

H. Academy 701

Chapter 701 157.4 - The Trip

The soft hum of the train persisted as the cabin lights dimmed, signaling the approach of nighttime. Irina tapped the interface on the wall, activating the cabin's transformation for its sleeping arrangement.

The room responded instantly, the dining table and chairs shifting seamlessly back into the floor. The faint glow of runes lit up the walls as the bed emerged from a concealed compartment, a luxurious king-sized mattress draped in soft, plush linens.

Astron, standing to the side, watched the transformation unfold with his usual calm. But as the bed revealed itself—its singular, unmistakably shared nature—he raised an eyebrow, his sharp gray eyes flicking toward Irina.

"You..." He began, his tone as calm as ever but carrying a hint of incredulity. "...did you really book a single bedroom?"

Irina turned toward him, her hazel eyes widening in feigned surprise. "What? I—I didn't know it was only a single bed!" she said, her voice laced with just the right amount of indignation.

Astron's gaze lingered on her, his expression unreadable as he observed her for a long moment. The room fell silent save for the faint hum of the train as it continued its steady journey through the Arcadia Dominion.

Then, he spoke his tone as cutting as it was calm. "You're lying."

Irina stiffened, though she quickly tried to cover it by crossing her arms. "I am not!" she shot back, her voice firm, though her flushed cheeks betrayed her.

"You can't escape my eyes," Astron said simply, his sharp gaze unwavering. "You booked this room knowing exactly what it was."

Irina's lips twitched as she fought to maintain her composure. "I didn't," she insisted, turning her head away. "It's just a coincidence."

Astron didn't reply immediately, but his silence was deafening. His piercing gaze seemed to strip away any pretense, leaving her feeling uncomfortably exposed. Irina avoided his eyes, her mind racing.

So what if I'm lying? she thought defiantly. It's not like you can prove it. As long as I don't acknowledge it, what can you do?

She glanced at him briefly, her smirk returning as a faintly mischievous glint shone in her eyes. And even then, we're already in this room. What are you going to do, leave the train or find another room? Heh, you're trapped here with me. You can't do anything.

Astron sighed softly, his expression shifting into something between exasperation and resignation. "You're not very good at hiding your intentions," he remarked, his voice calm but tinged with dry amusement.

Irina turned to face him fully, her arms still crossed. "And you're not very good at minding your own business," she retorted, her tone haughty. "Besides, it's just a bed. What's the big deal?"

Astron raised an eyebrow. "It's not about the bed. It's about your inability to admit what's obvious."

"Well, I'm not admitting anything," Irina said with a huff, turning her back to him. "So, you can think whatever you want."

Astron shook his head slightly but didn't press further. Instead, he stepped forward, his calm demeanor unshaken as he approached the bed. "Fine," he said simply, his voice even. "I'll take the right side. You stay on the left."

The room was quiet save for the faint hum of the train, the soft lighting casting warm shadows over the space. Astron stepped away from the bed, grabbing a small bag he'd brought with him.

"Where are you going?" Irina asked, her hazel eyes narrowing slightly as she watched him head toward the bathroom.

Astron glanced back at her, his sharp gray eyes calm. "To change."

Irina huffed, crossing her arms. "Change here."

Astron raised an eyebrow, his gaze flicking briefly to her before he shook his head. "No."

"Why not?" Irina pressed a mischievous glint in her eyes. "What's the big deal?"

Astron gave her a long, almost incredulous look. "I'm not into these kinds of things," he said flatly, his tone calm but edged with mild disbelief.

Irina's cheeks flushed, and she immediately looked away, waving her hand dismissively. "Hmph! As if that's what I meant!" she muttered, though her voice betrayed her embarrassment. She shook her head, pretending to focus on the glowing runes in the room. "Whatever, just go."

Astron turned back toward the bathroom, pausing only when Irina's voice stopped him again.

"Wait."

He turned slightly, his expression as unreadable as ever.

"You should turn off the disguise," Irina said, gesturing vaguely toward him. Her hazel eyes flicked to the ring on his finger. "It's just us here. Why bother?"

Astron raised an eyebrow. "What happened to being careful?"

Irina rolled her eyes, letting out a soft huff. "It's just the two of us. No one's watching, and no one's coming in. Why are you being so uptight?"

Astron shrugged, his calm demeanor unshaken. "If something unusual happens, it's not my responsibility," he said simply, then stepped into the bathroom without further argument.

Irina watched him disappear, her gaze lingering on the closed door for a moment before she exhaled softly. So stubborn, she thought, her lips twitching into a faint smirk. But at least he listens... sort of.

A few minutes later, the bathroom door opened, and Astron stepped out. He had changed into his sleeping clothes—simple, dark, and practical—but his appearance was striking nonetheless. His black hair was slightly damp, glistening faintly in the light, and small drops of water clung to his sharp features, giving his skin an almost luminous quality. His piercing purple eyes, no longer muted by the disguise, stood out vividly against his calm expression.

Irina glanced up from where she was seated, her gaze locking onto him for a brief moment before she quickly looked away, her cheeks heating. She let out a long, exaggerated sigh, feigning exasperation. "Your face... it's really fatal, you know that?"

Astron tilted his head slightly, his gaze calm but questioning. "Fatal?"

"Never mind," she muttered, standing abruptly. She grabbed her own bag, her movements brisk as she made her way to the bathroom. "I'm changing."

Astron didn't respond, simply moving toward the bed and settling on his designated side. As the door clicked shut behind Irina, she leaned against it for a moment, taking a deep breath to steady herself. This is going to be a long night, she thought, shaking her head before beginning to change.

A few minutes later, the bathroom door opened, and Irina stepped out. She had changed into her sleeping clothes—a simple but elegant set that spoke to her upbringing. Her damp chestnut brown hair, a result of her disguise, fell loosely around her shoulders, and her hazel eyes glanced briefly at Astron before she made her way toward the bed.

Astron, seated on the far side, was leaning against the headboard, his sharp purple eyes fixed on the glowing scenery outside the window. His calm demeanor was unshaken as Irina climbed into the bed, curling up on her side with a content sigh. For a while, she simply lay there, watching the subtle glow of the runes that adorned the cabin walls and the occasional shimmer of light reflecting from outside.

But her gaze kept drifting toward him—his relaxed posture, his striking features highlighted faintly by the ambient light, and the way his black hair framed his calm, unreadable expression. Finally, unable to resist, she sat up and shifted toward him, settling herself on his side of the bed.

Astron's eyebrows twitched slightly as he glanced at her. "What are you doing?"

"Watching the scenery," she said simply, her tone carrying a casual confidence that made it clear she wasn't moving.

Astron's sharp gaze flicked from her to the window, then back again. "Haven't you watched enough already?"

"So what?" she replied with a faint smirk. "I haven't had enough."

He exhaled softly, his expression as composed as ever, though the faintest flicker of exasperation crossed his eyes. Irina, meanwhile, continued watching the scenery outside, her focus occasionally shifting to him from the corner of her eye.

The glowing forests and mana-imbued cliffs of the Arcadia Dominion continued to pass by, casting a serene glow over the room. But for Irina, the view inside the cabin was proving far more captivating.

Astron's voice broke the silence. "It's getting late. We should sleep."

Irina glanced at him, then let out a soft sigh. "Fine," she said, her tone almost reluctant as she moved back to her side of the bed. Curling into the soft blankets, she turned her back to him, her eyes closing. "Goodnight," she murmured, her voice quieter now.

"Goodnight," he replied, his tone as steady as ever.

Irina lay curled in the bed, the soft hum of the train and the faint glow of mana-infused runes creating a serene atmosphere. But sleep didn't come easily. Her mind raced, filled with the novelty of the situation—sharing a bed in a train cabin, the quiet presence of Astron beside her, and the strange tension that lingered in the air.

She shifted slightly under the blankets, glancing over her shoulder at him. His back was to her, his dark silhouette outlined by the faint glow of the window. After a moment of hesitation, she spoke softly.

"Are you sleeping?"

Silence.

She frowned, turning a little more toward him. "Are you sleeping?" she repeated, her voice a touch louder.

Still nothing.

She waited for a beat, her lips pressing into a thin line. "Astron," she whispered insistently. "Are you—"

Finally, his voice cut through the quiet, calm but carrying a faint edge of exasperation. "I'm trying, but someone isn't making it easy."

Irina huffed, crossing her arms under the blanket. "Humph! Well, excuse me for not being able to sleep immediately. Not all of us are machines who can just turn off at will."

Astron sighed softly, but he didn't respond. His calm demeanor only fueled her irritation.

She turned fully to face him now, resting her chin on her arm as she stared at his back. "You don't seem tired, either," she accused lightly.

"I was getting there," he replied, his tone still measured. "Until now."

Her cheeks flushed slightly, but she masked it with a scoff. "It's not my fault this is... new."

Astron tilted his head slightly, though he didn't turn to face her. "New?"

"Yes, new," Irina repeated, her voice quieter now as if admitting something she wasn't entirely comfortable with. "I've never done this before—sharing a room, a bed, traveling like this. It's all... different."

For a moment, there was silence again. Then, Astron shifted slightly, glancing at her over his shoulder, his sharp purple eyes catching the faint light. "Different doesn't mean bad," he said simply.

Irina blinked, caught off guard by the unexpected softness in his tone. She quickly turned away, muttering under her breath. "You're annoyingly insightful sometimes, you know that?"

"Yeah, I do."

Imagining his smug face, she couldn't take it.

'Humph! Take this.'

And she rushed to his side.

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'Humph! Take this!'

Irina didn't give herself time to second-guess as she shifted across the bed and wrapped her arms around Astron from behind. The warmth of his body was startling, and she could feel the steady rhythm of his breathing under her touch. For a brief moment, she hesitated, almost surprised at herself, but she didn't let go.

Astron flinched slightly, his posture stiffening. "What are you doing?" he asked his voice calm but edged with a subtle tension.

"Nothing," Irina replied innocently, though her grip remained firm.

"This doesn't feel like nothing," he said, his tone now carrying a hint of dry humor.

"It may not feel like it, but it is nothing," she retorted, her voice light and unbothered.

"Don't slide your arms," he warned, his sharp purple eyes flicking toward her as if he could sense her next move.

She smirked slightly, leaning just a bit closer. "What are you going to do?"

Astron sighed, his gaze returning to the window. "Aren't you pushing it a bit far?"

"So what?" she replied, her tone more defiant now. "Is it wrong?"

"Wrong?" He paused, his voice steady but thoughtful. "I don't know. But it certainly feels quite... fast."

Irina chuckled softly, resting her chin lightly against his shoulder. "I disagree," she said, her voice carrying a playful edge. "I feel like I've waited for a long time already."

Astron turned his head slightly, his sharp gaze meeting hers. For a moment, his expression was unreadable, but the faintest twitch of his lips suggested he wasn't as unaffected as he wanted to appear.

"Do whatever you want."

"Hehehehe..." Irina giggled softly, a note of triumph in her voice as she buried her face against Astron's back. The warmth of his body was less than she'd expected, a faint chill clinging to him

that made her pause for a moment. Whether it was the contrast with her own warmth or something intrinsic to him, she couldn't quite tell.

Still, she didn't pull away. Instead, she tightened her hold, her arms wrapping securely around his waist as she let herself sink into the moment. The faint scent of him—a clean, subtle fragrance with a hint of something sharper, like steel or ozone—lingered in the air. It wasn't overwhelming, but it was enough to make her heart beat just a little faster.

"You're cold," Irina murmured again, her voice soft and slightly muffled against Astron's back.

Astron glanced over his shoulder, his sharp purple eyes flickering with curiosity. "That's how I usually am," he replied evenly. "You're the one that's hot."

Irina stiffened slightly, her cheeks flushing at his choice of words. "W-What?" she sputtered, but before she could gather herself, he continued.

"It appears you're feeling something," Astron remarked, his voice calm but with a faint edge of teasing. "Maybe... cool down a bit?"

Her face turned crimson as his words fully registered. Feeling something? Cool down? She buried her face further into his back, more out of embarrassment than anything else. This guy! He's impossible!

But as quickly as the flustered thoughts came, Irina's defiance flared up. So what if I feel a little warm? It's not like I'm doing anything wrong. Why should I care what he thinks?

"So what?" she said aloud, her voice gaining a bold edge. "What if I feel a little warm? You'll just have to deal with it."

Astron sighed softly, his tone neutral as ever. "I guess," he said, a faint trace of resignation in his voice.

Irina smirked, her embarrassment now tempered with a small sense of victory. She tightened her hold slightly, resting her cheek against his back as the tension of the moment began to fade. The soft hum of the train and the gentle motion of its journey wrapped around them like a cocoon.

"Goodnight, Astron," she murmured, her voice softer now, the earlier teasing replaced with a quiet sincerity.

Astron didn't respond immediately, his gaze fixed out the window. Then, with a calm steadiness that was so uniquely him, he said, "Goodnight."

The cabin fell into a peaceful silence, and slowly but surely, the two drifted off to sleep, their breaths falling into an unspoken rhythm as the train carried them further into the night.

Irina's dream unfolded like a vivid, forbidden fantasy. The warmth of an unseen presence, the closeness of a certain someone, the intensity of shared glances that led to something far more daring—it was all too real, too overwhelming. Her heart raced, her body responding in ways she hadn't expected, and as the dream grew more intense, a rush of emotions and sensations coursed through her.

But just as the dream reached its crescendo, a sharp jolt of awareness cut through the haze. Her eyes snapped open, her breathing uneven as reality came rushing back. The soft hum of the train grounded her, and her hazel eyes adjusted to the dim light filtering through the cabin. The scenery outside the window slowly came into focus—the train was still moving, its rhythmic motion steady and unchanging.

The world outside was bathed in the soft hues of dawn, the sky just beginning to lighten as the first hints of sunrise painted the horizon. Golden rays crept into the cabin, casting gentle patterns across the bed and walls. The scene was peaceful, serene—an almost cruel contrast to the storm of emotions Irina felt.

Her cheeks burned as the memory of her dream lingered, vivid and embarrassing. She glanced down at herself, her face turning crimson as she realized... something sticky. A quiet groan escaped her lips, and she pressed a hand to her face, mortified.

Why now? Why this? she thought, biting her lip. I can't believe... I actually had a dream like that. And about... him.

Irina blinked as her breathing steadied, the vivid remnants of her dream still swirling in her mind. Her cheeks burned hotter as she became aware of herself, and the mortifying reality of something sticky struck her fully.

Gathering her thoughts—or trying to—she glanced around the cabin, her hazel eyes darting to where Astron had been lying earlier. The sight of the empty space filled her with both confusion and relief.

Where did that guy go? she wondered, narrowing her eyes at the now perfectly made side of the bed. A small sigh of relief escaped her. At least he's not here to see this mess.

She let out a soft, self-conscious laugh, her body relaxing slightly. "Haaah..." A sense of calm returned as she took stock of the situation. Alright, focus. First things first.

She swung her legs off the bed and stood, her movements brisk as she focused on dealing with the evidence of her embarrassing dream. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath and summoned her mana. A shimmering light surrounded her hands as she chanted softly under her breath, casting a combination of magical constructs.

"[Sweep], [Evaporate]..." Her voice steadied as she worked, meticulously layering the spells. The [Clean] spell activated with a soft hum, the sticky discomfort vanishing instantly as her mana swept through the fabric and her clothes. Within moments, she was entirely refreshed, and the mortifying remnants of her dream were gone.

Irina let out another sigh, running a hand through her hair. "This is ridiculous," she muttered to herself, though the relief in her voice was palpable.

She stretched her arms above her head, feeling oddly well-rested despite everything. The tension that had built up in her chest throughout the trip seemed lighter now, dissipated by the warmth of the bed and the peaceful rhythm of the train.

"This guy..." she murmured, her lips curving into a small smile as she thought about Astron. "Whenever I'm with him, I sleep really well."

The thought lingered in her mind, and with it came a faint blush, though she quickly shook it off. Don't think too much about it. Focus on getting ready for the day.

She padded toward the bathroom, grabbing a fresh set of clothes along the way. The soft glow of the cabin lights illuminated her path, and as she stepped inside, the sound of running water greeted her. The shower was warm and inviting, a perfect way to start the morning after the strange but restful night.

As the water cascaded over her, Irina allowed herself a moment of peace, closing her eyes and letting her thoughts drift. The train continued its steady journey, and the soft light of dawn spilled through the window, promising the start of another eventful day.

The warm water cascaded over Irina's skin, soothing her muscles and washing away the remnants of sleep. She tilted her head back, letting the spray hit her face as she sighed contentedly. The gentle steam enveloped her, and for a few precious minutes, she let herself relax completely. It wasn't often she had the chance to indulge like this, and she savored every moment.

This is nice, she thought, a small smile playing on her lips. I could stay here forever.

But eventually, the practicality of the day called her back. Reluctantly, she turned off the water and stepped out, grabbing a towel to dry herself. The cozy warmth lingered on her skin as she wrapped the towel around her body. Out of habit, she didn't think much about it as she exited the bathroom, her damp hair falling loosely around her shoulders.

"Good morning," she said casually, glancing up—and freezing in place as she met Astron's sharp purple eyes.

Astron sat in the cabin, perfectly composed as usual, his gaze fixed on her with an unreadable expression. His eyebrow arched slightly, and after a moment, he replied evenly, "Good morning."

Irina blinked, her mind slow to catch up as she wondered why his reaction felt... odd. Then she noticed the direction of his gaze, her eyes following it downward. Realization struck like a bolt of lightning.

Oh no.

She wasn't wearing any clothes. Just the towel.

Her cheeks flamed a deep crimson as she coughed awkwardly, her hands instinctively clutching the towel tighter. "Cough... uh..."

Without another word, she spun on her heel and retreated back into the bathroom, shutting the door with a decisive thud. Her heart raced as she pressed her back against the cool door, mortification washing over her in waves. This is so not good! How could I forget?!

From the other side of the door, Astron's calm voice carried through. "Why not change here?"

Irina's eyes widened, and she immediately understood what he meant. He's referring to yesterday...

Her embarrassment quickly turned to irritation. "Fuck off," she shot back, her voice sharp but shaky.

A faint hum of amusement came from the other side, though he said nothing more. Irina groaned, running a hand through her damp hair as she tried to collect herself. This guy is impossible! Absolutely impossible!

Muttering under her breath, she quickly dried off and dressed, making sure everything was in place before stepping out again. This time, she held her head high, determined to ignore the smug glint she was sure would be in Astron's eyes. Just act like it didn't happen. Move on. Stay composed.

Easier said than done.

Chapter 703 158.1 - Coffee

When Irina stepped out of the bathroom, fully dressed and composed, she was greeted by the sight of Astron sitting on the couch. A steaming cup of coffee rested on the table beside him, and a small, well-worn book was open in his hands. The serene expression on his face only heightened her earlier embarrassment, though she forced herself to brush it aside.

The faint aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafted through the cabin, and her eyes flicked to the neatly arranged tray nearby. He made coffee? Of course, he did. He always has something in the morning. She recalled noticing this habit before but hadn't paid it much mind until now.

Wordlessly, she grabbed a cup and poured herself some coffee. Taking a careful sip, she walked over and settled on the seat beside him, placing her cup on the table. The warmth of the drink and the calming silence of the cabin eased her lingering embarrassment.

After a few moments, she broke the quiet. "Where did you go?" she asked, tilting her head slightly to study him. "I didn't see you when I woke up."

Astron didn't look up from his book immediately, finishing the line he was reading before responding. "I took a stroll around the train," he said, his tone casual. "There's more here than just the rooms. I wanted to see what this place had to offer."

Irina narrowed her eyes slightly, sensing there was more to it than he let on. Her hazel gaze lingered on him, and she let the silence stretch as she thought about the kind of person he was. Calm, composed, and always assessing. And then, the realization struck her.

"You went out to see the interior... in case something happens, didn't you?" she asked, her voice carrying a note of certainty.

Astron finally glanced at her, closing the book with a soft thud. "You know me well," he admitted simply, taking a sip of his coffee.

"Heh." Irina smirked, leaning back into her seat with a small sense of satisfaction. "Typical. Always thinking ahead, aren't you?"

"It pays to be prepared," Astron said, his tone calm but with an undercurrent of seriousness. "Especially in a place like this."

She rolled her eyes, though a hint of amusement danced in her expression. "You really need to loosen up, you know? Not everything is a battlefield."

Astron didn't reply immediately, taking another sip of his coffee before setting the cup down. "Perhaps," he said finally, his tone unreadable. "But I'd rather not take unnecessary risks."

"You...."

Though she knew, that changing this guy wouldn't be easy. After all, he was like that all the time.

"You...."

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Irina's gaze shifted from Astron's calm expression to the book resting in his hands. The title caught her eye, and she tilted her head slightly, curiosity sparking. "What are you reading?" she asked.

Astron glanced briefly at the cover before responding, his tone as composed as ever. "A book about Psychic Magic."

Irina's eyebrows shot up. "Psychic Magic? Why?"

"I've been interested in it for a while," Astron replied, setting the book down on the small table beside his coffee. "I think I might be talented in that field."

Irina blinked, momentarily caught off guard by his confidence. "You think you're talented?" she repeated, leaning forward slightly. Her hazel eyes narrowed as she studied him. "You know... I was the one who taught you the basic blocks of magic, and that wasn't even that long ago."

Astron shrugged, his expression calm but thoughtful. "And? That doesn't mean I can't be talented. Everyone has their strengths."

Irina folded her arms, a faint smirk tugging at her lips. "And what makes you think this is one of yours?"

Astron met her gaze evenly, his purple eyes unflinching. "Just a feeling," he said simply. "It's not like I have anything to lose by trying."

Irina chuckled softly, shaking her head. "You're unbelievable," she said, though there was no real bite in her words. "You've barely scratched the surface of magic, and now you think you're a prodigy in one of the most specialized fields?"

"Maybe I am," Astron said with a faint trace of amusement, picking up his coffee again. "Maybe I'm not. Either way, it's worth exploring."

Irina sighed, leaning back in her seat. "You're ridiculous, you know that?"

Astron didn't reply immediately, taking a slow sip of his coffee before placing the cup down again. "Maybe," he said, his tone calm and measured. "But if I'm right, it'll be worth it."

She rolled her eyes but couldn't help the small smile that crept onto her face. "Fine," she said, resting her chin on her hand. "Show me when you finally learn to read someone's mind. Then I'll believe you."

Astron looked into her eyes, the faintest hint of a challenge flashing in his eyes. "Don't worry. You'll be the first to know."

Irina huffed softly, shaking her head, but the lightness of their exchange stayed with her as the train continued its journey through the Arcadia Dominion.

The soft chime of the train's arrival echoed through the cabin, signaling that they had reached their destination. Irina straightened in her seat, smoothing the fabric of her coat as she glanced out the window. The city of Solren Heights came into view, its towering trees with glowing mana veins and crystalline spires glistening in the afternoon sun. The station was bustling with activity, a mix of travelers stepping off and new ones preparing to board.

Astron stood, his sharp purple eyes scanning the scene outside. "Busy," he remarked, his tone calm as always.

"Of course it is," Irina replied, flipping through her notebook as she reviewed the schedule she had prepared. "This train is designed for flexible travel. People can book rooms for specific legs of the journey, so there's always movement at major stops like this one."

Astron nodded, slipping his hands into his pockets. "Efficient."

"It is," she said, standing up and grabbing her bag. "Now, about the plan for today—listen up."

He glanced at her, raising an eyebrow. "Do I have a choice?"

"No," Irina replied with a smirk, stepping into the aisle as the door to their cabin slid open. "Come on, let's get off before it gets too crowded."

The two of them stepped off the train onto the platform, which was filled with travelers. The atmosphere was lively yet organized, with station attendants directing people toward exits or helping with luggage. Despite the luxury of the train, Solren Heights Station had a more natural aesthetic. Mana-infused vines climbed along the station's walls, and glowing runes provided soft, ambient lighting.

Irina walked briskly, her steps purposeful as Astron followed at her usual calm pace. "So," she began, flipping open her notebook again. "Here's the plan: we're heading to the springs outside the city. First, we'll grab a mana-powered cab to get to the trail entrance. From there, it's a short hike through the forest to reach the springs."

Astron's gaze flicked to her. "A hike?"

"Yes, a hike," Irina said, rolling her eyes. "Don't tell me you're one of those people who hates walking."

"I don't mind. In fact, I quite like it."

Irina raised an eyebrow at Astron's response. "Really?" she asked, her tone teasing but curious.

Astron gave her a sideways glance, his expression calm and unbothered. "Why wouldn't I?"

Irina smirked, closing her notebook with a snap. "No reason. I just didn't peg you as the type to enjoy anything remotely recreational."

Astron didn't reply, his gaze drifting toward the intricate mana-infused architecture of the station. The faint hum of magical energy in the air seemed to intrigue him, though his face remained composed.

"Heh," Irina said, falling into step beside him as they made their way through the bustling platform. "Maybe there's more to you than just planning and glaring at people."

Astron's lips twitched, though he didn't fully smile. "Perhaps."

The two walked toward the exit, weaving through groups of travelers and station attendants. Despite the crowd, the atmosphere remained surprisingly calm, a testament to the city's organized nature. The station blended seamlessly with the mana-charged environment outside, where towering trees and glowing veins of crystal could be seen stretching toward the sky.

As they stepped into the open air, the city of Solren Heights came into full view. The blend of natural beauty and magical engineering was breathtaking. Towering crystalline spires reflected the sunlight, while streams of mana energy pulsed gently along the streets, creating a sense of life that felt both vibrant and serene.

Irina took a deep breath, letting the fresh, mana-infused air fill her lungs. "Alright," she said, scanning the line of mana-powered cabs waiting nearby. "Let's grab a ride and get started. The springs are about twenty minutes from here."

Astron nodded, his sharp gaze taking in the details of their surroundings as he followed her toward the line of cabs. Despite his usual stoic demeanor, there was a faint glint of curiosity in his eyes, as though the unique environment of Solren Heights had managed to capture his interest.

As they climbed into a sleek, rune-etched vehicle, Irina leaned back against the seat, a small smile tugging at her lips. "You'll see," she said, her tone carrying a hint of excitement. "This is going to be worth the walk."

Astron glanced at her, his expression unreadable. "I'll hold you to that," he replied, settling into the seat as the cab began to hum softly, its mana-powered engine coming to life.

The journey to the springs had begun.

The trail to the springs wound through the heart of Solren Heights' glowing forest, a place where nature and magic coexisted in perfect harmony. The hike, though challenging for ordinary travelers, was almost leisurely for Irina and Astron. As Awakened students of the Arcadia Hunter Academy, they had undergone far more grueling physical training than this.

The path was uneven, lined with moss-covered stones and roots that twisted across the ground like intricate carvings. Mana-infused plants dotted the landscape, their faintly glowing leaves casting a soft, ethereal light. Occasionally, small streams of pure mana trickled through the rocks, filling the air with a refreshing, faintly sweet scent.

Irina walked ahead, her steps sure and steady. "This isn't so bad, is it?" she asked, glancing over her shoulder at Astron.

Astron, who moved with his usual calm precision, didn't seem the least bit affected by the terrain. "It's manageable," he replied simply, his sharp gaze scanning their surroundings.

Irina smirked, her hazel eyes glinting with a hint of challenge. "Manageable? This is nothing compared to the endurance runs we had to do last semester."

Astron's lips twitched faintly, though he didn't fully smile. "True. This feels more like a warm-up."

Irina chuckled, her mood lightened by his rare response. "Well, don't get too comfortable. The trail gets steeper before we reach the springs."

But even the steeper sections proved no match for them. The two moved effortlessly, their training evident in their controlled movements and steady breathing. For Irina, the hike felt like a break from the monotony of formal events and rigid routines. For Astron, it was a quiet escape into an unfamiliar yet strangely calming world.

After about an hour, the sound of flowing water reached their ears. Irina's pace quickened, her excitement bubbling to the surface. "We're almost there," she said, glancing back at Astron, who followed without a word.

They emerged from the forest into a wide clearing, and the sight before them was nothing short of breathtaking. The springs stretched out in a series of crystalline pools, each one glowing faintly with mana energy. The water was impossibly clear, reflecting the vibrant greenery and bioluminescent plants surrounding it. Small waterfalls cascaded into the pools from higher ground, creating a soothing, melodic sound that filled the air.

The entire area felt alive with magic, the ambient mana so thick it was almost tangible. Even the air seemed lighter, easier to breathe.

Irina stopped, taking in the scene with a satisfied smile. "Well?" she asked, turning to Astron. "What do you think?"

Astron's sharp purple eyes scanned the springs, lingering on the shimmering pools and glowing flora. "It's... peaceful," he said after a moment, his tone quieter than usual.

Irina crossed her arms, her smirk softening into something more genuine. "Peaceful, huh? I'll take that as high praise coming from you."

Astron didn't reply immediately, his gaze fixed on the gentle ripple of the water. There was a rare stillness about him, as though the place had managed to pierce through his usual walls.

"Well," Irina said, breaking the silence, "let's not just stand here. Come on, there's a spot further in where we can sit and enjoy the view."

With that, she led the way along the edge of the springs, her steps light as she took in every detail of the magical landscape. Astron followed, his expression unreadable but his movements unhurried, as though he, too, was allowing himself to absorb the rare tranquility of the moment.

Chapter 704 158.2 - Coffee

Irina and Astron sat on a smooth stone ledge by the edge of one of the mana-infused pools. The faint glow of the water reflected on their faces, and the soothing sound of the cascading waterfalls

filled the air. Irina leaned back slightly, her arms supporting her as she tilted her head to gaze at the shimmering canopy of bioluminescent leaves above.

"This," she said softly, her hazel eyes thoughtful, "is what peace should feel like, isn't it?"

Astron, sitting beside her, rested his forearms on his knees as his sharp purple eyes scanned the surroundings. For a moment, he didn't reply, his expression unreadable. Then, with his usual calm tone, he said, "It may look peaceful to you, but for someone who can discern the details, it's far from peaceful."

Irina raised an eyebrow, turning her head toward him. "What do you mean?"

Astron gestured subtly toward the forest and springs around them. "Look closer. Watch carefully."

Irina narrowed her eyes, following his gaze. At first, all she saw was the serene glow of the springs, the gentle sway of leaves in the breeze, and the faint movement of small creatures. But as she concentrated, she began to notice more.

"Over there," Astron said, pointing to a cluster of bushes across the spring. "See that small deer-like creature grazing?"

Irina nodded slowly. "Yeah, I see it."

"Now look to its left," Astron continued, his tone calm but edged with purpose. "There's a predator—a Slothien-Caster Wolf, crouching and waiting to strike."

Irina blinked, her hazel eyes sharpening as she spotted the faint shimmer of the wolf's fur blending with the surroundings. "I didn't notice that..."

"And that's not all," Astron added, pointing toward the water. "In the pool just below us, there's a school of mana fish. But look closer—see the serpentine shape weaving through the rocks?"

Irina squinted, her breath catching as she spotted the faint outline of a predator fish stalking the smaller ones. "They're hunting," she murmured.

"Exactly," Astron said, leaning back slightly. "Everywhere you look, there's movement, tension. The insects in the air—some of them are hunting others on a microscopic scale. In the distance, I can see two lesser mana beasts locked in a territorial fight."

Irina's gaze darted around as she took in the details Astron pointed out, her initial sense of tranquility giving way to a deeper understanding. "So... what you're saying is, what looks peaceful to us is actually full of chaos."

Astron nodded slightly. "For us, who aren't part of this ecosystem, it looks like a serene, untouched world. But for the creatures that live here, this is survival. Every moment is filled with their own conflicts, struggles, and balance."

Irina was silent for a moment, her thoughts swirling as she absorbed his words. "That's... kind of unsettling," she admitted, her tone quieter now. "But I guess it makes sense. Just because something looks calm on the surface doesn't mean it really is."

"Exactly," Astron replied, his gaze fixed on the water. "Perspective changes everything."

Irina leaned back again, her fingers tracing the smooth surface of the rock beneath her. "You always have a way of turning simple things into something complicated," she said, though her tone lacked its usual bite. Instead, there was a note of admiration hidden beneath her words.

"Or," Astron countered, "maybe I'm just seeing what's already there."

Irina chuckled softly, shaking her head. "Fine. You win this one."

The two of them fell into a comfortable silence, each lost in their own thoughts as the glowing springs and the chaotic, vibrant world around them carried on. It wasn't the peace Irina had imagined, but it was a different kind of understanding—one that left her feeling oddly grounded.

The gentle sounds of the springs and the subtle hum of mana-filled air surrounded them as Irina and Astron continued to sit in silence. Irina leaned back, watching the glowing water ripple with soft waves, her mind drifting aimlessly. Just as she began to relax fully into the moment, a loud grumble echoed through the quiet.

Irina froze, her cheeks immediately flushing as her stomach betrayed her. She glanced sideways at Astron, whose sharp purple eyes were now fixed on her, his eyebrows raised in silent question.

"Did you not plan for this?" he asked, his voice calm but carrying a faint trace of amusement.

"I—of course, I did!" Irina shot back, her embarrassment clear in her tone. She coughed lightly, rummaging through her bag. After a moment, she pulled out a neatly packaged set of portable meals, the branding of a high-end prepped meal company prominently displayed.

Astron tilted his head slightly, his gaze shifting from the meals to Irina's face. "That again?" he asked, his tone carrying a note of exasperation.

"What do you mean 'that again'?" Irina huffed, trying to mask her embarrassment as she began to unwrap one of the packages. "These are efficient, and they taste good. What's your problem?"

Astron sighed softly, his expression unreadable as he reached over and gently pushed the meal package back toward her bag. "Put those down," he said, his tone firm but not unkind.

Irina blinked, taken aback. "What? Why?"

Astron stood, brushing off his hands. "You always bring those whenever you go on an expedition or a dungeon crawl, don't you? A specific brand of prepped meals because you're a picky eater."

Irina crossed her arms, glaring at him. "So what? They're convenient and reliable. I don't see the problem."

"The problem," Astron replied, his voice calm as he pulled out his own supplies from his bag, "is that we're not in a dungeon right now, and there's no reason for you to eat something so bland when there's time to prepare something better."

Irina stared at him, her indignation faltering as curiosity took over. "You're going to... cook?"

Astron nodded, pulling out a compact cooking set and a small assortment of fresh ingredients. He set them up on a flat rock nearby with a quiet efficiency that left Irina momentarily speechless.

"You actually brought fresh ingredients?" she asked her tone somewhere between disbelief and curiosity.

"Of course," Astron replied, slicing into a mana-infused herb with practiced precision.

Irina folded her arms, her fiery gaze narrowing as she watched Astron work. "Since when did you become someone who isn't practical?" she asked, her tone carrying a mix of teasing and genuine curiosity. "You're always the one who prioritizes efficiency and practicality over everything else."

Astron didn't glance up as he continued slicing the mana-infused herb with meticulous precision. "You're not wrong," he admitted calmly. "I usually do prefer prepped meals when I'm on expeditions or in combat scenarios. They're quick and provide the necessary nutrients."

"Exactly," Irina said, leaning forward slightly as if she'd just won the argument. "So why are you suddenly acting like a chef out here?"

Astron finally paused, looking at her with his usual composed expression. "Because I knew a certain someone who's a picky eater," he said, his tone flat but pointed.

Irina froze, her cheeks flushing bright red as the implication hit her. "You... you brought all this because of me?" she stammered, trying to mask her embarrassment.

Astron shrugged, resuming his preparations. "I know you'd have glossed over something as important as proper meals, so I brought fresh ingredients from the kitchen before we left. Thankfully, Miss Esme was understanding. It seems she knows you well."

Irina's jaw dropped slightly, her face turning an even deeper shade of crimson. "Miss Esme? You—ugh, of course she'd say yes."

Astron shook his head lightly. "She did mention that you have a habit of overlooking meals when you're focused on other things. She was happy to help."

Irina huffed, crossing her arms and turning her head away. "Miss Esme is supposed to be on my side."

"She is," Astron replied, his tone calm as he pulled out a small pot and other cooking materials from his spatial storage. "Which is exactly why she helped me prepare for this."

Irina blinked as she took in the array of supplies he had at hand. "You were really prepared for this, weren't you?" she asked, her voice tinged with surprise.

Astron nodded slightly, pouring water into the pot and setting it over a portable mana burner. "In case something happens, having things like this in my spatial storage is always good. You never know when circumstances might require a little extra preparation."

Irina tilted her head, watching him as he worked with a surprising level of skill and care. "I didn't think you'd be the type to enjoy cooking," she admitted, her voice quieter now.

Astron shrugged. "It's not about enjoyment. It's about control. Preparing my own meals ensures I know exactly what I'm consuming and can adjust as needed."

Irina raised an eyebrow, a faint smirk returning to her lips. "Control, huh? You really do think about everything."

Astron glanced at her briefly, his sharp purple eyes calm. "It's better than leaving things to chance."

She sighed, leaning back slightly and resting her chin on her hand as she continued to watch him. "You're full of surprises, you know that?"

Astron didn't reply immediately, focusing instead on adding the sliced herbs and other ingredients to the simmering pot. The rich, savory aroma began to fill the air, and despite herself, Irina's stomach grumbled again.

"Just wait," he said, his voice carrying a faint note of amusement. "You'll see it was worth it."

Irina pouted slightly but didn't argue, curiosity and anticipation mingling as she watched Astron's quiet yet efficient movements. Maybe this won't be so bad after all.

The soft hum of the mana burner and the rich aroma of Astron's cooking filled the air as he worked efficiently, preparing their meal. Irina, for her part, busied herself setting out utensils and arranging their spot on a flat rock near the edge of the spring. It wasn't a proper table, but it would do. The

ambient glow of the mana-filled springs provided a soft, natural light, casting a serene ambiance over the scene.

As Astron finished cooking, he began assembling their meal with quiet precision. Using the freshly grilled meat, he created sandwiches and wraps, layering them with mana-infused vegetables and a light herbal dressing. A small pot of hearty soup, infused with the same mana-rich herbs, simmered beside him, its aroma enticing even to someone as picky as Irina.

"You're surprisingly good at this," Irina remarked as she watched him plate the food.

Astron glanced at her briefly, his expression as calm as ever. "It's not difficult if you pay attention."

"Hmph, I guess you are good at paying attention," Irina replied, smirking as she handed him the last of the utensils.

Once everything was ready, the two settled down on the rock, their plates balanced on their laps. As Awakened individuals, their appetites were much larger than ordinary humans, and the portions reflected that. Despite her earlier embarrassment, Irina dug into the food with gusto, savoring each bite.

"This is... really good," she admitted between bites, casting a sidelong glance at Astron.

"I told you it would be," Astron replied simply, sipping his soup.

They ate mostly in silence, the peaceful sounds of the springs and the soft rustle of leaves around them creating a comforting backdrop. Once they finished, Astron tidied up with his usual efficiency, while Irina leaned back on her hands, her gaze drifting upward to the starry sky above.

The darkness of the night was illuminated by countless stars, their brilliance reflected faintly in the glowing waters of the springs. The sight was breathtaking, and Irina found herself momentarily lost in the beauty of it.

"I used to watch the stars all the time when I was a kid," she said softly, breaking the silence.

Astron paused in his movements, glancing at her. "Did you?"

She nodded, a faint smile playing on her lips. "It was one of the few things I could do that felt... free. No responsibilities, no expectations. Just me and the stars."

Astron didn't respond immediately, his gaze following hers to the sky above. The faintest flicker of something—nostalgia, perhaps—crossed his sharp features before he spoke. "The stars do have a way of making everything else feel small."

Irina turned her head slightly to look at him, her hazel eyes searching his expression. She remembered the memories she'd glimpsed of his past, the way he, too, had seemed drawn to the cosmos. The young Astron she'd seen had spent countless hours staring up at the sky, as though searching for answers in its endless expanse.

But she didn't mention it. Instead, she leaned back further, letting her fingers brush against the cool surface of the rock. "You ever wonder what's out there?" she asked, her tone lighter now. "Beyond what we can see?"

"Sometimes," Astron replied, his voice quieter than usual. "But I think it's enough to appreciate what's here."

Irina chuckled softly. "That's surprisingly grounded for someone like you."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing."

"...."

They sat like that for a while, the conversation flowing easily between them as they talked about everything and nothing. The stars above seemed to shine a little brighter, their soft light mingling with the glow of the springs, creating a moment of peace that neither of them had known they needed.

As the stars began to dim and the night gave way to a lighter shade of blue, Irina and Astron finally decided to leave the springs. The glow of the mana-infused pools faded behind them as they retraced their steps along the forest trail, their conversation gradually shifting to lighter topics. Despite the serene atmosphere of the hike back, Irina's thoughts kept drifting toward the city and the next part of her carefully planned trip.

By the time they reached Solren Heights, the city was alive with a soft, magical hum that permeated the air. The glowing mana vines that adorned the buildings cast a warm light, illuminating the streets as they headed toward the hotel Irina had booked in advance. The towering structure exuded luxury, its sleek, modern design blending seamlessly with the natural mana-rich environment.

Astron followed her silently as they entered the grand lobby, its polished floors gleaming under the soft light of floating mana orbs. Irina checked them in with her usual confidence, and soon enough, they were led to their suite by a well-dressed concierge.

The suite itself was as luxurious as expected—spacious, with large windows offering a breathtaking view of the city's glowing skyline. The decor was elegant yet modern, with mana-infused lighting that adjusted to their presence. But it was the centerpiece of the room that immediately caught Astron's attention: a single, massive kingsize bed.

Astron's sharp purple eyes flicked to Irina, his eyebrows raised in silent question. It was the same look he'd given her on the train, as if to ask, Didn't you say you didn't check last time? What's your excuse now?

Irina, who had been setting her bag down, noticed his gaze and turned toward him, her hazel eyes sparkling with a mix of defiance and nonchalance. "What?" she said, crossing her arms.

Astron's expression didn't change, though the faintest twitch of his lips suggested he was trying not to smirk. He gestured subtly toward the bed, his raised eyebrow conveying everything he didn't say aloud.

Irina huffed, tilting her head back slightly. "I just didn't check again," she said matter-of-factly, her tone entirely shameless.

Astron stared at her for a long moment, clearly speechless at her blatant lack of effort to even pretend otherwise. Finally, he sighed softly and shook his head, muttering something under his breath as he set his own bag down.

Irina smirked, clearly enjoying the small victory. "You're not going to complain, are you?"

Astron glanced at her briefly, his calm demeanor fully intact. "What would be the point?" he replied, his voice even. "You'd just come up with another excuse."

Irina chuckled, leaning against the edge of the bed with a triumphant air. "Exactly."

Astron didn't respond, instead turning his attention to unpacking a few essentials. Irina, for her part, felt a small surge of satisfaction. She had no intention of admitting that she had checked this time—and decided not to change the booking. After all, it wasn't like Astron would do anything about it.

The suite's soft lighting adjusted as they moved around, creating a warm, relaxing ambiance. Irina couldn't help but glance toward the bed again, a small smile tugging at her lips as she thought about how the night would unfold. Astron, as usual, remained unbothered—or at least, that's what he wanted her to believe.

The soft glow of the mana-infused lights in the suite gradually dimmed as the night deepened, creating a serene, intimate ambiance. Irina and Astron lay on the large kingsize bed, the silence of the room broken only by the faint hum of the city outside the window.

Irina, as before, shifted closer to Astron, wrapping her arms around him from behind. The warmth of his presence was comforting, and she rested her chin lightly against his shoulder, her hazel eyes half-closed. After a moment, she broke the quiet.

"What did you think of today?" she asked softly, her tone curious.

Astron's sharp purple eyes remained fixed on the ceiling, his voice as composed as ever. "Not bad."

Irina frowned slightly, pulling back just enough to look at him. "Not bad? That's all?"

"What else is there to say?" he replied, his tone calm, almost dismissive.

Irina pouted, narrowing her eyes. "Maybe something else? Like how the springs were beautiful, or the food was amazing?"

"The scenery was good," Astron said after a moment, his tone still neutral.

"That's it?" Irina huffed, clearly dissatisfied. "You're masking it, aren't you? You're just not saying what you really feel."

Astron glanced at her briefly, his expression unreadable. "What makes you think that?"

"Because I know you," she replied confidently, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "And I know when you're holding back."

Astron didn't respond, but the faintest twitch of his lips betrayed that he wasn't entirely unaffected by her persistence.

Feeling emboldened, Irina leaned closer, letting her fingers trace lightly over his shoulder. "Come on, you can be honest with me," she teased, her voice soft and playful. When he didn't immediately reply, her hand drifted lower, brushing against his chest and the firm muscles of his abdomen.

"What's the harm?"

Astron's sharp purple eyes flicked toward her, his expression calm but edged with warning. "Irina."

"What?" she said innocently, her fingers lingering on his abs as she smirked. "I'm just checking if you're still alive. You're so stoic all the time, I wasn't sure."

"You're pushing it," Astron said, his voice low and steady, though the faintest hint of tension crept into his tone.

Irina's smirk widened as she leaned in closer. "Am I? Or are you just not used to someone getting under your skin?"

Astron sighed softly, his calm demeanor somehow both unshaken and slightly exasperated. "If you're trying to provoke me, it's not going to work."

"Oh, I'm not trying," Irina said, her voice dripping with mock innocence. "I'm succeeding."

For a moment, there was silence between them, the charged atmosphere filling the space like a quiet storm. Finally, Astron shook his head.

Irina, noticing Astron's subtle exasperation, let out a soft "Hmph." She shifted closer, resting her chin lightly on his shoulder, her hazel eyes glinting with mischief. "Look at me for a second," she said softly.

Astron turned his head slightly, his sharp purple eyes narrowing. "What is it?"

"Just look," she insisted, her tone light but insistent.

Astron sighed softly, finally turning his face toward her, his gaze steady and questioning. Before he could say anything further, Irina leaned in and pressed a swift, fleeting kiss to his lips—a barely-there touch, so quick it was over before he could even react.

She pulled back immediately, her cheeks faintly flushed, but she masked it with a smirk. "Good night," she murmured, turning her head away and burying her face against the bed behind his back, her arms wrapping around him once more.

Astron froze for a brief moment, his sharp purple eyes blinking as he processed what had just happened. His usual calm demeanor faltered slightly, replaced by a rare flicker of something unreadable.

"..."

Irina stayed quiet, though the faintest hint of a giggle escaped her, muffled by the bed. She tightened her hold around him, her warmth pressing against his back. Astron's lips twitched, as if he wanted to say something but chose not to. Instead, he let out a quiet sigh, his composure returning.

"Good night, Irina," he said finally, his tone calm but carrying a faint edge of something softer.

Irina didn't reply, but the small triumphant grin on her face said more than enough.

The soft morning light filtered through the large windows of their luxurious suite, signaling the start of a new day. Irina stirred awake, stretching lazily before noticing the empty side of the bed. Her brows furrowed slightly as she sat up, her fiery red hair slightly tousled.

Where did he go?

Moments later, the door to the suite clicked open, and Astron entered, his sharp purple eyes glancing toward her briefly before heading to his bag. He looked calm as usual, though his slightly damp shirt hinted at recent activity.

"You're up early," Irina remarked, narrowing her hazel eyes. "Where were you?"

Astron set his bag down and began pulling out fresh clothes. "Used the gym a little," he replied simply.

"The gym?" Irina repeated, raising an eyebrow. "At this hour?"

Astron glanced at her as if to say, You know me better than that. "It's quieter in the morning," he added. "Fewer distractions."

Irina crossed her arms, taking note of this habit. She already knew Astron was an early riser, but the fact that he actively sought out the gym first thing in the morning reinforced her understanding of his disciplined nature. "Hmph. Overachiever."

Astron didn't respond to the teasing, simply gathering his things and heading to the bathroom. "Your turn to make the tea," he said over his shoulder, his tone as even as ever.

Irina blinked, caught off guard by the casual assignment. "What? Me?"

"You heard me," Astron replied, shutting the bathroom door behind him.

Irina muttered under her breath, "Bossy," as she slid out of bed and shuffled toward the kitchenette. She found the tea leaves and set to work, her movements deliberate but clumsy. It wasn't as though she couldn't cook or prepare simple things—she was just used to leaving the finer details to others.

By the time Astron emerged from the bathroom, fresh and composed as always, Irina had managed to brew two cups of tea. She placed them on the small table in the living area with a triumphant air. "There," she declared. "Tea, ready and waiting."

Astron sat across from her, lifting the cup to his lips with his usual calm. He took a sip, his sharp eyes flicking to hers over the rim of the cup. A faint curl tugged at his lips. "It's... drinkable."

"Drinkable?" Irina shot back, glaring at him. "That's all you have to say?"

Astron set the cup down, his expression neutral but his tone lightly teasing. "For your first attempt, it's not bad. But it's not good either."

Irina bristled, her cheeks flushing faintly. "I'll have you know I'm perfectly capable of making excellent tea. Just you wait—I'll get better at this."

Astron raised an eyebrow. "I'll hold you to that."

Irina huffed, crossing her arms. "You'd better. And next time, you're getting nothing but perfection."

"We'll see," Astron replied, taking another sip with maddening calmness.

The lighthearted exchange set the tone for the morning, the two of them settling into a comfortable rhythm as they prepared for the next leg of their journey. Though Irina was determined to outdo herself, she couldn't help but enjoy the casual banter—another small moment that made their time together feel uniquely their own.

Chapter 706 159.1 - The case of plants

After their morning routine, Irina and Astron packed their belongings and left their hotel suite. The streets of Solren Heights buzzed with activity as they made their way to the train station. The glowing mana-infused vines and enchanted structures of Arcadia Dominion slowly began to fade into the distance as the luxury express train awaited them at the station.

This time, the itinerary was clear—they were leaving Arcadia Dominion. Irina, as the meticulous planner she was, had ensured that their paperwork was in perfect order, their disguised identities accounted for at every step. The transition across borders was seamless, the advanced magical documentation functioning without a hitch as they passed through the checkpoint.

The train itself was just as luxurious as the one they had boarded the day before. The mana-infused exterior glimmered faintly under the midday sun as they settled into their private cabin. Large windows offered a panoramic view of the countryside, blending Arcadia's magical glow with the less luminous but equally charming landscapes of the Valerian Federation.

As the train began to move, Irina pulled out her notebook, flipping it open with a sense of purpose. "Alright," she began, catching Astron's attention. "Here's the plan for this leg of the trip."

Astron leaned back in his seat, his sharp purple eyes meeting her hazel ones. "Let's hear it."

Irina smirked, clearly enjoying the role of guide. "We're heading to Everhall City. It's one of the larger cities in the Valerian Federation, known for its blend of modern technology and magical integration. Unlike Arcadia Dominion, where magic saturates everything, Everhall has a balance—practical, efficient, but still imaginative."

Astron raised an eyebrow. "And what do you have planned there?"

Irina's smirk widened. "First, we'll explore the Cloudspire Gardens. It's an artificial oasis in the middle of the city, filled with magically sustained flora from all over the world. After that, I've got tickets to the Mana-Motion Festival. It's a cultural event showcasing magical innovations and performances. Think dancing light constructs, enchanted music, and food stalls with dishes infused with unique mana properties."

"Dancing?" Astron repeated, his tone calm but carrying a faint note of disbelief. He glanced at Irina, his sharp purple eyes narrowing slightly. "I never thought I'd hear you talking about something like that."

Irina huffed, leaning back in her seat with a confident smirk. "Heh, dancing. But this isn't your typical ballroom affair or some mundane jig. The local tradition here is something entirely unique—Mana Reverie Dance."

"Mana Reverie Dance?" Astron raised an eyebrow, his curiosity piqued despite himself.

"Yes!" Irina exclaimed, her hazel eyes lighting up with excitement. "It's a blend of physical movement and mana manipulation. The performers weave mana patterns into the air as they move, creating these breathtaking visual effects. The dance is synchronized with enchanted music, and the whole thing feels like stepping into another world."

"You seem...oddly invested in this."

Irina's cheeks flushed faintly, but she crossed her arms and continued with her usual confidence.

"Well, I've always wanted to experience something like this—a festival steeped in local traditions, something completely different from what I grew up with. But between family responsibilities and training, I never had the chance."

Her voice softened slightly, a wistful note slipping through. "I used to imagine what it would be like to visit places like this, where people celebrate freely, without worrying about politics or reputation. Just... enjoying life."

Astron didn't reply immediately, his gaze lingering on her. She wasn't often this open about her desires, and the rare glimpse into her more vulnerable side didn't go unnoticed.

Irina, noticing his silence, quickly regained her composure and shot him a playful look. "Don't tell me you're too stiff to enjoy something like this. I'm not letting you stand around in the corner like some statue while everyone else has fun."

"You're assuming I'll even join in."

"Oh, you will," Irina said confidently, pointing a finger at him. "Because I'll make sure of it."

Astron sighed softly, leaning back in his seat. "We'll see."

Irina's smirk widened. "Oh, you'll see, alright. Just wait until you experience the festival—you might actually enjoy yourself for once."

The train gradually slowed, the rhythmic hum of mana conduits quieting as it pulled into the station. Astron and Irina gathered their belongings, stepping off into the vibrant atmosphere of Everhall City. Unlike the bustling, industrialized hubs of the Valerian Federation's high-ranked cities, this place carried a calm and almost quaint charm.

The architecture was a blend of stone and wood, infused with subtle magical enhancements. Mana lights hung like lanterns, glowing softly against the warm tones of the buildings. Small streams of water, sustained by gentle mana currents, wove through the city, creating a serene ambiance. Local vendors lined the streets, selling everything from enchanted trinkets to freshly baked bread, the aroma wafting through the air.

Irina paused, taking in the sight. "This is... different," she said, her hazel eyes wide with curiosity. "I've been to high-ranked cities in the Federation, but I've never been here before. It's nothing like I imagined."

Astron raised an eyebrow. "Different how?"

"It's less—how do I put it—industrialized? It's not a sprawling metropolis full of towering buildings and constant noise," Irina replied, gesturing at the scene. "It's more relaxed. Like a place people come to escape all that chaos. I saw pictures before, but seeing it in person is completely different."

Astron nodded slightly, his gaze scanning the surroundings with his usual calm. "It does feel... safe. Like it's in its own bubble."

Irina smiled faintly, pulling out her phone to check their hotel's location. "Alright, the hotel isn't far. Let's check in, drop off our stuff, and then head to the gardens."

The hotel was as charming as the city itself—a cozy, high-class establishment that blended luxury with simplicity. After a smooth check-in process, Irina and Astron left their luggage and set out for the Cloudspire Gardens, which were only a short walk away.

As they entered the gardens, the first thing that struck them was the air—crisp and faintly floral, charged with a subtle hum of mana. The pathways were lined with vibrant plants, many of which seemed to glow faintly or shift colors in response to their surroundings. A towering tree at the center of the gardens stretched toward the sky, its leaves shimmering like gemstones in the sunlight.

"This place..." Irina said softly, her voice trailing off as she looked around in awe. "It's incredible. Some of these plants—I've only read about them."

"Indeed. Many of them are evolved....Are they artificially altered, or naturally evolved?"

Astron's normally vibrant violet eyes now glinted a cool gray, blending seamlessly with his current disguise. He crouched slightly, his sharp gaze scanning the plants with quiet precision. The subtle glow of mana in the air wasn't just a natural byproduct of the environment; it was an intricate balance of magical energy, carefully curated to sustain the unique flora surrounding them.

He reached out, his fingers brushing against the soft leaves of a plant with delicate tendrils that curled in response to his touch. Its faint, rhythmic glow pulsated faster for a moment before settling again. "This one," he said, his voice calm, "isn't purely passive. It reacts to the mana flow of whatever touches it. Likely a symbiotic species. It feeds off ambient mana but also absorbs excess energy from nearby creatures without harming them."

Irina glanced over, intrigued. "You mean it's drawing mana from us?"

"Not exactly," Astron replied, standing upright. "It's more of an exchange. It takes ambient energy we naturally exude and filters it back into the environment. A kind of natural mana recycler. Efficient."

He moved further down the path, pausing in front of a patch of flowers with crystalline petals that shimmered under the sunlight. Their colors shifted subtly, cycling through shades of blue, green, and violet. He leaned closer, observing the fine crystalline structure of the petals. "These," he began, "are fascinating. Their color changes aren't just for show—it's a defensive mechanism. The light refraction creates illusions, confusing predators. Depending on the angle of approach, you'd think the plant isn't even here."

Irina tilted her head, crouching to examine the flowers. "A natural cloaking ability?"

"More or less," Astron replied, his tone analytical. "It's not perfect, but in dense environments, it would be enough to deter most threats. And judging by the faint mana signature, it can release a short burst of energy—probably to stun or blind anything that gets too close."

Irina smiled faintly. "You've really studied this kind of thing."

Astron shrugged, moving toward a towering vine that spiraled around a metallic frame, its leaves a deep, iridescent black. "Not quite. Observation is enough." He touched one of the leaves lightly, noting the slight resistance as the vine shifted almost imperceptibly. "This one," he said, narrowing his gray eyes, "is predatory. Likely feeds on smaller creatures. Its mana signature is more active than the others—almost aggressive."

Irina frowned, stepping back slightly. "Predatory? Here?"

"It's controlled," Astron said, his calm demeanor unshaken. "The mana barrier around this area probably keeps it in check. But if you were to disrupt that..." He let his words trail off, straightening and glancing toward the towering tree at the center of the gardens. "This place is designed as a system. Each plant has a role, and the balance is maintained through subtle interactions. If one element is disturbed, the whole ecosystem would shift to compensate."

Irina crossed her arms, her hazel eyes studying him thoughtfully. "Interesting. Is this the way you work?"

"Yes," Astron replied simply. "Understanding the flow of a system—be it an environment or a situation—is key to surviving it. Even a place like this, beautiful as it seems, isn't without its dangers."

His gaze lingered on the towering tree at the center, its shimmering leaves catching the light. "That tree," he said, "is the anchor. Its roots likely channel mana to the rest of the garden, keeping everything in balance. If anything were to happen to it..." His voice softened, turning contemplative. "The entire system would collapse."

Irina followed his gaze, a thoughtful expression crossing her face. "You're right. That tree is the centerpiece of the gardens. I read that its roots extend throughout the city, drawing mana from the streams and distributing it back to the environment."

Astron gave a small nod, his eyes still fixed on the tree. "Impressive design. Efficient. But fragile."

Chapter 707 159.2 - The case of plants

Irina glanced at the towering vine Astron had identified as predatory, a mischievous glint sparking in her hazel eyes. "You know," she began, her tone light but laced with curiosity, "it would be fascinating to see how it reacts if someone just... gave it a little nudge."

Astron turned to her sharply, his usually calm expression now edged with caution. "Don't even think about it."

She smirked, her arms crossed as she stepped just a bit closer to the vine. "What's the worst that could happen? This place has barriers, right?"

Astron's gray eyes narrowed, his voice low and firm. "Irina."

His warning tone only fueled her amusement. "Relax, I'm kidding," she said, though her grin widened. "Mostly."

Astron's gaze remained fixed on her, and for a moment, Irina thought she saw the faintest twitch in his jaw—a rare crack in his stoic armor. It was enough to make her laugh, the sound light and teasing as she stepped back from the vine.

"Your face!" she said between giggles. "You looked like I was about to summon horde of monsters or something"

Astron sighed, his gray eyes sharp as ever but carrying a faint glint of exasperation. "Knowing the kind of person you are, I really thought you'd do it."

Irina raised an eyebrow, crossing her arms as she looked up at him with mock offense. "Oh? And what kind of person do you think I am?"

Astron tilted his head slightly, his calm demeanor making the next words land with even more weight. "A fiery demoness, perhaps?"

Irina froze, her hazel eyes narrowing as she registered his choice of words. "Fiery demoness? Seriously?" Her cheeks flushed faintly as she remembered the nickname her peers had given her during training—a mix of admiration and intimidation that she hadn't entirely embraced.

"It's just a nickname," she muttered, cringing as she delivered a playful swat to his shoulder. "Don't act like it's a defining character trait."

Astron didn't even flinch, his expression calm but betraying the faintest hint of a smirk. "Is it not? It seems fitting"

Irina groaned, her hand flying to her forehead in mock despair. "Why do I even bother? You're impossible."

"Perhaps," Astron replied smoothly, brushing some imaginary dust off his sleeve, "but at least I'm consistent."

Irina huffed, though her lips quirked into a small, reluctant smile. "Fine. I'll let it slide

I

this time. But if you call me that again..." She raised a finger in warning, though the glimmer of amusement in her eyes betrayed her bluff.

"I'll consider myself warned," Astron said evenly, though the corners of his lips twitched as if suppressing a laugh.

The two continued their walk, the ambient mana around them shimmering faintly in the late afternoon light. Irina shook her head, muttering something about stoic swordsmen and their terrible sense of humor, while Astron remained as composed as ever, his sharp eyes scanning their surroundings as if nothing had happened.

Just like that, as Irina and Astron continued their walk through the garden, they followed a winding path that led to a lively section filled with artists, musicians, and enchanted tools. The Art Grove, as it was called, was a haven for creativity, where mana and art blended seamlessly to bring visions to life.

The first thing that caught their attention was a small group of people working at magical canvases. These weren't ordinary painting surfaces-each canvas shimmered with mana-infused particles, and as the artists moved their brushes, the strokes glowed faintly, leaving trails of vibrant, shifting colors. Some created serene landscapes, while others painted abstract depictions of mana flows or mythical beasts.

"This is..." Irina paused, her hazel eyes lighting up with intrigue. "Beautiful. Look at how they're using mana as part of the process."

Astron observed the scene quietly, his sharp gaze analyzing the subtle interplay of magical energy. "It's efficient," he said after a moment. "Mana isn't just powering the tools; it's part of the medium itself. The paintings are alive in a way, changing slightly based on the artist's intentions and emotions."

"I thought the same....The circuit looks for such manner...."

Irina stepped closer to one of the artists, her attention drawn to a depiction of a starry sky that seemed to ripple as though the stars were alive. "Still, it is amazing," she murmured. "It's like they're capturing the essence of the night, not just its image."

Nearby, a group of musicians played an ethereal melody using mana-infused instruments. A harp with strings made of glowing threads hummed gently, its sound weaving seamlessly with the chiming notes of crystal bells that resonated without being struck. Each instrument seemed to interact with the others, creating a harmonious symphony that enchanted everyone nearby.

"Even the music here is integrated...." Irina said, tilting her head as she listened. Irina's gaze lingered on the glowing harp, her hazel eyes narrowing slightly as she observed the intricate interplay of mana that emanated from its strings. "It's not just the instruments working together," she said thoughtfully, tilting her head. "The mana they're channeling is synchronized. Whoever designed these instruments must have calibrated their mana circuits to harmonize with one another."

Astron glanced at her, his gray eyes steady. Looks like she is enjoying it.'

Realizing what she was feeling, Astron decided to play along.

He glanced at her, his gray eyes steady. "So, you're saying the music itself is an extension of their magic?"

"Exactly," Irina replied, a faint smile tugging at her lips. "The mana threads are binding the vibrations together, creating a resonance field. It's subtle, but you can feel it, right? The way it makes the air feel... alive."

"See those runes? They're designed to absorb any excess mana and redistribute it evenly. That's why the sound feels so natural-it's not just a performance; it's an ecosystem."

She really liked the feeling of explaining things to him. Sure having him explaining things to her was not bad, but she also liked the feeling of giving.

Only receiving knowledge made her feel like she was somehow below him? Even if that was not what he meant, overly experiencing the same thing tended to become a little boring.

As Irina and Astron wandered further into the Art Grove, they came across a small gathering of couples around a series of shimmering, empty canvases. Each canvas radiated a faint glow, and it was clear that these weren't ordinary painting surfaces. Some couples were working together, their brushes moving in tandem, while others took turns painting as their partners watched. The air around the area was filled with laughter, soft conversation, and the occasional hum of mana as the canvases responded to their creators.

Irina paused, her hazel eyes drawn to the scene. 'Painting on the spot? The idea felt strangely compelling. There was something about the atmosphere-the ambient mana, the peaceful surroundings, the sheer creativity of it all-that made the concept seem...

inviting.

"I want to try it," she said suddenly, turning to Astron with an almost childlike enthusiasm.

Astron raised an eyebrow. "Painting?"

"Yes, painting," Irina replied firmly, her excitement undeterred by his skepticism. "Look at how everyone's enjoying themselves. Don't you think it's... nice?" Astron's gaze shifted to the couples for a moment before returning to her. "I suppose."

Irina smirked, grabbing his wrist and dragging him toward the nearest empty canvas before he could protest. A friendly attendant greeted them, explaining the activity in a warm, practiced tone. "This canvas is designed to resonate with the holder of the brush," the attendant said, gesturing to the glowing surface. "The mana within will subtly assist you, acting as a guide or corrector based on your intentions. Even if you're not experienced, it will help bring out your creativity"

Irina's smirk widened at that. "Well, that works out perfectly for me. I've already had training in painting."

Astron gave her a flat look. "Of course you have."

The attendant handed them brushes, and Irina grabbed hers with an almost triumphant air. "Let's see if you can keep up, Mr. Brooding Genius."

Astron didn't dignify her taunt with a response, taking his brush with his usual calm demeanor. He dipped it into one of the shimmering paint pools provided and made his first stroke. The result was... underwhelming. The line wavered, uneven and clumsy,

much to Irina's delight.

"Oh, this is rich," Irina said, her laughter light and teasing. "You're supposed to be this all-knowing, hyper-competent guy, and you can't even paint a straight line?" Astron glanced at her, unbothered by her teasing. "Not everyone was given noble lessons in painting as a child."

Irina waved her brush dramatically, already beginning her own painting. Her strokes were confident, and the canvas responded beautifully, enhancing her work with subtle, glowing details. "Maybe you should've signed up for a few. Look at this- perfection," she said smugly, stepping back to admire her blossoming depiction of a glowing, enchanted forest.

Astron's lips twitched faintly as he focused on his own work. His strokes were slower, more deliberate, but there was a quiet determination in his approach. The canvas, true to its nature, began to assist him, smoothing out his lines and enhancing the shapes. While it wasn't as refined as Irina's, there was a certain raw charm to the abstract shapes and faint mana flows he was beginning to create.

Irina noticed this and frowned, leaning slightly to peek at his canvas. "Imph. It's not terrible," she admitted grudgingly. "But don't think you're catching up to me." Astron made no comment, dipping his brush again and continuing to paint. The quiet

focus on his face only spurred Irina on, her competitive spirit igniting as she added more intricate details to her own work.

'He might be good at everything else,' she thought, 'but, this time I will not let it

happen casily.'

As the two finished their paintings, it became clear that Irina's work was a standout. Her canvas depicted a stunningly vibrant enchanted forest, its glowing flora intertwined with chaotic bursts of light that gave it a dynamic, almost alive quality. The spectators who had gathered around couldn't help but admire it, their voices filled

with awe.

"This is incredible," one of them said, their gaze transfixed. "The details, the energy-

it's so... alive!"

"Such a unique blend of beauty and chaos," another added.

forest itself is

telling a story." Irina basked in the praise, her smirk growing as she crossed her arms and gave Astron

a triumphant glance. "Well, it seems I've got a natural talent for this," she said, her tone dripping with mock humility. "Maybe I should've gone into art instead of magic." Astron, meanwhile, looked at his own canvas, which depicted an abstract representation of mana flow. While it had an intriguing concept and raw appeal, it was clear that some areas lacked the polish or resonance that Irina's work possessed.

The strokes in certain spots seemed disjointed, and the overall composition didn't flow as smoothly.

Irina tilted her head, studying his painting with a faux-critical eye. "Not bad," she said,

clearly relishing her victory. "But... it's a little inconsistent, don't you think? Here-this part doesn't even resonate properly."

Astron sighed softly, shaking his head as he put his brush down. 'She should have this win at least,' he thought, letting her bask in her moment.

But then Irina, emboldened by her win, leaned closer, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "Maybe it's because you're not used to expressing yourself? All that cold, stoic energy -you probably have no idea how to let loose, do you?" For that comment, strangely Astron felt something.

Chapter 708 159.3 - The case of plants

"Maybe it's because you're not used to expressing yourself? All that cold, stoic energy -you probably have no idea how to let loose, do you?"

Astron froze for a moment, his sharp gray eyes narrowing slightly. "Not used to expressing myself?" he repeated, his voice calm but carrying an unmistakable edge. Irina smirked, oblivious to the shift in his tone. "Exactly. That's probably why your painting feels so... rigid. You're always so focused, so in control. You don't know how to just let go and be free, do you?"

Astron turned to her fully, setting his brush aside. His expression remained composed, but there was a flicker of something sharper beneath the surface. "And you think chaotic brushstrokes are the epitome of freedom?" he asked, his voice deceptively mild. "Perhaps you should look a little closer. There's a fine line between freedom and a lack of direction."

Irina blinked, taken aback for a moment before recovering with a defiant huff. "Are you calling my painting directionless?"

"I'm saying," Astron replied evenly, his gaze steady, "that chaos without purpose is just noise. And maybe that's what you're comfortable with-noise. It hides the things you don't want to address."

For a moment, Irina was silent, the playful atmosphere turning unexpectedly charged. She opened her mouth to respond but stopped, a faint flush creeping into her cheeks. It wasn't anger or embarrassment-it was the realization that Astron, in his usual way, had seen straight through her.

"Well," she said after a moment, crossing her arms and turning away with a small pout, "you're still a terrible painter."

Astron's lips twitched faintly, his gaze steady as he glanced at Irina. "Then, how about another round?"

Irina blinked, caught off guard, but before she could reply, the small crowd gathered around them chimed in. A few children tugged at her sleeve, their eyes wide with admiration. "Miss, can you paint another one? Please?" one of them asked, their voice filled with awe.

Irina's expression softened, and she turned to the eager faces surrounding her. How could she say no to that? With a small smirk, she crossed her arms and glanced back at Astron. "Fine. One more. But don't blame me if your second one turns out even worse than the first."

"We'll see," Astron said evenly, picking up a fresh canvas as the two moved to their new spots.

This time, the energy between them was different. Astron's first stroke revealed a stark improvement, his brush gliding over the canvas with a new sense of purpose. It was clear he had taken note of his earlier mistakes, each movement deliberate yet fluid. His colors blended harmoniously, and his lines carried a confidence that had been absent before. Onlookers murmured in amazement, some even questioning whether he had been holding back during his first attempt.

"Look at him," one person said, their voice tinged with disbelief. "Is this really the same guy from before?"

"I know, right? It's like he transformed into a professional in a matter of minutes!" Irina, however, paid no attention to Astron's progress. Her focus was entirely on her own canvas. She had felt something stir within her during her first painting, a faint yet undeniable sense of guidance, and she decided to trust it this time. Her strokes were bold, her colors vibrant yet precise, as if the painting was creating itself through her hands. There was no strategy, no overthinking-just her heart poured onto the

canvas.

When they finished, the crowd around them grew even larger, murmuring with anticipation. Astron set down his brush, his second painting a clear testament to his rapid improvement. It depicted a breathtaking scene of an ethereal waterfall cascading into a serene lake under a shimmering aurora. Every detail was immaculate, from the light reflections on the water to the delicate threads of mana that danced within the aurora. It was as if the painting itself breathed serenity, flawless in its execution.

The crowd erupted into applause, many commenting in awe. "Was he holding back before?" one voice speculated. "This is like a completely different artist!"

But then, Irina stepped back, revealing her work. Gasps rippled through the onlookers, their attention snapping to her canvas.

Her painting wasn't just a picture-it was alive. It depicted a phoenix soaring through a night sky, its wings ablaze with flames that seemed to surge off the canvas. The moon loomed high above, its silver glow casting a serene contrast to the fiery intensity of the phoenix. The flames themselves flickered faintly as if imbued with a spark of life, and the phoenix's expression-its yearning, its determination-practically radiated from the painting.

"It's alive..." someone whispered, their tone reverent.

Another voice chimed in, "It's... it's more than a painting. It's an emotion."

Compared to Astron's flawless execution, Irina's painting was raw and filled with powerful, uncontainable emotion. While Astron's work was a masterpiece of skill and logical analysis of techniques, hers carried a soul, a story that resonated deeply with those who saw it.

Astron's gray eyes lingered on her painting for a moment before he nodded slightly, acknowledging the difference.

'Indeed.....'

It wasn't just a painting. The fire on the canvas-it was alive. Every ember seemed to breathe, fueled by an unyielding will, as if Irina herself had poured her very essence into the strokes. The crowd was right: it wasn't just a picture-it was an emotion, a story captured in a moment of raw brilliance.

As he examined it more closely, his mana senses stirred involuntarily, picking up faint traces of something deeper. The fire wasn't just an artistic illusion. No, it carried the unmistakable signature of Irina's Emberheart lineage. Her innate mana, her fiery will, had been infused into the painting, leaving behind a spark that made the flames come alive. This wasn't just skill; it was manifestation of her soul.

"This... this is something only she could do," Astron thought, his expression softening as he absorbed the painting's intricacies. The phoenix, its wings outstretched as if ready to embrace the heavens, radiated the same indomitable strength that Irina carried in every step, every word. The moon above, glowing with quiet serenity, provided a stark contrast to the phoenix's fiery intensity, yet it didn't feel out of place. Instead, it grounded the painting, giving it balance, a harmony between chaos and

peace.

Astron couldn't help but acknowledge the beauty in what she had created. It wasn't something he could replicate-not because of a lack of skill but because this was uniquely Irina. This was her story, her talent. It was a part of her that even she might not yet understand fully, but it was undeniably there, waiting to bloom. 'She hasn't realized it yet,' he mused, his gaze drifting to Irina, who stood with her arms crossed, her smirk tugging at her lips as she watched the crowd's reactions. 'Her talent isn't just her swordsmanship or her strength. It's this-the ability to pour herself into something, to make it come alive.'

And yet, his eyes flickered back to the painting, drawn to the moon hanging above the phoenix. Something about it stirred him, an emotion he couldn't quite name. It wasn't just the phoenix's blazing wings or the vibrancy of the flames that moved him, but also the quiet, watchful presence of the moon.

The warmth that spread through his chest was unexpected, subtle yet undeniable as if something within the painting-something within Irina's emotions-was reaching out

to him.

'What is this feeling?' he wondered, his fingers twitching slightly since he really couldn't understand it.

Before he could dwell on it further, Irina turned to him, her fiery gaze locking onto his. Her smirk widened, confidence radiating from her like the flames in her painting. "So," she said, tilting her head playfully. "How did I do?"

Astron blinked, momentarily thrown off by her directness, before a faint smile tugged at the corners of his lips. He raised his hands, shaking his head slightly in quiet acknowledgment. "You did really well," he said, his voice low but sincere, carrying the

weight of his admiration.

Irina froze as she caught Astron's faint smile-subtle, almost imperceptible, but undeniably there. It was a rare sight, one she'd only seen in fleeting moments. Yet, this time, something about it felt different. There was no teasing edge, no guarded undertone. Instead, it carried a quiet sincerity that sent an unexpected warmth spreading through her chest.

I can tell... she realized, her heart skipping slightly. He's holding back again, but this time, it's different. That smile... it's softer. Is he... proud of me?

Her cheeks flushed faintly, and before she could stop herself, she blurted out, "Better than you?"

Astron's smile faltered for a brief moment, his sharp gray eyes narrowing slightly. But

Irina could see through it now-after all this time spent with him, she had learned to read the tiniest shifts in his expression. He wasn't annoyed; he was suppressing something, likely the faintest hint of amusement.

"Better than me," he replied evenly, though his tone carried a weight of acknowledgment that made Irina's blush deepen. His gaze, steady and calm as ever, lingered on her, almost as if he were waiting for her next move.

Her heart thudded painfully in her chest. I... I want to kiss him, she thought, the realization hitting her like a sudden wave. Her hazel eyes flicked to his lips, the idea growing stronger. Right now. Just once. Why can't I just-

But then, the murmurs of the crowd broke through her thoughts. The children who

had watched her paint still hovered nearby, their admiration glowing in their eyes. Around her, people whispered about her phoenix painting, comparing it to Astron's work. The realization that they were still surrounded by so many onlookers made Irina's cheeks burn even hotter.

No way, she decided, panic bubbling in her chest. Not here. Not in front of all these

people. They'd all see, and... and he'd just stare at me with that calm, unreadable face like nothing happened. No, I can't. Not now.

Without another word, she turned sharply on her heel, her movements brisk and deliberate. "I'm heading to the garden," she said over her shoulder, her voice pitched louder than usual, betraying her flustered state.

Astron did not say anything, as he just watched her leave.

Her feet carried her quickly away from the scene, her thoughts a jumbled mess of embarrassment and frustration. Coward, she scolded herself as she weaved through the crowd. You had the perfect moment, and you ran away. Ugh! Why do you always

do this? When she reached the edge of the Art Grove, the quiet ambiance of the garden washed over her. Mana-infused plants glowed softly under the evening light, their luminescence casting gentle shadows on the stone pathways. Irina let out a long, shaky breath, leaning against a nearby tree as she pressed a hand to her chest.

"Haaah...."

It was really important to calm down.

Chapter 709 159.4 - The case of plants

The dimly lit office was silent save for the occasional crackle of the secure communication device on Reginald Hawkins's desk. He leaned back in his chair, his fingers steepled as he listened intently to the distorted voice on the other end of the line. The quality of the connection was poor, the sizzling sound of interference cutting through the words, but the information was clear enough.

The voice was soft but precise, carrying the professionalism of someone well-versed in secrecy. "...Lady Irina Emberheart and the young man left for a trip together. From what I could observe, she didn't bring her usual entourage. No guards, no attendants. It's the least defensive state she's been in for quite some time."

Reginald's lips curled into a thin smile, his sharp eyes glinting with interest. "She left without protection? Bold. Foolish. How long ago was this?"

"Two days," the spy answered, the crackling line momentarily cutting out before stabilizing. "They slipped out of the estate quietly. If not for my position, I wouldn't have noticed."

Reginald leaned forward slightly, his elbows resting on the edge of his desk. "And where did they go? Did she leave any clues?"

The spy hesitated for a moment, the sizzling of the line growing louder. "I can't say for certain where they've gone, sir. They've been careful about covering their tracks. But I did find something."

"Go on," Reginald said, his voice low and measured.

"When I was cleaning Lady Irina's room, I came across a note. It appeared to be part of her trip plan. I didn't have much time to examine it, but I saw a marking-one name in particular stood out."

"What was it?" Reginald asked, his tone sharp with impatience.

"[Stellamere Museum]," the spy replied. "It was circled. I couldn't make out the rest of the note, but the marking was distinct."

Reginald mulled over the name for a moment, the gears in his mind already turning. "The Stellamere Museum... That's a few days' journey from here, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir," the spy confirmed. "It's a relatively secluded area, not one you'd expect someone like Lady Irina to frequent. If they're headed there, it's likely she has a specific purpose."

Reginald nodded slowly, his thoughts racing. A secluded location, far from the protection of the Emberheart estate... This could be exactly the opportunity we need. "Very well," he said at last, his tone decisive. "You've done well. Continue monitoring the estate, and let me know if there are any further developments. Leave the rest to me."

"Yes, sir," the spy replied, and the line went dead with a final hiss of static.

Reginald leaned back in his chair once more, his mind already piecing together the next steps. If Irina was heading to the Stellamere Museum, it was the perfect chance to strike. Without her usual defenses, she would be vulnerable-exposed. And he would ensure that this time, there would be no escape.

Reaching for his desk communicator, he summoned his butler. Moments later, the door to his office opened, and the butler entered, bowing respectfully.

"Prepare a team," Reginald ordered, his voice calm but firm. "We may have found our opening. And send someone to confirm the routes to the Stellamere Museum. I want eyes on every path leading there."

The butler inclined his head. "At once, sir."

Reginald Hawkins sat back in his chair, the dim light from the room casting sharp shadows across his stern face. His mind was a storm of calculations and probabilities, but one fact loomed above all else: this clue, fragile as it was, might be their only chance. Irina Emberheart had left in disguise, and the use of facial artifacts made tracking her through conventional means nearly impossible. Such artifacts were rare and expensive, but with her family's resources, there was no doubt she could afford the best.

The lack of access to the Arcadia Dominion's resources compounded the challenge. As a family rooted in the Valerian Federation, the Hawkins family's reach in this region was limited. Even with their influence, operating so far from their power base was risky and inefficient. Every second spent investigating could mean Irina slipping further out of reach.

Reginald tapped a finger against the desk, his mind working through the limitations. The Stellamere Museum clue wasn't confirmed, but it was the only lead they had. He could dispatch scouts, lay ambushes along the routes, and tighten the net as much as possible-but it might not be enough.

Unless he tipped the scales.

Reginald's lips curled into a cold smile as an idea crystallized. There was something else he could use something that few in the world could even attempt.

"Now that our scope is narrowed down," he muttered, his voice low and deliberate, "let's try to use this."

His hand moved to a drawer in the desk, pulling out a small, intricately engraved crystal orb. The artifact shimmered faintly in the dim light, pulsating with latent mana. It was a tool for magic that transcended ordinary means of investigation-a magic that required precision, mental clarity, and immense focus.

[Foresight].

This rare ability was one that Reginald had honed over decades, a skill so delicate that a single misstep could lead to catastrophic failure. It wasn't infallible, but when used correctly, it offered glimpses into possible futures, shedding light on paths that would otherwise remain shrouded in darkness.

He placed the orb on the desk, the intricate carvings glowing faintly as he began to channel his mana into it. The room darkened further as the artifact drew in his

energy, responding to the complex threads of his will.

"Focus," Reginald murmured to himself, closing his eyes. The world around him seemed to fade, replaced by a vast, swirling void. Within it, faint threads of light began to appear, each one representing a possible outcome tied to Irina's journey.

His mind stretched, reaching for the strands that resonated with the clue he had been given: Stellamere Museum.

Images began to flicker in his mind—a patchwork of blurred possibilities, overlapping and shifting like a kaleidoscope. A quiet forest path. The façade of an old museum. A young woman with fiery red hair yet at the same time changing? She was walking beside a man whose features remained obscured. The scene shifted again, the museum's silhouette glowing faintly under the evening sun.

'Ah...'

There.

Reginald's concentration deepened, his focus narrowing on the faint image of Irina and her companion. The magic strained under his will, the visions threatening to fracture into incomprehensibility. But he held firm, pushing through the chaotic weave of possibilities to extract what he needed.

The visions stabilized briefly, and Reginald saw a clearer picture: Irina, her disguise partially lifted, stepping through the museum doors. Beside her, was a man with dark hair and striking purple eyes. Astron Natusalune. The name came to his mind with an almost audible clarity, tying the threads together.

CRACK!

The vision shattered like a fragile pane of glass, the swirling threads of light fracturing into jagged shards that collapsed inward. Reginald Hawkins gasped, his entire body jolting as if struck by a physical blow. His hands gripped the edges of his desk, knuckles white, as an intense wave of pain exploded through him. It felt as though his very nerves were on fire, the magic rebounding violently within his body. "Argh!" he growled, his voice low and guttural, barely suppressing a scream. His head pounded as if a hammer were driving nails into his skull, and his chest heaved with labored breaths. His vision blurred, the room around him spinning as the aftereffects

of the shattered Foresight gripped him in a vice. Reginald clenched his jaw, forcing himself to remain upright despite the searing agony radiating from his core. The backlash from the failed spell was overwhelming,

w

threatening to drag him into unconsciousness, but he refused to yield. His mind, though clouded with pain, latched onto the fragments of insight he had managed to

glean.

Disguise... Stellamere Museum... Astron Natusalune.

The words reverberated in his thoughts, solidifying despite the storm of pain and chaos. The pieces were still there, even if the vision itself had collapsed. He had narrowed down the possibilities, and made sense of Irina's movements, and that alone

was enough to justify the cost.

He let out a slow, shuddering breath, his body trembling as the pain began to subside,

leaving behind a dull, aching throb in its wake. His fingers finally loosened their grip

on the desk, and he leaned back in his chair, sweat beading on his forehead. The effort had taken more out of him than he'd anticipated, but it had also provided him with invaluable direction.

The butler entered the room cautiously, alerted by the muffled sound of Reginald's struggle. His eyes widened slightly at the sight of his master's pale complexion and strained expression, but he said nothing, knowing better than to comment on

Reginald's condition.

"Sir," the butler began, his voice carefully measured, "is everything... under control?"

Reginald waved a hand dismissively, his usual commanding tone slightly weakened.

"It's done. I've seen enough." He paused, taking another steadying breath. "Irina... She's using a disguise. Likely an artifact to mask her appearance. That's why she's been so

hard to trace."

The butler nodded, quickly taking in the information. "And the Stellamere Museum?"

"She's heading there," Reginald confirmed, his voice gaining strength as he pushed past the residual pain. "That much I'm certain of. And she's with him. Astron

Natusalune."

The butler's expression darkened slightly at the mention of the name. "The boy who was seen with her before? The one who-"

"Yes," Reginald interrupted sharply. "The very same. He's the key to all of this." He closed his eyes briefly, the fragmented images of the vision flashing in his mind. "They'll likely arrive at the museum soon if they aren't already there. Prepare

everything."

"Understood, sir." The butler hesitated for moment before adding, "Shall I arrange for

you to rest? The strain from-

"No," Reginald snapped, his tone firm despite the exhaustion in his voice. "There's no time for rest. Not now. We've already lost enough ground."

The butler bowed and left to carry out the orders, leaving Reginald alone in the dimly lit room once more. He exhaled slowly, the ache in his body a constant reminder of the cost of his actions. Yet, in his mind, the clarity of his findings outweighed the pain.

On the other side, Irina and Astron had finished another day in a different city together, continuing their date.

And just like that they were once again in a high-class train, as Irina had prepared her

whole plan.

"Heh...."

And she could finally go somewhere she had been wanting to go for a while.

'Stellamare Museum....Here I come!'

Chapter 710 160.1 - Resting is important

The rhythmic chugging of the train filled the cabin, a steady reminder that this time, their journey was far from luxurious. Irina adjusted herself in her seat, her hazel eyes narrowing slightly as the faint creaks of the older train car reached her ears. The polished elegance of the high-class trains they'd taken before was absent here-no mana-infused amenities, no seamless enchantments. Instead, the cabin was

utilitarian, with modest wooden panels and windows that rattled faintly with each bump in the track.

Irina crossed her arms with a soft huff, her gaze darting toward Astron, who sat across from her with his usual unbothered demeanor. His sharp gray eyes were fixed on the passing scenery, his expression as unreadable as ever. He seemed entirely at ease as if the simplicity of this train suited him more than the previous luxury.

Irina leaned back in her seat with a quiet sigh, her gaze flicking to the window as the scenery blurred past. Her hazel eyes traced the rolling hills and the faint outlines of distant mountains, but her thoughts were elsewhere.

Why are we even stuck on this train? she grumbled inwardly, shifting in her seat. I spent so much time planning every detail of this trip, and now, this? A rickety old train that looks like it hasn't been updated in decades? She bit her lip, feeling a flicker of frustration.

Of course, she knew exactly why they were here. Stellamare City wasn't exactly a hub of luxury transportation. For some inexplicable reason, the usual high-class trains weren't available for the time being, leaving her with no choice but to settle for this. The Stellamare Museum... Her expression softened slightly at the thought. It was a place she'd been wanting to visit for a long while. Both Julia and Lilia had sung its praises, describing it as a treasure trove of ancient artifacts, mana relics, and interactive exhibits that could bring even the driest history lessons to life. And it's not like I've had the chance before, she reminded herself. The museum was far to the west, tucked away in a region she rarely had reason to visit.

But now, with Astron accompanying her, the opportunity had finally presented itself. She'd worked hard to include this stop in their itinerary, weaving it into the flow of their journey as seamlessly as possible. She'd even gone out of her way to ensure their other accommodations were impeccable- just to balance out this train ride.

Still, as much as she was looking forward to their destination, the journey itself was proving to be a challenge. The creaking of the wooden panels, the faint draft seeping through the cracks in the windows, the lack of any enchantments to smooth the ride... It was all so different from the polished, seamless elegance of the high-class trains she was used to.

Irina sighed again, crossing her arms as she glanced at Astron. He sat perfectly still, his sharp gray eyes scanning the passing landscape as if he were taking mental notes. He didn't seem bothered in the slightest by the train's lack of luxury. If anything, he seemed more at home here than he had in the expensive carriages of the Arcane Stream Express.

Of course, he doesn't care, she thought with a small pout. He's not the one who spent hours planning this trip down to the last detail. He probably prefers this kind of simplicity anyway. Ugh, I should've known.

Considering that guy's way of doing things, this much was evident.

She leaned her head against the window, the rhythmic chugging of the train lulling her into a thoughtful silence. Her hazel eyes lingered on the blurred landscape as a memory stirred in her mind-one she hadn't thought of in a while. It had been months ago, during her return from a one-week break. The train she'd booked had been a luxury model, of course, with a private car tailored to her comfort. But midway through the journey, a malfunction had derailed her plans, forcing her into one of the standard cars.

She chuckled softly to herself. And that's where I met him.

Astron had been sitting in one of the corner seats, calm and unbothered, much like he was now. She remembered how his sharp purple eyes had glanced at her without a hint of surprise when she stormed into the train, fuming at her change in circumstances. At the time, she'd been so irritated she hadn't even bothered to notice the quiet aura of focus he carried.

I was so caught up in my own complaints, she thought with a wry smile. And there he was, completely unfazed as if trains like that were just a normal part of his life.

She glanced at him now, still the picture of composure, his gaze fixed on the window as if the passing scenery held secrets only he could see. For some reason, the memory made her smile. Without looking away from him, she decided to break the silence. "Do you use these types of trains often?" she asked, her voice light and curious. Astron turned his head toward her, his sharp gray eyes meeting hers. For a moment, he studied her, as if deciding whether her question warranted an answer. Then, with a small nod, he replied, "If I can't use teleportation gates, yes. Trains are reliable."

"Reliable?" Irina repeated, raising an eyebrow. "You're really okay with all this?" She gestured around them, her tone holding a hint of teasing. "The creaky wood, the rattling windows, the complete lack of amenities?"

Astron tilted his head slightly, his expression as calm as ever. "It gets me where I need to go. That's what matters."

Irina leaned back with a soft sigh, her arms crossing as she regarded him. "You're so practical sometimes it's almost boring"

"Boring or efficient?" Astron countered, his tone deceptively mild.

Irina smirked, shaking her head. "Efficient, maybe. But it is about the journey, the journey! Just how many times do I need to repeat!"

Astron raised his hand in mock defeat, the faintest trace of amusement flickering in his sharp gray eyes. "Journey, journey, I get it," he said dryly, his tone perfectly calm despite her dramatic emphasis.

Irina narrowed her eyes at him, her arms still crossed as she waited for more.

"But," he continued, his voice taking on a more thoughtful edge, "we're hunters, Irina. It's important to get used to situations like this-where you can't prioritize comfort." He gestured faintly around them, the subtle movement encompassing the creaky wooden panels and rattling windows of the train.

"I know that too," Irina replied with a huff, shifting in her seat to face him more directly. "But it's also important to enjoy life when you can. Don't tell me you think it's fine to just grind through everything without stopping to appreciate what's around

you."

"To enjoy life, you need to ensure safety first," Astron said, his tone calm but firm. "And this," he gestured again to their surroundings, "contributes to that safety. If you can't adapt to discomfort, you're leaving yourself vulnerable."

"Humph!" Irina crossed her legs, leaning back with a defiant smirk. "You're just using sophistry to cover up your lack of aesthetic!"

Astron's lips twitched, the barest hint of a smile threatening to break through his composed demeanor. "And you're using aesthetics to avoid acknowledging

practicality."

Irina gasped, placing a hand over her chest in mock offense. "How dare you accuse me

of such shallow reasoning!"

Astron raised an eyebrow, his expression faintly amused but otherwise unreadable.

"Because it's true?"

Irina leaned forward slightly, her fiery hazel eyes locking onto his. "Listen, Mr. Practicality, just because you can survive in a dingy cabin with no amenities doesn't mean you should. Life's too short to ignore the little things-like good food, warm lighting, and maybe a seat that doesn't creak every time you move!"

Astron tilted his head slightly, meeting her gaze with calm precision. "And if you get too used to those comforts, what happens when they're not there? Do you freeze up? Get distracted by how much you miss them?"

"Of course not!" Irina shot back, her tone indignant. "I'm not that fragile. I just think there's a balance, that's all. You don't have to live like a hermit just to prove a point." "I'm not proving a point." Astron replied smoothly. "I'm preparing for reality" Irina harrumphed, crossing her arms and leaning back in her seat with an air of indignation. "You're just escaping," she accused, her tone sharp but tinged with playful defiance.

Astron's sharp gray eyes met hers with steady calm. "It's not that easy to maintain

such a line," he said, his voice measured and composed. "In theory, you can claim to enjoy life while keeping your practical skills unaffected. But in practice, you're lying to yourself most of the time. Comfort has a way of dulling sharp edges."

Irina tilted her head, her hazel eyes narrowing. "Are you saying I'm dulling my edges?"

"I'm saying it's inevitable," Astron replied smoothly. "For instance, if you don't use your magic for a week, even though the basics are engraved in your mind, your body won't move flawlessly all the time. Your reflexes will slow. Your control will waver. The same applies to my martial arts and my body."

He leaned back slightly, his gaze unwavering as he continued, "That same reasoning applies here. If you grow too reliant on comfort, you lose the ability to adapt. It's a

gradual process, but it happens."

Irina frowned, her lips pressing into a thin line. "I can definitely maintain that line,"

she said firmly.

Astron's lips twitched faintly, a hint of amusement flashing in his eyes. "We'll see."

Irina sat up straighter, her gaze sharpening. "What do you mean, 'we'll see'?" "Sooner or later, nighttime will come," Astron said simply, his tone even but with a faint edge of challenge. "And we'll see if you can adapt to these conditions and sleep

well."

Irina gasped, pointing an accusatory finger at him. "I will definitely sleep well!"

Astron raised an eyebrow, his expression as calm as ever. "Good luck with that.

The train rattled softly as it rolled over a rough patch of track, the sound underscoring their exchange. Irina huffed, determined to prove her point. She leaned back against the worn seat, already plotting how she would make the best of the

situation. I'll show him, she thought with resolve. I'll sleep so well he won't have anything to say about it.

Across from her, Astron returned his attention to the window, the faintest trace of a smirk lingering on his lips. We'll see, he thought, already predicting the restless night

ahead.

"Why?"

Though apparently, Irina made a mistake....

She indeed couldn't sleep well.....

Had she known, she wouldn't have made such claims at all.....