

## H. Academy 691

### Chapter 691 155.2 - Case of a breakfast

Astron's mouth curled into the faintest of smirks, an expression so rare it caught Irina off guard. Even that subtle shift in his usually composed demeanor was enough to make her realize he was amused-deeply so.

Her cheeks burned as irritation flared. "What's with that smug face?" she muttered under her breath, though she couldn't muster the energy to do anything about it. Instead, she huffed and stalked closer to him, her steps deliberate.

"I want to do it too," she declared, crossing her arms as she stopped just short of where he stood.

Astron glanced at her, raising a single eyebrow. "Do what?" he asked, his voice calm but laced with a subtle challenge.

"Cook," Irina said firmly, her tone leaving no room for argument.

His lips twitched again, and his gaze flickered back to the skillet on the stove. "Feeling useless?" he asked, the question deceptively casual.

Irina bristled, her fists clenching at her sides. "Tch. Bastard," she snapped. "I'm offering my help."

Astron didn't miss a beat, his tone as steady as ever. "Sometimes, the best way to help is by staying still."

Her eyes narrowed, her jaw tightening. "You're saying it's better for me to stay still?" she challenged, her voice rising slightly.

Astron turned to face her fully, his purple eyes gleaming faintly with amusement. "It's up to you how you interpret it," he replied, his tone maddeningly neutral.

Irina huffed again, the frustration in her chest warring with a growing sense of determination. "Fine," she said, stepping closer until she was practically beside him. "Then I'll interpret it my way. Teach me."

Astron raised an eyebrow, clearly surprised by her persistence. He studied her for a moment, his gaze sharp and calculating, before he sighed softly. "Fine," he said, motioning toward the counter. "But don't blame me if you mess it up."

Irina scoffed, rolling up the sleeves of her robe. "I won't," she said confidently, though her heart was pounding. This wasn't about proving herself to him-it was about proving something to herself.

Astron handed her a bowl of chopped herbs, his movements as calm and precise as ever. "Start by mixing these into the batter," he instructed, his tone almost clinical.

Irina nodded, her competitive streak flaring as she set to work. I'll show him, she thought, her hands moving with surprising care as she followed his directions.

Astron watched her quietly for a moment, his rare smirk softening into something closer to a faint smile. "Not bad," he said finally, his voice low.

Irina glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, her lips twitching into a small, triumphant smile. "Of course not," she muttered. But her heart fluttered slightly at the subtle praise, and for a moment, the tension between them melted away as they worked side by side.

Just like that, she continued to work alongside Astron, her competitive streak driving her to focus intently on every instruction he gave. At first, everything seemed to go smoothly. She mixed the batter with the herbs, followed his precise measurements, and even managed to roll the patties into even shapes. A small sense of satisfaction bloomed in her chest as she saw her work come together.

"Not bad," Astron commented as he glanced at her progress, his tone neutral but with a hint of approval.

Irina puffed up slightly, a triumphant smirk on her lips. "Of course not," she replied confidently, her hands moving deftly as she turned her attention to the frying pan.

But then things took a turn.

Astron, managing multiple tasks at once with his usual calm efficiency, left her to handle frying the potato slices while he prepared another dish. Irina, eager to prove herself, worked with determination-until she made a critical error.

She grabbed a pot of hot water, intending to pour it into the nearby kettle, but in her haste, her hand tilted at the wrong angle. A splash of water spilled into the pan of frying oil.

The reaction was immediate.

With a loud hiss, the oil erupted into flames, a burst of heat surging upward. Irina jumped back, her eyes wide as the fire roared in front of her.

"Damn it!" she exclaimed, her instincts screaming at her to do something.

But this wasn't the controlled fire of her Emberheart techniques-this was natural fire, born from chemical reactions, and it didn't obey her in the same way. She reached out with her mana reflexively, but the flames resisted, wild and untamed.

"Think, Irina," she muttered under her breath, her heart pounding as the fire grew. She glanced at Astron, who was still managing his tasks with an infuriatingly calm expression, his sharp purple eyes flicking toward her briefly.

Her temper flared as she realized he wasn't stepping in. He's just watching me struggle?!

Gritting her teeth, she shifted her approach. If direct manipulation wouldn't work, then-Telekinesis. Her mind snapped to the solution, and she concentrated, her mana surging outward as she used her telekinesis to smother the flames by cutting off their

access to oxygen.

It worked-eventually.

The fire sputtered out, leaving behind a charred pan and the unmistakable scent of burned food. Irina stared at the blackened remnants of what had once been her carefully prepared patties and potatoes, her shoulders slumping as she let out a defeated sigh.

"Ah..." she murmured disheartenedly, her gaze fixed on the ruined meal.

A soft sound caught her attention. She turned her head sharply to see Astron standing nearby, his arms crossed, an unmistakable smirk tugging at the corner of his lips. "Heh..." he let out, his tone carrying more amusement than she could tolerate.

Her eyes narrowed dangerously as her face burned with equal parts embarrassment and anger. "You were watching me the whole time, weren't you?" she demanded, her voice rising.

Astron's smirk widened just slightly, and he shrugged nonchalantly. "I was curious to see how you'd handle it."

"You-!" Irina stomped her foot, her frustration boiling over. "You could have said

something!"

"And interrupt the heir of the Emberheart family in her moment of glory?" he replied smoothly, his tone maddeningly calm. "That would've been rude."

Irina's eyes burned with a mixture of embarrassment and determination as she pointed a finger at Astron. "Let me show you how to be rude!" she growled.

**SWOOSH!**

Before Astron could react, she lunged at him, her movements swift and fueled by her frustration. Her hands reached for the dishes he had so carefully prepared, her intent clear-if her meal was ruined, so was his.

Astron's eyes widened briefly in surprise before narrowing, his composure slipping just slightly. "What are you doing?" he asked, pulling the plate of food back as he

stepped away.

"Avenging myself!" Irina declared, her fiery determination unrelenting.

Astron sidestepped her with practiced ease, holding the plate high above his head as she reached for it. "Don't you think this is a bit extreme?" he asked, his tone still maddeningly calm despite the situation.

"No!" Irina shot back, her voice sharp. "Not when your smug face is involved!" The kitchen became a chaotic battlefield as the two moved around the space, Irina relentless in her pursuit of the food and Astron determined to keep it out of her reach. Plates clattered, a chair tipped over, and more than one utensil ended up on the floor

as they circled the island and darted between counters. Astron ducked under one of her grabs, his movements smooth as he maneuvered away from her. "You're going to destroy the kitchen at this rate," he pointed out, his voice steady despite the commotion.

"Then stop running and take responsibility!" Irina retorted, lunging forward again.

Eventually, she cornered him near the far counter, using her body to block his escape. Astron glanced around, his sharp eyes assessing his options, but before he could make another move, Irina surged forward, her hand outstretched toward the plate he held. The sudden motion brought her chest to press lightly against his, and before she knew it, she was leaning into him, her face mere inches from his. Her outstretched hand hovered just shy of the food, but her focus faltered as the proximity hit her. The room seemed to still, the sounds of their chaotic chase fading into the background as Irina's breath caught in her throat. Her fiery red eyes locked onto Astron's sharp purple gaze, the intensity of his expression sending a jolt through her

chest.

For a moment, neither of them moved. Astron's free hand rested lightly against the counter for balance, his other still holding the plate out of reach. Irina's fingers hovered just above it, trembling slightly as the realization of their position sank in.

This... Her thoughts scrambled, her heart pounding. This isn't- Astron's gaze flickered, the faintest hint of amusement returning to his eyes as he arched a brow. "You seem determined," he said, his voice low and teasing. "But are you

sure you're after the food?"

Irina's cheeks flared a deep crimson, the words snapping her out of her daze. "You-!" she sputtered, her hand pulling back as she stepped away hastily.

Her sudden retreat caused her to bump into the counter behind her, the motion jolting a plate that rattled noisily. She clutched at her chest, trying to steady her

racing heart as she glared at him.

"You're...."

"You are?"

Irina's words trailed off as she locked eyes with Astron again, her chest tightening. His

calm, sharp gaze held a faint glimmer of amusement, and it only irritated her further. Flustered, she turned her head away with a sharp huff and moved to sit at the table. "Humph," she muttered, crossing her arms and shaking her legs idly as they dangled from the chair. She didn't say another word, though the faint pout on her lips spoke

volumes.

Astron watched her for a moment, his expression softening into something close to amusement. "Now what?" he asked, his voice smooth as he leaned casually against the

counter.

Irina didn't look at him, her fiery red hair swaying slightly as she turned her face stubbornly to the side. "Humph!" she repeated, her tone carrying an air of exaggerated

indignation.

Astron raised an eyebrow. "You look like you're waiting for something," he observed,

his tone teasing.

Irina's legs swung a little faster under the table, her pout deepening. She didn't reply, but her expression resembled that of a cat sulking while very obviously waiting to be fed.

"Sigh..."

Astron sighed softly, shaking his head as he picked up the plate of perfectly cooked food and approached the table. He set it down in front of her with a deliberate motion, the enticing aroma wafting up as the plate landed.

Irina's nose twitched slightly at the smell, her stubborn facade cracking just a little.

She glanced at the plate out of the corner of her eye, but quickly looked away again, her arms still crossed.

"Are you going to eat, or should I take it back?" Astron asked, the teasing lilt in his voice unmistakable.

Irina's foot stopped mid-swing, her fiery gaze snapping to his. "Don't you dare," she said, her voice sharp but tinged with an undeniable hunger.

"What if I dare?"

"Humph!"

Seeing her eyes filled with fire, Astron shook his head.

"It is prepared for you anyway. Who can take it away from you?"

Irina huffed again but reached for the fork. As she took her first bite, her expression

softened, the flavors melting away her irritation. She didn't say a word, but her shoulders relaxed slightly, and her legs resumed their swinging under the table.

TAP!

"Here. Your tea."

".....Thanks...."

Eventually, the mood became normal.

But well, Irina was really having a hard time.

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Astron began setting down the rest of the dishes he had prepared, his movements calm and efficient despite the chaos they had caused earlier. Plates of fried herb patties, crispy potatoes, Emberboar bacon, and the vibrant eggs with tomato sauce filled the table.

Irina watched silently, her fork halfway to her mouth as she observed him. It struck her that despite their impromptu "battle" in the kitchen, not a single dish had been ruined or spilled. The chairs might have tipped over, a few utensils littered the floor, but every plate remained pristine, as if the chaos had been carefully choreographed. She glanced down at her own plate, then back at Astron, her lips pressing into a thin line. She hated to admit it, but she was impressed. "How did you...?" she began, her voice trailing off.

Astron glanced at her, one brow arched. "How did I what?" he asked, placing a cup of tea in front of her.

"Nothing," she muttered, quickly stuffing another bite of food into her mouth.



But her thoughts didn't stop. She replayed the earlier scene in her mind-the way he had moved, dodging her lunges with ease, holding onto the food without spilling a single drop. His movements had been so fluid, so precise. She'd never seen anyone so nimble, not even in combat. It wasn't just his speed or reflexes-it was the way he seemed to always be in control of his body, even in a chaotic situation.

Her gaze flickered to him again as he settled into a chair across from her, taking a sip of his tea. His sharp features were relaxed, his expression calm as if the earlier chaos hadn't happened.

"Like a cat..." she mumbled absentmindedly, her fork tapping lightly against her plate. Astron glanced up, his purple eyes narrowing slightly in curiosity. "What was that?" Irina blinked, realizing she had spoken aloud. Her cheeks flushed, and she quickly shook her head. "Nothing," she said quickly, though her mind lingered on the thought. She remembered a particular cat she'd encountered at the academy-a sleek, black creature that had a habit of leading her to places she hadn't intended to go, including the library that day. It had moved with the same kind of grace Astron did, its steps silent and deliberate, its gaze sharp and knowing.

That cat... and him... she thought, her lips pressing into a thin line. The resemblance was uncanny.

Astron leaned forward slightly, resting his chin on his hand as he studied her. "You've been staring," he said, his tone teasing. "Do I have something on my face?"

Irina's fork clattered against her plate as she quickly shook her head. "No!" she said, her voice higher than she intended. She cleared her throat, trying to compose herself.

"I was just... thinking about something"

"About me?"

Irina scoffed, crossing her arms as she leaned back in her chair. "Don't flatter yourself," she muttered, though the faint blush on her cheeks betrayed her.

"Hmm..."

Astron hummed softly, his gaze lingering on her for a moment longer before he returned to his tea. "If you say so," he said lightly, his tone leaving her bristling.

She huffed, turning her attention back to her plate. Like a cat... she thought again, stealing another glance at him. The idea refused to leave her mind, and she couldn't decide whether it annoyed her or amused her. Probably both.

The two of them dined quietly, the earlier chaos of the kitchen melting into a surprisingly comfortable calm. Irina poked at the fried herb patties on her plate, the golden crust catching the light, before taking a cautious bite. Her eyes widened slightly as the flavors hit her—a perfect balance of crispy exterior and savory filling, the herbs and spices enhancing the simplicity of the dish.

She glanced across the table at Astron, who ate with his usual unhurried grace. His expression betrayed nothing, but Irina could tell he was aware of her reaction. She huffed softly, unwilling to admit out loud that the food was, in fact, good.

The eggs and tomato sauce were next, the spices melding with the natural tanginess of the tomatoes to create a satisfying bite. The Emberboar bacon, with its rich, smoky flavor, practically melted in her mouth. Everything on the table was simple yet executed with care, the kind of meal that didn't need to be flashy to be satisfying.

"Not bad," she muttered under her breath, spearing another piece of potato with her fork.

Astron's gaze flicked to her, his purple eyes glinting with amusement. "What was that?" he asked, though his tone made it clear he'd heard her perfectly.

Irina glared at him, her cheeks flushing faintly. "I said it's not bad," she repeated, louder this time, her tone defensive.

"Hmm," Astron hummed, taking another bite of his food. "I'll take that as high praise from you."

Irina rolled her eyes, but her lips twitched slightly, almost betraying a smile. She returned her attention to her plate, determined not to let him see how much she was enjoying the meal.

It wasn't as if she was a gourmet or anything. Her standards for food weren't particularly high—as long as it was edible and didn't taste like ash, she'd be satisfied. But even so, she couldn't deny that Astron's cooking had a certain... charm. Each dish was balanced, the flavors complementing one another without being overwhelming. It wasn't chef-level, but it was clearly made with skill and care.

Her thoughts wandered briefly to the meals she was used to-elaborate, meticulously prepared feasts served by the finest chefs in the Emberheart household. They were impressive, certainly, but there was something about the simplicity of this meal that felt more genuine. It reminded her of the rare times she'd eaten something made by hand, without the layers of expectation and ceremony that usually accompanied her meals.

She stole another glance at Astron, who was calmly sipping his tea as though he hadn't. just orchestrated a chaotic yet perfectly executed breakfast. His composure was as steady as ever, his expression unreadable but oddly reassuring.

"Humph," she muttered, returning to her food.

They ate in companionable silence, the tension from earlier replaced by an unspoken understanding. Irina didn't want to admit it, but she felt strangely at ease, a rare feeling she wasn't entirely sure what to do with. The food, the quiet, the company-it all came together in a way that felt... right.

As she finished the last bite of her patty, she leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms as she watched Astron clear his plate. "You're annoyingly good at this," she said,

her tone begrudging.

Astron glanced at her, raising an eyebrow. "Good at what?"

"This," she said, gesturing vaguely at the table. "Cooking. Being irritating. Acting like you're perfect."

"I never said I was perfect," he replied, his tone calm. "But I'll take the compliment."

Irina scoffed, but the faint blush on her cheeks didn't go unnoticed. She turned her head, staring out the window as if to hide her expression. "Whatever," she muttered, though the corners of her lips tugged upward despite herself.

As Irina leaned back in her chair, a thought struck her, sharp and sudden. The herb patties. She glanced at the empty plate in front of her, the lingering taste still fresh on her tongue. It wasn't just that they were good-they were familiar. Strangely familiar.

Her brows furrowed as she tapped a finger against her arm, the gears in her mind turning. The flavor of the herbs he had used-it was almost identical to the ones she had tasted in the past. And that past wasn't something random or recent. It was a distant memory, tied to specific moments she'd long tucked away.

The sheer improbability of it made her chest tighten. There were countless herbs that could have been used to make these patties. Astron could have chosen any combination, and yet, he had picked these. The exact herbs that she happened to like. Her lips pressed into a thin line as the realization began to settle.

This isn't a coincidence, she thought, her fiery gaze darting toward Astron, who was now casually stacking their empty plates. His movements were calm and unhurried as if he were completely unaware of the thoughts swirling in her head.

But Irina wasn't convinced. There's no way he just stumbled into my home and decided to make herb patties with the exact ingredients I like by chance. That doesn't happen.

That can't happen.

Her fingers tightened on the edge of the table as she stared at him, her mind racing. Did he... plan this? The idea sent a small shiver down her spine, though she wasn't

sure if it was from unease or something else entirely.

"Astron," she said suddenly, her voice sharper than she intended.

He glanced at her, his sharp purple eyes locking onto hers. "What?" he asked, his tone calm as always, though his gaze carried a hint of curiosity.

Irina leaned forward slightly, her fiery gaze locked onto Astron. "Herb patties," she said again, her tone carrying the weight of her suspicion. "Why herb patties?" Astron paused for a moment, glancing at her before resuming his task of stacking utensils. His expression remained calm, unbothered, as if her question didn't faze him in the slightest. "Why not?" he replied casually. "Seemed like a good choice." Irina narrowed her eyes, her frustration bubbling just beneath the surface. "You don't strike me as someone who'd eat herb patties," she said pointedly. "You look more like the 'meat and potatoes' type. Something simpler, less... intricate." Astron turned to face

her fully, crossing his arms as he leaned back against the counter. "And what makes you think that?" he asked, his tone laced with mild

amusement.

"Because," Irina said, gesturing toward the now-empty plate, "these aren't the kind of

thing you just decide to make. They're specific. The herbs, the balance of flavors-it's not your usual style. So why? Why did you make these?"

Astron shrugged, his expression unreadable. "I wanted to make something different,"

he said simply. "That's all."

"That's all?" Irina repeated, her skepticism clear. "You expect me to believe that?"

He raised an eyebrow, his lips curling faintly at the corners. "Why not? Do you think I

made them for some grand reason?"

Her eyes narrowed further. "Yes," she said bluntly. "Because there's no way you just happened to pick the exact herbs I like by chance.""

"What herbs?" he asked, his tone carefully neutral.

Irina crossed her arms, leaning back in her chair as she listed them off. "Thymeleaf,

firemint, and shadow basil. The exact three you used for the patties. How did you

know to use those?"

Astron didn't respond immediately, his gaze steady as he watched her. For a moment,

the silence between them stretched, the tension palpable. Then he shrugged again, his tone as nonchalant as ever.

"I didn't know," he said. "I just picked what I had."

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"I didn't know. I just picked what I had."

Irina stared at him, her fiery eyes narrowing with suspicion. Those words-I just picked what I had felt hollow, a flimsy excuse that didn't match up with the improbability of the situation. Not because she'd caught him slipping or because his face betrayed him, but because something in her gut told her it wasn't the whole truth.

And Irina Emberheart trusted her instincts.

She pushed back her chair and stood, walking toward him with deliberate steps. Astron remained where he was, leaning casually against the counter as he watched her approach. His sharp purple gaze followed her every move, calm and composed, but she noticed the faintest flicker of something in his eyes-amusement? Challenge? She couldn't quite place it, but it only fueled her determination.

Stopping just in front of him, she set her empty cup down on the counter with a sharp clink. "Refill," she said flatly, holding his gaze.

Astron arched a brow but didn't move immediately. "Demanding, aren't we?" he remarked, his tone light.

Irina crossed her arms, her expression unwavering. "Stop dodging," she said firmly. "You didn't just 'pick what you had. That's a lie."

Astron sighed softly, his calm demeanor unshaken as he reached for the teapot. "You're persistent," he said, pouring the tea into her cup. The fragrant steam curled upward, but his movements were almost too casual, too composed.

"And you're deflecting," Irina shot back, her tone sharp. She took the cup and stepped closer, her fiery gaze locked onto his. "Why those herbs, Astron? Why those exact three?"

Astron paused for a fraction of a second, the briefest hesitation in his otherwise smooth actions. It was enough for Irina to pounce. "See? You hesitated," she said triumphantly, her tone gaining a hint of smugness. "You do know something."

He set the teapot down with a quiet clink, finally meeting her gaze fully. "You're reading too much into this," he said, his voice calm but firmer now. "It's just food,

Irina."

"Just food?" she echoed incredulously, her hands moving to her hips. "Do you have any idea how many herbs exist that you could have chosen? And you just happened to pick the exact ones I like? That's not a coincidence."

Astron tilted his head slightly, his expression unreadable. "Why does it matter so much to you?" he asked quietly. "Do you think I have some secret motive for making AMTMH--R8,EBUMHBE FR F5, P55" ,E 3Ru

breakfast?"

"It's not about the motive," Irina replied, her voice softer but no less insistent. "It's about you not being honest. I want to know how you knew."

The silence stretched between them, the air thick with unspoken tension. Astron's gaze didn't waver, but Irina could feel the weight of his thoughts, the way he seemed to be calculating his next move.

Finally, he exhaled softly, his lips curving into a faint, almost imperceptible smirk. "And if I said I guessed?" he asked, his tone carrying a hint of challenge.

Irina leaned closer, her fiery hair brushing against her shoulders as she stared him down. "Then I'd say you're a very lucky guesser," she said dryly, her voice tinged with sarcasm. "But I don't believe in luck like that. So, I'll ask again-how did you know?"

Astron's smirk widened ever so slightly, the amusement in his eyes more evident now. "You're relentless," he said, almost as if to himself. "Fine. Let's just say..." He leaned slightly closer, his voice dropping to a softer, more deliberate tone. "I pay attention." Irina blinked, her breath hitching as his words sank in. "Pay attention?" she repeated, her voice faltering slightly.

He straightened, his calm composure firmly in place as he picked up his own cup. "You can learn a lot by observing," he said simply, taking a slow sip of his tea.

Irina stared at him, her mind racing. Pay attention? What does that mean? How much does he know about me? The thought sent a shiver down her spine, though she wasn't sure if it was unease or something else entirely.

Well, she knew the answer internally though.

Irina's lips parted slightly, her voice stumbling as she latched onto his words. "Observing? You've been... observing me?"

Astron set his cup down with a deliberate calmness, his sharp purple eyes meeting hers. "I observe everyone," he said simply, his tone even.

Her fiery eyes narrowed at his response, a flicker of irritation crossing her features. "Everyone?" she echoed, her tone pointed. "So, you're saying you do the same for Julia or Lilia? Or Senior Maya? Sylvie?"

For a brief moment, Astron's gaze sharpened a flicker of something unspoken crossing his expression at the mention of those names. But just as quickly, his composure returned, his voice steady as he replied, "Yes. I do."

Irina bristled, but before she could interrupt, he continued, his tone taking on a faint edge of challenge. "The same goes for Ethan, Lucas, Carl, Victor, Eleanor, or anyone else I've crossed paths with."

His words struck like a hammer, and Irina felt her chest tighten as she realized what he was saying. He wasn't denying it—he was leveling the playing field, making it clear

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that his observations weren't personal. But still...



Everyone? The thought clawed at her, and she clenched her fists slightly at her sides. She understood his point, but understanding didn't stop the faint sting in her chest. Why? Why did it bother her so much? Why couldn't she be satisfied with his answer? Her fiery gaze flicked up to meet his, a mix of frustration and something more vulnerable flickering in her eyes. "But..." she started, her voice softer now, tinged with a hint of something she couldn't quite name.

"But?"

It's not the same, right? I mean...I'm not just... like everyone else to you, am I?"

She wanted to say, this but strangely, she did not. For whatever reason she didn't want to say it at all.

Irina's thoughts churned, her gaze locked on Astron's calm expression. The gears in her mind spun relentlessly. Can someone really understand someone else's preferences just by observing them? Especially something as specific as this?

Her fiery eyes narrowed slightly as doubt crept in. She couldn't ignore the situation- how could she? Astron's actions weren't adding up. It wasn't just a matter of casually observing her; it felt... deliberate. Intentional. She bit her lip, her head spinning as she tried to piece it together. Doesn't this mean he's been paying more attention to me

than he's letting on?

And yet... she couldn't help but second-guess herself. Am I imagining things? Overthinking? The uncertainty gnawed at her, making her stomach churn. She needed clarity-something solid to hold onto, something that would make sense of this

whirlwind in her mind.

She took a deep breath, fixing him with a casual yet pointed look. "Do you know what Julia likes to eat?" she asked, her tone light, as if the question was an afterthought. Astron glanced at her, his purple eyes steady as ever. He didn't respond immediately, as if considering the purpose behind her question. Then, with a faint shrug, he answered. "She likes fruit-based desserts. Citrus tarts, to be specific. She also prefers lighter meals-grilled fish, salads with vinaigrette. And she has a habit of drinking chamomile tea before bed."

Irina blinked, her chest tightening. His response was so calm, so precise, it took her by surprise. But more than that, it was accurate. He's right, she thought, her brow furrowing. As Julia's friend, she knew those were her preferences-there was no

denying it.

For a moment, she didn't know whether to feel relieved or more conflicted. If he could name Julia's preferences so easily, didn't that mean he paid just as much attention to others? That her suspicions were unfounded? But at the same time... wasn't this different?

Her fiery gaze darted back to his, searching for something-an answer, a crack in his composure, anything. But his face remained steady, unreadable, frustratingly calm. "Hmm..." She crossed her arms, leaning back slightly. "So, you're saying you just... keep track of everyone's preferences? Is that it?" Her tone was sharper now, edged with something she couldn't quite define.

Astron met her gaze evenly, his lips curving faintly. "If it helps me understand them,

why not?"

His answer was maddeningly simple, yet it left her even more tangled. "Why not?"

"What do you mean why not?"

Irina thought, her frustration bubbling beneath the surface. Of course, it's because...

Her chest tightened as the realization formed, sharp and undeniable. I only want you to look at me. What else? I want you to only pay attention to me, to focus on me. The thought sent a flush of warmth to her cheeks, but it also filled her with a gnawing uncertainty. But... is that too much? Would it come across as demanding? Selfish? She bit her lip, her fiery gaze flickering back to Astron, who had returned to his tea, seemingly unbothered by her internal turmoil. His calmness only made the storm in her head more pronounced. Doesn't that mean I'm just meddling in his life too much? That I'm trying to control something I have no right to?

Her mind raced as she tried to untangle her emotions. Knowing him, he probably wouldn't appreciate it. He values his independence-his space. If I start demanding things like this, would he... push me away?

The thought made her stomach twist uncomfortably. Irina wasn't used to feeling this way-unsure, vulnerable, like she was treading on fragile ground. She'd faced countless challenges, countless opponents, but this was different. This wasn't a fight she could win with skill or strength. This was something intangible, something far

more delicate.

But even so, she thought, her resolve hardening. I can't just ignore it. I can't pretend it

doesn't matter.

Her fingers drummed against the table as she wrestled with her thoughts, her fiery temper clashing with her own thoughts.

Finally, she exhaled sharply, leaning forward slightly as she tried to steady her voice.

"Astron," she said, her tone softer than before but no less determined.

He glanced up, his sharp purple eyes locking onto hers. "Yes?" Her heart raced under his gaze, but she held her ground. "Do you ever..." She

hesitated, the words catching in her throat. "Do you ever feel like... you pay more

attention to some people than others?"

Astron tilted his head slightly, considering her question. "Of course," he said after a

moment, his voice calm. "It depends on the situation. Some people require more attention, others less."

His answer was practical, and straightforward. But it wasn't what she wanted to hear.

It didn't address the knot of emotions twisting inside her.

"Humph."

Hence, she did act.

Chapter 694 155.5 Case of a breakfast

Irina acted before she could overthink it. In one swift motion, she stood, pushing Astron back into his chair with just enough force to make him sit down without resistance. Before he could respond, she moved deliberately, settling herself onto his lap as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Her hand held her cup firmly, and her posture was poised-but the faint flush on her cheeks betrayed her internal

turmoil.

Astron blinked, his sharp purple eyes widening slightly in genuine confusion. For a moment, he seemed completely thrown off, his calm composure slipping in the face of her unexpected action.

"What happened... out of nowhere?" he asked, his voice calm but edged with

bewilderment. He tilted his head, his gaze narrowing slightly as if trying to decipher her intentions. "What are you doing, Irina?"

The sight of his confusion-a rare, almost unprecedented expression-sent a flicker of satisfaction through her. He always acted like he was in control, always the calm and collected one. But with her, he seemed to falter, to break that perfect mask of composure.

Irina took a sip from her cup, pointedly ignoring his question as she steadied herself. The warmth of his lap beneath her sent a fresh wave of heat to her cheeks, but she refused to let it show. Instead, she looked down at him, her fiery red eyes gleaming with a mixture of challenge and something softer, more vulnerable.

"You're always so composed," she said finally, her tone quiet but deliberate. "Always so calm, as if nothing fazes you. But with me..." She trailed off, letting her words hang in the air as she watched his reaction.

Astron's lips parted slightly, but he didn't respond immediately. His confusion was still evident, but there was something else in his expression now—curiosity, perhaps, or even intrigue. He remained still beneath her, his sharp gaze never leaving hers. "Why?" she continued, leaning closer. Her voice dropped to a softer tone, her eyes narrowing as she searched his face. "Why is it that you always seem so unshaken, yet whenever it's me, you look like you don't know what to do?"

Astron exhaled softly, his composure slowly returning as he leaned back slightly, his hands resting lightly on the arms of the chair. "You're unpredictable," he said simply, his voice calm but carrying a hint of amusement. "And unpredictable people tend to catch me off guard."

Irina's eyes narrowed at his answer, her lips pressing into a thin line. "Is that all?" she asked, her voice tinged with frustration.

Astron's gaze softened slightly, the faintest curve of a smile playing at his lips. "Maybe,"

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he said, his tone teasing yet thoughtful. "Or maybe it's because you're... different."

Astron's smile faded slightly, his expression growing more thoughtful. He met her gaze, his purple eyes locking onto hers with an intensity that sent a shiver down her spine. "I don't know."

But what a way to kill the mood.

"Don't evade it. How different?"

Irina's fiery gaze didn't waver as she leaned slightly closer, her fingers idly wandering along the fabric of Astron's shirt. With her other hand, she brought her cup to her lips, sipping her tea slowly, her expression unrelenting. She wasn't about to let him off the hook.

Astron's purple eyes narrowed slightly, his lips twitching as if suppressing a smirk. "Different is just different," he said finally, his tone light but evasive. "Does it need a definition?"

"Yes," Irina replied without hesitation, her tone sharp and unyielding. "I want you to say it. How am I different?"

His gaze met hers, steady but guarded. He didn't answer immediately, and she could feel his hesitation like a tangible weight in the air. But she wasn't about to let him slip away. Her fingers moved deliberately, tracing a light path along his chest before curling slightly against the fabric, her touch both playful and challenging.

"Say it," she pressed, her voice soft but insistent.

Astron's lips parted as if to respond, but he hesitated, his purple eyes flicking briefly to her hand before returning to her face. The arm supporting her back shifted slightly, his touch firm but not restraining, as though grounding her in her perch.

"Say it," she repeated, a faint smirk tugging at her lips now as she felt the faintest stir of triumph. She could feel his discomfort, his usual calm composure wavering under her persistence.

His voice, when he finally spoke, was quiet but deliberate. "You're... infuriating." Irina's brow furrowed, and she leaned in even closer, her fiery hair brushing against his cheek. "Not an answer," she shot back, her voice laced with mock irritation. "Try

again."

Astron exhaled slowly, a faint smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth now. "You don't make it easy."

"Good," she said, her tone smug. "I don't plan to."

She shifted slightly in his lap, testing the comfort of his legs beneath her. To her satisfaction, they were steady and perfectly supportive, just like his arm against her back. It felt almost too natural, the way she fit there as if his presence had been tailored to accommodate her.

Her gaze softened, though the intensity didn't leave her voice. "So, Astron. How am I different?" She took another sip of her tea, her fingers resuming their wandering path as if daring him to evade her again.

Astron's eyes flickered with something she couldn't quite place—a mix of exasperation, amusement, and something deeper. His hand on her back pressed slightly, steadying her balance as he leaned forward, his lips mere inches from hers.

"You're the only one," he said finally, his voice low but firm, "who makes me feel like I'm losing control."

Irina froze, her breath catching at his words. The weight of his statement hung in the air, and for a moment, the world around them seemed to fall away. Her fingers stilled against his chest, her tea forgotten as her mind raced to process what he'd just said. "Control?" she repeated, her voice softer now, almost disbelieving. Astron's smirk faded, his expression turning serious as he met her gaze. "You push me," he said quietly, his purple eyes steady and unflinching. "In ways no one else does. You make me question things I thought I had figured out. You... unsettle me."

Irina's heart pounded in her chest, her fiery resolve flickering in the face of his rare vulnerability. For once, she didn't have a sharp retort, her usual confidence giving way to a quiet, unspoken understanding.

But she wasn't about to let him have the last word.

"Well," she said finally, a faint smirk returning to her lips as she leaned closer, her voice teasing. "It's about time someone shook you up."

Astron didn't reply immediately, his gaze steady as he studied her, his sharp purple eyes betraying nothing. Irina was about to press him further when she noticed a subtle shift in his expression. His eyes narrowed ever so slightly, and before she could react, his hand moved with precision.

A sudden, sharp pinch on her side.

"Ah!" Irina squealed, her voice breaking into a laugh as she instinctively squirmed, her

body jerking in surprise. "What are you—stop that!"

Astron's lips quirked into a faint smirk, his calm demeanor cracking just enough to

show a flicker of amusement. "You seemed too comfortable," he said smoothly, as if his actions were entirely justified.

Irina's fiery red eyes widened as she twisted in his lap, trying to avoid his hand while maintaining her balance. "Comfortable?!" she exclaimed, her voice laced with both

indignation and laughter. "You-bastard!"

Another pinch, this time lighter but perfectly aimed. Irina laughed again, her defenses crumbling as the ticklish sensation took over. Her movements became frantic, her tea

cup now abandoned on the table as she pushed at his chest, trying to create some

distance.

"Stop it!" she demanded between breaths, though her laughter betrayed her enjoyment of the moment. "I swear if you do that again-"

Astron raised an eyebrow, his mouth's curls growing slightly. "If I do what?" he asked

innocently, his tone infuriatingly calm.

Irina's cheeks flushed as she glared at him, her laughter fading into a mix of embarrassment and frustration. "You know what!" she snapped, though the lingering smile on her lips softened her words.

"Do I?" he replied, his fingers hovering playfully near her side again.

Her hand shot out, grabbing his wrist in a firm grip. "Try me," she said, her voice low

but tinged with amusement.



"Try me?" he echoed, his tone carrying an unmistakable challenge. Without hesitation, his right hand darted toward her side again.

Irina was ready this time-or so she thought. Her hands shot up to intercept his, but Astron's movements were infuriatingly precise. His left hand caught hers mid-air, holding it firmly in place, while his right hand feinted toward the same side she was

defending.

For a moment, she felt victorious. 'Gotcha!' she thought.

But then, in a fluid motion, Astron switched tactics. His right hand veered unexpectedly, reaching for her opposite side. His fingers found their mark, delivering

a perfectly timed pinch.

"Ah!" Irina squealed, her body jerking in response as a fresh wave of laughter burst from her lips. "You-stop it!" she gasped, squirming in his lap as she tried to twist away

from him.

The sudden movement threw her off balance, and for a moment, she felt herself

tipping. Her heart skipped a beat as she instinctively clutched at him, her hands

grasping his shirt for stability.

But Astron was faster.

His arm moved swiftly, wrapping around her waist to steady her. His grip was firm yet

gentle, pulling her back securely against him. Their laughter faded as the moment

shifted, the playful chaos giving way to a quiet stillness.

Irina's breath hitched as she found herself face to face with him, their gazes locking. Her fiery red eyes widened slightly, her cheeks still flushed from both the laughter and the sudden closeness. Astron's purple eyes, sharp and piercing, softened just enough to send a shiver through her.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. The only sound was the faint hum of the

kitchen, the distant ticking of the clock, and the quiet rhythm of their breathing.

Irina's hands, still clutching his shirt, trembled slightly as she tried to steady herself- not just physically, but emotionally.

"You're..." she started, her voice barely above a whisper, but the words caught in her throat.

Astron tilted his head slightly, his gaze unwavering. "What?" he asked, his tone quieter now, the teasing edge replaced with something gentler.

Irina's breath hitched, her heart racing as she leaned ever so slightly forward, her fiery

gaze locked onto Astron's lips. The quiet, magnetic pull between them seemed to draw

her in, and for once, her mind was blissfully silent. No doubts, no questions-just the moment.

But just as she closed the final gap, a sharp voice shattered the fragile stillness.

"Young Miss."

Chapter 695 156.1 - She can't say

"Young Miss."

The moment she had heard this sound, Irina froze, her entire body tensing as the familiar sound of Esme's voice echoed from the doorway. Her fiery eyes widened in horror, and her head snapped toward the sound, her heart dropping at the sight of her family's head maid standing there, her expression calm but her sharp gaze taking in every detail of the scene.

Astron, ever composed, loosened his grip around Irina's waist and straightened his posture. His sharp purple eyes flicked toward Esme with a calm, almost indifferent expression, as though being caught in this compromising position was entirely unremarkable.

Irina, on the other hand, was anything but composed.

"E-Esme!" she stammered, her face a deep crimson as she scrambled to stand, nearly tripping over her own feet in the process. "What-why are you-how long have you-" Esme's lips twitched ever so slightly, the barest hint of amusement breaking through her professional demeanor. "I came to inform you that Matriarch is asking for you," she said, her tone as smooth and composed as ever. "It's almost noon, and she was wondering why you missed breakfast."

Irina's stomach dropped further at the mention of her mother. "Noon?!" she exclaimed, glancing at the clock on the wall in a panic. "Why didn't anyone wake me up?!"

Esme's gaze flicked briefly to Astron, and the faintest trace of a knowing look crossed her face before she turned back to Irina. "You seemed... preoccupied," she said delicately.

Irina's face burned hotter, and she shot Astron a quick glare, as though blaming him for the entire situation. "I'll... I'll get ready and go," she said quickly, her voice strained as she tried to regain some semblance of composure.

Esme inclined her head slightly, her sharp eyes lingering on Astron for just a moment. before she turned and exited the room.

The silence that followed was deafening.

Irina slumped against the counter, covering her face with her hands as a muffled groan escaped her lips. "This is a nightmare," she muttered.

Astron leaned casually against the counter beside her, his calm demeanor unshaken. "I'd say it's more of a comedy," he said, his tone light but tinged with amusement.

Irina groaned louder, her embarrassment reaching its peak. "Shut up," she mumbled, refusing to look at him.

"Why?"

Seeing her face, Astron leaned back against the counter, his arms crossed casually as he regarded Irina with a faint smirk. "You know," he began, his voice carrying that infuriatingly calm tone, "for someone who was so bold yesterday, you seem awfully unsure today."

Irina's head shot up, her fiery red eyes narrowing as her embarrassment turned to irritation. "Bold?!" she snapped, her voice rising slightly. "You think-"

"You were the one who told me to stay," Astron interrupted smoothly, his tone still maddeningly composed. "You made the decision. You even said you didn't care about anything else in the moment."

Irina froze, her lips parting as the memory of her words from the previous night resurfaced. The warmth, the closeness, the conviction she'd felt-it all came rushing back, and with it, a twinge of shame for how she'd been acting now.

"You made your choice," Astron continued, his sharp purple eyes locking onto hers. "So why regret it now?"

Her initial irritation faded, replaced by a quiet realization that left her chest tightening. He was right-she had made a decision, and it wasn't like her to backpedal on something she'd resolved to do. She wasn't someone who ran from her choices.

Her hands lowered from her face, and her fiery gaze met his. "You're right," she admitted quietly, her voice steadying. "I did make a promise to myself."

Astron's smirk softened slightly, though he didn't respond. He simply watched her, waiting for her to continue.

Irina took a deep breath, straightening her posture as she pushed her embarrassment aside. "I'll be ready in ten minutes," she said firmly, her confidence returning as she turned on her heel and strode toward the stairs. "Don't go anywhere."

As she disappeared up the stairs, Astron glanced after her, his expression unreadable. A quiet hum escaped him as he turned his attention back to tidying the kitchen. He was already dressed and ready for the day-his black shirt neatly buttoned, his boots polished, and his hair still slightly damp from his earlier shower.

Before Irina had woken, Astron had already completed his morning routine. He'd trained rigorously in the Emberheart training grounds, honing his precision and strength as he always did. By the time she'd stumbled into the kitchen, flustered and disheveled, he was already several steps ahead.

Now, as he waited for her to return, his thoughts lingered on their brief but chaotic morning.

'It is indeed weird....

For a long time in a while, he was feeling something like this and it was oddly weird.

But, at this point, had already been accustomed to these feelings.

At least, he had started to.

As Astron worked swiftly through the kitchen, his hands moved with practiced precision. He disliked leaving any trace of chaos behind, especially after such a noisy morning. Each dish, utensil, and pan was cleaned and placed neatly back where it belonged. His movements were methodical, almost rhythmic, as the soothing flow of the task grounded his thoughts.

By the time he finished, the kitchen looked immaculate, as though the earlier flurry of activity had never occurred. The only evidence left behind were faint scuff marks on the tiled floor, remnants of their impromptu "battle." Astron crouched briefly, inspecting them with a discerning eye, and prepared to wipe them away when he heard the sound of hurried footsteps descending the stairs.

Irina appeared in the doorway, her fiery red hair slightly damp from a quick rinse and tied loosely behind her. She had changed into a more formal outfit-something fitting for the heir of the Emberheart family-and yet, her flushed cheeks betrayed the lingering effects of their earlier exchange.

Astron straightened, his sharp purple eyes flicking to her with mild curiosity. "You're faster than I expected," he remarked, his tone casual as he set the cleaning cloth aside. Irina scoffed, brushing a strand of hair from her face as she stepped into the kitchen. "Unlike you, I don't have the luxury of taking my time," she said briskly, though there was a hint of unease in her voice. Her gaze darted to the spotless kitchen, and her brows furrowed slightly. "You already cleaned everything?"

"Of course," Astron replied, turning to the faint marks on the floor and crouching again. "I don't like leaving a mess." His voice carried no hint of pride, just a

matter-of-factness that made her feel both impressed and mildly irritated.

"Still a perfectionist, I see," she muttered, crossing her arms. "You didn't have to go

that far. It's not like anyone else would've cared."

He glanced up at her briefly, his expression unreadable. "I would've cared."

That simple response made Irina's heart skip, though she quickly masked it by clearing

her throat and looking away. "Well, good. At least it won't give Esme or my mother

something else to complain about."

At the mention of her mother, a flicker of tension crossed her face, and Astron noticed. Though he had no intention of teasing her about it, he also understood the weight of dealing with someone as imposing as the Matriarch.

As Astron wiped away the last faint scuff marks from the floor, Irina lingered by the doorway, her arms crossed and her expression half-hidden behind her fiery red hair. She straightened when he set the cloth aside, watching as he gestured for them to leave. Without a word, they stepped out of the kitchen, Astron's steps calm and measured while Irina's were brisk with a faint undercurrent of tension.

As they made their way toward the main mansion, Astron broke the silence. "Why do you think she's called for you?" he asked, his tone light but curious. Irina's brow furrowed, and she let out a soft sigh. "It's probably about the trip I've planned," she replied, her voice carrying a faint edge of annoyance. Astron raised an eyebrow, the question clear in his sharp gaze. "Trip?"

Irina glanced sideways at him, a smirk tugging at the corner of her lips despite the

lingering tension in her chest. "Of course," she said, her tone tinged with amusement. "Did you really think I'd spend my one-week vacation here in this mansion, under my mother's ever-watchful eyes? That would be torture."

Not that it wouldn't be tempting to see you squirm around her, she thought,

suppressing a chuckle.

Astron shook his head, his expression unreadable as a faint hint of exasperation flickered in his eyes. "Indeed," he said simply, his voice steady but laced with a trace of

dry humor.

Irina straightened her posture, her fiery gaze fixed ahead as they approached the main mansion. The looming structure cast long shadows across the path, its grandeur and authority an ever-present weight on her shoulders.

This place feels more like a gilded cage every time I return, she thought, her lips pressing into a thin line. A beautiful one, but a cage all the same. No wonder I'm counting down the seconds until we leave.

Her mind drifted briefly to the logistics of their upcoming trip. She had spent weeks planning it, carefully coordinating every detail to ensure her time away from the Emberheart estate would be as liberating as possible. The thought alone was enough to soothe the knot of anxiety in her chest-until she remembered the inevitable confrontation with her mother.

She's going to dissect every decision I've made, Irina mused, her shoulders tightening

at the thought. I can already hear her questioning the destination, the arrangements, and, of course, why I'm dragging Astron along.

The thought made her glance at him, his calm demeanor as steady as ever. He walked beside her with the same quiet confidence that had become both infuriating and oddly comforting.

Does he even care about the trip? she wondered, her fiery gaze narrowing slightly. Or is he just going along with it because he's got nothing better to do?

The silence between them stretched for a moment before Astron spoke again, his tone casual. "You've put a lot of thought into this trip."

Irina blinked, caught off guard by his remark. "What makes you say that?" she asked, her tone sharper than she intended.

Astron glanced at her, his sharp purple eyes meeting hers briefly before returning to the path ahead. "The way you're walking," he said simply. "It's the same as when you're about to duel someone-focused, but bracing for a fight."

Her cheeks flushed, and she looked away quickly. "Tch. Don't read too much into it," she muttered, though her thoughts betrayed her.

How does he always do that? she thought, irritation bubbling beneath the surface. Just one glance, and it's like he's peeled back every layer I've tried to keep hidden.



Still, his observation left a faint warmth in her chest-a small, reluctant acknowledgment that he was paying attention, even if she hated how easily he saw

through her.

As the main doors of the mansion loomed closer, Irina straightened her shoulders and

took a deep breath. 'Whatever.....she can't say anything anyway.' The ship has already been sailed at the end.

Chapter 696 156.2 - She can't say

The Emberheart estate's grand doors creaked open, and a maid ushered Astron and Irina into the hallway leading to the Matriarch's study. The ornate corridor stretched endlessly, lined with paintings of Emberheart ancestors and tapestries depicting their fiery legacy. Each step echoed in the silence, a rhythmic reminder of the confrontation awaiting them.

Irina straightened her shoulders, her fiery gaze unwavering as they reached the polished wooden doors of her mother's room. She didn't glance at Astron, but she could feel his calm presence beside her-a steady anchor in the brewing storm.

The doors opened with a soft creak, revealing the Matriarch seated at her desk, her posture regal and her eyes sharp as ever. The air in the room was thick, charged with an unspoken authority that seemed to press down on them as they entered.

The Matriarch's gaze shifted to the two of them, her lips curving into a faint, sardonic smile. "Well, well," she said, her tone laced with subtle mockery. "It seems the two of you must have had quite the night... to even miss breakfast." Her narrowed eyes lingered on them, sharp and calculating.

Irina's face flushed faintly, but she quickly masked her embarrassment, her posture stiffening in defiance. "We don't need to report every moment of our lives to you, Mother," she said firmly, her tone tinged with annoyance but steady.

The Matriarch's smile widened, her eyes glinting with amusement at her daughter's quick response. "Ah, Irina," she said, her voice carrying a hint of mock sweetness, "you misunderstand. I wasn't asking for a report. I was merely observing. After all, it's not every day that you miss a meal."

Irina's jaw tightened, but she refused to look away. "And yet, here we are. Is there something you wanted, or are we here for another lesson in breakfast etiquette?" The Matriarch leaned back in her chair, her fingers steepling as she regarded her daughter with an almost predatory calm. "Always so fiery, my dear," she said smoothly, her gaze flicking briefly to Astron before returning to Irina. "But no, this is not about etiquette. I've called you here to discuss your... upcoming plans."

Irina's heart skipped a beat, but she forced herself to remain composed. "What about them?"

The Matriarch's gaze turned to Astron, studying him with an intensity that seemed to peel back layers. "Your companion here," she said, her tone cool and measured, "is an intriguing choice for such a trip. I wonder... how much of this planning was influenced by his presence?"

Astron stood silently, his expression unreadable as the Matriarch's sharp gaze bore into him. He could speak if he wished, but he chose not to, leaving the floor to Irina.

He understood the value of moments like these-this was her confrontation to navigate, her growth to claim.

Irina met her mother's gaze with a steady defiance, her fiery eyes unwavering. "Yes, Mother," she said firmly, her voice calm but resolute. "He is the reason I planned this trip. Is there a problem with that?"

The Matriarch's eyes narrowed, the sharp glint in her gaze turning colder. "This openly admitting, Irina?" she asked, her voice deceptively mild but laced with an edge. "You are aware, I trust, that such things cannot be taken back. Keeping this attachment within the Emberheart estate is one matter; taking it into the public eye is quite another."

Irina's jaw tightened, but she didn't falter. "I'm aware," she replied. Her fiery gaze flicked briefly to Astron before returning to her mother. "But I'm not foolish enough to put a target on my back. We will be disguising ourselves."

The Matriarch's eyebrows arched slightly in intrigue, her tone cooling further. "Disguising yourselves? And how, exactly, do you intend to achieve that? With his face, Irina, I doubt 'discretion' is even remotely feasible."

Irina smirked faintly at her mother's words, a glimmer of satisfaction flashing in her eyes. "I've thought about that too, Mother." She reached into her spatial storage, retrieving two silver rings

engraved with intricate runes. She held them up, the faint glow of their enchantments catching the light. "With these."

The Matriarch's eyes narrowed as she leaned forward slightly, examining the rings from a distance. "And where, may I ask, did you acquire such items? These are not the kind of trinkets one simply stumbles upon."

Irina's smirk deepened, her confidence shining through as she answered. "I had them commissioned weeks ago by a craftsman in Ingelheim-one of the few that Lilia trusts with this level of enchantment. They're mana-infused and calibrated to create a shifting illusion around the wearer. Hair color, eye color, facial features... even subtle aura dampening. Everything can be masked."

The Matriarch's expression didn't change, but the faintest glint of approval flickered in her eyes. "And the cost of such a commission?" she asked, her voice calm but

probing.

Irina's tone remained unwavering. "Considerable, but worth it. I planned for every detail of this trip, including the risk of exposure. These rings are essential for ensuring our safety and anonymity."

The Matriarch leaned back slightly, studying her daughter with an unreadable expression. "I see. And you believe these measures will suffice?"

"They will," Irina replied confidently. "The enchantments are top-tier, and I've verified the craftsman's reputation thoroughly. With these, no one will recognize us unless they're actively searching for us-and even then, it would take an expert to pierce the

illusion."

The room fell silent for a moment, the weight of Irina's words settling between them. The Matriarch's gaze flicked to Astron, then back to her daughter, a faint smile tugging at the corner of her lips.

"Interesting.....What if I wanted to test it?"

Irina's gaze didn't falter as she met her mother's challenge. "If that's what it takes to prove their effectiveness, then go ahead. Test them."

The Matriarch's faint smile grew, an almost imperceptible glint of intrigue flashing in her eyes. "Very well," she said, gesturing for Irina to proceed.

Irina took a steadying breath, then slipped one of the silver rings onto her finger. She handed the second to Astron, who wordlessly accepted it, his sharp eyes briefly meeting hers in silent understanding. With a practiced motion, Irina channeled her mana into the ring, the runes glowing faintly as the illusion took hold.

The change was subtle but striking. Irina's fiery red hair dulled to a deep, chestnut brown, cascading in soft waves instead of its usual vibrant intensity. Her eyes shifted from their ember-like glow to a warm hazel, and her angular features softened slightly. Her overall demeanor remained regal, but her identity was obscured to all but those who truly knew her well,

Astron followed suit, activating his ring with a steady flow of mana. His striking purple eyes dimmed into a muted gray, and his sharp features smoothed slightly, the edges softened to something less severe. His black hair lightened to a deep ash tone, blending seamlessly with his new appearance. Though his posture and composure remained the same, the change in his face was enough to make him unrecognizable at

first glance.

The Matriarch's gaze flicked between the two of them, her expression unchanging as she examined the illusions. "Impressive," she admitted after a moment, her voice calm but thoughtful. "The craftsmanship is indeed excellent. The changes are precise enough to mask your identities without drawing attention to themselves." Irina nodded, a small smile tugging at the corners of her lips. "As I said, Mother, I planned every detail. These artifacts will ensure our anonymity without compromising our presence."

The Matriarch's eyes narrowed slightly, her sharp gaze lingering on Astron. "Though the artifacts are well-made, they cannot suppress natural charm. You may have changed your faces, but you still look... striking. That alone could draw attention." Astron's expression remained composed, his voice calm as he replied, "Anonymity does not mean blending into the background entirely, Madam. It means avoiding recognition. As long as no one knows what they're looking for, appearances will only be a fleeting curiosity."

The Matriarch raised an eyebrow at his response, a faint smirk tugging at her lips. "A fair point," she said, leaning back in her chair. "Still, these illusions won't protect you entirely. There will always be those who see beyond the surface."

"I'm aware," Irina said, her tone firm. "But this is the best way to minimize risk. We'll be cautious, as always."

The Matriarch studied her daughter for a moment longer before finally nodding. "You've prepared well, Irina. I'll grant you that. I will allow this trip, but remember: if anything goes wrong, the responsibility falls entirely on your shoulders."

Irina straightened, her expression resolute. "I understand."

With that, the Matriarch stood, her commanding presence filling the room as she

turned toward the door. "You've shown me enough. I'll leave you to your final preparations." Her gaze lingered on Astron for a brief moment, her sharp eyes conveying a silent message.

As the Matriarch reached the door, she paused, turning back with an air of nonchalance that belied the sharpness of her gaze. Her eyes lingered on Irina for a moment longer, her lips curving into a faint, knowing smile.

"While I understand the enthusiasm of youth," she began, her tone deceptively light, "I would advise you both to keep your... excitement in check. There's a time and place for everything, and it's important not to lose focus. Especially you, Irina."

Irina blinked, her fiery red eyes widening in surprise before her cheeks flushed a deep crimson. "Mother!" she exclaimed, her voice rising in a mixture of shock and embarrassment. Her composure wavered for the first time, and she stumbled over her words. "That's why would you even-"

But the Matriarch didn't let her finish. Her gaze flicked to Astron briefly, her expression neutral but her meaning unmistakable. "And you," she said, her voice cool but not unkind, "should remember that the Emberheart name carries certain expectations. While I can understand the... thirst for someone like you, there are lines that must not be crossed."

Astron, for his part, didn't react visibly, his calm demeanor unshaken as he met her gaze. "Understood, Madam," he said evenly, though the faintest twitch at the corner of his mouth hinted at his amusement. "I shall make it so that, your daughter keeps her

thirst in line."

Irina, however, was still reeling. Her mother's words had caught her so off guard that she barely registered Astron's composed response. For a moment, the Matriarch sounded less like the unyielding head of the Emberheart family and more like a mother teasing her daughter-and the realization left Irina speechless.

The Matriarch didn't wait for a further response. She straightened, her commanding presence returning as she gestured toward the door. "I'll leave you to your preparations," she said smoothly, her tone once again all business. "Do try to ensure

that this trip is not wasted. Fun has its place, but you both have responsibilities to

uphold." With that, she swept out of the room, leaving an utterly flustered Irina and an unbothered Astron in her wake. The door clicked shut, and the room fell into silence.

Irina finally managed to find her voice, though it was a strained whisper. "I cannot

believe she just said that..."

Astron leaned back slightly, his expression neutral but his eyes glinting with faint

amusement. "She does have a point."

""

Irina shot him a glare, her embarrassment flaring anew. "Don't even start," she hissed,

though her tone lacked real bite. For some reason, despite the mortification, she felt a small flicker of warmth. In that fleeting moment, her mother had felt... human. But she quickly shook off the

thought, her composure returning as she turned to Astron. "Let's go. We've got a lot to do before we leave."

Chapter 697 156.3 - She can't say

The late afternoon sun cast warm golden hues over the Emberheart estate as Irina led Astron down a side path that meandered away from the grand main mansion. Her fiery red hair shimmered in the sunlight, but her pace was brisk, and her posture

carried an air of determination. Astron followed without a word, his calm demeanor a steady contrast to the quiet energy radiating from her.

Irina's heart beat faster as they neared their destination. This is it. All the planning, all the work—everything comes down to this week. She glanced at Astron, his sharp purple eyes scanning their surroundings with his usual composed expression. He probably doesn't realize how important this is to me... but that's fine.

As they walked, her mind wandered, weaving through fragments of her past. I've never had this kind of freedom before. My life has always been about training, appearances, and meeting expectations. Even the smallest decisions were scrutinized. Her lips pressed into a thin line as she suppressed the memories of countless scoldings, lectures, and carefully monitored actions.

'And now? Now I get to choose. For once in my life, I get to act on my own terms.' A faint smile tugged at the corners of her lips. Though, I never thought I'd be doing it with someone like him.

The thought sent a flicker of warmth to her cheeks, and she quickly shook it off. "We'll be leaving tonight," she said abruptly, breaking the silence. "Our carriage is ready, and everything's been packed. We'll arrive at the first destination by dawn."

Astron raised an eyebrow, his gaze flicking toward her. "You've thought this through." Irina's smirk returned, a hint of pride in her expression. "Of course. Did you think I'd handle this carelessly? This trip is the reason I endured all those weeks of grueling training in the Chamber of Emberheart, not to mention the endless social meetings with sycophants." She let out a soft huff. "If it wasn't for this, I might have gone insane."

Astron nodded slightly, his expression unreadable. "I suppose that explains the determination."

She glanced at him, her fiery gaze narrowing. "You sound skeptical."

"Not skeptical," he replied, his voice calm. "Impressed. You've put more effort into this than most would."

Irina's steps slowed for a moment, caught off guard by the quiet sincerity in his tone. Impressed? He doesn't say that lightly. A small, unexpected flutter stirred in her chest, but she quickly pushed it aside and picked up her pace again. "Well, someone had to make sure it would be perfect."

They continued walking in silence for a while, the path winding through the estate's outer gardens. Irina's thoughts drifted again, this time to her younger self. There was a time when I used to dream about something like this—a vacation, a chance to escape everything, even for a little while. A faint, bittersweet smile crossed her lips. Back then, I imagined it would be with... someone else.

The memory sent a pang through her chest, but she quickly dismissed it. That was then. This is now. Her gaze flicked to Astron once more. I never expected it would happen this soon. And I definitely didn't expect it would be with him.

As they reached a secluded area near the stables, Irina stopped and turned to face Astron, her fiery gaze locking onto his. "This week," she began, her tone firm but tinged with something softer, "isn't just a vacation for me, nor for you."

Astron tilted his head slightly, his sharp purple eyes narrowing, "What do you mean?" What do I mean? Heh.... Irina thought, a faint, bittersweet smile tugging at her lips. I mean this is my first real chance to act on my own—to live freely, without someone breathing down my neck or pulling the strings. But it's also about you.

She stepped closer, her gaze unwavering as she continued. "This isn't just about escaping my responsibilities or breaking free from the constraints of my family." Her voice softened, taking on a vulnerable edge. "It's about showing you something too." Astron remained silent, his expression steady as he waited for her to elaborate. Irina's heart clenched slightly, and she took a steadying breath before speaking again.

'You've spent so much of your life chasing something that's... destructive. It drives you, yes, but it's also consuming you.' Her fiery gaze flickered, a mixture of resolve and sadness shining in her eyes.

Estelle. The name lingered in her mind, unspoken but heavy with meaning. Your sister. The one you lost. She's the reason behind everything you've done, isn't she? The reason you push yourself so hard, the reason you've become who you are.



She clenched her fists at her sides, her thoughts swirling. I've seen what happens when that path takes you too far. In another timeline, another life, you became someone unrecognizable-a demon contractor who lost himself in the very revenge he sought. And eventually, you lost your life too.

Her chest tightened, a flicker of fear sparking in her heart. Even though this Astron is different-vastly different-I can't ignore the possibility. What if it happens again? What if I lose him the same way?

Irina's fiery eyes softened, a rare vulnerability flickering in their depths. Her gaze lingered on Astron, his composed expression as steady as ever, and she took a moment to collect her thoughts. This trip meant more to her than she could ever put into words-not just for her own sake, but for his.

He's detached from this world, she thought, the pang in her chest tightening. He's been so consumed by his goals, by the weight of revenge, that he's forgotten-or maybe never learned-how to actually live.

She stepped back slightly, her posture straightening as resolve filled her. This wasn't just a vacation. It was an opportunity-a chance to show him a side of life he'd likely never considered. For someone like him, who's missed so much... I want him to experience the world outside of his mission. To see the little joys, the moments of peace, the simple happiness he might never have known.

Her lips pressed into a thin line as she studied him. Of course, I can't just say any of this outright. If I did... who knows how he'd react? Astron's like me in some ways-he doesn't take well to being guided. He'd resist if he thought I was trying to show him something he didn't want to see.

Her fiery red hair caught the soft glow of the setting sun as she took a step forward. "This trip," she said finally, her tone steady but tinged with a quiet determination, "is about letting go of everything that weighs us down. It's a break, a chance to breathe." Astron tilted his head slightly, his sharp purple eyes narrowing in thought. He didn't respond, but the way his gaze lingered on her told her he was listening-truly listening. That was enough for now.

She smiled faintly, though there was a flicker of bittersweetness in her expression. Just like how he thinks I'm unpredictable, I feel the same about him. He's a puzzle I can't solve, and yet... that's what makes him so infuriatingly captivating.

Turning back toward the stables, she gestured for him to follow. "Come on," she said lightly, masking the swirl of emotions beneath her calm exterior. "We've got a lot to do before we leave tonight."

Astron moved to match her pace, his steps quiet and composed as ever. The silence that hung between them wasn't uncomfortable-it was the kind of silence that spoke of understanding, even without words

I want this trip to be memorable for him, she thought, her fiery gaze flickering with a rare softness. Not just for what we'll see or do, but for what it means. For him, for me,

for us.

Irina paused for a moment, taking a deep breath as if to steady herself. This is it. This is where everything begins.

Without looking at him, she spoke again, her voice quieter this time. "You know, Astron... I'm not going to make this easy for you."

His eyebrow quirked slightly, his expression unreadable but with the faintest trace of amusement. "I'd expect nothing less."

She smirked, the fiery determination returning to her eyes as she climbed into the carriage. "Good. Then you're ready."

I'll make sure he doesn't lose himself even if I have to drag him, kicking and screaming,

into a life worth living.

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As the late afternoon sun cast its golden hues over the Emberheart estate, Irina made

her way to the discreet garage near the mansion's east wing, her steps brisk and her fiery red hair tied back into a neat ponytail. Beside her, Astron walked with his usual calm, his sharp purple eyes

scanning their surroundings. Both of them wore their disguises-Illusion Rings activated, altering their appearances entirely.

Irina's fiery red hair had been replaced by a chestnut brown, her eyes a soft hazel, and her sharp features softened just enough to make her look unrecognizable. Astron, on the other hand, now sported ash-toned hair and muted gray eyes, his angular features less pronounced. Their aura dampened subtly by the enchantments, they appeared as nothing more than two ordinary travelers.

By the time they reached the garage, a sleek black car with no discernible marks of the Emberheart family awaited them. The vehicle looked perfectly unremarkable, designed to blend in on any street. The driver, a middle-aged man with a professional demeanor, stepped forward and opened the rear door for them with a respectful nod.

Irina slid into the back seat first, adjusting her coat as she settled in. Astron followed, his movements deliberate as he took the seat beside her. The door closed with a soft thud, sealing them inside the comfortably cool interior of the car. Irina glanced at Astron out of the corner of her eye as the driver started the engine.

"Remember," she said, her tone low but firm, "this trip is about staying under the radar.

No risks, no unnecessary attention. Got it?"

Astron leaned back in his seat, his expression as unreadable as ever. "Who are you

talking to? Me?"

Astron leaned back in his seat, his muted gray eyes glinting faintly with amusement.

"Who are you talking to? Me?" he asked, his tone calm but carrying a hint of teasing.

Irina shot him a sharp look, her hazel eyes narrowing. "Don't play coy," she muttered, crossing her arms. "You may have one of the faintest presences I've ever seen, but that doesn't mean you're immune to scrutiny."

Astron raised an eyebrow, his lips twitching slightly as if suppressing a smirk. "Of course. I'll be sure to stay in line, then."

"Hmph." Irina turned her head toward the window, unwilling to give him the satisfaction of a response. He's so infuriating sometimes. The corners of her lips twitched faintly, though, betraying her amusement at his calm confidence. The car moved smoothly through the streets, the driver expertly navigating the route toward Etheira Haven Station. The cityscape of Emberheart territory passed by in a blur of modern architecture and bustling streets. Irina's gaze lingered on the outside world, her thoughts drifting as she watched people go about their daily lives. And just like that the trip had started.

## Chapter 698 157.1 - The Trip

The car glided smoothly through the bustling streets of Etheria Haven, the vibrant cityscape alive with magical energy. The towering buildings, crafted with a fusion of modern design and arcane architecture, shimmered faintly under the warm evening light. Everywhere, people moved with purpose, their mana-infused lives evident in the subtle glow of their tools, trinkets, and even their clothing.

Irina's gaze remained fixed on the passing scenery, her expression composed but thoughtful. She had lived here her entire life-long enough to know that even with their disguises, staying here too long was a risk she couldn't afford. Etheria Haven isn't just another city in the Valerian Federation, she thought, her fingers brushing lightly against her coat. It's a city of magicians-people with abilities sharp enough to see through even the best illusions.

The magic-infused paparazzi were notorious here, with reporters trained to pierce through enchantments to uncover hidden truths. It was why Irina hadn't even considered showing Astron around the city, despite the fact that it was her home. I can't afford to be discovered, she mused. If anyone recognizes me, the heir of the Emberheart family, it would spell disaster for this trip.

Even her mother had questioned this plan before approving it. Irina could still hear her voice, calm but probing, asking whether Etheria Haven was truly the right place to start their journey. Irina had convinced her with careful reasoning: teleportation gates would reveal her identity in an instant, while trains offered a safer alternative—at least in appearance. Besides, she thought with a faint smile, there's something nostalgic and authentic about train travel. I didn't want to miss out on that experience.

That last part, of course, was an excuse. The real reason she'd chosen the train was simpler. I wanted to experience it with him, she admitted silently, her gaze flicking briefly toward Astron. Not everything has to be about magic or efficiency. Some things should just... be.

The car pulled into the underground lot of Etheria Haven Station, a sprawling hub of magical and modern transportation. The driver parked discreetly near an unmarked entrance, a quieter section reserved for high-profile travelers seeking anonymity. Irina adjusted her coat as the driver opened the door for them.

"Here we are," she said, stepping out and glancing at Astron as he followed. "Stick close. We're not lingering."

Astron nodded, his gray eyes scanning the station. The air was charged with energy, and even without seeing it directly, he could feel the magical currents flowing around them. People moved briskly through the vast space, the atmosphere alive with the subtle hum of arcane activity.

The station itself was a masterpiece of magical engineering. High ceilings were

adorned with floating, glowing runes that shifted and reformed to display train schedules. Streams of light crisscrossed the space, guiding travelers to their destinations. The faint scent of ozone and mana lingered in the air, a constant reminder that this was no ordinary place.

Irina led the way, her steps brisk and purposeful. She glanced briefly at Astron, who moved beside her with his usual calm demeanor.

As they approached the security checkpoint, she leaned closer to him, her voice low. "Remember what I said no risks, no unnecessary attention. Let me handle everything."

He gave a small nod, his expression unreadable. "Understood."

'He....'

Though it was clear that, he was enjoying the way Irina was acting.

They passed through the checkpoint smoothly, their disguises holding firm as they blended into the stream of travelers. Irina let out a small breath of relief once they reached the platform. The sleek high-speed train awaited them, its metallic surface shimmering faintly under the station's glow.

As the two stood on the platform, waiting for their train to arrive, the low hum of arcane energy in the air seemed to amplify the anticipation. Irina crossed her arms, casting a glance at Astron, who was standing with his usual calm, hands casually at his sides.

"Haaah..." she let out another soft sigh, though she tried to keep it subtle.

Astron's sharp gray eyes flicked toward her. "Why are you sighing?"

Her brow furrowed, and she turned away slightly. "...Nothing"

"Nervous?" he pressed, his tone calm but carrying just enough teasing to make her glance sharply at him.

"Humph. I am not nervous," she replied, her voice defensive.

"Really?" His lips twitched as if holding back. "It doesn't appear to be the case.

"Shut up," she muttered, her gaze darting back to the tracks as if that would end the conversation.

Astron hummed softly, a rare sound that made Irina's cheeks flush slightly. She huffed again, determined not to rise to his bait, but she could feel his amusement lingering in

the air.

Their disguises and fake identities had passed through the checkpoint without incident. Both wore the calm confidence of seasoned travelers, and their illusionary appearances had blended seamlessly into the crowd. Even those who glanced their way quickly looked elsewhere, likely drawn to their appearances for a brief moment before moving on. It's probably because of our looks, Irina thought, her hazel eyes

scanning the station. But as long as no one stops us, it's fine.

The platform was bustling with energy, but the crowd moved with purpose and efficiency. The magical city's influence was clear here-the air carried the hum of runes engraved on walls and

platforms, assisting with everything from navigation to announcements. Irina felt herself relax slightly. We've managed to blend in. That's all that matters for now.

A soft, melodic chime echoed through the station, announcing the arrival of their train. The sleek, silver-blue locomotive came into view, its surface shimmering faintly with runic patterns that pulsed in rhythmic harmony. This wasn't an ordinary train like those in the Valerian Federation. This was the Arcane Stream Express, a high-speed magical marvel managed by the Magic Council.

The train was a symbol of the Arcadia Dominion's prowess in blending magic with technology, a far cry from the standard trains of the Federation. Its carriages were spacious and enchanted for comfort, while its route wove through Etheria Haven and smaller cities in the Arcadia Dominion, connecting the region in a network of mana-infused travel.

Irina glanced at Astron, her hazel eyes glinting. "This is it," she said, stepping forward as the train slowed to a graceful halt.

"Impressive," Astron remarked, his calm tone betraying a flicker of genuine interest as his gaze scanned the intricate runes along the train's body.

A soft smile tugged at Irina's lips as she led the way toward their assigned car. Even he can't hide his curiosity, she thought with a faint sense of satisfaction.

They entered the train, stepping into a spacious corridor lined with softly glowing lights that adjusted to their presence. Their private cabin was located toward the center, its door engraved with subtle runes for soundproofing and privacy. Irina slid the door open and stepped inside, taking in the luxurious yet understated design. Plush seats faced large, magically enhanced windows that offered an unobstructed

view of the landscape.

Astron followed her in, settling into his seat with practiced ease. He glanced briefly at her, his gray eyes thoughtful. "You chose well," he said, his tone neutral but carrying the faintest hint of approval.

Irina smirked as she took her seat across from him, her hazel gaze meeting his. "Of course I did. You expected anything less?"

"Not really," he replied, leaning back in his seat.

As Irina and Astron settled into their cabin, a comfortable silence enveloped the space. The soft hum of mana coursing through the train's enchanted systems created a soothing backdrop, complemented by the faint glow of the magically enhanced

windows.

Astron leaned back in his seat, his sharp gray eyes occasionally drifting to the

intricate patterns etched into the cabin walls. Irina, meanwhile, busied herself adjusting a small travel bag, her movements precise as she placed it neatly by her

side.

A soft knock at the door broke the quiet. Irina straightened, her hazel gaze flicking toward Astron briefly before she called out, "Come in."

The door slid open to reveal a neatly dressed attendant, her uniform adorned with subtle magical insignias that identified her as part of the Arcane Stream Express staff. She stepped inside with a professional smile, holding a mana-imbued tablet in her

hands.

"Good evening, Mr. Calden and Miss Elira," the attendant said warmly, addressing them by the names listed on their tickets. "I'm here to confirm your travel details and provide some information about your accommodations."

Irina nodded, her expression composed but polite. "Go ahead."

The attendant scanned the tickets Astron handed over, her eyes glowing faintly as the tablet verified the enchantments. Once satisfied, she smiled again and began

explaining.



"As premium passengers, you're entitled to a variety of amenities during your journey," she said, her voice smooth and practiced. "Our dining car offers a selection of gourmet meals and beverages, which can also be ordered directly to your cabin. We recommend trying the seasonal specialties, which are freshly prepared by our

onboard chefs."

She gestured toward a panel embedded in the cabin wall. "You can use this interface

to request meals, drinks, or any additional services. We also have a curated library of entertainment, including enchanted books, mana-imbued games, and projection films available for your enjoyment."

Irina exchanged a brief glance with Astron before nodding. "That sounds excellent.

Thank you."

The attendant's smile widened slightly. "If you need anything else, feel free to use the

cabin's communication rune to contact the staff directly. We hope you have a pleasant.

journey."

With that, she bowed slightly and exited the room, sliding the door shut behind her.

For a moment, silence returned, broken only by the faint vibrations of the train as it began to come alive. The soft whirring of mana conduits filled the air, a rhythmic sound that seemed to sync with the cabin's ambient lighting. Outside, the golden light of dusk gave way to the deep blues of early evening.

Irina leaned back in her seat, a faint smile tugging at her lips. "They certainly know

how to set the mood," she remarked, her hazel gaze drifting to the glowing runes embedded in the cabin walls.

Astron nodded slightly, his gray eyes calm as he observed the space around them. "It's

comfortable.

Irina's smile widened. "Exactly. There's something about the details—the soft sounds, the cozy atmosphere, the little luxuries—that make the journey feel... special." Astron tilted his head, his expression thoughtful. "It is interesting...I would have chosen to be at my destination right away, rather than wasting my time on a travel."

"Humph.....that is why you are this dull."

Astron couldn't help but raise his eyebrows at that.

## Chapter 699 157.2 - The Trip

Astron raised an eyebrow, his gray eyes narrowing slightly. "Dull? That's an interesting way to put it."

Irina crossed her legs, leaning back into her seat with an air of confidence. Her hazel eyes glinted with playful defiance as she regarded him. "Yes, dull," she replied, her tone carrying a hint of mock superiority. "You view the journey as nothing more than a chore—a hurdle to get past. That's the problem."

Astron tilted his head slightly, the faintest flicker of amusement crossing his face. "Is that so?"

"It is," Irina declared, gesturing toward the glowing runes on the cabin walls and the soft hum of mana-infused magic in the air. "You're so focused on reaching the destination that you're blind to the beauty of the journey itself. And that's where you're missing out."

Astron's expression didn't change, but his silence invited her to continue. Irina leaned forward slightly, her voice gaining a touch of passion. "Think about it. At the end of the day, if you don't enjoy the journey, how can you truly enjoy your destination? The little details—the atmosphere, the people you're with, the experiences along the way—aren't those just as important as where you're going?"

Astron's gaze lingered on her, thoughtful but unreadable. Irina could tell he was processing her words, weighing them carefully, as he always did. The faint hum of the train filled the silence between them, broken only by the occasional murmur of passengers outside their cabin.

She smirked, satisfied that her words had struck a chord. "See? Even you can't refute that."

Astron remained silent for a moment longer, his sharp gray eyes drifting to the window. Outside, the golden hues of dusk had deepened into the soft blues of evening, the landscape blurring as the

train's mana-fueled engines hummed to life. Finally, he spoke, his tone quieter than before. "You might have a point."

Irina's smirk widened. "Might?"

He glanced at her, though his gaze was a little different. Indeed, when he was thinking about things, he became someone who was much more different. "I said what I said."

"Hmph. Typical," Irina muttered, but the satisfaction in her voice was evident.

As if on cue, the train let out a soft huff, the sound of its powerful engines echoing through the station. A gentle lurch signaled their departure, and soon the rhythmic thrum of the wheels on the tracks joined the ambient hum of mana. The cabin lights adjusted subtly, casting a warm, cozy glow over the space as the Arcane Stream Express began its journey.

Irina leaned back in her seat, her gaze returning to the window. The world outside was already fading into motion, a blur of lights and shapes against the encroaching night. For a brief moment, she let herself savor the sensation—the movement, the sounds, the anticipation of what lay ahead.

Astron, meanwhile, remained quiet, his thoughtful expression unchanged as he turned his attention back to the cabin. Irina's words lingered in his mind, challenging the practicality that had defined him for so long. For the first time, he found himself considering the possibility that the journey itself might hold something of value.

The hum of the train and the subtle warmth of the cabin filled the space, wrapping them in a cocoon of tranquility.

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As the Arcane Stream Express gained speed, the vibrant cityscape of Etheria Haven faded into the distance, replaced by the rolling landscapes of the Arcadia Dominion. Irina glanced out the window, her hazel eyes softening as the scenery shifted, the twilight glow casting a surreal hue over the surroundings.

The train cut smoothly through the Arcadia Dominion, its route weaving through a landscape shaped by both nature and magic. The Dominion, though small compared to the sprawling states of the Valerian Federation, was a hub of development and magical innovation. Its cities—five in total, aside from Etheria Haven—stood as gleaming examples of arcane-industrial prowess.

"Look," Irina said softly, gesturing toward the window. "That's Solren Heights."

Astron's gaze followed hers, his sharp gray eyes taking in the sight of a city nestled along the edge of a mountain range. Solren Heights shimmered under the faint glow of mana-powered lights, its buildings a seamless blend of stone and crystalline structures enchanted to radiate energy. Hovering platforms and mana-fueled transport systems zipped through the air, giving the city an otherworldly vibrance even in the growing darkness.

"Impressive," Astron murmured, his voice low.

Irina smirked faintly. "It's not just the cities. Even the environment here is different, thanks to magical industrialism."

As the train moved deeper into the Dominion, the landscapes shifted again. The mountain ranges loomed larger, their peaks glowing faintly with ambient mana. Waterfalls cascaded down jagged cliffs, their streams shimmering with a soft, unnatural luminescence—a testament to the mana that infused the land. Forests of tall, twisting trees with leaves that glowed faintly in the dark sprawled across the valleys, their bioluminescence a natural phenomenon enhanced by centuries of arcane influence.

"The mountains here aren't just mountains," Irina continued, her voice tinged with pride. "They're part of the Dominion's development. Teleportation networks and mana conduits run through them, linking the cities. Even the ranges themselves have been reshaped by magic—enchanted to prevent landslides and optimize the environment."

Astron leaned slightly closer to the window, his expression calm but his attention fully captured by the sight. The train began to curve along the edge of a ridge, offering a breathtaking view of the valleys below. Streams of light—mana-fueled transport vehicles and glowing ley lines—crisscrossed the landscape, connecting the cities like veins of energy pulsing through a living being.

"You've been to most of these places, I assume," Astron remarked, his voice steady but carrying a hint of curiosity.

Irina nodded. "Of course. My family has strong ties to the Dominion's cities. Etheria Haven is the heart of it all, but the other cities are just as important in their own way. Solren Heights specializes in mana-infused metals and materials. Veilspire focuses on magical artistry and enchantments. Starveil is the center of arcane research and experimentation. Each city contributes something unique to the Dominion's strength."

"..."

But then as if to remember something, Irina's smirk faltered slightly, her gaze returning to the window. "Though as incredible as all this is... it's suffocating sometimes. Living in a place like this means being constantly watched, constantly judged."

"This world is such a place. Regardless of where you go, as long as you are outstanding, you will always be watched."

"I know that, but that doesn't change much."

"Understandable."

"You....Don't you ever care about these things?"

"It is a bit late to ask such a thing, don't you think?"

"Why?"

"..."

"Humph. I still remember how you reacted to those rumors about you."

Astron's gaze remained steady, his sharp gray eyes fixed on the passing landscape as Irina's words hung in the air. The faint hum of the train accompanied their conversation, the rhythmic sound blending with the shifting mana currents outside. For a moment, he said nothing, allowing Irina's statement to linger.

Finally, he spoke, his tone calm and measured. "Why are you referring to it now?"

Irina's hazel eyes flicked to him, narrowing slightly. "Why would I not? The academy was practically buzzing with them when you first arrived. They said you were a criminal, a member of an underground organization... all kinds of ridiculous things."

Astron didn't respond immediately, his expression unreadable. The faint flicker of movement outside the window reflected in his ash-toned hair, making him appear even more detached.

Irina leaned back in her seat, crossing her arms. "Logically, anyone with half a brain would know that someone with a criminal record or ties to an underground group wouldn't be allowed in the academy. But logic isn't exactly a strong point for a lot of the students."

"They're young," Astron replied simply, his tone devoid of judgment. "Young minds latch onto rumors because it's easier than thinking critically."

Irina huffed, her gaze returning to the window. "That's true, but it doesn't make it any less frustrating. The way they whispered behind your back... spreading baseless accusations without even knowing you."

"It didn't bother me," Astron said evenly.

"Didn't it?" Irina turned to face him, her hazel eyes searching his expression. "You acted like it didn't matter, but I saw the way you reacted. You didn't lash out, but you didn't ignore it either. You let them talk, let them assume whatever they wanted."

Astron's lips twitched slightly, though it wasn't quite a smile. "What would you have preferred? That I confront them? Argue with every person who whispered about me?"

Irina's brow furrowed as she considered his words. "I don't know," she admitted. "But the way you just let it all roll off your back... It was like you didn't care at all."

"I didn't," Astron replied, his voice quiet but firm. "Not in the way you think. Rumors are just noise. They don't define who I am, and they don't change my purpose. Let them believe what they want—it doesn't affect me."

Irina frowned, a flicker of frustration crossing her face. "But it does affect how people see you. Don't you care about that?"

"Why should I?" Astron asked, his gaze turning toward her. "I'm not here to be liked. I'm not here to fit into their expectations. As long as I achieve my goals, the rest doesn't matter."

Irina stared at him for a moment, her frustration fading into something more complicated. "You really don't care what anyone thinks, do you?"

"It's a waste of energy," Astron replied simply. "I learned that a long time ago."

Irina's hazel eyes softened, and she looked away, her thoughts swirling. That's just like him—always focused, always detached. But... doesn't he ever get tired of carrying everything alone?

She let out a quiet sigh, her gaze drifting to the glowing forests passing by outside. "If it were me," she muttered, "I'd have dealt with the source of the rumors. Shut them down before they could spread."

"That is something only those with the ability can say," Astron said evenly, his gaze unwavering as he looked out the window.

Irina blinked, caught off guard by the weight behind his words. "What do you mean?"

"You say you'd deal with the source of the rumors, shut them down," Astron continued, his tone calm but laced with quiet intensity. "But you say that because you know you can. You've always had the strength, the authority, the resources to fight back when you wanted to. That's your privilege."

Irina frowned, her hazel eyes narrowing. "Privilege? You make it sound like I haven't earned what I have."

"I'm not saying you haven't," Astron replied, turning his sharp gray eyes toward her. "But not everyone has that luxury. For those who lack strength, power, or a voice, what choice do they have but to swallow it? To endure until they can stand on their own?"

Irina stared at him, her lips parting slightly as his words sank in. He's speaking from experience, she realized, her chest tightening. This isn't just theory for him. He's lived it.

"That's the difference," Astron said, leaning back in his seat. "You can fight back because you know you'll win. But for others, fighting back might cost them everything."

The cabin fell into silence, the rhythmic hum of the train filling the space between them. Irina's gaze dropped to her lap, her thoughts swirling. She didn't know how to respond, her usual sharp retorts feeling hollow in the face of his quiet truth.

Chapter 700 157.3 - The Trip

As the cabin fell silent, Astron did not say much for a while.

"Maybe you're right," Irina said finally, her voice softer. "But at the very least... I'd still fight back."

Astron's gaze lingered on her for a moment, his expression unreadable. "That's because you've never had to question whether it was worth it."

Irina opened her mouth to argue but stopped herself, her frustration mingling with a newfound understanding. He's right. I've always had the power to push back, to make people listen. But what about someone who didn't? What about someone like him?

The rhythmic hum of the train filled the silence between them as Irina stared out the window, her hazel eyes tracing the glowing cliffs and shimmering waterfalls outside. The Arcadia Dominion's mana-infused beauty passed by in a blur, but her mind was elsewhere, caught in the web of Astron's words and the quiet truths they carried.

You've never had to question whether it was worth it.

She sighed softly, her thoughts turning inward. He's right, isn't he? I've always had the ability to push back, to fight for what I want. But that's because I've had the strength, the resources, and the privilege to do so. It's easy for me to talk about freedom when I've never truly lacked the power to claim it.

Her gaze drifted over the passing scenery, the landscape shifting from glowing forests to intricate ley lines stretching across vast fields. The Arcadia Dominion was a place of unparalleled beauty and development, a hub of magic and innovation, yet even here, she realized, no one was truly free.

The unawakened... they rely on Hunters for protection. They can't live freely because their lives are bound by the need for someone stronger to shield them. And Hunters... Her thoughts lingered on her training, the rigorous discipline instilled in her as an Awakened. We're always on guard, always careful. Even the strongest among us live with the weight of their power and the responsibility it brings.

She frowned, her fingers drumming lightly against the armrest. If I were the strongest—stronger than anyone else—would that make me free? Could someone like my mother, who is bound by the rules of society and her role as the Matriarch, live freely if she had no equal?

Her lips pressed into a thin line as she remembered her mother's rigid discipline, her endless meetings, and the constant demands of their family's name. But even if she were the strongest, she'd still be bound by her own rules. She'd still choose to carry the responsibilities she has. Because strength doesn't erase responsibility—it just changes the form it takes.

The train let out another soft chime, its mana conduits glowing faintly as it began to ascend a ridge. The view outside opened up, revealing a breathtaking panorama of the Arcadia Dominion's cities and landscapes. Irina's thoughts darkened further, spiraling into a question she couldn't quite shake.

What if the only way to truly be free is to become something more than human? A god, maybe. But even that... doesn't seem right. Gods, if they exist, have their own rules and roles, don't they? Their own burdens.

She exhaled sharply, shaking her head as if to dispel the heavy thoughts. This is philosophy. It's pointless to think about it too much. But...

Her gaze shifted back to Astron, who remained calm and composed, his sharp gray eyes fixed on the passing scenery.

In the end, is it because he is strong that he can live by himself, or is it because he no longer feels attached?

Her expression softened slightly, a new perspective dawning on her. Maybe that's the answer. Even if I escape one set of responsibilities, another will always find me. There's no such thing as true freedom, not really. What matters is how you carry what you're given—and what you choose to do with it.

Irina leaned back in her seat, letting out a quiet sigh. "I hate to admit it, but you've got a point," she said, her voice low.

Astron glanced at her, his expression unreadable but patient. "Oh?"

"Even if I wanted to escape everything—to just be free—it wouldn't last. Something else would take its place eventually." She smirked faintly, though there was no humor in her tone. "Freedom isn't what I thought it was. It's not just running away or living without rules. It's... something else."

Astron didn't respond immediately, his gaze returning to the glowing landscape outside. "It's finding your own way," he said quietly, almost to himself. "Even within the constraints."

Irina blinked, caught off guard by the uncharacteristic depth in his voice. She studied him for a moment, her smirk fading into something softer. He's not just detached. He's navigating his own version of this, isn't he?

KNOCK!

Just then, a soft knock at the cabin door broke Irina's reverie, pulling her out of her thoughts. She sat up straighter, glancing at Astron, who remained calm but turned his sharp gray eyes toward the door.

"Come in," Irina called, her voice steady.

The door slid open to reveal the attendant from earlier, her professional smile in place. "Mr. Calden, Miss Elira," she said warmly, addressing them by their disguised names. "It's time for your dinner service. As I mentioned earlier, we'll prepare the cabin for your meal now."

Behind her, two additional personnel stepped in, each pushing a polished silver cart laden with covered dishes. The tantalizing aroma of gourmet cuisine began to waft through the cabin, a delicate blend of savory and herbal notes.

"Please allow us a moment to arrange everything," the attendant said, waving her hand.

The rings on the hands of the staff began to glow faintly, intricate runes shimmering to life as they activated the enchantments embedded in the room. The cabin responded immediately—the seating area shifted seamlessly, the plush chairs rearranging themselves into a more formal dining configuration. A smooth, polished table emerged from the floor between them, its surface glowing faintly with a protective mana layer.

The ambient lighting adjusted, casting a warm, inviting glow over the space. The entire process was fluid and almost theatrical, a display of magical precision designed to impress.

Irina raised an eyebrow, her lips twitching into a faint smirk as she watched the transformation.

"They certainly know how to set the stage."

Astron, as usual, remained composed, though his gaze lingered on the glowing rings and the precise movements of the staff. "Efficient," he remarked quietly.

Once the room had been rearranged, the attendants began to place the dishes on the table. Each plate was uncovered with a flourish, revealing beautifully plated meals that looked more like works of art than food. A rich, aromatic soup sat in a delicate porcelain bowl, accompanied by a warm bread basket. There was a main course of mana-infused grilled fish, its scales glistening faintly, paired with roasted vegetables that shimmered subtly with a faint magical enhancement.

"To complement the meal," the attendant said, placing two crystal glasses on the table, "we've brought our finest enchanted wine. It's non-alcoholic but infused with a calming mana blend to enhance relaxation."

Irina glanced at Astron as the final touches were made to the table. "See? Even you can't complain about this level of detail."

"..."

Astron could only stay silent.



The attendant and her team stepped back, their hands folded neatly in front of them. "If there's anything else you require during your meal, please don't hesitate to use the communication rune. Enjoy your dinner."

With that, they bowed slightly and exited the room, leaving the two of them alone in the transformed space. The soft hum of the train continued as a backdrop, blending with the faint clinking of silverware as Irina reached for her glass.

"Well," she said, raising the glass slightly, "to the journey."

"....Speechless...."

Astron commented, his voice laced with sarcasm.

"What?"

"You need to practice these lines a little more."

"Why?"

"Why do you think?"

Astron set his glass down with a calm, deliberate motion, his sharp gray eyes glinting faintly as he regarded Irina. "Your choice of words," he began, his tone as even as ever, "sounds like someone trying too hard to be wise. It's... juvenile."

Irina's hazel eyes narrowed as she stiffened in her seat, her expression shifting from playful to annoyed in an instant. "Juvenile? Excuse me?" she shot back, her voice dripping with indignation.

Astron leaned back slightly, his gaze unwavering. "You said, 'To the journey,' like it's something profound," he said, his voice carrying just enough sarcasm to be grating. "But it came off more like you were imitating someone older and wiser than you are."

Irina's cheeks flushed, though whether it was from anger or embarrassment was unclear. "Hmph! Why am I even bothering to toast with you?" she snapped, setting her glass down with a bit more force than necessary.

Astron raised an eyebrow, unbothered by her outburst. "I was wondering the same thing," he said coolly, his lips twitching faintly as if suppressing a smirk.

Irina crossed her arms, leaning back in her chair with a dramatic huff. "You're insufferable, you know that?" she muttered, glaring at the pristine table as if it were somehow at fault for her irritation. "Here I was, trying to make this meal feel a little special, and you ruined it with your stupid remarks."

"Stupid remarks?" Astron repeated, tilting his head slightly. "I thought I was being helpful. You could use the feedback."

"Feedback?" she sputtered, her fiery gaze snapping back to him. "You're impossible."

Astron shrugged, unperturbed by her frustration. "I'm just saying, if you're going to try for a profound toast, you might want to work on your delivery."

Irina let out an exasperated sigh, slumping slightly in her seat. "Why do I even try?" she muttered, sulking as she poked at her plate with her fork.

Astron watched her with his usual calm, his expression unreadable. He didn't offer an apology or attempt to console her, instead taking another sip of his enchanted wine as if the entire exchange were entirely unremarkable.

The silence stretched between them for a moment before Irina, unable to stand it, let out another huff. "You're so aggravating," she said, though there was a faint pout to her tone now, the edge of her frustration softening.

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And well, just like that the nighttime came.

And another crisis occurred.

Or rather an opportunity.

"You.....did you really book a single bedroom?"