

H. Academy 681

Chapter 681 151.3 - Let me see your strength

Astron's palm shot forward, cutting through the searing heat and directly toward Irina's body. His movements were decisive, his eyes locked onto her with a

determination that ignored the burns on his shoulder and leg. His singular focus on the offensive sent a clear message: he wasn't backing down.

Irina smirked, her flames burning brighter around her. "You're persistent, I'll give you that," she said, her voice steady despite the charged atmosphere. "But you should know by now-

The faint shimmer of her barrier came into view as his palm neared it.

"-this won't work," she finished confidently.

Astron's hand stopped just short of the barrier, his movements suddenly shifting. His sharp gaze flicked downward for a fraction of a second before his leg swept low in one fluid motion. The unexpected strike aimed directly at her balance point, catching her off guard.

Irina's smirk faltered slightly as she realized what he was doing. Her telekinesis was focused on compressing and bending the space around the barrier, creating an anchor that absorbed momentum from direct attacks. But that same precision also meant she couldn't shift her focus quickly enough to counter his leg sweep.

THUD!

Astron's leg connected, sweeping her feet out from under her. The sudden loss of balance caused her to stumble, the carefully compressed space of her barrier shifting awkwardly as she instinctively tried to reorient herself.

"Damn it," she muttered, catching herself just before she hit the ground by flaring her flames outward for stability. Her eyes snapped up to meet his, blazing with both irritation and grudging respect.

Astron stepped back, his stance balanced and ready. "Barriers are great for stopping direct attacks," he said calmly, "but they don't help much if you can't stay on your

feet.""

His hand was right before her face, shimmering. The exchange just now, had already made it evident.

This fight.

Irina lost.

Irina let out a slow breath, her flames dimming slightly as she lowered her hands. Her gaze remained locked onto Astron's, his hand still hovering near her face, the faint shimmer of his mana a silent declaration of victory.

She straightened, brushing off the lingering heat around her shoulders, and gave a wry smile. "Alright," she said, her tone calm but edged with reluctant acceptance. "You got me,"

There was no need for useless pride-Astron had acted decisively, exploiting her weakness with precision. As much as it stung, she couldn't deny that he'd earned this

win.

Irina's thoughts turned inward, analyzing the exchange. Her barrier, while strong, had an inherent limitation: its focus. Compressing psions to bend space required pinpoint accuracy and control, but that precision also made it difficult to shift the focal point quickly. Even with her immense telekinetic proficiency, moving the barrier's focus mid-battle remained a challenge.

'It's still a new technique,' she thought, her flames flickering faintly in response to her frustration. 'I haven't had enough time to refine it-especially against someone like him.'

Her gaze softened slightly as she glanced at Astron, his stance still poised but without arrogance. She could tell he wasn't gloating; he was simply acknowledging the result of the duel. That alone eased the sting of her loss-slightly.

"You exploited the weakness perfectly," she admitted, rolling her shoulders as her mana settled. "My barrier's strong, but it's not invincible. I can't move the focal point fast enough to counter something like that. At least... not yet."

Astron lowered his hand, his expression neutral but carrying a faint glimmer of respect. "You're already miles ahead with it," he said evenly. "The technique itself is incredible. It just needs more time."

Irina tilted her head, studying him. "You figured it out mid-fight, didn't you?"

He gave a small nod. "It wasn't hard to notice the way you shifted focus. The compression is flawless, but there's a slight delay when you transition. That's the only opening-and even then, it's small."

'Small, but he exploited it perfectly,' Irina thought, her respect for his analytical skills growing despite herself. She folded her arms, the corner of her lips twitching into a faint smirk. "You're really something.... Not bad...."

Astron tilted his head slightly. "Neither are you. That technique is something I'd rather not face once you perfect it."

The compliment caught her off guard, and for a moment, she didn't know how to respond. She shifted her weight, hiding her reaction behind a casual shrug. "Give me a little time, and you won't be able to exploit that opening again."

"Is that so?"

"Then, let's try again."

The faint shimmer of the arena's restorative formation activated, bathing Astron in a soft, golden glow. The burns on his body faded in an instant, his skin knitting back to its original state as if the damage had never occurred. Irina's eyes flicked to the light briefly, noting the same effect on her own residual strain, though hers had been far less significant.

The system had determined the exchange was over, and with that, it reset the field. It was one of the reasons they could keep pushing each other like this-injuries and fatigue were temporary, allowing them to test their limits without fear of long-term consequences.

Astron rolled his shoulder experimentally, flexing his fingers as if testing the restoration. "Impressive setup," he remarked, his tone calm as he glanced at the glowing formations embedded in the walls. "No wonder you're used to fighting at full

force."

Irina folded her arms, her flames flickering faintly around her. "It's convenient," she admitted, though her tone carried an edge of pride. "But don't think the system's doing all the work. You still have to handle the heat when it's on."

Astron's lips twitched faintly at her quip, his sharp eyes studying her for a moment before nodding. "Fair enough," he said. Then his stance shifted slightly, more relaxed but no less focused. "If you're ready, then so am I."

Irina raised an eyebrow, her own smirk widening. "You're not backing out of this one, huh?"

"There's no reason to," Astron replied smoothly, his voice carrying a quiet confidence. "Fighting you pushes me as much as it does you. And it's not like I need to hold back.

just because you're getting stronger."

Irina's flames flared brighter, her excitement rising at his words. There was something gratifying about hearing him acknowledge her growth, even if he said it so matter-of-factly. She let her arms drop, her stance widening slightly as she channeled her mana once more.

"Good," she said, her voice laced with challenge. "Because I don't plan on losing this

time."

Astron's response was a slight tilt of his head, the smirk in his eyes deepening, somehow she could see it, as his aura flared to life around him. "Then let's see what

you've got."

The air between them grew charged again, the energy of the arena responding to their rising mana. Flames crackled along Irina's arms, coiling like serpents, while Astron's presence sharpened, his movements already hinting at his readiness to

strike.

Neither hesitated.

And then Irina moved first, her flames surging outward in a fiery wave as she cast a barrage of searing spears, each one aimed with precision.

Astron darted forward, weaving through the assault with practiced ease. His speed had increased again, and Irina noted the subtle adjustments in his movements. 'He's already improving,' she thought, her respect for his adaptability growing even as her resolve hardened. 'But I'm not done yet!

With a flick of her wrist, she redirected the spears mid-flight, her telekinesis bending their trajectories to cut off his escape. At the same time, she summoned a wall of flames to block his advance, forcing him to shift his approach.

Astron didn't falter. His movements were fluid, almost instinctive, as he shifted his weight and countered with a sudden burst of mana, propelling himself into an unpredictable trajectory. He aimed for her flank this time, his hand already poised to

strike.

But Irina was ready.

Her barrier shimmered into existence, not as a single point of defense but as a flowing, adaptive shield that moved with her. She had learned from their last exchange, and this time, her telekinesis allowed her to counter his speed more effectively.

"Not bad," Astron remarked, his voice calm even as his strike met the edge of her

barrier.

"Still think you've got me figured out?" Irina shot back, her flames roaring as she pressed forward.

Their fight intensified, the room pulsing with heat and energy as their spells and

strikes collided in a seamless blend of offense and defense. For both of them, this wasn't just a spar- it was a test, a challenge to see who could adapt faster, strike harder, and push themselves further.

And neither had any intention of holding back.

The arena was a battlefield of scorched floors and lingering mana, the air thick with the heat of flames and the tension of unyielding combat. Three hours had passed since the duel began, and neither Irina nor Astron showed any sign of backing down. Irina's flames burned fiercely around her, though they flickered more unevenly now. Her breathing was labored, and beads of sweat dripped down her face, dampening strands of her fiery red hair that clung to her skin. Blood trickled from a shallow cut on her arm, the result of Astron's relentless offensive, and her once-pristine sparring attire bore scorch marks and tears.

Across from her, Astron stood, his figure shadowed by the faint glow of mana still emanating from his body. Though his stance remained composed, his condition was no less telling. His clothes were tattered, singed at the edges with streaks of soot and blood where her flames had found their mark. His calm breathing belied the strain of their prolonged battle, but the gleam in his eyes showed no sign of fatigue-only

focus.

Irina wiped the back of her hand across her brow, smearing a streak of ash. Her lips

twitched into a faint smirk despite her exhaustion. "You're not making this easy," she said, her voice hoarse but steady.

"Wouldn't want to disappoint you," Astron replied evenly, his tone calm but edged with quiet resolve. He shifted his weight slightly, his muscles tense and ready for the next exchange.

Both combatants remained still for a moment, their gazes locked as they assessed each other. The silence was heavy, the only sounds were the faint crackle of dying flames and the steady rhythm of their breathing.

"You've improved," Astron said at last, his eyes narrowing slightly as he studied her.

"Even when you're tired, your control hasn't slipped."

Irina chuckled faintly, though it was laced with exhaustion. "You're not so bad yourself," she admitted, rolling her shoulders despite the ache that settled in her

muscles. "But you're starting to look a little ragged. Are you sure you're not running out of steam?"

Astron glanced down at his torn sleeves, the faint sheen of blood visible beneath the fabric. He raised an eyebrow, the ghost of a smirk tugging at his lips. "You could say I've had worse," he said, his tone dry.

Irina's smirk widened, though it was tempered by the fatigue pulling at her features.

"Is that so?"

She stepped forward, flames flaring to life once more around her arms. Despite the strain in her body, her mana surged, the familiar heat rekindling her resolve. If Astron

thought he could outlast her, she was determined to prove him wrong.

"Then a final fight?" "Indeed. A final fight."

Chapter 682 151.4 - Let me see your strength

"Then a final fight?"

"Indeed. A final fight."

The arena felt like a furnace, the heat of Irina's flames mixing with the oppressive energy radiating from both combatants. Despite the exhaustion weighing heavily on them, the anticipation of one final clash rekindled their resolve.

Irina raised her arms, flames coiling tightly around her wrists, crackling with raw intensity. This fight had tested her in ways she hadn't expected. Astron's relentless speed and adaptability had forced her to push the boundaries of her control, her multitasking skills, and even her creativity.

"This isn't just about winning,' she thought, her eyes narrowing. 'It's about becoming better.'

Astron's stance shifted slightly, his sharp gaze locked on her movements. While his agility gave him an edge, he'd come to respect Irina's ability to adapt. Her quick thinking and sheer power had kept him on his toes, and every mistake he'd made had been met with punishing retaliation. Fighting her was an entirely different challenge from anything he'd faced before-a constant tug-of-war between precision and survival.

"Don't hold back," Irina said, her voice carrying over the heat between them. "If this is the last round, I don't want any excuses.""

Astron shook his head, his body lowering slightly as his aura sharpened. "I will not."

The air between them seemed to pause for a brief moment before they moved simultaneously.

Irina unleashed a wave of fire, her mana surging to its peak as she cast multiple spells at once. Flaming spears materialized in the air, shooting forward in rapid succession, while her flames twisted into a whip that lashed toward Astron with pinpoint accuracy.

But Irina had anticipated this. She split her focus, using her telekinesis to redirect the flaming spears mid-flight. They arced through the air, targeting Astron's blind spots. He reacted instantly, his instincts honed from the experience of fighting many stronger opponents. A burst of mana propelled him sideways, narrowly avoiding the first spear. Another grazed his shoulder, leaving a faint burn, but he didn't falter. His eyes flickered toward Irina, his determination unwavering.

'She's gotten faster,' he thought, a flicker of respect passing through his mind. 'But that just means I need to be sharper'

Astron changed his approach, feinting left before surging right. His sudden burst of

speed caught Irina off guard, and for a moment, he was within striking distance. His hand shot forward, aiming for her side, but her barrier shimmered to life, absorbing the blow and dispersing the impact.

Irina smirked, her flames roaring as she countered. Her whip lashed out, forcing Astron to retreat, while the redirected spears boxed him in. She could feel the strain of maintaining so many spells at once, but she refused to let it show.

Astron dropped low, his body twisting as he launched himself upward in a spiraling motion. The force of his movement created a small shockwave that disrupted her

whip, giving him just enough space to close in again.

This time, Irina didn't back down. She compressed the flames around her, creating a focused explosion that forced Astron to adjust mid-air. He landed with a roll, but she was already on him, her flames surging forward in a relentless assault.

The clash continued, both of them adapting and countering in real-time. For Irina, it was an opportunity to push her multitasking to its limits, balancing offense and defense with precise control. For Astron, it was a lesson in patience and timing, finding openings in her overwhelming power without getting caught in her traps. The minutes stretched on, each exchange leaving its mark on the arena and their bodies. Sweat dripped from their faces, mingling with the faint streaks of blood from their earlier wounds. Despite their exhaustion, neither showed any sign of giving up.

The intensity in the arena reached a fever pitch, the scorched air thick with mana and the heat of Irina's relentless flames. Both Astron and Irina were moving at the edge of their limits, each exchange pushing them closer to exhaustion. Yet, Irina's mind raced, weaving together a new strategy mid-fight.

She knew the risks of her most powerful spell-a devastating area attack capable of obliterating enemies like Astron in a single blow. But the memory of its destructive potential, from her duel against Seraphina, gave her pause. She'd nearly lost control then, and the thought of doing so now was unthinkable.

At that time, many instructors had all pushed their energy into the formations around the tournament arena. This time, her mother could possibly intervene, but there was no need to take such a risk.

Especially she wouldn't put Astron's life into such a danger.

And she was sure that, he was doing the same. Even though he was using nearly all of his power, she was %100 sure that Astron was not fighting to kill her.

That was why.....

'This isn't the time for brute force,' she thought, her eyes narrowing as Astron closed in once more. 'I need precision. Speed. And control'

With that resolve, Irina shifted her approach.

--Spellcasting Speed and Multitasking

Her flames surged outward, but instead of channeling her mana into a single massive spell, she cast multiple smaller ones in rapid succession.

School of Emberheart: Flickerburst Volley]

A flurry of fireballs materialized around her, each one a smaller, more concentrated burst of flame. They shot toward Astron in unpredictable arcs, forcing him to weave and dodge in a chaotic rhythm. At the same time, Irina kept her body enchanted with a layer of flame armor, reinforcing her defenses and enhancing her agility. Astron darted through the barrage, his movements fluid and calculated. His sharp gaze never left her, even as he twisted and turned to avoid the onslaught. Despite her rapid casting, he managed to close the gap again, his footwork precise as he prepared to strike.

But Irina wasn't done.

--Multitasking with Telekinesis

As Astron moved, Irina's telekinesis flared to life. The fiery projectiles she'd cast didn't dissipate after missing their target. Instead, she redirected them mid-flight, bending their trajectories to target Astron's blind spots. Each adjustment was subtle, almost imperceptible, but it forced him to constantly shift his focus.

Astron's eyes narrowed as he realized her intent. He launched himself upward, using a burst of mana to propel himself above the redirected flames. But Irina had already anticipated the move.

She extended her hand, flames coiling into a focused whip that lashed upward to meet him mid-air. At the same time, her telekinesis compressed the space around the whip,

amplifying its speed and precision.

SWIRL!

Astron twisted his body, narrowly avoiding the strike. As he landed, his feet barely touched the ground before he surged forward again, his speed nearly overwhelming.

--Experimenting with Teleportation

Irina's mana pulsed as she tried something new-something she'd been testing throughout the fight. Her flames flickered around her feet, forming a circular sigil

beneath her.

[School of Irina: Ember Step]

In an instant, her body flickered out of view, reappearing a short distance away just as

Astron's strike passed through where she'd been standing. The teleportation wasn't seamless-it required immense focus and drained her mana significantly-but it

worked. For a moment, she had the upper hand.

WARP!

Astron's eyes twitched slightly at her sudden displacement, but he adjusted quickly, his body pivoting toward her new position. Irina used the brief open:

another volley of spells.

--Relentless Adaptation

SWOOSH!

to launch

Astron evaded the incoming attacks, his movements becoming sharper, more

deliberate. His figure blurred as he closed the distance again, his body low and his hand already poised to strike. Irina summoned another barrier to deflect his blow, but this time, Astron didn't follow through with a direct attack. Instead, he feinted, spinning low and aiming a sweeping kick at her legs.

Irina jumped, her flame-coated body propelling her higher than a normal leap would allow. She retaliated with a downward slash of her flame whip, forcing Astron to leap

to the side.

SWOOSH! SWOOSH!

As Astron leaped sideways to evade Irina's flaming whip, his body twisted mid-motion,

and his hand reached for the sleek black bow slung across his back. With a fluid motion, he nocked and loosed five mana-infused arrows in quick succession. Each arrow cut through the air with lethal precision, forcing Irina to react.

Her whip dissipated in a burst of flames as she refocused, her hands raising to conjure

a defensive spell. With a quick gesture, a barrier of flickering fire formed before her, intercepting the incoming arrows. Each impact sent sparks flying, the force of the collisions pushing her back slightly.

Astron landed gracefully, his bow lowering as he stabilized his stance, his sharp eyes watching her every move. But Irina was no longer content to stay on the defensive.

Her flames flared brighter as she shifted tactics, her body moving with renewed determination. "Enough of this," she muttered, igniting her hands in a surge of fiery mana. With a decisive motion, she clapped them together, and a massive wave of fire roared forward, rolling across the arena like a tidal wave of heat and light.

School of Irina: Inferno Breathj

The flames surged toward Astron, but Irina wasn't done. Her eyes gleamed with intent as she anticipated his response. 'You'll use that bracelet again, won't you?' she thought, already preparing her next move. With a quick motion, she conjured five fire

spears, hurling them directly into the path of her flames.

Her strategy was clear; use the overwhelming wave of fire to obscure his vision, hiding

the true threat of the spears behind it.

BOOM!

Astron's bracelet shimmered faintly as he raised his arm. A sudden shockwave erupted

17'55"

outward, propelling the flames away from him in an explosive burst of energy. Just as

Irina expected.

SWIRL! SWIRL!

But as the flames cleared, his sharp eyes immediately caught the gleam of the

incoming spears. Despite their sudden appearance, he moved with precision, narrowly evading each one. His movements were almost instinctive as if he could see

through her ploy.

'How does he-?' Irina's thoughts were interrupted as Astron leaped into the air, twisting gracefully to avoid the final spear. She smirked faintly, already manipulating the trajectory of the spears with her telekinesis. They curved mid-flight, homing in on

him once more.

At the same time, she began casting another spell, her mana surging as a complex sigil formed beneath her feet.

But Astron wasn't idle. From mid-air, his hand moved swiftly, drawing four daggers

from his belt. With a flick of his wrist, he hurled them toward her in rapid succession,

each one imbued with a faint glimmer of mana.

SWOOSH!

The daggers flew toward her with incredible speed, forcing her to abandon her

casting. Irina growled under her breath, raising her hand to blast the projectiles away. The first three daggers were deflected in quick bursts of flame, each one detonating in a harmless flash of light as they collided with her magic.

But as she prepared to deal with the fourth, her eyes widened in realization.

The final "dagger" wasn't a dagger at all-it was a vial.

The glass container shimmered faintly as it arced toward her, its contents swirling

with a volatile mixture of mana. Irina's heart skipped a beat as the implications hit

her.

'A trap!'

It was a trap, and she had fallen for it right away.

She couldn't keep it at all.

Chapter 683 152.1 - Don't Escape

'A trap!'

Irina's flames surged outward as she blasted the incoming vial, her instincts guiding her actions faster than her reasoning could catch up. The glass shattered mid-air with a sharp crack, releasing a pressurized burst of dense, swirling gas.

The arena filled with the substance instantly, a strange pressure assaulting her eyes and lungs. Irina recoiled, coughing as the gas clouded her vision. Her mind raced, cursing her decision to act on instinct rather than taking a moment to assess the vial. In the chaos of battle, judgment was often a luxury she couldn't afford, but this time, it had cost her.

'Damn it-what is this stuff?!'

The pressure around her eyes grew unbearable for a fleeting second before her flames flared defensively, dispersing the gas slightly. But the damage was already done. Her vision blurred, her balance wavered, and for that split second, she was vulnerable. As she blinked rapidly to clear her sight, Irina felt the air shift around her-a warning that sent her instincts screaming. Her eyes snapped forward, and the first thing she saw was Astron. His figure blurred as he closed the distance in an instant, his hand already mid-motion.

His fist aimed directly at her stomach.

Irina gritted her teeth, bracing herself for the impact. Her flames surged around her body reflexively, forming a thin layer of defensive heat. Even so, she knew the force of the strike would send her reeling.

But it never came.

Astron's fist stopped just shy of her midsection, the rush of displaced air brushing against her as he held his position. His stance was firm, his expression calm but resolute, as if he'd made his point.

Irina froze, her breathing shallow as she stared at him. For a moment, the gas, the heat, and the tension of the fight seemed to fade into the background, leaving only the two of them in the silence.

"You need to watch for traps," Astron said evenly, his voice carrying a faint edge of admonishment. He didn't step back immediately, his sharp gaze meeting hers, unflinching.

"Haaaah...Haaaah..."

Irina's flames flickered, the intensity around her diminishing slightly as her body relaxed involuntarily. She exhaled slowly, her mind catching up with the situation. There was no mockery in

his tone, no arrogance in his stance. His words were simple, almost matter-of-fact-a reminder of her mistake.

"That was a cheap trick," she muttered, her voice hoarse from the gas. "Haaaaah...." Astron raised an eyebrow but didn't respond immediately. Instead, he slowly lowered his hand, his posture relaxing. "Cheap," he said finally, his tone calm but pointed, "but effective."

And she didn't have much to say to that.

"Haaah...." Her breathing had yet to be adjusted, after all.

The heat of the arena lingered even after their clash had stilled, the roaring crowd now a distant hum in the backdrop of Irina's labored breaths. Her body felt heavy. The adrenaline that had carried her this far was fading, leaving exhaustion in its place. Her flames, once wild and relentless, flickered weakly around her as her mana reserves dwindled.

Astron remained where he stood, his chest rising and falling in rapid succession, sweat glistening on his skin. His once-pristine clothes were torn and singed, revealing glimpses of his pale, jade-like skin beneath. He looked as tired as she felt, but his composure remained unbroken, his sharp purple eyes watching her carefully.

'I can't'-Irina's thoughts stumbled as her vision blurred. Her legs gave out beneath her, and before she could react, she was falling forward.

Warmth met her instead of the hard, unforgiving ground. Astron's hands caught her with startling gentleness, steadying her as her weight collapsed against him. His arms wrapped securely around her, one hand resting lightly against her back, the other supporting her shoulder. The firmness of his hold contrasted with the unexpected tenderness in his touch.

For a moment, she couldn't move, her head resting against his chest. The sound of his heartbeat, strong and rhythmic despite the strain, filled her ears. Her breathing slowed, syncing almost instinctively with the rise and fall of his chest.

'He's... so close.'

The realization hit her like another wave of heat. Her senses, dulled by fatigue, sharpened all at once. She felt the dampness of his sweat against her cheek, the faint tremor in his arms as he held her steady. His scent-lavender, familiar, and grounding -wrapped around her like a comforting haze.

"Why does he smell like this? How does anyone smell this good after all of that?"

Her gaze drifted upward, and her breath caught. His face was impossibly close, his purple eyes luminous like a night sky scattered with stars. They weren't just looking at her-they were seeing her, drawing her in with an intensity that made her heart

stutter.

"Those eyes... they're unfair"

Her gaze wandered unbidden, tracing the elegant lines of his face. His features, so refined they bordered on ethereal, were framed by strands of dark hair sticking to his damp forehead. She felt her cheeks warm despite the exhaustion weighing on her

limbs.

'Even his skin,' she thought, her eyes catching on the exposed planes of his chest, pale yet flushed with exertion. It seemed to glow in the dim light of the arena, smooth and unmarred despite the battle they'd just fought. 'It's not fair. He looks like... like a painting. Like he doesn't belong here.'

Astron's voice broke through her spiraling thoughts, soft and even. "You overdid it."

She flinched slightly at the sound, her body stiffening against his. "Haaah... haaaah..." She couldn't form words, couldn't even muster the energy to push herself away.

Or rather, she did not want to use her remaining strength to push him away, but rather for something else.

Her chest heaved as she struggled to steady her breathing, the heat of their battle still lingering in the air between them. Her exhaustion weighed heavily, her limbs refusing to move. Yet, beneath the haze of fatigue, a flicker of defiance burned bright.

'I can't let him think he's won. Not like this.

Her eyes narrowed, a mischievous glint sparking to life even as she leaned against him. Astron stood motionless, supporting her without complaint, his calm composure unshaken despite the strain of their fight.

'Perfect. He doesn't see it coming.'

Silently, she called upon the faint remnants of her mana, focusing what little strength she had left into a subtle burst of telekinesis. Her energy gathered near Astron's heels, a nearly imperceptible ripple in the air. The force wasn't enough to harm him-just enough to shift his balance.

Before he could react, the ground seemed to shift beneath him. His sharp eyes widened for the briefest moment as the telekinetic force swept his feet out from under him. Caught off-guard, his stance faltered, and his body tipped backward.

Irina smirked, satisfaction blooming despite her fatigue. But as gravity took hold, she realized too late that she hadn't accounted for her own precarious position. The momentum of her push carried her forward, and before she could stop herself, she

tumbled along with him.

"Ah-!"

Astron hit the ground with a muted thud, the impact cushioned by his reflexive use of mana. Irina landed unceremoniously on top of him, her hands splayed against his chest to steady herself. For a moment, neither of them moved, the silence filled only by the faint crackle of dying flames and their ragged breaths.

'Oh no.'

Her heart skipped a beat as she took in the scene-the proximity, the heat radiating from his skin, the unmistakable firmness of his chest beneath her hands. His lavender scent enveloped her, sharper now, mingling with the faint saltiness of sweat. She blinked, her gaze darting up to meet his.

Astron's face was mere inches from hers, his sharp features framed by his tousled hair.

His purple eyes, wide with surprise, locked onto hers.

For the first time, the unshakable calm that defined him seemed to falter, replaced by a flicker of bewilderment.

"This... is bad."

It was not good..... Really not good....

Because she felt her heart which was tired just before beating again.

THUMP! THUMP!

And much faster than she was expecting.

Her chest tightened, her breath caught somewhere between exhaustion and something else entirely. Her eyes refused to stray, locked onto Astron's face with a force she couldn't explain.

His features seemed impossibly clear, as though the chaos of the fight and the lingering exhaustion had sharpened her focus to a razor's edge. Her gaze traced the curve of his nose, the sharp line of his jaw, and the elegant angles of his cheekbones. His long, dark lashes framed those vivid, cosmos-like purple eyes, still fixed on her with an intensity that sent a shiver through her.

'Why is he like this?' she thought, the rhythm of her heartbeat deafening in her ears. 'Why does he always look... perfect?'

Her eyes betrayed her, wandering further. They lingered on the strong, defined lines of his brows, the way they knit together faintly in confusion or... something else. And then, as though drawn by some invisible pull, her gaze fell to his lips.

Soft, curved, and just slightly parted, they seemed to beckon her closer, though he hadn't moved a muscle. Her pulse quickened, and her breathing hitched, each thud of

her heart a heavy drumbeat echoing in her chest.

THUMP. THUMP. 'Stop,' her mind whispered weakly, but her body didn't listen. The heat from his skin

seemed to seep into hers, the faint scent of lavender wrapping around her like a spell.

'I shouldn't...'

Her hands trembled where they rested against his chest, her fingers brushing lightly

against the firm warmth beneath them. He hadn't said a word, hadn't moved to push her away, but his silence only made the moment heavier.

Her exhaustion blurred the lines between thought and action. Before she could stop herself, she leaned forward.

It wasn't a grand motion, more a subtle, instinctive tilt of her head. The distance

between them closed in an instant, her gaze flickering back to his lips even as her mind screamed at her to stop.

'This is insane. I shouldn't. But... I can't...'

Her lips hovered just a breath away from his, her heart pounding like a wild drum in

her chest. The world around them faded-the heat of the arena, the distant roar of the

crowd, the lingering aches of their battle-all of it melted away, leaving only the two of them in silence.

Astron's eyes widened slightly, his breath brushing against her lips as he finally spoke, his voice soft and low. "Irina..."

Her name on his lips sent a shiver down her spine, breaking the fragile stillness. Her

face flushed a deeper shade of crimson, and for a fleeting moment, she thought she

might pull away.

But she didn't.

"....Don't escape...."

Maybe these two words were said towards herself, or towards him....

It didn't matter....

She moved closer instead.

Chapter 684 152.2 Don't Escape

"....Don't escape...."

Irina's breath mingled with his, the faint lavender scent of his presence intoxicating and grounding her all at once. Her body moved with a will of its own, every ounce of hesitation burning away as she closed the gap, her lips brushing against his with a softness that sent a shiver down her spine.

For a moment, everything stopped-the echoes of the arena, the weight of exhaustion, the rational whispers in her mind-all silenced by the warmth of the kiss.

Her lips pressed fully against his now, tentative but firm as if she feared he might vanish if she let go. Her hands, trembling moments before, steadied against his chest, feeling the solid strength beneath her touch. His heartbeat, steady and strong, thrummed against her palms, matching the frantic rhythm of her own.

It had been so long-too long-since they had shared something like this. Her mind flickered back to that night under the moonlight, where the stillness of the world had allowed them a fleeting moment of vulnerability. She hadn't touched him like this since then, hadn't allowed herself to feel this close.

But now? Now, her restraint crumbled.

'Was I always this weak?' she thought, though the question lacked any real venom. Instead, it carried a raw honesty she rarely let herself feel. 'Or... did I just miss this? Miss him?'

Her body betrayed her further, leaning into him as though seeking to erase the distance that had lingered between them for weeks. It wasn't just the fight, the adrenaline, or the heat of the moment- this was something deeper, something she hadn't let herself acknowledge until now.

'I was craving this,' she realized, the admission crashing into her like

him.'

wave. 'Craving

Astron didn't pull away. His body tensed at first, as though caught off guard, but he didn't stop her. Slowly, hesitantly, his hand rose, fingers brushing against her back. The touch was light, almost as if he feared breaking the fragile moment, but it sent a spark through her all the same.

Her kiss deepened slightly, her desperation breaking through the careful mask she usually wore. This wasn't about pride or power or even winning-it was about something far more vulnerable. And though she'd never admit it, not even to herself, she didn't want this to end.

When she finally pulled back, just barely, her breath came in soft, uneven gasps. Her face flushed, her lips tingling from the kiss. She didn't dare meet his gaze at first, fearing what she might see there. But when her eyes flicked upward, she found him looking at her, his purple eyes wide and unreadable.

For the first time in what felt like forever, Astron seemed genuinely caught off guard. His calm, unshakable demeanor had cracked, and beneath it, she saw something raw- something real.

She swallowed hard, her cheeks burning as she realized the weight of what she'd just done. "Don't..." she whispered, cutting him off, though she wasn't sure what she was asking for. "Just... don't say anything."

Astron's eyes narrowed slightly, the faint flutter of his dark lashes betraying a fleeting hesitation before he composed himself once again. Irina could see the shift, subtle but unmistakable-the moment he began to regain his control, steadying the cracks in his usually unshakable demeanor.

'He's getting a hold of himself,' she thought, a pang of annoyance and something else entirely tugging at her chest. Just like he always does."

But even as the calm returned to his features, his piercing purple eyes locked onto hers once more. The intensity in them made her stomach flip, drawing her in as if the entire world had faded again. They weren't just looking at her; they were seeing through her, leaving her utterly captivated.

Her breath hitched as her hands began to move, her body acting without permission. One hand slid down from where it had rested, her palm pressing gently against his chest. Beneath her fingers, she felt the unyielding strength of his muscles, firm and robust in a way they hadn't been before.

"This is different,' she realized, her thoughts swirling. 'He wasn't like this back then... during the finals.'

Her memory flickered to their previous battles, how he had moved with speed and precision but lacked the sheer physical power she now felt beneath her touch. His body had changed, and improved, just like his strength and speed. And yet, as her fingers lingered, her thoughts drifted to another possibility.

'Or is it me?' she wondered, her cheeks warming further. Am I... noticing him more because... I've fallen for him?'

The thought made her heart stutter, but she pushed it aside, letting herself focus on the moment instead. Her other hand moved almost instinctively, fingers tracing the line of his neck with a delicate touch. His skin, smooth and warm beneath her fingertips, was damp with the sweat of their intense fight, yet it only added to the strange allure he seemed to exude.

She swallowed hard, her fingers swirling gently against his skin, collecting a small droplet of sweat. Without thinking, she brought it to her lips, tasting it with a soft flick of her tongue. The saltiness

mixed with something she couldn't quite place-a lingering trace of lavender, perhaps, or maybe just the intoxicating effect he seemed to have on her senses.

Astron's reaction was immediate, though subtle. His eyes twitched, the faintest flicker of tension passing through his otherwise composed expression.

"What are you doing?" He asked.

Astron's question lingered in the air, his steady, low tone laced with a tension Irina couldn't ignore.

But instead of embarrassment clawing at her, she felt something else entirely-a spark of exhilaration. The moment his composure cracked, however subtly, a sense of triumph flooded her. The thrill of seeing him caught off guard outweighed the mortifying reality of her actions.

'So even he can't completely keep his cool,' she thought, her confidence rekindling as she leaned in slightly, her voice barely above a whisper. "What's wrong? Not so

composed?"

The faint tremble in Astron's body didn't escape her notice. Barely perceptible, but it was there, a small sign that she'd managed to unsettle him in a way few-if any-ever could. Her confidence surged at the realization, and when his sharp purple gaze locked onto hers, his words came with an edge of dry provocation.

'Finally,' she thought, her lips curving into a sly smile. Finally, I'm winning.

"I wasn't expecting you to have such... preferences."

Irina didn't rise to the bait. Instead, she tilted her head slightly, her smirk unfaltering

as she leaned closer. "So what if I have?" she murmured, her voice low and teasing. "Do

you have a problem with it?"

Before he could answer, she moved again. Her head dipped, her forehead brushing lightly against his as her face lowered toward his neck. The faint scent of lavender grew stronger, mingling with the warm saltiness of sweat. Her lips brushed against his skin, soft and deliberate, before she buried her face fully against his neck.

"I don't hear you complaining," she added, her words muffled against his skin. Astron's breath hitched, a sound so quiet that anyone else might have missed it. But Irina was too close, too attuned to him now to miss even the faintest reaction. Her hands shifted slightly, one still pressed against his chest, the other moving to rest lightly on his shoulder as her lips found his neck.

She kissed him there, softly at first, her lips testing the sensation before her tongue flicked out, tasting him. The warmth of his skin mingled with the odd, lingering sweetness of lavender, and for a fleeting moment, her mind stuttered at the absurdity

of it all.

'Lavender?' she thought, her brow furrowing as she lingered against him. 'Why does he taste like lavender? That doesn't even make sense.'

The realization made her pause, but only for a moment. The taste wasn't unpleasant-

strange, yes, but it was undeniably him, and the sheer intimacy of the act sent another jolt of adrenaline through her. She pressed closer, letting herself sink into the moment, the weight of the arena and the world outside falling away.

To be frank, she also doesn't have such preferences, and this action is something that she had never thought that she would do. And in fact, if someone were to say that she would do something, she would even feel repulsed by that.

Irina's thoughts spiraled as she lingered against his neck, the taste of lavender and salt. on her tongue, her senses heightened to an intensity she hadn't expected.

"To be honest, I don't even have preferences like this, she thought, a flicker of self-awareness breaking through the haze. "This isn't me. This is something I'd normally hate. If someone told me I'd do something like this, I'd laugh. No, I'd be

disgusted!

But disgust wasn't here. Not even close. Instead, she found herself leaning into the moment, enjoying it in a way that felt entirely out of character. The intimacy, the warmth of his skin, the strange allure of the lavender-like taste-it was all so foreign

yet so... good.

'His sweat doesn't taste bad. No, it's not just that-it's almost like it's... pleasant?' She frowned slightly against his neck, her thoughts racing. 'Wait. Can sweat even taste good? Or is that something unique to him?'

Her fingers brushed against his chest again, tracing the lines of his muscles as her mind wandered. 'It could be related to whatever's changed about him recently,' she reasoned, her thoughts drifting to his sharper features, the way his skin seemed to glow even after their battle. His body's different. His aura's different. He's more... everything. Handsome. Refined. Even charming-damn it.'

Her lips hovered over his neck, but her mind kept pulling her into deeper musings. 'Could that have affected this, too? His sweat? That would... actually make sense!

A bold idea began to form, fueled by her curiosity and the lingering heat of their

closeness.

"What if?" she murmured aloud, her voice barely audible against his skin.

"What if?" Astron repeated, his voice steady but low.

SWOOSH!

But then, before she could even think she acted.

Since her mind played a certain scene...

BITE!

And then she bit him on his neck.

Chapter 685 152.3 - Don't Escape

Irina's teeth sank into his neck, her mind a whirlwind of sensations-heat, adrenaline, and a strange, intoxicating sweetness that filled her senses. For a fleeting moment, she reveled in the taste, the peculiar blend of lavender and salt that seemed to permeate his very being. But then, like a spark catching on dry tinder, another thought ignited in her mind.

A memory.

It hit her like a gust of wind, dragging her out of the moment and into a vivid scene she thought she had buried deep.

That time.

Irina's heart pounded as the image flashed before her-Maya, her fangs buried in Astron's neck, drinking deeply as though she owned him. Irina had been there, her body still and breath shallow, pretending to be unconscious. She had heard every word, seen every moment.

"That witch," Irina thought, her bite on Astron's neck tightening instinctively. The image burned in her mind-Maya clinging to him, her face buried against his skin, her crimson eyes filled with hunger and desperation. She could still remember the faint sound of Maya's trembling apologies, the quiet murmurs exchanged between them.

She hadn't known why she hadn't stirred back then, why she had remained still, her chest tight with something she couldn't name. But now, as the memory played out in her mind, she felt the

smoldering embers of that emotion flare to life.

Anger. Possessiveness. Something primal.

'Me,' she thought, the word surging in her mind like a declaration. Her lips pressed harder against Astron's neck, her fangs sinking deeper as if to erase the memory of Maya's mark on him. 'Only me. Only I get to do this.'

The fire inside her burned brighter, consuming her thoughts. She could see it so vividly-the way Maya had looked at him, the way he had allowed her, even comforted her. That scene, that intimacy, felt like a trespass, a violation of something that should belong solely to her.

She growled softly against his skin, her hands gripping his shoulders with a force that made him tense beneath her. A flicker of hesitation passed through her mind-what was she doing? But I was quickly drowned out by the torrent of emotions she couldn't suppress.

'She touched him like this. She tasted him like this!

Her mind conjured the image again, unbidden, and she felt her body flush with frustration. No. She wouldn't allow that. She wouldn't let anyone else have this connection with him, this closeness.

Astron stirred slightly, his voice low and steady despite the sharp sting of her bite. "Irina," he murmured, his tone calm but questioning.

His voice only fueled the fire. She pulled back, her lips stained faintly red, her breathing uneven. Her eyes locked onto his, her own burning with a mix of anger and something she didn't dare name.

"You let her," she said, her voice trembling with emotion. "You let her bite you, didn't you?"

Astron's purple eyes narrowed slightly, confusion flickering across his expression. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb," Irina snapped, her hands still gripping his shoulders. "That night. I saw it. I heard it. You let her drink your blood"

He didn't deny it, his gaze steady as he watched her. His silence only stoked the flames in her chest.

"Why?" she demanded, her voice rising, "Why did you let her? Why do you let her get so close to you?"

Astron sighed softly, his calm demeanor infuriatingly unshaken. "She needed it," he said simply. "It was the only way to help her regain control.

Irina's teeth clenched, her anger bubbling over. "And what about me?" she asked, her voice quieter but no less intense. "What about what I need?"

For a moment, there was silence between them, the weight of her words hanging in the air. Her breathing was ragged, her emotions raw and unfiltered.

Astron moved suddenly, his body a blur of strength and precision. Before Irina could process it, he was upright, his hands steadying her as he leaned back against the wall of the training room. Irina found herself still straddling him, her body perched on his lap, her heart hammering in her chest.

The shift in their positions left her breathless. Astron's height, even in this seated arrangement, gave him a natural advantage, his face slightly above hers, his piercing purple eyes locked onto her with an intensity that made her stomach twist. The weight of his presence was undeniable, and she hated how much it thrilled her.

For a moment, neither of them spoke, the silence crackling with unspoken tension. Irina's gaze flickered up to meet his, her breaths shallow and uneven.

"What do you think you're doing here?" she asked, her voice sharper than she intended, a desperate attempt to break the silence and regain some semblance of control.

"No. That is the wrong question. Astron replied. "You.....What do you think, I am doing here? For what reason did I come here?"

Astron's expression remained unreadable, his eyes steady as they bore into hers. He didn't answer, and the quiet stretched on, pressing down on her like a tangible force.

Irina's jaw tightened, her frustration mounting. She wouldn't let him have the upper hand, not like this. "You're here for the reward," she said, her voice tinged with defiance. "The bet. That's why you came, isn't it? To get what you wanted. Access to the armory"

Her words hung in the air, the accusation biting. For a moment, Astron didn't respond, and she thought she had him cornered. But then, his expression shifted-a flicker of rare, unmistakable anger crossing his face.

His gaze narrowed, sharp and cutting, and his voice, when he spoke, was low and deliberate. "Do you really think I'm here just because of that?"

Irina froze, the weight of his words and the intensity of his tone catching her off guard. She opened her mouth to retort, but no words came. Her mind raced, but her body betrayed her, her cheeks flushing as she felt the raw emotion behind his question.

Astron's hands were still on her, one steadying her back, the other resting lightly at her side. His grip was firm, but not restraining a balance of control and reassurance that only made her heart race

more.

"You're not being honest," he continued, his gaze piercing through her. "If I were here only for a reward, I'd have taken it and left. Do you think I'd waste my time coming here just for a spar if that were all I cared about?"

Irina's lips parted as she tried to summon a response, but the truth he spoke left her momentarily speechless. He wasn't wrong. If all he wanted was the reward, he wouldn't have bothered coming here, wouldn't have bothered sparring with her, wouldn't have lingered like this.

But acknowledging that truth meant confronting her own feelings-feelings she wasn't ready to

name.

"I..." she started, her voice faltering. She looked up at him, her eyes locking onto his again. The depth of his gaze, the quiet anger, the unyielding resolve-it was too much, too overwhelming.

Her hands, which had been braced against his chest, trembled slightly. "Then why?"

Astron scoffed softly, the sound low and almost amused. "Isn't that obvious?" he asked, his tone carrying a mix of exasperation and certainty.

Irina's eyes snapped to his, searching for meaning behind his words. His purple eyes, narrowed with a flicker of rare emotion, caught her off guard. There was something in them she hadn't seen before -a glint that made her breath hitch, her chest tightening.

Astron continued, his voice steady and unwavering. "If I didn't want to be here, I wouldn't be here! The simplicity of his words carried an undeniable weight. Irina felt her heart warm, the quiet sincerity in his tone wrapping around her like a comforting embrace. A shiver ran through her body, and she couldn't stop the small tremble in her hands as they clutched his shirt.

Her gaze drifted to the faint mark on his neck-the mark she had made. Her fingers moved on their own, brushing over it softly, tracing the indentation her bite had left. Her lips tingled at the memory, and she couldn't resist the pull drawing her closer.

Slowly, she leaned in, her breath brushing against his skin. Her lips pressed against his neck once more, this time not in a fit of anger or possessiveness but with deliberate purpose. She kissed the mark, her lips lingering, before she sucked on it with an intensity that surprised even herself. She poured everything into the action-her confusion, her longing, her desire to hear those words again. "Say that again," she whispered against his skin, her voice trembling yet firm. Astron's response wasn't immediate. Instead, his hand moved to her head, his fingers threading through her fiery red hair with a gentleness that made her knees weak. He stroked her hair in slow, deliberate motions, his touch grounding her even as it sent a fresh wave of warmth coursing through

her.

Then, he shifted slightly, lowering his head until his chin rested lightly on the crown of her head. The move trapped her against him, his presence overwhelming in the best possible way. She felt cocooned, surrounded by his scent, his strength, his steady calm.

And then he spoke, his voice low and rich, the words a quiet whistle that sent shivers down her spine.

"I want to be here!"

The moment the words reached her ears, her body reacted on its own. She trembled, the raw sincerity in his tone hitting her like a tidal wave. Her grip on his shirt tightened, and her breathing grew shallow as she struggled to process the weight of his admission.

It wasn't just the words-it was the way he said them. Rare, so rare, for him to speak with such

openness. Astron, who always carried himself with a calm detachment, now allowed her to see something deeper, something real.

Irina buried her face against his neck, unable to meet his gaze. Her lips brushed against his skin again, softer this time, almost reverent.

"You're really unfair, you know that?"

Chapter 686 153.1 - Sleep here tonight

"You're really unfair, you know that?"

Irina froze, her lips still brushing against his neck as a sound she hadn't expected reached her ears.

A chuckle.

It was low at first, soft, like the faintest ripple across calm waters, but it grew richer, resonating from his chest as though it came from somewhere deep and untouched. The warmth of it rolled over her, and for a moment, she couldn't move, couldn't breathe.

Astron chuckled.

Her mind reeled. She had seen him smile before-once under the moonlight, a quiet, subtle thing that had stolen her breath. And again, more recently, with this new, sharper face of his, a fleeting moment that had unsettled her in ways she still couldn't name. But a chuckle?

Never. Not once.

It wasn't the cold, calculated laugh she might have expected from someone like him. No, this was raw, unfiltered, like it had slipped past his usual control. There was no mask here, no detachment-just pure, unguarded emotion, and it echoed in her ears like a melody she didn't know she needed to hear.

Her breath hitched, her body still pressed against his as the sound settled between them.

Irina froze as Astron's hand moved with deliberate precision, his fingers brushing along her jawline before settling gently beneath her chin. The touch was firm but not forceful, carrying just enough weight to guide her, and her breath hitched as his voice, deep and authoritative, broke the silence. "Raise your head."

The words echoed in her ears, the tone commanding yet laced with an undeniable warmth. It sent a shiver down her spine, her body obeying before her mind could catch up. Slowly, Astron lifted her chin, his touch steady, his movements deliberate, until her gaze was locked with his.

His face had shifted completely, the chuckle from moments ago replaced by a seriousness that made her heart skip. The intensity in his eyes, those star-like purple orbs, left no room for her to look away. Yet, even with his stern expression, she noticed the faint curl of his lips-the slightest upward tilt that betrayed his composed demeanor.

Irina's chest tightened. How could he do that? How could he transition so effortlessly from lighthearted to commanding, from open to unreadable, and still hold her entirely in his grasp? It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair at all, and yet, she couldn't stop the warmth spreading through her chest. His thumb grazed her bottom lip, a feather-light touch that left her trembling. Her lips parted instinctively, her breath catching as she felt his fingers trace the soft curve with a tenderness that made her chest ache. Her heart pounded in her ears, drowning out all other sound.

And then he moved.

Astron lowered his head slowly, his eyes never leaving hers. The moment stretched between them, the anticipation thick and electric, until finally, his lips brushed against hers. The touch was light at first, testing, but it carried a quiet intensity that left her breathless.

He kissed her, and this time, it was him who initiated it.

Irina's eyes fluttered shut as the kiss deepened, her body leaning into his as though drawn by some invisible force. His lips were soft, yet the pressure he applied was firm, his movements slow and deliberate, giving her no choice but to match his rhythm. Her hands, still trembling, slid up to his shoulders, gripping tightly as if afraid he might pull away.

But he didn't. Astron's other hand moved to the small of her back, drawing her closer against him. The heat of his body seeped into hers, and she felt her mind go blank, overwhelmed by the sheer

presence of him. His lips were both demanding and gentle, coaxing a response from her that she couldn't have held back even if she wanted to.

It wasn't just a kiss. It was a statement-a claim, a reassurance, and an unspoken promise all at once. Irina felt it in the way his hand steadied her, in the way his lips lingered, in the way he held her as though nothing else mattered.

When he finally pulled back, his movements slow and measured, she found herself breathless, her eyes opening to meet his once more. His face was close, his gaze locked onto hers, and she felt the weight of his presence all over again.

"That," Astron murmured, his voice softer now, though no less certain. "Is the result of your own actions."

Irina stared at him, her chest rising and falling with uneven breaths. Words eluded her, her mind struggling to process the meaning behind his actions, his words. But one thing was clear-he wasn't hiding anymore.

And neither could she.

At the same time.....

She couldn't hold it back any longer.

Her chest heaved as she stared at him, the weight of everything her life, her family, her responsibilities-crashing down like an avalanche. The Emberheart Mansion, the family name, the endless expectations, the suffocating legacy. Her mother's sharp words, the demands of the world around her, the unrelenting pressure of her Awakened life.

All of it could burn.

They could all burn.

Because in this moment, none of that mattered. Nothing else mattered.

"It's you," she whispered, her voice low but trembling with emotion. Her fiery red eyes bore into his, glowing with a heat that no flame could match. "Only you!"

Her slender hands rose, cupping his face with a reverence that belied the storm of emotions raging inside her. The heat of her palms seeped into his skin, her fingers trembling ever so slightly as they brushed against the sharp lines of his jaw. Her body was already hot, worn out from the fight, her energy drained and aching for rest. But none of it mattered. Not now.

"Come here," she murmured, her voice husky, commanding yet vulnerable all at once.

And then she kissed him.

It wasn't gentle or hesitant. It was fierce, unrelenting, born from a place of raw desire and possessiveness. Her lips crashed against his with a hunger she hadn't allowed herself to feel until now. This wasn't a kiss of innocent affection or restrained longing. This was something deeper, something primal—a need to claim him, to make it known that he was hers.

Astron's body stiffened for a fraction of a second, but only just. His composure melted as her fervor enveloped him, and his arms instinctively tightened around her, pulling her closer. The heat between them grew, their bodies pressed together as though trying to erase the space that still dared to exist. Irina's fingers slid from his face to tangle in his dark hair, gripping tightly as if afraid he might pull away. Her lips moved against his with a fervor that matched the fire coursing through her veins. She tilted her head, deepening the kiss, pouring every ounce of her frustration, her passion, her need

into it.

This wasn't about expectations or the weight of the world anymore. This was about her. About him. About the undeniable connection that had simmered between them for far too long.

Astron responded in kind, his own restraint slipping as he matched her intensity. His hand moved from her back to her waist, his grip firm but not rough, grounding her in the whirlwind of emotion. The other hand slid to her neck, his thumb brushing against her pulse, which beat wildly beneath his touch.

Time seemed to freeze, the world outside the training room fading into oblivion. There were no whispers of duty, no chains of obligation. Just the two of them were lost in the fire they had ignited. Irina pulled back just enough to catch her breath, her forehead resting against his as she panted

softly. Her eyes, bright and unyielding, locked onto his, her voice trembling with determination and desire.

"I don't care about them," she said, her tone raw and fierce. "Not the mansion, not my family, not the world. None of it matters. You hear me? It's you, bastard. It is you."

She didn't give him a chance to respond, surging forward to claim his lips once more. This time, her kiss was slower, but no less intense, her actions deliberate as if carving her feelings into him with every movement. Her body burned with exhaustion and desire, but she didn't care. She couldn't

care.

Because in this moment, he was hers. And nothing else mattered.

Irina's breath was ragged as she pulled back again, just barely enough to speak, her lips still brushing against his. Her fiery red eyes blazed with unrestrained passion, her exhaustion forgotten, her focus entirely on the man in front of her.

Her body burned hotter than ever, her Emberheart lineage igniting a heat that seeped into every fiber of her being. It wasn't just the lingering adrenaline from their spar or the weight of her feelings -it was the sheer presence of him, the way his hands steadied her, the way his lips answered her

every movement with equal intensity.

Slowly, deliberately, she shifted, her knees sliding against the ground as she climbed over him. Her thighs straddled his hips, her body rising until she knelt above him, her gaze bearing down on him with an intensity that made his calm exterior falter for a moment. Her hands pressed against his chest, her fingers curling into the damp fabric of his training attire.

Their lips met again, and this time, the kiss was wild, consuming, filled with an urgency she couldn't name. Her body moved instinctively, leaning into him as though she could imprint herself on him entirely. Her hands slid lower, brushing against the planes of his chest, her touch firm yet trembling with the intensity of her emotions.

Her fingers curled around the edge of his shirt, tugging at it as a low growl of frustration escaped her lips. The fabric clung to his skin, damp and taut, and it felt like an obstacle-something that didn't

belong there.

"This," she murmured against his lips, her voice husky and demanding, "is in the way

Astron's gaze met hers, his purple eyes darkening with an intensity that matched her own. He didn't speak, but the slight curl of his lips and the way his hands moved to rest on her waist told her he

wasn't going to stop her.

Her fingers gripped the hem of his shirt, her movements hurried yet deliberate. She leaned back just enough to tug at the fabric, her breath catching as more of his skin was revealed. The pale, jade-like glow of his body beneath the dim lighting of the training room made her heart race faster. Her hands traced the newly exposed skin, her touch lingering as if trying to memorize every detail. Astron's hands tightened on her waist, his touch grounding her even as it sent shivers through her. "Irina," he murmured, his voice low, a quiet warning that was betrayed by the faint hitch in his

breath.

But she didn't care. Not about his hesitation, not about anything else. Her lips descended on his again, silencing whatever he might have said, her fingers splaying against the bare expanse of his chest. Her touch was more confident now, emboldened by the fire coursing through her veins.

She pulled back briefly, her lips swollen and her breathing uneven as she looked down at him. Her hair fell around her face in wild waves, her eyes fierce and unrelenting. Her hands slid lower, brushing over the hard lines of his abdomen, her touch exploring, possessive.

"You.....you are going to sleep here today"

Comment.

Chapter 687 153.2 - Sleep here tonight

Irina's voice, though slightly breathless, carried a resolute determination as she leaned closer to him, her hands still pressed against the bare warmth of his chest.

"You... you are going to sleep here today," she said, her words steady despite the faint tremble in her lips.

Astron's sharp purple eyes locked onto hers, his expression shifting. For a brief

moment, she saw a flicker of surprise, but it was gone as quickly as it came, replaced by a narrowed gaze. His lips curved ever so slightly, the faintest smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"Really?" he asked, his voice low, a subtle challenge laced in his tone.

Irina's fingers tightened instinctively against his chest as her own resolve solidified. "Yes," she said firmly, her fiery gaze meeting his unflinchingly. Her heart raced, but she didn't back down. Not this time.

Astron's silence stretched for a moment, his narrowed eyes studying her. She could feel the weight of his gaze, the sharpness of his presence as if he were dissecting her words, her intent, her very soul. But she didn't waver.

She had already decided.

Her mind raced, but her resolve didn't falter. At this moment, nothing else mattered- not the judgment of her family, not her mother's sharp words, not even her own doubts. She'd already crossed the line, already boarded the ship. And now that she was here, she wasn't going to backtrack. She couldn't.

"I've made up my mind," she continued, her voice growing steadier. Her hands slid slightly upward, tracing the hard planes of his chest as if to anchor her conviction. "I don't care what anyone else thinks. Not my family, not the world. Right now, I just... I want you here."

Astron's gaze softened slightly, though his piercing intensity remained. He leaned his head back against the wall, exhaling quietly. "And why do you think I'd stay?" he asked, though his voice lacked the edge it usually carried. It was a question, but not a refusal.

Irina tilted her head, her hair falling over one shoulder as her hands pressed more firmly against him. Her lips curved slightly, her fiery red eyes glowing with renewed determination. "Because I won't let you leave."

Her words hung in the air, bold and unrelenting, her confidence born from the fire burning inside her. She wasn't sure where this courage had come from-perhaps from exhaustion, from desire, or simply from the fact that she couldn't let this moment slip through her fingers. Tomorrow, she knew she might falter, hesitate, or overthink. But tonight? Tonight, she couldn't let him walk away.

Astron's smirk widened slightly, though the faint glint in his eyes betrayed a flicker of something deeper-amusement, curiosity, or perhaps something he wouldn't name. "You're not going to let me, huh?" he said, his tone dipping into something teasing yet still carrying a weight of seriousness.

"No," Irina replied, her voice unwavering. Her hands slid up to cup his face, her thumbs brushing against the sharp lines of his jaw. Her lips hovered just inches from his as she whispered, "You're staying. Here. With me."

Astron's expression shifted again, his smirk fading into something softer, something almost unreadable. His hands moved from her waist, one trailing up her back to rest gently between her shoulder blades, the other brushing against her arm as if grounding her in her own certainty.

"You're sure about this?" he asked, his voice quieter now, though the weight of his question carried no less intensity.

"Yes," she answered without hesitation, her gaze locking onto his. "I'm sure."

For a moment, neither of them moved, the weight of her decision hanging in the charged air between them. And then, slowly, deliberately, Astron's hand slid up to rest lightly against the back of her head, his fingers threading through her hair.

"Then I'll stay," he said simply, his voice carrying no doubt, no hesitation.

Irina exhaled, relief and anticipation flooding her all at once. She leaned forward, her lips brushing against his once more, her kiss a mixture of gratitude and the unspoken emotions she couldn't yet put into words. Tonight, nothing else mattered. Nothing except this.

Astron's sharp eyes softened as a rare smile curved his lips, a quiet warmth that seemed to melt the usual intensity of his features. He leaned forward, his breath brushing over Irina's skin, sending a shiver down her spine. His voice, low and rich, carried a calm certainty as he spoke.

"To be frank," he murmured, his lips close enough that she could feel the faint vibration of his words, "I don't really have anything to do. For the first time in a while, it feels like I have time-time to do whatever I want."

Irina's chest tightened, her heart pounding as his words sank in. There was something unguarded about his tone, something that made her breath hitch. Astron wasn't one to indulge, to linger, and yet now... now he was choosing this. Choosing her. "And now that I've made a promise with you," he continued, his voice quieter, more deliberate, "I'll comply with whatever you want."

Irina blinked, her cheeks heating as she stared into his eyes. There was no teasing in his expression, no challenge-just sincerity. It left her breathless, and unsteady. Her lips parted, the words tumbling out before she could stop them.

"The time has started?" she asked, her voice trembling despite her attempt to sound composed.

Astron nodded, the faintest hint of amusement flickering in his gaze. But before she could respond, she narrowed her eyes playfully, biting her lip. "But I made my plans for the whole week..."

He tilted his head slightly, a faint smirk pulling at the corner of his mouth. "Then let's say this is an extension," he replied smoothly.

Before she could process his words, Astron shifted. His arms wrapped around her, pulling her closer, his chin resting lightly on her right shoulder. The warmth of his body against hers was immediate, enveloping her in a way that made her breath catch. She froze for a moment, her heart pounding as his embrace tightened just enough to make her feel secure without overwhelming her.

For some reason, being hugged like this... it made her feel something she hadn't expected.

Safe.

She let her hands drift down, resting against his chest as she leaned into him, her cheek brushing against his. The weight of his presence, the steadiness of his breath, the way his arms anchored her-it was unlike anything she'd ever experienced. Her thoughts wandered, unbidden, to her life at the Emberheart Mansion. She'd always been surrounded by people-servants, advisors, knights, and her ever-watchful family. She was the heir of one of the most powerful families in the world, the daughter of one of the strongest Awakened beings alive. She was constantly in the spotlight, held to impossibly high standards, bearing the weight of endless expectations.

And yet, for all her strength, all her power, she had never felt this safe.

It was strange, almost unnerving, how this one person could strip away the layers of her armor so effortlessly. In his embrace, the world outside the training room faded into insignificance. The weight of her lineage, her responsibilities, her mother's expectations-all of it seemed to dissolve, leaving only this moment.

This man.

Her lips parted slightly as the realization hit her like a quiet storm, the words forming in her mind as if they'd been there all along: No matter what happens, this guy will

come to my side. He'll be with me. Always.

Was this a delusion?

Was this really how he thought?

She didn't know completely.

But so what?

Did she really need to know what he was thinking all the time? Wasn't she allowed to

dream on her own as well?

And most importantly...

The way he was acting right now....Wasn't he showing the biggest change for her

sake....Then, isn't this enough?

Irina's fingers curled against Astron's chest, her lips parting as her voice slipped out in a barely audible whisper. "You... can you make another promise?" Her words hung in the air, trembling with the weight of her unspoken fears and desires. She sought affirmation, something tangible to hold onto, yet the moment the question left her lips, doubt clawed at her. Her mind flashed to the vision she'd seen before the memory that didn't belong to her but lingered like a haunting specter.

Estelle.

Astron had made a promise to her once, hadn't he? A promise he couldn't keep. The thought sent a pang through Irina's chest. What if asking for another promise dredged up those painful memories? What if it brought something heavy, something that destroyed this fragile moment she'd fought so hard to create?

Her breath hitched, her thoughts spiraling. What if asking ruins everything? The question she wanted to ask pressed against her lips, a desperate plea to know:

Will you stay by my side, no matter what happens? But she swallowed it, forcing it back. The words lingered unspoken, too risky to voice.

Astron tilted his head slightly, his sharp gaze narrowing as he looked at her, "What kind of promise?" he asked, his voice calm but tinged with curiosity. Irina froze, her heart racing. She met his eyes for a fleeting moment before shaking her head quickly, her voice tight. "Nevermind. Just... stay here." Astron's expression softened, but only for a moment. Then, without warning, he moved. His arms tightened around her, and before she could react, he scooped her up, lifting her effortlessly from the ground.

"Wha-?" Irina gasped, her arms instinctively wrapping around his neck as she found herself cradled against him in a perfect princess carry.

Astron's eyes gleamed with a hint of teasing as he looked down at her. "It appears that

your mind is no longer working," he said smoothly, though his tone carried a rare warmth. "You must be tired."

Irina's face flushed, her lips parting in protest, but the words died in her throat. The

closeness, the strength in his arms, the quiet certainty in his voice-it was all too

much.

He began walking, his steps slow and deliberate, his hold on her steady and firm. Her hands tightened slightly around his neck, her breath hitching as she felt the steady

rhythm of his movements.

"Put me down," she managed to mumble, though her voice lacked conviction.

Astron glanced at her briefly, his lips curving in the faintest smirk. "No."

Irina huffed, her face burying against his chest as she muttered, "You're insufferable."

"Perhaps," Astron replied, his voice carrying a teasing lilt. "But I'm insufferable and carrying you. So, I'd say I have the upper hand."

Her chest tightened, but this time it wasn't frustration-it was something softer,

warmer. Despite her protests, despite her embarrassment, she didn't want him to put

her down. The steady beat of his heart beneath her cheek, the strength of his arms holding her securely-it felt safe.

For the first time in a long while, Irina let herself relax completely, surrendering to the moment. Whatever questions lingered in her mind, whatever fears she hadn't voiced,

they could wait.

Because right now, she didn't need promises. She didn't need words.

She had him.

Chapter 688 154.1 - Morning

The warmth of the sun filtered through the heavy drapes of Irina's room, casting soft golden hues over the sprawling expanse of her bed. Slowly, her eyes fluttered open, the haze of sleep lingering in her mind. For a moment, she simply lay there, her body sinking into the plush mattress, her senses attuned to the unfamiliar stillness of the morning.

"The sun's up, she thought, blinking slowly as she turned her head toward the window. The soft light streaming in confirmed what her drowsy mind had already noted. It was late-far later than she usually allowed herself to wake, especially here, at the

Emberheart Mansion.

Her chest tightened slightly at the realization, a flicker of unease rising. Normally, her mornings were rigid, dictated by an unspoken schedule her mother ensured she followed. Early training, meetings, appearances-it was all part of being the Emberheart heir. She was used to waking before the sun, her body conditioned to a life of constant expectations.

But now? The morning stretched before her, silent and undisturbed.

Irina shifted slightly, her eyes scanning the empty expanse of her bed. It was massive, fit for the heir of one of the most powerful families, but also coldly empty-just as it always was. And yet, something felt different. The solitude of her mornings, normally oppressive, felt softer somehow, less suffocating.

Her hand drifted to the space beside her, brushing against the untouched sheets. She frowned slightly, the memories of last night beginning to seep back into her thoughts. The intensity of the spar, the closeness, the quiet vulnerability they'd shared-it all came rushing back, leaving her heart racing as if she were still caught in that moment. "Ah...."

The realization hit her like a thunderclap.

Irina sat frozen, her hand still resting on the empty space beside her, her face rapidly reddening as fragments of last night's events played back in her mind with crystal clarity. The intensity of the spar, the closeness afterward, the boldness of her words- her actions.

"Ah..." she whispered, her voice barely audible as the weight of her behavior settled on her shoulders. Her lips parted, her breath quickening as the memory of her declaration echoed in her mind.

"You... you are going to sleep here today."

Her face burned, her hands flying up to cover her cheeks as the words reverberated like a gong inside her head. What had she been thinking? Had she even been thinking at all?

"I basically offered to sleep with him..." she muttered to herself, her voice trembling with disbelief. "What was I even doing?"

Her mind spiraled, replaying the moment she had spoken with such determination, as though she'd planned it out. But she hadn't planned it-hadn't even truly thought it through. She had acted on impulse, driven by emotion, exhaustion, and something far deeper than she cared to name.

For some reason, her actions last night felt like the reckless abandon of someone drunk, someone who had abandoned all sense of logic. But now, in the bright light of morning, the logical part of her-the one that had been conspicuously absent the night before-had returned with a vengeance.

'I basically told him to stay with me,' she thought, her heart pounding as her fingers clutched the edge of the blanket. And not just stay. I meant...

Her mind faltered, her cheeks growing impossibly hotter as the implications fully hit her. Did I really mean that? On one hand, she wasn't entirely opposed to the idea-not with him, not anymore. But on the other...

"That wasn't what I meant," she whispered, as if saying it aloud might somehow absolve her. Her hands tightened into fists, gripping the sheets as her chest heaved. "I didn't mean it like that."

Her thoughts tumbled further into chaos, and an alarming question began to creep into her mind. One that she didn't want to ask, but couldn't ignore.

"Did we... really do it?" The words slipped from her lips before she could stop them, her voice barely above a whisper. Her memory was hazy, scattered by the haze of exhaustion and emotion. She couldn't remember anything specific-no vivid images, no sensations that confirmed or denied the thought.

But the fact that she couldn't remember made her chest tighten even more.

'Did that guy take advantage of me... and then leave?' The thought struck her, a wave of indignation and panic flooding her chest. But it was quickly followed by doubt. Astron wasn't like that. Was he?

Her brow furrowed, and she shook her head quickly. No. He wouldn't. I would know. I would remember something like that... wouldn't I?

Her lips pressed into a thin line as she stared down at her hands, her thoughts a swirling storm of uncertainty. She could still feel the faint warmth of his presence from last night, the way he had held her, carried her, spoken to her. None of it felt like someone who would take advantage of her.

And yet...

Her hands flew up to her face again, covering it as she groaned softly. "This is a nightmare," she muttered, her voice muffled behind her palms. "I'm losing my mind."

Irina shot upright, her movements frantic as her heart raced in her chest. Her eyes darted to the empty space beside her, scanning the bed with a mix of hope and dread. The faint scent of lavender lingered in the air, unmistakable and frustratingly familiar. Her gaze landed on the pillow next to hers—a slight indentation, a small but undeniable mark where someone's head had rested.

Her cheeks flushed an even deeper red as her memory flickered.

"Ah... blood!" she gasped, her voice trembling with panic. Her hands immediately went to the sheets, pulling and tugging at the fabric as she searched for any trace of crimson. Her heart pounded louder with each passing second, the thought burning in her mind: If we really did it, there'd be blood, right?

Her fingers moved quickly, checking every fold and crease. But no matter how thoroughly she searched, the sheets remained pristine. There was no blood. No proof. She froze, her breath hitching as she tried to calm herself. "Okay, so... maybe nothing happened," she murmured, though her voice betrayed her lingering doubt. "Maybe " The sound of the door opening cut through her thoughts like a blade. She turned sharply, her eyes wide as Astron stepped into the room, his presence immediately

filling the space.

"What blood?" he asked, his voice calm, but his raised eyebrows betrayed his curiosity. His sharp purple eyes flicked to her, then to the disheveled state of the bed. Irina's mouth opened, then closed again as she took in the sight of him. He looked as composed as ever, his dark hair slightly damp, and in his hands, he carried two cups, both steaming faintly. The scent of freshly brewed tea wafted through the room, mingling with the lavender she already associated with him.

"Ah..." was all she managed, her voice barely a squeak. Her face burned with embarrassment, and she couldn't bring herself to meet his gaze.

Astron's smirk was subtle but unmistakable as he stepped closer, placing one of the

cups on the bedside table before holding the other in his hand. "I take it you're...

awake now?" he asked, his tone laced with amusement.

Irina's hands flew up to her face, covering it as she groaned softly. "This is... you-what are you doing here?" she stammered, her voice muffled by her palms. She peeked out between her fingers, her gaze darting between him and the tea.

Astron tilted his head slightly, his expression unchanging. "You told me to stay," he

said simply, his tone calm and matter-of-fact.

Irina's stomach flipped, the memory of her bold declaration hitting her like a wave. "You... you are going to sleep here today."

Her hands fell to her lap as she looked at him, her face a vivid shade of red. "I didn't mean it like that!" she blurted out, the words tumbling out before she could stop them.

Astron raised an eyebrow, his smirk growing slightly as he leaned against the wall, the tea still in his hand. "Didn't you?" he asked, his voice steady but teasing. Irina glared at him, her embarrassment turning into indignation. "No! I mean... yes? I mean..." She groaned again, grabbing the pillow and burying her face in it. "Ugh! You're impossible!"

Astron chuckled softly, the sound low and warm as he placed the second cup of tea on the other side of the bed. "Good morning to you too, Irina," he said, his voice carrying the faintest hint of amusement.

Irina peeked out from behind the pillow, her fiery gaze meeting his. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?" she muttered, her voice dripping with accusation.

Astron shrugged, his smirk softening into something more genuine. "You make it hard not to," he admitted, his tone light.

Her lips twitched, and she hated how her heart skipped at his words. She grabbed the cup nearest to her, holding it between her hands as if the warmth might calm her racing nerves. "Fine," she mumbled, her eyes darting away. "But next time, don't... don't just walk in without knocking."

Chapter 689 154.2 - Morning

The warmth of the tea in Irina's hands grounded her as she sat across from Astron. The quiet weight of his presence filled the room, the faint scent of lavender mixing with the rich aroma of the tea. Her initial embarrassment began to ebb, replaced by a lingering curiosity and a slow, creeping sense of recollection.

As she took another sip, her gaze flickered to Astron. His composure, his calm demeanor-it was impossible to ignore. And with it, fragments of last night began to piece themselves together in her mind.

She remembered the moment he had carried her, the strength in his arms as he navigated the hallways of the Emberheart. Mansion. She'd been too exhausted to protest, her body too drained to do much more than rest against him. Yet, even in her haze of fatigue, she'd felt safe-an unfamiliar but comforting feeling.

'He laid me on the bed,' she thought, her cheeks warming slightly at the memory. His movements had been deliberate, careful. He'd settled her onto the plush mattress as though she were something fragile, his touch gentle as he ensured she was comfortable.

Her fingers tightened around the cup as the next memory surfaced.

They hadn't simply parted ways after that. Astron had stayed, sitting beside her on the edge of the bed. She could still remember the faint glimmer of exhaustion in his usually sharp eyes, the subtle tension in his posture that spoke of a day spent pushing himself to his limits.

And yet, even with that fatigue, he'd remained.

They had talked for a while-soft, quiet words that seemed to fill the room with a rare sense of peace. His hand had brushed against hers at one point, a light, fleeting touch that had sent warmth spiraling through her. And then, as if drawn by some unspoken understanding, he'd allowed himself to relax, his head tilting back against the headboard.

'I was tired, she thought, her lips curving into a faint smile. 'So was he'

Her mind wandered further, recalling the subtle touches that had followed. Nothing overt, nothing rushed-just light caresses, hands brushing over shoulders and arms, the occasional shift of weight as they sat close to one another. She hadn't felt the usual tension of expectation or propriety. There had been no urgency, no demand for more. Just the quiet comfort of his presence, his scent, his warmth.

Her exhaustion had eventually caught up with her, pulling her into sleep before she could even realize it. The last thing she remembered before drifting off was the sound of his steady breathing beside her, a rhythm that had lulled her into rest. And then there was him-beside her, resting as well. The memory of his still figure lying beside her returned, and her chest tightened at the thought. Astron, who rarely let his guard down, had chosen to stay. Not because he had to, but because he wanted

to.

Her gaze flickered to him now, sitting across from her, his hand resting casually on his cup. His expression remained composed, but she could see the faint lines of weariness in his features, the subtle reminder of the toll yesterday had taken on both of them.

Irina's gaze lingered on Astron, his composed demeanor a stark contrast to the whirlwind of thoughts still swirling in her mind. She took a small sip of her tea, the warmth soothing but doing little to quiet the growing sense of unease mixed with an odd comfort she didn't want to name.

"Are you still tired?" she asked suddenly, her voice softer than she intended. Astron looked at her, his sharp purple eyes narrowing slightly before he shook his head. "No," he replied, his tone even. "Not anymore. I slept quite well, in fact."

Irina blinked, momentarily caught off guard by the simplicity of his answer. "You... slept well?" she echoed, her cheeks heating slightly as she thought back to the quiet moments they had shared before sleep overtook her.

Her thoughts turned inward. I slept well too, she realized, a fact that surprised her. It had been a deep, peaceful sleep, unbroken by the usual tension or unease she often carried. Was it because of that bastard? Or was I just that tired?

She didn't know. But the thought made her heart twist slightly, a part of her reluctant to admit how much his presence might have helped.

Her lips parted as if to speak again, but then something struck her. Her expression shifted, her eyes widening slightly as she leaned forward. "Wait... what time is it?" she asked, her voice tinged with sudden urgency.

Astron raised an eyebrow, clearly amused by her shift in tone. "It's 10 A.M.," he said smoothly, his lips curving into a faint smirk as he took another sip of his tea.

"Ten?" Irina repeated, her voice rising an octave as the weight of the time hit her. Her eyes widened further, and she sat upright, the blanket slipping off her shoulders. "Ten?!"

Panic surged through her. If my mother finds out about this...

She could almost hear the sharp tone of her mother's voice, the disapproving look in her eyes. It wasn't just about missing breakfast-it was about the principle of it. Her mother's strict rules left no room for negotiation or leniency. If something's time had passed, it had passed. There were no second chances.

And now, not only had Irina missed breakfast, but Astron had too. The two of them hadn't shown up, and if her mother found out why...

Her stomach twisted at the thought, but then-

RUMBLE.

Her face burned as her stomach growled loudly, betraying her hunger in the silence of the room. Irina froze, her cheeks turning an even deeper shade of red as she clutched her blanket tighter.

Astron's sharp gaze flickered to her. "Hungry?" he asked, his voice calm but laced with amusement.

Irina glared at him, though the effect was somewhat diminished by her flushed cheeks. "It's your fault," she muttered, her tone defensive. "If you hadn't..." Her voice trailed off as she realized she couldn't finish the sentence without incriminating herself further. Astron chuckled softly, the sound low and rich, sending a shiver down her spine. "If you hadn't told me to stay?" he teased, his tone light but unmistakably smug.

Irina groaned, burying her face in her hands as her stomach rumbled again, this time even louder. "Shut up," she mumbled, her voice muffled.

Astron didn't reply immediately, but when she peeked through her fingers, she saw him standing, his calm demeanor unchanged. "Come on," he said simply, holding out a hand. "Let's find something to eat."

She hesitated, her pride warring with the undeniable truth of her hunger. But as her stomach growled yet again, she sighed in defeat, reaching for his hand. "Fine," she muttered, her voice low. "But if my mother finds out..."

Astron's smirk deepened as he looked at her, his sharp gaze gleaming with amusement. "You weren't worried about your mother finding out when you were doing all that yesterday," he said smoothly, his tone laced with playful teasing. Irina scoffed, crossing her arms over her chest as she turned her head to the side, her fiery red hair cascading over her shoulder. "Imph," she retorted, her voice brimming with defiance. But the faint blush dusting her cheeks betrayed her composure, her

thoughts racing back to the night before.

Astron chuckled again, his voice low and rich. "Fine, fine," he said, raising his hands in mock surrender. "I'll make you breakfast. After all, you're the heir of the Emberheart family. It makes sense that you've never cooked for yourself."

Irina's eyes narrowed as she shot him a glare. "I could if I wanted to," she muttered, though the words lacked conviction. A faint memory flickered in her mind, pulling her attention away from her retort.

She remembered the time in Phantom's Land, a moment etched vividly in her mind. She, Astron, and Sylvie had been stranded there, left to fend for themselves. She and Sylvie, both entirely useless when it came to survival skills, had been completely at his mercy. Astron had been the one to gather ingredients, start the fire, and prepare their meals.

Her lips twitched into a faint smile despite herself as she recalled the way he had effortlessly managed everything, his calm demeanor never wavering. Both she and Sylvie had been ravenous, practically inhaling the food he'd made. His cooking had been far better than she'd expected-simple but delicious.

'It's been a while,' she thought, a flicker of anticipation rising in her chest. The memory of his cooking, the warmth of the meal, the quiet satisfaction of being cared

for-it all came rushing back.

Her gaze flickered back to Astron, who was already moving toward the door with that same unhurried confidence. The faint desire in her heart grew stronger, and before she could stop herself, she spoke up.

"Don't mess it up," she said, her tone sharper than she intended, though her blush betrayed her. "If it's as bad as your sparring skills, I'll throw it out."

Astron paused at the door, glancing over his shoulder with a faint smirk. "So you're saying my sparring was bad now?" he asked, his tone amused.

Irina huffed, crossing her arms again. "Just make the food," she said, her voice quieter this time, her blush deepening.

Astron didn't reply, his smirk lingering as he stepped through the door, leaving Irina

standing in her room. She watched him go, her arms still crossed as her blush

deepened.

"Stupid guy," she muttered under her breath, her gaze flickering to the bed before returning to the door. How does he always manage to get the last word without even

saying anything?

With a soft sigh, she moved toward her wardrobe, her thoughts drifting as she began to collect herself. If Astron was heading to the kitchen, it would give her some time to freshen up. She glanced down at herself, the faint sheen of sweat on her skin reminding her of last night's sparring match. The memory of their duel-the heat, the intensity, and everything that had followed-sent wave of warmth through her cheeks once more.

'I didn't even shower yesterday,' she realized, cringing slightly. Her competitive spirit had driven her to push herself to the limit during the spar, and afterward... well, everything else had happened.

She ran a hand through her fiery red hair, wincing at the slight tangle near the ends. It

felt wrong to let herself be so disheveled, especially now. Astron might have seen her at her most vulnerable yesterday, but that didn't mean she wanted to stay in that

state.

'I'll just take a quick shower,' she decided, her steps purposeful as she moved toward the bathroom.

Chapter 690 155.1 - Case of a breakfast

Meanwhile, Astron strolled into the Emberheart kitchen with his usual composed air, taking in the pristine countertops and sleek design. He wasn't surprised to see the space was immaculate-untouched, even. It was clear that no one here had ever truly cooked a meal.

'Figures, he thought. Considering the fact that, Irina was that kind of a girl, he could understand it.

'Hmm?'

Yet just then, to his surprise, he saw that the fridge was stocked. Fresh vegetables, neatly packaged cuts of meat, an array of sauces and spices-all of it was there, ready to be used. It was almost too

perfect, as though someone had gone out of their way to ensure it looked well-prepared, even if it had never been touched.

"This wasn't just stocked by her staff, he noted, a flicker of curiosity passing through his mind. His curl of mouth widened slightly as he began pulling out ingredients- eggs, bread, some fresh herbs, and a bit of cheese. It didn't matter why the fridge was stocked; what mattered was that he had the tools he needed.

As he moved efficiently through the kitchen, his thoughts wandered briefly back to Phantom's Land. The memory of Irina and Sylvie sitting uselessly by the fire as he prepared their meals brought a quiet chuckle to his lips. He could still remember Irina's defiant glare as she begrudgingly ate the food he'd made, clearly hating that she had to rely on him.

'She hated it then,' he thought, cracking an egg into a bowl with practiced ease. 'But I wonder if she'll admit she's looking forward to it now.'

He had been seeing quite a lot of amusing things recently, and it appeared that this one was one of those.

Back in her room, Irina stepped out of the shower, her hair damp and clinging lightly to her shoulders. The heat of the water had washed away the grime and tension from last night, leaving her feeling refreshed. She wrapped a towel around herself, pausing for a moment as she caught her reflection in the mirror.

Her cheeks were still faintly pink, though whether it was from the heat of the shower or the lingering embarrassment from earlier, she wasn't sure.

'He better not mess this up, she thought, her competitive streak flaring as she dried herself off and began getting dressed. The memory of Phantom's Land returned unbidden, and she found herself smiling faintly as she recalled the taste of the food Astron had made back then.

As Trina finished drying her hair and began getting dressed, a faint, tantalizing aroma

wafted into her room. Her movements stilled, her senses sharpening as the scent grew stronger. It was unmistakable-the scent of something cooking, something fresh and

warm.

Her brow furrowed slightly as she turned her head toward the partially open door. 'The door... I didn't close it?' she realized, her cheeks flushing slightly at her carelessness. But that thought was quickly overshadowed by recognition.

'Wait... this scent... isn't this...'

Her heart skipped a beat as the realization struck her. He's making-?Her mind raced to put a name to the dish.

'Fried herb patties.'

The simple, unassuming meal was something she rarely had the opportunity to enjoy. It was a dish loved by common folks-crispy and golden on the outside, with a savory filling of finely chopped herbs, spices, and a hint of melted cheese. It was hearty and unpretentious, the kind of food that didn't belong in high-end restaurants or the refined meals served at the academy.

Irina had tasted it only three times in her life, and each of those moments was etched deeply into her memory.

The first time was during a rare outing with "him" even before she had been admitted to the academy.

Irina remembered sneaking a bite of the street vendor's patties, her eyes widening at the explosion of flavor.

'Ah....'

And as those memories were brought back, she naturally remembered about a certain someone as well.

The second time was far more personal. She had been with "him", as well - certain someone from her childhood who had a knack for dragging her out of her comfort

zone.

They'd sneaked away to explore a bustling village market, and he had insisted on buying the patties for her. She could still remember the way he'd grinned at her as she reluctantly took the first bite, only to devour the rest in minutes. It was one of the few times she'd allowed herself to let go, to enjoy something without the weight of expectations pressing down on her.

The third and final time was shortly after his absence. She had been alone, wandering through the same market, hoping to find a taste of that fleeting happiness again. She'd bought the patties herself, but they hadn't tasted the same. The warmth, the laughter --it was missing. And though the flavor had been there, the memory left a bittersweet ache in her chest.

And now... now that same aroma was filling her senses once again, pulling her back through time.

Her breath hitched as she tightened the sash of her robe, and she stepped quickly toward the door. 'Really....This is driving me crazy....'

Irina tugged at the sash of her robe, her steps quick and purposeful as she headed toward the kitchen. Her thoughts swirled with a mix of frustration and unease. 'I don't want to think about those memories,' she told herself firmly. 'They don't bring anything good.'

Yet no matter how hard she tried to suppress them, the feelings lingered. The laughter, the warmth, the sense of fleeting freedom--they gnawed at the edges of her mind, refusing to be buried.

'And then there's last night,' she thought, her cheeks heating again as fragments of the evening replayed in her head. That guy... he's so irritating. But she couldn't deny the quiet sense of comfort she had felt in his presence, a feeling that seemed to carry over into this morning.

As she stepped into the kitchen, the scene before her brought her to a halt.

Astron moved with practiced ease, his calm demeanor as steady as ever. The air was filled with the tantalizing aromas of cooking, each scent distinct yet blending harmoniously. Her eyes darted to the countertop, where an array of dishes was coming together.

A pot of tea steamed gently on one side, its faint floral aroma mingling with the scent of herbs. The fried herb patties were already plated, their golden crust glistening enticingly. Nearby, slices of potato sizzled in a pan, their edges crisping to a perfect golden brown. A small skillet held a mixture of eggs and tomato sauce, the vibrant colors blending with a sprinkle of spices.

And then there was the meat-thin strips of bacon-like cuts, their marbled texture revealing the quality of the special meat. It wasn't just any bacon; it was Emberboar bacon, a rare delicacy known for its rich flavor and tender texture.

Irina's gaze swept over the variety, her brows furrowing as a question formed in her mind. "Where did he get all this?"

She was sure her fridge hadn't been stocked with this many ingredients. She had prepared it with only the basics-herbs, cheese, and a few fresh items after that time in Phantom's Land, but nothing like this.

Astron seemed to sense her presence, glancing over his shoulder with his usual calm expression. "You're up," he said simply, turning back to the sizzling pan in front of him.

"Perfect timing"

Irina crossed her arms, her eyes narrowing slightly as she leaned against the doorframe. "Where did you get all of this?" she asked, her tone sharp despite the faint

flush creeping up her neck.

Astron didn't look at her immediately, instead focusing on plating the fried potatoes with a casual precision that only irritated her more, "Your fridge was a good start," he said, his voice even. "But I improvised."

"I can see that," Irina replied, her tone tinged with disbelief as she stepped closer. "But there's no way my fridge had these herbs for the patties. Or that tea blend. Or half of

these spices."

Irina's brow furrowed as she scanned the countertop again, her gaze settling on the neatly plated Emberboar bacon. Of course, she had that-it was something only her family could provide. The Emberboar was a unique breed, raised specifically by the Emberheart family. These boars were fed special, nutrient-rich food and periodically exposed to the Emberheart fire, which infused their meat with a distinct smoky flavor and unparalleled tenderness.

However, the meat was rare. There was only a limited amount produced each year, reserved for the family and their most prestigious guests. She had no idea how Astron even knew about it, much less how he'd decided to prepare it.

Her lips pressed into a thin line as she crossed her arms, trying to make sense of what she was seeing. She remembered stocking her fridge impulsively after that time in Phantom's Land. Watching Astron cook back then had irked her competitive streak, and on a whim, she'd filled her fridge with high-quality ingredients.

But even then, she hadn't been thorough. Sure, the Emberboar bacon, eggs, and

cheese were her doing, but she had no idea where he'd found those herbs, that tea blend, or the spices. She didn't know much about those things-her meals were usually prepared by staff or served at high-end establishments, leaving her clueless about

such details.

Her gaze shifted back to Astron, who seemed completely at ease as he worked. His

movements were precise yet unhurried, his focus split between the sizzling skillet and the tea he was pouring into two cups. The way he moved, the quiet confidence with which he handled every step-it was infuriatingly captivating.

"Okay," she said finally, her voice cutting through the quiet hum of the kitchen. "I get that the bacon is from here. That's my family's specialty. But where did you get everything else? The herbs, the spices, the tea blend-none of that was in my fridge." Astron glanced at her over his shoulder "You're right," he admitted. "They weren't." Irina raised an eyebrow, her arms tightening across her chest. "Then?"

"I brought some things with me," he said simply, turning back to the stove as he flipped the last strip of bacon onto the plate. "Call it a habit."

"A habit?" Irina repeated, her tone incredulous. "You just... carry herbs and spices

around with you?"

Astron shrugged, his calm demeanor unshaken. "You'd be surprised how useful they can be. Especially when someone forgets to stock the basics."

Irina bristled, her cheeks flushing as she took a step closer. "I didn't forget," she

snapped. "I didn't think they were necessary."

Astron turned to face her, holding out a plate with a perfectly balanced assortment of

food. "And yet, here you are, questioning my methods while your stomach growls loud enough to wake the dead."

Irina's cheeks burned as she glared at him, but her traitorous stomach rumbled again louder this time. She snatched the plate from his hands with a huff, her eyes

narrowing.

"Shut up....

Irina was hungry.