

H. Academy 671

Chapter 671 148.2 - Armory

The Emberheart Armory loomed before Astron, its heavy, ornately engraved doors casting long shadows in the dim light. This was no ordinary armory-it was the culmination of centuries of Emberheart legacy, a place where power was not only stored but guarded with an almost sacred reverence.

Standing there, he understood why Irina's mother had put him through such a brutal test. Irina had clearly spoken highly of him, likely even bragged, and that alone would have sparked her mother's interest. But granting an outsider access to this armory? That was a different matter entirely.

For someone outside the Emberheart family, gaining entrance to the armory was a privilege beyond imagination. Even Irina herself had limited access to its treasures; if she needed an artifact, it would be brought to her, not something she could simply choose freely.

It wasn't that her mother wanted to hold her back-far from it. The Matriarch was

strict, but her discipline was rooted in a desire to see her daughter's potential fully realized. For an outsider, however, earning the Matriarch's trust was another challenge entirely.

Astron, of course, had known this. He understood the implications of requesting access, and he'd prepared himself for the scrutiny that would follow. He was fully aware that Irina's mother would need to assess him thoroughly, and he had accepted the Chamber of Emberheart's trial without question. As he stood there, he took a deep breath, his mind steady and focused. This wasn't just about accessing powerful artifacts-it was about respect and proving that he was worthy, even by the exacting standards of the Emberheart family.

Just then, he heard quiet footsteps behind him. Irina approached her expression a mixture of pride and quiet satisfaction. She glanced at him, noting his calm, ready demeanor, and gave a slight nod.

"I knew you'd make it here," she said, her voice filled with quiet pride. "My mother doesn't let just anyone step foot into this place. You've earned it."

However, at the same time, she somehow felt like this guy knew everything from the beginning. "Were you.....expecting this?"

Astron shrugged, a calm expression on his face. "This much was evident. If I were in the Matriarch's shoes, I'd have done the same. It's understandable."

Irina studied him, a spark of curiosity in her eyes. "Not even the Chamber of Emberheart?"

He paused, a flicker of surprise passing over his face-barely noticeable, but she caught it. For just a moment, his composed demeanor slipped, and she realized that even he hadn't expected to be thrown into that kind of trial. She couldn't help but feel a strange sense of satisfaction. Here he was, the man who always seemed to have everything under control, showing a glimpse of uncertainty. It reminded her that he was just as human as the rest of them.

The realization softened her gaze. He's not invincible, she thought, feeling a warmth she couldn't quite name. He's here, facing challenges head-on, and even if he doesn't know exactly what's coming, he's still willing to take the risk.

She gave him a faint smile. "So, you don't always have everything figured out, do you?" she said lightly, a teasing note in her voice.

He looked at her, the corner of his mouth twitching upward. "Apparently not. Even I miss a few details now and then."

Irina felt her heart skip a beat at his subtle, self-aware humor. The detachment he usually showed seemed to soften, just for that moment, and she liked seeing him like this-more grounded, more real. The quiet vulnerability he'd shown reassured her somehow, a reminder that despite his strength, he was also figuring things out one step at a time, just like she was.

"Well," she said, folding her arms and feigning indifference, "I'm glad to know you're human after all. Makes things a little more... manageable."

"I am of course a human. What else can I be?"

"A blockhead, humph," Irina replied, folding her arms with a smirk. "That's exactly what you'd be without me."

Astron shook his head, amused. "I'll take that as a compliment-if it means I'll be spared more of your... instruction."

For a brief moment, it was just them, the usual tension between formality and duty absent. Irina felt lighter than she had in days, as if they'd managed to step outside the expectations of their world, if only for a moment.

But their lighthearted exchange was soon interrupted by the sound of approaching footsteps. Irina turned, her smile fading as she recognized Esme, her old nanny and her mother's closest aide, approaching them. Esme offered a polite bow, her expression professional and unyielding.

"Lady Irina. Mr. Natusalune," Esme greeted them, her tone formal. "The Matriarch has requested that I oversee Mr. Natusalune's visit to the Armory. I will ensure everything is conducted properly."

Irina's expression shifted, a hint of annoyance crossing her face as she shot Esme a displeased look. She'd been hoping to guide Astron through the Armory herself, to show him each artifact in her own way, without the formality and oversight that Esme's presence would bring. But she knew better than to argue; her mother had likely anticipated this and sent Esme as a precaution. She kept her frustrations to herself, managing a curt nod instead.

Astron, on the other hand, simply nodded in acknowledgment, his demeanor calm and respectful. "I understand. Thank you, Miss Esme."

With Esme now leading the way, the three of them moved through the grand corridors, Irina and Astron following behind. The faint disappointment Irina felt was evident, though she forced herself to let it go. It wasn't worth making a scene over, especially with her mother's trust riding on Astron's respectful conduct. Still, she couldn't help but glance over at him now and then, a small, knowing smile shared between them whenever Esme's back was turned.

Finally, they reached the entrance to the Emberheart Armory, a pair of towering doors adorned with intricate carvings and blazing fire motifs, the legacy of the family engraved into every corner. Esme stepped forward, placing a hand on the doors and activating a concealed mechanism that caused the heavy doors to part slowly, revealing the treasures within.

As Esme stepped forward, her hand reaching out to touch the carved flames on the towering doors, Irina watched with a careful eye. Her fingertips ignited with a controlled flicker of fire, and she placed

them on specific points along the door's intricate carvings. The flames licked across the surface, tracing a path in sync with the patterns embedded in the wood. It was almost ceremonial, each touch igniting another section of the door, like a series of locks being released in succession.

'So, the doors recognize her mana through fire... a security mechanism keyed to the Emberheart lineage.

The carvings glowed as Esme continued, the fire illuminating each motif in brilliant shades of red and orange. I could feel the power humming from the doors, the ancient magic in them responding only to her touch.

Even from a distance, the heat radiating from the doors was palpable, like standing too close to an open flame. The mechanisms, despite their age, felt potent,

undiminished by the years.

"This isn't just magic-it's a legacy, indeed."

I glanced around, noting the intricate runes etched into the stone walls, the carefully inlaid gems pulsing faintly beneath the surface. They'd been placed with precision, reinforcing the room's structure, binding the magic to the very walls and floors of this

place.

It was remarkable; everything looked at least three centuries old, yet it functioned as if crafted yesterday. This wasn't some show of wealth or vanity. It was the Emberheart family's way of preserving their heritage, their history etched into every corner, every

surface.

Esme completed the sequence, and with a deep rumble, the massive doors began to part, revealing the Emberheart Armory. The air grew heavier as they opened, an aura

of contained power seeping out. I could almost taste it-raw, concentrated, and ancient, the unmistakable weight of treasures held in one place for centuries.

"They've guarded this place well.

I stepped forward, the light from the armory spilling out around us. I glanced at Irina beside me, catching her subtle reaction-a spark of pride in her eyes mixed with a restraint that hinted at her own awe, even though this was her family's legacy. This place was as much a part of her as her very name, yet it seemed to impress her

every time.

'Knowing her childhood and seeing this reaction, it seems she hadn't been here a lot

either.'

At that moment, I understood a little more about what had driven her, the weight of living up to something so carefully cultivated.

As we moved into the armory, I took in the sight. Weapons of every kind lined the walls, blades, maces, and axes, each one unique and steeped in Emberheart tradition. Racks of armor stood like silent sentinels, their surfaces adorned with the same intricate fire motifs. Every artifact seemed infused with the family's signature flame, a testament to the centuries of Emberhearts who had wielded them.

I reached out, letting my fingers hover near a blade resting in its place. Even without touching it, I could feel the warmth emanating from it, a steady, controlled heat-a remnant of the fire that had forged it. It was clear each item here had been crafted with purpose, with reverence.

'Not bad... quite a collection of rare and unique-grade artifacts.'

As my gaze traveled across the racks and shelves, I recognized pieces that were undoubtedly beyond what most could ever hope to acquire. In the world outside, artifacts were classified by their power, rarity, and the skill required to wield them. At the lowest end, Common Artifacts were almost household tools-minor enhancements with simple effects, available to just about anyone with the coin. Then there were Rare Artifacts, useful in the hands of trained fighters but limited in scope

and power.

They were the types of items you'd find on seasoned mercenaries or moderately skilled hunters.

But here... here there was a different class altogether.

Unique Artifacts dotted the room, each possessing singular effects that set them apart.

from mass-produced weaponry. These artifacts often carried stories of their own, passed down through generations, their powers honed to specific abilities. Irina's family had clearly put effort into gathering such items.

A good number of the weapons I could see displayed here were of this rank, and I suspected that these, while valuable, weren't necessarily the peak of the Emberheart

collection.

'Indeed.....There is another section that could be accessed behind the place, but that is

not what I am after in the first place.'

I came here with a clear goal after all.

Chapter 672 Chapter 148.3 - Armory

In the game, this armory had been a significant moment-entering the Emberheart mansion, gaining access to this storied place once the player's affinity with the Emberheart family had grown. Back then, the Matriarch had only opened its doors. after the player had resolved certain conflicts within the family, earning her respect and trust. Access to the armory wasn't simply given; it was earned through blood and sweat, through proof that the player understood and upheld the values the Emberhearts lived by.

And even then, only the first section of the armory was open.

This wasn't the entirety of the Emberheart collection. They couldn't-and wouldn't- display their most powerful artifacts here, even within these walls. Epic-grade artifacts and beyond demanded layers of protection that went beyond a simple barrier or a locked door. They were relics of a different class, weapons, and tools that could shift battles, maybe even affect the course of entire wars. A family like the

Emberhearts, with centuries of history, would have protocols, vaults, and more secure places to contain such rarities.

"They'd never keep anything higher than Unique-grade just lying out in the open like this. Items ranked Epic and above are kept under watch, only to be used for the most extreme reasons.'

I recalled that in the game, most of the families were notorious for their guarded nature regarding their artifacts, and rightly so.

Epic artifacts were exceedingly rare-most kingdoms didn't even have one to their name. They were far beyond what could be acquired by even wealthy merchants or the highest-ranking nobles. Legendary artifacts were mythical, with only a handful existing across the world. It was no exaggeration to say that the possession of even a single Epic or Legendary artifact could elevate a family's influence to staggering heights, a power no one would leave unprotected.

But... does everything in this world work flawlessly?

Is there a single method that's foolproof, a system immune to error? The answer, of course, was a resounding no. Every structure has its flaws, and every safeguard has its weaknesses.

And in a world where artifacts were ranked and categorized, these classifications weren't as ironclad as they might seem. Classifying an artifact as Mythic or Legendary?

It worked well enough for bounded weapons, those that carried set attributes linked directly to the user's status window. But when it came to other artifacts, the process was less precise.

After all, what happens when a grading system fails to fully understand an artifact's hidden potential?

In the game, this ambiguity created hidden paths, secrets buried deep within the world's structure. Some players, those who were tireless in their search for every achievement, had uncovered a

particular flaw in this armory. They'd discovered that by systematically testing every piece of equipment, they could uncover an artifact that didn't fall under its apparent classification.

'A hidden artifact... one that slipped through the system's categorization.'

It was something most players would miss, dismissed as a typical Unique or Rare-grade item. But for those who explored every option, digging beyond appearances and default labels, there was a reward-a piece that held properties above its apparent grade.

The grading system had failed to properly measure its potential, allowing it to hide in plain sight, overlooked by most who saw it.

And that was what the developers in the game exploited. In a sense, this was something that enabled them to include an easter egg in the game.

The developers had always been obsessed with realism, committed to building a world that felt immersive, detailed, and almost alive.

They left a few loopholes, crafted environments that reacted to player choices, and- whenever possible-added layers that made the game feel like a living world.

"Though knowing that I am in the game itself.....It is indeed questionable.

Easter eggs, they reasoned, were part of this philosophy, subtle nods for players who were meticulous, who pushed beyond the obvious paths.

This artifact was one of their more ingenious creations, intentionally crafted to appear as a Unique-grade item, something valuable but ultimately modest. In truth, it was an Epic-grade artifact, its potential hidden by design. A system flaw, they justified it as, one that could feasibly occur in a real world, where even magical classifications might not grasp the true nature of certain relics. A rare find, meant only for those who looked deeper.

Just then, a sharp voice broke into my thoughts.

"So, what do you think?" Irina stepped forward, her eyes bright, her usual composed gaze replaced with a fiery curiosity. Her intensity caught me off guard, her expression openly interested as she glanced between me and the armory. "Is there a particular item you're after?"

For a moment, I considered telling her about the hidden artifact, letting her in on what I was searching for. But something held me back, a small spark of curiosity of my own. Watching her stand there, visibly invested, eager to see me take something valuable- something worthy of her family's armory-was unexpected. It wasn't just about duty or family pride. She wanted to share something meaningful, a gift that went beyond the Emberheart name.

'Interesting... she's really invested in this.'

I kept my expression measured. "Nothing specific," I replied, letting my gaze linger over the shelves. "I'm just.... getting a feel for the options."

Her eyes narrowed slightly as if trying to read into my words. "You're not going to settle for just anything," she said, crossing her arms with a smirk. "I can tell you're sizing everything up, assessing. I thought you'd be more direct with what you

wanted."

She wasn't wrong, but I wasn't about to give her the satisfaction of knowing that. I shrugged, keeping my tone light. "I'm not in a rush. There's a lot to consider here."

Her smirk softened into something more genuine. "Good. Take your time, then. There's no point in picking something unless it truly resonates with you. I will also guide you."

I glanced at her, noting the way she watched me, the quiet enthusiasm in her gaze. She truly wanted me to find something worthwhile, something that would suit me in a way that went beyond practicality. And it wasn't just because I'd endured the Chamber of Emberheart or proved myself. She cared, a rare warmth underlying her words that spoke of more than just family duty.

"So," she continued, leaning in with a conspiratorial grin, "I have to ask-what exactly are you looking for in a weapon or artifact? Something flashy? Something subtle?"

I tilted my head, meeting her gaze with a calm expression. "Maybe something a little.... unexpected," I replied, allowing my tone to drop just enough to hint at mystery. I watched her eyebrows raise in intrigue, her curiosity only deepening. "Just try to

guess."

Her eyes glinted. "Figures. You always keep me guessing."

Irina moved beside me, her gaze roaming over the artifacts with a thoughtful intensity. Being in the Emberheart armory, surrounded by the legacy of her family, she seemed almost at home. The artifacts here reflected the Emberhearts' specialty, their mastery over fire magic evident in nearly every piece. From the finely crafted staffs to enchanted amulets, almost everything here had a tie to flame-a signature trait of her

lineage.

I watched as she lingered on an ornate staff, its surface adorned with crimson and gold runes that pulsed faintly with dormant energy. "This one increases fire magic output," she murmured, almost to herself. "An artifact like this could maybe double or even triple the potency of a flame spell according to its rank if low, amplifying the caster's reach and intensity. Though the same wouldn't be said for higher rank spells."

Her hand moved to another piece-a slim, obsidian bracelet etched with symbols of dancing flames. "And this," she continued, "enhances one's affinity with fire psions. It makes fire feel like an extension of the user's will, effortless and intuitive."

As she spoke, I noted the subtle pride in her voice. These artifacts were crafted not just with power in mind, but with precision, the expertise of a family that understood fire intimately, down to the smallest flicker. She walked to a rack that held a series of amulets, her fingers hovering over one with a shimmering ruby at its center. "This one... grants a high resistance to fire damage," she said, her tone shifting, a hint of intrigue slipping in. "Most Emberhearts wouldn't have much use for it, given our natural resistance. But keeping artifacts like this here ensures they aren't accessible to rival families. No point in letting another house acquire it if it can serve us better

here.

It made sense. These items weren't just weapons; they were resources, locked away here so that their potential couldn't be used against the family.

Still, I could see how some of these pieces would be invaluable for others outside the

family. A mage without a natural affinity for fire could find their spells enhanced beyond anything they'd experienced.

A fire resistance artifact could be the difference between life and death in battle against a fire-wielding enemy. But here, in this armory, these treasures were safeguarded, their power contained to ensure they would never tip the scales in someone else's favor.

"That is one of the reasons why overall having people in one center tended to harm the general society."

I thought. If these types of artifacts were to be revealed to the world and were to be distributed, that would enable many hunters to fight better.

But, that would bring its own set of problems.

After all, not every Hunter is a good person either.

Irina caught me watching her, a flicker of curiosity in her gaze. "What about you?" she

asked, tilting her head. "Surely you've seen something here that speaks to you?" "There are a few things," I replied, keeping my tone neutral. "But I'm more interested in something... less direct. Perhaps something that doesn't rely solely on fire."

She raised an eyebrow, a knowing glint in her eyes. "As expected, you're looking for versatility. Makes sense-fire may be our specialty, but you are someone who values a broader set of options." She turned back to the shelves, her gaze scanning for anything

that might fit.

'Well, this nanny here seems to like watching the show as well.'

Overall, seeing Irina's enthusiasm, I wondered what kind of expression she would

make when I made my decision.

'It will definitely be quite funny.'

Chapter 673 Chapter 148.4 - Armory

Irina moved through the armory, her gaze animated as she pointed out various artifacts, each one possessing a unique power or history. She seemed completely engrossed, lost in her enthusiasm as she shared the Emberheart family's legacy with Astron. Her eyes sparkled with pride and excitement, her explanations becoming more detailed and vibrant with each piece.

"This one here," she said, pointing to a dark, crimson blade hanging elegantly from the wall, "was wielded by my great-uncle during the Battle of Runes. It's said to channel the heat of molten lava, making it nearly impossible to parry."

Astron nodded thoughtfully, his gaze studying the blade's fine craftsmanship and the intricate runes etched into its surface. "A weapon like this isn't just for attack-it's a statement," he murmured, meeting Irina's gaze with quiet admiration. "Your family's attention to detail is... impressive."

A faint blush crept up Irina's cheeks, but she quickly masked it with a haughty grin. "Of course. It's Emberheart craftsmanship, after all," she replied, her tone playfully smug. Unbeknownst to her, Esme stood silently nearby, observing the two with a faint, knowing smile. Despite being sent by the Matriarch to oversee Astron's visit, Esme could see that her presence had faded into the background for Irina, who was entirely absorbed in sharing this part of her world with him. Her young charge had never been this animated while explaining anything before.

Irina, meanwhile, continued to point out various pieces. "Now, this," she said, indicating an amulet embedded with a dark, glistening gemstone, "isn't just a simple accessory. It's one of the few defensive artifacts in the collection that manipulates heat into a barrier. Useful in close combat situations."

Astron raised an eyebrow. "Heat manipulation into defense... that's more intricate than a typical shielding artifact."

"Exactly," she said, a touch of pride in her voice. "Our ancestors believed that fire wasn't just for offense but could be mastered and harnessed to protect as well."

"Were you there when your ancestors gathered this?"

"I don't need to be there to understand what they were thinking"

"Really?"

"Humph. Just listen."

With each artifact, Irina became more animated, almost forgetting herself entirely. For her, this moment was more than just showing off family heirlooms-it was a chance to share the legacy she held close to her heart with someone who respected its weight and significance.

"So," she continued, holding up a small, intricately carved pendant, "this one-

She suddenly stopped, noticing Esme standing nearby with a bemused expression, her eyes flicking between Irina and Astron with a trace of knowing amusement.

Irina blinked, realizing how deeply she'd been absorbed in showing Astron around. She coughed, shifting slightly, her earlier confidence replaced by a slight awkwardness as she glanced at Esme.

"Why am I even conscious of her? It is not like I am doing something wrong."

She reassured herself, shaking off the momentary self-awareness. With renewed focus,

she continued showcasing the artifacts, her enthusiasm returning as she pointed out more treasures, each with its own story, legacy, or unique power.

Finally, she turned to Astron, a spark of curiosity still bright in her gaze. "So... have you finally found what you wanted?"

Astron met her gaze, nodding. "I have."

"Oh?" Her interest piqued, she leaned in, eyes brightening with anticipation. "What is it?"

Without a word, Astron moved forward, glancing back briefly to ensure she was following. Intrigued, Irina fell into step behind him, watching as he navigated past several rows of grand, fiery artifacts that had once belonged to her family's most renowned members. She wondered what had caught his attention and resisted the urge to guess, letting him lead the way.

After a few more steps, they stopped in front of a small, inconspicuous section near the back. There, resting on a simple wooden stand, lay a slim bracelet. It had a delicate, unassuming design-nothing like the imposing weapons and enchanted amulets scattered throughout the armory. A small note underneath identified it as a rare-grade artifact that granted the wearer a modest boost to agility.

Irina raised an eyebrow, a flicker of surprise crossing her face. "This... isn't even one of the pieces I showed him."

It dawned on her that he must have noticed it on his own, reading the note without her assistance. She reached out, studying the bracelet more closely. The boost it offered was practical but modest, designed for speed rather than power or grandeur. 'Not exactly a mage's first choice, she thought, noting why her family hadn't prioritized it. It wasn't tailored for their fiery specialty, and to most Emberhearts, agility alone was hardly noteworthy.

"You chose this?" she asked, glancing at him with a raised eyebrow, genuine curiosity lacing her voice.

It was indeed a weird choice.

Her expression couldn't help but get twisted as she stared at the bracelet, a mixture of bewilderment and frustration flickering across her face. 'Of all the artifacts in the armory... he chose this?' she thought, almost insulted on behalf of the other artifacts.

There were items in here that were centuries old, imbued with the fiery power of Emberheart legends-cach crafted to be wielded with respect and to demonstrate the Emberheart's dominance over fire.

And yet, here he was, gravitating toward something as modest as an agility bracelet. It was almost as if he were silently dismissing every other piece in the room, deeming them

unworthy.

'What the heck? Isn't he basically saying, "You're all not worthy of me; this bracelet is enough"?' she fumed internally. The worst part was that Astron wasn't even someone who needed an agility boost. Speed had always been his strongest asset, from what she had observed. He had outmaneuvered countless opponents without breaking a sweat. What could he possibly be thinking?"

She shot him a glare, trying to mask her growing irritation. But as she lifted her head, she saw him looking at her with that unmistakable glint in his eyes-amusement, plain as day. He was clearly enjoying her reaction, and the faintest hint of a curve tugged at the corner of his mouth as if this whole charade had been orchestrated just to see her struggle with his choice.

"You think this is funny?" she snapped, her voice tinged with frustration. "I spent all this time guiding you through my family's prized armory, showing you our finest artifacts...

and this is what you choose?"

Astron's calm gaze met hers, and he tilted his head, the hint of amusement still lingering. "Why?" he retorted, his tone light yet pointed. "On what basis are you saying this was the

wrong choice?"

Irina's brows knit together, her frustration simmering as she took in his composed expression. She narrowed her eyes, feeling her patience wearing thin. "Are you really asking me that?" she replied, her tone laced with disbelief.

"Yes," he replied simply, his gaze unwavering. He waited, clearly inviting her to explain herself.

'Fine,' she thought, crossing her arms and letting out an exasperated sigh before speaking. "All right, let's start with the obvious. You don't even need an agility boost, Astron. I've seen you in action. Speed is already your strongest trait! And here you are, picking the one thing that adds more speed, ignoring all the other options that could

actually offer you something new."

She gestured around the room, her voice rising in frustration. "This armory is filled with artifacts crafted by generations of Emberhearts, each one a testament to our mastery over fire. There's power here, refinement, and tools that could enhance your magic or even add a unique edge to your abilities. And yet, you choose this..." She gestured to the modest bracelet with a look of near-incredulity. "This one artifact that barely scratches the surface of what's available!"

Astron listened, his expression remaining steady as she laid out her reasoning. When she finally finished, he gave her a slow, thoughtful nod. "I understand," he said, his tone calm but with a glint of amusement still dancing in his eyes. "But, do you think I am a fool

Irina?"

Astron leaned in, his face coming closer, his voice dropping to a low murmur that sent a shiver down Irina's spine. "Do you think I'm a fool, Irina?" he asked, his breath warm against her skin, his scent unexpectedly close. "Haven't I lost every time I made a quick

judgment?"

For a split second, her mind went blank, caught off guard by his sudden proximity. She felt her thoughts blur as her senses took in the warmth of his presence, his voice reverberating in a way that made her heart skip. But then, with a flash of clarity, she remembered Esme standing nearby, watching the exchange with silent amusement. 'No way am I letting him get away with this,' she thought, regaining her composure. She gave him a firm shove, pushing him back just enough to regain some distance, though the heat she felt rising to her ears betrayed her flustered state.

With a glare that held both irritation and a hint of something she refused to acknowledge, she crossed her arms tightly over her chest. "Just... keep your distance, she muttered, glancing away to conceal the faint blush creeping up her cheeks.

"So?"

Astron's face remained calm, but Irina caught the faintest twitch at the corner of his lips, an almost smile threatening to break through his usually serious expression. He was trying to mask it, yet she could see it—a small victory for him, and somehow, it made her both irritated and amused.

She scoffed, giving him a light but pointed smack on the chest. "What do you mean, "So"?"

What?"

He raised an eyebrow, his tone smooth. "So... what do you think? Do you think I'm a

fool?" She narrowed her eyes at him, half-exasperated, half-relenting. "Of course, you're not a fool, Astron. Don't act like I'd actually think that."

"Good," he replied, the almost-smile finally breaking through. His face relaxed, that slight smirk now fully visible, and she couldn't decide if she wanted to hit him again or laugh. "Then, shouldn't you trust my judgment?"

Irina's lips pressed into a thin line as his words sank in. Despite her irritation, she couldn't ignore the truth of his statement. "Trust his judgment..." she thought, recalling that time they'd studied together with Sylvie. She remembered the moment Astron had pinpointed the location of the Phantom's Land, effortlessly spotting clues that had slipped past both her and Sylvie. His eyes, sharp and unyielding, seemed to catch details others missed, always seeing further than anyone expected.

'If he's chosen this bracelet, it can't just be for its agility boost,' she reasoned, feeling her

frustration ease, replaced by grudging admiration. Astron wouldn't have made a choice based on something so trivial. There had to be something about the bracelet he'd noticed-something she hadn't.

She studied him, her gaze softening. "Fine," she relented, a bit of her irritation fading. "I

guess... I'll trust your judgment. But I'm curious-what did you see in that bracelet that I

missed?"

"You will see."

In the end, she didn't get the answer.

Chapter 674 - 149.1 - Really

With their exchange winding down, Irina cast a quick glance at Esme, who had been silently observing from a distance. As she'd anticipated, Esme's expression betrayed a hint of disapproval, her usual calm demeanor tinged with something sharper. The display between her and Astron had evidently struck a nerve, though Irina felt little concern. 'We didn't do anything wrong,' she thought with a shrug. Besides, she'd made her intentions toward Astron quite clear from the beginning, even if Esme had reservations.

Esme stepped forward, her gaze shifting between Irina and Astron, before settling on the bracelet. "Is this truly your final choice?" she asked, her voice steady but laced with curiosity. Irina could sense her subtle intrigue—Esme, like herself, was likely wondering what Astron had seen in such a simple piece.

Irina watched Astron, who only nodded in quiet confirmation, his expression unchanging. She noticed the brief flicker of curiosity in Esme's eyes as she studied the bracelet once more. "To choose a modest artifact like this... I suppose there must be something unique to it," she murmured, half to herself. "After all, anyone who can endure the Chamber of Emberheart has already proven to be resilient. And since you are one of those, I wonder what you have seen in it."

Irina felt a pang of pride at Esme's words, realizing how Astron's reputation was growing even within her own household.

Astron glanced at Esme, his expression as calm as ever. "What do you think, Miss Esme? Can you sense anything different about this bracelet?" His tone was polite, but Irina couldn't help but feel there was a subtle edge to his question, almost as if he were testing her perception—or her opinion of him.

Esme's gaze lowered to the bracelet, her face composed as she examined it, though Irina could see her cautious pause. "I can't sense anything out of the ordinary," she replied, her tone respectful but measured. "And I certainly don't possess qualifications above those of the appraisers who have examined it. They would have noted any unique properties." She lifted her gaze, the statement hanging in the air as a quiet challenge. If Astron was mistaken about this artifact, it might imply he had overestimated his insight, possibly lowering his standing within the household's eyes.

Astron, however, didn't seem fazed. He shrugged slightly, his expression unbothered. "That's normal," he replied with an expressionless face. "Most people wouldn't notice. You don't need to worry." The words were mild, yet there was an unmistakable undertone that Irina picked up on—a subtle assertion that Esme was just like most people in matters such as these, lacking the insight he possessed.

Esme's eyebrows lifted ever so slightly, her gaze sharpening, though she maintained her composure. She chose not to respond, merely inclining her head in acknowledgment, though Irina could sense the flicker of disapproval beneath her stoic expression.

With a final nod from Esme, who had been observing them carefully from the start, Irina and Astron exited the Emberheart armory. Esme had seen every move they'd made, noting that Astron had only taken the single item the Matriarch had allowed. Satisfied that nothing amiss had transpired, she closed the doors behind them, leaving the two alone in the quiet hallway.

They stepped out into the slightly cool air of the Etheria Haven, the twilight casting a gentle, muted glow over the surroundings. Irina took a deep breath, letting the crispness of the evening air calm the lingering thoughts from their exchange in the armory. A silence stretched between them, comfortable yet tinged with the weight of their earlier conversation.

Irina cast a sidelong glance at Astron, the bracelet now settled on his wrist. She still couldn't shake her curiosity—there had to be more to that artifact than met the eye. He walked with his usual calm, but there was an undeniable air of satisfaction about him, like he'd achieved something only he understood.

"So... was this all part of the plan?" she asked her tone light yet probing.

"What do you think?"

As they walked, Irina's mind whirled with questions she didn't dare voice aloud. She cast another glance at Astron, her gaze narrowing as she took in his composed expression, that faint smirk still lingering on his face as if he were savoring some private victory.

She huffed, unable to resist. "I refuse to believe you'd go through the trouble of requesting access to the Emberheart armory, winning a bet and all, just to pick... that." Her words came out sharper than intended, her tone a mix of irritation and something else—a deeper curiosity she couldn't suppress.

Astron tilted his head, unbothered by her tone. "Is that so? And what did you expect?"

A pang of frustration flared within her. "This guy," she thought, clenching her fists subtly, "why does he always act like he knows something no one else does?"

She thought of the other timeline—the world she'd glimpsed in fragments, where Astron was someone else entirely. So much of him didn't line up with what she remembered. It wasn't just his actions, but the way he looked at her, as though he held secrets too vast to even begin explaining. And those secrets weren't limited to his knowledge of her family or the academy; no, it was as if he saw through the very core of her, stripping away her pride and defenses with that unreadable gaze.

Irina hesitated, her thoughts tangling. She wanted to ask, needed to, but the courage seemed to slip from her grasp each time. How did he know so much about her, about her family, about the vulnerabilities she'd tried so hard to hide? Why did he behave differently than he should, as if shaped by some force she couldn't comprehend?

Yet, her voice faltered as she looked up at him. 'There's no way I can just ask him outright,' she thought, feeling the familiar weight of pride holding her back. She shook her head, trying to brush off the lingering questions, her voice softening. "Sometimes, it feels like you're... different," she murmured, barely loud enough for him to hear.

Astron's gaze flicked toward her, his expression curious. "Different, how?"

She swallowed, casting her eyes away. "It doesn't matter," she replied quickly, her cheeks warming as she realized she'd said more than she'd intended.

With their steps falling into a comfortable rhythm, Irina's thoughts turned to the deal she'd won through stubborn determination and a well-placed bet. She had brought Astron into the Emberheart armory, navigating the endless obstacles her mother had thrown her way, from sudden changes in plans to last-minute "tests of worthiness" designed to keep Astron out. But she'd done it—she'd fulfilled her end of the bargain.

And now it was his turn.

The thought brought a spark of excitement to her chest, something she'd held onto through the grueling weeks in the Chamber of Emberheart. The relentless fire, the constant pain—it had all been endurable because she knew that on the other side of it waited this moment. A whole week. Just her and Astron, no distractions, no outside interruptions, a promise he'd made when she won their bet.

She cast a glance his way, a flicker of anticipation showing in her eyes. "Now that I've delivered on my end, it's time for you to keep your promise, isn't it?"

Astron looked over at her, a hint of amusement softening his usually impassive face. "You mean you actually remember that?"

Irina rolled her eyes, crossing her arms as she walked. "Of course, I remember. Do you think I endured three weeks of burning in the Chamber of Emberheart just to let this slip?" She huffed, though there was a playfulness to her tone that she couldn't hide. "For the whole week, you're mine. You promised."

He raised an eyebrow, his gaze steady. "I did. Though I have to admit, I'm curious what exactly you're planning."

She smirked, a mischievous glint lighting her eyes. "You'll find out soon enough. But first..." She hesitated, looking away as a flicker of uncertainty crossed her face. For all her anticipation, now that the moment was here, a small part of her felt oddly self-conscious. 'After all this time waiting, I can't back down now,' she thought, steeling herself.

"Hehehe.....You will see."

Hearing her saying that Astron raised his eyebrows.

Irina shot him a smug grin, crossing her arms with a self-satisfied look. 'Get a taste of your own medicine, you bastard,' she thought, feeling a surge of satisfaction at the baffled look in his eyes. Astron had left her hanging so many times, tossing her half-answers and cryptic remarks whenever it suited him, always keeping her guessing. Now, finally, it was her turn to keep him in the dark.

"Oh?" he asked, his curiosity piqued, but she could see the flicker of wariness beneath his calm expression.

But she wasn't about to give him anything more. "Just wait," she replied, practically humming with triumph. She could practically feel him straining to figure her out, and it was a glorious reversal.

They walked side by side, her mind racing with the plans she'd laid out for their week. Every detail was tucked away in her mind, carefully prepared. She wanted to give him a glimpse of her world—the parts she valued most. And, maybe, she wanted to learn more about him, to coax out the person beneath his usual guarded front.

In the silence, she felt the anticipation build, knowing she held all the cards this time. Glancing over at him, she caught the slight crease in his brow as he pondered, and her grin widened.

'Now you know how it feels to be on the other side,' she thought with a quiet thrill. 'Hope you're ready, Astron. This is just the beginning.'

As they continued walking, Astron suddenly stopped and turned to her with that familiar, unreadable expression of his. "By the way, Irina," he began, his tone casual, "is it possible to use one of your training grounds?"

Irina blinked, her momentum halted. "Our training grounds?" She raised an eyebrow, eyeing him with suspicion. "Why? Planning to give me a private show of your skills?"

He shrugged, his gaze unbothered. "Not quite," he replied smoothly. "I need to test the equipment. That's it."

Chapter 675 Chapter 149.2 - Really

"Not quite. I need to test the equipment. That's it."

Irina considered his request for a moment, her curiosity piqued. It was fair enough that he wanted to test the equipment—she could only guess at what he'd seen in that bracelet, and part of her was eager to witness it firsthand. Besides, they had the rest of the week ahead of them; one night spent indulging his request wouldn't cut into her plans too much.

And also it was freeing to be done with all obligations, with only the open week stretching before them. 'I'll have all the time I need to get my plans in motion,' she thought, glancing sidelong at Astron, who followed her with his usual calm. Their official deal hadn't even started yet; tonight, he wasn't under any obligations from the bet. Monday would mark the beginning of the week she'd won, a whole week before classes resumed.

"Fine," she nodded, a faint smile tugging at her lips. "Go ahead. I'll show you to the training grounds." She turned, leading him through the Emberheart estate's winding halls and out to the grounds specially designed for intense combat practice. The large space was outfitted with powerful, mana-reactive equipment, each piece built to withstand the force of their family's fiery abilities.

"Wait...."

Irina paused mid-step, the realization hitting her like a spark in a powder keg. Why was she even considering the main training grounds, knowing full well that the place was constantly under some form of surveillance? With Astron's tendency to keep things hidden, he'd likely hold back, wary of prying eyes. Not to mention, the general training grounds could be bustling with people at this hour, trainees honing their skills even after dark.

'No,' she thought, quickly dismissing the idea. Her training ground would be better—more secluded, and far from any unnecessary onlookers. Her family maintained a private area meant for high-level training and sparring, typically reserved for those with the Emberheart name or their most trusted allies. And tonight, it was empty.

She couldn't deny the convenience of it. She'd have an uninterrupted view of his techniques, and he could train without the constraints of public scrutiny. Not that she needed a private place with him, of course—it was simply the best option. This was about practicality, not the slight thrill that came with the idea of having his undivided attention in her personal space.

With a firm nod, she turned to him, her face the picture of calm resolve. "Actually, I've got a better idea," she said, her tone casual as if the thought had just occurred to her. "I have my own training ground. It's away from the others, so you won't have to worry about interruptions."

Astron tilted his head, his eyes narrowing just slightly as he studied her, though he didn't protest. "Lead the way, then."

Irina did just that, fighting to keep a neutral expression as they walked the short distance to her personal training grounds. It was a quiet, open-air arena set back from the main complex, shielded by high walls and enchanted to keep sound from escaping. Only the faint glow of mana lights along the perimeter illuminated the area, giving the space a good ambiance.

Of course, he knew her motives, as what she did was evident. And she also knew he knew, but so what?

In the end, did it matter?

As they returned to her own building, Irina led Astron into her personal training grounds, her expression neutral despite the underlying anticipation.

She had already shown him the way in her building so she didn't do it again.

The first room she showed him was dedicated to mana and magic training, the second was the physical combat room, a space outfitted with dummies, reinforced targets, and specialized equipment for agility, strength, and endurance.

And the third one was the one she relied on most for battle training—her combat magic room. Here, targets were enchanted to react with high-intensity defenses, forcing her to weave her physical prowess with her magic.

There was also a place that she would consider as her most personal space, though for the time being Astron had no business being there.

Irina guided Astron into her third training room, the one she relied on most for refining her combat magic. She had shown him this room briefly during the tour, but now she intended to give him a real demonstration of how it functioned. The air inside felt different—charged with traces of residual mana and the unmistakable scent of singed metal and stone. Enchanted targets lined the far wall, each one specifically designed to withstand high-intensity attacks, adjusting its defenses in response to the level of force applied.

"Here we are," she said.

Astron scanned the room, his expression thoughtful as he took in the reinforced walls and the strategically placed mana channels embedded into the floor. She could tell he was assessing every detail, and she resisted the urge to smirk. 'Go ahead, try to figure it all out,' she thought. 'I've spent years in here, and I doubt you'll grasp it all in one glance.'

Without waiting for him to respond, she strode over to one of the targets, her hand glowing faintly as she summoned a controlled burst of Emberheart fire. The flames flared to life around her palm, dancing in rich shades of crimson and gold as she channeled them into her fist. With a sharp exhale, she punched forward, sending the flames barreling into the target. The enchanted defenses responded instantly, a shimmering barrier flaring up to absorb the impact before dissipating just as quickly.

"This is what I mean," she explained, her tone matter-of-fact. "The target's enchantment adjusts to absorb or deflect attacks, so I have to keep increasing the force if I want to break through. It's a battle of endurance and control."

She stepped back, looking at him expectantly. "So... any thoughts? Or are you just going to observe?"

"Observing is part of it," he said smoothly. "But I didn't come here just to watch. Change the mode to the all-rounder one."

Irina blinked, momentarily thrown off by Astron's request. "All-rounder mode?" she echoed, slightly confused.

But then, understanding dawned on her. Of course—this room had three modes, each tailored for different training purposes: Offense, where the targets focused purely on countering her attacks; Defense, where they simulated a constant onslaught for her to parry and evade; and finally, the combined mode, which her family had given a formal name—Total Resonance. It was a mode designed to push both offensive and defensive abilities to their limit, forcing the user to adapt between attacking and evading with little warning.

Because he said All Rounder instead of Total Resonance she didn't grasp it at once.

She let out an exaggerated sigh, crossing her arms. "Honestly, anyone with a functioning brain could have figured that out," she muttered, though her words lacked real annoyance. It was just like Astron to pick up on the nuances of the room with a single glance.

With a nod, she stepped over to a panel embedded in the wall. A faint pulse of mana later, she activated Total Resonance. The room responded instantly: mana channels embedded in the floor and walls flared to life, casting an ethereal glow over the area. The targets along the far wall adjusted, their forms shifting as they prepared to engage in both offensive and defensive maneuvers.

She turned back to him, giving a half-smirk. "There you go. Let's see if you can keep up."

Astron glanced around, a gleam of interest in his eyes as he took in the changes. "Remember, I am not here to showcase my abilities, we are here to test the bracelet out."

"Heh....You might be planning that. But this is my home. Remember the saying? In Emberheart Estate, do as Emberhearts do."

".....That saying, it definitely was not Emberhearts."

Hearing Astron's response, Irina couldn't help but smirk, crossing her arms. "Well, I just changed it, then. Does that bother you?" She raised an eyebrow, the faintest hint of a challenge in her tone. "Or are you just scared?"

Astron let out a sigh, shaking his head. "Do you really have to use the same excuse every time? I'd think you'd have found a better provocation by now."

She whistled, feigning innocence. "When have I ever used the same excuse? You're imagining things." Her tone was light, teasing, and she watched as he merely shook his head, a ghost of a smile touching his otherwise stoic face.

Satisfied, Irina turned on her heel, walking toward a small, enclosed section at the edge of the room. The area was reinforced with multiple defensive formations, designed as a spectator's safe zone while still offering a clear view of the action. From here, she'd be able to watch Astron's every move without the threat of stray mana or debris.

Settling into her vantage point, she leaned casually against the transparent barrier, watching as he stepped fully into the center of the training area. She could already see the targets recalibrating, shifting subtly as they assessed his presence and prepared to challenge both his offense and defense simultaneously.

"Let's see the bracelet that you have chosen."

Irina's gaze narrowed with intrigue, her curiosity growing as she settled back into the safe zone. Her eyes stayed fixed on Astron, her thoughts lingering on the bracelet he'd chosen. Out of all the artifacts in the armory, what had he seen in that simple, unassuming bracelet to make it his choice?

As if in answer, Astron stepped into position, facing the enchanted dummies now poised to attack. The room went silent for a heartbeat, and then the targets launched forward in synchronized motion, moving with a speed and precision that would force most opponents into evasive maneuvers. Yet Astron didn't move to dodge. Instead, he held his ground, a faint pulse of mana radiating from him, calm and controlled.

Irina's eyes widened slightly as she observed his aura. His entire body seemed charged with mana—not just coating his skin in a protective layer, as most mages would do when enhancing themselves, but rather circulating mana through his body in a strange, almost rhythmic flow, moving from inside to outside, every fiber of him infused with power.

"Martial arts?" she muttered to herself, realization dawning on her as she watched. This wasn't ordinary combat magic or body reinforcement—Astron was channeling his mana through his internal circuits, almost as if he were one with it, blending strength and agility with an elegance that went beyond typical spellwork.

And as she remembered, only [Martial Artist]s tended to do that.

'Interesting....'

It seemed Astron had not been slacking off in his break at all.

Chapter 676 Chapter 150.1 - Why don't you see for yourself?

Astron settled into position, his stance shifting slightly as he prepared to engage the dummies in earnest. Irina watched closely, her curiosity intensifying. She was already familiar with his impressive speed and agility-qualities that had always set him apart. And true to form, he displayed those traits now, weaving effortlessly through the oncoming strikes with a fluidity that made it look almost easy.

Yet something nagged at her. This was the same Astron she'd seen before, albeit with a slightly heightened speed thanks to the bracelet. He moved with precision, slipping between attacks, delivering well-timed counters that incapacitated the dummies one by one. But that was it. Nothing about his movements explained why he'd chosen the bracelet over artifacts that were far more powerful and suited to magic or even defense.

Irina's brow furrowed as she continued to watch, scrutinizing each of his moves. He was fast, yes-almost too fast for an ordinary opponent to keep up. But was that all? Was it really so important to him that he'd chosen a modest agility boost over enchanted weapons or protective amulets? It didn't add up.

'What am I missing?' she thought, irritation pricking at her as she tried to reconcile his choice with what she was seeing. The bracelet made him faster, sure, but there were many ways to achieve speed. And even though he moved gracefully, each strike landing with purpose, she couldn't shake the feeling that the bracelet was only part of the equation.

She leaned forward slightly, her eyes narrowing as she focused, determined to see beyond the surface. "Why this piece?"

Irina continued to watch Astron, her eyes tracking every movement as he navigated the relentless strikes from the enchanted dummies. His speed was remarkable-higher than she'd ever seen from him before. But as she observed more closely, she realized that this speed wasn't simply from the bracelet. The increase felt far beyond what a modest agility boost could provide.

"He must've been training intensely during the break, she thought, her brows knitting in confusion. The bracelet, though useful, couldn't account for this significant leap in his stats. It was clear he hadn't been idle; if anything, his agility and reflexes seemed almost honed to a razor's edge, each movement so precise it bordered on effortless. Still, the nagging question remained: why the bracelet?"

As the session wore on, she felt a faint sense of frustration. While he performed flawlessly, each strike perfectly timed and each movement unhindered, she couldn't pinpoint what she was supposed to be observing in relation to the artifact. In truth, he could've achieved nearly the same outcome without it.

When Astron finally slowed, allowing the room's enchantments to power down, Irina མོ་ཟེ་ཆེན་-
AṚ2LALALAMET """"| S|" "M---LLA ILLIALLLALLAAལུ་པ།ཟེ། AAAI stepped out of her
reinforced section and approached him, her curiosity unabated. She folded her arms, leveling him
with a direct look.

"All right," she said, her tone edged with challenge. "You've tested the bracelet. But... what was I supposed to see, exactly?" She gestured toward his wrist, her eyes scanning his calm expression, looking for any hint of an explanation. "Because, from where I'm standing, it doesn't seem like it made much difference."

Astron looked at her, his expression calm as he nodded, seemingly agreeing with her assessment. "That's exactly how it was supposed to be seen," he replied, his tone measured. "After all, whoever brought this bracelet into your family's armory would've tested it thoroughly. If it had any obvious powers, they would have noted it. So, what you saw is precisely what anyone else would see."

Irina frowned slightly, processing his words before nodding. "All right," she conceded, though her curiosity was far from satisfied. "Then... what's the point?" Astron didn't answer immediately. Instead, he looked at her with a question of his own. "Tell me, Irina-what makes a piece of equipment better than others?"

Irina straightened, feeling as though she'd just been handed a challenge. Her knowledge and training as a mage had long since taught her how to evaluate equipment, and she didn't hesitate as she began explaining.

"Well, it depends on a few factors," she said, her tone shifting into that of a teacher, as if she were presenting a lesson. "First, the equipment's inherent properties matter-its enchantments, how well it's crafted, and what kinds of materials were used. Then, there's compatibility. An artifact that aligns with the wielder's mana or abilities can elevate its effectiveness. And of course, there's adaptability, how versatile the piece is in different situations. Some artifacts shine in specific uses, while others are well-rounded and dependable in any situation."

She paused, glancing at him to gauge his reaction, but his face remained unreadable, prompting her to continue. "Lastly, there's potential-some artifacts grow stronger with the user or adapt over time. So, to sum it up, the best equipment is strong in its own right, works seamlessly with its wielder, and has potential for growth." Astron nodded thoughtfully, his gaze unwavering. "You're right, Irina. But the way you're assessing it-it's a consumer's perspective. And while that's useful, it lacks a certain depth."

Irina arched an eyebrow, clearly unimpressed. "So, you're saying I should look at it from the creator's perspective?" She crossed her arms, a hint of challenge in her tone. "If it were that easy, I'd be creating my own artifacts, wouldn't I?"

"True," Astron agreed with a slight incline of his head. "But understanding a piece of equipment as a creator would isn't necessarily about crafting it yourself. It's about knowing what to look for. Sometimes, even with basic knowledge, you can infer a lot if you approach it from the right angle."

Irina's eyes narrowed, scrutinizing him. "That's exactly what you're good at, isn't it?" Her voice softened as the realization dawned on her. "You don't just look at things the way everyone else does."

She paused, her mind racing as she pieced it together. "This guy sees things differently. It's like he has a lens no one else has... something about his eyes!

The pieces fell into place with a startling clarity. Astron's ability to choose the bracelet wasn't just about theoretical knowledge or random chance. He had seen something others hadn't. Her ancestors, the armory appraisers, anyone else who had looked at that bracelet-they'd only looked with surface-level vision. But Astron, he'd been able to see through it, to look deeper in a way that went beyond ordinary observation. "Your eyes," she murmured, barely audible, staring at him with newfound curiosity. "There's something... different about them, isn't there?"

Astron held her gaze, his expression unreadable but the faintest flicker of

acknowledgment in his eyes.

Irina's eyes narrowed as she considered her next question, trying to put the pieces together. "So... is it about the material? Or maybe something with the engraving?" she asked, her tone probing, her gaze intent on him.

At her words, she caught a faint shift in Astron's expression-a barely noticeable change, but enough for her to sense she was onto something. Her eyes widened in realization. If she was right, then this meant Astron could actually see through the material and grasp a possible way to improve it? The thought left her momentarily

speechless.

"This guy..." she thought, awe settling over her. He has an ability that goes beyond typical sight.

Then, without a word, Astron reached into his spatial storage, his hand reappearing with a small, slightly shiny piece of metal that seemed to pulse with contained mana. He held it out to her, the material gleaming in the dim light of the room. "This is Orichalum," he said simply, the name carrying weight. The metal was rare, difficult to refine, and incredibly potent in mana conductivity. For many, this was the foundation of high-grade artifacts. Though her family possessed the resources to acquire it, even they used it sparingly due to its cost and the skill needed to work with

it.

Irina looked at the Orichalum in his hand, her mind racing with possibilities. "You're telling me... you saw a way to use this with the bracelet?" she asked, incredulity coloring her voice. "You could refine it?"

When Irina asked if he could refine the bracelet himself, Astron simply shook his head.

"If I could do that, I'd be an artifact creator," he replied dryly. "But I can do something

else."

Without further explanation, he took the bracelet in one hand and held the Orichalum in the other, his gaze steady as he watched her reaction. He seemed to be measuring her understanding, waiting for the realization to dawn.

Then, he spoke, his voice calm but purposeful. "Let me ask you something, Irina. Why do you think a bracelet like this-something that doesn't align with any of the Emberheart skills or fighting style-ended up here, in your family's armory?" Irina considered his question, her mind racing as she looked from the bracelet to the

Orichalum in his hand. Why indeed? If this bracelet had no direct use for her family, then there had to be something else that warranted its place among their treasures.

She thought back to what he'd already hinted at.

"The material..." she said slowly, piecing it together. "It's because of the material it was made with, isn't it?"

"Exactly," Astron replied a glint of satisfaction in his gaze. He motioned for her to come closer, and she obliged, intrigued despite herself.

"That's why it's here," he continued, holding up the Orichalum in his hand. "The bracelet is made with a dormant layer of a similar mana-conductive metal, one that can be activated-but only with a specific kind of flame."

Irina's breath caught as she began to realize what he was implying. "You mean... my flame."

"Precisely." His tone was matter-of-fact as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Only a flame like yours-one from an Emberheart-can invoke a reaction in this material. It wasn't about choosing a piece with immediate power. It was about seeing the potential for something greater."

Irina furrowed her brow, skepticism flashing across her face. "This is... why do I feel like this is just a bunch of nonsense?" she muttered, half to herself, still grappling with the idea of her flames activating the bracelet's dormant potential. Astron merely shrugged, a calm, knowing look in his eyes. "Of course, it sounds hard

to believe. It's not something most would notice right away." He took a step back, positioning himself with a relaxed stance, clearly inviting her to test his words. He raised a hand, gesturing for her to come at him, a slight curl tugging at the corner

of his mouth. "Why don't you see for yourself?"

It was an invitation to fight.

Chapter 677 150.2 - Why don't you see for yourself?

"Why don't you see for yourself?"

Astron's invitation to spar hung in the air, his calm gaze unwavering as he waited for her response. Irina studied his expression, noting the subtle intensity in his eyes and the slight smirk on his lips. So he wanted to test the bracelet and see what it could truly handle and, if she was honest with herself, she was just as eager to see what he was capable of.

A smirk curved her lips as a spark of anticipation ignited within her. She'd always wanted a better grasp of Astron's strength, and here was the perfect opportunity to do just that.

But she raised an eyebrow, meeting his gaze. "Are you serious about this?" she asked, a hint of mischief in her tone. "Should I grab some protective gear for you? My flames aren't exactly gentle."

Astron shook his head, his expression relaxed but resolute. "This is just a spar. And let's be honest," he replied smoothly, "no equipment will save me from your flames anyway." He paused, then added, "Besides, I trust you to control your strength."

The simple statement caught her off guard, warmth flickering through her chest at his words. His trust in her, despite the power she wielded, meant more than she cared to admit.

"Fine," she said, taking her stance and letting her mana flare to life around her. Her flames danced along her arms, rich and vibrant, embodying the very essence of Emberheart fire. "Don't blame me if you get singed," she teased, though there was a softness to her tone that wasn't usually there.

Astron mirrored her, settling into a balanced stance, his gaze steady, unwavering. "I'll take my chances."

3

As the timer counted down, Irina took a deep breath, focusing her mana into a simmering warmth that spread through her core. She knew Astron's speed was his greatest advantage, so she'd need to be precise, using her flames to control his movements and force him to respond to her terms.

2

'Alright, Astron,' she thought, feeling the ember of anticipation flare into readiness. 'Let's see just how quick you are.'

1

SWOOSH!

The moment the timer hit zero, Astron shot forward, moving with explosive speed, his

figure blurring as he aimed to close the gap between them, Irina reacted immediately, sweeping her hand forward as a wave of flame surged from her fingertips, fanning out to create a wall of heat in his path. Her mana pulsed in steady waves, a testament to her control, as she wove the fire into a barrier designed to slow his approach, if only for a split second.

But Astron was ready. He didn't hesitate, twisting his body mid-sprint to sidestep her flames. His movements were fluid, almost as if he could read her intentions, dodging the fire with practiced agility.

'As expected,' Irina noted, her eyes narrowing.

Without missing a beat, she spun her wrist, redirecting the flames to trail after him. This wasn't about overpowering him-she knew better than to waste her energy against someone as evasive as Astron.

Instead, she focused on creating a rhythm, a tempo to her attacks that would eventually force him to commit to a defensive stance.

"Not bad," Astron called, his voice calm even as he dodged another fiery arc. His steps were calculated, every movement efficient and precise, like he was studying her just as much as she was studying him.

"Let's see how long you can keep that up," she replied, a hint of challenge in her voice. Her flames pulsed brighter, flickering as if they shared her excitement. With a flick of her fingers, she sent small bursts of fire toward him-quick, compact attacks designed to probe his defenses.

Astron's response was instantaneous. He weaved through her attacks, slipping past each burst of flame with ease. But Irina didn't let up, increasing the pace of her strikes, her mana thrumming as she pushed herself harder, flames surging in controlled bursts.

Finally, she saw her chance. Astron was forced to dodge a low arc of fire, his balance shifting ever so slightly. In that split-second opening, she thrust her hand forward, sending a concentrated blaze directly at his chest.

But Astron was quicker than she'd anticipated. He twisted his body with impressive agility, the flames grazing past him, leaving only a faint scorch mark on his sleeve. Before she could fully register the near-miss, he countered, closing the distance in an instant, his hand coming down in a quick strike aimed at her shoulder.

Irina barely had time to react, but her instincts kicked in. She shifted, angling her arm to intercept his strike while channeling her mana through her body, creating a thin layer of heat around her skin. His hand connected, but the fiery shield absorbed much of the impact, leaving a stinging sensation rather than real pain.

A grin spread across her face as they disengaged, though she was breathing a little heavy.

"This guy? When did he become this fast?"

He was even faster than when he was dealing with the dummies just now. It was evident that he was not showing his full speed at all.

"Not bad yourself," she quipped, letting her flames flicker brighter. "But I hope you're not holding back too much."

Astron did not reply, simply looking at her.

Irina's smirk faltered as she caught Astron's gaze, his eyes carrying a silent message of victory. He hadn't said a word, but the look was enough. It was as if he was telling her that he'd won that round effortlessly, as though her carefully controlled flames had been nothing more than a warm-up to him. The realization sparked a flare of indignation in her chest.

'Is he serious? I was going easy on him, and he dares look at me like that?'

She narrowed her eyes, a flicker of irritation crossing her face. "Alright," she said, her voice low but laced with challenge. "You're asking for it. I won't hold back as much this time. Let's see if you can keep that expression then."

Astron raised an eyebrow, giving a faint nod, his calm demeanor unchanged. That only fueled her resolve further. Taking a step back, they both assumed their stances, each one silently preparing for the intensity of the second round. Irina could feel the anticipation building in the air, her flames burning brighter as she gathered her mana, letting it course through her body with renewed purpose.

The moment the signal sounded, she moved, sending a wide arc of flames cascading across the ground, creating a wall of fire that spanned the entire width of their makeshift arena. Her goal was clear: limit his movements, cut off any escape routes, and make him truly contend with her flames.

This time, there would be no restraint.

FLICK!

With a flick of her wrist, the wall of flames surged forward, inching closer to Astron,

forcing him to backpedal.

SWIRL!

She followed up with a second layer of fire, interweaving smaller bursts between the larger arcs, making it impossible for him to find an opening. The heat intensified, casting a flickering orange glow that bathed the area in a fierce, oppressive warmth.

To her satisfaction, Astron was forced to stay on the defensive, his agility limited as he dodged each strike, his expression sharpening as he realized her change in tactics. She could see his gaze darting from flame to flame, calculating his next move, but she didn't let up, pushing him harder and harder.

"Not so easy when I don't hold back, is it?" she called a victorious edge in her voice.

She intensified the heat, pouring more mana into the flames, making them sear the ground around him, creating a dangerous perimeter he couldn't step into without risking a burn.

For a moment, she thought she'd cornered him. But just as she prepared to close in, Astron shifted his stance, his body tensing. In one swift movement, he leaped, launching himself over a surge of flames with perfect timing. The maneuver was bold -and dangerously close to reckless-but he landed on the other side unscathed.

And the way he moved was a perfect example of complete body control, as he didn't waste any movement at all.

Irina felt a surge of respect, mixed with a renewed determination, 'He's really not

backing down.'

But that was it.

'And I knew you would do it like that.'

Astron was using [Martial Arts] right now at this moment, and he was fighting barehanded. She didn't know why he was doing that, but now that he had decided to take this route, she wouldn't complain.

Irina focused, visualizing Astron's movements in her mind, the way he'd counter her flames with precision and agility. His mastery over every muscle, each motion deliberate and efficient-it was impressive, even a little exhilarating. But she wasn't about to let him mock her with that calm expression, as though he'd already won. 'Alright, Astron,' she thought, a smirk forming on her lips. 'Let's see how you handle

this.'

In an instant, she summoned multiple Fire Javelins, their tips glowing hot as they hovered in the air before her. With a quick motion, she sent them hurtling toward him in rapid succession, each one aimed to test his evasive skills. She knew he'd dodge, and that was precisely what she was counting on.

True to her expectation, Astron's body moved, weaving between the flaming projectiles with speed and control. He sidestepped each javelin, his gaze sharp and focused, but Irina was already onto her next move.

With a flick of her fingers, she channeled her mana again, igniting the ground around him. Flames burst up in a tight circle, forming a wall of fire that surrounded him completely, cutting off any horizontal escape. She watched him carefully, her smirk

widening.

'Let's see if you're bold enough to run through that, she mused.

She saw him pause for a split second, evaluating his options. And then, just as she'd anticipated, he bent his knees, preparing to leap. Her flames roared higher, framing him perfectly against the fiery background. This was her moment.

[School of Emberheart. Pointy Blaze.]

The second he launched into the air, Irina's mana surged as she focused on a single,

powerful blaze. With practiced precision, she directed a concentrated arc of fire directly at him, its path aligned with his mid-air trajectory. There was no way he could dodge mid-leap, and the realization struck her with a spark of satisfaction.

'Got you, Astron.'

As the flames closed in on him, she couldn't help but feel a surge of anticipation. The image of him charred and singed was oddly satisfying, yet...she didn't actually want to

harm him, especially that face of his.

Yet, things didn't play as she wished.

Suddenly, something that she would never have expected happened.

BLAST!

Her flames were blasted back.

And there, as her flames were blasted back, she saw the bracelet on the Astron's arm

shining, with the Orichalcum melted onto the bracelet itself.

Chapter 678 150.3 - Why don't you see for yourself

As I landed, the bracelet gleaming on my wrist, a sense of satisfaction settled over me. The Orichalcum had fused perfectly, the flames Irina unleashed igniting a reaction I'd anticipated, but that even she hadn't seen coming. It was the developers' handiwork at its finest-a hidden mechanic that most players would overlook entirely, a reward for those who knew to look beyond the surface.

'Easter eggs, I thought to myself, 'they're not meant to be obvious. They need to be hard to discover-obscure enough that only a few would ever find them.'

The best secrets aren't gifts wrapped in neon lights; they're woven into the world, tucked away where only the most persistent or the luckiest can stumble upon them. They require a delicate balance, almost like a developer's art form. Sure, some items can be found with basic exploration,

but the truly powerful artifacts? They come with a catch. A trick. A test. Something only the right set of eyes or the right moment can unveil.

In my old gaming days, I used to scroll through forums where players would swap rumors and half-baked theories about hidden items, mysterious interactions, and vague dialogue choices that hinted at something deeper. Most of the time, it was just speculation or dead ends.

But once in a while, someone would hit the jackpot. They'd connect the dots, follow the breadcrumbs, and unlock something incredible. It wasn't just the item itself that made it memorable- it was the thrill of discovery, the satisfaction of finding something hidden in plain sight.

'A hidden artifact should be just that: hidden. Out of reach for those who settle for the obvious.'

I glanced over at Irina, her expression shifting from surprise to something closer to

awe.

'Well.....that is the expression that I was looking forward to.'

Seeing her reaction was kind of funny, and for whatever reason, I felt warm inside. This feeling was rather odd, and I certainly did not expect to feel it at this moment, but for some reason I did.

Irina's eyes widened as she stared at the bracelet on my wrist, the glint of Orichalcum still fused into the metal. She seemed to be piecing things together, her expression somewhere between astonishment and disbelief.

"Did that... did all of that come from that bracelet?" she asked, her voice a mixture of curiosity and wonder.

I nodded, keeping my face carefully neutral, though it took every bit of self-control to keep from smirking. "Yes," I replied, my tone as calm as I could manage. "That reaction was entirely thanks to the bracelet."

Her eyes flickered between me and the bracelet, trying to make sense of it all. And honestly, I couldn't blame her. After all, there was a reason why this bracelet had been hidden as an easter egg. For it to reach its full potential, it needed three very specific components: Emberheart's flame, this

particular bracelet, and a piece of Orichalcum, all in the same place. The odds of that combination happening naturally? Astronomically low. But that's exactly what made it so brilliant.

"This is why the developers loved these kinds of details, 'I thought to myself, Easter eggs were supposed to be tucked away, only accessible to those who either stumbled upon them by pure luck or figured out the right sequence through an almost unnatural level of curiosity and persistence. The bracelet, by itself, looked like nothing special. In fact, I could see why even her family's appraisers had dismissed it as a Unique-grade artifact at best. It didn't scream power, didn't have an obvious aura or visible enchantment. But with the right elements? It became something extraordinary.

Irina was still staring, her brows furrowed in thought. She looked as though she wanted to ask a hundred questions at once, her mind racing to understand just what had happened.

"It's not something most people would notice," I offered, breaking the silence.

"But...what exactly it does?"

"Couldn't you see?"

She seemed momentarily speechless, her gaze flicking to the bracelet and then back to me, searching for any sign of deception. But I could tell she was starting to accept the truth of it, her expression softening as understanding dawned.

Irina's gaze drifted to the bracelet again, her lips moving in a faint murmur as she pieced it together. "It has... a special mana-repelling ability, doesn't it?"

I nodded, feeling a flicker of respect for her keen perception. "Exactly. This bracelet wasn't just crafted for speed. It has an ability that most would overlook entirely, a power that's subtle but invaluable."

In its dormant state, this piece was simply known as Emberlight Band-a generic name that didn't hint at much. But in the game, once its potential was unlocked, players had come to know it as Entropy's Aegis. It was a name that held weight among those who understood the rarity of what this artifact could do.

"This bracelet's ability is unique," I explained, keeping my tone steady as I felt her interest deepen. "When the user is struck by an attack fueled with mana, the bracelet absorbs a portion of the

entropy from that attack, storing it within. And when the user decides, it releases that stored entropy as a powerful repellent against incoming attacks."

She blinked, realization dawning on her face. "So, it doesn't just defend passively-it actually gives the user control over when to use that stored energy?"

"Exactly," I replied. "In essence, this bracelet is a high-ranked magical artifact that could protect its user from some of the strongest attacks, letting them turn the enemy's power against them. It doesn't just absorb-it deflects, creating a shield that's almost impossible to penetrate once it's charged."

Her eyes lit up with a new understanding. "No wonder....."

"Now, what do you think? Dare to doubt me?"

"Heh..."

Irina stared at me, her lips parted slightly, as though searching for something to say. For a moment, there was only silence. I could see the realization settling over her, the acknowledgment that the bracelet-something her family had overlooked-was far more significant than she'd initially thought.

But just as quickly, her expression shifted. Her brows furrowed, and she let out a soft huff, turning her face sharply to the side. "Hmph. It's nothing special," she said, her tone carrying a faint edge of irritation. "As long as the enemy is powerful enough, that bracelet will be useless anyway."

That was indeed the correct approach. As long as one is powerful enough, they can indeed break through this artifact.

"You're not wrong," I replied evenly, watching her closely. "That's true for all artifacts in the world. If someone is powerful enough, no artifact will be enough to stop them."

Her eyes flicked back to me, a spark of indignation flaring within them. "Exactly," she said, folding her arms as if she'd scored a point in some unseen debate. "Artifacts can only do so much. It's the person wielding them that matters most."

I nodded, letting her have her moment, though the amusement dancing in my chest was hard to contain. "You've hit the core truth of it," I said, my tone calm but pointed. "The bracelet is just a

tool, Irina. It doesn't make me invincible. But in the right hands, at the right moment, it can make all the difference."

Irina's eyes narrowed as she studied me, her irritation bubbling just beneath the

surface. I could see the wheels turning in her head, the subtle shift in her demeanor as she crossed her arms, tilting her head slightly. And then, with a smirk that was equal parts challenge and bait, she spoke.

"In the right hands, huh? But can you even effectively utilize it?" The words hung in the air, pointed but hollow—a cheap provocation, and she knew it. Ordinarily, I'd have shrugged something like that off without a second thought, letting the comment roll over me. After all, I wasn't the type to rise to obvious goading. But this wasn't just anyone trying to provoke me. This was Irina, and the intent behind her words was crystal clear,

'She wants to continue the spar, and she is trying to find an excuse for it.'

I met her gaze, calm and steady, letting her see that I wasn't fooled by her ploy. "You're trying awfully hard to poke holes in this, Irina," I said, my tone light, almost teasing. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were itching for another round." Her smirk faltered for just a fraction of a second, a subtle shift that confirmed my suspicion. But instead of backing down, she leaned into her role, her expression sharpening into one of mock superiority. "Well, it's not my fault if you can't properly demonstrate its potential," she said, her tone dripping with feigned indifference. "If I'm going to take you seriously, you'd better show me what that bracelet can really do."

It was almost endearing, the way she tried to mask her excitement behind a veil of challenge. She wanted to test me, to push me further, and she wasn't going to admit it

outright. And that was the same for me.

'Let me get myself familiar with the artifact.'

Even if it is me, I can't just get an artifact and utilize it effectively after just a second of

getting it. And it is better to practice it against a strong opponent like Irina so that I can feel myself better as well.

"You're right," I said with a sigh, stepping forward as I adjusted the bracelet on my wrist. "It'd be a shame to let such an incredible artifact go untested."

Her eyes lit up, though she quickly masked it with a nonchalant shrug. "Exactly," she

said, her voice steady, though I could hear the faint edge of anticipation creeping in. "Someone needs to make sure you're not all talk."

I nodded as I settled into a relaxed stance. "Alright, Irina," I said, my voice calm but

carrying just enough weight to spark her competitive spirit. "You wanted another round? Let's see if you can make me use the bracelet's full potential"

She straightened, her flames flickering faintly to life around her, that fiery intensity

back in her gaze. "Oh, don't worry," she said with a grin, her confidence blazing as

brightly as her mana. "You won't have a choice."

"Heh.....We will see about that."

I mumbled, just then Irina came forward.

"But this time, let's get serious."

Saying that she activated a different mechanism in the room.

Chapter 679 151.1 - Let me see your strength

Irina's smirk widened as she stepped toward the wall and pressed her hand against a glowing panel. Mana surged through her fingertips, activating a mechanism that rarely saw use. The floor beneath them vibrated faintly, and the entire arena began to shift. Targets retracted into the walls, replaced by intricate formations and dynamic structures-pillars, walls, and elevated platforms-that rose from

the ground in smooth, deliberate motions. The changes created an environment designed to push the combatants to their limits.

This was no ordinary mode. "Crucible Protocol" was reserved for the most intense sparring sessions. Designed with high-level safeguards, it activated the strongest defensive formations embedded in the arena's architecture. These formations monitored the contestants for any signs of critical danger, instantly deploying protective barriers to prevent lethal injuries. Around the edges of the room, concealed compartments opened, revealing shelves stocked with high-ranking and mid-ranking potions, ready to be deployed in case the formations weren't sufficient.

The temperature in the room rose as the mana channels embedded in the floor and walls glowed brighter, amplifying the intensity of the environment. Flames flickered along the edges of the room, casting long, dynamic shadows across the space.

Irina turned back to Astron, her grin widening. "Crucible Protocol," she said, her tone teasing yet serious. "This isn't something I activate lightly. I hope you're ready."

As part of the mode, a new set of sparring clothes emerged from an enchanted compartment.

Both contestants changed into specially designed attire, woven with mana-conductive threads that linked directly to the room's systems. These garments ensured seamless integration with the protective formations, allowing the room to monitor their energy levels and prevent any dangerous spikes or drops.

Astron glanced down at the attire, adjusting the lightweight material that fit snugly yet comfortably. "Impressive," he remarked, his tone neutral but faintly intrigued.

Irina folded her arms, watching him with anticipation. "It should be," she replied. "This mode isn't about holding back. The Crucible doesn't just test strength-it challenges control, adaptability, and endurance. Let's see if you can handle it."

Astron adjusted the mana-conductive attire, his gaze flicking to the intricate formations glowing faintly in the room. "The academy has something similar," he remarked his tone calm but tinged with curiosity. "These types of rooms are incredibly expensive to build and maintain. Is Arcadia Dominion supplying them here as well?"

Irina raised an eyebrow at his question, her expression turning mildly amused. "Impressed, are we?" she teased, though her smirk faltered slightly as she glanced at the shifting formations. Memories flickered through her mind-memories of her training in this very room as a child.

"You could say that," Astron replied, his gaze scanning the room again. "Having direct access to something like this-it's overwhelming, to say the least. How do you even justify using it? Most people wouldn't even dare, considering the cost."

Irina hesitated for a moment, her flames dimming slightly as her expression turned pensive. "You'd be surprised," she said softly. "I've been using this room since I was a child." Her tone shifted, becoming quieter, tinged with something Astron couldn't quite place. "Back then, it wasn't exactly... optional."

Astron's brow furrowed slightly, as he immediately realized what she meant. "I see...."

There was no reason for Irina to elaborate further after all.

Astron's expression shifted subtly as Irina's words sank in. The Matriarch-Irina's mother-was known for her unyielding demeanor and the high expectations she set for her family. The idea of Irina being forced to train here as a child pushed against opponents far stronger than her, painted a vivid picture of the kind of pressure she'd grown up under.

'I should've seen that coming,"

It made sense now that this kind of room was installed in Irina's building.... It was also quite easy to see, but it appeared that he somehow missed it this time.

'Next time, I shall be careful.

Though it was not his fault that Irina had such memories, he could at least be more considerate.

But now wasn't the time to dwell on it. Astron realized there was no need to press her further on something so personal. Instead, he decided to steer the conversation elsewhere.

"With this mode," he said, his tone calm and steady, "we should be safe. No real holding back this time, then?"

Irina's smirk returned, her flames sparking to life around her once more. "Exactly. No holding back."

Astron nodded, settling into his stance. The spar they'd just had felt like a warm-up in retrospect. Both of them had held back significantly-there was no real need to go all out just to test the bracelet. But this time, it was different. The air between them was charged with a new energy, competitive and unrelenting.

Irina, for her part, felt a strange sense of anticipation coursing through her veins. She'd been thinking about this moment since the end of the semester. She had fought beside Astron, seen his abilities as a teammate, and marveled at his precise, calculated approach. But she'd never faced him directly, never tested herself against him to see where she truly stood.

Her flames roared higher as her excitement grew. "I've been curious about this for a while, she admitted, her voice carrying a fiery edge. "Fighting beside you is one thing. But facing you? That's an entirely different challenge."

Astron adjusted his stance, his sharp gaze meeting Irina's as the energy in the room seemed to intensify. Her flames danced wildly around her, a clear reflection of her anticipation and determination. For the first time, he truly understood the weight of this encounter-not just for her, but for himself as well.

"It's the same for me," Astron said, his voice steady yet charged with a subtle undercurrent of excitement. He wasn't one to openly display emotion, but he couldn't deny the rush coursing through him. "Back then, I wouldn't have had a chance against you-not enough strength, not enough skill. But now..." He shifted his weight slightly, the mana-conductive attire amplifying the aura around him. "Things are different." He wasn't boasting-it was a simple statement of fact. Since the end of the semester, Astron's progress has been relentless. His training, combined with his natural talents and the boosts that he'd gathered, had brought his stats to a level where he could truly compete with Irina.

Especially in raw parameters like speed, strength, and endurance, he could feel that he was no longer overmatched.

This was an opportunity to gauge just how far he had come-and how much further he still had to go.

Irina tilted her head slightly, her fiery gaze narrowing as she studied him. She could sense it too. The Astron standing before her wasn't the same as the one she'd fought beside before. His movements carried a subtle confidence, his stance exuding calm control. For a brief moment, she wondered if he might even be capable of surpassing

her.

'Interesting,' she thought, the corner of her lips curling into a smirk. "This is going to be fun.

The room pulsed with energy as the Crucible Protocol adjusted to the rising tension. The flames along the edges flared brighter, responding to the heat of their mana. Astron could feel the bracelet on his wrist faintly hums with potential energy, its fusion with the Orichalcum already attuning itself to his rhythm.

"Alright." Irina said, her voice steady but charged with anticipation. Her flames surged, crackling as they wrapped around her arms in a fiery embrace. "Let's see if all that

progress of yours means anything."

Astron gave a faint nod, his eyes locked onto her. "You will see."

No further words were exchanged. The room fell silent save for the crackle of flames

and the hum of mana, and then...

SWIRL!

Irina's flames roared to life, surging outward in a vibrant display of power. She didn't

hesitate this time, there would be no holding back. With a sharp sweep of her arm,

she channeled her mana into a fiery wave.

[School of Emberheart: Infernal Surge]

A massive column of flame erupted from the ground, its intensity shaking the room

and blasting toward Astron with explosive force. The heat was oppressive, the flames crackling with relentless energy as they raced to engulf him. She smirked, confident that this opening move would at least slow him down.

But then he moved.

Astron blurred forward, his speed far exceeding what Irina had seen before. It was as if

he'd been holding back during their earlier exchanges, saving his true speed for this moment. His movements were seamless, weaving through the edges of her flames with a precision that left her momentarily stunned.

'So he was holding back,' she thought, narrowing her eyes. The realization only ignited

her determination further.

Though she couldn't hope to match him in speed, her instincts kicked in. Her 'intuition'-an innate parameter honed through relentless training-allowed her to track his movements despite his velocity. She focused, channeling mana into her body as her flames began to wrap around her, forming a protective layer.

[School of Emberheart: Pyroclastic Aegis]

The fiery coating surged along her limbs, reinforcing her body and amplifying her physical capabilities. With her defenses up, she started moving, keeping him at bay with rapid bursts of fire.

[School of Emberheart: Blazing Scattershot]

She launched a series of flaming projectiles in rapid succession, each one forcing

Astron to adjust his approach. But he was relentless, dodging with an almost supernatural grace as he closed the gap between them. Irina gritted her teeth, taking a step back to create distance while continuing to strike at him with calculated

precision. Astron's expression remained calm, his sharp gaze never wavering as he advanced. But

then, to Irina's surprise, he slowed his pace. In a single fluid motion, he reached over his shoulder and drew a sleek black bow from his back, its frame humming faintly with mana. Without hesitation, he nocked an arrow, the motion smooth and practiced. 'A bow?" Irina's eyes narrowed, her focus sharpening as she saw him pull the string

back. He was indeed a marksman, but for the moment. Irina had forgotten that he was like that.

After all, he had been fighting in close combat, as a [Marital Artist] all the time before, and she didn't think he would take his bow out at that moment.

SWOOSH!

The mana-infused arrow crackled with energy, and before she could react further, he released it.

The arrow flew fast and true, a streak of light cutting through the air with unerring accuracy.

'What?'

Irina's instincts flared, warning her of its precision. She reacted immediately, summoning a burst of fire to intercept it.

[School of Emberheart: Ember Flare]

The arrow collided with her flames, detonating in a controlled burst of energy. But just as the explosion cleared, Irina caught a glimpse of Astron darting forward through the smoke, using the distraction to close the distance.

'Damn it,' she thought, her smirk returning despite herself. The way he adapted and

took advantage of every opening was impressive-even frustratingly so. But if he thought she'd let him get the upper hand so easily, he was sorely mistaken. With a flick of her wrist, she redirected her flames, sending a searing wave toward him to force him back once again. "Not so fast, Astron," she called, her voice tinged

with both challenge and excitement. "Let's see what you will do now."

Chapter 680 151.2 - Let me see your strength

"Not so fast, Astron," she called, her voice tinged with both challenge and excitement. "Let's see what you will do now!"

The searing wave of fire surged forward, its heat rippling through the air as it bore down on Astron. For a moment, Irina was certain I would force him to retreat-or at least slow him down. But then, something unexpected happened.

A sudden shockwave erupted from Astron's position, blasting her flames apart with a force that left the air crackling. Her eyes widened as she saw the bracelet on his wrist glowing faintly, its surface shimmering with the energy it had absorbed.

"The bracelet... he's using it already?"

Before she could fully process the situation, Astron shot forward, his body enveloped in a layer of mana. His speed was overwhelming, far surpassing the pace he'd shown earlier. It was as if the previous exchanges had been nothing more than a warm-up. SWOOSH!

In an instant, he was right before her, his hand aimed directly at her exposed stomach. The precision and speed of his strike were undeniable, and Irina knew that evasion was no longer an option. But even as the realization struck her, she remained calm, a faint smirk tugging at the corners of her lips.

'Did you think I wouldn't prepare for something like this?'

Her mana surged, flames flickering briefly before she focused entirely on defense. With a quick motion, she activated a spell she had honed to perfection.

School of Irina: Pyroclastic Barrier]

A barrier of fiery mana materialized between them, but it wasn't just an ordinary shield. Irina's mastery of telekinesis allowed her to compress the psions within the barrier, bending the very space behind it. This compression created a unique effect- stretching the collision time of any impact and dispersing the force over a broader

area.

Astron's strike connected with the barrier, and for a brief moment, the room seemed to be still. The collision time extended unnaturally, the momentum of his attack being systematically absorbed and redistributed. Instead of the force transferring directly to Irina, the barrier diffused it, rendering the strike far less effective than it should have been.

The barrier shimmered under the strain, its compressed psions glowing brilliantly as it held firm against the blow. Irina felt a slight jolt as the residual momentum reached her, but it was negligible- nothing she couldn't handle. Her smirk deepened as she locked eyes with Astron, the faint flicker of surprise in his gaze not lost on her.

"You didn't think I was just going to let you land that, did you?" she teased, her voice steady despite the lingering heat in the air that she was channeling.

Now that she had the free time, she couldn't allow him to stay in the same position hence she had already cast her next spell.

SWIRL!

Flames compressed and shot forward to Astron, and he was forced to retreat. But because the barrier had extended the space itself, he was a tiny bit slow to move, and flames pushed forward and burned his skin a little.

SWOOSH!

Though, he didn't let himself get attacked for too long and he had already increased the distance just then.

"Heh.." Irina sneered as she started casting another spell.

On the other hand, Astron's expression didn't waver, but the faintest trace of respect. flickered in his eyes as he pulled back. "Clever," he admitted, his tone neutral but edged with acknowledgment. "You compressed the psions and manipulated the impact... not bad."

Irina tilted her head slightly, her flames flaring to life once more as she prepared for the next exchange. "It's my own technique," she said, pride evident in her voice. "You're not the only one who's been innovating"

Astron nodded, stepping back just enough to dodge the trailing remnants of her flames. "It's a good trick," he said, his tone calm and matter-of-fact, though his words carried an undertone that felt like praise.

Irina's brow twitched, though she didn't let it show. How could he already figure out the intricacies of her spell after seeing it just once? The way his sharp gaze dissected her techniques made her feel as though she were facing some kind of battle-hardened strategist, not someone supposedly on her level.

"This guy... He's too much of a cheat,' she thought, the faintest ripple of annoyance flickering in her chest. Still, she refused to let it rattle her.

SWIRL!

Her flames surged forward, weaving tightly together as she directed another volley of fire toward him. The attack split into multiple tendrils, each one seeking to ensnare him from a different angle.

Astron's expression didn't waver. As he released a slow, measured breath, his body shifted slightly- just enough to let him evade the first wave of flames. His movements were precise, and calculated, as though he were predicting her next strike before it even formed.

"Your control is impressive," he said, dodging another tendril of fire while

simultaneously closing the gap between them. His hand darted out, slashing through a burst of flame with a quick swipe of his mana-coated palm. "But you're leaving just enough of a pattern to predict."

Irina's flames coiled back as she raised her hand, casting another spell mid-motion. This time, her flames expanded outward in a sudden, explosive wave.

[School of Emberheart: Incandescent Tempest]

The flames roared toward Astron, leaving him no choice but to retreat. Even his agility wasn't enough to completely evade the heat, and Irina smirked as she saw a flicker of discomfort cross his face. A faint scorch mark darkened the edge of his sleeve, and she could tell the heat had gotten to him.

"Heh..." Her smirk widened. "What was that about patterns?"

Astron didn't reply immediately, his focus sharp as he ducked beneath a secondary surge of flames. His movements remained fluid, but Irina could see the faint sheen of sweat on his brow now. It was proof that her relentless assault was wearing him down -if only a little.

"Still not bad," he said at last, his voice steady even as he deflected another burst of fire with a precise twist of his wrist. The bracelet on his arm shimmered faintly, absorbing the lingering energy from her attacks. "But don't think I haven't adjusted." 'He's not just evading,' Irina realized, narrowing her eyes as she tracked his movements. The way he shifted, the subtle rhythm to his steps-he wasn't simply dodging her attacks; he was testing her, probing for weaknesses while simultaneously building momentum.

Her flames flared brighter, mirroring her resolve. She refused to let him dictate the pace. "Then stop running and show me what you've got!" she called, her tone sharp

but laced with anticipation.

Astron's lips twitched into the faintest hint of a smirk. "Alright," he said, and with that, he surged forward, his body a blur of motion.

This time, he didn't aim directly for her. Instead, he darted to the side, forcing her to adjust her aim. The shift in his trajectory was subtle but effective, and for a moment, she had to split her focus to track him.

But Irina wasn't one to be easily cornered. She drew her flames inward, channeling

them into her core as she prepared for his next move. If he wanted to get close, she'd make him fight for every step. Flames danced along her arms, surging outward in quick, precise bursts designed to box him in.

Astron's speed increased again, his movements almost blurring as he closed the gap. His hand shot forward, aiming for her shoulder this time, but she was ready. With a sharp motion, she cast another spell, a wall of fire erupting between them just as his strike connected with the edge of her barrier. The flames bent outward,

dispersing the impact but forcing him back once more.

"You're persistent," she said, her tone a mix of irritation and respect as she readied her

next move. "But don't think I'll let you off that easily."

Astron didn't reply to her taunt, his focus unwavering as he shifted his stance. Irina felt the weight of his concentration, and for a moment, she realized he was preparing

to strike harder and faster.

But she wasn't one to back down.

With a sharp motion, she extended her arms, her mana surging in two distinct directions. On one side, five fiery spears materialized in the air, their tips glowing molten red as they hovered, ready to strike. On the other, her flames began to coil and twist like a living creature, forming into a whip of concentrated fire that lashed

outward with crackling energy.

[School of Emberheart: Ember Spear VolleyJ

[School of Emberheart: Whip of Infernoj

Irina's movements were seamless as she directed both spells simultaneously, her whip

slicing through the air toward Astron's chest while the spears launched forward in rapid succession. Each spear tore through the air with unerring speed, forcing Astron

to respond.

His reaction was immediate. Dropping his center of gravity, he moved like a predator -a tiger stalking its prey. His form was low, his body fluid and efficient as he weaved through the incoming spears. The fiery whip lashed toward him, but he ducked and rolled, narrowly avoiding the searing heat as he repositioned himself.

Irina's eyes narrowed. 'He's faster than before!

Astron's speed had doubled, his figure blurring as he darted forward. It was unmistakably a skill-one that amplified his already impressive agility. But Irina didn't panic. Instead, she smirked, her mana flaring even brighter.

'So you're going all in, huh? Then let's see how you handle this.' Astron closed the gap in an instant, appearing right in front of her with his hand poised to strike. But Irina's flames surged to life again, her whip snapping back to guard her flank while her barrier spell shimmered into existence between them.

At the same time, the spears Astron had dodged earlier suddenly reversed direction, twisting midair and flying toward him from behind. The shift was almost imperceptible, but Irina's telekinesis proficiency allowed her to manipulate the trajectory with precision. The fiery projectiles shot toward him with deadly accuracy, catching him in a pincer attack.

Astron's sharp eyes flicked to the spears, his instincts warning him of the incoming

danger. But it was too late to fully evade.

One spear grazed his shoulder, leaving a faint burn. Another singed his leg as he twisted to avoid a more direct hit. The others slammed into the ground near him, creating bursts of flame that forced him to retreat once again.

But, he did something different.

THUD!

His palm rushed forward as it aimed through Irina's body.