

## H. Academy 651

### Chapter 651 143.1 - Voidborne

As Astron's body collapsed to the ground, his strength utterly spent, a strange pulse rippled through the air. From the fallen Void Dragon, a bubble of chaotic, purplish energy began to seep out, twisting and spiraling, moving with a malevolent intent toward him. The energy crackled, dense, and overwhelming, carrying with it the fury and essence of the defeated Primordial Demon.

Just as the dark energy neared Astron, a soft glow emanated from the necklace resting against his chest. From within it emerged the faint, ethereal form of Estelle, appearing more solid and composed than ever before. Her expression was a blend of sadness and faint regret as she regarded her unconscious brother, who lay battered and drained beneath her gaze.

"Brother..." she whispered, her voice gentle yet filled with an almost maternal warmth. Estelle reached out, brushing her hand softly along his face, her touch ghostly but filled with affection. "You're working really hard..." Her fingers trailed along his forehead, smoothing away the traces of strain and weariness that marred his features. A tender smile graced her lips, though sadness lingered in her eyes. "I'm sorry for not being able to show myself... yet."

She looked up, her gaze shifting to the chaotic energy hovering ominously in the air. The remnants of the Void Dragon's essence pulsed within it, wild and untamed. Estelle raised her hand, her fingers weaving through the currents of power as she steadied its chaotic flow.

"You've managed to conquer yet another one," she murmured, almost to herself, admiration and pride flickering in her gaze as she studied her brother. Then, with a calm resolve, she raised her hands, tracing intricate symbols in the air. "I shall guide this energy for you," she whispered, her voice laced with determination.

With each delicate movement of her fingers, Estelle directed the Void Dragon's energy toward Astron's body, guiding it with a practiced grace. The purplish aura wove through her hands, now refined and tempered, as she funneled it gently into Astron. The energy merged with him, its chaotic nature softened by her touch, flowing seamlessly into his body and intertwining with his essence.

As Estelle channeled the Void Dragon's energy toward Astron, a faint glow began to bloom above them. A small moon materialized in the air, illuminating the pair with a soft, mystical light. The colors shifted gently from green to red, from purple to blue, then to a muted grey before becoming a shimmering, translucent hue, casting an otherworldly glow that ebbed and flowed with her chants.

Her voice was low, melodic, woven with an ancient rhythm that seemed to resonate with the light itself:

"Vires lunaris, effunde mihi,

Ad fraternum cor, in unitate tua,

Fluere tranquillus, sanguine fortis,

Infunde potentiam, manere victoris."

With each phrase, her hands moved delicately, guiding the pulsing energy into Astron's body. The raw essence of the Void Dragon, once chaotic and wild, now flowed gently, tempered, and refined under her careful touch, weaving itself into Astron's very being. Estelle's face held a soft smile, but she whispered to herself, her voice a faint murmur carried by the glow of the moonlight.

"If you take on too much, you'll burst, little brother," she sighed softly, almost chiding yet fond. "You're pushing yourself so hard... try to be more careful."

Despite her gentle reprimand, her expression was one of unwavering affection. Her fingers traced along his chest, weaving patterns to guide the energy into his core, allowing it to settle without overwhelming him. The moon above them began to pulse with each color, echoing her words, her essence, and her love for him, infusing him with the strength of the Void Dragon while leaving him intact.

Her smile softened as she brushed a stray lock of hair from his forehead. "You're not alone, brother," she whispered, the light around them dimming as the final remnants of energy settled within him. "Please seek our home....You are now ready to continue our legacy....And to learn the secrets of our kin." With a final, gentle, kiss on his forehead, Estelle allowed her form to dissolve back into the ethereal realm, leaving only the faintest glimmer of moonlight as a reminder of her presence, and the lasting power she had woven into his spirit.

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"You are working really hard...."

It was a voice that I could never forget.

The voice of a certain someone haunted me for quite a while. But for some reason, this time, the memory will be fresh. Much fresher than how it would be. For some reason, I felt a warm sensation in my head. Then, I blinked my eyes open, staring up at the familiar, dim purple sky that stretched endlessly above. I took a deep breath, feeling the air fill my lungs easily, invigoratingly. The exhaustion, the sluggishness—the oppressive weight of the hibernation state—had vanished completely. Instead, my body felt revitalized, stronger than before, as if every cell hummed with newfound energy.

I lifted a hand, flexing my fingers, testing the range of motion. No pain, no weakness—only a deep, simmering power flowing through my veins. Whatever had happened during that blackout had left me in a state far beyond what I'd felt even before the battle began.

I rose to my feet, brushing dust from my coat, feeling as though the crash of the [Overdriving Pill] had never even happened. Whatever surge of energy I'd absorbed from the dragon had not only revitalized me but had completely eradicated the effects of the hibernation debuff.

Looking around, I took in the cavern again. The Void Dragon's carcass lay a few meters away, massive and unmoving, its dark form stark against the dim glow of the cavern. Its once-pulsing veins of void energy had dimmed, and its terrifying presence was now reduced to a lifeless shell. The dragon lay in absolute stillness, its primal force dissipated, and I felt an odd stillness settle within me too—one born of the quiet finality of the victory.

I took a moment to examine the Void Dragon's carcass, and it struck me just how massive it truly was. In the game, it had always looked enormous, filling the screen with a dark, fearsome presence, but standing here, facing its real-life scale, was something else entirely. The sheer size of it was staggering, almost surreal, and it hammered home the reality of what I'd just accomplished.

'Even after all this time, seeing something this large up close... scaling it from a screen to the real world is a different feeling altogether,' I thought, a sense of appreciation for the art mixing with the residual pulse of adrenaline.

A part of me itched to test my newfound strength, to feel the extent of what I'd gained from this battle, but I quickly shook the thought. There was no telling how much time had passed while I was here. This was a different dimension, a place cut off from the normal flow of reality. Time could be running faster here, or maybe even slower. Either way, I couldn't afford to gamble on it.

'This is no place to linger. There's a chance someone noticed the Void Dragon's death,' I reasoned. Killing a Primordial of the Void wouldn't go unnoticed forever, and it was only a matter of time before someone came to investigate. I'd stirred up enough trouble for one day.

I glanced around, my mind already planning my exit. There was no room for distractions, not even to check my own status window. I'd have to trust that the gains would be there when I needed them.

'Time to go,' I decided, one final look at the fallen dragon sealing my resolve. I had survived, come out stronger, but staying any longer would only invite new dangers.

Without wasting a moment, I reached into my coat and pulled out a newly acquired storage ring—a large-capacity one I'd invested in recently, bought for exactly this purpose. The Void Dragon's carcass was a treasure trove of valuable materials, and leaving it behind was out of the question. Dragon scales, bones, organs—all of it could be crafted into rare artifacts or used to study the unique properties of Void energy.

With a thought, I activated the storage ring, channeling mana into it. The dragon's massive form shimmered and, piece by piece, vanished into the spatial storage, leaving only faint wisps of residual energy where its body had once been. Satisfied, I slipped the ring back onto my finger, feeling the weight of the dragon's remains securely within.

Turning, I took hold of the necklace, feeling its familiar weight in my palm. I focused, and the mana within me responded. This energy wasn't like any I'd wielded before; it was deep, consuming, a darkness that thrived in silence. The [Voidborne] trait had settled naturally within me, instinctive, its presence pulsing in rhythm with my own mana. Although I hadn't yet seen the full details in my status window, I could feel an innate understanding of how to control this Void energy.

As I channeled Void mana into the necklace, it began to glow, its surface radiating with an otherworldly light. The space around me warped, the dimensions bending and folding with each pulse of energy I fed into the artifact.

WARP! In an instant, the air twisted, and the familiar pull of spatial displacement seized me. The cavern, the dragon's grave, and the eerie sky vanished as reality bent around me, transporting me back to the world I'd come from.

The world settled around me, and I felt the familiar, solid weight of the ground beneath my feet. The oppressive mana of the dragon's lair was gone, replaced by the more neutral energy of the dimension I'd returned to.

I blinked, allowing my senses to adjust as I took in my surroundings. I'd emerged just outside the entrance to the hidden tunnel I'd entered earlier, the faint glow of the teleportation magic fading from the space around me. The atmosphere was eerily quiet, the cavernous pathway deserted and untouched, as if no one had been aware of the Void Dragon's existence or its death.

I took a deep breath, grounding myself. My body felt alive, every fiber humming with the new, potent power coursing through me. With the Void Dragon's carcass securely stored and the [Voidborne] trait now a part of me, I had achieved everything I'd set out for.

After a quick assessment of the surroundings, I knew I had to leave this place immediately. The Void Clan, the Federation—any number of groups could have sensed the disruption, and it wouldn't be long before someone came to investigate.

Adjusting my coat, I set my sights on the distant exit, stepping into the shadows as I prepared to make my way out of this place.

## Chapter 652 143.2 - Voidborne

I stepped into the hotel, its polished floors and warm lighting a stark contrast to the dark, oppressive atmosphere I'd just left behind. The place was quiet, elegant, and mercifully empty—a welcome change after days spent stalking through shadows and hunting a creature like that. Now, all I wanted was a place to rest. A bed, silence, and maybe a few hours without worrying who or what might be watching.

As I approached the front desk, the receptionist looked up from her screen, a polite smile at the ready. Her gaze met mine, and for a split second, her expression faltered. Her eyes widened, cheeks flushing faintly as she took in my appearance.

'Ah. Another one,' I thought, suppressing a sigh. Ever since I'd consumed that flower in Maya's forest, I'd noticed this reaction everywhere. Strangers staring, women going pink in the face, and even a few men were caught off guard. It was as though my very presence now carried some inexplicable allure, one I hadn't asked for and didn't want.

"Good evening, sir," she greeted, her voice a little too bright, the blush still coloring her cheeks. "Welcome to the Arcadia Hotel. How can I assist you?"

"Just a room for the night," I replied, keeping my tone as neutral as possible. "Something quiet, if you have it."

"Of course," she said, typing away, her gaze flickering back to me every few seconds. "Under what name should I register your stay?"

"Astron Natusalune," I replied, watching as she noted it down, her blush deepening slightly. She handed me the keys, her fingers brushing against mine as she did. Another lingering glance, almost as if she couldn't help herself.

I nodded politely, turning away. 'This charm nonsense is more trouble than it's worth,' I mused, moving toward the elevator. I wasn't interested in people's admiration, nor did I care for the attention that came with it. All it did was remind me of how far I still had to go, and the focus I needed to maintain.

The ride to the room was blissfully silent, and as I reached my floor and slipped the key into the door. I stepped into the room, letting the door click shut behind me, savoring the solitude.

I set down my belongings and surveyed the room. A brief flicker of satisfaction crossed my mind as I took in the polished elegance of the space, the muted lighting, and, most importantly, the oversized tub that awaited in the bathroom. It was why I'd rented a place this fine—might as well have the quiet and comfort while I could. Herbal baths had become a habit, ever since the organization had introduced me to their therapeutic effect. They steadied my mind and soothed the tension that built up after too many missions, letting me reflect without distraction.

'Let's take a bath first,' I thought, moving to prepare it.

The water filled steadily, steam beginning to cloud the air as I added the herbs from a small pouch I'd carried with me. Their scent—calming, slightly bitter—filled the room, a familiar blend that reminded me of the solitary moments I'd taken advantage of back at the organization. I slipped into the tub, letting the warm water rise around me, seeping into my skin, easing the lingering ache from my muscles.

Silence wrapped around me like a second skin, the kind I welcomed. Here, alone and away from any prying eyes, I could think without restraint. I allowed myself to feel the stillness, a state I'd grown accustomed to, free from the needless burdens of excitement or fear. I rarely felt anything at all, in truth. My emotions had long since been subdued, directed toward purpose rather than impulse. It was a kind of clarity I valued.

As I lay there, submerged in warmth, I turned my attention inward, letting my senses flow through the energy within me. The Void energy from the dragon felt different, deeper, darker as if it reached beyond what normal mana could touch. It pulsed, synchronized with my own reserves, but still carried a wildness, a primal force that resisted being fully tamed.

'The [Voidborne] trait is potent,' I observed, watching the way the energy settled and moved. It felt almost alive, weaving through me with an instinctual understanding, as if it knew its place already. Even without opening my status window, I could sense the changes: my mana was denser, my physical strength heightened, and beneath it all, a quiet, consuming power that made each breath feel purposeful.

But well, aside from that, I still needed to check the status window of course. So that, a certain someone could show a better view for the people reading? 'Status Window.'

As I called, the panel appeared before me. -----

▶ Name: Astron Natusalune

▶ Occupation: Weapon Master (level 4)

▶ Talent Limit: 12 ▶ Passives: Vengeful Bane

Bloodline Resonance Psychic Cognizance

▶ Attributes: Variable Attributes:

- Strength: 6.02 → 6.74
- Dexterity: 6.04 → 6.76
- Agility: 6.12 → 6.85
- Constitution: 6.03 → 6.75

- Intuition: 6.20 → 6.94
- Magical Power: 6.61 → 7.40
- Mana Capacity: 6.70 → 7.50

Invariable Attributes Charisma: 11 Vitality: 10 ▶ Traits: Perceptive Insight (Epic)(Unchanging)

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

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

Voidborne (Legendary) (Growth Type)(Stage 1)

▶ Arts:

Lethal Arsenal Ascendancy (????)(%37)

▶ Skills:

Eyes of Hourglass

▶ Body Imprints:

Everchanging Glyph

▶ Bonds: Aurora Raven (Rare)(Growth Type)

Celestalith, The Transcendent Eclipse -----

The status window shimmered before me, its familiar layout detailing every aspect of my growth. As I scanned the numbers, the changes were immediate and undeniable. Every attribute had surged,



the increases lining up perfectly with what I'd expected. A twelve percent boost across the board—precisely what comes from killing a Primordial Demon, even one that wasn't fully realized.

'So, a twelve percent increase. Not bad, even if it was expected,' I mused, noting the way each stat felt more refined, more substantial, as though my very foundation had shifted.

The boost was unmistakable, my strength, dexterity, and agility were now at levels that were leagues beyond what they'd been before. And it wasn't just the physical. My mana capacity had climbed significantly, a steady surge of energy coursing through me, ready to be wielded. My magical power itself was close to breaching an entirely new threshold, a solid 7.40 that marked a milestone in my progress.

'Indeed.....Now, I can command the next level of mana.' I thought to myself. With each integer increase for the Magical Power, the rank of the mana that one would be able to make use of would also increase. It was a satisfying sight, though satisfaction was a fleeting concept. Each boost, each increment, was simply another step. The real work came next, taming this new energy, and fusing it fully into my skillset. I knew well enough that raw power meant nothing if it couldn't be wielded precisely.

My gaze fell on the Voidborne trait, newly acquired and resting at Stage 1. -----

Trait: Voidborne

Description: The innate trait bestowed by the Primordial Void Dragon, this ability grants the user mastery over void energy, enabling them to bypass physical and mystical barriers, nullify magical effects, and render themselves undetectable in various environments.

Stage 1:

Void Cloak:

The user cloaks themselves in void energy, allowing them to phase briefly through physical barriers and evade basic detection methods. While cloaked, the user nullifies minor ambient energies in the immediate area, making it difficult for magical or sensory abilities to track them. This energy cloak enhances the user's stealth, creating an elusive, incorporeal presence that slips through obstacles and evades observation.

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I took in the description of the [Voidborne] trait, noting each detail with a sense of mild satisfaction. Just like in the game, it had granted me the initial ability, [Void Cloak]. Familiar, yet distinct from the stealth provided by [Shadowborne's] [Shadow Veil].

[Shadow Veil] had served me well enough until now, shrouding me from perception, blurring my presence into the shadows. But [Void Cloak]—this was something else entirely. Not only did it conceal, but it nullified, stripping away the very traces that magic and senses relied on. No mere cloak, it made me incorporeal, an elusive void that slipped through barriers. And if I could understand a structure, and see its design clearly, I could phase through it.

'This isn't just hiding—it's erasure,' I thought, my fingers tapping lightly against the edge of the bath. 'If I need to vanish, I'll do more than disappear. They'll forget I was even there.'

The implications were significant. With [Void Cloak], I could evade even the most sensitive detection. The potential for this power, especially once mastered, was staggering. Each wall or barrier was no longer an obstacle but a faint suggestion, a guideline I could simply pass through. But the true strength would lie in my understanding—knowing where to phase, when to cloak, and making each choice precise. The Void demanded precision, and I would need to wield this trait carefully.

Satisfied, I dismissed the panel, the details now committed to memory. This was a new advantage. 'While it may look like a waste, it is still fine. Since I know the second stage of this trait, it shouldn't be that hard for me to get to that stage.'

That was the main part. With [Shadowborne] I lacked the necessary guiding principles, as the trait was different from the one that was shown in the game.

But this one seemed to be similar to the one in the game, and that gave me a direction to pursue. 'But, the most important thing is the fact that I now got my hands on the void energy.'

With the acquisition of void energy, I finally had the catalyst I needed. The very essence I'd absorbed from the Void Dragon was more than just raw power—it was the cornerstone of a technique I'd been working toward, one that would take advantage of the Void's unique properties to break past typical limits. This was more than an ability; it was a path to mastery.

'Void energy... now this is where it completes.'

Now, with everything finished, it was time for me to meet with a certain someone.

Chapter 653 144.1 - Finally

<Friday Morning, Mansion of Emberheart>

Irina sat across from her mother at the long dining table, the morning sun filtering through the Emberheart estate's towering windows, casting a chill despite its warmth. The scent of freshly baked bread and honey lingered in the air, but Irina felt no appetite. After days spent enduring the brutal trials in the Chamber of Emberheart, her body still ached, though it had become stronger in ways even she hadn't anticipated.

But none of it seemed to matter under her mother's gaze.

The Matriarch of the Emberheart family sat silently at the head of the table, her posture impeccable, eyes cold as they regarded her daughter. The faintest twitch of her lips hinted at disapproval. Irina kept her own gaze focused on the table, her fingers poised around her teacup, waiting for her mother's judgment—an inevitable ritual with every achievement, no matter how hard-won.

"Is this all?" her mother finally said, her voice a quiet blade cutting through the silence.

Irina's grip on her cup tightened, but she forced herself to keep her expression neutral. She knew her mother's expectations well enough by now, yet some part of her had hoped—foolishly—that this time, the strength she'd gained would be enough.

"I completed the Chamber's trials," Irina replied, her voice steady but edged with a restrained frustration. "My reserves have nearly doubled. I've learned the Emberheart Flame Cascade technique. I know it doesn't mean anything yet, but it's progress."

Her mother's gaze didn't waver, and she made no attempt to mask the unimpressed look on her face. "Progress?" she echoed, her tone laced with subtle disdain. "Is that what you call it? You may have endured the Chamber, Irina, but a flame that flickers under pressure is not enough. You will need more than mere progress if you are to carry our name."

The words hit Irina harder than she wanted to admit. For anyone else, surviving the Chamber would have been a mark of accomplishment, but for her mother, it was simply the bare minimum.

"I'm not finished," Irina replied, meeting her mother's gaze with a defiance that simmered beneath her calm expression. "I know what's expected of me, Mother. I'm not asking for approval, just a moment to catch my breath."

A faint, humorless smile tugged at the corners of the Matriarch's mouth. "Approval? You still misunderstand. This is not about approval—it is about readiness." She reached for her tea, letting a measured silence fall between them before continuing. "Do you think your opponents will wait for you to 'catch your breath'? They won't care if you're tired or in pain. You'll either be prepared or you'll be eliminated."

Irina bit back a retort, refusing to let her frustration surface. "I'm well aware of that, Mother. But even you didn't master the Emberheart legacy overnight."

Her mother's eyes sharpened a subtle challenge flashing in them. "I was not distracted by trivial attachments," she replied a clear jab at the connections Irina had made outside their family. "The Emberheart name demands full devotion. You're distracted by those who will only weaken you."

There it was—the criticism that lingered behind every reprimand, every cold look. Irina kept her gaze steady, though the words stung deeper than any training wound.

"Those connections aren't a weakness," Irina countered, keeping her tone measured. "If anything, they've strengthened me."

Her mother's expression remained unchanged, save for the faintest crease of disapproval. "Strengthened? You allow your emotions to cloud your judgment. Sentiment will only drag you down."

The silence thickened, and Irina felt her pulse quicken, anger flickering beneath her calm exterior. She had fought, sacrificed, and bled, all to live up to her family's impossible standards—and still, it was never enough.

The Matriarch's gaze remained fixed on Irina, sharp as ever, her expression unreadable. At Irina's question, "Is that all, Mother?" she simply shook her head, a subtle gesture that sent a wave of tension through the air. Irina's pulse quickened, the silence amplifying her anticipation.

But instead of continuing her reprimand, the Matriarch tilted her head, her eyes narrowing slightly as if examining something beneath the surface. "'That boy,'" she began, her tone deceptively casual. "I remember instructing you to invite him here."

Irina's reaction was subtle but unmistakable—a small, defiant smile brightening her face. She no longer bothered to hide the connection, knowing well that her mother, with all her influence and resources, would discover any hidden ties regardless. There was no point in subterfuge; the truth lay bare between them, and Irina had chosen to meet it head-on.

"Yes, Mother," Irina replied, her tone calm yet tinged with an unmistakable edge of satisfaction. "Just as you requested, I have called him here. He will be taking the portal today."

The Matriarch's expression flickered, a hint of intrigue briefly breaking through her icy façade. "Hmm...he will be taking the portal, today, you say?" The Matriarch's eyes narrowed, her sharp gaze honing in on her daughter with a renewed intensity. So, she thought, this is what you meant by 'requesting free time today.'

It was evident. The moment Irina mentioned that "the boy" would be taking the portal to Etheria Haven, the pieces had fallen into place. Irina's subtle smile, her unusual request for personal time—it all led to one conclusion. She intended to meet him, to personally welcome Astron upon his arrival.

The Matriarch's voice cut through the air, laced with a chilly edge. "You've requested free time today, and he just so happens to be arriving... today?" She leaned forward, her gaze unwavering. "I assume you realize how transparent that looks, Irina."

Irina's smile didn't falter. She held her mother's gaze, a hint of defiance sparking in her eyes. "Yes, Mother. I'm aware."

The Matriarch's lips pressed into a thin line, her displeasure evident. "So you mean to show everyone your... connection to him. You intend to let it be seen—this attachment of yours?"

Irina's expression remained calm, but her tone carried an undeniable strength. "He is mine, mother. Someone who will be on my side, and the same for me. My loyalty to him isn't a weakness; it's a choice. One I won't hide."

The Matriarch's fingers tapped lightly on the table, her gaze growing colder. "Your choices are becoming increasingly bold, Irina. But remember, every connection you make binds you. And the Emberheart legacy cannot afford bonds that weigh it down."

Irina's gaze didn't waver as she met her mother's cold, scrutinizing stare. "Then perhaps, Mother, when he arrives, you can see him yourself," she said, her tone unwavering. "I'd wager you may regret those words once you do."

The Matriarch's eyes flashed, a faint smile curling at the edges of her mouth. It was a smile devoid of warmth, one that held a glint of both irritation and amusement. "Regret?" she replied, her voice laced with ice. "I don't regret anything I do, Irina. That is the Emberheart way. It is the reason I took control of this family and built it into what it is today."

Her mother leaned back, her expression darkening as she recalled her own rise to power. "In my youth, I fought for succession with my siblings, clawing my way to this seat. I did whatever was necessary to secure our legacy. I have no regrets, no matter the price. And I expect the same resilience from you."

Irina held her ground, a flicker of defiance still in her eyes. But she knew better than to press further. Her mother's ascent had been built on calculated choices, many of them ruthless. The Matriarch expected her to follow the same path, to be unyielding, unshaken by sentiment.

The Matriarch's faint smile faded, her expression hardening as she eyed Irina with a touch of annoyance. "But understand this," she continued, her tone sharp and unforgiving, "even if I did wish to see this boy, I must uphold the dignity of this family."

She leaned forward, her gaze narrowing with a cold fire. "The heir of the Emberheart family does not lower herself to welcome someone of no standing. It is unacceptable for you to go there yourself, and I expect you to understand that."

Irina's jaw clenched, the familiar frustration simmering beneath her calm exterior. Her mother's words were a reminder of the rigid expectations placed upon her—a constant weight, a line that could not be crossed without consequence.

But that did not mean she did not have her own argument.

Irina's gaze sharpened, a flicker of challenge lighting her eyes as she met her mother's unyielding stare. Her tone was calm, yet there was an undeniable edge to it as she replied, "That might be the case, Mother... for someone who is weak. But for someone with true talent, the act of receiving him in person demonstrates strength—a declaration of whom he stands with, and to whom he owes his loyalty."

The Matriarch's expression didn't soften, but she didn't interrupt, her eyes narrowing as Irina continued.

"Anyone can bow to a lion when it's fully grown, acknowledging its power once it's already risen. But the one who claims its loyalty, who earns its respect, is the one who stood beside it when it was just a cub. That's the respect that matters, and that's what I want from him."

For a moment, silence reigned between them, thick and charged with unspoken tension. Irina had spoken boldly, and she knew her mother would not appreciate the comparison—or her challenge to the Emberheart traditions.

"You have indeed grown up."

The Matriarch's faint smile remained, her gaze shifting from cold disapproval to a glimmer of curiosity. Irina's words had been bold, brimming with conviction, and the Matriarch couldn't ignore the fierce loyalty her daughter displayed toward this boy. It was unusual—and intriguing.

"You speak of him with such certainty, Irina," she said, her tone softer but no less calculating. "You've shown a tenacity I have rarely seen, even within our family. Perhaps there is something to this boy, after all."

Irina felt a faint sense of victory, but she kept her expression steady, waiting for her mother's response.

"Very well," the Matriarch continued. "I will allow you to do as you please this time. Go, welcome him as you wish." She leaned back, her eyes narrowing, the coldness in them returning with a sharp edge. "But mark this: if he fails to meet my expectations, if he proves to be anything less than what you so adamantly promise... I will not tolerate a disgrace. Not again."

Her words were a thinly veiled threat, each syllable laced with the weight of Emberheart tradition and the ruthless expectations she held over her daughter. Irina knew well the implications. Her mother was granting her the freedom she sought, but only on the understanding that failure would bring consequences—and that her mother would not hesitate to cut any ties that weakened their legacy.

"I understand, Mother," Irina replied, her voice steady. "I know the weight of the Emberheart name, and I assure you, he will not be a disappointment."

The Matriarch's expression softened, but only slightly, a hint of approval in her gaze. "See that he isn't. I will be watching."

Irina inclined her head, respectful but resolute. She turned to leave, her heart racing but her mind focused. She had won a small victory, but she knew this was only the beginning. Astron would need to prove himself worthy, not just to her but to her mother and the entire Emberheart legacy.

'Well, he is more than enough for this.'

Chapter 654 144.2 - Finally

Irina's steps were light as she left the dining room, her heart lifting in a way she hadn't felt in a long time. The cold, lingering tension of her breakfast with the Matriarch seemed to fade behind her, replaced by a rare sense of satisfaction.

'Well,' she thought, a small, triumphant smile pulling at her lips, 'it appears Mother underestimated me today.'

Her gaze wandered through the grand, silent corridors of the Emberheart mansion, the echoes of her footsteps a steady rhythm that matched her thoughts. She had known from the beginning that her mother would see through her intentions, the subtle maneuvering that allowed her to "request" free time without suspicion. But that was exactly why she had led the conversation there, planting the idea firmly in her mother's mind before broaching her true desire—to meet Astron in person, without subterfuge or deceit.

'Why hide what can be set in plain view?' she mused, feeling the thrill of her victory. 'If he's going to stand by me, then let it be known from the start.'

It was a risk, certainly, but one she was willing to take. As she ascended the winding staircase leading to her wing, she felt the weight of her decision settle comfortably on her shoulders, blending with her confidence. Her mother's words, though laced with warning, had also hinted at a reluctant respect for her choice. Irina would carry that small victory forward, making it the foundation for everything that would follow.

'Mother may be ruthless,' she thought, a faint smirk tugging at her lips, 'but she respects strength. And today, I showed her a glimpse of mine.'



Reaching her room, she pushed open the door, stepping into the quiet sanctuary she had crafted for herself. The heavy wood closed behind her with a satisfying thud, sealing her off from the rest of the mansion, and she allowed herself a deep breath. For the first time since her grueling days in the Chamber of Emberheart, she felt a calm wash over her.

'So, he'll be here soon.'

The thought sent a shiver of anticipation through her. She moved toward the window, gazing out over the estate's vast grounds, her mind drifting to Astron. In the darkness of the Chamber, when her strength had been tested to its limit, she'd often found herself thinking of him—of the quiet reassurance his presence offered, a strength that complemented her own.

'I really had been waiting for the whole month....' she told herself, her gaze steady on the horizon. 'I've trained, endured, sacrificed. And now, I'll finally have him.'

Irina lingered by the window, the faint warmth spreading through her chest as she thought of Astron, and how soon he'd be here.

But she wouldn't let herself dwell on the feeling for long. She had a task to complete, and sentiment was no excuse for negligence. She'd waited a full month to see him, but she wanted to make sure she was ready to greet him with the poise her family demanded—on her terms.

Turning away from the window, she approached the tall mirror that hung in the corner of her room. Her reflection looked back at her, bearing the faint marks of her grueling training.

Dark lashes framed her sharp gaze, and her hair, though tied up, fell in disarray, a reminder of the exhaustion she'd barely had time to shake off. She traced her fingers through the loose strands and considered what she'd need to do.

'No extravagant makeup, just enough to look... presentable,' she thought, tilting her head slightly. Extravagance wasn't her style, nor did it fit the meeting she had planned. She wanted him to see her as she was, not hidden behind layers of paint. Still, a touch of refinement couldn't hurt; it had been a long time since she'd seen him in person.

Just then, a gentle knock sounded on her door.

"Enter," Irina called, her voice calm and steady.

The door opened, and Esme stepped in, her demeanor as composed and respectful as always. Irina had called her earlier, knowing the maid's practiced hands could bring out a polish that matched the Emberheart standards without overwhelming her natural features.

"Good morning, Lady Irina," Esme greeted, giving a slight bow.

Irina nodded, stepping back from the mirror and gesturing to the chair by her vanity. "I'd like to keep things subtle. I don't want an elaborate look."

Esme nodded, understanding the instruction immediately. "Of course, Lady Irina. A simple, refined look. I'll ensure it's perfect."

As she sat down, Irina allowed herself a final, fleeting thought of Astron. Soon, he would see her again—not just as the Emberheart heiress, but as someone who had endured for his sake as well as her own.

The girl she had once been, trying to meet her mother's impossible expectations, was gone. She was different now—stronger, sharper, and fully prepared to stand at his side.

'After all,' she mused, watching her reflection as Esme began gathering her hair with quiet precision, 'this is just the beginning.'

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<Friday, Hotel in Jarden City>

The next morning, the hotel lobby was quiet as I made my way to the front desk, the remnants of last night's calm lingering within me. The clerk greeted me with the same polite smile, the faintest hint of that familiar blush creeping back onto her face as she handed over the final bill.

"Thank you for staying with us, Mr. Natusalune," she said, her voice steady despite the soft pink in her cheeks.

I nodded, settled the bill without much thought, and made my way outside, the cool morning air a refreshing contrast to the hotel's warmth.

My stay here had been comfortable, and though it served its purpose, it was time to move on. The quiet wouldn't last long—not with the Void Dragon's death out there waiting to be noticed.

Outside, I flagged down a taxi, the driver giving a brief nod as he pulled over to the curb. I slipped into the back seat and handed over 100 Valer, settling the fare before we even began. A quiet transaction, and the driver barely looked at me as he pocketed the payment and started the car.

"To the city center," I said simply, leaning back as the vehicle eased into motion, weaving through the early morning traffic. The streets of Jarden City passed by in a blur of bustling shops opening for the day, people on their way to work, and the muted hum of morning activity.

—DING!

Just then, I suddenly got a notification from my watch. I glanced down, noting the sender's name—Kieran. The name alone brought a sense of satisfaction, a confirmation that the plan was already in motion.

Kieran had proven himself more than capable, displaying a talent I rarely encountered. His skill with enchantments, his understanding of mana, and his adaptability all spoke to a level of genius I couldn't afford to overlook. Having tested him, and seen his precision and dedication firsthand, I'd already decided to establish a firmer connection.

The watch continued to hum softly with the incoming call. I tapped to answer, leaning back in my seat as the city scenery blurred outside the window. "Kieran."

There was a slight crackle before his voice came through, laced with an unmistakable eagerness. "Morning, Astron. I have something new to show you—the adjustments we discussed. I think you'll be... pleasantly surprised."

I inclined my head slightly, keeping my voice calm. "Show me what you have in mind."

On the other end, Kieran didn't waste a second. A faint hum through the line was followed by the flickering glow of a hologram generated on my watch screen. The display flickered, then solidified, revealing the outline of a sleek, compact vehicle with streamlined edges and a sturdy frame.

"This is what I've been working on," Kieran began, the excitement clear in his voice. "A foldable transport, as per your request. Here's the concept in compact form. It collapses down to fit within a spatial compartment you can carry without trouble."

I studied the hologram carefully, noting the intricacies of the design. Kieran had gone beyond just functionality—every inch of the vehicle looked optimized for both speed and efficiency as if he'd calculated each contour for minimal resistance.

"Impressive," I commented, and his enthusiasm seemed to double.

"Glad you think so. Now, I've been experimenting with a dual-mana core setup." He paused, letting that detail sink in. "This will allow the vehicle to self-charge if it's parked in mana-rich zones. One core would handle standard propulsion, but the second core could boost acceleration when you need a quick escape. This feature would double the speed for a short burst."

I leaned closer, intrigued. "And the handling? I need it to respond without lag, regardless of the terrain."

Kieran nodded eagerly. "Ah, yes—that's where I need your input. To make it adaptable, I can use either adaptive stabilizers or an enchantment that senses terrain. The stabilizers would adjust the frame physically, while the enchantment would let it shift on a micro-level, adjusting traction and balance almost instantaneously."

I considered it, weighing the advantages. "Enchantment. It'll keep the weight lower and ensure responsiveness. What about its durability?"

A faint smirk crossed Kieran's face in the hologram projection. "Glad you asked. I planned for high-grade Kalisium alloy—light enough to avoid weighing you down but resilient to most attacks. It can withstand heavy impacts, so you won't need to worry about it failing mid-use."

I met his gaze through the screen, a glint of approval in my eyes. "You've covered every detail."

It was indeed really impressive that he would be working with this.

'But, something doesn't feel that right.' I observed the hologram of the vehicle intently, letting the structure and details settle into my mind. The design was sound, with its efficient build and dual-mana core system giving it flexibility and power. But as I mentally envisioned its framework, something felt... incomplete.

'What if it could be more adaptive?' The thought crossed my mind as I imagined the vehicle bending, shifting its shape with ease. In my mind's eye, I saw it transform seamlessly for different terrains, adapting to environments with a fluidity that no fixed structure could achieve.

Chapter 655 144.3 - Finally

'What if it could be more adaptive?' The answer was clear. Morphium. When I was first thinking about this matter, the material that came to my mind was Morphium—a rare, highly versatile metal capable of adjusting form instantly, blending with other compounds to enhance durability while allowing a controlled, shape-shifting ability. With Morphium woven into the design, the vehicle wouldn't just withstand harsh terrains; it would mold to them.

But I kept my thoughts to myself, letting the idea simmer. Kieran had come a long way with his concept, and I wanted him to complete his current design before introducing this layer of complexity. Pushing him too soon might disrupt his focus, and there was no point in suggesting Morphium until he'd perfected the initial prototype. 'Dealing with Morphium is not something that any engineer has been able to do so far. It was only that old man....that I had seen creating a weapon like Celestalith.'

The idea of Morphium lingered in my mind, its potential undeniable. I'd seen it used only once before—who'd somehow managed to forge the rare metal into a weapon that could change form at will, an artifact as unique as it was powerful. That old man had also created my weapon, Celestalith, a weapon that few could comprehend, let alone replicate. His knowledge of Morphium's nuances had been unparalleled.

But Kieran wasn't ready for that level of complexity. Introducing Morphium now might overshadow his own creativity, guiding him down a path that was, ultimately, not his own. Inspiration had a fragile nature; revealing Morphium's capabilities too soon could close off the avenues he might otherwise explore. Kieran had the potential to innovate, to forge something unique from his own experience with mana cores and adaptive enchantments. And if he could, it would open doors—not just for himself, but for the entire Federation.

If Kieran developed his own solution to adaptability, it could pave the way for more accessible, practical models for Federation use. And, in the long run, that accessibility might lead to advancements far beyond the elite few who could wield Morphium. It was better this way, to let him find his footing and discover his own path.

I leaned back, the cityscape outside blurring past. Kieran's eagerness to refine his prototype was promising. I'd wait and see where his ideas led.

Kieran's voice brought me back from my thoughts. "Well, that's all for now," he said, his tone tinged with lingering excitement. "I'll call you when I've finished the prototype or if I have any questions along the way."

I nodded, keeping my expression calm but allowing a hint of approval to seep through. "I'll be waiting."

"Got it," Kieran replied, a faint grin in his voice. The line clicked, and the hologram faded from my watch screen, leaving only the faint glow of the city's early morning light filtering into the cab.

As the call ended, I let my gaze linger on the watch for a moment longer, thoughts swirling. Kieran's progress was impressive, and his enthusiasm was both refreshing and rare. Given time and space, he'd undoubtedly surprise me further—and that was precisely what I intended to see.

The driver glanced back at me, catching my eye in the rearview mirror as I ended the call. Like most professionals, he'd activated the privacy formation the moment the call came in. It was a standard courtesy—an ambient barrier that kept conversations within the passenger area completely private. As useful as it was, it also served as a reminder of how far privacy measures had come here in the Federation.

Soon enough, we reached the city center. I slipped out of the taxi, giving the driver a nod, then turned toward the large structure that dominated the area: the Teleportation Center. It loomed like a fortress of smooth stone and glass, humming faintly with the energy of hundreds of interconnected portals leading to cities across the Federation.

With my business here concluded, Arcadia City was my next stop. The Center's doors slid open as I approached, revealing a bustling lobby filled with travelers, traders, and guild representatives waiting to warp. I approached the main console

I made my way through the lobby, weaving past clusters of travelers and merchants who lingered by the ticketing desks. Reaching the counter, I presented my ID to the personnel—a young woman with a sharp gaze and a practiced efficiency in her movements. She glanced down at my ID, her eyes flickering over the insignia of the Arcadia Hunter Academy.

"Ah, a cadet," she said, nodding as she swiped the ID through her console. "Teleportation to Arcadia City is free for Academy cadets. Let me print your ticket, Mr. Natusalune."

A faint beep signaled my ID's confirmation, and within moments, she handed me the ticket. She pressed a button, speaking into her communicator. "A12, please escort Mr. Natusalune to Gate 3."

Almost immediately, another personnel—a tall man with the designation A12 embroidered on his uniform—appeared from a nearby corridor. He gave me a courteous nod.

"Mr. Natusalune, please follow me," he said, his tone polite but brisk. Without another word, he led me through the bustling crowd toward a row of portals, each one glowing faintly with mana as they prepared for their next wave of travelers.

At Gate 3, he paused, nodding as he verified the details on my ticket. "The portal to Arcadia City is ready. Once you step through, you'll arrive in the Capital's main Teleportation Hub."

I gave him a nod of acknowledgment, stepping onto the gate platform as its ambient energy pulsed beneath my feet. I could feel the familiar hum of mana intensifying, aligning to send me directly to the heart of the Federation.

With a final glance around the Teleportation Center, I stepped forward. The world dissolved in a flash of light, and the familiar sensation of spatial displacement took over as I left Jarden City behind, moving through dimensions toward Arcadia City.

As the teleportation light faded, the familiar sights and sounds of Arcadia City came into view. I stepped off the platform, the grand hall around me bustling with travelers, guild members, and officials from all walks of life. Arcadia City's Teleportation Hall always had a lively hum, filled with the buzz of mana, chatter, and the occasional flash of portal light.

I left the hall, crossing into the open streets where the crisp morning air met me. After the intensity of the past few days, the familiar sights of the city felt grounding, a reminder of the world beyond battles and objectives. I took a short walk to a nearby café, tucked into a quiet corner on the main street, its charm understated but cozy. Perfect for a moment of calm before my next move.

The moment I settled in and ordered a drink, my mind drifted to the Emberheart Family. Soon enough, I'd be visiting their estate—a prospect that carried both opportunity and complication. Heeding the promise to Irina was one part of it, and perhaps the simplest. The other, more strategic

reason, lay in their armory, a treasure trove containing some of the most powerful artifacts and enchanted weaponry in the Dominion.

The Emberhearts were one of the six pillar families of the Arcadia Dominion, a small but influential country that thrived on magical advancement. While not expansive in the land, the Dominion was renowned for its magical prowess, and its capital, Etheria Haven, was its crown jewel. Etheria Haven wasn't just a city; it was a hub where magic permeated every corner, where scholars, mages, and adventurers alike gathered in search of power and knowledge. In a place like that, the Emberhearts held significant weight.

'But Arcadia Dominion isn't part of the Federation,' I reminded myself. Getting into Etheria Haven wasn't as straightforward as teleporting between Federation cities. Entering an independent country meant paperwork, permissions, and a credible reference. While Arcadia Hunter Academy's status opened many doors, it wasn't a blank check for crossing international borders.

'Well.....The invitation from the Emberheart Family is enough.....'

I thought, glancing down at the confirmation slip Irina had arranged. With their influence in Arcadia Dominion, the process was smooth—practically effortless on my end. Irina had handled every detail, securing the permissions and filling out the paperwork without so much as a reminder to me. For an outsider, gaining access to Etheria Haven was typically a lengthy ordeal, reserved for high-ranking mages, scholars, or those with verifiable contributions to magic studies. But with the Emberhearts pulling the strings, everything had fallen neatly into place.

However, there was one condition: limited access to the teleportation gate. Even with Irina's preparations, it would only open at set times, and my slot wasn't until 1 P.M. A sensible precaution, considering Arcadia Dominion's wariness of outside influence. For now, that meant time to spare.

Settling back into my seat at the café, I pulled out a book I'd recently acquired on [Psychic Magic]. The subject was often overlooked, but it had its merits—especially when one delved into the subtler aspects of manipulation, communication, and influence. Though not directly tied to my abilities, I was keen on integrating aspects of it into my techniques.

The book's title, "The Mind's Labyrinth," hinted at its depth. I flipped through the pages, my attention drawn to sections on mental fortification and projection. Psychic Magic relied on tapping into the mind's inherent energy, creating extensions of thought and will that could influence, shield, or even alter perceptions. Useful for encounters with those less versed in mental defenses, as well as situations requiring discretion.



'Mental fortification... useful,' I noted, scanning a passage on shielding one's consciousness. Psychic Magic was less about raw power and more about control, intention, and precision—qualities I valued in any discipline. The text spoke of layers within the mind, comparing it to a labyrinth. By understanding each layer, a practitioner could manipulate not only their own thoughts but those of others, constructing barriers, illusions, and projections.

I let myself sink into the book, page after page detailing techniques and practices for honing these mental abilities. The hours passed quietly, the faint chatter and ambient noise of the café providing a steady backdrop. When I glanced up at the clock, it was nearing noon, and a reminder to head to the teleportation gate soon ticked into my mind.

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And then, following that the time came.

Chapter 656 144.4 - Finally

<Arcadia Dominion, 00.15 P.M>

Irina leaned back in her seat, her gaze fixed on the passing scenery as the vehicle glided smoothly along the path toward the Teleportation Center in Etheria Haven.

Her attire was meticulously chosen—a simple yet elegant ensemble in deep ember and charcoal tones, hinting at her family's legacy without the usual intensity.

Her hair, styled just enough to appear refined but understated, felt right for the occasion. It was exactly what she'd wanted: presentable without the overt glamor her mother might have insisted upon.

With each passing moment, her anticipation grew. She couldn't deny the way her pulse quickened, the faint sense of exhilaration that made the journey seem both endless and fleeting.

'Almost there,' she thought, glancing down at her smartwatch. A small smile tugged at her lips as she opened the messaging app and began typing.

Irina: "You're ready, aren't you? Waiting close to the Teleportation Center in Arcadia?"

She watched as the screen indicated that he was typing a response, a flicker of warmth sparking in her chest. It had been a while since she'd been able to simply reach out to him like this, to communicate without the barriers of family or duty.

Astron: "Yes, just outside the center."

Irina rolled her eyes, a soft laugh escaping her despite herself. Even through text, his calm, slightly teasing tone came through, grounding her in the familiarity of his presence.

Irina: "What are you doing?"

Astron: "Reading a book."

Irina stared at his last message, the casualness of it settling in her mind in an oddly irritating way.

Reading a book? she thought, almost scoffing. Here she was, dressed to the nines, her heart pounding, barely containing her anticipation. And he was waiting there... reading? Calm and composed, as if this were just another day for him.

'Of course, he'd be completely unbothered,' she mused, feeling a prickling annoyance. She almost felt foolish for how much she'd prepared, the time she'd spent thinking about this moment. Meanwhile, he was just... reading a book.

'You're the one making this a big deal,' she reminded herself, but it did little to settle her frustration. It was exactly like him to be so unaffected, always so calm and detached. And yet, it only made her determination grow—to surprise him, to see even the smallest flicker of something different in his expression when he saw her standing there instead of some random agent.

Irina: "Good, then. The agent there will handle everything when you arrive on this end."

She couldn't help but smirk slightly, knowing she'd be the one waiting for him, not some faceless envoy. It was her decision, after all, to take control, to ensure that she'd be the one by his side the moment he stepped through the portal. But there was no need for him to know that just yet.

Astron: "Understood. I'll see you soon, then."

Her thumb hovered over the screen, almost tempted to add something more, but she stopped herself, closing the messaging app and setting her smartwatch down with a satisfied huff.

'Heh.....Let's see the face you will make when you see me....'

Irina was excited.

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At around 12:30, the faint ring of my smartwatch interrupted the silence, pulling me out of the mental labyrinth I'd been exploring. I glanced at the caller ID—Lyra Fendral, one of the Emberheart Family's assistants. Irina must have arranged for her to escort me to Etheria Haven.

I tapped to answer, leaning back as her voice came through, calm and professional. "Mr. Natusalune, this is Lora Fendral from the Emberheart Family. I'll be handling your transport to Etheria Haven. Could you let me know where you are currently?"

I glanced around the café, a relaxed smile from habit as I took in the surroundings. "I'm at the Arcane Oak Café, near the Teleportation Center," I replied.

"Understood," she answered promptly. "I'll be there in a few minutes. Please wait there."

The call ended, and I returned to my book, skimming the last few passages I'd been studying on mental fortification. Control, intention, precision, I reminded myself. These principles applied well beyond psychic magic—they were keys to survival and advantage in any setting.

Moments later, a figure entered the café, her posture straight and expression composed. Lora was tall, with a calm presence that conveyed both discipline and confidence, her attire formal yet efficient, suited for the duties of a high-ranking family's assistant. She scanned the room briefly before her eyes settled on me, and she approached with a polite nod.

"Mr. Natusalune," she greeted, her tone even but respectful.

'Indeed the same reaction....' As Lora greeted me, I caught the faintest stammer in her voice, almost unnoticeable—a subtle tremor as her gaze met mine. She quickly masked it, her professionalism reasserting itself, but it didn't escape my notice.

That reaction had become all too familiar ever since my charm had spiked; it was expected, almost routine by now. I gave no indication that I'd noticed, merely returning her nod with a calm, neutral expression.

But a faint, unexpected excitement stirred within me as we left the café. A thought crept in, one I hadn't anticipated: how would Irina react when she saw me again?

The last time we'd met, things had been different. Now, with this new face—one that seemed to draw people in effortlessly—I couldn't help but wonder how she would respond. She wasn't the type to be easily swayed, but this was no ordinary shift.

'With the increase in charm, would she even notice?' I mused, feeling the slightest hint of curiosity mixing with the growing anticipation.

'There is no way, she doesn't....' Irina's reaction would be worth noting, at the very least.

Lora led the way through the bustling street toward the Teleportation Center, her pace brisk and efficient. She kept her gaze forward, saying little as we walked, perhaps determined not to betray any further reaction.

But I could still sense her occasional, fleeting glances as if she was caught between curiosity and the restraint her position required.

As we approached the Teleportation Center, Lora broke the silence, her tone composed and reassuring. "Mr. Natusalune, I'll be handling all the documents and permissions for our travel to Etheria Haven, so there's no need for you to worry about any formalities," she said, glancing briefly in my direction. "The entire process should take no more than fifteen minutes."

I nodded, appreciating her efficiency. We entered the grand hall, and as expected, the teleportation area dedicated to Arcadia Dominion had drawn quite a crowd. A long line of travelers, each waiting for the standard spatial storage inspection, wound its way toward the security checkpoint.

This process was mandatory for nearly everyone heading into the Dominion—arcane items and other enchanted goods were tightly controlled.

—Nearly everyone, that is.

Lora directed me to a separate, less obvious pathway that led toward a discreet section at the back of the teleportation area. Here, the crowds thinned, and the only people present were either high-ranking officials or trusted individuals under the authority of the Dominion's pillar families. A guard in sleek, enchanted armor stood by the entrance, his stance alert but unintrusive. He looked up as we approached, noting Lora with a slight nod.

Without a word, Lora produced her ID card, the Emberheart family crest gleaming subtly on its surface. The guard examined it for a moment before stepping aside, gesturing us through with a respectful nod.

"This way, please," Lora said, her professionalism never wavering. She led me down a short corridor, bypassing the main inspection area entirely. I took in the process, noting the efficiency and the understated security Emberheart's influence afforded me. These were the privileges of association with one of Arcadia Dominion's elite families.

As we moved past the initial checkpoint, another line awaited us, shorter but nonetheless present—a reminder that even the Emberheart Family, with all their influence, couldn't circumvent every procedure.

This checkpoint was purely for document verification, an agreement that had been solidified by the Council of Magic to ensure that everyone, regardless of status, adhered to certain protocols. Etheria Haven's gates didn't open for just anyone without strict documentation.

'In the game, it was also the same for the player.'

Ethan would also go through the same procedure, regardless of whether the player was closer to Seraphine or Irina.

Lora glanced at me briefly, sensing my awareness of the situation. "This will only take a little," she informed, her tone maintaining its professional calm.

The line moved steadily, each person ahead of us presenting identification and entry documents to a group of officials stationed behind a desk.

When our turn came, Lora handed over a neatly organized bundle of documents to the official at the counter. The Emberheart crest caught his attention immediately, his demeanor shifting to one of careful respect as he scanned through each page.

"Emberheart Family authorization," he murmured to himself as he read, nodding in approval before marking the documents with a glowing seal. His gaze flickered briefly to me, curiosity in his eyes, but he offered no comment beyond a professional, "Everything is in order. Welcome to Arcadia Dominion, Mr. Natusalune."

With the final approval in hand, Lora led me toward the portal room where the gate to Etheria Haven was prepped and ready. The room's ambient hum of mana grew stronger as we approached, a testament to the level of magical prowess maintained within the Dominion's capital.

Lora paused at the portal, giving me a slight nod. "Once you step through, the Emberheart Family will be informed of your arrival. Thank you for your patience, Mr. Natusalune."

"Understood."

Without further delay, I stepped onto the portal platform, feeling the mana gather around me, dense and charged with purpose.

A moment later, the familiar tug of teleportation took hold, drawing me through the dimensional boundary and straight into the heart of Etheria Haven.

The teleportation process felt slightly different this time, a faint but undeniable shift in the mana currents that tugged me forward.

The sensation was both familiar and strange, a subtle reminder that the gate to Etheria Haven wasn't an ordinary transport link. It had a depth to it, a resonance that hinted at the arcane layers woven into the very fabric of the portal.

And then, in a flash, I arrived.

As I stepped onto solid ground, the first thing I noticed was the mana. It was everywhere—dense, vibrant, and potent, saturating the air itself. Unlike any other place, the atmosphere here was thick with power, each breath filled with a faint charge that tingled against my skin.

Countless streams of mana in different hues and signatures coursed around me, almost as if the entire capital pulsed with its own lifeblood. 'So, this is the heart of Etheria Haven,' I thought, taking a moment to absorb the unique energy.

All around, people moved with purpose, their robes and attire marking them as scholars, mages, and various other practitioners of magic.

There was an air of quiet authority, a disciplined focus that distinguished the inhabitants here from those in other regions.

Many walked with the kind of calm intensity that spoke of years spent in study, research, or magical refinement.

'Even the breathing here feels different.'

That was something that I couldn't just get used to immediately, but even at this moment, my body started adapting to the conditions.

[Everchanging Glyph]

It was adapting to how the mana levels here were different.

Just then, as I was feeling absorbed in the potent atmosphere of Etheria Haven, feeling Everchanging Glyph adjusting to the dense mana currents around me, a sudden shift in the air alerted me.

My senses flared instinctively, picking up on the distinct presence moving quickly in my direction—a presence I recognized.

Before I could even turn fully, a familiar voice called out, a soft but excited shout breaking through the controlled hum of the capital. "Astron!"

And then, with a flash of motion, she was there.

#### Chapter 657 144.5 - Finally

Irina stepped out of the vehicle alongside Esme, her heels clicking softly against the polished floor of the Teleportation Center's main hall.

The bustling space was grand and imposing, built to accommodate travelers from all corners of the federation, but even here, her presence commanded attention. Her bearing, her Emberheart attire, and the subtle, simmering aura of power she carried marked her as someone unmistakably highborn.

The personnel at the entrance immediately noticed her arrival. Normally, strict protocols kept those awaiting arrivals and those arriving via the teleportation gate in separate areas, but the Emberheart name held its own influence, bending the rules and making exceptions as naturally as breathing.

A young attendant approached, bowing slightly with an air of respectful caution. "Lady Irina, please note that you are advised to limit your exposure to the spatial mana. Prolonged presence can have... side effects."

Irina dismissed his concern with a wave of her hand, her tone calm yet edged with a touch of impatience. "I can take care of myself, thank you."

The attendant nodded, bowing again, though she caught a hint of apprehension in his expression before he stepped back. She could feel the eyes of others around her—subtle glances, whispers that seemed to follow her every step. After all, she was Irina Emberheart, heiress of one of the Six Pillars, the "princess" of the Emberheart family. Her reputation preceded her, and for some, it brought awe; for others, it caused intimidation.

She ignored the stares, her gaze fixed on the door leading to the teleportation chamber. Esme moved beside her, her calm, composed presence grounding Irina's anticipation as they walked further into the center.

As she entered the teleportation part, the faint hum of spatial mana surrounded her, a whisper of power that vibrated through the air. She barely noticed it, her focus set entirely on the moment to come.

'This is it,' she thought, a small, almost imperceptible smile pulling at her lips. Any moment now, the portal would open, and he would step through. She could already picture his calm, composed



expression, but a part of her hoped for a flicker of surprise when he saw her standing there instead of the agent he'd expected.

She folded her arms, her posture relaxed yet commanding, her presence unmistakable to anyone who dared glance her way. The whispers around her grew softer, a mix of curiosity and reverence that filled the room. But she paid them no mind.

'Let them stare,' she thought, the faintest trace of satisfaction settling over her. She had worked too hard to be affected by the idle murmurs of strangers. And soon enough, they'd see exactly why she'd chosen to meet him herself.

As Irina stood waiting, her gaze fixed on the portal, Esme moved quietly beside her, her presence a reassuring shadow amidst the growing anticipation. After a moment, Esme leaned in slightly, her voice low and respectful.

"Lady Irina, would you like anything? Perhaps... I could remain inconspicuous and give you a chance to surprise him?"

Irina's lips curved in a faint smirk, though her eyes remained on the portal. "It's a thoughtful idea, Esme, but he's perceptive. He'd notice me the second he arrived, no matter how well I tried to hide."

Esme raised an eyebrow, a flicker of surprise evident in her usually composed demeanor. She said nothing more, merely giving a slight nod. "Understood, my lady."

Irina continued to wait, the anticipation growing stronger with each second. The soft hum of spatial mana, the subtle whispers around her—all faded into the background. She'd come here prepared, her posture poised, ready to greet him as he stepped into her world.

Just then, her smartwatch vibrated softly. Glancing down, she saw the caller ID: Assistant Lora, the attendant who had been sent to coordinate Astron's departure from Arcadia.

With a quick swipe, she accepted the call. "Yes?"

"Lady Irina," Lora's voice came through, formal but calm. "I wanted to inform you that he is preparing to enter the teleportation gate. His portal will be arriving at Etheria Haven through Gate A02."

"Thank you," Irina replied, her voice steady as she ended the call.

She turned her gaze toward Gate A02, her heart beating a little faster. The portal was beginning to glow with an intensified light, signaling an imminent arrival. Irina straightened, her presence still commanding but carrying a subtle warmth beneath the formality.

This was her moment—not just to see him again but to make clear, even in her own subtle way, that he belonged here.

The portal's glow intensified, casting a bright shimmer across the chamber, and then, through the light, a figure began to take shape.

Irina's breath caught for a moment as she watched him step forward—Astron, his presence unmistakable even before she could make out his features. He wore his usual attire: a simple black shirt beneath a dark coat, jeans that fit him casually yet perfectly, the same calm, effortless look she knew so well.

'It is indeed him.'

Before she could stop herself, Irina felt her heart leap, the anticipation spilling over into action. She'd told herself she'd wait, remain composed, and let him come to her, but now that he was here, her resolve broke in an instant.

Without a second thought, she took off in a sprint, her controlled elegance giving way to something entirely different—pure, unrestrained joy.

"Astron!" she called out, her voice echoing across the teleportation chamber as she closed the distance.

For once, she imagined to see the surprise flicker in his eyes, a rare break in his usual composure as she launched herself forward.

In a swift motion, she leaped, throwing her arms around him before he could so much as react. The weight of the past month's anticipation, the struggles, the determination—it all came pouring out in that one, reckless moment.

She could feel his hesitation at first, but it quickly faded as his arms found their way around her, steadying her.

"Hehehe...."

A soft, unexpected giggle escaped her lips, a sound she didn't quite recognize, but couldn't hold back. She buried her face against his chest, feeling the steady rise and fall as he adjusted to the sudden embrace, his arms wrapping around her more firmly.

The month apart, the training, the anticipation—all of it melted away as she let herself savor the moment.

But as she rested her head there, she couldn't help noticing something... different. Pressing her cheek slightly against him, she felt the solid strength of his frame, stronger and sturdier than she remembered. She pulled back just enough to look up, a faint curiosity in her eyes.

'Did he... get taller?' she wondered, noting how she had to crane her neck a little more to meet his gaze. And his build—what had once been lean felt subtly reinforced, as if he'd been through trials of his own since they'd last met.

"Have you... been working out?" she asked, half-joking but feeling the genuine intrigue seep into her voice. She let her fingers rest lightly on his shoulders, testing the tension beneath the fabric of his coat, which felt like it fit differently now.

Astron merely raised an eyebrow, his usual calm masking any trace of surprise. "Did you forget that I had been training," he replied simply.

"Cough...." Irina scoffed lightly, though she couldn't deny the faint thrill it gave her. The familiar scent of lavender lingered around him, yet even that seemed deeper, more intoxicating somehow. It wrapped around her senses, blending with the steady warmth of his presence and grounding her in a way that made her feel unexpectedly at ease.

"You certainly don't seem like you've been taking it easy," she murmured, her tone almost teasing as she held his gaze, a slight smile tugging at her lips. She didn't pull back just yet, allowing herself a few seconds longer to enjoy the unexpected strength that had somehow become even more reassuring.

"You do know, I never take it easy." His calm voice reached out. "But, for how long you will be staying like this....Quite a lot of people are already looking at this way."

Irina tightened her hold around him, ignoring the curious stares from bystanders in the teleportation chamber. She felt a flicker of embarrassment at first, but the warmth of his presence overpowered it. Looking up, she gave a slight pout, unable to mask her need for just a few more moments.

"It's been so long, Astron," she murmured, her voice softer than usual. "Let me feel this."

He let out a small, almost amused sigh. "You've really become bolder, haven't you?" His gaze was steady, a touch of playfulness glinting in his eyes, though Irina couldn't see. "Don't you care what your mother will say about this?"

The mention of her mother sent a brief shiver down her spine, her body tensing slightly in his arms. She knew all too well that her mother's scrutiny was as sharp as ever, and she could practically hear the disapproving comments that would await her back home. But the moment she felt Astron's steady embrace again, the worry faded, replaced by a quiet defiance she hadn't felt before.

"Whatever," she said, her tone laced with unexpected confidence. "I don't care."

"Is that so?" His voice held a note of amusement, and for a brief, unguarded moment, she could've sworn there was a smile in his tone. It was rare for him to show even the smallest hint of emotion, but here—just for her—there was something different, something softened.

That is why, she wanted to check that smile.

At this point, surprised face or whatever, she cared about none of those.

She just wanted to see his face.

With a slight shift, Irina tilted her head upward, her curiosity pushing her to confirm the faint hint of a smile she thought she'd heard in his tone. Her heart raced as she looked up, fully expecting the familiar, calm expression she'd come to know so well.

"Ah....."

But the moment her eyes met his face, her breath caught, a split second of shock rippling through her.

It was.....It was just breathtaking....

'Ah....'

Even her thoughts stopped.....

Chapter 658 144.6 - Finally

"Ah....."

With a slight shift, Irina tilted her head upward, her curiosity pushing her to confirm the faint hint of a smile she thought she'd heard in his tone. Her heart raced as she looked up, fully expecting the familiar, calm expression she'd come to know so well.

But the moment her eyes met his face, her breath caught, a split second of shock rippling through her.

The face before her... it was still Astron, undeniably him, but somehow, subtly, everything about him had sharpened, deepened.

His purple eyes, once enigmatic, had grown impossibly alluring, their depths pulling her in with an intensity that made her pulse quicken.

His nose, now more refined, angled perfectly in a way that suited his features. His cheekbones were more pronounced, his eyelashes longer and darker, framing his eyes with an almost mesmerizing effect.

His lips... slightly fuller, with an edge of softness that made her stomach twist.

'What... happened?' she thought, feeling a wave of warmth spread across her cheeks. He had always been handsome, but this?

This was different, magnetic in a way she hadn't expected. She found herself lost, her gaze lingering over each detail as if committing it to memory, unable to tear her eyes away. Words abandoned her, and she simply stared, her usual composure crumbling under the sheer impact of his presence.

Astron raised an eyebrow slightly, the faintest hint of amusement glinting in those impossibly captivating eyes. "Speechless?" he murmured, his voice holding that familiar, calm resonance, though now she felt it more acutely than ever.

She managed a shaky breath, realizing how long she'd been staring. Her lips parted, but no words came, only the slightest sound of disbelief as she continued looking at him, mesmerized. She knew she should say something, anything to break the spell, but all she could do was hold his gaze, awestruck by the transformation.

Astron's lips curved into a beaming smile, the kind that was so rare it left her utterly stunned. "Indeed, you are..." he said, his voice low and teasing. "The expression you're making right now... it's priceless."

Irina's mouth fell open, her breath catching once more. That smile of his—no matter how many times she'd seen it, it never failed to disarm her completely. But as she gazed at him, a sudden, cool sensation rippled through her, as if an invisible force was pulling her back to reality. Her focus sharpened, and she felt the faint, familiar hum of her artifact pressing against her skin, the one she wore as a precaution against enchantments and charms.

'Wait... what?' she thought, blinking as her mind scrambled to process. Her artifact had activated? Her artifact, which only ever reacted to strong enchantments. Did her own reaction just... count as someone who was charmed?

Heat flooded her cheeks, and she tore her gaze away from his smile, pressing her lips together as her mind raced. 'No... No way. There's no chance he just... charmed me, right?'

She shot him a narrowed, accusing look, hoping it would mask her embarrassment. But Astron merely looked back, his expression as calm as ever, though the faintest spark of amusement danced in his eyes as if he knew exactly what had just happened.

"This... This is absurd," she muttered under her breath, clenching her fists slightly as she tried to compose herself. 'How did I let my guard down so completely? And over... him?'

But no matter how hard she tried to push the thought away, the memory of his smile lingered, igniting that spark of warmth all over again. It seemed that no matter how much she prepared herself, this bastard still knew how to leave her completely off-balance.

Whether it was intentional or not....

But then, Irina froze, her face heating up as she heard his question. "What is absurd?" he asked, an innocent look on his face, though his eyes betrayed a glint of mischief. "Also, that surge of mana just now... did you do something?"

She could feel her face turning even redder. How was she supposed to explain this? Her artifact activating because she had reacted too strongly to his presence? This was a nightmare. If he found out, she'd never hear the end of it. He'd have more ammunition to tease her for ages, and by the look in his eyes, he already suspected something.

'Does he know?' she thought, noting the way his gaze lingered knowingly, almost as if he was waiting for her to crack. She clenched her fists, swallowing down the wave of embarrassment that threatened to spill over.

"Nothing!" she exclaimed, her voice a touch sharper than she intended. With a quick motion, she pushed him back, her hands firm against his chest as she forced some space between them. She needed the distance to breathe, to regain some semblance of control.

Astron didn't resist, his eyebrow quirking with that infuriatingly calm expression as he stepped back, a faint smirk tugging at his lips. She tried to ignore the warmth in his eyes, the hint of laughter that seemed to be lurking there.

Without meeting his gaze, she turned to compose herself, desperately trying to shove down the lingering traces of flustered excitement. She took a deep breath, determined not to let him get the better of her.

'This was a mistake,' she thought, fighting the blush that refused to fade. 'Next time, I need an artifact to guard against him, specifically.'

Just then, Esme stepped forward, breaking the tension with her calm, composed presence. "Welcome, Sir Astron," she said, inclining her head respectfully. Her voice was soft but carried the steady tone of someone who'd been through her share of dignified introductions.

The sudden shift in attention made Irina aware of just how many eyes were fixed on them. The teleportation chamber, once filled with hushed whispers and curious glances, now seemed to hum with a different kind of energy.

She caught flashes of light as cameras and magical artifacts activated, capturing the moment from every angle. Some mages even discreetly murmured incantations, weaving spells to record the scene—a rare and noteworthy meeting between one of the Emberheart heiresses and the enigmatic Astron.

Esme's entrance had added a formal touch, her presence reinforcing the significance of this reunion. She knew Astron from the brief encounter after the Phantom's Land mission when Irina, Sylvie, and Astron had received their rewards.

Though their interaction had been wordless—a mere exchange of glances—the recognition in her eyes was clear.

Astron nodded in response to Esme, his expression respectful but still laced with his usual calm demeanor. He gave no indication of being affected by the attention, his gaze flickering briefly to the onlookers before returning to Irina.

"Lady Irina, I have arranged for the private transport as requested," Esme continued, a slight smile on her lips as she observed the subtle shift in Irina's demeanor—a touch of flustered irritation mingling with her usual confidence. "If you're ready, we may proceed before the crowd grows any larger."

Irina, grateful for Esme's intervention, gave a brisk nod, forcing herself to ignore the lingering heat in her cheeks. "Yes, let's go," she replied, casting a quick look at Astron. "I'd prefer not to have an audience for the entire journey."

She took a step forward, allowing Esme to guide them, and Astron followed, his expression as unbothered as ever, though she could feel his gaze on her, probably relishing the lingering traces of her embarrassment. She shot him a quick, pointed glare, her pride flickering back into place.

As they exited through the back door of the teleportation center, Irina caught sight of the sleek black car waiting for them, discreetly parked to avoid drawing unnecessary attention. The driver gave a respectful nod as Esme stepped forward, holding the door open for Irina and Astron.



But before stepping in, Astron cast a brief glance back toward the front of the teleportation center. Even from the back entrance, he could see the growing crowd of reporters, photographers, and mages gathered there, their anticipation evident as they waited for a glimpse of the Emberheart heiress and her unexpected companion.

"You certainly took your time, didn't you?" he remarked, his tone calm but with that unmistakable hint of amusement. "Looks like you gave them more than enough time to gather."

Irina shot him a sharp look, though her lips betrayed the faintest hint of a smirk. "Are you suggesting I planned this? Unlike you, I didn't expect to become a spectacle today."

Astron's gaze flickered with mild amusement as he leaned against the car, waiting patiently as she composed herself. "Just pointing out the obvious. Seems the Emberheart heiress can't escape attention—whether she plans it or not."

Her smirk grew, laced with a touch of defiance. "Perhaps. But I didn't come here for them. They're just... collateral."

With a slight tilt of his head, Astron watched her, the quiet curiosity in his gaze making her heart skip a beat, though she maintained her composed facade. She knew he wasn't fooled; he'd seen right through her flustered moments earlier. But if he wanted to tease her, he'd have to work harder.

"Cough....Miss, the car is ready." Esme's voice cut through, her usual patience strained by the commotion outside.

Irina took a breath, nodded, and finally stepped into the car, sliding gracefully onto the seat. Astron followed, settling beside her, and Esme joined them, sitting on the driver's seat.

As the car pulled away from the teleportation center, leaving the throng of reporters behind, Irina leaned back in her seat, feeling the tension of the day begin to fade.

She turned her gaze to Astron, studying his calm expression as he looked out the window, taking in the sights of Etheria Haven.

"What do you think?" she asked, her tone softer, curiosity woven into her words. "The city... it's different from Arcadia City, isn't it?"

Astron glanced at her, his purple eyes reflecting the faint glimmer of the city lights outside. "It is," he replied thoughtfully, his voice carrying a hint of admiration. "There's... more to it than I expected. The atmosphere here... it feels like the magic is alive."

A faint smile played on Irina's lips as she nodded. "It's true," she murmured, almost to herself. "I may not like the constant expectations or the endless scrutiny from my family... but Etheria Haven has its own kind of magic. The entire Arcadia Dominion does."

She looked out the window, watching as the city lights cast a warm glow over the streets, illuminating the intricate architecture that melded seamlessly with the vibrant pulses of mana. Magical artifacts adorned storefronts, soft blue lights hovered along the pathways, and enchanted banners floated in the air, announcing events and displays that were unique to the capital.

"Every corner feels... connected," she continued, her voice carrying a note of reverence. "There's a constant hum of magic like the city itself is alive and breathing. It's different from the academy, where everything feels contained. Here... everything feels endless."

Astron listened, his gaze steady on her as she spoke. He seemed to absorb her words, his expression thoughtful. "I see why you'd feel that way," he said finally, his voice a quiet acknowledgment. "The city has a depth to it. Layers you can't find in a place like the academy."

"Indeed." Irina nodded, feeling a sense of satisfaction that he understood. "It's why I wanted you to come here... to see this side of it. The side that isn't just tradition and obligation."

For a moment, silence settled over them, comfortable and reflective. She leaned back, feeling the car glide smoothly down the road, the city lights flickering like stars in the distance. Though her family's pressures weighed heavily on her, she found solace in this moment, sharing this side of herself, and of Etheria Haven, with him.

A small part of her hoped he felt the same spark of connection that she did—a connection not just to the city, but to everything she'd worked for.

## Chapter 659 145.1 - Emberheart Mansion

As the initial rush of excitement settled, Irina felt herself slowly return to her usual, more composed self. The fluttering in her chest faded, leaving behind a calm awareness. Her gaze shifted, and for the first time in a long while, she looked at Astron from a different perspective—not as the person

she felt a growing attachment to, but as an Awakened, someone whose power had evolved in ways she hadn't expected.

'This... he really has grown...'

Her eyes traced over him with a calculating intensity, and she felt a pang of realization. Before, she could always sense the limits of his strength, and could somewhat grasp where he stood, even if his presence was a mystery.

Astron had always been someone who could cloak himself in silence, his aura faint yet steady, a shadow at times—someone who could slip away unnoticed. Yet, when he wanted to, he could be solid, an unyielding force even if his power hadn't matched his resolve.

But now... it was different.

Irina's mind raced as she studied him in silence, sensing a depth of strength she hadn't expected. She could no longer measure him as she once did; his presence had become layered, like the quiet hum of Etheria Haven itself—a power hidden beneath the surface, waiting. There was an undeniable aura around him now, an energy that felt impenetrable, almost unsettling in its calm.

'What did he go through?' she wondered, a faint chill creeping down her spine. The Astron she remembered was strong, yes, but this...

This was someone who felt like he could bend reality if he so chose, someone whose quiet demeanor belied an overwhelming strength lying dormant beneath.

Irina's gaze lingered on him, her mind swirling with thoughts she hadn't expected. She'd always known Astron was dedicated—someone who trained relentlessly, who honed his skills with a sharp mind and a tenacity that set him apart. She had respected that about him, admired it, even. But there had always been a quiet, unspoken understanding in the back of her mind: if it came down to a fight, she was stronger. She could defeat him.

Now... she wasn't so sure.

A part of her instincts whispered that if they faced off at this moment, the outcome would be uncertain. And that thought, strange as it was, stirred something deep within her—a mixture of

intrigue, caution, and a new sense of respect. The idea that he could transform so drastically in just a month was both unsettling and exhilarating.

'What kind of training did he go through?' she wondered, still searching his face for clues he wouldn't reveal. Whatever he had faced, it had hardened him and brought something out of him that hadn't been there before. The calm, faint aura that used to surround him had grown into something impenetrable, a quiet strength layered with a sense of boundless potential.

A faint smile tugged at her lips as she looked away, her thoughts spiraling in a direction she hadn't anticipated. 'The academy... maybe it was holding him back.'

It was an insolent thought.

The best academy in the world. How could it hold someone back?

But what if?

The thought was both a realization and a revelation. The controlled, limited environment of Arcadia Hunter Academy could only push someone so far. But out there, beyond its boundaries, Astron had encountered something that had reshaped him entirely.

Or maybe, she was just wrong.....

Whatever, it was, it didn't matter.

Astron's voice broke through her thoughts, jolting her back to the present. "Looked enough?" he asked, his tone as calm as ever, though she detected the slightest hint of amusement.

Realizing she'd been staring at him without realizing it, Irina quickly composed herself, crossing her arms and giving a small, defiant huff. "Humph! And what if it wasn't enough?" she shot back, masking her momentary fluster with her usual confidence.

He raised an eyebrow, a faint raise at his lips. "Then I'd say that's your problem," he replied smoothly. "It's hardly my fault if I've become this... charming."

She blinked, momentarily speechless. This narcissistic bastard. Of course, he'd turn it around, just like that. Her face flushed slightly as she glared at him, her earlier admiration quickly tempered by irritation.

"Charming?" she muttered under her breath, barely able to keep herself from rolling her eyes. "If you're any more charming, you'll be insufferable."

Astron's amusement didn't fade, and he settled back in his seat, clearly pleased with her reaction. He'd seen through her flustered moment entirely, and she could practically see him storing it away for later teasing.

"But you..." Irina's voice softened, genuine admiration slipping through her usual teasing tone. "You have become really strong..."

Astron glanced at her, a faint smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "You're not so different," he replied. "I can tell you've gotten stronger too."

She raised an eyebrow, a small, pleased smile forming on her lips. "You can tell?"

He nodded thoughtfully. "Your body's more toned, and you've become more resistant to mana effects. Your willpower feels sharper—like you've tempered it somehow."

Irina gave a satisfied nod. "The Chamber of Emberheart. I had to... burn myself, and push past my limits. That's why." She glanced down at her hands, almost as if she could still feel the echoes of the intense flames she'd endured. It had been grueling, but she could feel the difference, even if her mother had barely acknowledged it.

As the memory faded, her curiosity took over, and her eyes drifted back to him, studying his features once more. What happened to this bastard's face? The transformation was undeniable, and she couldn't help but wonder about it.

She'd heard of certain elixirs, ancient techniques, or even rare artifacts rumored to enhance beauty or alter one's appearance, but she'd always brushed them off as exaggerated tales. Not that she'd ever needed them herself; she'd been naturally blessed with her own beauty.

But now...

She frowned, tilting her head slightly as she considered him. "Did you... do something specific to get this look?" Her tone was half-serious, half-teasing, but her curiosity was genuine. "You look... almost too perfect, even for you."

Astron raised an eyebrow, a faint glint of humor in his eyes. "Are you saying you find me perfect?" he replied, his voice smooth as silk, clearly enjoying her reaction.

Irina scoffed, rolling her eyes. "Don't get too full of yourself, Astron. I'm just curious. If you're going to walk around with a face that looks like it belongs in an ancient hero's portrait, the least you can do is share the secret."

"Nothing so dramatic, I assure you," he said, though he didn't offer more than that, leaving her curiosity unsatisfied. "I just absorbed a flower."

"A flower? What flower?"

What kind of flower was that to have an effect like this? There was just no way, it was a normal flower.

If that was a normal flower, then what is the point of having an aesthetical surgery? Everyone would be the most beautiful then?

Astron shook his head lightly, an amused expression on his face. "It was just a flower I encountered in a forest," he replied, his tone casual, almost dismissive. "Didn't expect it to have this... side effect. Pure luck, really."

Irina narrowed her eyes, skepticism creeping in. A flower? In a forest? That simple explanation did little to satisfy her curiosity. What kind of forest would hold a flower with effects this powerful? And why did it feel like he was conveniently glossing over some key details?

'This bastard is hiding something,' she thought, her instincts kicking in. There was more to this story than he was letting on, and every fiber of her intuition told her that. She was just about to press him further, to peel back the layers of this mystery and get to the truth, when—

"Miss," Esme's voice came from the driver's seat, calm and efficient. "We have arrived."

Irina blinked, her train of thought momentarily interrupted as she looked outside the window. They had pulled into the familiar drive of her family's mansion, the grand structure looming ahead, framed by the towering iron gates and lush greenery that marked the Emberheart estate. For a moment, the mystery of the flower slipped from her mind, replaced by the awareness of where they were.

With a slight sigh, she gave Astron a final, lingering glance, her curiosity far from satisfied. "This isn't over," she murmured, barely loud enough for him to hear as she gathered herself.

"...."

Astron did not reply, simply looking at the estate and the mansion itself.

As the car came to a smooth stop, Irina straightened, the faint anticipation for what lay ahead mingling with her lingering curiosity about Astron's story. She would get her answers eventually—one way or another.

But for now, she had the entire Emberheart estate to navigate with him by her side, and that, she realized, was bound to hold its own challenges.

Especially her mother.

She needed to pass this ordeal.

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The Matriarch sat in her office, her hands folded elegantly on the desk, the golden rays of the late afternoon sun filtering through the tall windows behind her. The time was already nearing 2:15 PM, and her eyes flicked briefly to the clock.

"She is late," she murmured, the faintest hint of annoyance threading her words. Irina was rarely late, especially when it concerned matters she held close to her heart.

But annoyance alone was not enough. With a wave of her hand, the Matriarch activated her magic computer. In an instant, a dozen holographic screens materialized before her, each displaying various streams of news and surveillance feeds. Her gaze shifted between them until one headline caught her attention—a name that appeared all too frequently in recent times.

The screen displayed images of her daughter, Irina, alongside a young man.

Her mother's eyes narrowed slightly, her gaze sharpening as she took in the details. In the photograph, Irina was seen embracing him—a warm, unrestrained gesture that contrasted with the stoic composure she typically displayed in public.

The Matriarch's lips curved into a faint smile, though the glint in her eyes was anything but warm. She studied the image, her expression unreadable as her fingers tapped slowly against the edge of her desk.

"So," she murmured to herself, her tone laced with a mixture of intrigue and challenge, "this is truly the path you want to take."

For a long moment, she sat in silence, her eyes lingering on the image of Irina and Astron.

'He indeed looks good enough.' The photograph revealed more than just a bond; it exposed Irina's willingness to defy expectations, to stand openly beside him. It was a declaration, one that would not go unnoticed by their family's allies and rivals alike.

The Matriarch leaned back in her chair, her smile fading as she considered the implications. Her daughter's choices were becoming bolder, more visible—and with that visibility came risk. But there was also potential if Astron proved himself worthy.

Her gaze flickered to another screen, displaying information about Astron, his origins, his recent actions, and any scraps of data her intelligence network had managed to collect. She would study him, assess every detail, every action. Irina's loyalty to him had piqued her curiosity, but loyalty alone was not enough. If Astron could withstand the scrutiny and prove himself valuable, he might yet hold a place within her carefully guarded plans.

With a final, thoughtful look at the images on the screen, she closed the holograms, her resolve set. "Very well, Irina. If this is your choice, then let us see where it leads. I will give you enough time, for now."



## Chapter 660 - 145.2 - Emberheart Mansion

As they stepped out of the car and approached the mansion, Irina felt a small knot of tension settle in her stomach. She had never brought anyone here like this before, much less someone like Astron, whose calm indifference masked a world of complexities. She stole a quick glance at him, trying to gauge his reaction, but his expression was as composed as ever—completely unaffected by the grandeur of the Emberheart estate or the formality of the situation. His calm demeanor seemed almost absurd in contrast to the sheer weight of the occasion.

A faint laugh escaped her, the sound almost bitter. Why was I even worried? she thought, shaking her head at herself. This guy... he's always been like this, hasn't he? Astron had a way of facing situations, even the most intense ones, with that quiet, unshakeable calm that made him so different from everyone else she knew.

As if sensing her inner turmoil, he turned to her, his gaze steady. "You should calm down," he said in that soft, level voice of his. "It's fine."

His words were simple, but they carried a surprising reassurance that eased the tension in her chest. Irina met his gaze, taking a slow breath and nodding, a faint smile tugging at her lips.

"Easy for you to say," she murmured, her tone half-teasing, half-grateful. "You're not the one who has to introduce someone to... her."

Astron only shrugged, his calm expression unwavering. "Your mother's just another person."

Irina's eyes widened slightly, an incredulous laugh bubbling up. "Another person?" She shook her head, both amused and a little stunned. "I don't think anyone's ever called the Matriarch of the Emberheart family 'just another person.'"

He raised an eyebrow, unfazed. "Titles don't change what people are," he replied quietly. "She'll either approve, or she won't. Worrying about it won't change anything."

Irina took a breath, letting his words sink in. Somehow, his logic made the impending confrontation seem... manageable, or at least less daunting. She straightened her shoulders, feeling the weight of her usual confidence return.

"Fine," she said, giving him a sidelong glance.

But then, just as they were about to walk towards where her mother was, a maid who was waiting for them in the entrance hall came forward. She inclined her head respectfully, her gaze flickering briefly to Astron before settling on Irina with a reserved but attentive expression.

"Lady Irina," the maid began, her tone calm and formal, "the Matriarch has instructed me to inform you that she wishes to meet you both at dinner this evening, at 6 P.M."

With that, the maid offered a respectful bow before retreating, leaving the two of them in the entrance hall once more.

Irina sighed softly, the hint of tension creeping back into her posture. A dinner meeting. Of course, she thought, an uneasy understanding settling in her mind. Her mother, ever strategic, was giving them time—a seemingly generous gesture. But the implication was clear: dinner was a test.

In a noble society, meeting someone over a prolonged meal meant evaluating their manners, their poise, and their command of etiquette. It would be a chance for her mother to watch Astron closely, to observe his every reaction.

"Seems she's not planning to make this easy," Irina murmured, glancing sideways at Astron, who looked unperturbed, his expression as calm as ever.

He noticed her slight frown and raised an eyebrow. "A dinner test?"

"Something like that," she replied, folding her arms. "It's not just a casual meal. In noble society, a dinner invitation like this is a way to measure someone—whether they're aware of the subtle rules, whether they know how to handle themselves for an extended period under scrutiny."

Astron gave a small nod, as if digesting the information, his gaze thoughtful. "So, it's not just a meeting with your mother. It's a prolonged evaluation."

"Exactly," she said, a wry smile crossing her lips. "She wants to see if you can keep up. If you make even one mistake, she'll see it."

"Then I suppose I'll have to be on my best behavior."

"You need to," Irina insisted, her gaze sharp and serious. She didn't want him taking any of this lightly, especially not with her mother. She knew the Matriarch's methods better than anyone; her mother was not someone to underestimate. Every glance, every gesture—nothing would go unnoticed.

Astron's expression narrowed a little, though he remained focused. "I'm not underestimating her," he replied calmly, meeting her eyes. "She's an Archmage, after all." His voice was steady, unwavering. "Just trust me."

Irina's gaze lingered on him, her usual worries easing slightly. His confidence, as always, felt solid, and reassuring. She let out a small sigh, nodding in reluctant acceptance. "Fine," she said, finally relenting. "Now that it's come to this, let's take a look around the mansion. Might as well get you familiar with the place."

Astron nodded, following as she led him down the grand corridors, her heels clicking softly against the polished marble floors.

She glanced around as they moved, memories flickering in her mind—of the times she'd shown visitors around when she was younger, or how she'd given Julia and Lilia tours of her home whenever they'd visited.

While it was indeed true that she herself never brought outside people here, that did not mean, nobody came to her home after all.

Being an heir to the Emberheart family, she naturally needed to keep some connections.

It felt almost strange to be doing this now, with him of all people. But there was a certain pride in it, too, a subtle sense of belonging she hadn't expected.

Irina guided Astron through the main halls, her steps steady as they moved past the storied portraits of Emberheart family heads. Each one was captured in a way that seemed almost alive, their eyes intense, their postures exuding an unmistakable aura of power and control. She gestured toward them with a slight nod, feeling a strange sense of pride mixed with the weight of her family's legacy.

"These are the previous heads of the Emberheart family," she explained, her voice calm but carrying a note of reverence. "Each of them commanded fire in their own way. The flames you see here... they're not just decorations. They're part of the family's legacy."

As they moved, Astron's gaze lingered on the walls, taking in the intricate engravings that framed each portrait. Flames danced around the edges, but not with the usual chaotic energy of fire. Instead, the blaze was restrained, almost graceful, forming arcs and patterns that seemed to tell a story. The flames shifted in color—deep red, golden orange, and soft amber—casting a warm glow that felt both ancient and eternal.

Irina noticed his interest and couldn't help but feel a quiet satisfaction. "The fire here is different from what we use in combat," she continued, glancing at the engravings as if seeing them anew. "It's... tamed, controlled. Artistic. Our family has always believed that true mastery over fire isn't just about its power, but about its beauty and elegance as well."

Astron's gaze shifted to Irina, an amused glint in his eyes even as his expression remained perfectly neutral. "Heh... For some reason, I'm not so sure," he remarked, his tone casual yet pointed.

Irina instantly caught the underlying jab. She knew exactly what he was implying. Fiery Demoness—that nickname had followed her through countless battles and duels, a title she'd earned for her fierce and unrestrained combat style.

She crossed her arms, tilting her chin up in defiance. "Whatever you think, you're wrong," she shot back, her tone firm. "I have one of the most controlled fires in the entire world."

Astron looked at her, his expression unreadable. "Really?" he replied, deadpan. But the faint spark in his eyes told her he was holding back a laugh.

Irina narrowed her eyes, her lips curving into a challenging smile. "If you doubt it, you're welcome to test it for yourself."

He inclined his head, considering her for a moment. "That might be... for another time, don't you think? If we started, I doubt it would end quickly."

Irina's smirk grew, an unspoken challenge flashing in her gaze. "Indeed. Because I wouldn't stop until I beat you up."

For a moment, they stood in the grand, flame-lit hall, their gazes locked in mutual challenge. The playful banter held an edge of real anticipation, a hint of the rivalry that simmered beneath their relationship. She knew that if it ever came down to a real test, neither of them would back down easily.

"Well," Astron murmured, breaking the silence, "something to look forward to, I suppose."

Irina scoffed, her amusement barely concealed. "Only if you think you can handle it," she replied, a spark of competitive fire lighting her eyes.

"We will see when that time comes."

Irina shook her head, amused by their exchange, before continuing to lead Astron through the Emberheart mansion. The next few places she showed him weren't so much historical as they were powerful displays of her family's influence, subtle reminders of the Emberheart legacy that was woven through every corner of the estate.

They walked through a grand indoor garden, a place entirely dedicated to rare, magical plants that thrived only under carefully controlled flames. Brightly colored flowers with fiery petals bloomed in the enchanted warmth, each one radiating a gentle glow. "These plants are only possible to grow here," Irina explained, her tone casual but with a touch of pride. "The Emberheart flames sustain them—any other heat, and they'd just wither."

Astron observed the garden with interest, his eyes flicking over each bloom. "A reminder of your family's unique mana, then?"

"Exactly," she replied with a smirk. "It's a place only someone from the Emberheart lineage could maintain." The idea clearly pleased her, adding an edge of confidence to her posture as she moved on. Though she had no idea how this guy came from a place filled with special plants like this.

They continued to a long, polished hall lined with glass cases, each one holding a weapon from past Emberheart warriors. "These are all enchanted weapons forged with Emberheart flames," she said, gesturing toward the array of weapons, from slender daggers to massive swords. "The flames strengthen them, binding them to their wielders in a way that's hard to replicate."

Astron's eyes lingered on one particularly grand sword, its blade seeming to pulse with an internal, ember-like glow. "Interesting," he murmured, inspecting it closely. "This one....."

Irina noticed Astron's gaze fixed on the grand sword, its ember-like glow pulsing as if with a life of its own. A faint smile played on her lips. "Your eyes really are something. That one... belonged to my great-grandfather," she said, her voice carrying a note of reverence. "They called him the Dragon Slayer."

"The Dragon Slayer? Senior Sigurd?"