

H. Academy 661

Chapter 661 - 145.3 - Amberheart Mansion

"The Dragon Slayer? Senior Sigurd?"

Irina nodded. "Indeed. His full name—Sigurd Eldric Faelan Emberheart. He wasn't originally from the Emberheart family," she explained, crossing her arms as she glanced at the sword. "He was a warrior—a rare type even among Awakened—known for his skill with the blade and his unyielding spirit. He came from outside, but his achievements brought him into the family through marriage to my great-grandmother, who was the Matriarch at the time."

She gestured to the intricate hilt of the sword, its guard shaped like dragon wings, the blade gleaming with an internal fire. "They were the first humans to slay a dragon," she continued, her pride evident. "It was thought impossible back then—dragons were beyond the reach of any Awakened. But he and my great-grandmother combined their strengths: his skill with weapons, her Emberheart flames."

Astron's gaze never wavered from the sword, his expression contemplative. "And that's what forged this weapon?"

"Yes," Irina replied. "It's said that the final breath of the dragon was sealed into the blade, binding it to his will. That's why it glows like that—it's not just enchanted. It's alive with the essence of his battle, his victory." She glanced at Astron, her eyes glinting with pride. "It's one of the greatest artifacts in our family, a reminder that we can achieve the impossible."

Astron studied Irina as she spoke, noting the subtle glint of pride in her eyes, the reverence in her tone as she recounted her great-grandfather's story. Despite her frequent complaints about the pressures and expectations of her family, it was clear to him that she valued the Emberheart legacy deeply. That was Irina, after all—complex and contradictory, finding both pride and frustration in her heritage. He chose to keep his observations to himself, simply listening as she continued.

"This weapon," she went on, her gaze drifting back to the sword with a mixture of respect and curiosity, "it's been sitting here for years, untouched, because it has a consciousness of its own. Ever since my great-grandfather, no one has been able to wield it. The sword hasn't accepted anyone else."

Astron raised an eyebrow, his curiosity piqued.

"There was no mention of this in the game?"

"A conscious weapon?"

Irina nodded. "Yes. We believe it was because of the dragon's essence bound within it. Over time, it developed a will, a... personality of sorts." She smirked faintly, as though recalling some stories. "There were a few attempts to claim it, of course. But the sword rejects any who don't meet its standards, even going as far as repelling them with bursts of flame."

"So it's here as a guardian of sorts," Astron observed, his voice thoughtful.

"Exactly," Irina replied, glancing at the sword with a flicker of admiration. "It's a testament to the Emberheart legacy, reminding us that some things can't be inherited or claimed by force. They have to be earned. And even if we're its descendants, the sword holds us to that same standard."

"Your family has quite the legacy," he said quietly.

"You learned it just now?"

"...."

Seeing Astron staying silent, Irina also did not pressure him any further, and she continued to enjoy the scene.

Leaving the hall of ancestral relics, Irina continued guiding Astron through the vast expanse of the Emberheart estate. She pointed out the various facilities with an air of practiced familiarity, explaining each one briefly. The sheer scale of it all was impressive—even by noble standards. As the main branch of the Emberheart family, this place was fortified with countless formations, built to support and train the family's forces.

"This whole area here—" she gestured to a sprawling landscape stretching far into the distance "—is dedicated to training. Around 50 hectares in total, equipped with everything our Awakened need to develop their skills." She spoke with a mix of pride and practicality.

Astron nodded thoughtfully, recognizing the importance of such facilities. Families like the Emberhearts weren't just high-ranking mages; they commanded significant power, both magical and political, and they needed their own private forces to maintain that authority. It wasn't unusual, but the scale and specialization here were impressive even by elite standards.

Irina opted not to take him through the training grounds, knowing it would take far too long. Instead, she led him through a winding path toward a more secluded part of the estate.

"Come on," she said, her tone shifting to something lighter. "I'll show you my own quarters."

Astron raised an eyebrow but followed her without question. As they walked, the noise and energy of the estate's main facilities faded, replaced by a quieter, more personal atmosphere. Finally, they arrived at a separate building nestled within the estate's land, a place that felt both part of and apart from the mansion. It was unmistakably hers—bearing a certain Emberheart elegance, yet with personal touches that softened the grandeur.

Being the family heir, Irina had an entire building to herself, an oasis away from the demands of her role yet equipped with everything she needed. She pushed open the door and led Astron inside, the halls echoing with the soft warmth of controlled flames illuminating the walls.

"This is my training space," she explained, gesturing to a few doors as they walked. "I have rooms built specifically to withstand fire at full force, simulation rooms to help me refine my control, and, well... this," she said with a smirk, pointing toward a room labeled "Close Combat."

Astron raised a curious eyebrow. "You? Close combat?"

Irina shrugged. "It's mostly unused. I'm a mage, after all. But," she added with a smirk, "it's there if I ever feel like switching things up."

'A whole room if you feel like you want to switch up.....Really, something else.' He thought that he wouldn't get any more surprised after seeing Maya's mansion, but indeed. Irina was not lacking when it came to the money part.

They paused by the library, lined with bookshelves filled with tomes on everything from mana control to historical lore. Next to it was her computer room, equipped with advanced technology for research and planning.

"Do you even use all these things?"

"Not really."

"....."

Irina shrugged at Astron's unspoken question, reading his silent curiosity as they moved through her quarters. "Honestly, most of the time I'm training under my mother or another family instructor," she admitted. "I don't get to use all of this as often as you'd think. It's only when I have time alone that I come here to work on my own training."

She glanced around, noting how untouched everything looked since the academy term had begun. The quiet rooms were almost like a snapshot of the past—a time when she'd spent countless hours honing her skills alone, away from prying eyes.

She gestured toward the computer and artificial intelligence console in the corner, a faint smile crossing her lips as she remembered. "Though I have to admit, this setup was helpful when I was younger. I used it a lot for developing theories, working on mana control calculations... anything that needed a bit of precision."

Astron raised an eyebrow, seeming a bit surprised. "So you actually have an AI service here?"

Irina nodded, feeling a quiet pride at her younger self's determination. "Yes. It was a bit overkill," she admitted, "but the calculations it provided made a difference. There were times when even my tutors didn't have the answers I needed, so I'd come here and work things out for myself."

She turned to him, her expression a mix of nostalgia and satisfaction. "I spent a lot of time in this room—maybe more than in any of the others. It's where I first started to understand my abilities beyond what I was taught."

"Interesting....."

"Well, I no longer need it, since I am already doing the calculations instinctively now. But at that time, it really helped."

"I see."

Astron glanced around the room, taking in the various setups and equipment scattered about before his gaze shifted toward a staircase that led to the upper floor. "So... upstairs is your bedroom then?" he asked, a casual curiosity in his tone.

The moment he mentioned her bedroom, Irina felt a jolt of alarm shot through her. T-that... Her heart skipped a beat, and she struggled to keep her expression neutral. The last thing she needed was him wandering upstairs—there were things there that were, well, entirely personal.

Astron raised an eyebrow at her reaction, an amused glint in his eyes. "Should I check it out, then?"

"No!" she blurted out, stepping slightly in front of the stairs as if to block his path. "Let's stop here," she said, her tone firm, trying to sound casual but likely failing.

Astron tilted his head, clearly amused. "Why?"

Irina folded her arms, leveling him with a glare. "It's... my personal space," she replied, her voice cool and resolute. "Not something for anyone else to see."

He held her gaze for a moment, his usual calm demeanor unruffled, but he didn't push further. Instead, he gave a small nod, respecting her unspoken boundary. "Fair enough."

Though she did now know, he had gotten a slight glimpse of her room thanks to his eyes.

'Well, as expected from the Emberheart family....Even the walls don't let out any mana.'

Though, since there were no mana psions leaked, he could not see anything with his eyes. And he was not unhappy with that, since that also ensured that someone was not to be seen by others.

Irina led Astron back down the stairs, a faint sense of relief mingling with her usual composure. With her private quarters off-limits, she could finally show him the last place she'd wanted him to see—a place she'd once mentioned in passing during a late-night phone conversation, one of the few moments she'd opened up to him about her home.

"This isn't quite the same as the other places," she said as they exited her quarters, "but I think you'll appreciate it. It's... a bit more peaceful."

They walked through a winding path that led to a secluded part of the estate grounds, shielded by tall hedges and walls covered in ivy. As they rounded the corner, a sprawling garden came into view, dotted with rare and vibrant flowers that seemed to glow in the evening light. The air was thick with the scent of blooming petals, and small, controlled flames danced in lanterns scattered around, giving the garden a quiet, ethereal beauty.

"This is the Emberheart Garden," she said, gesturing to the elegant landscape around them. "It's a place I go to think, or when I need a break from training."

Astron nodded, taking in the serene beauty of the garden, his expression thoughtful. "Is this place where you were when you called me?"

"Yes.....How did you know?"

"Just guessed. But it is really serene."

"That's why I come here," she replied, smiling slightly. "Here, everything feels calm, quiet. Even the fire here is tame, soft."

They walked in silence for a while, the peacefulness of the garden setting a comfortable atmosphere between them. It felt strange, yet natural, to share this place with him—a contrast to the usual intensity of their interactions.

Chapter 662 145.4 - Amberheart Mansion

They strolled quietly for a bit, the garden's calm vibes making things feel easy between them. It was kind of weird but also natural to hang out here with him, especially compared to their usual intense chats.

But as much as she enjoyed the moment, Irina knew it wouldn't last long. Turning to Astron, she crossed her arms, her tone shifting to something more serious. "Alright," she said, her gaze direct. "Now that you've seen my world, it's time to get you prepared."

Astron raised an eyebrow, a glimmer of amusement in his eyes. "Prepared for...?"

"For meeting my mother," she replied firmly. "A dinner like this isn't just about etiquette. There are unspoken expectations. Subtle cues. I want you to be ready for what she'll expect and how she'll judge."

Irina watched him carefully, noting the thoughtful expression that crossed his face. Astron was quick to learn, especially when it came to dexterity and precision. His focus had always been more on agility and control rather than sheer strength, a trait that would work in his favor tonight. Dexterity was, after all, just as essential for mastering etiquette as it was for combat, and if anyone could handle the subtle intricacies of noble manners, it would be him.

"Hmm..." he murmured, considering her words.

She allowed herself a small smile, feeling a sense of satisfaction. He'd pick this up quickly; she was sure of it. And, if she was honest, the prospect of guiding him through these traditions and being closer to him—even if only under the excuse of teaching him—wasn't entirely unwelcome. Cough.....it was rather something that she was looking forward to. After all, it wasn't every day she had him here, in her world, and if it meant a few extra moments, well... that wasn't too much to ask, right?

"Don't worry," she said, a hint of playfulness in her tone as she took a step closer, reaching out to adjust the collar of his shirt as though fine-tuning his appearance for the occasion. "With a bit of guidance, you'll be more than capable of handling my mother's scrutiny."

"I am not worrying about anything." He said. But, he still raised an eyebrow, glancing down at her hand, though he didn't move away. "You're that confident?"

"Of course," she replied smoothly, her fingers lingering a second longer than necessary. "Just follow my lead."

"Is that so?" Astron replied. "Then.....go ahead." Irina smiled, pleased by his response, and gestured for him to follow her back toward her quarters. "Alright then," she said, her voice carrying a note of confidence. "Let's make sure you're more than prepared."

They walked through the garden, returning to the quiet seclusion of her building. While Astron was observant and picked up quickly, she knew that giving him a proper demonstration would be far more effective than simply explaining the rules. And to her, there was no better way to show him than setting up a real practice table and utilizing the hologram simulation available in her quarters.

After all, if her mother's plan was to evaluate him over dinner, then dinner etiquette was just as important as his responses.

As they entered her building, Irina led him towards her computer room. She tapped a panel on the wall, activating the room's hologram simulation system, and in an instant, a modest dining area, complete with a long table and elegant chairs appeared as a hologram. In the hologram, a scene of a formal dinner unfolded, with elegantly dressed figures seated around a long table, each movement calculated and refined. The guests dined with precision, every gesture smooth and restrained, from the delicate handling of silverware to the graceful sipping of wine. It was an ideal, educational setup for a beginner, the perfect way for Astron to observe the nuances of noble etiquette in action.

Irina crossed her arms, watching him as he took in the scene. "Watch their movements carefully," she instructed, her voice steady but encouraging. "Each gesture has a purpose, and timing is everything."

Astron's gaze remained focused, absorbing the movements of the holographic diners with that same calm attentiveness he applied to everything he learned. His eyes tracked the positioning of the cutlery, the way each guest delicately dabbed their mouths with napkins, even the subtle nods and glances exchanged among them. It was clear he was studying each detail, committing it to memory.

Once the demonstration ended, Irina led him toward her kitchen area, where a small dining table stood waiting. Unlike the hologram's grandeur, it was a simpler setup, yet it would be effective for practice. She laid out the silverware, glassware, and plates, mimicking the arrangement they would see later at dinner.

"Alright," she said, gesturing to the table. "Go ahead." Astron took a seat, his calm demeanor unwavering as she began explaining each element. She went through the placement of utensils, the delicate folding of the napkin, and the precise way to hold the glasses. And though she expected him to need a few adjustments, he surprised her by mastering each step with ease, mimicking the grace of the holographic diners as if it were second nature.

'Why am I even surprised.....'

She asked herself. For this guy, something like that must have been as easy as breathing, though she wasn't without a hint of frustration. She'd hoped he'd make a few mistakes—just enough for her to swoop in with guidance and gain a bit of an upper hand.

But she wasn't about to let this opportunity slip away completely.

Clearing her throat, she leaned closer, her gaze critical as she inspected his hand positioning. "Your grip on the glass," she said, reaching forward to adjust his fingers. "It's close, but not quite perfect. The angle matters."

Astron raised an eyebrow, a glimmer of amusement flashing in his eyes, but he allowed her to reposition his hand without comment. Satisfied, she moved to his silverware, her fingers lightly touching his wrist as she angled it slightly. "Here, too. The way you hold the knife," she murmured, leaning in closer than necessary. "It has to be precise."

She felt his gaze on her, and for a moment, her composure nearly faltered under his silent scrutiny. He hadn't made a single error—she knew it, and so did he. But he allowed her to make her adjustments, following each minor correction with an expression that was calm, yet held a faint trace of amusement.

Finally, she stepped back, folding her arms with a satisfied air, though his mouth was curled up a little. "So," he said, his voice soft but edged with humor, "is there anything else I'm 'getting wrong'?"

She huffed, feeling a faint flush rise to her cheeks. "I'm just making sure you're prepared," she replied smoothly. "It's a high-stakes dinner, after all."

"Of course," he said, his tone completely serious, though his eyes betrayed him. "I appreciate the... thorough instruction."

Irina took a steady breath, pushing past the faint blush she felt from his teasing as she continued her "instruction." The next part was equally important: timing in conversation—knowing when to speak and when to listen, the subtle rhythm of polite pauses, and how to navigate a formal dinner without appearing too eager or, worse, uncivilized.

"Now," she said, her tone a touch more serious, though she couldn't resist the occasional playful glance his way, "when it comes to conversation, timing is key. You'll need to listen attentively, show you're interested, and only speak when it's appropriate." She demonstrated, holding a calm, polite gaze and nodding slightly as though following an invisible conversation. "If there's a pause, don't rush to fill it. Keep a natural rhythm, like this."

Astron mimicked her movements perfectly, his posture and expressions just as she'd shown him. His attentive expression, that composed poise—it was nearly flawless. Irina struggled to find any

excuse to correct him. The way he carried himself was graceful, and his demeanor was almost effortlessly refined, leaving her little to critique.

And that was normal. While Astron did not show it outside, he had practiced how to control his mimics, gestures, and every part of his body countless times before, so that he could mask his intentions and everything.

With [Perceptive Insight] he was able to grasp it rather fast, and he had already mastered it when he was at the academy. However, Irina still did not care. Not willing to let him off that easily, she leaned in, eyes narrowing with a mock-critical gaze. "And when someone raises a point, make sure you react accordingly," she said, touching his arm lightly as though making a point. "A subtle nod, a thoughtful glance. Show engagement without overdoing it."

Astron's eyes flickered with that same faint amusement, but he nodded, following her instructions. And well..... She couldn't help but feel a thrill at having his attention. 'This bastard's face is really deadly now.'

As the lesson continued, a thought crossed her mind, her gaze lingering on him as she weighed her options. She'd considered testing him in dance, to see how he handled the coordination and poise required. But she reminded herself this wasn't a banquet—they were preparing for a formal dinner, and introducing a dance would certainly be going overboard.

Still, her curiosity got the better of her. She held back a mischievous smile, simply observing him as he continued practicing with the same poise and focus. Perhaps another time she'd bring it up; for now, she decided to enjoy these moments.

It was not like she did not have the following one week to herself after all....

As the evening approached, Irina stood in front of the mirror in her quarters, adjusting the final details of her attire, ensuring every element was flawless. Her reflection showed composure, and elegance—a perfect Emberheart heir ready to face the high-stakes dinner with her mother. Yet, as she turned to Astron, waiting near the door, she felt a flicker of nerves she hadn't anticipated.

Dressed in formal attire that somehow managed to enhance his already striking appearance, Astron looked entirely at ease, his calm demeanor adding to the natural confidence he carried. His presence

was a reminder of the countless hours she'd spent preparing him for this, yet now, right before the moment of truth, she felt a small knot of anxiety tighten within her.

"Ready?" she asked, her voice steady, though her gaze betrayed a touch of uncertainty. She wasn't worried about his etiquette or performance—he had mastered everything she'd taught him. Still, the prospect of this dinner and all it represented weighed heavily on her mind.

"Ready." Then, she led him to the dining room.

Chapter 663 146.1 - The Matriarch

Irina led Astron into the grand dining room, her steps confident, though the faint tension in her shoulders betrayed her awareness of the stakes. The room was elegantly lit, the flicker of Emberheart flames casting a warm, controlled glow across the polished mahogany table, which was set meticulously for three.

At the head of the table sat the largest chair, the seat of the Matriarch, a subtle reminder of her authority over this gathering. Across from it, two smaller yet equally refined chairs faced each other, reserved for Irina and Astron.

They approached their places, and Irina gestured for Astron to sit. He took his seat without hesitation, his movements steady, his expression composed. Irina sat opposite him, smoothing out her dress as she did so, feeling a flicker of pride as she noted his calm demeanor.

A quiet tension hung in the air as they waited for the Matriarch to arrive. Irina's gaze drifted to Astron, a silent reassurance in her eyes, though her own nerves simmered just below the surface. The dinner hadn't even begun, yet she was keenly aware of every tiny gesture, every breath she took.

The room was silent but for the faint crackling of the flames in the sconces along the walls, a gentle reminder of the Emberheart legacy. Irina kept her posture poised, her gaze steady, prepared for her mother's scrutiny.

After a few moments, a faint rustle of movement from the corridor signaled the arrival of the Matriarch.

As the evening settled over the Emberheart estate, the Matriarch stood by the window in her chambers, her thoughts gathered like shadows cast by the waning light.

She had dressed with particular care tonight, draping herself in a gown of deep crimson that seemed to flicker like embers with each movement-a silent reminder of the power and presence she commanded. Her gaze drifted over the estate grounds, her mind calculating, assessing the various ways she might probe and test this guest of Irina's.

A soft knock at the door broke her contemplation. It was one of the maids, bowing as she entered. "Madam, the dinner is ready. The young lady and her guest have taken their seats."

The Matriarch's lips curved into a knowing smile. She could already sense their presence in the dining hall below-the confident, steady pulse of Irina's aura, tempered but persistent, and the unfamiliar yet resilient energy of the boy beside her.

There was a tension there, a contained power that hinted at more than his humble background might suggest.

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"Very well," she replied, her voice smooth, masking the intrigue simmering beneath. She made her way toward the dining room, her steps light but deliberate, each one reflecting her measured intent.

In her mind, she sifted through the many ways she could test him-his manners, his reactions, his ability to withstand pressure. A subtle smile played on her lips; it was time to see if this boy truly had the strength Irina so adamantly believed in.

As she entered the dining room, her gaze fell upon Irina and the boy seated at the long, elegantly set table. Irina rose first, a spark of defiance mingling with respect in her eyes, while the boy followed suit, his posture calm.

'Hmm.....?'

The Matriarch's gaze shifted to him, taking in his composed demeanor, his steady eyes that met hers with neither arrogance nor fear, Interesting, she thought, noting his restraint.

"This face...A charm enhancement perhaps? This boy seems to have had a unique encounter recently'

The Matriarch's eyes narrowed slightly as she assessed his appearance, noting the subtle changes in his features—a sharpness in his gaze, a refinement to his profile that hadn't been present in the previous reports she'd gathered.

Being the head of the Emberheart family, she had encountered her share of powerful mages and high-standing nobles, each bearing their own unique charms and enhancements. Beauty, she knew, was often as much a crafted illusion as a natural

gift.

'Curious,' she mused silently, a small flicker of intrigue sparking beneath her cool demeanor. The boy she had investigated before had possessed none of these refined qualities. This was no mere accident of youth; it was the result of a recent, fortuitous

encounter.

'So, he has already begun to reshape himself,' she noted, her mind efficiently filing away this information, checking off a small box in her mental ledger. It wasn't that his enhanced appearance impressed her; rather, it saved the effort.

Handsome was useful in its own way—a tool to influence, to charm. And in certain circles, it could save significant effort.

As the Matriarch settled into her seat, a chill seemed to descend upon the room, cooling the warmth that had briefly lingered in the air. She folded her hands gracefully before her, casting a glance at Irina and Astron across the table. Irina sat with a composed posture, her gaze steady but respectful, while Astron held himself with a calm alertness, waiting patiently. Neither spoke, both well aware that the rhythm of this evening rested entirely in the Matriarch's hands.

Her gaze lingered on Astron a moment longer, sizing him up in the quiet. Beneath her

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serene exterior, she held her reservations. 'This boy,' she thought. 'A guest of dubious standing, unproven in strength and talent... hardly the partner one would choose for an Emberheart.'

To her, Astron's presence here felt like an indulgence of Irina's youthful sentiments, a product of her daughter's defiant streak, swayed by what she likely mistook for love or loyalty. In the Matriarch's experience, emotions were fickle, often clouding the better judgment required to lead a legacy as grand as Emberheart.

After a long silence, she reached for her glass, swirling the liquid within it thoughtfully before taking a sip. She placed the glass back on the table with a soft clink, her gaze never leaving Astron.

The Matriarch's gaze remained fixed on Irina, a faint, expectant smile playing at the edges of her lips. Her tone was smooth but held a quiet force as she spoke. "So... you are not going to introduce him to me, Irina?"

Irina's gaze narrowed slightly, the faintest flicker of irritation crossing her expression. She knew well that her mother was already more than familiar with Astron's identity. 'Don't you know already, Mother?' her eyes seemed to say, a silent challenge simmering beneath her composed exterior.

But the Matriarch's eyes returned the look with an unspoken reply of their own: 'I know, but you are required to do as I please.'

Irina's jaw tightened, her composure straining under her mother's subtle demand. She knew there was no point in resisting, and yet, the calculated restraint in her mother's gaze infuriated her. She opened her mouth, prepared to comply despite her reluctance

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But before she could utter a word, Astron spoke, his voice calm and unshaken by the tension in the room. "I am Astron Natusalune," he said respectfully. "It is an honor to

be here tonight, Madam Emberheart."

The Matriarch's gaze flicked to him, a brief flash of surprise passing through her eyes before settling back into an unreadable expression. He had spoken with a quiet assurance, a steadiness that neither flinched nor faltered. This was no timid boy stumbling through his introduction; this was a young man who understood the weight of the room's scrutiny and remained composed beneath it.

But at the same time, what he did was an act of defiance, that much being clear.

The Matriarch's gaze turned cold, her lips pressing into a thin line as her eyes bore into Astron. He had spoken without her invitation—a silent but unmistakable act of defiance. Irina's own gaze snapped to Astron as well, a glimmer of worry flaring in her widened eyes. They had reviewed etiquette meticulously; she had expected him to avoid even the smallest misstep. But here he was, breaking protocol in the very first

moments.

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The Matriarch's narrowed gaze sharpened, and a faint, icy smile touched her lips. "I don't recall asking you to speak, Young Natusalune," she said, her voice like a blade wrapped in silk. "It seems you carry a certain... arrogance for one so young."

As she spoke, the room seemed to grow heavier, the air thickening as her aura unfurled. The weight of her Archmage's presence pressed down on Astron, invisible yet undeniable, a force that seemed to seep into the very walls. She restrained herself, careful not to injure him, but the pressure was unmistakable, designed to test his resilience and his nerve.

Astron's face did not even change a little as the aura bore down on him, but he held his ground, his calm expression unwavering even as the force tested his endurance. He met the Matriarch's gaze directly, a quiet resolve glinting in his eyes. The aura was suffocating, demanding submission, yet he did not falter.

"It might have seemed so, Madam," he replied, his voice steady despite the weight pressing upon him. "My intent was not to appear arrogant, only respectful. I am not a child who needs someone else's mouth to be introduced."

The Matriarch's eyes narrowed further, studying him as he withstood the pressure, her curiosity piqued even as her expression remained unreadable. 'He doesn't back down easily,' she noted, the faintest hint of intrigue mingling with her irritation. 'But defiance alone does not make one worthy.'

Irina watched with barely concealed tension, her hands tightening slightly in her lap. She knew the risk Astron was taking by standing firm, but there was also a flicker of pride in her gaze. He was enduring it without faltering, even under her mother's oppressive aura.

After a prolonged silence, the Matriarch finally eased her aura, retracting the weight of her presence with a dismissive glance. "Respect," she murmured, her tone icy, "is shown through restraint and deference, not audacity."

"Restraint and deference go both ways.....At the end of the day, in the table of clashes,

it is the strong who gets the respect."

The Matriarch's eyebrows arched slightly, a flicker of genuine surprise flashing in her eyes as she took in Astron's response. 'This boy... truly was different,' she thought, a mixture of intrigue and irritation simmering beneath her poised exterior.

He met her challenge head-on, with words that carried both defiance and a sharp insight-a confidence uncharacteristic of someone of his standing.

But she knew well that pressing further would be unseemly. To engage him in a

prolonged battle of words and auras would reduce the evening to a display unworthy of the Emberheart's dignity.

With a slight wave of her hand, she signaled the maids to begin serving, allowing the charged atmosphere to settle as the meal commenced.

Chapter 664 146.2 - The Matriarch

"Restraint and deference go both ways.....At the end of the day, in the table of clashes, it is the strong who gets the respect."

As the meals came, Matriarch finally addressed those words.

Her gaze lingered on Astron for a beat longer, a subtle glint in her eyes as she acknowledged his words. "Indeed," she said, her voice a calm, measured tone. "Respect is often claimed by those with the strength to wield it. Though strength, Young Natusalune is not only a matter of power but of control. True strength is often quiet, disciplined."

As the maids presented the main course, the rich aroma of the dish filled the room—a premium cut of beef, prepared and marinated under special conditions to maximize its mana-rich qualities.

This was no ordinary meal; each slice of meat was infused with concentrated mana, a delicacy reserved for high-ranking magic families who required both sustenance and mana fortification in equal measure.

The Matriarch glanced at Astron as the plate was set before him, a hint of expectation in her eyes. To most, such a dish might seem indulgent, but in families like the Emberhearts, it served a deeper purpose.

Mana-infused food was essential for maintaining their heightened magical abilities and resilience. The body of a true mage could handle the surge of energy, absorbing and utilizing the mana for strength and refinement.

For an outsider, however—someone without rigorous training or a developed magical constitution—the mana could be overwhelming, even potentially dangerous if not consumed with control and moderation. She took a delicate bite, her gaze shifting briefly to Irina, who seemed relaxed, her posture indicating familiarity with this sort of meal.

The Matriarch then turned her attention to Astron, subtly watching for any reaction. It was one thing to sit at the Emberheart table; it was quite another to partake in their mana-laden fare. If Astron was truly as capable as he presented himself to be, then he would understand how to handle the meal before him with care and skill.

The Matriarch took another slow bite of the mana-infused meat before turning her attention back to Astron, a faintly condescending smile playing at the corners of her mouth. She gestured subtly toward his plate, her tone laced with a quiet but unmistakable air of superiority.

"This dish, Young Natusalune," she began smoothly, "is not merely a meal. It is crafted with a refinement and potency that requires both skill and experience to consume safely. For someone of your... background, I would imagine this is quite unfamiliar." The implication was clear: in her eyes, his meager experience would hardly prepare him for something so steeped in the elite practices of high-ranking magical families. Irina stiffened slightly beside him, recognizing the veiled insult for what it was, but before she could intervene, Astron spoke, his voice calm but edged with defiance. "Madam Emberheart," he replied, his tone respectful but firm, "I don't need experience with this particular dish to handle it. I assure you, I'm more than capable of managing a challenge like this."

Without hesitation, he took a measured bite of the mana-rich meat, his gaze steady and unwavering as he met the Matriarch's eyes. The subtle rudeness of his response- his willingness to call her out directly-was impossible to ignore. Yet his composure remained intact, each bite calculated, his focus entirely on absorbing the mana without being overwhelmed.

The Matriarch's eyes narrowed slightly, her expression unreadable as she studied him. She could sense his confidence and his controlled handling of the meal's potency, his challenge to her assumption clear and unmistakable.

"Interesting," she murmured after a moment, her tone still cool but laced with a hint of intrigue. "It appears you are indeed capable of holding your own, even when faced with the unfamiliar."

Astron raised his head slightly, acknowledging her words without breaking his calm demeanor.

"Indeed. It is when facing the unfamiliar that one's capabilities are tested, don't you think?"

He had taken up the challenge, and with each bite, he demonstrated that his strength was more than just a claim-it was something he had cultivated, regardless of her opinions of his background.

The Matriarch studied Astron with a glint of genuine interest in her eyes, the subtle curve of her lips betraying a hint of approval. He had not only handled her mana-laden challenge with composure but had met her subtle insult head-on, showing a quiet resilience and tact that few could muster. The boy was steadily rising in her estimation, though she kept her face an unreadable mask. There was much yet to assess many layers of his character still to probe.

Her eyes flicked over him, noting his posture, the careful way he held his utensils, the precision in every movement. It was clear that he possessed a refined etiquette she hadn't anticipated. Inwardly, she acknowledged Irina's role in this; her daughter must. have drilled him extensively, guiding him through the formalities and protocols expected at their table. Irina had, indeed, prepared him well.

'Still,' she thought, her gaze thoughtful, 'How much of this discipline is his, and how much is a mask taught to him for tonight?' She had seen far too many from modest backgrounds attempt to adopt the manners of the clite, only to falter and reveal a

vulgarity beneath the surface. Manners and decorum required more than practice- they needed a deeper understanding and a certain temperament, one she doubted Astron would possess.

But as the meal progressed, she found herself with little to criticize. His demeanor remained composed and dignified, his every movement measured.

There was no overeagerness, no hesitation, nothing betraying the commoner's insecurity or roughness she had expected. He showed neither deference nor arrogance, maintaining a careful balance—a rare skill even among the nobility. Despite her observations, the Matriarch's mind refused to grant him the full acknowledgment he might have earned.

Her pride, deeply ingrained and unyielding, would not allow her to accept so easily the notion that this boy, from such a modest background, could measure up to her expectations for an Emberheart.

She had stood against Irina's choice at every turn, had questioned and challenged it, and there was no way she would relent simply because of a few commendable traits displayed over a single dinner.

'No, she thought with an almost defiant inner conviction, 'I am an Archmage, the head of the Emberheart family. I have the right to maintain my standards, and to take pride in my judgments. It is indeed illogical. But so what?'

The very notion of yielding her opinion, even for a moment, felt like a compromise she was unwilling to make.

Pride was her prerogative, a privilege earned through years of discipline and rigor. She could and would take pride in whatever she deemed worthy—and if this boy were to truly earn her respect, he would need to do so on terms far stricter than a simple display of manners.

Her lips tightened slightly, a flicker of self-satisfaction crossing her face as she reaffirmed her decision.

'He has yet to truly prove himself, regardless of his current performance. He will need more than etiquette and composure to withstand what I expect from him.' The Matriarch's gaze sharpened, her mind already weaving a new strategy to probe Astron's boundaries.

She had noted his distaste for being looked down upon....No, it was rather the fact that he hated when others were being inconvenienced because of him. It was subtle, but when she had pressured Irina earlier, Astron had intervened—a small defiance, but one that told her volumes about his character. 'Let's see,' she mused, a glint of intrigue flashing in her eyes.

The Matriarch's gaze shifted to Irina, her tone polite yet laden with veiled curiosity as she broached the topic of Irina's performance. "Irina, I have been most attentive to your progress at the academy," she began, each word deliberate. "I understand that your grades remain at the top, as expected."

Irina inclined her head respectfully. "Yes, Mother. I work hard to maintain our family's standards."

The Matriarch's smile was slight, almost dismissive, as she continued, her attention drifting momentarily toward Astron. "Yes... and I've also noticed that you and Young Natusalune have been grouped together for most of your projects and assignments." Astron's posture remained steady, but there was a flicker in his gaze as if sensing the subtle implication in her words.

Irina's expression grew guarded, aware of her mother's tendency to probe weaknesses in any form, but she kept silent, allowing the Matriarch to continue. "Quite the rise, isn't it?" the Matriarch mused aloud, her eyes fixing on Astron with an unreadable intensity. "From the last rank at the start of the semester to a much... improved position by the end. Impressive for someone with such a steep learning

curve, wouldn't you say?"

Her words were delivered smoothly, yet the implication was unmistakable—that perhaps Astron's rise in rank had been less a result of his own effort and more a consequence of his association with Irina. Her gaze lingered, as though awaiting some acknowledgment of this potential dependency.

"What do you mean mother?" Irina was the one to speak further. "That, his grades were not due to his efforts?"

The moment she asked this, the Matriarch's smile widened, though her eyes remained calculating. "I do not mean anything," she said smoothly, a note of skepticism barely concealed. "Though it is not unheard of for associations to sometimes... lend a certain

advantage."

The Matriarch's gaze shifted to Irina, her faint smile never faltering, though a glint of amusement flickered in her eyes. "Tell me, Irina," she said, her tone deceptively mild, "why is that the first thing that came to your mind? Surely, as one of the academy's top students, you would know how performance is measured."

Irina felt a flash of irritation, her chest tightening as she realized her mother's game.

She planned this. The Matriarch had known precisely how to manipulate her, to guide her into giving such an answer.

The question hadn't been about Astron's achievements-it had been a subtle trap, one she had unwittingly stepped into.

"For what reason, you are suspecting this, Madam Emberheart?" Just then, his voice intervened just as she expected. "Can you please clarify?"

Chapter 665 Chapter 146.3 - The Matriarch

Astron's voice broke through the tension, calm yet firm. "For what reason are you suspecting this, Madam Emberheart?" he asked, his gaze steady as he held her eyes. "Could you clarify?"

The Matriarch's smile widened, her amusement barely veiled as she met his question with a touch of condescension. "Of course, Young Natusalune," she replied smoothly. "You see, at the beginning of the semester, your ranking was... well, how should I put it? 2450 out of 2450 students."

She leaned forward slightly, her voice carrying a subtle edge. "It was, frankly, a surprise that you were even accepted into the academy with such a standing. Typically, such placements require considerable talent or, at the very least, influential connections." She paused, her eyes narrowing with a feigned look of pity. "Unfortunately, it appears you possess neither."

She let her words settle, watching Astron's reaction as she continued, "Yet, despite such a low start, you have climbed significantly in rank by the semester's end. And what's more interesting is that almost all of your major projects, dungeon raids, and practical assignments have been completed alongside Irina. Surely, you can understand why a mother might question whether this association has... perhaps provided you with a certain advantage."

The implication was clear: his rise in rank, she suggested, could hardly be attributed to his own efforts alone. Instead, she hinted, it was his connection to Irina that had opened doors he would not have managed otherwise.

Irina straightened, a spark of frustration flashing in her eyes as she opened her mouth to respond. "Mother, it's the academy's policy that once a group is formed, they continue together until the end of the semester-"

But before she could finish, the Matriarch raised a hand, silencing her with a single, authoritative gesture. Her gaze remained fixed on Astron, her expression cool and unyielding. "Those things that I mentioned should suffice as a reason, wouldn't you think, Young Natusalune?"

Astron met her gaze without hesitation, his voice calm but resolute as he responded. "Madam Emberheart, if I truly lacked connections or talent, as you imply, then Arcadia Hunter Academy would be... well, foolish to accept me. It is, after all, the best academy in the entire human domain. They have no reason to waste a slot on someone without potential, given the fierce competition to enroll."

The Matriarch's eyes narrowed, her gaze turning sharper, her lips curving into a faint, almost mocking smile. "And yet, the very same academy you hold in such high regard has been infiltrated and attacked by demon contractors no less than three times in recent years." She leaned forward slightly, her tone cold and cutting. "Do forgive me if their judgment seems questionable. I have every reason to doubt their competence in selecting students... or in protecting them, for that matter."

Astron's expression remained calm, though his eyes held a steady resolve as he continued. "It is indeed true that the academy's competence should be questioned in recent times, Madam Emberheart. However, these incidents are recent developments. Before this semester, Arcadia's prestige and reputation were well-earned, built over countless years of service and competence. And I believe that's precisely why you chose to send Irina-your family's heir-there in the first place."

The Matriarch's lips curved into a faint smile, a glint of amusement in her gaze as she considered his words. "Oh? Then are you suggesting that my sources somehow failed to uncover the truth of how you were admitted to the academy? Are you claiming I missed something so crucial?"

Astron met her gaze steadily, unphased by the implication. "It might be the case, Madam, one would not know without the information."

Astron continued, his tone calm yet unwavering. "To add more, Madam Emberheart, the academy is far from ignorant. They are well aware of the potential for students to benefit unfairly from group projects. That's why individual assessments are conducted separately, and every team captain is required to submit detailed group reports on each member's contributions. As Irina was the one submitting these reports, it implies she considered my work worthy enough to credit."

The Matriarch's smile thinned, a glint of sharpness flashing in her eyes. "Or perhaps," she replied smoothly, "my daughter's vision has been... compromised by certain emotions, emotions that might cloud her judgment."

Astron didn't miss a beat, his voice steady as he met her gaze head-on. "If that were the case, Madam, then it would suggest that she lacks the discernment to choose the right person to stand by her side. And perhaps... such a shortfall could be attributed to decisions made by her predecessors?"

The Matriarch's smile froze, her expression hardening as the meaning of his words sank in. He had not only defended Irina's judgment but subtly implied that if she had any such blind spots, it might reflect the influence or failure-of her own upbringing and guidance. Her gaze sharpened, a flicker of irritation breaking through her composed exterior.

"A bold statement, Young Natusalune. It seems your manners are lacking, perhaps because of the lack of parents to teach you?"

Astron's eyes narrowed slightly at the Matriarch's pointed remark, the subtle sting of her words hitting deeper than she could see. But he quickly regained his composure, his tone calm but carrying an unmistakable edge as he replied.

Astron's gaze remained unwavering, a calm defiance simmering beneath his composed exterior. "True, Madam," he began, his tone carrying a quiet edge. "People like us tend to learn manners on our own, to find our own way. But it appears there are also those whose parents are present-yet absent when it comes to guiding them in more... meaningful ways. Don't you think, it is more pitiful for such people to exist?"

The Matriarch's expression froze for a fraction of a second, her eyes narrowing as his words settled in. He hadn't raised his voice or wavered in his tone, yet the implication was clear. In his measured, polite response lay a subtle reproach, suggesting that mere presence alone didn't guarantee influence or genuine guidance-a pointed remark on the hollowness of some bonds.

An icy silence hung between them, and Irina glanced anxiously between her mother and Astron, sensing the depth of the moment. The Matriarch's lips pressed into a thin line, her gaze colder than before, though her curiosity was unmistakable. Few dared to speak to her so boldly, especially while standing on such uncertain ground.

Her voice, when she finally spoke, was smooth but sharp as a blade. "A bold observation, Mr. Natusalune."

Few people dared to speak to her mother so directly-let alone imply any form of shortcoming. And yet, Astron's calm, measured tone held no arrogance, only a steadfast confidence that gave weight to his words.

"This is.....not good...."

It was not going in the direction she wanted at all.....This guy, why was he talking like that to her mother? Did he have a death wish!?

The Matriarch's expression darkened, her lips pressing into a thin line as she regarded Astron. Despite his respectful tone, his words cut deeper than any arrogance might have, challenging not only her reasoning but the pride she took in her judgment. Anger simmered beneath her calm exterior, her pride feeling the sharp sting of his unyielding resolve.

"It seems, Mr. Natusalune," she said, her voice dangerously low, "that you may have mistaken your worth, or overestimated your strength." Her aura intensified, and flames began to flicker around her, moving with a controlled precision that hinted at the sheer depth of her power. The heat in the room grew oppressive, the flames dancing closer to him, warning him of the peril his words had invited. "One should tread carefully, lest they vanish in a single moment," she said, her tone carrying the weight of her threat.

But Astron stood firm, his posture unwavering despite the suffocating heat. His voice remained steady as he responded, his gaze unflinching. "Madam, I only speak the truth as I see it. Everyone's life hangs by a thread at every moment, and yours is no exception." He took a measured breath, seemingly undeterred by her fire. "An Archmage wields the power to annihilate millions in a heartbeat. I have no control over the actions of such a person, nor over whether I will survive those actions. Given that reality, I prefer to speak my mind honestly rather than hide behind empty

flattery!"

"This...."

For some reason, the moment Irina heard those words, she was reminded of the times

when she acted the same. At that time she was also offended by his words, and back then she was much more fiery ever than before.

And he had replied to her words, in the same manner, without any ounce of fear and regret. The same eyes, that only felt cold and empty.

'Hahah....'

And for some reason, she felt like laughing, though she hardly suppressed her emotions.

His calm, logical reply cut through the tension, striking a chord in the room that even the Matriarch couldn't ignore. There was no pleading, no fear in his words-only the acceptance of his vulnerability and the resolve to stand by his convictions.

The Matriarch's flames subsided slightly, her eyes narrowing as she took in his words, her anger tempered by an undeniable curiosity. Few people dared to speak with such honesty before her, let alone someone with so little apparent power. Despite her pride, a part of her could not help but respect his stance, however infuriating she

found it.

After a long, tense silence, she allowed a faint smile to return to her face, though it lacked warmth. "You really are interesting"

The Matriarch's faint, chilling smile lingered as she observed Astron with renewed interest. Though his defiance had stirred her irritation, it had also, finally, brought her to the point she had intended all along.

"Well," she began, her voice smooth but carrying an unmistakable edge, "if you're so

certain of yourself, it's time you proved that certainty." She glanced briefly at Irina as if to remind her of the glowing praise she had once given this young man. "When Irina spoke of you, her words were filled with... remarkable confidence. She believed you worthy of privileges within this house, even access to the armory."

Irina's expression shifted, her gaze turning wary as she caught on to her mother's intentions.

"But," the Matriarch continued, turning her gaze back to Astron, "I cannot grant such privileges to someone who is all words and no action. So I ask you, Mr. Natusalune- will you back up that bold stance of yours?"

Astron's eyes met hers without flinching, his voice steady. "What would you have me do, Madam?"

The Matriarch's smirk grew, a glint of challenge flickering in her eyes.

"One day in the Chamber of Emberheart.

"Mother!"

Chapter 666 147.1 - Chamber of Emberheart

"What would you have me do, Madam?"

"One day in the Chamber of Emberheart."

"Mother!" Irina's voice cut through the room, a mixture of alarm and frustration flashing in her eyes. Her objection was immediate, her voice tinged with concern that she could barely contain. "You can't seriously expect him to endure that. The Chamber isn't something just anyone can withstand. Even our family members, who have natural resistance to fire, face difficulty with its intensity." She looked to Astron, a hint of worry in her expression. "Even I... one of the most skilled of our family, struggled in that place."

The Matriarch's gaze shifted to her daughter, her expression a cold mask of authority. "Exactly, Irina. If this young man truly deserves the access and privileges you've asked of me on his behalf, then he should be capable of enduring what we endure." Her voice held a steely edge, firm and unwavering. "And if he cannot, then it will be a clear indication that his place is not beside an Emberheart."

She turned back to Astron, her gaze piercing. "The Chamber of Emberheart is not a test of simple strength or resolve-it demands resilience and adaptation. It will push you to your limits, and it does not forgive weakness."

Irina opened her mouth to protest again, but the Matriarch silenced her with a raised hand. "Irina, you yourself spoke highly of him, vouched for his capability. Do you not believe he can rise to this challenge?"

Irina hesitated, torn between her trust in Astron's resilience and the harsh reality of the trial her mother proposed. She knew the Chamber's intensity, the way its flames seemed to consume even the strongest minds. She had survived it, but it had been a grueling ordeal, a test even for those whose very blood carried the Emberheart flame.

"But....mother..."

"Do not worry. I am not stupid." The Matriarch's gaze shifted back to Astron, her expression stern yet calculating. "Since you are an outsider," she said, her voice cool and resolute, "I will not expect you to endure the Chamber as one of us would. You will be tested at the first level only. One day-no more."

Irina's eyes widened, her worry plain, but she knew better than to argue further. Her mother's decision was final, and beneath her composed exterior, Irina understood her mother's reasoning. This test was inevitable, a calculated move she had likely intended from the beginning. For the Matriarch, it was a twofold purpose: if Astron truly proved himself, she would be forced to acknowledge him, however begrudgingly. But if he failed, the experience would serve as punishment-a harsh reminder to Astron for daring to challenge her authority, and to Irina, a warning of the cost of misplaced loyalty.

Irina cast a glance at Astron, who met her gaze briefly before nodding, calm and resolved. She could see that he understood the stakes just as well, that he saw this not only as a test but as a challenge to stand on equal footing with the family she'd been born into.

The Matriarch's voice softened, though her words were as unyielding as ever. "Consider this, Mr. Natusalune, both a trial and a lesson. If you can withstand even this single day, I will grant you the access Irina has requested. If not..." Her words trailed off, the implications unmistakable.

Astron nodded once, his tone steady. "Understood. I have no intention of backing away."

A faint, cold smile appeared on her lips. "Then I suggest you prepare. You will enter the chamber in one hour.""

As the Matriarch left the dining room, her cold parting words lingering in the air, Irina's gaze immediately turned to Astron, her expression clouded with concern. Her mind raced, grappling with a mixture of frustration, worry, and self-doubt that threatened to overwhelm her composure.

'How could he possibly withstand the Chamber of Emberheart?' The Chamber was an ordeal few could endure, even those born with the Emberheart flame coursing through their veins. Irina had barely survived her own trial, and she had the inherited resilience of her family. But Astron-an outsider with no natural resistance to fire- was being expected to last a whole day within its relentless heat.

'This is madness,' she thought, bitterness pooling in her heart. She felt an intense resentment rising within her, directed first at her mother, whose calculated cruelty had led to this. Her mother's unyielding standards, her disregard for Astron's well-being-it was all a display of power, a reminder that she controlled everything, even her daughter's choices.

But her frustration didn't end there. She felt anger at Astron too, who hadn't backed down despite her warnings.

He could've backed down swallowing his pride, but instead, he'd faced her mother's challenge with that same infuriating calm. His resolve, his unshakable confidence-it was as though he didn't even realize the risk he was taking.

And then, a deeper resentment twisted inside her, one that she turned inward. She felt a sting of self-reproach for being unable to stop her mother, for being forced to sit by and watch as he stepped into a trial she knew was meant to break him.

"Why didn't you refuse?" Her voice was low and strained as she looked at him, her eyes reflecting the depth of her worry. "Astron, this isn't just some simple test. The Chamber... it's meant to push you beyond your limits. It's unforgiving."

He held her gaze, his expression as steady as ever, though she could sense the quiet resolve behind his calm exterior. "I know," he replied simply, his tone reassuring. "But this is my choice. If I want to be taken seriously, I need to prove myself."

Irina bit her lip, feeling the weight of helplessness press down on her. "But you don't have to do this," she murmured. "This... this is my family...."

Astron's gaze softened, and he took a small step closer, his calm demeanor anchoring her even as her emotions churned. He didn't know why, but seeing her down like

this....

For some reason, he felt really uncomfortable.

PAT!

His hand instinctively reached out for her head, who had been looking down.

"Irina," he said gently, "this is as much about you as it is about me, now." Astron's hand rested gently on Irina's head, a comforting warmth that steadied her despite the storm of emotions twisting inside her. He looked down at her, his gaze unwavering, a quiet strength that she couldn't ignore.

"You must have known," he murmured, his tone gentle but resolute. "From the very start, the Matriarch had this in mind. Sending me to the Chamber was always her plan. No matter what we did or said, this was bound to happen."

Irina looked up, her eyes teary, but her expression was one of realization. "So... there was only one way to avoid this." Her voice was soft, filled with a sadness she hadn't let herself feel until now.

Astron met her gaze, nodding. "Yes. And that way was for us never to meet."

His words settled heavily between them, but then he added, his voice softening, "But I don't regret it."

Irina's eyes widened, a surprised blush spreading across her cheeks. She could feel her heart racing, and before she could process the overwhelming warmth that his words stirred in her, she instinctively buried her face in his chest. This infuriatingly calm, insufferably steadfast... She couldn't even finish the thought, feeling her cheeks grow hotter as she struggled to find her composure.

After a moment, she managed to breathe, murmuring quietly, "Right? What am I even doing?" She took a deep, steadying breath, her embarrassment mingling with a renewed sense of strength. She wiped away the faint traces of her earlier tears, her resolve hardening once more as she looked up at him.

"I don't regret my decision either," she said, her voice steady, filled with a quiet determination. "No matter what happens in that Chamber, I'm glad we met."

"Heh.....You have returned to yourself."

Astron's faint, reassuring smile was the only response she needed. However, what she wanted wasn't there.

'This guy.....He really should smile more.....'

With this deadly face, she really wouldn't be able to keep herself down, but so what?

Though, eventually she felt like dying of embarrassment.

"Cough.....It wasn't because of you, or anything! Don't get it wrong!" And she could

only resort to her usual way of acting.

"Really.....?"

Astron didn't need to smile for Irina to see the amusement in his eyes. He was calm as

ever, but she could tell he was enjoying this, the faint glint in his gaze enough to make

her huff in annoyance.

"You bastard... you really make me worry all the time," she muttered, lightly hitting him on the chest. Her hand barely made an impact, but it was enough to convey her

frustration.

Before she could pull away, Astron caught her hand, his grip gentle yet firm. His hand was cool to the touch, and the sudden contrast sent an involuntary shiver down her spine. He leaned in slightly, his voice calm but edged with a teasing undertone. "Isn't that good?" he murmured. "Better than not thinking about me at all, right?" Irina glared up at him, but her heart raced, his words lingering in her mind. She pulled her hand back sharply, only for a playful idea to spark. Without a second thought, she leaned forward and bit his finger, quick but enough to make her point.

The surprise flickered in his eyes, though he didn't pull away. Instead, he watched her with that same unflinching calm as she smirked, feeling a triumphant satisfaction at having thrown him off-balance, if only for a moment.

"Thank you for the meal-," she said, her tone cool, though her cheeks were still faintly flushed. And with that, she turned and quickly left, her steps brisk as she tried to regain her composure, leaving him to process her unexpected act of defiance.

Chapter 667 147.2 - Chamber of Emberheart

"Thank you for the meal-"

Irina hurried out of the dining room, her heart still racing as she strode quickly through the corridors. She moved purposefully, her footsteps echoing off the polished floors as she made her way outside to the garden. The moment she stepped into the open air, she took a deep breath, letting the cool breeze help calm the lingering heat in her cheeks.

'Get it together,' she told herself, placing a hand over her chest to steady her pulse. She forced herself to look at things from an objective perspective, reminding herself of the task at hand: Astron was about to face the Chamber of Emberheart-a place that demanded far more than simple endurance.

Just as she began to compose her thoughts, she heard footsteps behind her. Turning, she saw Astron emerging from the mansion, his expression steady as always. For a moment, she felt that same flicker of frustration at his calmness, but she pushed it aside, focusing on what needed to be done.

"Astron," she said, her tone shifting to something more serious. "There are things you need to know about the Chamber"

He moved closer, nodding in silent acknowledgment, his attention fully on her.

"It's... unlike anything you've faced before most likely," she began, her voice low but firm. "The Chamber of Emberheart isn't just a test of physical endurance. It's a place designed to test your very essence. Its flames... they burn deeper than just flesh. They reach into your mana, your willpower, everything that holds you together."

She looked away, her gaze distant as she recalled her own experience in the Chamber. "When I was in there, it felt as if the flames were stripping away every layer of who I was, testing if I was worthy of wielding the Emberheart flames. For someone without our family's affinity... it can be overwhelming."

Astron's expression remained calm, but she could see the faint glint of resolve in his eyes. "And what's the best way to handle it?" he asked, his tone thoughtful, almost curious.

Irina took a deep breath, searching for the right words. "Don't resist the flames outright," she advised, her gaze returning to him. "The more you fight, the harder they'll push back. Instead... let them test you. Accept their intensity but don't let them consume you. Think of it as a negotiation with fire itself. If you endure and adapt, the Chamber might recognize your strength, even if you're not from our bloodline."

She hesitated, feeling a pang of worry, but pushed forward. "This isn't a test of raw power. It's about resilience, Astron. And if anyone can handle that... I believe you can." Her mind still raced, trying to think of any possible way to aid Astron in the Chamber. When she'd undergone the trial, Esme had secretly provided her with herbs to bolster

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her endurance—a quiet act of rebellion against the harshness of the ordeal. But she doubted her mother would allow the same leniency for Astron. This was different; he was an outsider, and the Matriarch was not one to give unearned advantages.

Still, she couldn't help but hope, and so she called for Esme, the faint thread of determination in her voice.

Esme arrived swiftly, bowing respectfully. But even before Irina could open her mouth, the older woman spoke, her expression sympathetic yet resigned. "I'm sorry, young lady. The Matriarch has already instructed every maid to refrain from offering any assistance. We are not to interfere with the trial."

Irina paused, her faint hope extinguished. After a moment, she let out a soft, bitter laugh, waving her hand to signal Esme's dismissal. She should've known her mother would cover every angle, ensuring that Astron's test was as unforgiving as possible. Esme gave her a respectful nod, her expression laced with a quiet understanding before she turned and left, leaving Irina and Astron alone once more.

Once Esme was out of sight, Irina sighed, her gaze fixed on the ground. "I should have expected that. She never leaves anything to chance." She looked up at Astron, a trace of resignation mixed with the glimmer of her usual defiance. "So... it really will be just you and the Chamber."

Astron simply nodded, accepting this without complaint, his calm unshaken. Irina's chest tightened. She knew he'd go in without hesitation, but that didn't ease the worry gnawing at her. All she could do now was prepare him with what little advice she could offer.

"If there's anything else you need to know or... any way I can help, just tell me," she murmured, her voice softer. She wished, more than anything, that she could do something to tip the scales in his favor.

"It is fine."

Hearing his steady response, Irina found herself studying his face, her gaze tracing the calm lines of his expression. For a brief, unsettling moment, she saw a flicker of another timeline, a version of him where he had lost himself completely, swallowed by powers and burdens that had fractured his spirit. The memory lingered, raw and haunting, as she imagined the agony he must have endured.

She didn't want him to feel that pain-not again, not ever. But she knew this world had its own rules, indifferent to wishes or pleas for mercy. Life here demanded strength, unyielding and often brutal, and though she wished she could shield him from that reality, she understood that no words or sentiment could alter it.

A soft sigh escaped her lips as she reached out, leaning her head gently against his shoulder, grounding herself in his presence. The warmth of him, steady and unwavering, was a comfort she hadn't expected to need. She knew he didn't often seek support, didn't rely on anyone but himself, and yet she hoped that he might feel her

quiet resolve beside him, even if unspoken.

For a moment, they stood like that, the silence between them filled with unspoken promises. She closed her eyes, letting the cool air mingle with the warmth of their connection. "Just... remember," she murmured softly, "I will be there."

And she really intended to uphold her words.

The Chamber of Emberheart loomed before them, an ancient structure that seemed to pulse with the energy of generations past. Towering, weathered stone walls framed the entrance, etched with intricate patterns of flame that glowed faintly, as if alive with the latent power of the Emberheart legacy.

It spiraled downward into the earth, each level intensifying in heat and fury, until at the deepest depths lay the legendary Fire of Amber-a primal, unyielding flame that had tested the worth of every Emberheart heir.

Irina stood beside Astron, her face a mask of composure, though her eyes betrayed the quiet turmoil roiling within her.

The Matriarch, ever poised and unreadable, moved with calm authority, her gaze fixed on the door to the Chamber as it slowly creaked open, the ancient metal groaning in

response.

The air was thick with an oppressive heat that radiated from within, and a subtle, almost inaudible hum of magic thrummed from the walls. The Chamber exuded an energy that seemed to look right through you, measuring, judging-a sentinel of the Emberheart legacy.

The Matriarch stepped inside, her demeanor unchanged as the wave of heat washed over her. She glanced at Astron, her expression firm yet strangely expectant, as if

silently daring him to falter before he'd even begun.

"This is the Chamber of Emberheart," she announced, her voice steady and unyielding. "Each level grows more intense, requiring not only endurance but absolute control over one's own mana and spirit. It demands resilience, a clear mind, and the strength to confront one's own limitations." Her gaze hardened. "You will only be entering the first level, as discussed. But do not be deceived-this trial is not for the faint of heart. Even the first level has claimed many who were... unprepared."

Astron held her gaze, undeterred, his expression calm and resolute. Irina, watching him closely, could sense the subtle tension in his posture-the readiness for what lay ahead, the acceptance of the challenge. He was prepared, even if the path before him was unlike anything he had faced.

The Matriarch turned her gaze to her daughter, her expression unreadable, though there was a faint glint of steel in her eyes. "Irina, I trust you understand that this is his

test alone."

Irina clenched her fists, the words stinging even though she'd expected them. "Yes, Mother," she replied, her voice low but steady.

"Then, why-"

"I will enter with him," Irina declared, her voice firm and unwavering as she turned to face her mother. She'd anticipated resistance, but she wasn't prepared to simply stand by, not when Astron was about to face the Chamber.

The Matriarch's eyes narrowed her expression hardening. "No," she replied, her tone brooking no argument. "I do not trust that you would be able to remain impartial. This

is his trial, Irina, not yours."

Irina clenched her fists, struggling to contain her frustration. "I can promise you, I won't interfere. I only want to be there-"

But before she could finish, Astron spoke, his calm voice cutting through the tension.

"If she enters, you'll never be convinced," he said, his gaze steady on the Matriarch.

"It's better this way."

Irina's face twisted with concern, her resolve wavering as she looked at him. She knew he was right-her mother would never truly consider his trial legitimate if she were inside with him. This had to be his fight alone. She had only been testing the waters, hoping against reason that her presence might be allowed.

Taking a deep breath, she nodded reluctantly. "Fine," she murmured, her voice barely a whisper.

The Matriarch gave her a faint, knowing glance before leading them down the dim

stone staircase that spiraled into the depths of the Chamber. They descended in silence, the air growing warmer with every step, carrying the scent of smoke and ember. The weight of the Chamber's ancient energy pressed against them, filling the space with a palpable, almost living heat.

They stopped at the entrance to the first level, a large stone door carved with intricate flames. The room beyond seemed to glow with an ominous red light, the fire within casting shifting shadows on the walls. Irina's heart raced, her hands cold despite the heat around them, but she kept her face steady.

She wanted to say something, to offer him words of encouragement, but she found

herself at a loss. All she could do was hold his gaze, hoping he could feel the silent support she offered.

He stepped forward, crossing the threshold into the first level of the Chamber of Emberheart. The door closed behind him with a heavy, resonant thud, sealing him inside.

Irina stood there, her heart pounding, her eyes fixed on the closed door.

Chapter 668 147.3 - Chamber of Emberheart

The moment Astron stepped into the chamber, the searing heat pressed down on him like a physical weight, saturating the air with an intensity that would have crushed lesser men.

The room was bathed in a deep red glow, the shadows shifting and dancing along the walls as small tongues of fire licked at the edges of the stone. Yet, for all its warmth, he knew instinctively that this was only the beginning. The true test had yet to reveal itself.

He moved further into the room, his steps careful and measured, and settled in the lotus position at the center of the chamber.

Closing his eyes, he began to steady his breath, allowing his awareness to expand, His mana senses unfurled slowly, reaching out like invisible tendrils to probe the

environment.

The ambient mana here was thick, dense with the potency of generations of Emberhearts who had faced these flames, and he could feel the lingering echoes of their battles imprinted on the very air.

The formations carved into the walls were intricate, a latticework of glowing runes that pulsed with restrained energy, holding back the flames from overtaking the room entirely.

He recognized them as a containment barrier-designed not to suppress the fire entirely but to temper it, to keep it just at the edge of tolerance. He observed the patterns, noting the subtle fluctuations in their glow, a rhythm that seemed to echo the heartbeat of the chamber itself.

'So, this is how they regulate the fire,' he thought, admiring the craftsmanship in the formations.

The runes appeared ancient, etched with a precision that spoke of countless hours spent refining and perfecting each line, each symbol. He could feel the strength of the barriers surrounding him, designed to shield only this small area for initial acclimation.

Despite his calm exterior, he remained vigilant, attuned to every shift in the air around him. He knew that the trial would begin in earnest soon, that the flames would test him, pushing beyond the barrier, seeking to consume him as they had all who had entered here before. His mind replayed Irina's words:

- "Don't resist the flames outright... Let them test you. Accept their intensity, but don't let them consume you."

As he sat, he adjusted his breathing, inhaling slowly and deeply, allowing his mana to align with the rhythm of the chamber.

He could feel the weight of the atmosphere pressing down on him, an almost sentient force that sought to gauge his worth.

The trial was more than just withstanding flames; it was a confrontation with something deeper, a force as ancient as the chamber itself, one that would strip him to his core to see if he could endure.

Seconds ticked by in silence, the only sound was his slow, controlled breathing. And then, with a sudden surge, the formations around the room dimmed, the protective glow receding as the true trial began. The flames surged, advancing toward him with unrestrained fury, licking at his skin as the heat intensified.

Astron steadied himself, letting his mana flow smoothly through his body, fortifying his spirit against the overwhelming heat. He reminded himself of Irina's advice-to yield to the flames, to let them probe his defenses without fully surrendering. This was a test of resilience, of his ability to endure and adapt, not through sheer force but through balanced acceptance.

As the fire crept closer, he could feel the first tendrils of heat curling around his body, scaring through his defenses.

"Grrrr..."

The pain was immediate, raw, and unforgiving, but he held steady, letting the flames weave around him, studying the sensation as if it were a curious intruder. He felt his mana react instinctively, pushing back just enough to maintain his boundaries but not resisting outright.

The room pulsed with energy, testing him, measuring his spirit. Each flicker of flame seemed to probe deeper, burning through his mana and reaching toward his essence. Yet, he remained still, his expression calm, his focus unwavering as he settled into the rhythm of the flames, matching their cadence with his own.

'This is just the beginning,' he reminded himself, feeling the weight of the challenge settle upon him. The true heart of the flames lay further within, beyond the outer layers that merely probed. Here, he was but at the threshold.

The flames crawled closer, and as they did, the silence around me deepened. It's strange how, when left in silence-true silence, with only the heat pressing down and no distractions-thoughts creep in unbidden.

Most people fear the quiet more than they care to admit. They fill their lives with noise, with flashes on screens, messages to respond to, and voices echoing in their minds. Anything to escape that solitude.

Because when it's just you, stripped of every distraction, every responsibility, you're left with only your thoughts. And that... that's where it gets dangerous.

For those who carry regrets, the silence is a mirror, reflecting every failure, every

moment they wish they could bury. In times like these, distractions are a comfort, a way to avoid looking too closely at what festers beneath the surface. Phones, screens, constant interaction-it's an escape.

A wall they've built against the echoes of their own voices. But here, in this chamber, no such escape exists. The flames strip you down, leaving nothing to hide behind.

The heat bore down on me, like a hand pressing into my chest, and I could feel my defenses stretch thin. Memories surfaced, fragments of the past... a reminder of what drove me here in the first place.

I forced my breathing to remain steady, in sync with the rhythm of the flames, trying not to let those memories dig too deep. Because the truth was, I knew that feeling too well. The need to keep moving, to fill every moment with something tangible, something that kept me from the silence.

But here, with the fire pressing against my skin, burning into me, I couldn't afford to run from my own mind. The flames seemed to sense it, to push me toward that place, to make me face every weakness, every regret. My chest tightened, the heat digging past the layers of mana I'd reinforced, reaching into something deeper, something I could barely defend.

"Haaah...."

I let out a slow breath, feeling it blend into the thick, burning air around me. Maybe that's the true purpose of this trial.

Not just to test physical endurance, but to strip away all the barriers we've built within ourselves, forcing us to confront what we hide from. I had always considered myself prepared, and disciplined, but even I felt the edges of my resolve strain under the

weight of my own thoughts.

Or maybe, I am just trying to pass the time, maybe this is just me with my random

thoughts wandering around my mind.

That was most likely the case.

The pain....

It was indeed too much.

'It hurts really bad....'

It did hurt really bad.

"This... is different."

The thought flickered through my mind as the heat sank deeper, digging past layers of what I'd come to accept as pain. I'd been burned before-hell, I'd been through every kind of injury imaginable. In the organization's training halls, I'd been broken and put back together, tested until every nerve screamed.

Fighting demons, I'd felt claws tear into flesh, the cold burn of their mana seeping through my skin. And the Void Dragon... I'd barely come out of that with anything

intact.

But this fire-no, it was something else entirely. It didn't just burn; it invaded. It wasn't content with my body alone. It dug in, gnawing at my mind, warping thoughts that were already raw from being dredged up in the silence. I could feel it, pressing in on my focus, trying to unravel the thread I was clinging to.

'Irina wasn't exaggerating. This fire doesn't just test; it breaks.'

The pain was unpredictable. One second, it would flare, scorching me until I couldn't breathe. Then, it would pull back, leaving a chilling emptiness that almost felt worse. There was no rhythm, no pattern I could adapt to. Just a relentless, shifting wave of agony that kept me on edge, never allowing my body the mercy of adjustment. I couldn't get used to it. Every time I thought I'd found my footing, it twisted, found a

new place to dig in, a new part of me to tear open.

'Focus. Don't let it in.'

But my mind wandered, in spite of myself. I couldn't hold on to a single thought for more than a few seconds before the fire found a way to distract me, to shake me

loose.

'What is this...? It's not just pain-it's in my head. It wants me unfocused. Disoriented!

My breath came in ragged gasps, each inhales like swallowing a mouthful of embers. I tried to hold to something solid, anything that would keep me steady. But even my memories of past training seemed warped here, distant and strangely muted. The memory of Senior Maya's herb resurfaced the bitter taste, the burn as it forced its way through my veins. I'd thought that was the height of endurance then. And the training when I first joined the organization? I'd been sure that would be the last time I'd feel pain that intense. But this fire felt... alive like it was burrowing into my thoughts, finding the memories I wanted hidden, dragging them out into the open. "This... this is what they meant. The flames probe. They find the cracks.

The heat grew sharper, more intense, and my focus wavered again, slipping as the fire pressed harder. Every moment I stayed here, it felt like it was peeling back layers, stripping me down to something I wasn't sure I wanted to see. The pain wasn't the worst part. It was the feeling of vulnerability, of having nowhere to hide from myself. 'Am I just.... passing the time with this rambling? Trying to escape my own mind?'

A flicker of doubt settled in, prickling like another flame. Was this just a distraction, another excuse not to face what lay at the heart of this fire? I gritted my teeth, feeling frustration bubble up against the flames, a resistance I knew wouldn't hold for long.

'It hurts. It hurts really bad...'

The thought came unbidden, raw, and unfiltered. For all my preparation, my training, there was no denying it. This was pain on a level I hadn't imagined-because it was

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different. It didn't stop at the body, didn't settle at the skin. It burned through, reaching places I hadn't wanted to be exposed.

'I'm... going to feel this in my mind for a long time, aren't I?'

But as much as I wanted to pull back, to shield myself, I knew that wouldn't work here.

Chapter 669 147.4 - Chamber of Emberheart

'How long has it been... hours? Minutes?'

Time had become something distant, slipping away like sand through my fingers. Each second stretched, distorted by the heat until I couldn't tell if I'd been here for a few breaths or half a day. Everything blurred into a haze of scorching air, searing pain, and the relentless pressure pushing down on me.

I could feel my own pulse thundering against the inside of my skull, each beat a reminder that I was still here, still enduring. But for how much longer? The fire wrapped around me, and pressed deeper, and my thoughts grew faint, scattered in the heat.

And then... something shifted. Subtle at first, a faint, almost imperceptible sensation- a tremor, like a ripple inside my chest, spreading outward. It felt... foreign as if it didn't belong to me, yet at the same time, intimately familiar. It wasn't the flames; no, this was something different, something that moved from within rather than pressing down from outside.

'What... is this?'

The feeling grew, spreading through my body like a silent current, pushing back against the fire in a way that felt... instinctual. I couldn't pinpoint it, but it was there, pulsing just beneath my awareness, building in intensity, matching the rhythm of the flames but working against them. It was as if some force within me had finally awakened, responding to the fire's challenge.

'Ah....Right.....

The haze around my mind began to thin, as if that steady, foreign pulse was carving a path through the fire, clearing the fog that had consumed my thoughts. My awareness sharpened, the oppressive heat retreating to the edges, no longer clouding my mind. I could feel clarity returning, my senses recalibrating as the fire's grip lessened.

And then I realized it-my subconscious had acted.

Somewhere, deep within, I'd triggered an old safeguard. My mana had traveled along a pre-planned path, connecting to something I'd embedded beneath the surface, something that, under normal circumstances, I wouldn't have needed. But this was exactly why it was there, why I'd planned for a scenario like this in the first place. I glanced down, and there it was: the faint glint of a small, nearly invisible needle pressed into my chest. I could feel it embedded near the ganglion just below my collarbone, exactly where I'd set it. The pain from it was sharper than the flames, precise and unyielding—a clean, piercing sensation that cut through the numbing heat like a knife.

'So, it worked...'

"Haaah....."

I let out a slow breath, feeling the faint sting of relief. This needle—this tiny mechanism of my own design—was a tool I'd developed when I'd begun studying psychic magic, particularly the mental defenses that could be employed in extreme conditions. I'd wondered, what if I encountered something that could warp my focus, that could slip through the cracks in my defenses? Something like the flames here, that didn't just attack the body but also the mind?

And so, I'd crafted a solution. A needle, enchanted with just enough magic to stay hidden beneath my skin, with a small reserve of mana directed toward it. In the event that my thoughts were compromised, my subconscious would release that mana, sending a surge of pain through my chest—sharp enough to cut through any mental haze, but controlled so that it wouldn't compromise my physical state.

'A bit unconventional, but necessary'

I leaned into the feeling, letting that controlled pain bring me fully back to myself. It wasn't overwhelming; it didn't distract from the flames, but it gave me something to anchor to, a solid line that my mind could follow back to clarity. The fire continued to burn, pressing in with its relentless fury, but now I could meet it with clear intent. 'And now, you will start to act.'

The moment I thought it, I felt a familiar pull—a sudden, intense drain as my mana began to flow, not outwards, but inward, toward the center of my chest.

-The Everchanging Glyph.

It flared to life, pulsing beneath my skin like a second heartbeat. The rune's ancient symbols, etched into me through countless hours of training and adaptation, began to absorb mana at a steady,

insistent rate. It was sensation I'd grown accustomed to during training, but here, under the relentless assault of the flames, it felt different- hungrier, more eager. It was as if the glyph itself sensed the extremity of the environment, the intensity of the flames, and recognized it as a call to evolve. 'So, this is how you react...'

I let the glyph do its work, feeling the familiar tingling spread through my limbs as it adapted, recalibrating my body. This was its core purpose-the ability to shift, to adjust to any condition, to place me in the most optimal state for survival. It was as though my body and mana were reorienting themselves, aligning with the chamber's conditions. Muscles tensed, then relaxed, my skin grew attuned to the heat, feeling it more acutely but managing to endure it more efficiently.

A faint glow spread from my chest, like faint embers flickering to life just beneath my skin. The glyph was adapting, realigning every fiber, every cell, until my body understood the conditions here and began to acclimate. I could feel my breathing ease, each intake of air no longer searing my lungs as intensely. Even my skin felt less vulnerable, almost as if it had developed a slight resilience to the heat licking at it. 'Good. Now we're getting somewhere.'

The Everchanging Glyph had been invaluable in training, adjusting my body to withstand fatigue, amplify strength, or enhance agility.

But here, in the Chamber of Emberheart, I could feel it pushing itself further, beyond what I'd experienced. This wasn't just about stamina or strength. It was a full-body adaptation, aligning me with the unyielding heat of the flames themselves.

The rune's power dug deeper, reaching into the recesses of my mana reserves and siphoning it in controlled bursts, fueling the changes with precision. I felt my heart rate steady, my muscles relax, and my skin cool slightly, an effect that didn't lessen the fire's presence but made it... bearable. I could feel the glyph tuning me to the rhythm of the flames, matching its cadence with my own, like two forces reaching an

understanding.

"This is the basis of the glyph... complete adaptation."

The fire surged again, pressing in, testing my defenses. But now, I wasn't merely enduring. I was meeting it with something that grew stronger with each wave, a force that evolved as quickly as the fire shifted.

The Everchanging Glyph was feeding on the mana, growing more attuned to the environment, syncing with the chamber's unique mana signature. It understood the flames' rhythm now, the ebb and flow of their heat, and it adjusted my body accordingly.

Every nerve and every muscle responded in kind, evolving in real-time. And in that moment, I realized something crucial: this trial was no longer just a test of endurance. It had become an opportunity—a way for the glyph to evolve, to mold my body and mind into something sharper, more resilient.

'If this is the Chamber of Emberheart's test, then bring it on.'

With the glyph blazing into my body, I met the flames head-on, feeling not just the burn, but the edge of something powerful building within me. The chamber might have been designed to strip me down, but here, with my glyph pushing me to the threshold, I was becoming something new, something forged in fire. And I knew, without a doubt, I would emerge stronger.

The following evening, Irina sat across from her mother at the long dining table, her posture composed and her expression unreadable. She sipped her tea calmly, her eyes fixed on the view beyond the window as though nothing unusual had transpired. The Matriarch observed her daughter with a hint of surprise, her brows lifting slightly. She had expected Irina to look more unsettled, perhaps distracted or visibly restless, given that Astron had spent the night in the Chamber of Emberheart. Yet here Irina sat, serene and composed, as if it were any other morning. "Surprisingly calm today, aren't we?" the Matriarch remarked, her tone deceptively casual as she studied Irina. "I half-expected you would be pacing around, perhaps

anxiously awaiting news of his... performance."

Irina met her mother's gaze with an unwavering calm, her expression unflinching. "I trust him," she replied simply, her voice steady. "He knew what he was getting into, and I believe he'll endure. Worrying won't change anything."

The Matriarch's eyes narrowed slightly, sensing the underlying determination in her daughter's words. "Trust," she repeated, her tone holding a faint trace of skepticism. "It's easy to place trust in someone until that trust is tested. I wonder, Irina... will he live up to the faith you so freely give?"

Irina took a measured sip of her tea, meeting her mother's gaze without hesitation. "He's stronger than you think," she replied. "And if he proves himself, I trust that you'll see him in a different light."

The Matriarch's smile was faint, her eyes gleaming with a mix of intrigue and quiet satisfaction. "We shall see," she murmured, her voice soft but edged with authority. "If he truly survives the Chamber, he may indeed deserve a second look. However, resilience in a single trial is no guarantee of worth. Only time and consistent strength reveal the truth."

Irina held her mother's gaze, her own eyes fierce but composed. "Then I suppose he'll have more opportunities to prove himself."

The Matriarch allowed a small smile, watching her daughter closely. So composed, she mused, even when faced with uncertainty. Perhaps Astron's influence was not entirely unworthy-Irina's quiet confidence was, in itself, a testament to something she had long searched for in her daughter.

Just as they returned to their meal, the heavy sound of approaching footsteps echoed through the hall. The Matriarch's attention shifted, a hint of curiosity flickering across her face as the door to the dining room slowly opened, revealing one of the Emberheart servants.

"Madam, Lady Irina," the servant announced, bowing deeply. "Mr. Natusalune has

emerged from the Chamber."

Irina's expression softened, relief flickering in her eyes for just a moment before she composed herself again. She exchanged a look with her mother, her silent confidence

steady as ever.

The Matriarch's expression remained neutral, though her eyes betrayed a hint of surprise-and perhaps, grudging respect. "Bring him here," she said, her voice smooth and measured. "It seems he has earned a conversation."

Chapter 670 148.1 - Armory

"Bring him here. It seems he has earned a conversation."

A few moments later, Astron stepped into the dining room, flanked by the servant who had escorted him. Clad in fresh clothes provided by the Emberheart household, he looked composed, his posture steady and unbowed. His face was calm, his gaze unwavering, as if the previous night's ordeal in the Chamber had barely affected him. The Matriarch's eyes narrowed slightly, betraying a flicker of surprise that she masked quickly. She had expected him to emerge weary, perhaps showing signs of strain or even quiet relief at surviving the Chamber's trial. But here he stood, exuding the same steady resolve that had infuriated and intrigued her in equal measure.

"Mr. Natusalune," she greeted him, her tone measured, laced with an undertone of challenge. "I trust the Chamber was... enlightening?"

Astron inclined his head respectfully, his voice calm. "It was a worthwhile experience, Madam,"

The Matriarch's eyebrows lifted slightly at his understatement. Worthwhile? she thought, the faintest glint of amusement mingling with her skepticism. Few who entered the Chamber spoke of it so casually, especially after facing the grueling intensity of even the first level. Yet Astron spoke as if it had been merely another trial.

"Worthwhile, indeed," she replied, her tone cool. "One would think a night in the Chamber would leave a more lasting... impression."

Irina's gaze flicked to Astron, her eyes betraying the hint of a smile. She had anticipated his resilience, but even she was surprised by how composed he appeared now, standing firm beneath her mother's sharp scrutiny.

Astron met the Matriarch's gaze without flinching. "The Chamber challenged me, but it also provided an opportunity to learn and adapt. For that, I'm grateful."

The Matriarch leaned back, observing him intently, her gaze penetrating as if searching for any hint of weakness. After a pause, she inclined her head slightly. "Interesting. Few emerge from the Chamber of Emberheart with such... poise. Even fewer would speak of adaptation so calmly. It seems you may indeed have a resilience beyond mere words."

Irina's expression softened, a small hint of pride flickering in her gaze as she looked at Astron. He had not only endured the Chamber—he had emerged stronger, more resolute, proving himself in a way that few ever could.

The Matriarch allowed a faint smile, her eyes gleaming with a grudging respect. "Very well, Mr. Natusalune. You have passed this trial, and with it, you have earned the access Irina requested."

She paused, her gaze shifting to Irina briefly before returning to Astron. "But

remember this family values strength, consistency, and loyalty above all else. Your actions may have earned my attention, but respect in this household is earned time and again."

'Especially, if you wish to get my daughter.'

She did not say this part out loud.

"We understand, mother.....So, please can you let him have a breath..... He just got out from the chamber."

The Matriarch's expression softened slightly, a rare, almost indulgent smile tugging at the corners of her mouth as she observed her daughter's protectiveness. She let her gaze linger on Irina for a moment, something unspoken yet significant passing between them.

"Very well," she said, her voice carrying a note of resignation mingled with quiet amusement. "I will leave him to you, Irina." With a final, appraising glance at Astron, she added, "Mr. Natusalune, remember-this is merely the beginning."

With that, the Matriarch turned and left the room, her footsteps light but deliberate, each one echoing in the quiet that settled after her departure. The door closed softly behind her, leaving Irina and Astron alone in the dining room.

Irina let out a quiet breath, relief evident in her eyes as she looked at him. "So... it seems you've managed to surprise even her," she said, a small smile breaking through her composed demeanor. "Are you all right?"

Irina narrowed her eyes, stepping closer, her gaze intent as she studied him. Standing directly in front of him, she raised a hand and gently touched his cheek, her fingers grazing his skin as if to confirm for herself that he was truly unharmed. His body temperature felt surprisingly normal, cool, and steady-not at all what she'd expected from someone who had spent a night in the Chamber of Emberheart.

She murmured softly, almost to herself, "Indeed... you're not burnt or anything. Perfectly fine, even."

Her fingers lingered for a moment longer than necessary, a quiet sense of relief settling over her as she looked into his calm, unwavering eyes. It was as though the grueling trial had barely left a mark on him, though she knew that couldn't be the whole story. Even the strongest in her family emerged with some sign of the Chamber's touch—a scar, a lingering heat, something to mark the experience.

Astron tilted his head slightly, his gaze meeting hers with a gentle intensity. "It wasn't easy," he admitted, his voice low. "But I managed."

A faint smile tugged at her lips, and she let her hand fall, though she didn't move away. "I'd call you reckless if I didn't know better," she murmured, her tone softened by a touch of admiration. "You really don't know how to quit, do you?"

"This time, there wasn't any choice to quit."

"Yeah...."

Irina's gaze held his, her bright yellow eyes tracing the depths of his dark purple ones. She studied them closely, feeling herself drawn in by their calm intensity. Slowly, her eyes drifted down, lingering over the line of his nose, then settling on his lips. Her hand, which had rested on his cheek, instinctively moved, her fingertips grazing his lips, her touch light and tentative.

She had put on a strong front earlier, feigning calm as she faced her mother's scrutiny. But the truth was, she hadn't slept well at all last night. Worry had gnawed at her, every worst-case scenario flashing through her mind. And now, standing here, with him not only safe but having earned her mother's approval... it felt surreal, like a hard-won reward she hadn't dared to expect.

Her fingers lingered, and for a moment, she allowed herself to take in the quiet warmth of his presence, savoring the relief that came with knowing he had truly returned to her, unscathed. Maybe... just this once, she thought, a faint, almost mischievous smile tugging at her lips. I deserve this.

Without another word, she leaned in.

"Cough...."

Just as she leaned in, a sudden, awkward cough sounded from the doorway, startling Irina out of the moment. Her eyes widened as she looked over, spotting a maid standing there, balancing a tray of plates, her face visibly flushed. The maid's gaze darted away, but not before Irina caught the faint hint of embarrassment coloring her cheeks.

In an instant, Irina pulled back like a startled cat, her own cheeks warming with a fierce blush. She coughed, attempting to regain her composure, though she could still feel the maid's knowing glance as she hastily set the tray down on a nearby table, her eyes studiously fixed on anything but the two of them.

Irina cleared her throat, willing herself to act natural, though the moment of vulnerability had left her flustered. "Thank you," she said to the maid, her voice a touch higher than usual. The maid quickly bowed, murmuring a polite response as she made a quick exit from the room, clearly trying to spare them both further embarrassment. Once the door closed, Irina let out a soft, mortified sigh, her gaze finally shifting to Astron, who was watching her with a faintly amused expression. She crossed her arms, her cheeks still tinged with pink and shot him a mock glare. "Not a word," she muttered, though her lips twitched with the hint of a smile.

Astron held up his hands, his face the picture of innocence. "I wasn't going to say

anything," he replied, his tone calm, but she could see the glimmer of humor in his eyes. It only made her blush deepen, and she turned away, silently cursing the

interruption and her own impulsiveness.

"You.... You really...."

Irina trailed off, her cheeks still burning as she struggled to find words that wouldn't

betray how flustered she felt. She spun around, making her way to the table where the maid had left the plates. Her hands moved quickly, almost as if by instinct, lifting the lid to reveal a well-prepared meal, likely something her mother had ordered to be served to him as part of her own silent acknowledgment.

As she picked up the plates, it dawned on her that the maid had discreetly given them some privacy, likely to spare them both the awkwardness of her witnessing that almost-moment. The thought made her cheeks flush even more, but she steadied herself, determined to focus on something practical. Astron had just emerged from a brutal trial, and she knew he hadn't eaten anything substantial all day.

"This... is for you," she said, clearing her throat as she set the plate in front of him, trying to keep her tone steady. "You've been through enough already. Now's not the time for distractions."

Astron looked at her as he took his seat. "I suppose, thank you? Lady Irina."

She took her own seat across from him, trying to shake off the embarrassment still lingering in the air between them. Watching him begin to eat, she felt her own tension ease a little, reminded of the simple importance of just... being here. After everything he'd endured, her worries and blushes seemed trivial, and she found herself smiling

faintly as he ate.

"Eat," she murmured, almost to herself, as if the reminder was as much for him as for

her own peace of mind.

And just that night....

Astron stood right before a place.

"This is the place....."

It was the armory of the Emberheart Family, as Irina had promised.....