a one-rank difference, the impact was undeniable.

Dorian let out a sigh of relief, stretching his arms. "I don't know how you're still standing like it's nothing, Astron. You're like a damn machine."

I gave a slight nod, choosing not to reveal the full extent of my abilities. "Just trying to make sure we all make it through. Let's focus on resting now."

The team settled in, taking advantage of the respite while we prepared for the final push toward the boss.

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As the team settled down, the weight of exhaustion slowly giving way to a more relaxed atmosphere, the biting cold still lingered, but the break offered a much-needed reprieve. For a few moments, there was silence, with only the howling wind and the occasional crackle of ice breaking the stillness. Then, as they warmed their hands and rubbed their tired limbs, the conversation shifted to something lighter—dreams, goals, and the unexpected changes in their lives.

Dorian, as usual, was the first to break the silence, stretching his arms above his head with a yawn. "Man, it's been wild, hasn't it? A few months ago, we were just another team scraping through rank-5 dungeons, and now we're about to clear a rank-6 gate, with cameras following us around like we're celebrities."

Kurt nodded, a rare smile crossing his usually serious face. "Yeah, it's a bit surreal. I always knew I'd push myself to get stronger, but I didn't think we'd be getting this kind of recognition so soon. Feels like everything's happening fast."

Elena leaned against a large rock, her staff resting beside her. "We've earned it, though. We've worked hard, and we've grown a lot in a short time. The media attention is strange, but it's also a sign that we're on the right track. We're finally making a name for ourselves."

Lila, who had been quietly recharging her mana, nodded in agreement. "I never thought we'd be getting this kind of exposure so soon. I always wanted to be a successful Hunter, but I didn't expect it to feel like this."

Dorian smirked. "Yeah, fame's a funny thing. One day, you're just another guy swinging a sword, and the next, people are recognizing you in the street. But you know, I'm not complaining." He winked. "Who knows? Maybe it'll help me finally get a girlfriend."

Lila, sitting nearby, raised an eyebrow at Dorian's comment. "A girlfriend, huh? I thought you had one when you first joined the team. What happened with that?"

Dorian chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly. "Yeah, well, let's just say things didn't work out. She wasn't too thrilled about me constantly running off to fight monsters in dangerous dungeons. Can't blame her, though. It's not exactly a stable lifestyle."

Lila smiled faintly. "That makes sense. Being a Hunter isn't for everyone. It's hard to maintain relationships when you're constantly risking your life."

Dorian sighed dramatically. "Yeah, that's the problem. But still, I wouldn't trade this life for anything. We're chasing our dreams, pushing ourselves to be the best we can be. That's what it's all about, right?"

Kurt grunted in agreement. "That's the goal. We all want to reach our full potential. Becoming stronger, achieving our dreams as Hunters—that's why we're here."

Elena glanced at the others, her expression thoughtful. "For me, it's always been about proving myself. I want to be one of the best battlemages, to show that I can stand on my own in the Hunter world. Fame is nice, but it's not the end goal. Strength is."

Gareth, who had been sitting quietly, finally spoke up. "Same here. It's not just about fame or money. It's about pushing yourself to the limit, seeing how far you can go."

Lila nodded, her eyes distant for a moment as she reflected on her own journey. "I want to protect people. That's always been my goal. Becoming a successful Hunter is just part of that. If we can grow stronger, we can save more lives."

Dorian grinned. "Well, I'm all for saving lives, but I wouldn't mind a little romance along the way. Maybe once we clear a few more dungeons, I'll find someone who doesn't mind dating a guy who's constantly fighting off monsters."

The team chuckled at Dorian's comment, the air between them lightening as they relaxed, even if just for a moment. Lila shook her head, smiling softly. "Always chasing something, aren't you, Dorian?"

"Hey, I've got priorities," Dorian replied, winking playfully. "Saving lives is great and all, but a little romance never hurt anyone."

Kurt, who had been quietly watching the banter unfold, finally cracked a small grin. "You're not wrong. Life's short, especially for Hunters. Might as well enjoy it when you can."

The conversation flowed naturally, the team enjoying the brief reprieve. But after a while, the conversation turned quiet, and one by one, their gazes shifted to Astron, who had remained silent, standing guard and watching the frozen landscape with his usual calm demeanor.

Dorian, never one to let silence linger for too long, raised an eyebrow and smirked. "So, Astron, you've been pretty quiet. What about you? What's going on in that head of yours?"

Kurt leaned back, his arms crossed as he added, "Yeah, you're younger than most of us, but you've already got the skills of someone who's been in this for years. What do you think? About... everything, really."

Astron's gaze shifted from the horizon to the group, his expression unreadable for a moment. He hadn't expected the conversation to turn toward him, and the question wasn't immediately clear. Were they asking about relationships or being a Hunter? The two topics were so intertwined in their conversation that it left him momentarily unsure.

After a brief pause, he spoke, his voice as calm and measured as always. "What exactly are you asking?" he said, a hint of curiosity in his tone. "Are we talking about relationships or the life of a Hunter?"

Dorian laughed, the sound echoing in the cold air. "Both, I guess! You've been the one guiding us through these dungeons like a seasoned pro. We're just curious—what drives someone like you? And hey, if there's a romantic side to Astron, we wouldn't mind hearing about that too."

Kurt nodded, his smile lingering as he added, "Yeah, we've been wondering what's going on in your head. You're a lot younger than us, but you've got this calm, almost detached way of dealing with everything. You've got skills and discipline, but what's your story? What keeps you pushing forward?"

The others listened quietly, their eyes fixed on Astron. For a moment, there was a stillness in the air as they waited for him to speak. It wasn't often that Astron talked about himself, and they were curious to learn more about the person who had helped shape their progress in such a short time.

Astron took a moment, looking at the landscape.

"The reason, huh?" It was a topic that he never liked to talk about, let alone think. This topic alone has always brought out all those memories.

At least, that was how it was before.

"Being a Hunter..." he began, his voice quieter than usual but firm. "This world took something precious from me. And I'm going to take it back."

The words hung in the cold air, sharp and final. There was no need for further explanation, no embellishment, or a deeper dive into the emotions behind them. The simplicity of his statement said it all.

As the others processed his words, a heavy silence fell over the group. They didn't push for more details, sensing the depth of the pain behind what he had said. The look on Astron's face, the way his voice had shifted, told them everything they needed to know.

Dorian, usually quick with a light-hearted comment, stayed silent, his grin fading as he exchanged a look with Kurt. The usual playful energy was replaced with quiet respect. Kurt nodded slightly, understanding dawning in his eyes. Elena and Lila shared a glance, their expressions softening as they realized the weight of Astron's words.

Whatever Astron had lost, whatever had driven him to this point, it was enough to push him to become the Hunter he was today—calm, disciplined, and focused.

Kurt broke the silence first, his voice low. "I get it. We all have something that pushes us forward. Yours... it sounds like it's not just about strength or fame. It's personal."

Astron didn't respond, simply giving a slight nod.

The team understood. They didn't need to know the details to recognize the resolve that had shaped their leader. What mattered was that they had someone beside them who wasn't just skilled, but deeply driven. It added another layer to the trust they had built over the past few days.

Dorian finally spoke up, his voice softer than usual. "Well, whatever it is, you've got our backs—and we've got yours."

There was no further conversation after that, just a quiet understanding shared between the team.

The cold winds howled through the frozen cliffs of Frostbound Ascent as the team moved forward, their breaths visible in the icy air. They had rested, regained their strength, and were now prepared for the final push toward the boss. The tension in the air was palpable, each member of the team steeling themselves for what lay ahead.

As they navigated through the narrow pass, the air around them grew even colder, a clear sign that they were nearing the core of the dungeon. The ground beneath them was slick with ice, the jagged cliffs towering on either side, casting long shadows over the group. Astron led the way, his eyes scanning the area for any signs of movement. The boss was close, but the dungeon wasn't done with them yet.

Suddenly, a deep rumble echoed through the frozen pass, followed by a series of sharp, guttural growls. The team halted, their weapons at the ready.

From the icy mists ahead, a new enemy emerged—Frostbound Goliaths, towering humanoid creatures covered in thick layers of ice and frost, their eyes glowing with cold fury. Their massive arms were lined with jagged spikes of ice, and each step they took caused the ground to tremble.

But the Goliaths weren't alone. Accompanying them were Snowstalker Wargs, smaller but no less dangerous.

These lupine creatures moved with deadly speed, their white fur blending perfectly with the snowy landscape, making them difficult to spot until they were already upon you.

Their eyes gleamed with predatory hunger, and their razor-sharp fangs glinted in the pale light.

"There!" Kurt called out, raising his shield as the Goliaths and Wargs charged toward them. "We've got company!"