

## H. Academy 551

Chapter 551 123.5 - Rank-6 Gate

"We've got company!"

Astron's eyes narrowed as he quickly assessed the situation. The Goliaths were slow but powerful, their massive fists capable of crushing anything in their path. The Wargs, on the other hand, were fast and agile, and they would strike from multiple directions, attempting to overwhelm the team.

"We take out the Wargs first," Astron ordered, his voice calm but authoritative. "They're too fast to leave unchecked. Kurt, Gareth—hold the front against the Goliaths. Elena, focus your magic on keeping them at bay. Dorian, Lila, with me. We're handling the Wargs."

The team moved into position without hesitation, their training and experience kicking in. Kurt and Gareth formed a defensive line, raising their shields as the first Frostbound Goliath closed in. The creature roared, its massive fists slamming into the ground, sending shards of ice flying in every direction. Kurt grunted as he absorbed the impact while Gareth's barriers flared up, deflecting the icy projectiles.

"Keep them off balance!" Gareth called out, reinforcing the barriers as the Goliaths continued their relentless assault.

Meanwhile, Dorian and Lila followed Astron as they broke off from the main group, their focus on the Snowstalker Wargs.

The Wargs were fast, darting through the snow with lethal precision, their eyes locked onto their prey. Astron drew his bow, quickly nocking an arrow and releasing it with precision. The arrow found its mark, striking one of the Wargs in the side, but the creature barely faltered, its thick fur absorbing most of the impact.

"Damn, they're tough," Dorian muttered, his twin blades flashing as he lunged toward a Warg that had leaped toward him. He spun gracefully, his swords cutting through the air as he struck the creature's flank, but the Warg was faster than expected, dodging the blow and snapping its jaws at Dorian's arm.

"Careful!" Lila shouted, sending a burst of magic toward the Warg, causing it to stumble back. Her golem charged forward, engaging another of the creatures, its massive form crashing into the snow as it grappled with the Warg.

Astron's eyes remained sharp, tracking the Wargs' movements. They were fast, but they followed a pattern. He could see the mana threads that connected them, revealing their tactics.

With a quick, fluid motion, he switched his bow for the Serpent Fangs, knowing he needed more than just arrows to deal with these creatures.

He dashed forward, weaving between the Wargs as they circled, his daggers flashing as he struck at their legs, cutting through fur and muscle with precision. The venomous effect of the Serpent Fangs quickly took hold, slowing the Wargs' movements and weakening their ability to evade.

Dorian, seeing an opening, grinned and darted in. "Now we're getting somewhere!" he shouted, his blades slicing through the air as he finished off one of the Wargs, its body collapsing into the snow with a final growl.

Lila, her magic crackling in the air, focused on another Warg that had lunged at her golem. "I've got this one!" she called, her voice steady as she unleashed a burst of energy that sent the Warg crashing into the ground, stunned.

As the Wargs began to fall, Astron turned his attention back to the main battle. Kurt and Gareth were still holding the line against the Frostbound Goliaths, but the creatures' sheer strength was starting to wear them down. One of the Goliaths raised its massive fist and brought it down with a deafening crash, forcing Kurt to brace himself as the impact sent cracks splintering through the ice beneath him.

"Elena, now!" Astron called, his voice cutting through the chaos.

Elena, who had been gathering her mana, unleashed a powerful fire-based spell that engulfed the nearest Goliath. The creature roared in agony as the flames licked at its icy form, its thick armor of frost melting away under the intense heat.

Taking advantage of the moment, Gareth surged forward, his barrier pushing the Goliath back, and Kurt followed up with a powerful strike, his shield slamming into the creature's chest. The Goliath staggered, its defenses weakened.

"We're finishing this now," Astron said, moving swiftly to join them. His daggers glinted in the icy light as he closed in on the Goliath, striking with precision at the weakened points Elena's fire had exposed. With each strike, the Goliath's movements became slower, more sluggish, until finally, with a final, resounding crack, the massive creature crumbled into a pile of ice and snow.

The remaining Goliaths, seeing their ally fall, let out guttural roars and pressed forward with renewed fury, but the team was ready. Astron, Dorian, and Lila regrouped, and together with Kurt, Gareth, and Elena, they coordinated their final assault. Elemental magic, blades, and barriers worked in perfect harmony as they dismantled the last of the Goliaths, their towering forms collapsing under the team's combined strength.

As the final Goliath fell, a heavy silence settled over the battlefield, broken only by the sound of the wind howling through the icy cliffs.

Astron surveyed the scene, his breath steady as he sheathed his daggers. "Good work. That was the last wave."

Kurt wiped the frost from his brow, his shoulders sagging with relief.

"Only the boss left?"

"That is right."

Astron glanced at the team, giving them a moment to recover. The fight had been grueling, and while they had held their ground well, the toll of the battle was evident. The air was biting, and the relentless cold of Frostbound Ascent had begun to sap their energy.

"We'll take a short break here. Everyone, renew your energy." His tone was steady, leaving no room for argument.

The team, grateful for the chance to recover, began rummaging through their supplies. Each of them pulled out a small bar from their gear—a concentrated resource designed to replenish both mana and physical stamina. The bars, made from processed molecules of Awakened monsters, were common among Hunters, a vital tool for enduring prolonged dungeon raids.

Astron reached into his spatial storage and retrieved his own bar. It was a dark, compact block, packed with the nutrients and mana-boosting properties necessary to restore energy after a tough fight. He unwrapped it without ceremony, biting into the tough, slightly bitter meal. The processed molecules from the Awakened monsters coursed through his system, providing an immediate boost to his mana and physical reserves.

Around him, the rest of the team followed suit, eating their own energy bars in silence. The exhaustion of the fight was starting to fade, their strength slowly returning.

"These bars never get any better, do they?" Dorian muttered, chewing on his with a grimace. "Tastes like I'm eating compressed dirt."

Elena chuckled softly, shaking her head. "I've heard they're working on flavor improvements, but I wouldn't hold your breath."

Kurt leaned back against a nearby rock, his shield resting beside him as he wiped the frost from his brow. "Doesn't matter how they taste, as long as they keep us going."

Astron remained silent, focusing on restoring his energy. The food did its job, flooding his body with the mana and nutrients needed to maintain his peak condition.

The team was the same. With their energy restored, they followed Astron toward the boss chamber, ready to face whatever awaited them inside.

As the team approached the boss chamber, the terrain began to shift dramatically. The jagged cliffs and towering walls of ice slowly gave way to a vast, open expanse that stretched out before them. Unlike the rest of the dungeon, which had been suffocatingly cold and filled with the sound of the wind howling through the mountains, this area was disturbingly quiet—eerily still.

The ground beneath their feet was hard-packed snow, almost unnaturally smooth, as if nothing had disturbed it for a long time. Even the air felt heavier, weighed down by an unnatural silence.

"Something's off," Elena whispered, her voice barely carrying in the stillness. She glanced around, her staff held tightly in her hands.

Kurt nodded, his shield raised as he scanned the area warily. "Where's the boss? Shouldn't it be here?"

The chamber, which should have housed the dungeon's final challenge, was oddly empty. There was no sign of movement, no signs of a beast lying in wait. The walls were lined with those strange engravings, the only indication that something—something powerful—was supposed to reside here. But the Snow Yeti, the boss they were preparing for, was nowhere to be seen.

Dorian, his blades at the ready, narrowed his eyes. "This is weird. We should've seen it by now."

Astron, walking slightly ahead of the group, surveyed the area with his usual calm precision. He couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong.

'I am meeting with that bastard once again.' He had met the yeti before. At least, at that time, he hadn't faced it directly, but still, he was still aware of its presence. ((N1))

The Snow Yeti was a peak-rank-6 monster, powerful and territorial. There was no way it would have simply disappeared. His eyes darted to the strange symbols carved into the ground, and a sense of unease settled over him.

Then, without warning, a deep, resonating roar echoed from somewhere beyond the chamber. The sound reverberated off the icy walls, sending a shiver down the spines of every team member.

Astron's eyes widened as realization hit him. "It's not here..." he muttered, his voice barely audible.

The others turned to look at him, confusion on their faces. "What do you mean?" Gareth asked, his barriers flickering slightly in response to the growing tension.

"It's coming from somewhere else," Astron said sharply, his tone urgent now. "The Yeti isn't waiting for us—it's running toward us."

The moment those words left his mouth, the team tensed, readying their weapons. "Take your positions!" Astron ordered, his voice cutting through the cold air. "It's closing in fast!"

No sooner had they moved into position than a massive shadow loomed over them, blocking out the faint light that had filtered into the chamber. The ground trembled beneath their feet, and a gust of freezing wind whipped through the air as something huge leaped into the sky, its immense form blotting out the sun.

The Snow Yeti, larger and more terrifying than they had anticipated, soared through the air above them, its powerful muscles propelling it with terrifying speed. Its massive, fur-covered body was a blur of white against the icy backdrop, and its eyes glowed with an intense, predatory fury.

Astron's instincts kicked in immediately. "It's here—now!" he shouted.

The Yeti's enormous form descended upon them, its massive claws extended, ready to strike. The team had only seconds to react as the shadow of the beast covered their faces, plunging them into a moment of darkness before the battle began.

#### Chapter 552 123.7 - Rank-6 Dungeon

The Snow Yeti came crashing down with a thunderous impact, sending shockwaves through the frozen ground as its massive feet slammed into the ice. The team staggered, barely able to keep their footing as the sheer force of the landing rattled their defenses.

Astron's eyes flicked to the creature, immediately recognizing the difference in power. This Yeti wasn't just a mid-rank six monster as they had expected—it was far stronger.

The air around it seemed to vibrate with an oppressive mana, and its glowing blue eyes bore into them with a primal rage. Its fur, thick and white, was lined with jagged ice that shimmered under the faint light, and its breath came out in visible clouds, freezing the air around it.

"Stay sharp!" Astron barked, his voice cutting through the chaos. "This is no ordinary boss—it's peak rank-6. We need to be careful!"

The Yeti wasted no time. With a deafening roar, it lunged forward, its claws swiping at Kurt and Gareth, who were positioned at the front. Kurt raised his shield, bracing himself as the massive creature's claws collided with it, sending him skidding back several feet despite his best efforts to hold his ground.

"Damn, that thing's strong!" Kurt grunted, struggling to keep the Yeti's overwhelming force at bay.

Gareth, his face set in concentration, summoned his barriers to reinforce Kurt's defense, but even the magical protection wasn't enough. The Yeti's claws tore through the barrier, shattering it with ease. Gareth cursed under his breath, realizing the extent of the challenge they were facing.

"Fall back!" Astron shouted. "We can't take it head-on!"

Kurt and Gareth quickly retreated, giving the Yeti space as it swung its claws again, narrowly missing them but gouging deep furrows into the icy ground. Elena was already in motion, her staff glowing brightly as she unleashed a powerful fire spell, aiming directly at the Yeti's chest.

The flames roared toward the creature, and for a moment, it looked like the fire would engulf it. But the Yeti's fur, layered with ice, seemed to absorb the heat. The flames dimmed, barely scorching the surface before they fizzled out. The Yeti snarled, its cold eyes locking onto Elena.

"That didn't work as well as I'd hoped," Elena muttered, backing up quickly as the Yeti charged at her.

Before it could reach her, Dorian darted in, his twin blades flashing as he struck at the creature's side. His blades, sharp and precise, barely cut through the Yeti's thick fur, leaving shallow gashes that the creature hardly seemed to notice.

"Damn it," Dorian hissed, leaping back just as the Yeti swung its massive arm toward him, the force of the blow sending shards of ice scattering through the air.

Lila, positioned behind the main group, directed her golem to engage the Yeti. The massive stone construct lunged at the beast, grappling with it in an attempt to hold it back. For a brief moment, it looked like the golem might slow the Yeti down, but the monster was too strong. With a mighty roar, the Yeti grabbed the golem and hurled it across the battlefield, the stone figure crashing into the ice with a resounding thud.

"This thing is too strong!" Lila shouted, her eyes wide with shock as her golem struggled to stand. "It's shrugging off everything we throw at it!"

Astron stood at the edge of the battle, watching closely as the team scrambled to adjust to the overwhelming power of the Snow Yeti. He could see their desperation, the way they struggled to hold their ground against a monster that was stronger, faster, and more cunning than anything they had faced before. But he didn't intervene—not yet. This was a crucial moment, and he needed to see how they handled it.

'They need to learn to handle crises on their own,' Astron thought, his eyes narrowing as he observed each member of the team. 'I won't always be there to give orders. They have to be able to adapt, to push themselves when things get tough.'

Kurt, still recovering from the Yeti's first blow, readied his shield again, but the creature was relentless. It swung its massive claws toward him, and though Kurt blocked the strike, the sheer force sent him skidding back once more. Gareth was doing his best to maintain barriers, but they shattered almost as quickly as he could summon them, unable to withstand the Yeti's raw power.

The Yeti roared again, the sound piercing the air and reverberating in their minds. The sheer volume of the roar caused everyone to flinch, a disorienting effect that momentarily disrupted their concentration. Elena clutched her staff tightly, shaking her head as she tried to refocus her magic, but the mental fog from the roar slowed her reactions.

Astron frowned. 'It has sound magic as well. It's using its roar to disrupt their focus.'

Despite the chaos, he remained calm. He'd seen monsters of this level before, and while the Yeti was stronger than anything the team had faced, Astron knew its weaknesses. But that wasn't the point of this battle. The point was to see how far the team had come, how they would push forward in the face of overwhelming odds.

Still, Astron wasn't idle. He needed to test his own strength against the creature. Without a word, he drew his daggers, the familiar weight of the Serpent Fangs in his hands grounding him as he stepped forward into the fray.

The Yeti, sensing Astron's approach, turned its attention toward him, its glowing blue eyes narrowing as it let out a low growl. It swung one of its massive arms, the claws glinting in the dim light as they tore through the air. Astron dodged effortlessly, his movements fluid and precise, but even as he avoided the strike, he could feel the sheer power behind it.

'It's fast,' he noted, watching the Yeti's movements carefully. Despite its massive size, the creature moved with surprising agility, each swing of its claws fast and deadly.

The Yeti roared again, this time focusing its ice magic. Spikes of ice shot from the ground, sharp and jagged, aimed directly at Astron. He leapt back, dodging most of the projectiles, but one grazed his arm, the cold biting into his skin.

He didn't flinch. Instead, he rushed forward, using the opening to strike. His daggers flashed in the light as he aimed for the Yeti's exposed side, but as he expected, its fur was thick and tough. His blades, though sharp, barely made a dent, and the venom that usually took effect quickly was slowed by the creature's resistance to physical attacks.

'Its defenses are ridiculous,' Astron thought. 'It's going to take more than just brute force to bring this thing down.'

As if sensing Astron's thoughts, the Yeti let out another deafening roar, this time infused with its sound magic. The roar hit Astron like a physical force, vibrating through his mind and momentarily clouding his senses. He staggered back, gritting his teeth as he fought to clear the disorientation.

At the same time, the Yeti summoned blocks of ice from the ground, shaping them into massive clubs. With a single swing, it hurled one of the ice clubs at Astron, who barely managed to dodge in time. The club shattered against the ground with an explosive force, sending shards of ice flying in all directions.

'This thing's magic is as strong as its physical attacks,' Astron analyzed, his eyes narrowing. 'They'll need to be smart about how they fight it.'

He glanced back at the team. Kurt and Gareth were struggling to maintain their defense while Elena was trying to counter the Yeti's ice magic with fire spells. Dorian and Lila circled the creature, looking for an opening, but the Yeti's speed and power made it hard for them to get close.

"Focus on its magic!" Astron finally called out, his voice cutting through the chaos. "The Yeti's using its ice and sound magic to disrupt us—use that against it! Gareth, reinforce Kurt's defense, and Elena, time your spells to hit after it roars. We need to overwhelm it, or we won't stand a chance!"

As he issued the minimal orders, Astron darted back into the fray, testing the Yeti's defenses with another series of rapid strikes. The creature roared in frustration, swinging its ice club at him with renewed fury, but Astron was ready. He dodged, ducking under its arm and delivering a precise strike to the back of its knee, aiming for the joints where the fur was thinner.

The Yeti staggered, but it quickly recovered, turning its attention back to the rest of the team. Elena, following Astron's advice, unleashed a well-timed fire spell just as the Yeti roared, her flames crashing into the creature's chest and weakening its defenses for a brief moment.

Gareth, his barriers reinforced, moved to cover Kurt, allowing the tank to focus on blocking the Yeti's physical attacks. With Gareth's support, Kurt managed to hold his ground, even as the Yeti's claws slammed into his shield again and again.

Dorian, seeing an opening, darted forward, his twin blades flashing as he aimed for the creature's exposed side. He struck with precision, his blades digging into the Yeti's flesh just as Lila's golem tackled the creature from the other side, briefly pinning it down.

Astron watched carefully, analyzing the battle as it unfolded. The team was adapting, pushing themselves despite the overwhelming odds. They were working together, finding ways to counter the Yeti's magic and physical strength.

But it wasn't over yet. The Yeti, enraged by the combined assault, let out a final, ear-splitting roar, summoning a massive blizzard that swirled around them, cutting off visibility and pelting them with shards of ice.

Astron narrowed his eyes, feeling the cold bite into his skin. 'This is the final push.'

With a swift movement, he activated the full power of the Serpent Fangs, his daggers glowing with venomous energy as he rushed forward. The Yeti, blinded by its own rage, didn't see him coming. He leaped onto its back, driving his daggers deep into its flesh, right between the shoulders.

The venom surged through the creature's body, spreading quickly and paralyzing it. The Yeti let out a final, pained roar as its movements slowed, its body freezing in place as the venom took hold.

"Now. Elena!"

「Fire Grasp.」

At his command, Elena unleashed her most powerful fire spell, the flames engulfing the Yeti's weakened form.

Elena's fire spell, 「Fire Grasp」, ignited beneath the Yeti, fiery claws rising from the icy ground and wrapping around the creature's massive form.

The flames weren't meant to burn away its flesh but to corrode the remaining defenses, weakening the thick layers of fur and ice that shielded the Yeti from their attacks.

'Slowly.'

Astron was also made aware of this when he asked about Elena's spells.

That was why he was ready to deliver the final blow to the creature itself.

Chapter 553 123.7 - Rank-6 Gate

ROOOAAAR!

The creature let out a deafening roar as the fire's corrosive energy tore through its outer defenses, but it wasn't yet defeated.

Astron leaped back, his body tense as he observed the flames wrapping around the Yeti. 'Elena's fire is working, but it's not enough to finish it. The defenses are still tough, but they're crumbling.'

As the flames began to flicker, signaling that the spell's effect was nearing its end, Astron didn't hesitate. He felt a surge of mana rise within him, flowing through his body and into his legs. The familiar sensation of his 「Cyclone Stance」 enveloped him, enhancing his footwork and preparing him for the rapid movements to come.

In an instant, he blasted forward, his legs carrying him with incredible speed as he circled the Yeti. His daggers gleamed with a sharp edge of mana as he coated them in energy, sharpening their blades and increasing their effectiveness against the weakened defenses.

With a sharp exhale, Astron activated the final form of the common dagger art that he had learned:

「Modified Form: Serpent's Dance」

It was something that most of the dagger users were given by the association, a common-grade art that everyone could have access to.

But he had modified the technique, improving it as he developed his combat abilities. This modified form was inspired by the [Martial Art] that he had learned from Dakota as he had adapted his dagger forms to flow seamlessly.

Yet, it still contained the base of the common grade art that he had practiced, making the fundamentals fitting for a dagger.

SWOOSH! His movements were a blur as he darted in and out of the Yeti's reach, his form weaving between its flailing limbs with deadly precision.

Eyes of Hourglass. The time was slowed right in front of him, as he could see the structure of the monster before him.

SLASH! SLASH! Each strike of his daggers was fast and purposeful, targeting the now-exposed joints and weak points that Elena's fire spell had revealed.

The venomous energy of the Serpent Fangs pulsed through the blades, spreading deeper into the Yeti's system with every strike.

Astron moved with fluidity, his body barely a shadow as he slashed across the Yeti's body, each cut leaving behind a trail of venom that corroded its insides.

The Yeti roared in agony, its massive form swaying as it tried to keep up with Astron's relentless assault, but it was too slow. Even in its peak-rank six strength, it couldn't match the speed and precision of Astron's 「Modified Serpent's Dance」.

The other members of the team watched in awe as Astron moved like a whirlwind of death, his strikes a series of controlled, lethal movements. He danced around the Yeti, cutting away at its strength piece by piece until the massive creature could barely stand.

Kurt, Gareth, and the others stayed on alert, but they could see that the tide had turned. Astron had taken control of the battle, and the Yeti was on its last legs.

With a final, powerful thrust, Astron drove his daggers deep into the Yeti's chest, right where its heart should be. The venom surged through the creature's body one last time, and the Yeti let out a final, desperate roar before its body went rigid, paralyzed by the poison coursing through it. The

massive beast collapsed onto the icy ground with a heavy thud, the blizzard it had summoned dissipating into the cold air.

The battle was over.

Astron stood over the fallen creature, his breath steady as he withdrew his daggers, the mana around him slowly fading. He turned to the rest of the team, his expression calm despite the intensity of the battle.

"It's done," he said, his voice cutting through the silence that had fallen over the battlefield.

The team, still catching their breath from the fight, looked at Astron with a mixture of relief and respect. They had fought hard, but in the end, it had been Astron's speed and precision that had sealed the victory.

The team stared at Astron, their faces a mix of awe and disbelief. Kurt, still catching his breath, leaned on his shield for support, wiping the sweat from his brow. "You... is there something you can't do?" he asked, his voice filled with both exhaustion and admiration.

"You're a monster, Astron. No one should be that good."

Astron remained composed, though he could feel the strain in his muscles from the intense dagger technique. 「Serpent's Dance」 was an advanced art, one that pushed his body to its limits, even for someone with his experience.

He was already feeling the dull ache in his arms and legs, though his body was quickly adapting and recovering thanks to the [Everchanging Glyph]. Still, the toll it had taken wasn't something to be ignored.

"If not for everyone's combined effort to stack all those status effects, that would not have been possible."

Despite his words, the team continued to look at him with a mixture of respect and amazement.

Kurt finally stood upright, clapping his hands. "Still, you carried us through this. You don't give yourself enough credit."

Dorian chuckled though his exhaustion was clear. "Yeah, and here I was, thinking I was getting better with my blades. Then you go and pull that off."

Astron shrugged, trying to shift the focus back to the team's success. "We're alive, and we cleared the dungeon. That's all that matters."

Lila, still standing beside her battered golem, nodded as she activated her communication device. "I'll inform Liana that the dungeon is cleared."

While she relayed the message, the rest of the team took a moment to gather themselves. The tension of the battle was starting to fade, replaced by a sense of accomplishment and relief. They had faced their toughest challenge yet, and despite the odds, they had come out victorious.

Lila's voice echoed in the cold air as she finished the call. "Liana says the exit gate is active. We can leave whenever we're ready."

Astron gave a brief nod. "Let's not linger, then. We need to recover."

As the team began to move toward the exit, the oppressive atmosphere of the dungeon seemed to lift, the biting cold now feeling less harsh as the adrenaline from the battle faded. They walked in silence for a few moments, each member reflecting on the fight they had just endured.

The sheer power of the Snow Yeti had tested them, but it had also shown them how far they had come as a team—and how much they still had to grow.

\*\*\*\*\* Toren stepped through the front entrance of the guild, his usual commanding presence slightly dimmed by exhaustion. His dark hair, streaked with a few strands of gray, was damp with sweat, and there was a weary look in his sharp eyes. The weight of the rank-8 gate expedition clearly showed in the slight sag of his broad shoulders, but he carried himself with the same air of authority that defined him.

He made his way to his office with long, purposeful strides, acknowledging a few passing guild members with brief nods. Though tired, his mind was still focused, already thinking about the next tasks at hand. Once inside his office, Toren let out a long breath and sank into the large chair behind his desk. The familiar coolness of the room washed over him, a small relief after the grueling battle they had faced in the dungeon.

For a moment, he closed his eyes, allowing himself a brief respite. His body ached from the prolonged fight, and while they had succeeded in clearing the rank-8 gate, it hadn't been without its challenges.

A soft knock on the door pulled him from his thoughts.

"Come in," Toren called, his voice steady despite his fatigue.

The door opened, and Liana stepped inside, her expression professional but carrying a hint of warmth. She moved with her usual composed grace, though there was a touch of relief in her eyes when she saw him.

"Guild Master," she began, offering a respectful nod before stepping closer to the desk.

"Congratulations on clearing the dungeon without any major injuries. The team has been eagerly awaiting your return."

Toren gave a tired smile, leaning back in his chair. "Thank you, Liana. It was a tough gate—tougher than we anticipated. But we managed to pull through."

Liana's gaze softened as she took a seat across from him. "I heard the monsters were stronger than expected. It's good to have you back in one piece."

Toren chuckled lightly, rubbing the back of his neck. "They were. Rank-8 gates always test the limits, but this one... it felt different. Like the energy inside was unstable. We had to adapt quickly."

Liana nodded, her eyes narrowing thoughtfully. "Unstable gates are becoming more common. I've been hearing similar reports from other guilds. The mana flows within them are shifting unpredictably."

Toren sighed, his expression growing more serious. "That's what I'm worried about. If these fluctuations continue, even our top teams could struggle to handle the more dangerous gates. We'll need to adjust our strategies."

Liana smiled faintly, hearing that.

Toren leaned back in his chair, rubbing his tired eyes before giving Liana a curious look. "How are the little ones doing?"

Liana smiled at his choice of words and nodded. "They finished their first rank-6 gate in six hours. No injuries, just fatigue. Right now, they're in the second rank-6 gate."

Toren's eyes lit up with pride. "Six hours might seem like a long time, but for a group of newbies to clear a rank-6 gate without any serious injuries on their first try—that shows real talent. They've come a long way."

Liana nodded in agreement. "They've exceeded expectations. Astron's leadership has played a big part, but the team is pushing themselves. They're growing more confident with every challenge."

Toren's smile widened. "That's what I like to hear. It means they're ready for more, and we can count on them when the tougher gates come."

Liana paused for a moment, then shifted to another important topic. "There's also something else. Since the media attention, quite a few companies have been contacting us. The small footage from the dungeon run, especially the rank-6 gate, has stirred up a lot of interest. The team is being seen as the next big thing, and companies are eager to invest in Vanguard Haven."

"Oh....." Toren raised an eyebrow, clearly intrigued. "Companies? What kind of offers?"

Liana pulled out a tablet and scrolled through the details. "Sponsorship deals, equipment partnerships, even media companies wanting exclusive interviews and footage of the team in action. They're seeing potential, and the fact that we're guiding a team of fresh Hunters through rank-6 gates with this kind of efficiency is catching attention."

Toren leaned forward slightly, eyes narrowing as he looked over the media reports and sponsorship offers on the tablet Liana had presented. He tapped the screen thoughtfully, absorbing the attention Vanguard Haven was beginning to attract. After a moment, a small smile crept across his face.

"Hmm..." he muttered, looking up at Liana with a gleam of something calculated in his eyes. "If this is the level of interest we're generating with just a glimpse of what the team can do, then there's only one thing left to do."

Liana tilted her head slightly, curious. "And what would that be, Guild Master?"

Toren's smile widened, his tone almost casual but carrying a sharp edge. "Leak the location of the second rank-6 gate."

#### Chapter 554 124.1 - Fame (2)

The cold air of the dungeon slowly gave way to the more familiar warmth outside as the team neared the exit of the second rank-6 gate. Their breaths were heavy, their bodies aching from the grueling battles they had endured. Frost and dirt clung to their armor and clothes, and despite the exhaustion etched on their faces, there was a quiet sense of accomplishment among them.

Kurt limped slightly, his shield showing signs of heavy use. Gareth's barriers had flickered out long ago, and he was leaning on his staff for support. Dorian had a fresh cut along his arm, the result of a close call with one of the creatures they had faced, and even Elena's usually sharp, pristine appearance was dulled, her robe singed and covered in soot from her magic.

Lila's golem had sustained visible damage but still hovered near her protectively, and Astron, while standing tall, showed signs of strain. His breath came in slow, deliberate exhales, and the fatigue in his muscles was palpable, though hidden beneath his usual calm exterior.

Just as they were about to step fully out of the gate, the sudden noise of voices and the flashing of cameras greeted them. A crowd of reporters—far more than they had seen before—stood at the entrance, their faces alight with curiosity and excitement. Several drones hovered in the air, recording the scene from every angle. Reporters from different agencies were jostling for position, eager to get the first words from the team.

The team exchanged weary glances, taken aback by the sheer number of reporters waiting for them.

"Didn't think we'd have this kind of reception," Dorian muttered under his breath, glancing at the sea of cameras with a mix of surprise and annoyance.

Kurt wiped a streak of dirt from his forehead, his voice low. "I thought the first interview was intense... this is on a whole other level."

Before anyone could react further, the reporters surged forward, their voices overlapping as they bombarded the team with questions.

"How did you manage to clear two rank-6 gates in one day?" "What challenges did you face inside?" "Is it true that this is one of the most difficult gates under Vanguard Haven's jurisdiction?"

Astron's sharp gaze quickly scanned the crowd, his exhaustion tempered by his instinct to assess the situation. 'This was no coincidence,' he thought. 'They were waiting for us.'

Liana had mentioned the increased attention, but this—this was more than he had anticipated.

One reporter, her face familiar from their previous encounter, pushed forward. It was Shira Fenn, her expression alight with excitement as she addressed the team. "Vanguard Haven's rising stars! How are you feeling after completing yet another successful dungeon clear? What can you tell us about the difficulties you faced this time?"

Astron glanced at his team, noting their exhaustion. He could tell they weren't in the mood for an extended media session, but this wasn't something they could avoid. He stepped forward slightly, his presence drawing the attention of the reporters, just as Liana had expected.

"Today's clears were difficult," Astron said, his voice steady despite the weariness. "Rank-6 gates aren't easy, and the challenges we faced were real. But we prepared, we worked together, and we pushed through."

Astron's gaze didn't falter. "This team has been pushed to grow quickly, and they've risen to every challenge. We're doing what needs to be done, but every victory comes with its cost. We're just focused on continuing to improve."

Dorian, standing behind Astron, couldn't help but smirk despite his weariness. "Yeah, you could say we're putting in the work. But let me tell you—rank-6 gates don't go easy on you."

As the reporters saw the team's haggard state, many of them seemed to pause for a brief moment, taking in the exhaustion and battle-worn expressions. But the pause didn't last long. The rush for answers, the drive to get a scoop on the latest rising stars, overpowered any sense of empathy.

Questions began to fly from all directions, overlapping in a chaotic barrage:

"What kind of training regime does Vanguard Haven put you through to prepare for rank-6 gates?" "How do you manage your personal life while handling such intense challenges?" "Do you ever get time off, or is it all work for Hunters like you?"

The team, overwhelmed and visibly tired, exchanged uncertain glances. The relentless attention was a stark contrast to the quiet moments they had shared during their time inside the dungeon. Dorian, Kurt, Elena, Gareth, and Lila all seemed to hesitate, unsure of how to respond to the sudden flood of questions.

Astron, sensing the rising tension among his teammates, stepped forward calmly. His expression remained composed despite the exhaustion. Without saying a word, he gave a small nod toward the team and gestured for them to continue, silently encouraging them to answer. His steady presence seemed to ground them, offering a quiet reassurance that they could handle this, too.

Dorian was the first to speak up, his smirk returning despite his obvious fatigue. "Our training? Let's just say it's not for the faint of heart. You'd be surprised how much you can learn when you're pushed to your limits."

Elena, drawing strength from Astron's silent support, added, "It's intense, but necessary. If you want to succeed as a Hunter, you have to be willing to go beyond your comfort zone. Vanguard Haven's regime prepares us for that. Personal life... well, that takes a backseat when you're focused on survival."

Kurt nodded in agreement, wiping a layer of sweat and grime from his forehead. "It's about dedication. There's not much balance when you're trying to stay alive in a dungeon. But you make it work."

Lila, quieter than the others, smiled softly. "It's not easy, but we've all grown stronger because of the challenges. You learn to manage your time and push through, especially when you have a team like ours backing you up."

The reporters, eager for more, pressed on with follow-up questions, each trying to dive deeper into the team's lifestyle and the methods behind their growing fame. Yet, despite the onslaught, the team held their ground, their earlier exhaustion slowly fading as they drew courage from Astron's unspoken leadership.

"You've been working together for a while now—do you ever find it difficult to balance teamwork with your personal goals as Hunters?" one reporter asked, clearly aiming for a deeper, more personal answer.

Gareth, who had been silent up until now, finally spoke. "It's not always easy, but we've learned to rely on each other. Each of us has personal goals, sure, but as a team, we're stronger. We push each other to be better."

Another reporter quickly followed up, her voice filled with curiosity. "And how about you, Astron? You've become a key figure in this team. How do you balance your personal ambitions with the team's needs?"

Astron paused, meeting the reporter's gaze directly. "Every Hunter has their own path. But in a team, we support each other's growth. There's no balance—there's just doing what needs to be done. The rest comes naturally."

The reporters continued to scribble notes and shoot questions, but as the team stood there, supported by each other and guided by Astron's steady presence, it became clear that while the media attention was overwhelming, they were beginning to adapt to this new challenge, just like they had with the rank-6 gates.

As the questions continued to flood in from the reporters, Astron maintained his calm composure, answering with measured responses. But something in the atmosphere shifted, and his heightened senses picked up subtle movements in the crowd—movements that felt out of place, deliberate.

Midway through answering a question about the team's future plans, his eyes narrowed slightly. 'Something's wrong.'

He turned his head slightly, surveying the crowd more carefully. Among the sea of reporters, a few individuals stood out—too rigid in their stance, their eyes not on the team but scanning the surroundings, as if they weren't here for the interview at all.

Astron held up his hand politely, pausing mid-answer. "Excuse me for a moment."

He stepped back slightly, turning toward Liana, who stood beside him, her expression calm but observant. Leaning in, he whispered, "There are some suspicious people among the crowd. They're not here for the interview. I'm sensing potential sabotage."

Liana's eyes flicked briefly in his direction, but her face remained composed as she continued to look out at the crowd. "How many?" she asked in a low voice, keeping her tone casual to avoid drawing attention.

"Four that I can see," Astron replied quietly. "They're blending in with the reporters, but their movements are too calculated. They're positioned near the edges of the crowd. Their strength... moderate, but enough to cause trouble. I'd estimate mid-rank-5 Hunters. Two men, tall, both wearing black coats. One with a scar above his left eyebrow. A woman, dark hair tied back, wearing sunglasses. And another man, shorter, closer to the front—his hand hasn't left his pocket since we arrived."

Liana gave a subtle nod, her expression unchanged as she processed the information. "Understood," she murmured, her voice barely audible over the noise of the crowd. "Stay on alert. I'll take care of it."

Without breaking stride, Liana stepped away from the group, her movements smooth and deliberate, so as not to draw attention. As she left the stage, her hand subtly moved toward the communication device on her wrist. She spoke into it softly, her voice barely carrying through the noise.

"This is Liana. We've got a potential security breach in the crowd. Four targets, described by Astron. Prepare to engage discreetly."

The response on the other end was swift and professional. The guards from Vanguard Haven had anticipated the possibility of sabotage, and they were already stationed nearby, blending in with the crowd. Liana's quick actions ensured they would be ready.

Astron, meanwhile, returned to the team, his posture relaxed but his eyes sharp. He subtly scanned the area again, keeping track of the movements of the suspicious individuals while answering more questions from the reporters.

As the guards began to move into position, the atmosphere around the stage remained deceptively calm. The team continued their interviews, unaware of the threat lurking in the background.

## Chapter 555 124.2 - Fame (2)

As Astron returned to the group, the barrage of questions from the reporters resumed almost immediately. But this time, the tone shifted. Instead of focusing on the team's accomplishments or the intense battles they'd just fought, the questions began to veer into more personal territory.

A reporter from a lifestyle magazine leaned in with a playful grin. "Astron, you've got quite the fanbase growing. Everyone's wondering—how do you keep your face looking so flawless after all

these intense dungeon clears? Is there a secret behind your striking appearance, especially those unique purple eyes?"

Astron's eyes flickered slightly, but he maintained his calm demeanor. He wasn't unfamiliar with these kinds of questions, but it was clear they were digging for something more. Before he could answer, another reporter jumped in.

"And speaking of your appearance, we've been hearing rumors that your romantic life has caught some attention. Can you share if there's anyone special? Maybe someone from your time at Arcadia Hunter Academy?"

Astron remained silent for a moment, but he could already sense where the questions were heading. The reporters, now emboldened by the relaxed atmosphere, continued.

"Word is you were seen with Irina Emberheart, one of the most powerful heirs in the Federation. There were even pictures of you walking with her—anything you'd like to share about your relationship with her? Are you close with the other heirs as well?"

The mention of Irina Emberheart made Astron pause internally, but outwardly, he kept his expression neutral. He had expected the media to dig into his past eventually, but the personal nature of these questions was clearly designed to provoke a response.

'So, they did their research.'

He took a slow breath before addressing them, his voice measured and calm. "As for my appearance and eyes, there's no special secret. It's just a result of being an Awakened, like many others. We undergo changes as our bodies adapt to the use of mana. The higher our rank, the more our appearance shifts due to the elimination of impurities."

The reporters listened attentively, but it was clear they were waiting for him to address the more personal questions.

"As for my time at Arcadia Hunter Academy," Astron continued, his tone steady, "I'm focused on my training and mission there, just as I am here. Yes, I've crossed paths with many people, including heirs like Irina Emberheart. But my priority is my growth as a Hunter, and that's where my focus remains."

He deliberately kept the mention of Irina vague, not offering any details about their relationship. The truth was far more complicated than any of the reporters could understand, and Astron had no intention of feeding the media frenzy around it.

One of the reporters, however, wasn't ready to drop the subject just yet. "So you and Irina are just... acquaintances? There's been a lot of speculation, especially with her reputation in the Federation. She's not someone who spends time with just anyone."

Astron's expression remained neutral, but there was an underlying firmness in his reply. "Irina Emberheart is a powerful figure, and I respect her abilities as a Hunter. Beyond that, I have nothing more to add."

His calm and controlled response didn't give the reporters the reaction they were hoping for, but it was clear that Astron wasn't going to indulge in any rumors or personal details.

The crowd buzzed with whispered discussions as the reporters scribbled down notes, but the focus began to shift again. They realized they wouldn't get much more from him on the topic of his personal life. Instead, they returned to safer ground, asking more about his time at Arcadia Hunter Academy and how his training there had shaped his abilities.

Just as Astron finished answering another question about his time at Arcadia Hunter Academy, the air shifted. A sudden tension crackled through the crowd, barely noticeable at first, but Astron's heightened senses picked it up immediately. His eyes flickered to the suspicious figures he had marked earlier, and in that moment, everything happened at once.

The group of saboteurs, all Awakened, sprang into action. Shouts filled the air, cutting through the chatter of the reporters. "Vanguard Haven, know your place!" one of them yelled, their voice laced with fury. The crowd erupted into chaos as the attackers launched a direct assault, targeting the reporters and anyone associated with the interview.

It was a blatant act of terrorism.

The first blast of mana surged toward the cluster of reporters, knocking some of them back with a forceful shockwave. The drones that had been hovering overhead for the live broadcast wobbled and crashed to the ground as the crowd scattered in fear. Several saboteurs, their bodies radiating dark mana, charged forward, their intentions clear.

Astron's instincts kicked in immediately. He moved like lightning, positioning himself between the saboteurs and the panicked reporters. "Everyone, get behind me!" he commanded, his voice cutting through the chaos.

Dorian, despite his exhaustion, was already drawing his blades, his expression sharp as he assessed the attackers. "Damn it! These guys are Awakened!" he cursed, moving to cover the other flank of the team.

Kurt and Gareth were quick to form a defensive line, raising their shields to protect the retreating reporters. Elena and Lila, though equally drained from the dungeon, were already gathering their mana, preparing to support the team.

One of the saboteurs, his eyes wild with rage, lunged at the nearest reporter with a glowing fist, but Astron intercepted him with a swift, precise movement. His dagger flashed in the air, deflecting the attacker's blow before delivering a calculated strike to the side, sending the man sprawling into the ground.

More shouts erupted as the attackers pressed their assault. "Vanguard Haven has overstepped its bounds! Daring to resort to illegal tactics like sacrificing people in the dungeon!" They aimed not just at the reporters but at anyone wearing the guild's insignia, turning the situation into a full-on skirmish.

Astron moved fluidly through the chaos, issuing orders as he fought. "Dorian, cut off their right flank! Gareth, reinforce the barrier—keep them away from the non-combatants!" His voice was calm but commanding, even as he engaged another attacker, his daggers flashing with deadly precision.

The saboteurs, though clearly skilled, were reckless, relying on brute force and rage to fuel their attacks. One of them, a larger man wielding a club of condensed mana, charged at Kurt, bellowing angrily. "You think you can stand above us?!"

Kurt gritted his teeth, his shield barely holding up against the ferocious strike. "I've had enough of this," he growled, shoving the attacker back with a powerful counterstrike, sending the man stumbling.

Elena unleashed a torrent of magic, her staff glowing brightly as she cast a series of spells to hold back the advancing saboteurs. Fire and ice surged across the battlefield, slowing the attackers' movements and giving the team a much-needed reprieve.

In the midst of the chaos, Astron's sharp gaze flickered back to Liana, who had disappeared into the crowd earlier to alert the guild's security. She had anticipated this, and now, just as the saboteurs began to regroup for another push, Vanguard Haven's security force arrived.

A team of trained Hunters, led by one of the guild's top enforcers, surged into the fray, expertly cutting off the attackers and forcing them back. The tide of the battle began to shift in their favor, the saboteurs quickly finding themselves outnumbered and outmaneuvered.

One of the attackers, realizing their plan had failed, snarled in frustration. "This isn't over!" he spat before disappearing into a cloud of dark mana, using a teleportation technique to flee. The others followed suit, vanishing into the shadows, leaving behind only destruction and chaos.

As the dust settled, the battlefield fell eerily silent. The reporters, shaken but unharmed, began to collect themselves, while Vanguard Haven's team remained vigilant, ensuring no further threats lingered.

Liana reappeared, her expression grim but composed. "Is everyone alright?" she asked, her eyes scanning the team.

Liana turned to the reporters, her face calm but with a flicker of concern in her eyes. "Is everyone alright?" she asked, her voice steady as she scanned the group, making sure none of them were injured from the attack.

The reporters, still shaken but unharmed, began nodding their heads. "Yes, we're fine," one of them said. "Thanks to your team, nothing serious happened."

Shira Fenn stepped forward, her voice filled with admiration. "Your team intercepted the attack just in time. They were incredibly fast—almost too fast to follow." She gave a nod to Astron and the others. "I'm sure our viewers saw just how effective they were."

Some of the other reporters exchanged glances, their expressions ranging from relief to excitement. The attack had been broadcast live, and while dangerous, it had given them exactly the kind of story that would capture attention. A few even smiled, realizing they had exclusive footage of a terrorist attack and a swift counter from Vanguard Haven's elite team.

"This will make headlines for sure," one of the reporters muttered, still gripping their notepad tightly.

Liana, sensing the opportunism but maintaining her professionalism, gave them a firm nod. "I'm glad everyone's safe, but for now, the team is exhausted. I'm afraid today's interviews will have to be cut short. They've been through a lot, and they need time to rest and recover."

The reporters, understanding the situation, nodded in agreement. They had enough material to work with, and the live broadcast of the attack had more than fulfilled their expectations. One by one, they began to wrap up their reports and sign off from their broadcasts.

Shira gave Liana a respectful nod. "Thank you for your time, and thank the team for their incredible work. This was... quite an eventful day."

Liana smiled faintly, though there was a trace of exhaustion in her eyes. "Thank you for your understanding. I'll be sure to pass that along."

As the last of the reporters packed up their equipment and began to leave, the atmosphere around the gate finally started to calm. Liana escorted them out, ensuring they were safely on their way before turning back to the team. The crowd dissipated, and the chaos of the earlier attack slowly faded into the cold night.

With the area cleared and the reporters gone, Liana returned to the team, her expression softening slightly. "Let's get you all back to the guild. You've done enough for today."

But on the way, she heard Astron mumbling.

"That was quite a good plan."

Liana's smile stiffened for a moment, but she kept her composure as she turned to face Astron. "What do you mean by that?" she asked, her tone light but with an edge of curiosity.

Astron glanced at her, his expression unreadable, but his voice carried a subtle hint of amusement. "It was a well-executed plan, that's all. The stage was perfectly set. The attack, the timing, the media—it all worked together. Don't you think?"

For a moment, Liana said nothing, studying him carefully. Her eyes flickered with a mix of acknowledgment and resignation. Finally, she let out a soft sigh, her shoulders relaxing slightly. "You saw right through it, didn't you?"

Astron gave a small shrug, his gaze calm but sharp. "It wasn't that difficult to figure out. The sudden increase in media interest and the reporters conveniently being here just when the attack happened—all pointed to a bigger plan. However, you could just inform me if you wanted to create such an attack out of nowhere to attract more clout. At the very least, the team could be prepared."

"Then we would lose the authenticity."

"Indeed."

Astron spoke, but something was making him tense once again.

SHIVER!

Once again, his senses were telling him that something was wrong. Yet he did not know what it was.

Until midnight, when he got a call from a certain someone.

Chapter 556 124.3 - Fame (2)

<Chamber of the Emberheart, Third Week>

The chamber pulsed with ancient energy, its very walls alive with the history and power of the Emberheart lineage. The swirling fires that filled the air were not just flames—they were a manifestation of centuries of power, burning in different hues, each one a test of strength, endurance, and will.

In the center, surrounded by the blazing heat, stood Irina. Her body was drenched in sweat, her muscles trembling from the exertion, but her mind was focused, her eyes narrowed in determination.

The white fire of the chamber, the highest and most fearsome level of flame, crackled before her, its light casting eerie shadows across her face.

The burning sensation gnawed at her skin, as if every inch of her body was being seared by the flames. But there was no retreat in her. She had endured this pain for days now, and though it still hurt—though every breath felt like inhaling fire—she could feel the difference.

She was making progress.

'I must not fall behind,' she reminded herself once more, gritting her teeth against the pain. She could sense her own fire rising inside her, the flame of her lineage struggling to emerge against the overwhelming heat of the chamber.

Irina inhaled deeply, feeling the pulse of power inside her chest, and let it out slowly as she extended her hand toward the white flames. Her fire, a brilliant ember-red, ignited in her palm. She could feel its familiar warmth, the fire of her bloodline. And then, she thrust it forward to meet the white flames.

For a moment—just a fraction of a second—her fire held. It was there, blazing defiantly against the white fire that had devoured her so many times before.

'One millisecond.'

The thought flickered through her mind as her fire was consumed, extinguished as quickly as it had appeared. But she had seen it, felt it—a single moment where her flame had held, lasting just a little longer than it had the day before.

She smiled to herself, her chest heaving from the effort. One millisecond. It was barely noticeable, barely anything at all, but to Irina, it was proof. Proof that her strength was growing. Proof that she was getting closer to mastering the fire that had burned within her family for generations.

'One millisecond more than yesterday.'

Her skin still burned, the searing pain still radiating through her body, but she could feel the subtle change in her resistance. Her body was adapting. Where before she felt as though she was being consumed by the white fire, now she felt as though she was beginning to push back, if only by the smallest margin.

She ignited her fire again, this time with more resolve. It was still devoured in an instant, but she wasn't discouraged. Each attempt brought her closer, each failure was a step forward. She could feel the fire of the Emberheart bloodline surging through her veins, resisting the chamber's flames, becoming stronger, more resilient.

Irina closed her eyes, focusing inward, letting the fire burn her skin as she gritted her teeth and pushed her own flame outward. She knew what she was fighting for. She knew that this pain was temporary, and the strength she was gaining would last far beyond these moments of torment.

'Just one more millisecond. One more.'

Her fire blazed again, devoured just as quickly, but that tiny progress—one millisecond—was all she needed to push herself forward.

The next time, it would be two. Then three.

In the end, one day, her fire would be the one that would be devouring this white fire.

'Once that happens.....'

She would be the real master of Emberheart.

CREAK!

The familiar sound of the chamber door creaking open broke Irina's concentration. Her eyes snapped open, the glow of the white flames reflecting in them as she turned to face the entrance.

Esme stepped into the chamber, her presence calm and composed despite the oppressive heat that would have overwhelmed anyone else. It was a testament to her own strength that she could enter this space with such ease. The tray in her hands bore the usual items Irina needed to replenish herself after each session—vials of healing elixirs, rare herbs, and enchanted tonics crafted by the finest alchemists.

"Young Miss," Esme greeted her, her tone formal and soft. "It is time for your recovery."

Irina nodded, extinguishing her flames and letting out a slow breath as the tension in her body began to ease. Her muscles still trembled from the exertion, and her skin tingled with the sensation of having been scorched, though not quite burnt. The progress she had made in her resistance to the white fire was undeniable, but the pain was still very real.

She glanced at Esme, her body still tingling with the aftermath of the flames. "You're a little early today," Irina noted, her voice slightly raspy from the intensity of the training.

Esme offered a small, respectful bow. "I thought it prudent to ensure you had sufficient time to recover. You have been pushing yourself harder than usual."

"..." Irina did not give any answer as she looked at Esme. Recently, since she was in her family's mansion, those feelings that she had cultivated in childhood, or when she was tired, were coming back.

The memories of the time when the same person before her turned her back to her.

They were becoming vivid once more.

'Sigh.....'

It was really hard for Irina to keep all those thoughts to herself and get rid of them when she was constantly seeing her serving.

'But, this is how it needs to be.'

Esme's expression remained neutral, but there was a flicker of concern in her eyes. "You are making remarkable progress, Young Miss. But even you need rest."

Irina sighed, knowing Esme was right.

'Tsk.'

As much as she hated to admit it, her body was reaching its limits, and pushing herself too far could lead to catastrophic results. She needed to recover if she wanted to continue her progress tomorrow.

Also.....Since it was the 7th day, that meant that she could talk to him.

She reached for the tray, picking up the first vial—a high-ranking elixir designed to accelerate healing and fortify her mana reserves. Next came the rare herb, finely ground and mixed into a paste. Irina consumed it without hesitation, the taste bitter but familiar. Finally, she took the last vial, a powerful concoction specifically designed to restore the strength of her mana channels, which had been strained to their limits in her battle against the white flames.

She could feel its effects almost immediately, the tension in her chest easing as her mana flow stabilized.

Esme watched silently as Irina completed the ritual, her gaze steady but thoughtful.

After a few moments of silence, Irina rose to her feet, her body still sore but noticeably lighter. "Let's head out."

Irina stepped out of the chamber, her body still feeling the lingering effects of the white flames. But the moment she was outside, the fresh, cool air washed over her, and it felt like a balm against her skin. She took a deep breath, her chest rising and falling as the tension slowly ebbed away.

The sky above was painted in hues of orange and pink as the sun began its descent. It wasn't quite evening yet, but the world was in that peaceful in-between, where the light was soft, and the shadows were long. Last week, by the time she emerged, it had been night, the moon high in the sky. But today, she had a little more time.

'A small blessing,' she thought, her steps light as she moved further away from the chamber.

Esme followed a few paces behind, as was her custom, her silent presence a constant. Irina glanced over her shoulder at her attendant but quickly turned her attention back to the path ahead.

The Emberheart estate stretched out before her, vast and beautiful, yet it felt suffocating at times. Growing up here, she had always been surrounded by expectations, rules, and the weight of her family's legacy. But now, as she walked under the setting sun, she felt a brief moment of freedom. It wasn't much, but it was enough to clear her mind before her next conversation.

She turned down a familiar path that led toward the estate's gardens. This was her favorite spot—an oasis of calm amidst the intensity of her training. As she walked, the scent of flowers filled the air, mingling with the crisp breeze, and for a moment, the weight of her responsibilities felt a little lighter.

'Let's call him.'

It was a little bit earlier than usual, but that was fine.

Irina walked through the gardens, her fingers hovering over the call button for a moment before she pressed it. The familiar ring echoed in her ear, but instead of hearing his voice, a message popped up: "The person you are calling cannot be reached at this time."

She stared at the screen for a moment, then let out a small sigh, her lips curving into a slight frown. 'He's probably busy,' she thought, nodding to herself. After all, she had called earlier than their usual time.

'Fine. I'll just wait.'

With that decision, she headed back to her quarters, deciding to take the time to have her meal and relax a little. After all, she had just come out of the chamber, and her body was still sore from the intensity of her training. A bath and some food would do her good.

Once she was back inside, the familiar scent of freshly cooked food filled the air. The staff had already prepared her meal, and the table was neatly set for her. Irina sat down, taking a moment to enjoy the food before her mind wandered back to Astron and the odd feeling that had lingered after her call went unanswered.

As she ate, she pulled up her tablet and started browsing the school forums, catching up on any news or gossip she had missed during her time in seclusion. Her eyes scanned the headlines, half-focused on the articles that flitted past the screen.

But then, something caught her attention. A headline, accompanied by a familiar image, appeared in front of her: "Irina Emberheart and Mysterious Boy Spotted Together—Who is the Dark Horse at Arcadia Academy?"

Irina's hand froze mid-bite as she stared at the image. It was a photo of her and Astron, taken in the academy. She recognized the moment instantly—one of the rare times they had been seen together outside of their usual routines.

'Another one of these,' she thought with mild annoyance. It wasn't the first time she had seen gossip about her circulating online. Being an Emberheart meant that she was always in the spotlight, and tabloids had been writing about her for as long as she could remember. Her life was a constant topic of speculation, and normally, she had no problem brushing it off.

But something about this article was different.

Normally, such gossip articles needed some sort of trigger to pop up—some event, some public appearance. But she had been in seclusion for the past two weeks. She hadn't been seen in public at all. So, why now?

Curious, she scrolled down to read more of the article, and that's when she saw it.

[A newly rising star of Vanguard Haven? Who is Astron Natusalune?]

This time, it was about Astron.

Chapter 557 124.4 - Fame (2)

"A Newly Rising Star of Vanguard Haven? Who is Astron Natusalune?"

This time, the article was not focused on her but on Astron. Normally, she was used to being the center of attention in these gossip columns, with journalists speculating on her personal life, alliances, and family matters. But this... this was different.

The article delved into Astron's recent activities, detailing his involvement with the guild, Vanguard Haven, which had become the subject of increasing attention due to its successful dungeon clearings and high-profile missions. The fact that Astron was affiliated with them, despite being a first-year student at Arcadia Hunter Academy, seemed to be the trigger for this newfound scrutiny.

"Astron Natusalune, a promising young intern at Arcadia Hunter Academy, has recently made waves in Nexaira City's Hunter circles due to his affiliation with Vanguard Haven. This guild,

known for taking on high-risk dungeons and its meteoric rise in rankings, has added a new dimension to the academy freshman's reputation."

The article highlighted his recent achievements, from his performance in the academy to his involvement with Vanguard Haven, painting him as a rising talent in the Hunter world. But it wasn't just praise—it was also filled with thinly veiled skepticism.

"Despite his low ranking within the academy, Astron Natusalune has caught the attention of several powerful figures. His meteoric rise within Vanguard Haven has sparked speculation about his abilities and connections, with many wondering if he's simply lucky—or if there's more to his story."

"Moreover, Astron's close association with Irina Emberheart, heiress of the powerful Emberheart family, has raised eyebrows. How has an orphan with no notable background found himself amidst some of the most influential circles of Nexaira? What is the nature of his relationship with the Emberheart family? Is there more behind his sudden rise in status?"

The tone was insidious, casting doubt on Astron's merits as if implying that his accomplishments were due to his connection with her rather than his own skills.

'They are trying to undermine him.'

It was evident that this article was written by a media organization that was rather hostile to him.

Irina had long since grown accustomed to seeing her name splashed across headlines, often twisted and manipulated to suit the narrative of whatever media outlet had decided to take aim at her. She had been forced to get used to it over the years—rumors, innuendos, and outright lies were the price one paid for being in the spotlight, especially when you belonged to a family like the Emberhearts. But seeing Astron caught in the crossfire of these media attacks was different.

Her fingers hovered over the screen, her irritation bubbling just beneath the surface as she scrolled through the article. 'They're trying to undermine him,' she thought again, this time with a sharper edge to her anger.

It was clear that whoever wrote this piece had an agenda, an attempt to frame Astron's recent successes as anything but his own doing. It was the same tactic they'd used on her in the past—paint them as entitled, unworthy, their accomplishments a product of their connections rather than their own skill.

But this wasn't about her. Astron was different. He didn't care about media or gossip. She had seen how rumors about him spread back at the academy, how people whispered about his strange abilities and his lack of connections, and he had never so much as flinched.

'He won't care about this,' Irina reminded herself. He had bigger things on his mind. But still, it bothered her. Not because she thought he'd be hurt by it, but because it was unfair. He worked harder than anyone she knew, and the idea that someone would try to tear him down just to sell a story made her blood boil.

But then her eyes caught the headline again: "A Newly Rising Star of Vanguard Haven?"

She paused, her curiosity piqued. Vanguard Haven—it wasn't a name she was familiar with. And that was odd, given her connections. The article had mentioned the guild's recent rise in popularity, but she hadn't heard much about it until now. That was unusual in and of itself. How had Astron become involved with them, and why hadn't she known about it sooner?

'What is this guild up to?' she wondered. If they were tied to Astron, they were worth investigating.

Irina leaned back in her chair, her fingers tapping lightly on the armrest as she scrolled through the articles about Vanguard Haven. The guild's rise to prominence seemed steady, with numerous reports praising its accomplishments in clearing high-level dungeons and taking on increasingly difficult missions. It was impressive, no doubt, but in her mind, it was far from extraordinary. After all, she was an Emberheart, and her standards were... considerably higher.

'They've done well for a B-rank guild,' she thought. For most people, their rise would be something to marvel at, but for Irina, it barely scratched the surface of what true power meant. The Emberheart family, after all, was one of the most influential and formidable families in the Hunter world. Their reach extended far beyond that of a mid-tier guild like Vanguard Haven. In her world, the kind of success Vanguard Haven was experiencing was just the beginning.

As she continued reading, her curiosity about the guild's structure and leadership began to wane. Nothing particularly caught her attention until she stumbled upon a series of articles about Astron himself. At first, it was just a mention of his recent rise in popularity within the guild, but as she clicked further, the tone of the articles began to change.

A few clicks later, she found herself on social media, where the conversation had taken a sharp turn from the professional to the personal.

Photos of Astron began to surface—some real, some clearly edited—but all of them focused on his appearance. His chiseled features, his striking purple eyes, his enigmatic presence.

There were threads of girls—fangirls, really—fawning over him, posting everything from screenshots of his recent dungeon runs to blatantly photoshopped images that turned him into some sort of fantasy heartthrob.

One image showed him mid-battle, his eyes glowing as he fought. Another was an obviously edited picture of him shirtless, standing on a mountain peak, with comments like "Hunter of my dreams" and "Astron, marry me!" flooding the page.

Irina's eyes narrowed as she scrolled through the comments, her irritation rising again. "Seriously?" she muttered to herself.

Irina tossed the tablet onto her bed with an exasperated sigh, her irritation reaching a boiling point. The sheer amount of attention Astron was getting—fangirls fawning over him, those ridiculous photos, the countless comments—was more than just annoying; it was infuriating.

'Why is everyone so obsessed with him?' she thought, pacing back and forth in her room, her mind unable to let go of the frustration.

While she knew Astron wouldn't care about the attention, and would likely brush it off with his usual nonchalance, that didn't make it any easier for her to deal with. The thought of strangers turning him into some sort of heartthrob, fantasizing about him, commenting as if they had any right to, was enough to make her blood boil.

'How is it that he—of all people—has managed to get this much attention?' she wondered. It wasn't just about the articles or the social media buzz. It was the idea that they—people who didn't even know him—were talking about him as if they had any understanding of who he really was.

She knew Astron, truly knew him. His strengths, his weaknesses, his motivations. They didn't. They only saw a façade, an image crafted by the media and their own fantasies.

'Bastard...' she thought with a frown. 'He's out there, doing who knows what, while I'm stuck here, dealing with all this nonsense.'

With her meal finished and her patience worn thin, Irina stood up, running her hands through her fiery red hair as she made her way toward the bathroom. She needed to calm down, and a hot bath was the perfect way to relax after the grueling day she'd had in the chamber. But even as she prepared to unwind, her thoughts kept circling back to him.

'Why am I getting so worked up over this?' she thought, slipping out of her clothes and stepping into the bath.

As the warm water enveloped her, she sank into its comforting embrace, hoping it would help soothe her mind. But even as the heat relaxed her muscles, her thoughts remained tangled in frustration.

"Tsk."

And she couldn't resist the urge. The more she thought about it, the more curious she became. Even if it irritated her, she wanted to know more.

With a frustrated sigh, Irina reached for her smartwatch, pulling it over to her. Despite her annoyance at all the attention Astron was getting, a small part of her couldn't help but feel something else—an odd sense of satisfaction.

'He's finally starting to become a part of this world,' she thought, her finger hovering over the social media feed. 'He's always been so detached, so distant. And now, look at him. People are noticing him.'

She couldn't deny it: Astron becoming more well-known, more normal in the eyes of the public, was something she hadn't expected but welcomed nonetheless. Even if the attention annoyed her, it was also proof that he was beginning to connect with this world, with her world.

'Maybe it's not all bad,' she mused, scrolling through the pictures again. Despite the fangirls' over-the-top reactions and the ridiculous photos, there was something strangely comforting in seeing Astron garner this attention. It meant he wasn't as unreachable as he used to be.

Though he was still someone who kept himself distant, more reserved than others, these little things—these moments of recognition—were tethering him to reality. They were keeping him grounded in ways she hadn't been able to before.

'But damn, they're still annoying,' she thought, rolling her eyes at the comments. Yet, a small smile tugged at her lips. In some twisted way, this was progress.

As Irina continued scrolling, her eyes caught sight of a sudden notification on the screen—an announcement of a live broadcast. The headline immediately grabbed her attention.

[Astron Natusalune: A Rising Star Emerges from a Rank-6 Gate]

Without hesitation, Irina tapped the link, and the live feed opened. Her eyes widened as the scene played out before her. There was Astron, standing right in front of the gate, surrounded by the broadcast crew. His face, though slightly fatigued and marked with the wear of battle, was as stoic as ever.

His usual cold, detached demeanor was on full display, his sharp purple eyes locked on the camera with the same intensity he carried into battle. But what made Irina's breath hitch was hearing his voice through the feed.

"Irina Emberheart is a powerful figure, and I respect her abilities as a Hunter. Beyond that, I have nothing more to add."

Her eyebrow twitched.

Chapter 558 124.5 - Fame (2)

"Irina Emberheart is a powerful figure, and I respect her abilities as a Hunter. Beyond that, I have nothing more to add."

Her eyebrow twitched.

Her eyebrow twitched, but not because she didn't understand Astron. No, she understood him all too well. Astron wasn't someone who shared his personal life with others; in fact, she was certain he had never spoken to anyone about the things that had transpired between them. He was private and closed off, and this was just another example of that.

The reason for her annoyance, though, was something else entirely. Watching him stand there, composed and detached, delivering a perfectly crafted lie with that cold, calm expression of his—it

irked her. Even from behind the screen, she could see how effortlessly he could hide the truth. How easily he could brush everything aside without a single tell.

'Liar,' she thought, her eyes narrowing slightly.

Part of her wanted him to acknowledge it—just a little. To admit, even subtly, that there was more between them than just respect for her abilities as a Hunter. But no, he had given nothing away. No recognition of their connection, no hint of what lay beneath the surface.

And while she could understand why he would say something like that, it didn't make it any less frustrating. A small part of her, deep down, wanted him to at least show some reaction, to let the world know that they were something more. Even if it wasn't explicit, she wanted acknowledgment.

'You really are good at lying,' she thought, a slight grin tugging at the corner of her lips. But the grin wasn't one of amusement—it was one of annoyance and determination.

'Fine. You can pretend like that now, but you'll owe me for this.' She was already planning her revenge. Astron was going to pay for that little stunt. After all, she deserved something in return for his public coldness, didn't she?

After staying in the bath a little longer, the warmth soaking into her muscles and helping her relax, Irina's thoughts still simmered with annoyance. She stared up at the ceiling, letting the steam curl around her, but the image of Astron's stoic face in that broadcast lingered in her mind.

'You owe me,' she repeated to herself with a silent smirk.

Eventually, she decided it was time. Glancing at her smartwatch, she noticed the hour—the promised time for their call. Without hesitating, she tapped her screen and initiated the call.

It rang once. Twice.

Then, the familiar voice answered. —"You're right on time today," Astron remarked, his tone neutral as always but with that faint, unmistakable trace of amusement that only she could pick up on.

Irina took a deep breath, masking her irritation as best she could. "Of course I am. I always keep my promises, unlike some people."

—"Is that so?" Astron replied, clearly picking up on her tone. —"What's this about?"

Irina leaned back, closing her eyes for a moment as the warm bathwater swirled around her. "Oh, nothing," she said, her voice a touch too sweet. "Just something I saw earlier... a certain broadcast."

There was a slight pause on the other end of the line, the kind of silence that made her grin. —"Ah, the broadcast," Astron said slowly. —"I see you've been keeping up with the news."

"Of course," Irina responded, her tone growing sharper. "And I couldn't help but notice how easily you lied. It's almost like second nature to you."

—"I wouldn't call it lying," Astron countered smoothly.

Irina smirked to herself, already predicting his next move. She knew how Astron always managed to wriggle his way out of things with cold, hard logic. Before he could even say it, she cut in. "You didn't lie, you just didn't answer truthfully."

—"That's correct," Astron replied, unfazed. His tone was as calm as ever, as if he knew exactly where this conversation was headed.

Irina's annoyance flared slightly at his nonchalance. "You could have at least shown something, you know," she pressed, her voice turning sharp. "But no, of course you won't. You're probably enjoying all that attention, aren't you?"

—"What attention?" Astron asked, genuinely sounding confused, which only served to irritate her more.

Irina scoffed. "Oh, please. You didn't notice? All those girls fawning over you online, posting pictures of you from the broadcast? Some of those edits are just ridiculous. Honestly, Hunter of my dreams? Astron, marry me?" Her voice was dripping with sarcasm, but underneath it was the sting of something else.

Astron paused for a moment, his usual unshaken demeanor still present. —"I didn't even notice," he said flatly.

But Irina was skeptical. Something about the way Astron was speaking made her think that this bastard was once again playing with words.

"You didn't know?"

Irina's eyes narrowed as she waited for his response, sensing that familiar pause—one that always seemed to precede a careful choice of words.

Astron finally replied, his voice calm. –"I didn't know... directly."

She scoffed again, leaning forward slightly as if he could feel the weight of her stare through the phone. "So you did know. Why are you lying, then?"

–"I didn't lie," Astron corrected smoothly. –"I really didn't notice it myself. I was informed by others that such a thing was happening."

Irina huffed in irritation, but before she could continue, Astron cut her off. –"Why is this even important? It's not like the opinions of other people or whatever they're saying matters."

She opened her mouth to respond but stopped herself for a moment, feeling the frustration bubble up again. "It's annoying," she began, but once again, Astron didn't let her finish.

–"Annoying? Irina, you're not any different," he said, his tone steady but pointed. –"You've got a lot of fans, probably more than I ever will. With your reputation, there are countless people out there watching you, admiring you."

Irina paused, taken aback for a moment. He wasn't wrong, of course. She had been dealing with public attention her entire life, but something about hearing him say it irked her.

"That's not the point," she retorted. "They're just—"

–"It is the point," Astron interrupted again. –"You've always had more eyes on you than I ever did. Why should this be any different?"

Irina clenched her jaw, knowing Astron was right, but she still couldn't let it go. "I don't enjoy that kind of attention," she pushed back. "You know that. It's just because of my lineage, not because of who I am."

—"And I'm the same," Astron replied, his voice level. —"It's just for the sake of business. None of that attention means anything to me."

She let out a frustrated sigh. "But it's still annoying seeing the person you care about getting all that attention from others while you're stuck dealing with the same boring routine."

Astron was silent for a beat before his calm voice returned. —"Same."

Irina continued to ramble, her voice rising slightly as her frustration simmered beneath the surface. "Do you know how annoying it is to hear about you from the internet? Seeing everyone else talking about you like they know something, while I'm sitting here, piecing together scraps of your life like some outsider?" She clenched her fist, feeling the warmth of the bathwater still against her skin, though her mind was anything but calm.

"You didn't even bother telling me anything. Not a word, not a hint." Her words came fast, each one tinged with frustration and confusion. "Instead, I get to hear about it from strangers who don't know anything about who you really are."

But then, it registered.

"Same."

Astron's last word echoed in her mind.

She froze, the rant dying on her lips. For a moment, it didn't register what he had said, but as the silence stretched, her brain finally processed it.

Slowly, her eyes widened, and the irritation that had fueled her words began to shift into something else—something deeper.

"Same?" she repeated softly, her voice barely a whisper.

Irina's heart was pounding as she repeated the word, her mind spinning with the possibilities. "Same?" she asked, her voice a little louder, more insistent this time.

But instead of answering directly, Astron played it cool, as if the word had slipped out unintentionally. –"Hmm? What are you talking about?" His tone was smooth and calm, just like always.

Irina blinked, momentarily thrown off. "Don't 'what are you talking about' me!" she snapped, her frustration bubbling up again. "You said 'same.' What did you mean by that?"

A brief silence followed, and for a second, she wondered if she had imagined it. Maybe she was reading too much into it. After all, this was Astron—the master of deflection. He could easily brush it off as nothing like he always did.

But no, she wasn't going to let him get away with it this time.

"I know you said it, Astron." Her voice was sharper now, determined. "Don't act like you didn't."

Astron, still calm, responded in the same infuriatingly neutral tone. "I think you're imagining things, Irina."

Her jaw tightened, her irritation growing. "I'm not imagining anything. You said it." She leaned forward, gripping the edge of the bathtub, as if somehow that would bring her closer to him. "I heard you. What do you mean 'same'?"

Astron sighed on the other end of the line, his tone light, almost teasing. "You're really persistent, aren't you?"

Irina's eyes narrowed, suspicion growing. Something was off, and as she listened more carefully, she caught it—the subtle change in his tone. It was slight, barely noticeable to anyone else, but she had spent enough time with him to pick up on it. Beneath his calm facade, there was something else.

A smile.

He was smiling.

Her breath caught, and suddenly, all the pieces fell into place. The way he was deflecting, the way his voice held that faint trace of amusement—it all pointed to one thing.

He knew what he had said. He had meant it.

"You are laughing," she whispered.

—"I am not."

"No, you are."

Astron didn't deny it. —"Am I?"

Irina felt her heart skip a beat. She bit her lip, her frustration giving way to something warmer. "You can't hide that from me," she said, her voice softening as her earlier annoyance faded. "I can hear it in your voice."

There was a pause on the other end, and then, in that same calm, teasing tone, Astron replied, —"You're hearing things again, Irina."

But this time, she didn't press him. She didn't need to. The way his voice had shifted told her everything she needed to know.

'You.....I don't really understand why you are always like this.'

She really could not understand.

THUMP!

Why was this heart beating too fast just because of some words?

Yet as she looked at the reflection from the bathtub....

.....she found herself smiling too....

## Chapter 559 124.6 - Fame (2)

Irina stared at her reflection, the faint smile lingering on her lips as the warmth from her earlier annoyance settled into something softer, more intimate. Her heart still beat faster than she would like, but she couldn't deny the strange comfort she felt from this small exchange with Astron. Somehow, despite his walls, despite the distance he always kept, there were moments like this—moments where she could feel something more.

"Why do you always have to be like this?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

—"Like what?" came Astron's teasing reply, though the warmth in his tone was unmistakable.

Irina shook her head, realizing there was no point in pressing him further on that. He'd deflect as usual, and maybe that was fine for now. But there were still things she wanted to know. Her thoughts drifted back to the broadcast, to his involvement with that guild.

"Astron," she began, her voice more serious now, "that guild you're affiliated with... Why are you with them?"

There was a brief silence, but she knew he was still there, considering her question. When he finally answered, his tone had returned to that familiar calm neutrality.

—"I'm just doing my job, Irina. Repaying what I owe."

Repaying. The word stuck in her mind. It didn't sound like some deep allegiance or personal investment—it was just a transaction to him. A way to settle a debt. But that only raised more questions. Who did he owe, and why?

Her mind raced through the possibilities. She tried to recall everything she knew about Astron's past, which, admittedly, wasn't much. He was always so careful to keep his personal life hidden. But then, a memory surfaced—the final exams. The bulky Hunter she had seen, Garrett, standing tall and imposing, his presence almost suffocating, and the woman beside him.

'Could it be them?'

The realization hit her like a jolt of electricity. Garrett had been more than just a bystander. He hadn't acted like some mere observer during those exams and the way Astron had interacted with him... there was something deeper there, something personal.

"Garrett," she murmured to herself, the pieces slowly falling into place. Her gaze sharpened as she recalled the woman next to him, her aura one of quiet authority.

"They're the ones you're repaying, aren't they?" she asked suddenly, the question hanging between them.

—"You can say that, though that is not entirely, true."

She felt her heartbeat quicken again, her curiosity pushing her to ask, "Garrett... He's your guardian, isn't he?"

There was a slight pause before Astron answered, his voice calm but tinged with acknowledgment. —"That's correct."

Irina's mind raced, the pieces clicking into place. But if that was true, then... "Then if it's not entirely true," she continued, her tone growing sharper, "does that mean that woman is involved too?"

Astron's response was measured, almost too casual. —"Partially."

Partially? Irina's brows furrowed in irritation. Why did he always have to speak in riddles? It was like he enjoyed being just cryptic enough to drive her crazy. "Why are you speaking in riddles?" she demanded, her annoyance creeping back into her voice. "Just tell me what's going on instead of being all mysterious."

There was a faint sound on the other end, almost imperceptible, but she knew what it was—he was smiling again. —"Because it's fun."

Irina felt a surge of frustration, her fingers tightening around the edge of the tub. "Fun?" she scoffed, her voice laced with irritation. "I'm not having fun."

But even as she said the words, she knew it wasn't entirely true. Beneath her frustration, there was a flicker of something else, something warmer. She was enjoying this—enjoying the way he was slowly letting his guard down, even if it was in the most infuriating way possible.

Still, she refused to let him off that easily. "You're impossible, you know that?"

Astron's voice, though still calm, held that faint trace of amusement. —"Maybe."

Irina sighed, sinking deeper into the warm water, her irritation fading as quickly as it had come. She could never stay mad at him for long, especially when he was like this. "One of these days," she muttered, "I'm going to make you answer me properly."

—"We'll see about that," Astron replied smoothly, and she could almost hear the smile in his voice again.

"Bastard. I'll make you do all my errands; just wait. There's only one week left," Irina muttered with a sly grin, her mind already racing with ideas. The promised time was fast approaching, and the thought of Astron—usually so distant and composed—being at her beck and call for an entire week was too good to pass up.

She could picture it now: sending him on ridiculous tasks, watching his stoic face as he carried out her every whim, pretending like he wasn't secretly annoyed. A small, almost wicked smile crept onto her lips as she imagined all the ways she could tease him.

"Maybe I'll make you hold all my bags while I shop," she mused aloud, her voice playful. "Or you could fetch me snacks whenever I want. Oh, and let's not forget polishing my boots. You'll look so dignified doing that."

Astron's calm voice cut through her fantasy still tinged with that faint amusement. —"Somehow, it feels like the contents of the promise have... changed."

Irina let out a soft laugh, sinking deeper into the warmth of the bathwater. "Changed? No way. I'm just getting creative. The promise was for you to listen to me for a week, right? And that means doing everything I say."

—"That's one way to interpret it," Astron replied, his tone so neutral that it only made her more determined to break through his cool exterior. "But I don't remember agreeing to be your personal servant."

"Too late," she said with a satisfied hum. "It's happening, Astron. Just you wait."

—"I will be waiting."

\*\*\*\*\*

Toren leaned back in his chair, rubbing his temples as he stared at the report in front of him. The dim light of his office cast shadows over his tired features, but his eyes gleamed with satisfaction. Liana sat beside him, her usual composed expression betraying a hint of weariness. Across from them, Astron stood, arms crossed as he listened intently.

"Well," Toren began, his voice calm but filled with quiet pride, "we've done it. Our short-term goal has been achieved, and the results are better than we could've hoped for. Vanguard Haven is now the topic of discussion in every relevant circle, and our reputation is on the rise."

Liana nodded, glancing over at Astron before speaking. "The media coverage, the successful gate runs, and even the attack—everything played out perfectly. We're now seen as a guild that can handle tough situations, even with relatively inexperienced Hunters. The fact that the media positioned Astron as a key figure in all this only amplified the effect."

Toren looked over at Astron with a smile. "You, my friend, have had quite the impact. While you're a top-tier Hunter candidate since you are a student at Arcadia Hunter Academy, the fact that you're only a freshman means that much of your success has been attributed to Vanguard Haven's training. The media spun it brilliantly—they've made it seem like our guild molded you into the fighter you are."

Astron remained silent for a moment.

'Hmm....Not bad....'

He thought about the outcome, and he liked it quite well. He was relaying his background for future actions. Now, he would not become as suspicious as he was compared to before, and the organization would also cover him a lot more easily in the face of the media.

'Most likely, they even planned this to some extent.'

However, he did not mind that, as his goal was also the same.

"It worked out well," Astron finally said, his voice calm and measured. "The media companies knew exactly how to spin the story. I may have the potential, but they were quick to highlight that I haven't had extensive education yet. It's the perfect way to show that Vanguard Haven's training is what propelled me."

Toren chuckled, tapping the table. "And that's exactly what we wanted. The story is out there now, and people are buying into it. Your presence, combined with the team's performance, made us look like a guild capable of molding talent quickly and efficiently."

Liana added, "The attack was also a turning point. It wasn't just a typical dungeon report anymore—it became a narrative of how our team, under pressure, responded to an unexpected crisis. The media companies are all over it. That incident is now being used as proof of our readiness for more dangerous gates, and we've been contacted by side organizations who are rating us highly for how we handled the situation."

Astron raised an eyebrow. "And no one suspects that it was orchestrated?"

Liana shook her head. "Not at all. It was subtle enough to seem real but not so chaotic that it raised red flags. We've already heard positive feedback from the higher-ups in the Hunter community. The fact that we intercepted it so quickly helped. And, no one can trace it back."

"I see."

Toren stood from his seat, his imposing figure casting a long shadow over the room. With a satisfied grin, he extended his hand toward Astron. "You've done more than your share, Astron. Thanks to your efforts, everything is now as we intended. You've completed your end of the deal."

Astron met his gaze, then extended his hand to shake Toren's. The firm grip between them was a silent acknowledgment of the work they'd accomplished together. "It was a pleasure working with someone like you," Toren continued, his voice genuine. "You've not only helped elevate the guild but pushed the team beyond what we thought was possible."

Astron nodded, his expression calm but appreciative. "The time I've spent here was short, but it was a good experience. If the future allows it, I wouldn't mind working with Vanguard Haven again."

Toren chuckled lightly, clearly pleased. "We'll hold you to that. Doors will always be open for you here."

Liana, standing to the side, smiled. "You've helped us build something solid, Astron. We won't forget that."

Astron's eyes briefly scanned the room. While his role here was finished, the connections he had made and the impact he had left were not. "Good luck with the next steps," he said. "This is just the beginning."

"Let's hope we don't need it."

As Astron gave a final nod and turned toward the door, the weight of his departure settled over the room. His footsteps echoed softly in the quiet space, and for a brief moment, Toren and Liana watched him go, each understanding the significance of the moment.

With a soft click, the door closed behind him, leaving Toren and Liana alone in the room. The energy of the room shifted as the two exchanged glances.

"This kid.....Let's hope we can really keep him in the future."

Chapter 560 125.1 - Finally Free

As Astron walked down the corridor, ready to leave the guild behind, he received a message on his communicator. It was short but to the point: "Team's waiting to see you off."

He paused, slightly surprised. He hadn't expected the others to make a scene about his departure, but knowing them, it wasn't too shocking either. With a sigh, he adjusted his cloak and made his way toward the main hall where they were waiting.

As he rounded the corner, the team stood there, each of them showing various signs of fatigue from the recent battles, but all looking determined not to let him leave without saying goodbye.

Kurt, with his usual stoic expression, was the first to speak. "You're really leaving us, huh?"

Astron nodded, his calm demeanor unchanged. "That was the plan from the start."

Dorian, leaning casually against the wall, crossed his arms and grinned. "Still feels weird. You've only been with us a short time, but it feels like you've been part of this team forever. You sure you can't stay for a little longer?"

Astron mumbled, shaking his head. "Afraid not. I've got other obligations to get back to."

Elena stepped forward, her staff resting against her shoulder. "We wouldn't have cleared those rank-6 gates without you. We're going to miss having you around."

Lila, standing next to Elena, nodded in agreement. "You pushed us harder than anyone else. We're better Hunters because of it. Thanks, Astron."

Elena stepped forward, her staff resting against her shoulder. "We wouldn't have cleared those rank-6 gates without you. We're going to miss having you around."

Lila, standing next to Elena, nodded in agreement. "You pushed us harder than anyone else. We're better Hunters because of it. Thanks, Astron."

Gareth, usually the quiet one, chimed in as well. "We'll manage, but it's going to be different without you."

Astron met their gazes. "You're all strong enough. You don't need me to keep moving forward. Just trust in what you've learned."

Kurt gave a firm nod. "We will. But don't think we're letting you off that easy. The next time you're back, we'll be even stronger."

Dorian's grin widened. "And next time, we're buying the first round of drinks. No excuses."

Kurt stepped forward, his usually stoic expression tinged with a hint of humility. He looked directly at Astron, and for a moment, the weight of his thoughts was visible in his eyes.

"You know," he began, his voice steady but sincere, "in this short time, I've realized just how much I was lacking as a leader. I thought I had things under control, but you opened my eyes. I was too shortsighted, too comfortable. I didn't realize how much I was slacking—how much I was missing in the Hunter world. I wasn't pushing myself or the team hard enough."

Astron regarded him with his usual calm, but there was a flicker of understanding in his gaze. "No one can ever be sure of their progress, Kurt. Not completely. And that's the key—you can't let yourself get complacent. The moment you think you've got everything figured out, you stop growing."

Kurt nodded slowly, absorbing the words. "I get that now. It's about knowing that there's always more to learn, more to improve on."

"Well, it seems I don't need to say anything more."

Kurt let out a small breath, his gaze firm but grateful. "Knowing that you know nothing—I'll remember that. And next time, when you see us again, we'll be a team you can be proud of."

Astron gave him a nod, the faintest trace of a smile on his face. "You're already on the right path. Keep going."

You're already on the right path. Keep going."

The rest of the team, listening in, seemed to feel the weight of Kurt's words. They had all grown in their own ways, but hearing Kurt—who had been their anchor—acknowledge his own shortcomings reinforced how much they had all been through together.

As the conversation settled, the atmosphere became a little lighter. Dorian nudged Kurt with a grin. "So you're saying we were all slacking, huh? Guess we've got some work to do."

Kurt chuckled, shaking his head. "We've all got work to do."

Astron glanced around at the team one last time.

"Good luck," Astron said finally, turning toward the exit. "I'll be watching your progress."

With that, he walked away, leaving the team behind. But as they watched him go, they knew this wasn't the end—just a new beginning for all of them.

"But still.....being teammates with a guy like him, I guess I have one more thing to brag to my grandchildren in the future."

Dorian, ever the one to lighten the mood, smirked and clapped Kurt on the back. "Grandchildren? Why don't you start with a girlfriend first, old man? You might not make it that long at this rate."

Kurt shot him a mock glare. "Oh, don't start with that. I'll live long enough to see all you slackers fall behind."

Elena raised an eyebrow, trying and failing to suppress a smile. "Don't go jinxing yourself with that kind of talk, Kurt. Who knows, with how reckless you've been, you might not even live long enough for the girlfriend part."

The rest of the team chuckled, and even Gareth cracked a rare smile. Dorian, never one to miss an opportunity, leaned in with a playful grin. "Yeah, Kurt, maybe focus on surviving the next rank-6 gate before planning your legacy."

"Or," Lila chimed in with a teasing tone, "you could always settle down with one of those reporters. They seemed pretty impressed with you back there."

Kurt groaned, rubbing his face as the teasing continued. "You're all impossible," he muttered, though there was a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "First a girlfriend, then grandchildren—let's keep it in order."

Dorian winked. "Baby steps, my friend. Though, if you keep charging headfirst into danger, you might want to hurry up with that whole 'settling down' thing."

Elena lightly tapped Dorian's arm. "Stop saying ominous things, will you? We've had enough close calls for one day."

The team laughed, the tension of the earlier battles melting away in the warmth of their camaraderie. Even after all the hardships and the weight of Astron's departure, they found solace in

each other. Their shared experiences, the jokes, and the teasing reminded them that, despite everything, they still had each other.

As the laughter faded, Kurt shook his head, smiling. "All right, all right, enough with the doom and gloom. We've got more battles ahead, but we're ready. Let's keep moving forward."

"Yeah..."

\*\*\*\*\*

Why are there many people who want to become hunters, even knowing the dangers that those hunters face?

What is the primary reason for such a thing?

The answer lies in mostly two things: wealth and strength.

Firstly, the industry is heavily invested in, offering vast opportunities for financial gain. The life of a successful hunter provides immense improvement in living conditions, access to resources, and societal status. The sheer amount of money involved attracts many, as the rewards are seen as outweighing the risks.

Secondly, strength is crucial in their world. Physical power and combat ability are essential for survival and influence.

Yet, strength alone isn't sufficient for an average person. Without the money and resources that come with being a successful hunter, even the strongest individual would struggle to thrive in the dangerous environment in which hunters operate.

—"You have successfully completed your mission as promised; congratulations."

"Is that so?" I responded, sitting casually at my desk as Reina's hologram flickered in front of me, her usual calm yet commanding presence transmitted through the glowing projection.

—"That is right. You have exceeded the bar set for success. With the amount of media attention, Vanguard Haven can now be used as a proxy a lot more efficiently."

I nodded, letting the weight of her words sink in. This third mission had been the final piece of the deal I made with her. I'd kept my end of the bargain—three successful missions, media coverage to bolster Vanguard Haven's influence, and now, with my promise fulfilled, I was free to focus on what mattered to me.

"Then that settles it," I said, my tone flat but filled with satisfaction. "I've completed my part."

Reina's holographic figure studied me for a moment, her sharp gaze unwavering even through the distance. —"Yes, you have. You've earned the time you requested for yourself. The rest of the break is yours to do with as you please."

I leaned back in my chair, crossing my arms. "I appreciate you holding up your end of the agreement."

—"A promise is a promise," Reina replied, her voice carrying a sense of finality. —"Though I'm curious what you'll do with the time now that you have it. Training? Preparing for the upcoming semester?"

"Something like that," I answered.

—"You really will not answer, huh?"

She has been asking me about this for a while, though she met the same answer all the time. Though it is a bit risky to hide this from the organization, for now, I can't trust them fully.

It is important to keep my things to myself.

Reina leaned back slightly, her sharp gaze softening for the first time during the conversation. —"Fine, keep your secrets for now," she said, a hint of amusement in her voice. —"But let's talk about something more concrete—your payment."

I tilted my head, waiting for her to continue. Payment wasn't the primary reason I took on the missions, but it certainly didn't hurt to know how much my time was worth.

—"For your first two missions," she continued, her tone becoming more businesslike, —"since they were undercover, the payment will be done via Arcanum Credits. You'll be able to use those within the organization's system. Think of them as internal currency—useful for acquiring specialized gear, information, or even training sessions with top-tier instructors."

I nodded. Arcanum Credits were well-regarded within the organization, particularly for hunters like me who operated both inside and outside of the public eye. Having a reserve of those would be useful.

—"As for your third mission," Reina added, —"you'll be paid in both Arcanum Credits and Valer."

I raised an eyebrow at that. Valer was the primary currency for most regions, used by both guilds and mercenaries. Getting paid in Valer meant I could use the funds freely outside the organization, wherever I pleased. "And why the difference?"

—"Since your third mission involved Vanguard Haven, it's important to set an example," she explained. —"The guild is heavily invested in maintaining public trust, and that means they reward success handsomely. By associating yourself with them and performing well, it strengthens their reputation, and they want to show their appreciation."

I nodded again, understanding the broader implications. Vanguard Haven was keen on keeping its hunters well-compensated, especially when those hunters drew positive media attention, as I had done.

—"Additionally," Reina continued, a glint in her eyes, —"thanks to the positive feedback from Warden Toren, your pay will be higher than initially planned. He was impressed by your performance and the way you handled things under pressure."

I remained expressionless, but inwardly, I noted the significance of Toren's approval. It wasn't easy to impress someone like him.

—"For your two-day internship, you'll be rewarded with 2 million Valer."

I blinked, keeping my reaction measured. That was a significant sum, far more than I had anticipated. While the Arcanum Credits would help me navigate within the organization, the Valer gave me more freedom and options in the broader world.

—"The payment will be transferred to your account shortly," Reina concluded, her tone returning to its usual composed state. —"You've done well, Astron. Use the break wisely."

"I will," I replied, leaning back in my chair again. The weight of the rewards, both monetary and otherwise, hung in the air between us. But I knew Reina wasn't just talking about money. She was reminding me that with freedom came responsibility—and that the next steps I took would matter.

The hologram flickered once more before disappearing, leaving me alone in my room, now significantly wealthier and with a brief period of freedom ahead.

"Two million Valer...They really want to show off...."

Though I did not mind.

"Now, let's prepare."

The hunt for an undercover dog.....

It was the time.