

H. Academy 711

Chapter 711 160.2 - Resting is important

The soft hum of the train blended with the faint creaks of the wooden panels, creating a rhythm that should have been soothing. But for Irina, it was anything but. She shifted again in her seat, adjusting the thin blanket she had brought along. The night had deepened, and the cabin was bathed in the faint glow of moonlight streaming through the rattling window.

She closed her eyes tightly, willing herself to fall asleep. But every bump in the tracks sent a jolt through the seat, every faint groan of the train's old structure seemed amplified in the silence. With an exasperated sigh, she sat up, her hazel eyes flicking to Astron.

He sat across from her, his arms crossed and head leaning slightly against the backrest. His sharp features were softened in the dim light, his usually sharp gray eyes hidden behind closed lids. His chest rose and fell in an even rhythm, his expression calm and untroubled.

He's sleeping... Irina thought incredulously, her lips twitching into a pout. Of course, he's sleeping. Why wouldn't he be? He was right-again.

The realization stung, though not as much as she expected. He told me I'd struggle. That adapting to discomfort wasn't as easy as I made it out to be. She sighed softly, leaning her chin on her hand as she studied his peaceful face.

How does he do it? she wondered, her gaze lingering on him. Is it just practice? Or is it something else?

Astron's ability to adapt, to take things as they came without complaint, was

something she envied in moments like these. It wasn't that she couldn't be practical- she was a Hunter, after all-but she'd always valued a balance between efficiency and enjoyment. Yet here she was, unable to sleep because of a rattling window and a hard

seat.

Her lips pressed into a thin line as she watched him. He's probably going to bring this up tomorrow, she thought, her cheeks flushing slightly at the idea. "I told you so," or something equally smug in that calm, unreadable tone of his.

Irina felt a pang of bubbling resentment prick at her chest, fueled partly by her own frustration and partly by the sight of Astron's peaceful sleep. How is it so easy for him? she thought, her hazel eyes narrowing slightly as she glanced at the blanket crumpled in her lap.

Her jaw tightened, and before she could second-guess herself, she stood up with a huff, the sound barely louder than the train's hum. The faint sway of the car as it moved over uneven tracks did little to deter her. The cabin consisted of a block of four seats arranged in pairs facing each other, and while she had originally taken the seat

opposite Astron, she now moved to sit directly beside him.

If he's so comfortable, she thought, her irritation mingling with a touch of childish defiance, then I might as well make it a little harder for him.

The curtain separating their block from the rest of the train's interior swayed slightly as she brushed it aside. Not that it mattered—they had the entire section to themselves. Irina had rented all five blocks around them precisely so they could enjoy their journey in peace. Yet right now, that solitude only served to highlight her restless discomfort.

Sliding into the seat next to Astron, she glanced at him again. His head rested slightly against the seat's backrest, his sharp features illuminated softly by the moonlight. Even now, there was a quiet strength to him, as though nothing could truly disturb his calm.

"Unbelievable," she muttered under her breath, her voice too low to wake him.

She leaned back, crossing her arms as she stared out of the window at the darkened landscape. But her gaze kept drifting back to him, her frustration waning slightly as she took in the peaceful rhythm of his breathing.

It's not fair, she thought, her lips curving into a faint pout. How does he manage to make even this look effortless?

Irina narrowed her eyes, her frustration bubbling into a mischievous defiance. He's so calm, so serene... it's infuriating, she thought. Her gaze fell to his face, softened in sleep, and an idea crept into her mind. Before she could think better of it, her hand moved almost on its own, her index finger pressing gently against his cheek.

The faint warmth of his skin caught her attention first, followed by its texture- smooth and soft, as she had expected. Of course, it's soft, she mused. With a face like his and being an Awakened, it makes sense.

But there was something else. While his skin was soft, it wasn't squishy. His face lacked the slight layer of fat that would give it that plush quality. Instead, it was firm, the kind of firmness that spoke of someone who trained their body rigorously, every muscle and fiber in balance.

Her lips curled into a small, triumphant smirk as she pressed her finger a little harder into his cheek, testing its elasticity. The slight resistance amused her, and she found herself pressing again, just a bit more firmly, as if measuring the give and recoil.

"Heh....Now what?"

She leaned closer, her finger now tracing small circles against his skin. There was a strange satisfaction in the act, a way to release her pent-up annoyance while indulging in the rare opportunity to bother him without consequence.

Astron's face twitched slightly, but he didn't stir. Irina froze, her heart skipping a beat as she waited to see if he would wake. When he didn't, she let out a small sigh of relief,

her smirk returning as she resumed her exploration.

She poked, prodded, and even tried lightly pinching the corner of his jaw, noting how the firm structure remained steadfast under her touch. Not a single ounce of squishiness, she thought, shaking her head. Just hard angles and that infuriating perfection.

Her finger lingered a moment longer before she leaned back slightly, crossing her arms as she regarded his still-sleeping face. "You're lucky you're asleep," she muttered softly, a faint pout tugging at her lips. "Otherwise, I'd have a lot more to say about how annoying you are."

Just then..... Irina froze, her heart lurching in her chest as a sudden, inexplicable chill washed over her. She blinked, her gaze snapping back to Astron's face-only to find his eyes open, glowing with their unmistakable purple intensity.

"Ah?!" she exclaimed, her voice barely more than a strangled whisper. Her finger was still pressed against his cheek, but now, those piercing eyes locked onto hers, clear

and unflinching.

It took her a moment to process the shift, but when she did, her stomach dropped. His disguise-it was gone. His usual gray eyes had been replaced by the vibrant amethyst hue she had grown accustomed to seeing only when his true face was revealed. Even his features seemed sharper now, more distinct in the dim moonlight.

How...? she thought, her mind racing. Wasn't he asleep? When did this-

"You weren't exactly subtle," Astron's voice cut through her thoughts, calm and measured as always. His lips twitched faintly, almost as if he were amused, but the sharpness in his tone was unmistakable. "Did you really think I wouldn't wake up if someone got that close to me?"

Irina's mouth opened, but no words came out. Her brain scrambled for a response, but his steady gaze held her captive.

"You weren't even trying to be stealthy," he continued, his voice carrying a faint edge

of dry humor. "If I didn't wake up when something like this happened, I'd be in a much worse state in dungeons."

Her cheeks burned as his words sank in. He's been awake this whole time?! Watching

me?!

"I... I wasn't..." she stammered, pulling her finger back as if it had been burned. Her face was practically glowing with embarrassment now, her hazel eyes darting anywhere but at him. "You-how long-why didn't you say anything?!"

Astron tilted his head slightly, his sharp gaze unyielding. "Because I was curious," he admitted calmly. "What exactly were you hoping to accomplish by poking and pinching my face?"

"I—I wasn't—" Irina sputtered, her thoughts a jumbled mess of indignation and humiliation. "You were asleep! How was I supposed to know you were awake?!" "You weren't supposed to," he replied simply, leaning back against the seat as if the entire situation were entirely normal. "But you should've considered the possibility." Irina clenched her fists, her frustration bubbling over. "You're impossible!" she hissed, her voice a mix of outrage and mortification. "You could've just said something instead of... instead of letting me make a fool of myself!"

Astron's lips twitched again, this time unmistakably forming a faint smirk. "And interrupt your little experiment?" he asked, his tone as calm as ever. "That would've

been rude."

"Rude?!" Irina's voice pitched higher, her cheeks still burning. "You're the one who just sat there letting me—"

She cut herself off, burying her face in her hands with a groan. He's so infuriating! she thought, her embarrassment only growing as she replayed the scene in her mind. Astron's smirk faded slightly as he studied her, his expression softening by a fraction. "Irina," he said quietly, his tone losing some of its teasing edge. "Next time, maybe just

ask if I'm awake."

She peeked through her fingers, her hazel eyes narrowing at him. "Next time?" she repeated, her voice dripping with exasperation. "There won't be a next time!"

"Are you sure? Since I really doubt that...."

Irina groaned again. "Bastard."

SWOOSH!

And bam.

She was again on top of him.

"What are you doing?" "Humph....how about this?" "About what?"

"Can you sleep like this?"

"Heh....I will stay like this....Let's see if you can 'adapt' to this one as well then!"

=Irina huffed, her cheeks still warm as she adjusted herself on Astron's lap, straddling him with her legs pointed toward the window. Her head rested against his chest, and she crossed her arms in mock defiance, her hazel eyes daring him to say something. Astron, for his part, stayed remarkably composed despite the sudden escalation. His sharp purple eyes narrowed slightly as he looked down at her, his arms resting calmly at his sides. "This case," he began, his voice calm but tinged with a faint note of incredulity, "is not entirely practical."

Irina tilted her head up to look at him, her lips twitching into a triumphant smirk. "Not

practical?" she echoed. "Isn't adapting to strange situations what you preach all the

time?"

Astron raised an eyebrow, the faintest trace of amusement flickering in his eyes.

"There's absolutely no reason for me to practice adapting to this particular situation."

Irina grinned, her confidence growing as she leaned back slightly, her hands resting on his chest. "What if I say this is a situation I'll make you adapt to?" For a moment, Astron simply stared at her, his expression unreadable. The train rattled softly, the only sound filling the silence between them. Then, without a word, he closed his eyes and leaned his head back slightly, as if conceding to her antics. Irina's smirk widened, a feeling of triumph blooming in her chest. "Get used to it while you can," she declared, settling against him with a satisfied sigh. Astron let out a quiet sigh of his own, raising a hand to rest gently on her head. He

patted her lightly, his touch surprisingly soft. "Are you a child?" he asked, his tone carrying a faint edge of teasing.

Irina stiffened, her cheeks flushing once again. "I'm not a child!" she snapped, glaring

up at him even as her blush betrayed her.

"You're acting like one," Astron replied evenly, though the slight upward twitch of his

lips gave away his amusement.

Irina pouted, burying her face against his chest to hide her embarrassment. Astron's hand remained on her head, patting her lightly again.

Irina couldn't think of a proper retort, so she simply stayed where she was, her head

resting against him as the train rocked gently along the tracks. Despite her earlier frustration, she found the position surprisingly comfortable. Maybe he's not so impossible after all, she thought, her eyes drifting closed as a small smile tugged at her

lips.

Astron glanced down at her, his expression softening for a moment before he returned his gaze to the window. The faint glow of the moonlight illuminated the cabin, casting a calm stillness over the scene as the train carried them through the

night.

Chapter 712 161.1 - Market

The train screeched to a halt, the brakes whining as the cabin jolted gently. Irina stirred, her hazel eyes fluttering open. She blinked, momentarily disoriented by the soft warmth against her cheek. Realizing she was still leaning against Astron, she jerked upright with a faint blush, quickly smoothing her hair.

"We've arrived," Astron said, his tone as calm as ever. He rose from his seat, brushing off his cloak with practiced precision. He glanced down at her, his sharp gray eyes (thankfully back to their usual disguise) unreadable as always. "You ready?"

Irina straightened her posture, her earlier embarrassment quickly replaced by her usual poise. "Of course," she replied, her voice firm as she grabbed her bag. She moved to the window, peering out at the platform below.

The station was modest but clean, with polished stone floors and simple arches supporting the roof. Beyond the station's edges, the city spread out in orderly grids of buildings-sharp, modern structures that contrasted sharply with the historical charm of other cities she'd visited. Yet there was something oddly incomplete about it as if the city had been freshly constructed but was still waiting to be fully brought to life. "This is Stellamare," Astron said, his voice low as he joined her by the window.

Irina nodded, her gaze sweeping over the scene. The streets were alive with activity despite the sparse population. Vendors lined the sidewalks, their stalls brimming with goods that reflected a blend of modern and traditional craftsmanship. Bazaar canopies of colorful fabric swayed gently in the breeze, and the hum of quiet conversation filled the air as shoppers browsed.

"It's... different," she murmured, her tone laced with curiosity. "It doesn't feel settled yet."

Astron offered a faint shrug, "Most likely that's because it isn't."

"Indeed. Just a recently constructed city, isn't it?"

"You were the one who brought me here. Don't you know more?" "Cough....."

Irina glanced at him, noting the way his sharp gaze seemed to catalog every detail of the bustling scene below. "Ehm," she said with a small smile, "let's see what this place has to offer."

The two stepped off the train and onto the platform, their boots clicking softly against the polished stone. Irina adjusted her coat, the faint chill of the evening air brushing against her skin. Astron carried his bag slung casually over one shoulder, his posture relaxed as they made their way toward the station's exit.

As they emerged into the open air, the city unfolded before them. Rows of sleek

buildings with smooth, reflective facades lined the main avenues, interspersed with pockets of greenery-small parks and planters brimming with carefully arranged flowers. The streets were lit by soft, glowing orbs of mana, their gentle light giving the city an almost ethereal quality.

Irina's attention was immediately drawn to the bazaar ahead, its vibrant stalls a stark contrast to the clean lines of the surrounding architecture. Vendors called out to passersby, their voices mingling with the sounds of bartering and laughter. The air was thick with the scents of roasted spices, sweet confections, and freshly baked bread.

"Over there," Irina said, nodding toward the bazaar. "We should take a look."

Astron raised an eyebrow. "I thought the museum was the main reason we came here!" "It is," she said with a small smirk, "but I don't see why we can't explore a little first. We're already here, aren't we?"

Astron didn't argue, simply giving a faint nod as he followed her lead.

The bazaar was kaleidoscope of colors and sounds. Brightly patterned awnings shaded the stalls, their edges embroidered with intricate designs. Irina paused at a stall displaying delicate jewelry, her hazel eyes drawn to a pair of earrings shaped like tiny crescent moons.

"These are lovely," she murmured, reaching out to examine them.

"Handmade with mana-infused silver," the vendor said, his tone eager. "The enchantment ensures they'll never tarnish."

Irina smiled politely but set the earrings back down, moving on to the next stall. Astron lingered a few steps behind her, his sharp gaze scanning the crowd with practiced caution.

As they wandered deeper into the bazaar, Irina's attention was caught by a vendor selling what appeared to be small glass orbs filled with swirling colors. She picked one up, watching as the hues shifted and danced within the orb.

"What's this?" she asked the vendor.

"A memory sphere," the vendor explained with a proud smile. "Infused with captured mana flows. Each one is unique-a small piece of someone's memories, preserved for eternity."

Irina arched an eyebrow, intrigued. "Someone's memories?"

"Fragments," the vendor clarified. "Moments of strong emotion-joy, wonder, even sorrow. They resonate with whoever holds them."

She turned the sphere over in her hands, her curiosity piqued. "Interesting"

Astron stepped closer, his gaze briefly flicking to the sphere before settling on her.

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"Do you want it?"

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The vendor leaned forward, his face lighting up with an eager grin. "You've got a good eye," he said, motioning to the sphere in Irina's hands. "That one's special-rare, high-end quality. It used to belong to a noble house before finding its way here. I'll let it go for just 4000 Valer"

Irina's hazel eyes widened slightly at the mention of its supposed noble origins. She turned the sphere over in her hands, watching the swirling colors shift and shimmer. The price didn't seem entirely unreasonable-after all, she was used to far higher price tags in the high-end markets she frequented.

Astron, standing beside her, raised an eyebrow but remained silent. His sharp gaze flicked between the vendor and the sphere, his expression unreadable.

Irina hesitated, her fingers brushing the smooth surface of the sphere. She couldn't deny its allure, nor the curiosity it sparked. But a voice in her head reminded her of her mother's advice: Always haggle. Never take the first offer.

"It's beautiful," she said, her tone thoughtful as she set the sphere back down. "But 4000 Valer seems a bit steep for something without proper documentation of its

origins."

The vendor's grin faltered for a fraction of a second, but he quickly recovered, his hands gesturing animatedly. "Ah, but you see, the quality speaks for itself! The mana flows are exceptionally stable-rare for memory spheres. And look at those colors! That vibrancy is a hallmark of genuine noble craftsmanship,"

Irina tapped her chin, pretending to consider his words. "Even so, I've seen similar items go for much less in markets like this. How about 1500 Valer?"

The vendor's smile slipped into a nervous laugh. "1500? My dear, you wound me! I'd be losing money at that price. But for you, I'll lower it to 3500 Valer. That's a generous

offer."

Irina narrowed her eyes slightly, feeling the thrill of negotiation. "Generous, but still not worth it. 2000 Valer, and I won't go a single coin higher."

The vendor grimaced, his eyes darting to Astron, who stood silently observing the exchange. The vendor's hope of getting support from him quickly faded when Astron simply crossed his arms, his sharp gray eyes offering nothing in the way of help. "Fine," the vendor finally said with a sigh, throwing his hands up in mock defeat. "2000 Valer. You're driving a hard bargain."

Irina's lips curled into a triumphant smile. She handed over the coins and picked up the sphere, its swirling colors catching the light as she held it carefully. "Thank you," she said, her tone polite but firm.

As they stepped away from the stall, Irina glanced at Astron, who had remained silent throughout the negotiation. "What?" she asked, her voice defensive. "I got a good

deal."

Astron's lips twitched into the faintest hint of a smirk. "Did you?"

Irina frowned, clutching the sphere tighter. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing," he said, his tone neutral. "You handled well, considering."

"Considering what?" she demanded, narrowing her eyes at him. "Considering you're used to paying ten times that price for similar items," Astron

replied calmly, his gaze flicking to the sphere. "But it's fine. You seemed happy enough with the deal."

Irina's frown deepened as she studied Astron's calm expression, her hazel eyes narrowing. He wasn't outright mocking her, not with his words anyway-but she knew that tone. That ever-so-slightly amused, maddeningly indifferent tone that said, You tried, but it wasn't good enough.

Her jaw clenched, the sphere still cradled in her palm. "This bastard," she thought, her cheeks warming in frustration. 'He's doing it on purpose. He didn't even say I did poorly, but I know that look. That "I could do better without trying" look.

Her grip tightened on the sphere as she replayed his words in her head. You handled it well, considering.

'Considering what, exactly? That I'm not as good as him at haggling? That I've been ripped off before? Oh no, I'm not letting him get away with this.'

She turned on her heel, her hazel eyes blazing with a sudden, fiery determination. "Fine," she said, her voice sharp.

Astron's gray eyes flicked to her, one brow arching slightly in question. "Fine?" he repeated, his tone as calm as ever.

"I want to compete," she declared, thrusting a finger toward his chest. "If you're so

confident that you could get a better deal, why don't we settle it right now?"

His brow furrowed ever so slightly, the only indication of his mild surprise.

"Compete?"

"Yes!" Irina said, stepping closer, her voice rising with her indignation. "You pick something, anything, from this market, and we'll see who can get the best deal for it. If you're going to stand there acting like you're so much better at this, prove it!" Astron regarded her for a moment, his expression unreadable. Then, he let out a soft sigh, his gaze flicking briefly to the bustling stalls around them. "I wasn't implying-" "Oh, please," Irina cut him off, her hands on her hips. "You absolutely were. Don't even

try to deny it."

I'm not letting him weasel his way out of this,' she thought fiercely, her hazel eyes boring into him. 'He's always so smug, so annoyingly composed. Well, let's see how he does when he's put on the spot.'

Astron's lips twitched into a faint smirk, the kind that only fueled her competitive fire. "Alright," he said simply. "If that's what you want."

Irina blinked, momentarily thrown off by how easily he agreed. 'Wait, that's it? No argument? No condescending remark? No, focus, Irina. You started this, and you're

going to win.'

"Good," she said, her tone firm. "You pick the item. I'll show you exactly how wrong you are."

Astron nodded once, his gaze scanning the nearby stalls. After a few moments, he motioned toward a vendor selling intricately carved mana crystals. The crystals were set into decorative bases, their soft glow illuminating the intricate designs etched into

their surfaces. "That one," he said, his voice calm. "We'll both try to buy the same piece." Irina followed his gaze, her competitive spirit flaring anew. "Perfect," she said, brushing past him toward the stall. I'll make him eat his words. Let's see how smug he is when I out-negotiate him."

Chapter 713 161.2 - Market

The competition's rules were simple: one would haggle first while the other observed from a discreet distance, then they'd switch, each attempting to get a better price for the same item. At the end of three rounds, they'd compare receipts to declare the victor.

Irina, her hazel eyes blazing with determination, volunteered to go first. She stepped up to the first stall-a vibrant display of handwoven scarves, each shimmering faintly with mana-infused thread. Astron lingered just out of carshot, his posture relaxed but his sharp gray eyes clearly watching.

The first haggle was about a scarf.

Irina picked up a pale blue scarf, running her fingers over the delicate fabric as the vendor beamed at her.

"Ah, a fine choice," the vendor said, clasping his hands. "Mana-woven silk, perfect for warding off the chill while enhancing your magical resonance. 3000 Valer."

Irina tilted her head, her expression thoughtful. 'Alright, start strong. Compliment the item, but cast doubt on its worth! She held the scarf up to the light, her lips curving into a small smile.

"It's lovely, but I've seen similar scarves priced lower in Stellamare's main market," she said smoothly. "For 3000 Valer, I'd expect something rarer. How about 1500?"

The vendor's smile faltered. "1500? Madam, this is no ordinary scarf! The mana infusion alone makes it worth far more. I could go to 2500 for you, but not a coin

less."

Irina arched an eyebrow, her tone taking on a polite but firm edge. "2500 is generous, but I doubt you'll move these at that price today. I'll offer 2000 Valer-right now."

The vendor hesitated, glancing between her and the scarf. After a moment, he sighed. "Alright, 2000. You drive a hard bargain."

Irina's lips curled into a triumphant smile as she handed over the coins. She glanced toward Astron, who gave no visible reaction, before moving on to the next stall.

At the next stall, Irina examined a pair of golden earrings shaped like phoenix feathers, their edges glinting faintly with enchantment.

"Ah, exquisite taste!" the vendor exclaimed. "These earrings are imbued with minor fatigue resistance-practical and stylish. Only 8000 Valer."

Irina raised an eyebrow. 'Overpriced. Time to play the long game.' She set the earrings down gently. "8000? They're charming, but for that price. I'd expect a stronger

enchantment."

The vendor looked startled but recovered quickly. "The craftsmanship alone-"

"Is excellent, but not worth more than 5000 Valer," Irina interjected, folding her arms. "That's my offer."

The vendor grimaced. "5000 is far too low... I could do 7000, but not a coin less." Irina gave a small, calculated shrug. "Then I'll look elsewhere. Plenty of vendors carry similar designs."

As she turned to leave, the vendor panicked. "Wait! 6000 Valer. Final offer."

Irina paused, her lips twitching into a victorious smile before she turned back. "Deal"

She handed over the coins, her gaze darting toward Astron. He stood a few stalls away, arms crossed, watching with quiet interest.

At the final stall, Irina selected a small mana trinket-a pendant that shimmered faintly with shifting colors.

"This is a rare piece," the vendor said proudly. "Crafted with spectral mana. 10,000 Valer."

Irina let out a soft laugh, shaking her head. "This one's absurdly overpriced. Heh....you think you can trick me into doing this?" She leaned forward slightly, her tone turning skeptical. "10,000 for this? It's lovely, but I've seen better-crafted pendants with stronger mana flow."

The vendor's smile wavered. "Ah, but this one-"

"I'll offer 4000 Valer," Irina said firmly. "That's more than fair for something of this level."

"4000? Impossible!" the vendor exclaimed. "The materials alone-"

"Are standard," Irina interrupted, holding his gaze. "Look, I don't want to waste either of our time. 5000 Valer, and we'll make the deal now."

The vendor hesitated, his expression conflicted. Finally, he sighed. "Alright, 5000 Valer. You drive a hard bargain, miss."

Irina paid for the pendant, clutching the receipt as she walked back toward Astron. Her eyes sparkled with triumph as she gestured for him to take his turn.

Irina returned to Astron's side, her hazel eyes glowing with triumph as she clasped her hands behind her back. She exuded confidence, the faint smirk on her lips practically daring him to try and top her performance.

"Well," she began smugly, tilting her head slightly. "I hope you were paying attention, Astron. You might learn a thing or two. I managed to get those vendors down to what I'd call very reasonable prices. I'd be surprised if you could even come close." Astron glanced at her, his gray eyes calm and unreadable. "You seem confident," he said simply.

Irina crossed her arms, raising an eyebrow. "Oh, I am. Those prices were practically unbeatable. You should just accept your loss now and spare yourself the

embarrassment."

Astron let out a faint sigh, shaking his head ever so slightly. Without a word, he began walking toward the first stall, his calm demeanor unchanged. Irina blinked, caught slightly off guard by his lack of response.

'He's probably just trying to act unfazed,' she thought to herself, trailing after him. 'There's no way he'll do better than me.'

When Astron reached the first stall, the vendor's expression brightened, clearly eager to make another sale. "Ah, a discerning customer! Perhaps a scarf to catch your eye?" Astron picked up the same pale blue scarf Irina had purchased earlier, running his fingers over the fabric as he examined it closely. Then, in a calm, measured tone, he spoke. "Mana-woven silk, basic threadwork. The mana infusion is low-grade-likely performed with second-hand equipment. The material cost? About 100 Valer. Labor included, 150 at most."

The vendor froze, his cheerful expression faltering. "W-well, you see-" Astron's sharp gray eyes met the vendor's, unblinking, the faintest hint of menace lurking in his gaze. "3000 Valer was a bold starting price. 2000 was still an overcharge. I'll pay 200 Valer. Or should I share these details with your other customers?"

The vendor paled, his hands fidgeting nervously. "200 Valer? But-"

"200," Astron repeated, his tone soft yet unyielding. His eyes didn't waver, and the air

between them grew heavy with an unspoken tension.

Finally, the vendor sighed in defeat. "Fine. 200 Valer."

Astron handed over the coins without another word, tucking the receipt into his pocket as he moved to the next stall. Irina, watching from a short distance, felt her jaw

tighten. 'What just happened?'

At the second stall, Astron approached the phoenix feather earrings. The vendor greeted him enthusiastically, but Astron's response was just as direct as before. He picked up the earrings, turning them over in his hands as he spoke.

"Gold-plated steel. The enchantment is rudimentary-fatigue resistance of this level barely qualifies as practical. Production cost, including enchantment, around 200

Valer.

The vendor stammered, his confidence visibly crumbling. "Sir, I—"

"8000 Valer was insulting." Astron said, his voice as calm as ever. "7000 was laughable.

I'll pay 400 Valer."

The vendor's eyes widened at Astron's blunt statement, but there was a dangerous

glint beneath his initial surprise. His fingers twitched nervously at the counter, and he leaned in slightly, his voice lowering to a conspiratorial whisper. "You might be sharp, friend, but this city isn't kind to those who poke around too much. It's best not to make enemies where you don't need to."

The words were laced with a thinly veiled threat, but Astron didn't flinch. His gray

eyes remained locked on the vendor, his expression calm yet piercing, as if he could see straight through the man. Then, with an almost imperceptible tilt of his head, he spoke, his tone carrying a quiet finality.

"Tell me, do you trust the three men stationed at the eastern gate of Everhall? The one with the scar under his left eye, the second with the uneven gait near the fountain, or the third who lingers by the corner of the artisan's market? You shouldn't." The vendor froze, his blood draining from his face. The details Astron provided- specific locations, precise descriptions-cut through any bravado he had. A cold sweat broke out on his brow as his hands tightened into fists. He didn't need Astron to elaborate further; the implication was clear. Whatever connections the vendor thought he had, Astron had already noticed them and was prepared to leverage that

knowledge.

"Fine," the vendor finally muttered, his voice shaky. "300 Valer."

Astron handed over the coins with a serene expression, his movements deliberate.

Without another word, he pocketed the receipt and turned to leave, his posture relaxed but exuding quiet authority.

When he arrived, the vendor at the third stall-an older man with a shrewd look in his eyes-tensed visibly at Astron's approach. The man's gaze flicked nervously to the mana pendant on display, then back to Astron. Before Astron could speak, the vendor reached for the pendant, hastily placing it in a small cloth bag and extending it toward

him.

"It's... on the house," the vendor stammered, his smile strained. "No charge." Astron's gray eyes lingered on the man for a moment, gauging his sincerity. Then,

with a slight nod, he took the pendant, pocketed it, and turned away without another

word.

As Astron rejoined Irina, she couldn't help but feel a bit suspicious. How come this guy finished everything this easily?

Irina watched Astron approach her with his usual calm demeanor, his hands tucked

casually into his coat pockets. Something about the way he moved-the faint ease in

his steps, the utter lack of tension-set her on edge. He handed over his receipts without a word, his expression unreadable as always.

Her hazel eyes darted between the slips of paper in her hands, her brows furrowing as

she scanned the numbers.

'What?'

"What?"

Her thoughts mirrored her words.....

Chapter 714 161.3 - Market

Irina stared at the receipts in her hands, her hazel eyes growing wider with every passing second. Her gaze darted between the numbers again and again, as if hoping they would magically rearrange themselves into something that made sense.

200 Valer.

300 Valer.

No charge.

Her jaw dropped. She raised her hand, pointing at Astron with a trembling finger, her mind spinning in disbelief. "How!" she exclaimed, her voice tinged with equal parts outrage and confusion. "How did you do this?!"

Astron's gray eyes met hers, calm and unbothered as always, "I told you," he said simply, his tone maddeningly composed. "I observed."

Irina gawked at him, her mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water. 'Observed? That's it? Just observed? He didn't use mana, didn't pull out some hidden skill. He didn't even haggle the normal way!!

She threw up her hands, her receipts fluttering to the ground as she began pacing in small, frustrated circles. "This doesn't make any sense! The scarf-200 Valer?! That vendor practically begged me to take it for 2000! And the carrings-300?! I spent 6000, and I thought I was being clever!" She stopped abruptly, spinning to face him. "And the pendant! Free?!

Astron watched her tirade with an unreadable expression, his hands tucked casually into his pockets. "You're overthinking this," he said, his voice steady. "I pointed out flaws in their products and leveraged their circumstances. That's all."

"That's not all!" Irina shot back, jabbing a finger at him. "You didn't just point things out-you made them fold like wet parchment! That's not normal!"

Astron tilted his head slightly, the faintest hint of amusement flickering in his eyes.

"What's abnormal about it?"

Irina's eyes narrowed, her frustration bubbling over. "Everything! You didn't even raise your voice. You didn't argue, or charm them, or-I don't know-bribe them! They just... caved! It's like you hypnotized them without even trying."

He raised an eyebrow. "Would you prefer if I had?"

She groaned, throwing her head back in exasperation. "Astron, I'm being serious!"

"And I'm answering seriously," he replied, his tone infuriatingly even. "I observed their weaknesses, applied pressure where necessary, and allowed them to make a choice. Simple"

Irina glared at him, her hands clenched into fists at her sides. 'Simple? Simple?!

There's nothing simple about this! He makes it sound like some mundane chore, like sweeping the floor or folding laundry.

She took a deep breath, trying to calm her racing thoughts. "Okay," she said finally, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Let's break this down. The scarf vendor-what did you say to get him to drop the price to 200?"

Astron shrugged slightly. "I pointed out the low-grade mana infusion and the lack of craftsmanship. He understood the value wasn't what he claimed."

Irina's eye twitched. "And the earrings?"

"I informed him of the actual material costs and the poor quality of the enchantment," Astron said, his tone as calm as ever. "I also mentioned a few... external factors that persuaded him to be more agreeable."

Irina threw up her hands. "External factors?! What does that even mean?"

".....

But as Astron didn't reply, Irina finally came into a thought!

'Wait.....'

She stood frozen, her hazel eyes narrowing as a realization struck her like a thunderclap. It wasn't just about Astron's ridiculous haggling victories. No, this was about her. About the truth that those vendors had likely known all along.

She clutched the receipts in her trembling hands, her mind replaying every moment of her supposed "triumphant" negotiations. The scarf vendor's hesitant smile, the jewelry seller's mock indignation, the pendant vendor's exaggerated explanations-it all clicked into place.

"Those shameless bastards,' she thought, her jaw tightening. "They were playing me the whole time!"

She could almost hear their smug inner voices now: Oh, look at her, thinking she's being clever. Let's humor her-she'll never know she's still overpaying by triple. Her hands clenched into fists, crumpling the paper. "Those... those scamming parasites!"

Astron raised an eyebrow at her outburst, but wisely kept silent.

Irina's face flushed as the humiliation settled in. All that effort, all that haggling and it was a lie. A performance, with her as the fool, dancing to their tune. She could practically feel their invisible laughter trailing after her as she walked away from each stall, proud of her "victories."

Her teeth ground together as she imagined the vendors chatting amongst themselves after she left: Did you see how she thought 2000 was a bargain? Hilarious. She was practically begging to be overcharged!

Her anger flared, hot and uncontrollable. "How dare they!" she hissed, her voice rising with each word. "How dare they scam me and pretend like they're doing me a favor?!"

Astron, still maddeningly composed, watched her with faint amusement. "You're taking this personally," he noted.

Irina rounded on him, her fists clenched at her sides. "Of course I'm taking this personally! I spent hours negotiating, thinking I was outsmarting them, and the whole time they were probably laughing behind my back! It's infuriating!"

Her gaze swept across the bustling market, now teeming with activity as the vendors called out their wares. The vibrant colors and cheerful voices grated on her nerves. She could almost hear the whispers: That girl? The one who overpaid for everything? Yeah, she's an easy mark.

Her blood boiled. "I should burn this entire market to the ground," she muttered, her fingers twitching as though itching to summon flames. "Teach them all a lesson about

cheating their customers."

Astron's lips quirked into the faintest smirk. "That seems... excessive."

"Oh, excessive?" Irina snapped, turning her fiery glare on him. "Excessive is scamming an honest buyer and treating her like a fool! Excessive is letting someone walk away thinking they've won when you've been mocking them the whole time!"

She began pacing again, her thoughts spiraling. 'How could I not have noticed? I've been shopping in high-end markets for so long that I didn't even question their pricing! They must've pegged me as a clueless noble from the moment I walked up!' Her frustration bubbled over as she kicked a stray pebble, sending it skittering into a nearby stall. The vendor gave her a startled look but quickly averted his gaze when he saw the storm brewing in her eyes.

Astron stepped closer, his calm presence irritating her further. "Are you planning to torch the entire market, or just the vendors who wronged you?"

"Don't tempt me," Irina growled, her fists still clenched. "They deserve it. All of them."

"And what would that accomplish?" Astron asked, his tone annoyingly reasonable. "You'd waste your energy, and the market would rebuild. Meanwhile, you'd be remembered as the noble who lost her temper over a few coins."

Irina glared at him, her lips pressed into a thin line. "A few coins? I spent thousands,

Astron! Thousands on junk!"

"Junk you chose to buy," he pointed out calmly.

Her eye twitched. "You're not helping."

"I wasn't trying to," he replied, his expression neutral.

Irina's frustration was palpable, her fiery hazel eyes practically daring the market to

test her patience again. But when she paused to glare at him, he tilted his head slightly and spoke with a measured calmness.

"You're upset because you feel cheated," he began, his voice steady. "And you have a

right to be. But before you burn the market to the ground, consider this: these vendors aren't just random scammers. They're meeting a demand."

Irina stopped mid-step, her frown deepening. "Meeting a demand? Astron, they're lying! Overpricing junk and passing it off as rare or valuable. How is that meeting a

demand?"

Astron raised an eyebrow. "Think about it. You came here expecting authenticity. Something tied to the experience of this place. These vendors know that. They sell you the idea of value, wrapped in the atmosphere of this market. If you hadn't pushed me into revealing the truth, you'd still be marveling at your purchases, connecting them

to the charm of your trip."

Irina blinked, her frustration momentarily giving way to surprise. Is he seriously justifying this?" she thought, her lips pressing into a thin line. "So what? That makes it okay to rip people off?"

"I didn't say it was right," Astron replied calmly. "But it's not as simple as you think. These vendors provide exactly what many customers are looking for-something they can take home and feel good about. It's supply and demand. If people stopped paying these inflated prices, the market would adjust. But as long as people are willing to pay, the system sustains itself."

Irina crossed her arms, her expression skeptical. "That's ridiculous. It's still dishonest."

Astron's gaze remained steady. "Is it? Or is it just business? They're not forcing anyone to buy. They're creating an illusion, yes, but one that the customer willingly participates in. And before you realized the truth, you were a willing participant,

weren't you?"

Her cheeks flushed with indignation. "That's not the point! I thought I was getting something real-something valuable!"

"And to you, it was real," Astron said, his tone soft but unyielding. "Until I pointed out the flaws. Without that, those items would still hold value in your mind. The authenticity you sought wasn't in the products themselves but in the connection you made to this place. The vendors know that, and they cater to it."

Irina clenched her fists, her frustration bubbling over again. "So what, I'm just

supposed to accept being scammed?"

"No." Astron replied evenly. "But you should understand the system you're

participating in. If you truly want to change it, then don't just rage against it. Stop participating. Spread the truth, and the demand will shift. But blaming the vendors alone won't solve anything-they're just the other half of the equation."

Irina stared at him, her hazel eyes narrowing as she absorbed his words. 'Of course, he's turning this into some philosophical debate,' she thought bitterly. But deep down, she couldn't entirely dismiss his point. The logic of it gnawed at her, frustratingly sound despite her emotions.

"Fine," she said finally, her voice clipped. "But it doesn't change the fact that they're

taking advantage of people like me."

Astron nodded slightly. "True. But they're also providing exactly what people like you

are looking for. The question is whether you value the truth more than the illusion." Irina glared at him, her frustration warring with reluctant acknowledgment. She exhaled sharply, brushing past him with a huff. "You and your sophistry..." And then just like that, they did head to the inward of the city.

Chapter 715 162.1 - You will get it

Irina folded her arms tightly, still simmering from the exchange. But deep down, beneath the frustration, a flicker of curiosity sparked. If she was going to lose-truly lose she at least wanted to understand why. Why was Astron so effective? What was she missing?

She shot him a sideways glance, her hazel eyes narrowing. "All right," she said finally, her tone begrudging. "Show me."

Astron raised an eyebrow, tilting his head slightly. "Show you?"

"Yes," Irina snapped, her voice tinged with exasperation. "You clearly know something I don't. I want to see how you actually do it-up close"

For a moment, he studied her, his sharp gray eyes thoughtful. Then, with a small nod, he gestured toward the bustling market. "All right. Follow me."

Irina trailed after him as he wove through the crowd with a calm ease that seemed almost instinctual. Unlike her fiery determination, Astron carried an air of quiet authority, the kind that made people notice him without even realizing they were doing so. She frowned, watching his movements. 'He doesn't rush,' she observed. 'It's like he's already in control before he even speaks!'

Astron stopped at a modest stall displaying polished wooden carvings-figurines of animals, warriors, and mythical creatures. The vendor, a wiry man with a weathered face, perked up immediately, his eyes lighting with the practiced enthusiasm of a seasoned seller.

"Ah, sir! Welcome! Interested in something? These carvings are crafted from enchanted ebony wood, infused with-"

"Hold on," Astron interrupted gently, picking up a small carving of a gryphon. He

turned it over in his hands, his gray eyes scanning it with precision. "Enchanted ebony wood, you said?"

"Yes, yes," the vendor said eagerly, leaning forward. "Rare and durable, perfect for collectors."

"Interesting. Because this grain pattern is clearly mahogany. Beautiful in its own right, but far from rare."

The vendor's smile faltered, and Irina's eyes widened as she watched Astron continue, his tone calm but firm.

"Mahogany's a fine wood," Astron said, setting the carving back down. "But it doesn't take enchantments well, does it? The mana residue on this piece is faint, likely from a weak infusion spell. So, let's skip the pretense. How much for this as a decorative piece?"

The vendor stammered, clearly thrown off balance. "Uh... well, for a decorative piece, I suppose I could-"

"500 Valer," Astron said, his tone final. "Fair for the craftsmanship, but that's all it's worth."

After a moment's hesitation, the vendor nodded, his earlier bravado replaced with a sheepish smile. "500 Valer it is."

Astron handed over the coins, pocketing the receipt with a nod before turning to Irina. "See?"

Irina stared at him, her hazel eyes wide. "You knew the wood type just by looking at it?"

Astron shrugged lightly. "It's not hard if you pay attention. The grain patterns are distinct. And the mana residue? That's just basic observation."

Irina blinked, her mind racing. 'Basic? How is that basic? I would've believed the whole enchanted ebony story without a second thought!'

Astron led her to another stall, this one selling gemstones embedded in intricately designed rings. The vendor, a plump woman with a warm smile, greeted them eagerly. "Ah, what a fine couple," the woman said, her tone sweet.

Astron talked with the vendor like that and at the end, she end the same.....

The vendor's confidence wavered, but Astron continued before she could respond. "I'll offer 1000 Valer, for the design. The stone's value is negligible."

The vendor hesitated, glancing at Irina as if hoping for some support. But when Irina said nothing, her frustration still tinged with curiosity, the woman relented. "Fine. 1000."

From the starting value of 9000 Valer, the price fell down to 1000.

As they walked away, Irina couldn't hold back any longer. "How do you know all this?" she demanded, her voice tinged with awe and irritation. "The wood, the stone-how can you tell so quickly?"

Astron walked calmly alongside Irina, his gaze flicking briefly to the bustling market. before returning to her as she asked her question. He seemed to consider her words for a moment before speaking, his tone steady and deliberate.

"Observation," he began, "is about identifying patterns and linking what you see to what you already know. It's finding relevant, discerning details and comparing them to your prior experiences."

Irina frowned, her hazel eyes narrowing slightly. "That sounds... vague. Can you be more specific?"

Astron nodded, gesturing toward a nearby tree. "Take that tree, for example. You

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know its trunk is brown. If I asked you to describe that shade of brown, you might compare it to something else-say, the color of milky coffee."

Irina blinked, tilting her head. "Alright... and?"

"How did you make that connection?" Astron continued. "You linked the tree's color to coffee because you've seen coffee before. You know it's brown. That prior knowledge lets you create a bridge between the two."

Irina pursed her lips, her mind working to keep up. "So... you're saying observation is just connecting things to what we already know?"

"Exactly," Astron said, his voice calm but firm. "When I looked at the carving, I recognized the grain pattern because I've seen mahogany before. When I examined the gemstone, I noticed how it refracted light, and I compared it to what I know about moonstones and feldspar."

Irina's brows furrowed as she considered his words. "But... what if you don't have that prior knowledge? What if you don't know what mahogany looks like or how

moonstones refract light?"

"That's where experience comes in," Astron replied, his gray eyes sharp. "You can't observe what you don't understand. But every observation builds on the last. The more you expose yourself to, the more connections you can make."

He paused, gesturing to the market around them. "Think of it like building a web. Every piece of knowledge is a strand, and observation is about weaving those strands together. The more strands you have, the stronger your web."

Irina tilted her head, her expression thoughtful. "So... when you observe something, you're not just looking at it-you're analyzing it based on everything you've seen

before."

"Exactly," Astron said. "Observation isn't just about the object itself. It's about the context, the details, and the patterns, And it's not just objects-it applies to people

too."

Irina raised an eyebrow. "People?"

Astron nodded. "Take the vendors we just dealt with. The first one hesitated when I mentioned the wood type. That hesitation told me he wasn't confident in his claim, which made it easier to push back. The second vendor, on the other hand, tried to double down. But when I pointed out the flaws in her stone, she glanced at you, looking for support. That glance told me she was desperate to salvage the sale, so I

pressed harder."

Irina stared at him, her hazel eyes wide. 'He's not just observing the items, she thought. 'He's reading everything-the vendors' reactions, their body language, their tone. It's like he's picking them apart without even trying!

Astron's calm gaze met hers, and for a moment, she felt a flicker of frustration. He

made it sound so simple, but she couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to it than he let on.

"So," she said slowly, "it's all about finding patterns, making connections, and reading people."

Astron continued walking through the market, his tone calm as he elaborated, "That's exactly what it comes down to. Observation isn't some mystical skill-it's about building a knowledge bank, a repository of connections and experiences that you can refer to as needed. But the trick is in knowing how to build that bank."

Irina walked alongside him, her brows furrowed as she absorbed his words. "And how do you do that? Build a knowledge bank, I mean."

"You observe more," Astron replied simply. "The more you expose yourself to different environments, objects, and people, the more you start recognizing patterns and traits. Over time, those patterns become your references. You don't need to memorize every detail-just the ones that matter."

Irina tilted her head, her hazel eyes narrowing. "But how do you know which details matter? Isn't that the hard part?"

"Not as hard as it seems," Astron said, stopping at a stall selling spices and dried herbs. He gestured subtly toward the vendor, a middle-aged man whose hands were stained with yellowish hues from handling turmeric. "You don't analyze everything-that would take too long. Instead, you focus on key areas."

Irina's gaze followed Astron's gesture. "Key areas?"

Astron nodded. "Look at his hands. They tell you he handles his products frequently, meaning he's likely familiar with their quality. His apron is worn but clean-he takes pride in his work, even if his setup is modest. And the arrangement of his spices? Meticulously organized, which suggests he values precision. Those small details are enough to tell me he's not the kind of vendor who'd overinflate prices without good

reason."

Irina stared at the vendor, her eyes darting to his hands, his apron, and his display. "You got all that just by glancing at him?"

"Yes," Astron said, his tone steady. "Because I know where to look. That's the real skill-

not just observing, but knowing what to observe. The key is efficiency. You don't need to analyze the entire context-just the parts that matter."

Irina let out a low whistle, her frustration giving way to reluctant admiration. "That's... impressive. And a little annoying, honestly. You make it sound so easy!"

"It's not about being easy," Astron said, his gray eyes meeting hers. "It's about practice.

Inherently, some people are better at noticing where to look. But even that can be trained. The more you observe, the better you get at filtering out the noise and zeroing in on the important details."

Irina crossed her arms, her lips pressing into a thin line. "So, what you're saying is... I've been looking at the wrong things."

"Not wrong," Astron corrected. "Just less relevant. You were focusing on the vendors' words, their sales pitches, and the aesthetics of the products. Those things are designed to distract you from the truth. If you want to observe effectively, you need to cut through the distractions and find the details that actually tell the story."

Irina considered his words, her hazel eyes narrowing thoughtfully. 'He's right,' she admitted to herself begrudgingly. "I was too caught up in the surface-the presentation, the charm of the market. I never thought to look beyond what they wanted me to see.

Astron gestured for her to follow him to another stall, this one selling intricately

designed lanterns. Without hesitation, he pointed to a specific lantern. "Take this one, for example."

Irina leaned closer, inspecting the lantern carefully. "What about it?" "Notice the welds along the edges," Astron said. "They're uneven-likely done by hand. The metal is sturdy but shows signs of patchwork repairs. This isn't a new piece, but

it's functional. The vendor might try to sell it as an antique, but it's probably just a repurposed design."

Irina blinked, studying the lantern again. 'Uneven welds? Patchwork repairs? I wouldn't have noticed any of that.

"You don't need to know everything about metallurgy or design," Astron continued.

"Just enough to spot inconsistencies. Once you know where to look, the rest falls into

place." Irina straightened her expression a mix of frustration and determination. "All right. I get it. I've got a lot to learn."

"If you pay attention, with a mind like yours.....you will naturally get better at it. You are one of the smartest after all."

Chapter 716 162.2 - You will get it

"If you pay attention, with a mind like yours.....you will naturally get better at it. You are one of the smartest after all."

Irina felt a small spark of pride bloom in her chest at Astron's words. She tried to keep her expression composed, but the corners of her lips twitched upward despite herself. 'One of the smartest, huh?' she thought, a mix of satisfaction and determination bubbling within her. 'Well, if he thinks I can do it, then I'm going to prove it!

She straightened her posture, her hazel eyes glinting with renewed energy as she glanced around the market. "Alright," she said decisively. "Let's see if I can put what I've learned to use."

Astron tilted his head slightly, watching her with his usual calm demeanor. "You're going to test yourself already?"

"Why not?" Irina replied, folding her arms with a confident smirk. "I've already booked the hotel for two nights. We're not in a rush, and the market's still bustling. I might as well use the time to practice."

Astron gave her a small nod, his sharp gray eyes studying her as if gauging her resolve. "Fair enough. Where do you want to start?"

Irina scanned the stalls, her gaze flitting over colorful displays and eager vendors. Her attention landed on a booth selling intricately beaded necklaces, each one strung with vibrant stones and small, metal charms. The vendor, a cheerful older woman with a warm smile, was already calling out to potential customers.

"That one," Irina said, nodding toward the booth. "Let's see how much I can get one of those necklaces for."

Astron stepped aside, gesturing for her to take the lead. "Go ahead. I'll observe."

Irina took a deep breath, adjusting her posture as she approached the stall, 'Alright, Irina. Focus. Don't get distracted by the sales pitch. Look for the details that matter!

Just like that, Irina's little adventure did start....

The city's market district was abuzz with the hum of activity, filled with people from all walks of life-travelers, merchants, and locals creating a vibrant tapestry of motion and sound.

Among the crowd, the operatives moved with careful precision, scanning every face, every movement, every interaction. They had narrowed down the possibilities, but nothing was confirmed yet.

The foreknowledge from Reginald Hawkins had provided critical hints, but disguises

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made confirmation challenging. Astron and Irina had altered their appearances- Astron now had ashen hair and gray eyes, while Irina's fiery red locks were replaced with deep chestnut brown, her amber eyes masked behind a hazel hue. Their disguises were strong enough to blend them into the sea of people, but the operatives knew to look deeper.

From multiple vantage points, the team observed several couples fitting the general profile provided. Each operative had been assigned to shadow a different pair, employing their high-grade detection artifacts to search for any signs of hidden enchantments or mana flows indicative of disguises.

"Target spread confirmed," one operative reported quietly through the communication network. "Five couples matching the descriptions across the district. Assigning resources to all pairs."

The team leader, stationed on a rooftop overlooking the central square, issued commands with calculated precision. "Maintain observation distance. Activate enchantment analyzers, but keep the fields low-don't risk tipping them off. We're searching for any anomalies."

The operatives moved to comply. One, stationed near a café, adjusted his enchanted goggles. The lenses shimmered faintly as he scanned a couple sitting by a window. Their features matched the descriptions loosely, but the lack of any detectable enchantment dismissed them as a possibility.

"Negative," the operative murmured. "No signs of disguise artifacts on this pair. Moving to the next."

Another team member, trailing a couple walking through a quieter alley, activated a mana-detection artifact. The artifact pulsed faintly, sending out a subtle wave of mana to probe for hidden enchantments. The couple glanced around briefly but continued on their way, seemingly unaware of the observation.

"Negative," the second operative confirmed. "No response from the probe. Moving to new targets."

In the market, there was a man named Jihan. He came from the rather eastern side of the Federation, up to this city on the west side after hearing about the fact that there were many quick bucks that were to be made here.

Jihan adjusted the display of trinkets and small enchanted charms on his stall, his movements automatic as he tried to keep his mind from wandering. The bustling marketplace surrounded him, vibrant and noisy, yet he felt strangely detached. His thoughts kept drifting back to the strange encounter from the day before.

The man who had approached him in the shadows of his stall had been unremarkable at first glance, but his demeanor was unnervingly calm, his voice carrying an edge that left no room for argument. The artifact he handed Jihan was small, nondescript- a smooth, flat stone with a faint shimmer of mana coursing through it. "Use this if you see a couple that stands out," the man had said. "The girl will act haughty, angry, or overbearing. The man will be calm, quiet. That's all you need to know. Press the button on the artifact if you spot them. One-time use. Don't ask questions."

At the time, Jihan had laughed it off. What kind of nonsense is this? he'd thought. The marketplace was full of all sorts of people, but finding such a specific pair seemed absurd. He had pocketed the artifact anyway, more for the decent sum of coin the man had offered than any intention of actually using it.

But now... now, he wasn't so sure.

His gaze flicked to a couple browsing a nearby stall. The woman, her chestnut brown hair glinting faintly in the sun, was speaking to the vendor with a tone that was sharp and impatient, her words laced with a subtle authority. Beside her stood a man with ashen hair and gray eyes, his demeanor calm and composed, as though he were entirely unaffected by her mood.

It was uncanny, like watching a scene from one of the adventure tales his son loved so much-where an unsuspecting market vendor stumbled into something far larger than

himself.

'Is this... them?' Jihan's heart began to race, his hands growing clammy. No, it's probably nothing. Just a coincidence. But... what if it isn't?

The memory of the strange man's words came rushing back. A couple that stands out. The girl, haughty or angry. The man, calm and quiet. The description fit too well. His hand hovered over his pocket, where the artifact lay. It felt heavier than it should, its presence a silent reminder of the choice he had to make. Am I really doing this? he wondered, his chest tightening with a mix of anxiety and curiosity. What if it's just some kind of prank? Or worse... what if it isn't?

The couple moved closer to his stall, their quiet interaction drawing his attention. The woman was gesturing to a trinket with a faint scowl, her body language radiating irritation. The man beside her simply nodded, his expression calm as he listened to her, occasionally offering a soft word or two.

Jihan's pulse quickened. It's them. It has to be.

His fingers closed around the artifact, the cool surface tingling faintly against his palm. He hesitated, glancing around the marketplace as if expecting someone to leap out and stop him. No one did. The bustling market continued on, oblivious to his

internal struggle.

With a deep breath, Jihan pressed the button.

The artifact pulsed once, a faint glow emanating from its surface before it faded, leaving no trace of its activation. Jihan slipped it back into his pocket, his heart

hammering in his chest as he tried to act normal.

That's it? he thought, a wave of anticlimactic relief washing over him. Nothing happened. Maybe it really was a joke.

Jihan's breath hitched as the couple drifted closer to his stall. He busied his hands, arranging trinkets on the display to feign nonchalance, but his heart was hammering in his chest, louder than the chatter of the bustling marketplace. He had pressed the button, and done what he was told, but now he couldn't shake the feeling that something had shifted.

He risked a glance at the pair, and that was when it happened.

The young man's gray eyes locked onto his, steady and unblinking. Jihan froze, his fingers trembling as they hovered over a small amulet. Those eyes... There was something about them, something unnatural. They weren't just gray; they seemed to pierce through him, reaching beyond the surface, as if peeling back layers he didn't even know he had.

A shiver ran down his spine. What the hell? Why is he looking at me like that?

Jihan quickly averted his gaze, his throat tightening as he struggled to swallow. His palms grew slick with sweat, and he felt an unfamiliar, unsettling pressure weighing down on him. It wasn't just fear—it was as if the young man's gaze carried a weight that bore into his very soul.

The woman beside the young man appeared oblivious, her attention still focused on the trinkets at the next stall. She spoke to the vendor in a clipped tone, her impatience evident, but Jihan barely registered her voice. His focus was entirely on the gray-eyed man, who, mercifully, had shifted his gaze back to the woman.

Jihan exhaled shakily, his pulse still racing. He glanced around the marketplace again, half-expecting someone to appear and confront him, to call him out for what he'd done. But no one did. The world carried on as if nothing had happened.

The couple moved away from the stall, the woman leading with a purposeful stride while the man followed close behind, his calm demeanor unchanged. Jihan watched them go, his shoulders slumping as a wave of relief washed over him.

That was weird. Way too weird. He rubbed his sweaty palms against his tunic, trying

to steady himself. Maybe it wasn't them. Maybe I'm overthinking this. But those eyes... He shook his head, trying to push the thought away. The artifact had been activated, and whatever it was supposed to do, it wasn't his concern anymore. He had done his

part, and collected his payment. That was all.

Irina's sharp tone cut through the buzz of the marketplace. "What are you looking at?"

she demanded, her hazel eyes narrowing as she turned toward Astron. Her arms were crossed, her stance radiating irritation.

Astron's gaze lingered in the direction of the stall they'd just passed, his gray eyes unreadable. "Nothing," he said calmly, though his tone carried a faint edge of caution. "I just... felt something"

Irina harrumphed, her frustration evident as she stomped forward a few steps before

turning back to face him. "Felt something? You're just saying that to sound mysterious,

aren't you?"

Astron didn't respond immediately, his expression as impassive as ever. Instead, he continued walking, his calm demeanor only fueling Irina's growing irritation. She caught up to him quickly, her words tumbling out in a stream of complaints. "This isn't easy at all," she grumbled, throwing her hands in the air. "You said I'd learn

fast, didn't you? Well, I've been trying, and all I've done is embarrass myself in front of half the market!"

Astron glanced at her, one brow lifting slightly. "You've improved," he said simply. "But

if learning observation were something you could master in a single day, everyone would be a detective."

Irina opened her mouth to retort, but no words came out. She closed it again, her cheeks warming slightly as she realized she had no counterargument. "Still," she muttered, crossing her arms and looking away. "I hate feeling clumsy at anything. It's

annoying."

"Being annoyed is part of the process," Astron said, his tone calm but firm. "Mistakes

are how you learn. The more you fail, the more you'll start to notice what you missed."

Irina frowned, her hazel eyes darting to the bustling marketplace around them. Despite his frustratingly logical words, she couldn't shake her lingering embarrassment. "Fine," she said abruptly, as if making a decision. "Let's take a break. I've had enough of this market."

Astron tilted his head slightly, studying her for a moment.

"The museum," Irina said, her tone firm. "I've been wanting to go there anyway. It's better than staying here and humiliating myself more." Astron gave a small nod, his expression unreadable. "Alright. Lead the way." Without waiting for him to respond further, Irina turned on her heel and marched

toward the museum district, her steps quick and purposeful. She could still feel the weight of the market's bustling atmosphere behind her, but the thought of exploring the museum—a place where she could shift her focus—lifted her spirits slightly.

Chapter 717 163.1 - Sanctum

Irina slowed her pace as they approached the museum, her hazel eyes lighting up with anticipation. The Stellamare Museum, though modest in size, stood proudly with its clean stone facade and intricate carvings of suns and mountains decorating its pillars. She glanced over her shoulder at Astron, her earlier frustration fading as her excitement bubbled to the surface.

"This place," she began, her voice carrying a sense of awe, "isn't just another museum. It's a connection to something far more extraordinary."

Astron raised an eyebrow, his sharp gray eyes flicking over the building. "A connection to what?"

"To Aurora Sanctum," Irina said, her tone reverent. "A place shrouded in mystery and ancient traditions, far to the west, deep in the Targorian mountain range. It's unlike anything governed by the Valeria Federation or any other known power."

Astron's expression remained calm, but Irina could tell he was listening intently. She continued, gesturing toward the museum as they stepped closer. "Aurora Sanctum is a nation that feels more like a legend than a real place. The people there—the Solarians—revere the sun as a deity. They believe it's the source of all purity, enlightenment, and divine power. Their entire society revolves around that belief, and they've developed customs and hierarchies that we can't even begin to understand."

"And this muscum?" Astron asked, his gaze sweeping over the entrance.

"It was founded by people who've had the rare privilege of visiting Aurora Sanctum or establishing relations with them," Irina explained. "There's a special exhibit here- artifacts, writings, and even replicas of their sacred items. It's not much, but it's the closest most of us will ever get to understanding that place."

She paused, a faint smile tugging at her lips. "The Aurora Sanctum isn't a place anyone can just decide to visit. Even the most powerful states under the federation can't dictate terms to them. They're completely self-governed, and isolated, and they only allow outsiders in under very specific circumstances. Most of what we know about them comes from the few who've been invited-or the even rarer few who returned with their lives and memories intact."

Astron glanced at her, his interest piqued. "And why does this muscum matter to you?"

Irina's expression softened, and for a moment, she seemed lost in thought. "Because it's proof that there are still wonders in this world-things we don't fully understand, places that remain untouched by all the chaos and greed out here. The Aurora Sanctum represents a kind of purity, a way of life that's entirely their own. And even if this museum is small, even if it's just a glimpse into that world, it's still worth

preserving"

They reached the entrance, where a modest plaque engraved with golden lettering read:

Stellamare Museum

Dedicated to the History, Culture, and Mysteries of Aurora Sanctum

Astron's calm gray eyes flicked toward Irina, a faint glimmer of amusement dancing in them. "You got all of that from Julia, didn't you?" he said, his tone more observational than accusatory.

Irina coughed, looking away toward the plaque as if suddenly fascinated by its engraving. "I... may have discussed it with her," she admitted, though she quickly straightened, brushing imaginary dust from her sleeve. "But that doesn't mean I'm not genuinely interested in Aurora Sanctum. It's such a mysterious place, you know? Their traditions, their isolation, even their devotion to the sun-it's all so... different. I just wonder what it's really like there."

Astron remained silent, his gaze lingering on her for a moment. Sensing his pause, she turned back to him, her hazel eyes narrowing slightly. "What about you?" she asked, tilting her head. "Do you know anything about Aurora Sanctum?"

He shook his head slowly. "Not much more than you already mentioned. Just that it's a secluded place, difficult to reach, and the people there are highly protective of their way of life. But..." He hesitated briefly before adding, "I've heard there are some strong individuals among them."

Irina rolled her eyes with an exasperated sigh. "Of course there are strong individuals. If they didn't have the strength to back it up, the Valeria Federation would've crushed them ages ago. You think they'd just let a place like that 'govern itself' without reason?"

Astron shrugged, his expression neutral. "True enough."

With that, the two stepped through the museum's arched entrance. The air inside was cool and filled with the faint hum of murmured voices. Displays lined the walls, each carefully curated to highlight different aspects of Aurora Sanctum's culture. Artifacts rested on pedestals beneath protective glass, and large plaques offered detailed explanations in elegant lettering.

As they moved further inside, Irina's gaze darted from one display to the next, her earlier frustration melting away into genuine fascination. The serene environment was almost meditative-until a cheerful voice interrupted their quiet.

"Hello there! Welcome to the Stellamare Museum!"

A young woman in a neat, modest uniform approached them, her bright smile suggesting she was accustomed to greeting curious visitors. "Are you here for the self-guided tour, or would you like a guide? We offer a volunteer service where our

guides can walk you through the exhibits and share some additional insights. It's all tip-based, so there's no set fee."

Irina glanced around, noticing several other guides already speaking to small groups of visitors scattered throughout the museum. The sight reminded her of other tourist-heavy locations she'd visited-where such volunteer services were common, if

not expected.

She turned back to the guide, her tone polite but firm. "We'll take a guide. If we're going to be here, we might as well get the full experience."

The woman's smile widened. "Wonderful! Let me just grab my notes, and I'll show you around."

Irina glanced at Astron, who merely gave a small nod, his expression unchanged. The guide quickly retrieved a small booklet and gestured for them to follow.

"This way, please," she said brightly. "We'll start with the history of Aurora Sanctum

and its founding myths. It's truly fascinating, I promise!"

As they followed, Irina leaned slightly toward Astron, whispering, "She seems enthusiastic."

Astron's gaze followed the guide for a moment before he leaned slightly toward Irina, his tone calm and matter-of-fact. "She's trying to impress us. That's essentially how

this works."

Irina raised an eyebrow, glancing at him. "Trying to impress us? You mean for the

tip?"

He nodded slightly. "Exactly. She'll make as much effort as she can, sharing detailed insights and going above and beyond. If we don't tip at the end of the tour, she can still use the situation to 'guilt trip' us-or, in other words, play on our conscience." Irina blinked, her lips twitching into a smirk as she considered his analysis. "What if we're ruthless?" she asked, her voice low but tinged with amusement.

"Then it's a pity," Astron replied evenly. "Her day will be ruined because of that, most likely."

Irina chuckled softly, her hazel eyes darting toward the guide, who was busy flipping through her notes a few steps ahead. "Is it just observation again?"

"It's just observation indeed," Astron said, his tone nonchalant. "It doesn't take much to understand motivation when it's this transparent."

Irina rolled her eyes, though her smirk remained. "And here I thought you were just being cynical."

"Not cynical," he corrected, his gaze steady. "Practical. If she does her job well, she deserves the tip. If not, she'll have to reflect on why."

Irina hummed thoughtfully, a hint of mischief sparking in her expression. "So, what you're saying is, we're her test today?"

"Call it what you like," Astron said calmly, his focus shifting back to the guide as she turned to address them.

"Are you both ready?" the woman asked brightly, her voice brimming with enthusiasm.

"Ready as we'll ever be," Irina replied, glancing at Astron with a teasing glint in her eye.

The guide smiled and gestured toward a large display depicting a carved sun surrounded by intricate golden patterns. "We'll start here with the founding myths of

Aurora Sanctum. The Solarians believe the sun is a divine force, and their entire society revolves around its worship. Let me explain..."

As the guide began her detailed explanation, Irina leaned slightly closer to Astron, whispering just loud enough for him to hear, "Let's see if she earns that tip." Astron's lips twitched faintly, the closest thing to a smirk she'd get from him. "We'll

see."

The tour began with the guide leading Irina and Astron to the large display of the carved sun. The intricate golden patterns shimmered faintly under the museum lights,

giving the piece an almost ethereal glow,

"The Solarians believe the sun is the ultimate source of purity and enlightenment," the

guide began, her tone animated yet reverent. "It's not just a deity to them-it's the very foundation of their existence. Every ritual, every celebration, every law they have ties back to the sun's cycles. This carving is a replica of what they call the Radiant Crest, a sacred artifact housed in their capital, Radiant Citadel."

Irina tilted her head, studying the detailed patterns. "The Radiant Crest... what does it

do?"

The guide smiled, clearly pleased by the question. "It's said to be a focus for their divine energy, used in ceremonies to connect the people to the sun's power. The

original is made from a rare metal known as solarite, which supposedly absorbs and amplifies sunlight."

Astron's sharp gray eyes flicked to the carving. "A focus for divine energy-or perhaps an advanced form of mana manipulation," he mused softly.

The guide hesitated for a moment, her smile faltering slightly at his pragmatic tone.

"Well, the Solarians would certainly call it divine," she said, recovering quickly. "But yes, it's possible there's a more practical, magical explanation. Much of what we know about their artifacts

comes from merchants or high-ranked Awakened who've had brief interactions with Aurora Sanctum."

As they moved deeper into the museum, the guide led them to a display of weapons

mounted on the wall. Each weapon was crafted with an elegant yet unfamiliar style- blades with sunburst motifs, bows with strings that shimmered like threads of sunlight, and shields etched with intricate geometric patterns. "These are replicas of Solarian weapons," the guide explained, gesturing to the display. "Their artistry is unmistakable. The Solarians incorporate their reverence for the sun into every aspect of their lives, including their weaponry. See the grooves along the blade of this sword? It's designed to reflect and channel sunlight, blinding opponents

during combat."

Irina's hazel eyes sparkled with fascination as she leaned closer to examine the details. "That's... beautiful. Even their weapons are like works of art." The guide nodded enthusiastically. "Indeed. It's said that every Solarian weapon is crafted with precision and care, and many are infused with solarite to enhance their

effectiveness."

Astron's gaze lingered on the shield. "Artistic, but functional," he remarked. "They're not just for display. These designs suggest practical application in combat." The guide brightened at his observation. "Exactly! The Solarians are known for blending form and function seamlessly. Their weapons are as deadly as they are

beautiful." They moved on to a series of glass cases containing smaller artifacts-pendants, ceremonial masks, and scrolls filled with intricate calligraphy. The guide pointed to a particularly ornate pendant shaped like a sunburst, its center a radiant yellow gem. "This is a replica of a Solarian talisman," she said. "These are believed to protect the wearer from darkness and corruption, both physically and spiritually."

Irina reached out, her fingers hovering just above the glass. "So much of their culture

seems centered on light and purity. I wonder what they think of places that don't revere the sun."

It was just a question....

At least it looked so.

But Irina asked it not without a reason. 'Something.....Why does this feel like it?' Something.

She felt it.

Chapter 718 163.2 - Sanctum

Irina's question lingered in the air, her hazel eyes studying the guide intently. For a moment, the guide's smile faltered, as though she were weighing her response, but then she recovered with practiced ease.

"Well," the guide began, her tone steady and measured, "it is said that the Solarians came from another world through the cracks in space in the time of the Nexus of Convergence. In their original world, their religion was the primary faith of the Holy Church-a vast and powerful institution."

Irina blinked, her curiosity piqued. "Another world? So they're... not from here originally?"

The guide nodded. "That's correct. According to the fragments of records we've pieced together, the Solarians believe they were guided to this world by their deity, the sun. For them, the cracks in the space at the time of The Nexus of Convergence are thought to be some form of divine or mystical gateway, but the specifics are shrouded in mystery."

Astron remained silent, his sharp gray eyes focused on the guide as she continued.

"What's fascinating," the guide added, "is that despite their deeply rooted faith and traditions, most sculptures and records from Awakened who've visited Aurora Sanctum suggest the Solarians are remarkably welcoming. They accept visitors of all races and beliefs, provided they adhere to the rules of their land. It seems they prioritize harmony over exclusion."

Irina frowned slightly, her thoughts turning inward. 'Welcoming, huh? That doesn't quite match the picture of an isolated and self-sufficient society.' She crossed her arms, leaning closer to the display case containing the sunburst talisman. "If they're so welcoming, why isolate themselves so completely? Why not share their traditions more openly?"

The guide chuckled softly, her expression thoughtful. "That's a question many have asked, but there's no definitive answer. Perhaps they view their isolation as a way to preserve their purity and way of life. Or maybe they see the outside world as too chaotic to risk full integration. Whatever the reason, it seems to work for them."

Irina hummed thoughtfully, glancing at Astron. His calm expression offered no hint of his thoughts, but she had the distinct feeling he was dissecting every word.

The guide gestured for them to follow her to the next section. "Now, if you'll come this way, we'll look at some of the artifacts inspired by Solarian artistry. While the originals are closely guarded in the Sanctum, many craftsmen and artists have tried to replicate their designs. These pieces offer a glimpse into their style and creativity."

They entered a gallery lined with artifacts, each displayed on a pedestal beneath soft

lighting. A sun-themed ceremonial mask, a gilded chalice with intricate solar motifs, and an ornate dagger with a curved, shimmering blade were among the items showcased.

"This mask," the guide said, pointing to the sun-themed artifact, "is a recreation of the ceremonial masks used during the Solarian solstice festivals. Each mask is said to represent a different aspect of their deity's light-guidance, protection, renewal." Irina tilted her head, examining the mask. "It's intricate, but there's a simplicity to it too. Like they didn't want to overdo the design."

"Exactly," the guide agreed. "The Solarians believe in balance. Their creations are meant to be beautiful, but also practical. The balance between form and function is a recurring theme in their culture."

They moved to the dagger next, and the guide gestured to the blade's subtle curve and radiant sheen.

"This dagger," the guide continued, gesturing toward the elegant weapon, "is a replica of a piece originally crafted by Elarion Talsi, a renowned Solarian artisan from Radiant Citadel. Elarion was known not just for his remarkable skill but for his philosophy: that weapons and artifacts should embody the ideals of the culture they represent. For the Solarians, this meant a perfect balance between beauty, functionality, and their reverence for the sun."

Irina leaned closer, her hazel eyes tracing the intricate etchings along the blade's edge. "So, this isn't just a weapon-it's a statement."

"Exactly," the guide said with a nod. "Elarion's work wasn't about mass production or practicality in isolation. He saw each piece as a reflection of Solarian values. The solarite alloy, the delicate curve of the blade, even the etchings of sunbursts-they're all carefully chosen to represent precision, harmony, and the light of their deity." Astron's gaze flicked between the dagger and the guide. "And you said this design inspired a movement?"

The guide smiled, clearly pleased by the question. "It did. While it wasn't a complete revolution, Elarion's work opened a new perspective in the fields of artifact creation and magic engineering. His designs demonstrated that functionality didn't have to come at the cost of artistry. In fact, he argued that the two should enhance each other."

She gestured to a nearby plaque, which featured a sketch of Elarion alongside notes from his journals. "For instance, this dagger inspired many artisans beyond the borders of Aurora Sanctum to experiment with solarite and other rare materials. It also pushed them to consider the cultural significance of their creations. What message does an artifact send? How can its design reflect its purpose and the values of its creator? These were questions Elarion encouraged artisans to ask,"

Irina tilted her head, her expression thoughtful. "Interesting.....So, in his view, it wasn't just about making things look nice. It was about infusing them with meaning." The guide nodded. "Precisely. And while Elarion's influence didn't completely reshape artifact creation, it left a lasting impression. Many modern artisans and magic engineers draw inspiration from his philosophy, even if they don't have access to the same materials or techniques."

Astron's sharp gray eyes remained on the dagger as the guide spoke. "Solarite seems central to this philosophy. Without it, would the movement have had the same

impact?"

The guide paused, considering his question. "That's difficult to say. Solarite is unique- its ability to absorb and amplify sunlight gives Solarian artifacts their distinct character. Without it, Elarion's designs might not have carried the same weight. But his ideas about balance, symbolism, and craftsmanship? Those resonate far beyond the material."

Irina glanced at Astron, a faint smile tugging at her lips. "It's kind of like your observation thing. Knowing where to look, what details matter most." Astron didn't reply immediately, but then he replied with a simple tone. "Perhaps."

The guide led them to another display case, this one containing a series of smaller artifacts-rings, pendants, and even tools. Each piece bore the unmistakable influence of Solarian artistry, with sun motifs, elegant lines, and subtle enchantments that glimmered faintly under the display lights.

"These," the guide said, "are examples of how Elarion's philosophy trickled down into everyday life. While not everyone in Aurora Sanctum could wield a weapon or create grand artifacts, they could still carry pieces that reflected their values. These items show how deeply their culture is intertwined with their craftsmanship." Irina studied the pieces, her mind buzzing with questions. "It's incredible how much thought they put into every detail. Even the smallest items feel... significant."

The guide smiled. "That's the power of their philosophy. Elarion believed that even the most ordinary objects could hold extraordinary meaning if created with care and

intention."

Irina glanced at Astron again, her eyes alight with curiosity. "So, what do you think? Does all this balance and symbolism mean anything to you?"

Astron's sharp gray eyes lingered on the display for a moment before he finally spoke,

his tone calm and even. "It reminds me of something..."

His words hung in the air, simple yet laden with an unspoken weight. He didn't elaborate, his gaze flicking to the ornate artifacts once more before turning away, as if the thought didn't warrant further reflection.

Irina, however, froze. Her hazel eyes widened slightly, and a faint chill ran down her spine as his words stirred a memory buried deep in her mind. Something...

11-03

Estelle.

The name surfaced in her thoughts, unbidden but undeniable. It was from the dream-

or was it a vision?-the fragments she'd glimpsed when she had somehow seen pieces of Astron's past. A younger Astron, his purple eyes filled with a light that had long since dimmed, standing in a village surrounded by unfamiliar yet hauntingly intricate

symbols.

Her gaze darted back to the artifacts in the case. The sunbursts, the balance between form and function, the deliberate precision in every curve and line-it was all eerily similar to the markings she had seen in that vision.

The symbols on the homes of his village... They looked like this. Not identical, but

close. Too close to ignore.

Her heart quickened as she traced the lines of the artifacts with her eyes, piecing

together fragments of a memory that felt both distant and urgent. Is this connected somehow? Was that place tied to Aurora Sanctum? Or... was it something even older, something lost?

Irina clenched her fists slightly, a mix of curiosity and unease swirling in her chest. She glanced at Astron, who now stood silently, his expression as unreadable as ever. He had said so little, and yet she couldn't shake the feeling that he had noticed the same resemblance-or perhaps he had already dismissed it as insignificant. Does he remember? she wondered, her lips pressing into a thin line. Does he know what these symbols mean, or is it just a coincidence?

The guide's voice broke her train of thought, cheerfully leading them to the next display. Irina forced herself to follow, nodding occasionally at the explanations, but her mind remained elsewhere, caught between the fragments of Astron's past and the mysteries of Aurora Sanctum.

She didn't say a word about her realization. Not yet. There were too many questions and not enough answers, and she doubted Astron would be eager to discuss something so personal in the middle of a museum tour.

But as they moved through the exhibits, her curiosity only deepened. This can't just be

a coincidence, she thought, stealing another glance at Astron. I'll figure it out.

Eventually. Irina's mind was a whirlwind of thoughts, piecing together fragments of memory and

possibility as she moved through the museum. Her gaze occasionally drifted to Astron, his calm demeanor an anchor amid her swirling doubts.

'Could he know? Or is it just me chasing shadows?' she wondered, her fingers idly

brushing against a nearby exhibit. Then something happened!

Chapter 719 164.1 The Attack

On the market side, the artifact that the vendor named Jihan had activated began to hum faintly, its mana pulsing as it analyzed the couple. Invisible to the untrained eye, a web of detection magic expanded outward, scanning for the presence of

enchantments. Moments later, the artifact flared briefly before settling back into its dormant state, the signal it sent out discreet but unmistakable.

Far from the market, in a concealed location where the operatives coordinated their efforts, a receiver lit up. A faint glow spread across its surface, and the encrypted signal was processed instantly. The room buzzed with quiet efficiency as one of the operatives studied the data, his eyes widening.

"Leader, we've got confirmation," he said, his voice steady but charged with urgency. "The artifact just flagged a high-level enchantment on a female target in the marketplace. Based on the signature, it's a disguise artifact"

The team leader, Rován Kael, turned sharply, his expression darkening. He was a seasoned operative, known for his precision and ruthlessness, and this mission was personal for him. Failure was not an option.

"Are the targets still in the area?" Rován asked, his voice calm but firm.

"Yes, sir," the operative replied. "The pair is still moving through the market, but based on their trajectory and behavior, they match the intel we received. All other subjects have been cleared-this is our couple."

Rovan nodded, his mind already spinning through the next steps. "Good. Maintain observation but keep your distance. If the enchantment is active, there's no doubt it's them. We'll follow their lead."

Back in the marketplace, the operatives began converging discreetly on the confirmed targets. Astron and Irina moved through the bustling streets with practiced ease, their movements calm and unhurried. To the untrained eye, they appeared like any other couple-a man and a woman casually exploring the market. But to the team, the subtle signs were unmistakable.

"They're heading east," one of the operatives reported through his communicator. "Looks like they're making their way out of the market district."

"Keep eyes on them," Rovan ordered. "If the intel is accurate, they'll be heading to the Stellamere Museum. Make sure they don't slip out of sight."

The team moved with precision, shadowing the couple from multiple angles. High-grade artifacts concealed their presence, ensuring that neither Astron's heightened awareness nor Irina's sharp instincts would detect them.

As the pair exited the marketplace and began walking toward the outskirts of the city, the operatives maintained their formation, reporting every movement back to Rovan.

19-10

"They're on the main road to the museum," another operative confirmed. "Estimated arrival time, twenty minutes."

Rovan activated his communicator, his voice cutting through the network. "Alert the agents we've stationed at the Stellamere Museum, Targets are confirmed-Irina Emberheart and Astron Natusalune. They're en route."

At the museum, a team of agents received the alert. Situated discreetly within the museum's staff and visitors, they had been planted there days in advance, ready for this exact scenario. The museum was a sprawling, ancient structure with high ceilings, shadowed alcoves, and winding

corridors-a perfect stage for the ambush. "We've got confirmation," one of the agents said, speaking into a concealed communicator. "Targets are inbound. Irina Emberheart and Astron Natusalune. All units, prepare for action."

The agents began their preparations, activating artifacts and securing key positions throughout the museum. High-grade cloaking devices ensured they remained undetected, while suppression artifacts were placed strategically to neutralize any unexpected magical outbursts.

Back on the road, Rován received the updates with satisfaction. His team had done their part perfectly, and now, everything was falling into place.

"Remember," he said to his operatives, his tone steely, "we're dealing with Irina Emberheart. She's not just another target-she's a walking arsenal. And that boy with her, Astron... while it appears that the young man is not of a strong background, he can't be someone casual if he is with Irina Emberheart. Don't underestimate him too much either. We strike only when we're certain they have no way out. No mistakes." The operatives acknowledged the order, their focus unwavering as they continued to tail the pair. Every step brought them closer to the museum-and to the moment they had been preparing for.

The Stellamere Museum loomed large, its ancient stone façade bathed in the warm glow of the setting sun. Inside, the vast halls were a mix of shadow and light, the high ceilings creating an almost reverent atmosphere as visitors moved quietly through the exhibits. Among them, Irina and Astron followed a guide, their steps measured as they wandered through the displays.

The guide was a middle-aged woman with a polished demeanor, her tone professional and her knowledge of the exhibits impeccable. She pointed out artifacts with enthusiasm, explaining the significance of each with a depth that even caught Irina's interest.

"And here," the guide said, gesturing toward a glass-encased relic, "we have a ceremonial blade from the early Dominion period. Notice the intricate carvings along the hilt-they represent the phases of the moon, believed to grant the wielder clarity of thought."

The Stellamere Museum maintained its quiet dignity, its stone walls and towering exhibits bearing witness to centuries of history. Visitors moved about in hushed tones, adding to the reverent atmosphere. Among them, Irina and Astron were entirely unaware of the silent storm brewing around them.

The agents executed their operations with flawless precision. Concealed by high-grade cloaking artifacts, their presence was undetectable.

They moved into preassigned positions, their fire-resistant armor blending seamlessly under their uniforms.

Suppression artifacts, placed strategically throughout the museum, would create a web of mana disruption, ensuring that any attempt to unleash powerful magic would

be stifled.

Rovan Kael, stationed in a concealed alcove above the central gallery, observed the scene with cold, calculating eyes. His operatives' movements were smooth, disciplined, and coordinated. This is perfect, he thought. They have no idea what's

coming.

Irina and Astron wandered through the museum, their steps leisurely as the guide led them through another section. Astron's posture remained relaxed, though his sharp eyes occasionally scanned their surroundings. Irina, on the other hand, was absorbed in the guide's explanations, and her interest in the ancient artifacts was genuine.

"And this," the guide continued, gesturing toward a grand display case, "is a ceremonial staff used by the Dominion's early seers. It was believed to amplify foresight magic, allowing the user to glimpse into potential futures."

Irina leaned slightly closer to examine the staff, her hazel eyes narrowing in thought. Astron stood a step behind her, his hands loosely at his sides. To any onlooker, they appeared like a couple enjoying a quiet outing. But to the trained eyes of Rován and his team, their behavior was carefully analyzed, and their strengths and weaknesses

assessed.

"They're in position," one of the agents murmured through the communicator.

"Central gallery, northeast wing."

Rovan's voice crackled through the communication network, calm and commanding. "Good. This is our moment. All units, get into final positions. On my mark, we strike. Do not underestimate Irina Emberheart. The boy is secondary-take him down if he

resists."

wenty-five operatives surrounded the gallery, their formations tightening as they prepared for the assault. Among them were five masters, elite hunters of the highest rank, whose presence was overkill even for a target like Irina. Every operative was equipped with fire-resistant armor and enchanted weapons designed to counteract

Irina's flame-based abilities.

nanter na nam

The intelligence they had gathered ensured they were prepared for nearly every contingency. They knew Irina was a walking arsenal, capable of wielding fire magic with devastating precision. They knew Astron was a skilled dagger and bow user, though they dismissed him as less of a threat compared to his companion. He's good, but he's not a professional, Rovan thought. This will end quickly. Rovan's voice cut through the silence of the communicators. "Now."

The attack began with ruthless precision. Suppression fields surged to full power, the air around Irina and Astron growing heavy with mana disruption. Hidden panels in the

walls and ceiling opened, and the operatives emerged from their concealed positions, their movements swift and coordinated.

The air had grown subtly heavy, a faint shift that might have gone unnoticed by most, but not by Astron. His sharp gray eyes flickered with an almost imperceptible change, a glimmer of heightened awareness. Something was wrong.

Irina, absorbed in examining the intricate carvings on the ceremonial staff, didn't sense it. Her focus was entirely on the artifact as she murmured, "It's incredible how they infused their beliefs into even the smallest details..."

Astron's muscles tensed, his head turning slightly as his heightened senses caught the

faintest vibration in the air-a telltale sign of mana gathering in the distance. His instincts screamed danger.

"Down!" he barked, his voice sharp and commanding.

Before Irina could register his words, he moved. With inhuman speed, his body surged

with mana, his movements precise and fluid. His figure blurred for a split second as he closed the gap between them. In one swift motion, he tackled her to the ground, his

body covering hers protectively.

BOOM!

The explosion ripped through the gallery with a deafening roar, the shockwave tearing

through the air like a physical force. Glass cases shattered into thousands of jagged shards, artifacts toppled from their pedestals, and the ground beneath them trembled

violently.

Smoke and debris filled the air, the acrid stench of burnt materials stinging Irina's nostrils as she struggled to catch her breath. The weight of Astron's body pinned her to the ground, shielding her from the worst of the blast. Even so, she felt the force of the explosion reverberate through her bones, leaving her momentarily disoriented. Her ears rang as she coughed, blinking rapidly to clear her vision. "Astron-what-?" "Stay down," he ordered, his tone clipped but calm, his sharp gray eyes scanning their surroundings.

His presence was solid and grounding, his body emanating a faint, almost imperceptible glow as residual mana coursed through him. He had acted in an instant, faster than even most trained Awakened could have managed. Irina realized with a jolt of clarity that he had saved her from taking the full brunt of the explosion. The gallery was in chaos, smoke billowed around them, distorting the figures of operatives as they moved into position. Their cloaking devices shimmered faintly in the haze, giving them a ghostly, spectral appearance. Suppression artifacts hummed ominously, their fields thickening the air and making mana manipulation increasingly

difficult.

Irina's hazel eyes darted around, her instincts finally kicking in as the reality of the

ambush sank in. "Astron, what's going on? Who-?"

"Ambush."

It was an ambush.

Chapter 720 164.2 - The Attack

Irina exhaled slowly, her body steadying as she forced the chaos out of her mind. Smoke swirled around her, debris clattering to the floor, but her focus remained unshaken. She was an Emberheart, heir to one of the strongest families in the world. She had faced danger before-and survived.

This was no different.

Her hazel eyes sharpened as she pushed herself up, her stance steady. Astron was already in front of her, his daggers drawn in a reverse grip, their edges gleaming faintly even in the dim, smoke-filled gallery. His disguise had vanished, revealing his striking purple eyes, glowing faintly with mana. It was a startling contrast to his usual calm demeanor, his aura now charged with quiet intensity.

Irina tried to summon her own mana, reaching for the familiar flames that always answered her call. Nothing. Her connection to her core felt distant, suppressed. "They've laid out mana suppression fields," she murmured, her voice low and measured.

Astron glanced over his shoulder, nodding in acknowledgment. "Clever. Designed to weaken Awakened. They're trying to nullify your flames."

Irina's jaw tightened, her hazel eyes narrowing. 'Figures,' she thought bitterly. "They came prepared! She had faced suppression fields before, but this one was more sophisticated, more oppressive than most. It wasn't just limiting her mana-it felt like it was actively smothering her connection to it.

Astron's sharp gaze swept the room. "They're closing in. Twenty-five operatives, five elites. Fire-resistant armor. We're in their web."

Irina smirked faintly despite the situation. "You counted them already?"

He didn't reply, his focus already shifting to the approaching figures. The faint shimmer of cloaking devices in the haze made it clear that the operatives were professionals, moving in coordinated formations. Their presence exuded the calculated precision of hunters used to high-stakes missions.

Irina straightened, her fiery confidence returning despite the suppression fields. She might not have her flames, but she wasn't defenseless. Her eyes flicked to a shattered display case, where the fragments of a ceremonial dagger lay among the broken glass. With a quick, fluid motion, she grabbed the blade, testing its weight. Not ideal, but it would do.

Astron's voice broke through her thoughts, low and calm. "Can you fight without mana?"

Irina inhaled deeply, her chest rising and falling as she forced herself to steady her

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mind. Her pride—normally a cornerstone of her demeanor—was not what mattered now. If she allowed it to blind her, it would only hold her back. This was not the time for bravado or stubbornness; this was survival.

Her grip on the ceremonial dagger tightened as she met Astron's steady gaze. "No," she said simply, her voice firm and resolute. "I can't fight like this."

Astron nodded once, his purple eyes gleaming in the dim, smoke-filled gallery. His gaze held none of the condescension she might have feared before, only sharp focus and acknowledgment. "Good," he said, his voice low but decisive. "That makes this clear. My main objective is getting you out of here."

Irina stiffened slightly but forced herself to stay calm. "What about you?"

His expression didn't change. "I'll handle what I can, but don't try to play hero. Your job is to survive. No matter what happens, you stick to that."

Irina felt her jaw tighten, her pride bristling for a fleeting moment before she crushed it down. His words weren't meant to belittle her-they were logical, brutally so. The field suppressing her flames was crippling, and in her current state, she wasn't at full strength. Astron's abilities were far less reliant on mana, making him the better combatant in these conditions.

Her hazel eyes flickered with reluctant acceptance. "Fine. But if you think I'm just going to cower behind you-"

"I don't," he interrupted, his tone sharp but calm. "But your survival comes first. They're targeting you. Use that brain of yours and stay one step ahead. Let me do the

rest."

Irina hesitated, then nodded. "Alright," she said, her voice quieter but no less resolute. "I'll trust you."

"Good," Astron replied, already turning his attention back to the approaching operatives. His daggers glinted faintly in the low light, their edges sharp and poised for action. "Stay close."

And then in an instant, he took out something from his spatial bracelet.

FOOOSH!

It was a device.

'A smokescreen?'

Just as the attackers were using the smoke as a measure of attack, Astron did the same. Smoke started rising all around covering everyone's vision.

TAP! TAP!

The air around them thickened, the oppressive silence broken only by the faint hum of suppression fields and the distant crackle of debris settling. Irina's grip tightened on the ceremonial dagger as shadows emerged from the smoke-silent, calculating figures moving with predatory intent.

Four operatives closed in, their weapons glinting faintly in the dim light. Irina felt her heartbeat quicken. They weren't rushing in recklessly; their movements were methodical, and coordinated, like a pack of wolves circling their prey.

"Target found," one of them muttered, his voice carrying a cold certainty as his eyes locked onto Irina. She shifted her stance, preparing herself, but even as she moved, she realized something strange.

Where is Astron?

In that split second, she lost track of him. Her sharp senses, trained through years of combat and intense training, couldn't pinpoint his presence. It was as though he had vanished completely, swallowed by the smoke and shadows.

The operatives moved closer, confident in their advantage. One raised his weapon, a sleek, enchanted blade designed to nullify defensive magic. Another pulled out a suppression baton, the faint hum of its enchantment crackling in the air.

Irina tensed, her mind racing. 'No flames, no mana. I'm cornered, but I can still-'

"Kurghk-!"

The sound shattered the oppressive quiet, a wet, choking noise that came from somewhere behind the operatives. One of them staggered forward, clutching his throat as blood sprayed from a precise slash across his neck. He fell to the ground with a heavy thud, his weapon clattering beside him,

"What the-?" one of the remaining operatives began, spinning around, but he barely had time to react before a dagger flashed through the haze, embedding itself into his chest. The man stumbled, gasping as the weapon's sharp edge pierced armor and flesh alike, before collapsing to his knees.

The remaining two operatives turned, their confidence evaporating as they tried to locate the source of the attack. But before they could act, a blur of motion

materialized from the smoke.

Astron.

His movements were impossibly fast, almost inhuman, his figure a shadow among shadows. One moment, he was behind the nearest operative, and the next, his dagger was driving cleanly into the man's back, severing critical ligaments with clinical precision. The operative fell without a sound, his body hitting the ground like a rag

doll.

The last man turned to face Astron, raising his suppression baton defensively, but the effort was futile. Astron sidestepped the swing with unnerving ease, his purple eyes glowing faintly with mana. His other dagger swept upward, slicing cleanly through the man's weapon arm. The operative screamed, dropping his baton as he stumbled

backward.

Astron stepped forward, his expression unreadable as he drove his dagger into the man's chest with a channeled mana.

SPURT!

The sheer strength behind the attack was too much.

The chaos of the ambush spiraled to a fever pitch as the remaining 21 operatives advanced with ruthless precision. Some brandished enchanted blades, others readied suppression bows with arrows glimmering faintly in the dim light, while a few began channeling magic, their mana flaring in the haze.

The smoke-filled gallery pulsed with tension, the oppressive hum of suppression fields tightening the atmosphere. Irina stood her ground, her hazel eyes sharp despite the storm surrounding her, but her grip on the ceremonial dagger betrayed her frustration. Her flames-her greatest weapon-remained suppressed, leaving her

vulnerable.

Astron, however, was far from deterred.

From the shadows, he saw the operatives converging, their focus unmistakably fixed on Irina. A cold clarity settled over him.

'They're targeting her,' he knew. 'All of them.'

Without hesitation, the shadows around him thickened, an unnatural darkness that

seemed to pulse in time with his intent. His figure melted into the haze, the faint outline of his body consumed by the deep black tendrils of [Shadowborne].

In an instant, he vanished.

The first operative to reach Irina lunged with a curved blade, aiming for her

unguarded side. Before the strike could connect, Astron emerged from the smoke, a

dagger in hand, its edge glinting ominously.

THUNK!

The blade found its mark, embedding deep into the attacker's throat. The operative's body fell lifelessly to the ground before his comrades could react.

Astron didn't linger. Using the momentum of his leap, he landed in front of Irina, his daggers spinning into reverse grips as he prepared to hold the line. His shadow-cloaked figure exuded an aura of menace, his glowing purple eyes cutting through the haze like twin beacons of death.

"Stay behind me," he ordered, his voice low but firm.

Irina hesitated, her pride warring with practicality, but the growing tide of enemies

left little room for argument. She nodded, adjusting her grip on the dagger and shifting into a defensive stance.

The operatives surged forward in unison, their weapons and spells creating a symphony of chaos. Arrows whistled through the air, crackling with suppression mana, while fireballs and bolts of icy energy illuminated the smoke in bursts of light.

Astron moved like a shadow come to life. He dodged an incoming arrow with a tilt of his head, his body twisting fluidly to evade a lunging blade. With a flick of his wrist, he

hurled two daggers into the fray.

BOOM!

The daggers detonated midair, releasing a burst of concussive force that threw several operatives off balance. Smoke and debris swirled chaotically, the shockwave disorienting the attackers and creating a momentary opening.

"Cover your ears!" Astron barked as he reached into his spatial bracelet.

FOOOSH!

He unleashed another device—a smokescreen, denser and infused with mana. It

rapidly engulfed the area, turning the already chaotic battlefield into a complete sensory void.

The operatives faltered, their vision obscured, but Astron moved with ease with Irina on his shoulder.

"Hold your breath."

And then he ordered.