

H. Academy 441

Chapter 441 101.1 - Dakota Hellen

There were many different classes in the world.

And being an Awakened who had fought on the frontlines for a long time, Dakota had seen her fair share of classes on her own.

But, different from how everyone thought, having a unique class was not something that was always beneficial.

Especially in places like the military. Since that place puts more importance on the system than an individual strength, in the military, the importance was on numbers; thus, most of the time, those with general and common occupations would be taken there.

Even then, there were still many unique occupations. Just like herself and the unit she was in. After all, being a [Martial Artist] was not a common thing in the military as most of the soldiers either used a sword, spear, or bow.

That was why she was assigned to a unit that was filled with people just like herself. People with unique occupations and weapons.

Dakota reminisced about her time in the military, a period that had shaped her into the person she is today. Her unit was a motley crew of individuals with unique abilities and even more unique personalities.

There was Lieutenant Seraph, a [Battlemage] whose mastery over both physical combat and elemental magic made him a force to be reckoned with on the battlefield. He could switch seamlessly between casting devastating spells and engaging in close-quarters combat, often turning the tide of battle single-handedly.

Then there was Corporal Ingrid, a [Thrower] who specialized in using throwing weapons with deadly precision. Her arsenal ranged from throwing knives to custom-made explosives, and she could hit a target from an impressive distance. Ingrid's keen eye and quick reflexes made her an invaluable asset during skirmishes and ambushes.

Private Jaxon, known as the [Hallucinator], had the rare ability to create powerful illusions that could confuse and disorient the enemy. His mental prowess allowed him to manipulate the perceptions of others, making them see things that weren't there. Jaxon's abilities were often used to create diversions or to provide cover for the unit's movements.

But out of all the unique individuals she had served with, there was one person who stood out the most—a young man named Elias. He was both the luckiest and unluckiest person Dakota had ever met.

Because of his class.

[Weapon Master]

But why was he lucky and unlucky at the same time? What was the reason for such a thing?

Dakota thought back to Elias and his journey as a [Weapon Master]. For someone in this class, their abilities were both a blessing and a curse.

The class offered unparalleled versatility and the potential to master any weapon, but it came with significant challenges that made it incredibly difficult to advance.

The primary issue for a [Weapon Master] was finding a suitable [Combat Art]. Most combat arts were specialized for a single type of weapon, designed to maximize the efficiency and power of that weapon.

This specialization meant that a swordsman could fully devote themselves to mastering the sword, and a bowman could hone their archery skills to perfection. Each combat art was intricately tied to the specific nuances of its weapon, allowing practitioners to achieve extraordinary levels of proficiency.

However, for a [Weapon Master], this specialization was a double-edged sword. Since they needed to be proficient with multiple weapons, finding or creating a [Combat Art] that could encompass all their skills was nearly impossible. Most combat arts simply weren't versatile enough to support the broad skill set required by a [Weapon Master].

Moreover, the efficiency of combat arts was closely correlated to the level of the practitioner's occupation. As someone leveled up their occupation, their understanding and effectiveness with their chosen combat art would naturally increase.

This synergy between occupation level and combat art mastery was crucial for becoming a top-tier fighter.

But the path of a [Weapon Master] was different. To level up their occupation, they needed to develop proficiency with multiple weapons, each requiring deep understanding and practice. This meant that advancing as a [Weapon Master] required exponentially more effort compared to someone specializing in a single weapon.

For every level a swordsman could gain, focusing solely on the sword, a [Weapon Master] would need to divide their time and effort among numerous weapons, potentially requiring five to ten times more effort to achieve the same level of advancement.

This dual nature made the [Weapon Master] class both a boon and a burden. It was perfect for those starting their journey, offering the flexibility to learn and experiment with all paths open. But as they advanced, the same flexibility chained them, demanding immense dedication and perseverance to make meaningful progress.

That was also the reason why the advancement of the Weapon Master class was unknown.

A Mage could become an Archmage for an advanced and final class.

A Sorcerer could become a Magus.

A Witch could advance to a Supreme Witch.

A Swordsman could become a Swordmaster, etc.....

There are many occupations with their advancements known. But that was not the case for the weapon master, as while already rare, they were also hard to advance.

The [Weapon Master] class was highly related to one's talent for comprehension and ability to learn.

This was why Dakota could see Elias in this kid. Astron had the same dedication, waking up early to train and pushing himself beyond his limits. It was this similarity that sparked Dakota's interest in him even more.

She turned her attention back to Astron, a hint of a smile playing on her lips. "A [Weapon Master], huh? That explains a lot."

Astron nodded, his expression serious. "Yes, ma'am."

Dakota's eyes softened slightly. "It's not an easy path. You need to have a strong talent for comprehension and a relentless drive to learn. Many have tried, but few succeed."

"Indeed. But I am confident."

Seeing those purple eyes filled with glint, she felt amused. "This Trainee seems to be a bit cheeky, isn't he?" "Ho?" She raised her eyebrows, looking at him.

"Ho?" She raised her eyebrows, looking at him. She pulled out her tablet and glanced at the examination file. "If you're that confident, you wouldn't mind a little change in the examination, would you?"

Astron tilted his head slightly to the left, curiosity evident on his face. "What do you mean by that, ma'am?"

Dakota's smile widened. "Normally, you'd only be tested in your main weapons. But since your class is a [Weapon Master], different from how it's registered here, wouldn't it be fair for us to test a variety of weapons?"

Astron didn't answer immediately, but Dakota could see the gears turning in his mind. She could tell he was considering the implications of revealing all his skills in front of other cadets.

"If you're concerned about showing everything to the other cadets, that's fine," Dakota continued, her tone thoughtful. "We can start the examination a bit earlier if you prefer."

As she spoke, she sized him up from top to bottom. His body had already recovered to some extent, and the sweat that had covered him had disappeared.

A body that is toned is fair enough. Since the training clothes were made from a special fiber, they clasped together directly to the body. Hence, she could observe.

"An early examination?" Astron repeated, weighing the idea. "That could work."

'Not bad. She can pick up those minute details quite well. I had been hinting that I was hiding my class from other people, and she actually picked it up.'

Dakota nodded approvingly. "Good. You'll be tested in a variety of weapons to assess your versatility as a [Weapon Master]." She said, looking at her watch. "It is now 5.45 A.M. We will start at 6. Is that okay for you?"

"I have no problems with that."

"You don't need to worry about the weapons. I will deal with everything."

"I see."

Dakota gave him a final nod before heading toward the equipment room. As she walked, she mentally reviewed the weapons she would select for the test. She wanted to ensure a comprehensive assessment of Astron's skills, challenging him with a variety of weapon types.

'So, this is Dakota Hellen.'

As Dakota left to prepare for the examination, I took a moment to process our encounter. She was not a character from the game, which meant I had no prior knowledge of her. But even without that advantage, I could glean quite a bit from our brief interaction.

'Her posture, her movements, and the way she carries herself...'

There was a certain way that she had clothed and carried herself that made me think she was trying to act with an allure.

'She had a rigid life, and looking for a bit of an attention?'

This was my first speculation. It was not something that concerned me, as this was her personal choice, so I did not judge.

But aside from her intentions, Dakota's bodysuit clung to her well-trained physique, accentuating her athletic build. Her stride was powerful and deliberate, radiating confidence and authority. Every step was measured, and her eyes were sharp, taking in every detail of her surroundings. It was clear she was accustomed to command and discipline.

'Definitely military background.'

Her tone was firm but not unkind, suggesting she was used to giving and getting orders and expecting them to be followed. The way she analyzed my movements and the ease with which she suggested modifying the examination indicated she was experienced in evaluating combat skills.

'She's been on the front lines before.'

From the slight deformities in her knuckles, elbows, knees, and the bottom part of her palms, it was evident she was a close combatant. Those kinds of marks were the result of years of intense training and real combat experience, the kind that only someone who regularly fought with their body would have.

Even though her body-tight suit did a really good job covering that part, such small details would not get passed by my eyes.

'A [Martial Artist].'

Her ability to pick up on my hints and her quick thinking suggested she was not just a brute-force fighter but also someone with a keen mind.

She understood the importance of tactics and strategy, which made her a formidable opponent and an even more formidable instructor.

And more important than others, it looked like she had a prior encounter with my occupation.

'This examination will be interesting.'

This was the first time.

I was curious to see how she would test me and what kind of weapons she would select. Her approach hinted at a thorough and challenging assessment, which was exactly what I needed to gauge my current abilities and push my limits.

'No point in holding back. This is an opportunity to learn and grow.'

With that thought, I focused on calming my mind and preparing for the upcoming examination.

'Maybe I can even learn from a martial artist as well.'

Chapter 442 101.2 - Dakota Hellen

The clock ticked closer to 6:00 A.M. as I stood in the training hall. I had used the remaining time to center myself, focusing on the upcoming examination.

Dakota returned, her stride purposeful as she approached.

She was followed by weapons, each of them flying as an assortment of weapons that gleamed under the facility's ambient light.

No matter how many times I had seen it, it was evident that most of the people who had fought out for a long time and were talented tended to master 「Telekinesis」 partially.

She laid the weapons out in a row, presenting a formidable array of choices.

Dakota gestured to the weapons. "We'll be starting with these," she announced, her voice carrying an edge of authority. "You'll demonstrate your proficiency with each, beginning with the most basic and moving to the more complex."

I nodded, my eyes scanning the selection. Swords, spears, axes, daggers, and more, each weapon represented a different style and set of skills.

As usual, they were laid out in general. This was exactly the method that would be used in the academy, so I didn't mind.

"We'll begin with the sword," Dakota said, picking up a standard longsword and handing it to me. Its weight and balance felt in my grip.

The training dummy stood ready, its holographic eyes locked onto mine. I adjusted my stance, recalling the basics of Federal Swordplay that Eleanor had demonstrated before.

This style was designed for efficiency and adaptability, perfect for someone like me who had learned to value versatility in combat.

"Begin," Dakota commanded, her voice echoing in the spacious hall.

I stepped forward; my movements were fluid yet deliberate. My footwork followed the patterns that I had drilled into my head. I raised the sword, feeling the mana flow from my core into the blade, just as Eleanor had taught. It had been a while, but even then, the teachings were still in my mind.

And thanks to the morning training that I did, I was already accustomed to the training suit that I was wearing.

—SWOOSH! With a swift motion, I executed the first stripe, a clean diagonal slash aimed at the dummy's midsection. The sword cut through the air, leaving a faint trail of mana in its wake. The dummy parried, moving with surprising speed and accuracy.

'This hologram is no joke,' I thought, adjusting my grip.

I followed up with a series of quick, calculated stripes, each one testing the dummy's defenses.

The Federal Swordplay's efficiency shone through as I focused on maintaining a consistent flow of mana along the blade. My strikes were simple yet effective, designed to conserve energy while maximizing damage.

CLANK! The dummy responded with a counterattack, its movements mimicking those of a skilled opponent.

I sidestepped, deflecting the incoming blow with a well-timed parry.

CLANK! The clash of our blades echoed in the hall, an example of the realism of the holographic technology and how advanced it was.

But aside from that, I found out something.

'The dummies really feel a lot more organic, indeed.' The fluidity of the enemy's movements, their way of using swords, and the styles that were used clearly showed that the thing before me was close to a real person.

CLANK!

As I parried the dummy's blade, it suddenly shifted its stance. The holographic opponent lowered its blade to the right bottom side, a position I hadn't seen before.

My instincts screamed a warning, and thus, I kept my eyes open. But even that has limits.

–SWOOSH! With startling speed, the dummy dashed forward, executing a cross slash aimed at my torso. The swiftness and precision of the move were unlike any basic technique; this was a [Skill], a deliberate and powerful attack designed to catch me off guard.

–WOOSH! I quickly stepped back, trying to keep my distance and maximize my sword's length advantage. However, my footwork faltered slightly, a consequence of my habits with shorter weapons like daggers. The dummy's blade sliced through the air, grazing my side as I barely evaded the attack.

'Think, Astron. This isn't a dagger,' I reminded myself, narrowing my eyes. 'A sword is different.'

I adjusted my stance, planting my second foot at a slightly different angle to provide better stability and reach. As the dummy prepared for another strike, I formed a visualization in my head consisting of three precise 「Stripes」 .

The first stripe, a diagonal slash from top left to bottom right, aimed to force the dummy into a defensive position. The second stripe, a horizontal slash, targeted its midsection to disrupt its balance. The third stripe, a vertical strike, aimed to deliver the final blow.

If executed correctly, that would end the fight in an instant.

—Eyes of Hourglass. Though I did not want to use this, it was better for me to show something more so that I could get better feedback.

Focusing on the visualization, I executed the first stripe with a swift, powerful motion. The dummy parried, but I was ready. Transitioning smoothly, I brought the blade across in a horizontal slash. The dummy's defense faltered slightly, its movements less fluid.

Seizing the moment, I unleashed the third stripe, a vertical strike with all the force and precision I could muster. The blade is connected to the holographic opponent, cutting through its form. The dummy flickered, its image breaking apart before dissipating into pixels.

Breathing heavily, I lowered my sword, feeling a mix of satisfaction and determination. The adjustments to my stance and the visualization had made a significant difference, allowing me to exploit the sword's potential more.

"Good," Dakota's voice rang out, breaking the silence. "You adapted quickly and used the Federal Swordplay effectively. But remember, your footwork needs to match the weapon you're using. Practice moving with the sword, not just swinging it."

"Now," she said, gesturing to the array of weapons, "we'll move on to the spear."

Setting the sword aside, I picked up a spear, its unfamiliar weight and balance, which made me adjust my grip.

'Spear, huh?'

It was not my first time trying a spear, but still, I had not paid much attention to it as there were more pressing matters.

–WRROM! The training dummy was reactivated and ready for the next round of the examination. I took a deep breath, readying myself.

Unlike the sword, the spear felt awkward in my hands. The length and weight distribution were vastly different from the daggers I was accustomed to.

I adjusted my stance, trying to recall the basic principles of spear combat from my limited theoretical knowledge.

'And from Ethan.'

Since I had fought with him before and also watched how he used a spear, I had a slightly basic grasp of his body.

The dummy moved into position, its holographic form mimicking a skilled opponent once again. I knew this would be a challenge, but it was also an opportunity to learn and grow.

With a tentative thrust, I aimed the spear at the dummy's midsection. The attack was clumsy, lacking the precision and control I had with the sword. The dummy easily deflected the strike and countered with a swift, accurate blow.

–SWOOSH! I dodged, narrowly avoiding the attack. The spear's length made it difficult to maneuver in close quarters, and I struggled to find the right balance between offense and defense. My movements felt slow and cumbersome compared to the fluidity of my dagger techniques.

'This isn't working,' I thought. 'I need to adapt, to find a way to use the spear effectively.'

I watched the dummy closely, its movements fluid and precise, embodying the essence of a skilled spearman.

'Right...There is no need to make it complex.' Instead of relying on past memories and interactions, I realized it might be better to keep it simple and just observe what was in front of me.

'Just be content with what is before you.' There was no need to get it perfect instantly, nor get Ethan's level.

'Watch and learn,' I told myself, focusing on the dummy's stance, its grip on the spear, and the way it moved.

The dummy took a defensive stance, its spear held at an angle, ready to parry or thrust. I mirrored its position, adjusting my grip and stance to match. The holographic opponent moved, executing a series of fluid strikes and parries. I watched intently, noting the rhythm and flow of its movements.

With each exchange, I tried to replicate the dummy's actions, focusing on the basics. My first attempts were clumsy, but as I continued to observe and mimic, my strikes began to improve. The spear started to feel more natural in my hands, its length and weight becoming an extension of my body.

The dummy lunged forward with a powerful thrust. I sidestepped, bringing my spear around in a wide arc to deflect the attack. The maneuver was smoother this time and more controlled. Encouraged by the small success, I pressed forward, initiating a series of quick jabs and slashes.

As the combat continued, I began to see patterns in the dummy's movements. It wasn't just about strength or speed; it was about timing and precision.

'Indeed. The spear is different from the dagger. The energy and power spent while recovering the blade is a lot more high compared to a dagger, and that contrasts with my style. I need to keep my body in control. Don't take risks.' I adjusted my strikes, focusing on hitting the dummy's weak points and exploiting its openings.

The dummy countered with a swift, downward strike. I parried, feeling the impact reverberate through the spear. Instead of retreating, I stepped forward, using the momentum to deliver a powerful thrust. The spear's tip connected with the dummy's chest, causing it to flicker and stagger back.

I pressed the advantage, executing a series of rapid strikes. Each movement was a blend of observation and adaptation, mimicking the dummy's techniques while refining my own. The fluidity

of the Federal Swordplay principles began to integrate with the spear, enhancing my control and precision.

The dummy moved to counterattack, but I was ready. I sidestepped, delivering a swift, precise jab to its midsection. The holographic opponent flickered again, its form destabilizing. With a final, decisive thrust, I drove the spear into the dummy, causing it to dissipate into pixels.

Breathing heavily, I lowered the spear, feeling a sense of accomplishment. By observing and adapting, I managed to improve my proficiency with the spear, turning a weakness into a strength.

Dakota approached her expression one of approval. "You adapted well," she said. "But, you must really be a beginner on a spear. Was this your first time using one?"

"Indeed. I had used a spear for the first time in a while."

"Makes sense. Now, we will continue with others."

Just like that, we have gone with every weapon one by one, from axe and whip to everything.

Until every weapon was finished.

Aside from one.

"Now, we are going to test your bare-handed combat abilities."

It was the thing that I wanted to show the most.

Chapter 443 101.3 - Dakota Hellen

As Dakota watched Astron prepare for the examination, she felt a mix of curiosity and anticipation.

His confidence intrigued her, and she was eager to see how he would handle the diverse array of weapons she had selected.

When she handed him the longsword, Dakota watched closely. The way he adjusted his grip and stance, recalling the basics of Federal Swordplay, demonstrated his adaptability. As he began his strikes, she could see the fluidity in his movements, but there were also moments of hesitation.

'He's trying to find his footing with the sword,' Dakota thought, her keen eyes catching every detail. 'The basics are there, but he needs to refine his technique.'

As Astron engaged the training dummy, she saw the potential in his strikes. The Federal Swordplay's efficiency was evident, but his footwork needed improvement.

'No, it may not be his footwork....'

At the start, that was what she had thought, but there was somehow something different about it. It was as if he was trying to do something, but his body wasn't doing it exactly.

'Maybe.....It might have been that....'

She remembered something that she had seen when she was in the military. People who had changed their weapons tended to feel the need to reshape their bodies accordingly.

After all, even different stances can be specialized in some muscles, and changing stances could affect the body. Changing a complete weapon would be even harder to do so.

'His specialized weapons are daggers and the bow. And, it seems he had picked the bow later on. That means, for all his childhood, he had been guided to use a dagger. I don't know why he did that, but if this is the case, the reason why his body is not able to follow his thoughts can be explained.' Dakota's observations sharpened as she considered this. She watched Astron closely, noting the subtle hesitations in his movements. It was clear that his body was still accustomed to the movements and muscle memory of a dagger user, which were vastly different from the techniques required for a longsword.

'His body is used to quick, close-quarters combat. The fluidity and lightness of a dagger are deeply ingrained in his muscle memory. Transitioning to a longsword, which requires broader, more powerful movements, would naturally create this disconnect.'

As the examination continued, Dakota saw Astron's adaptability. He watched the holographic dummy, mimicking its techniques and gradually adjusting his own. His strikes became more confident, and his footwork started to align better with the demands of the sword.

'Good. He's learning to bridge the gap,' she thought. 'But it's going to take time and a lot of practice.'

Normally, to make these types of situations work, one would need to abandon the first weapon completely so that one can transition easily without overwriting the previous habits.

But, since Astron was a [Weapon Master], abandoning a dagger would be impossible, as the sole reason why he was practicing a sword was to keep the variety of weapons.

'For such a situation....A special body might be needed. And, I may know what it is.'

She had some ideas about what to do, but she decided to keep that to herself for the time being.

When they moved to the spear, Dakota's initial curiosity deepened. The spear was even more different from the dagger, requiring entirely different muscle groups and techniques.

She observed his initial clumsiness but also his determination to adapt by observing the dummy's movements.

'He's watching and learning. That's a good sign. He understands that each weapon requires its own set of skills and that brute force won't be enough.'

As Astron continued to practice with the spear, Dakota saw him gradually becoming more comfortable. He started to integrate the principles of the Federal Swordplay, enhancing his control and precision with the spear. Despite his initial awkwardness, he was able to adapt and improve his techniques quickly.

'He's learning to use the spear efficiently,' she mused. 'He understands the importance of precision and timing. He's making the necessary adjustments, even if they're not perfect yet.'

Dakota noted the improvements with satisfaction. She could see that Astron was making a concerted effort to bridge the gap between his muscle memory and the new techniques he was learning.

His willingness to observe, adapt, and apply feedback was crucial for a [Weapon Master]. They continued through the array of weapons, and Dakota's approval grew with each new challenge Astron faced.

'He has the potential of becoming versatile,' She thought. 'That's a critical quality for a [Weapon Master]. He's not just focused on one weapon; he's willing to learn and adapt to each one.'

Just like that, the time for the last weapon that they would be testing came.

"Now, we are going to test your bare-handed combat abilities." ((N1))

It was her specialty, being a [Martial Artist]. Thus, she was looking forward to watching him fight in close combat directly.

Before she could say anything more, Astron raised his hand. "Excuse me, ma'am, may I request something?"

Dakota tilted her head slightly, intrigued. "What is your request?"

Astron looked into her eyes with a slight glint and asked, "Would it be okay if we sparred for this part of the examination?"

Dakota's eyes narrowed, a mix of curiosity and caution in her gaze. "Why would I do such a thing? What reason made you request this?"

Astron glanced at her body, sizing her up from top to bottom before replying, "Since you're a [Martial Artist], I thought it would be best if I went against someone like you. It would provide a more realistic and challenging assessment of my skills."

Dakota raised an eyebrow. "And what makes you think I am a [Martial Artist]? How can you be so sure?"

Astron maintained eye contact, his expression steady. "Firstly, I observed the way you move, ma'am. Your posture is always perfectly balanced, and your strides are purposeful and controlled.

Different from a person with a weapon user, you are not leaning onto one side. That meant you were either a dual wielder or a martial artist.

What gave away is your clothing.

From the slight deformities in your knuckles, elbows, knees, and the bottom part of your palms, it is evident you use them a lot, especially since your palms are covered. Those kinds of marks were the result of years of intense training and real combat experience, the kind that only someone who regularly fought with their body would have.

That was why I reached such a conclusion."

Dakota's interest was piqued even further. His observations were accurate, and his confidence in his request was compelling. She could see he had been paying close attention, analyzing every detail.

'From this alone, it can easily be concluded that he has good observation skills. His observation grade for this exam would be an A just from this.'

Most cadets didn't have such good eyes.

'It is mentioned in his file, but even I was not expecting such a result. How intriguing.'

"Very well," she said after a moment of consideration. "We will spar. But know this, Trainee Astron, I will not go easy on you. You might end up with more severe injuries than you imagine. Are you still okay with it even after hearing this?"

"Yes, ma'am," Astron replied as if he was sure of himself.

'Heeeeh.....How cheeky....'

She was amused but, at the same time, curious. And she was not repulsed by the idea either, as she was faring to know what he would do against her.

Dakota moved to the center of the training hall, gesturing for Astron to join her.

This sparring session would not only test Astron's bare-handed combat abilities but also provide a deeper insight into his adaptability and resilience.

FLICK!

And then she had flicked her fingers, and her watch glowed.

~~whisper whisper whisper~~

With the veiled whispers that were incomprehensible, the platform that they had been standing on started to transform. The ground solidified, and mana barriers surrounding them strengthened. It took the form of an arena, creating a focused environment for their sparring session.

Dakota smiled as she took her position. "Since you are just a beginner, I am going to limit my strength to match your stats." Saying that, she channeled her mana all across her body, which began to glow slightly.

Astron nodded his head, acknowledging her statement. "Understood."

Dakota settled into her stance, her eyes locked onto Astron. "Begin," she commanded.

SWOOSH!

And the two launched forward.

As Dakota settled into her stance, her presence exuded a powerful and predatory aura. Her body was coiled like a spring, ready to unleash explosive force at a moment's notice.

Observing her posture, I couldn't help but think she looked like a tiger—graceful yet dangerous, her every movement calculated and efficient.

'This is going to be challenging.'

And that was exactly what I had been desiring. S

The moment she gave the command, "Begin," we both launched forward simultaneously.

–SWOOSH!

Dakota moved with incredible speed and precision, her fists and feet striking out with an accuracy that could kill.

Yeah.....

Right from the start.

I could barely keep up, but my eyes and instincts were honed from countless hours of training. I dodged and parried her attacks, trying to find an opening.

–THUD! THUD!

Her blows were relentless; each strike aimed to exploit any weakness in my defense.

I felt the impact reverberate through my arms as I blocked her punches, my muscles straining against the force.

Despite her self-imposed limitation, it was as if I was facing a mountain and a truck.

THUD! A swift kick to my side sent me staggering back, but I quickly regained my balance. I could see the hint of a smile on Dakota's face.

'She's testing me, pushing me to see how I'll respond under pressure.'

I tightened my stance, focusing on my breathing and calming my mind.

Even though I was always prominent in combat, there was something that I had been missing in this world.

'Barehand combat with mana. This is my first time.'

Indeed, this was the case.

There was something fundamentally different with just fighting with one's bare body and one's weapon coated with mana.

Since the moment mana entered the system, even fundamental things would change.

Circulating mana while controlling your own body was an intricate dance. It required a heightened level of awareness, a deep connection between mind and muscle.

Every movement, every breath, had to be synchronized with the flow of mana within. It was like trying to pat your head and rub your belly simultaneously but on a much more complex and demanding scale.

'This is harder than I thought.'

And doing this against an enemy like her was much harder.

But that was fine.

Losing here or showing off your winning side was not important here.

What was important was how I could improve. That was it.

Thus, I would be doing exactly that.

Strikes had to be timed not just with physical precision but also with the precise release of mana. It demanded an acute sense of internal balance, an ability to modulate the flow of energy through your body while executing complex movements.

My brain had to process not only the physical actions but also the intricate patterns of mana circulation.

It was like learning to walk all over again, with an additional sense to manage. The sensory input was overwhelming at times, the feel of mana coursing through my veins, the hum of energy amplifying each movement.

'Every punch, every kick... it's like recalibrating my entire combat style.'

–SWOOSH!

"It seems you are finally getting onto something. But, you must never forget your opponent is right here."

Dakota moved in again, her body blurring.

THUD!

And I felt a pressure right under my left ear.

'No!'

I moved my body to raise my hand rapidly, and I was successful in blocking the strike.

–DING!

But, as if a shock blast appeared out of nowhere, I felt my eardrums ring.

THUD! And lost my balance for a second, falling down to the ground.

"Or things like this may happen."

I was knocked down.

Chapter 444 101.4 - Dakota Hellen

"Or things like this may happen."

As I was on the ground, lying there, a new attack came hurtling toward my face. Instinctively, I activated my 「Eyes of Hourglass」, and the world around me slowed down.

The familiar sensation of time decelerating enveloped me, giving me a critical advantage. In this altered state, I could observe every detail with heightened clarity.

Dakota's fist inched towards me, her form a blur of motion. I focused intently on her, my eyes tracing the flow of mana through her body.

Her mana moved in intricate patterns, concentrated in her limbs and core, enhancing her speed and strength. I could see the subtle shifts in energy, the precise control she exerted over it.

There was no way I could fully replicate it in the short time I had, but I could try to imitate it partially.

'Focus... channel the mana to my legs... increase speed...'

I directed my mana towards my legs, feeling the energy surge through my muscles. The sensation was intense, like a current of electricity coursing through me.

I visualized the flow and the pathways the mana needed to take to enhance my speed.

With a burst of speed, I pushed off the ground, using the mana to propel myself upwards. The world seemed to snap back to normal speed as I launched myself towards Dakota.

SWOOSH!

I moved with a sudden acceleration, catching Dakota off guard. Her eyes widened for a split second, a flicker of surprise breaking through her composed exterior.

THUD!

My fist connected with her midsection, the force amplified by the mana coursing through my legs. The impact sent her staggering back, a look of recognition in her eyes.

I landed, my breathing heavy but steady. The exertion had taken a toll, but the adrenaline and the rush of mana kept me going.

Dakota regained her balance quickly, her eyes locking onto mine with renewed intensity. "Impressive, Trainee. You're starting to understand."

I nodded, a sense of accomplishment mixing with the ever-present determination. "Thank you, ma'am."

The reason why I was thankful was because of the small bracelets that she was wearing. Normally, most people would refrain from wearing bracelets to suppress their mana and would do it manually on their own.

That would make them feel a lot better and safer, and in the academy, most instructors did the same.

But this had one downside. Those with higher [Magical Power] attributes would have a higher ranking mana commandment. They would be able to command mana of a higher density and rank, and such condensed mana psions would be something that those with lower [Intuition] stat wouldn't be able to sense.

This difference would be evident if one's [Magical Power] stat was higher by at least one digit on parameters.

That was why higher-ranking Awakened would be this oppressive against lower-ranked ones and why [Intuition] stat was this important.

And that was why I was also able to sense the mana flowing down in Dakota's veins. It was because the bracelet was directly limiting her body and the mana she was using, making it visible to my eyes.

As she settled back to her stance, Dakota's predatory glance returned, her body shining orange.

"But you still have a long way to go. Let's continue."

SWOOSH! She had dashed forward once again, blasting herself once more.

SWOOSH!

I did the same.

We launched at each other again, our movements a blur of strikes and counters. Dakota's fists flew at me with relentless precision, each punch a test of my reflexes and endurance.

THUD! THUD!

I blocked her strikes, countering with my own. Our blows met with resounding impacts, the sound echoing through the training hall. I could feel my body reaching its limits, but I pushed through the pain, refusing to back down.

As we fought, I focused on my mana control, channeling it through my body. Every movement needed to be precise, the mana amplifying my speed and strength.

'Stay focused, maintain the flow.'

THUD!

A powerful kick from Dakota sent me sprawling to the ground. I quickly rolled to my feet, ready for the next attack. She moved with the grace and power of a seasoned warrior, her eyes never leaving mine.

'She's not giving me any room to breathe.'

I tightened my stance, focusing on my breathing and calming my mind. The fluidity and lightness I had cultivated with daggers were not enough here; I needed to adapt to harness the power and

precision required for close combat. The integration of mana made every strike more intense and every dodge more critical.

SWOOSH!

I moved in, aiming a series of quick jabs at her midsection. She blocked them effortlessly, her movements a blur. I feinted left, then brought my right elbow up towards her chin.

THUD!

Dakota deflected my elbow with a swift motion, countering with a sharp jab to my ribs. The pain was immediate, but I gritted my teeth and pushed through it. I had to remain focused.

'Adapt, observe, and counter.'

I saw an opening and took it, ducking under her next strike and launching a powerful uppercut. She dodged just in time, her reflexes honed to perfection. Her eyes met mine, a flash of respect evident in their depths.

THUD! THUD!

Her fists flew at me in rapid succession. I dodged the first and parried the second, using the momentum to spin and deliver a roundhouse kick aimed at her midsection. She blocked it with her forearm, the impact reverberating through both of us.

Dakota's movements were precise and controlled, a testament to her experience and training. Each attack flowed seamlessly into the next, leaving little room for error. I could feel the strain on my body, the exertion taking its toll.

But I wasn't done yet.

SWOOSH!

I dashed forward, feinting a punch and pivoting to deliver a swift kick to her knee. She sidestepped, countering with a back fist that grazed my temple. The world tilted momentarily, but I shook off the dizziness and refocused.

THUD!

I aimed a low kick at her shin, forcing her to shift her weight. With her balance momentarily disrupted, I saw my chance. I lunged forward, using my shoulder to push her back and create some distance.

Breathing heavily, I wiped the sweat from my brow. Dakota was a formidable opponent, but I was learning and adapting to her style. The integration of mana was becoming more natural, the flow of energy through my body enhancing my every move.

'She's not unbeatable. I just need to find the right strategy.'

Dakota nodded, acknowledging my efforts. "Good. You're learning quickly. But you'll need to do better than that."

I nodded and adjusted my stance, ready to continue the fight. Dakota's presence was imposing, but I welcomed the challenge. This was my chance to prove myself, to show that I would be more than a mere trainee here.

I would be someone that she would pay attention to and possibly take as a disciple.

Since that was my goal for this spar,

To impress someone like Dakota and make her teach me, to make use of her abilities as an overseer to the maximum.

SWOOSH!

We launched at each other again, our movements a blur of strikes and counters. Dakota's fists flew at me with relentless precision, each punch a test of my reflexes and endurance. I could feel the mana coursing through her strikes, adding a layer of complexity to the fight.

THUD! THUD!

I blocked her strikes, countering with my own. Our blows met with resounding impacts, the sound echoing through the training hall. I could feel my body reaching its limits, but I pushed through the pain, refusing to back down.

The mana in my legs and arms amplified my movements, giving me the edge I needed.

THUD!

A powerful kick from Dakota sent me sprawling to the ground. I quickly rolled to my feet, ready for the next attack.

Indeed, a real warrior was different. It was even harder for me to just keep track of her attacks, and she was pushing every little gap effortlessly.

'Not giving any room means this, I guess.' However, I wasn't about to give up. I focused on her movements, searching for patterns, weaknesses, and anything I could exploit. The integration of mana made her attacks faster and stronger, but it also made her movements more predictable if the mana was read properly and efficiently.

SWOOSH!

Dakota came at me again, her fists a blur. I ducked under a high punch and launched a counterattack, aiming a series of rapid strikes at her midsection. She blocked and parried, but I kept up the pressure, forcing her to stay on the defensive.

THUD!

I landed a solid punch to her side, and she staggered slightly. It was a small victory, but it somehow felt a little different, as the touch on my hand was soft this time instead of being quick.

"Not bad."

"Thank you."

I pressed the advantage, my strikes coming faster and harder, each one infused with mana.

THUD! THUD!

Dakota's eyes narrowed, and she adjusted her stance, her movements becoming even more precise. She met my attacks with fluid grace, her counters swift and powerful. The intensity of the fight increased, each of us pushing the other to the limit.

THUD!

She landed a powerful blow to my shoulder, and I felt a sharp pain shoot down my arm.

"Urghk-!"

I gritted my teeth, refusing to let it slow me down, igniting the pain on my shoulder. Instead, I focused on my legs and my external oblique muscles, rotating my body.

I countered with a spinning kick, catching her off guard.

THUD!

She blocked the kick but stumbled back, her eyes flashing with respect. "Not bad, young man. Using the pain as a faint."

I nodded, breathing heavily. "Thank you, ma'am."

Somehow, it seemed my evaluation rose from a trainee to a young man, but that was not the main focus.

"But from now on," Dakota said, her voice taking on a serious tone, "I will stop holding back."

The moment she said this, the pressure emanating from her body changed, and she looked like a tiger ready to pounce. She let out a faint breath, her eyes turning brown.

In an instant, she dashed towards me on all fours, moving with rapid speed. Her first strike was a rotating kick. I barely managed to block it with my elbows, but the impact sent a jolt through my arms. Using the momentum, Dakota landed on her two hands, which was followed by an acrobatic move, throwing a reverse axe kick.

I evaded the strike at the last second, pushing myself to the side. But this maneuver messed up my footwork, putting me in an unfavorable position.

As she finished the axe kick, her foot landed on the ground with her back facing me. She suddenly took a horse stance.

"Tiger stance. Fallen leaf."

She struck the air while turning her body, and the strike created a powerful blast. I braced myself for the attack, but even before I could adapt, I felt the shockwave hit me.

The force of the blast knocked me off my feet. My head spun as I hit the ground, my body skidding across the floor. I tried to regain my bearings, but the room tilted and swayed.

Dakota stood over me, her stance relaxed but her eyes sharp. "You did well, Trainee Astron." She said. It was as if she had returned to being normal, but I knew it was different.

"How about becoming my disciple?"

And, just as expected, I got the offer.

Chapter 445 101.5 - Dakota Hellen

'Let's see.'

As Dakota settled into her stance, her presence exuded a powerful and predatory aura. Her body was coiled like a spring, ready to unleash explosive force at a moment's notice.

This was one of the stances that she used against beginners like the kid before him. It was to test their explosiveness and the reaction time.

Many people would not know this, but most of the time, people's attention range was lower right at the start.

It would reach its peak after the fight had started for a while.

This phenomenon is often referred to in neuroscience as the "warm-up decrement." The warm-up decrement is the initial period during which performance is lower due to a lack of immediate readiness or focus before reaching an optimal level of performance as one becomes fully engaged.

'This is going to be challenging,' Astron thought, feeling the thrill of anticipation.

The moment she gave the command, "Begin," they both launched forward simultaneously.

–SWOOSH!

Dakota moved while moving her limited body to utmost precision. Even if she had limited her strength to some point, the power that she could exert was much higher than any type of trainee.

–THUD! Therefore, while she was parrying and exchanging blows, she was able to continue with her observation.

'His reflexes are sharp, but his form still needs refinement,' Dakota noted. 'He's relying on instincts and agility, but there's a lack of flow in his movements.'

–THUD! THUD!

Her blows were relentless; each strike aimed to exploit any weakness in his defense. She felt the impact reverberate through his arms as he blocked her punches, his muscles straining against the force.

'He's strong, but he hasn't yet mastered the integration of mana with his physical movements,' she observed. 'He's treating them as separate entities rather than a cohesive force.'

THUD!

A swift kick to his side sent Astron staggering back, but he quickly regained his balance.

'He's resilient. That's good,' she thought, observing his tenacity. 'But resilience alone won't be enough. Maybe he can show the same thing in this one as well.'

And it happened just as he thought it would.

When they continued, Dakota noticed Astron's efforts to synchronize his movements with the flow of mana within his body. She recognized the struggle in his eyes, the difficulty of managing the intricate dance of mana and muscle.

Just as she expected. He was learning how to do it while he was fighting. It was the same when he did it with the sword and the spear or other weapons.

'He's trying to adapt, but it's a complex process,' she mused. 'Circulating mana while controlling your body requires a heightened level of awareness. He needs to learn to synchronize his internal and external movements.'

Every movement, every breath, had to be synchronized with the flow of mana within. Dakota watched as Astron adjusted, trying to find that balance.

'He's learning, but it's still rough. His strikes are becoming more precise, but he needs to control the flow better,' she analyzed. 'Each punch, each kick... it's like recalibrating his entire combat style.'

Of course, just as she thought that, he stopped for a split second, his eyes widening slightly. Something had changed, as it seemed, and he came to a realization.

'That is good, but discipline needs to be installed.'

She didn't know what kind of student life he had when he was in the academy, but she wanted to make sure that things like these would not be tolerated here and he would know about it.

–SWOOSH!

"It seems you are finally getting onto something. But, you must never forget your opponent is right here." Dakota moved in again, her body blurring with speed and precision.

THUD!

She felt her strike connect, and Astron raised his hand rapidly to block it.

–DING!

The shockwave from her attack rang out, and she saw Astron momentarily lose his balance and fall to the ground.

"Or things like this may happen."

As Astron lay on the ground, Dakota prepared for another attack. She noticed the slight glow in his eyes, a sign of his ability activating.

'Indeed, he has one of those eyes.'

Being in this organization for more than a decade, she was now familiar with the concept of special eyes.

Since her rank was not as high as some certain people, she was not a core member or a [Chosen]. Thus, she did not have access to the information regarding Eyes.

But she still knew they existed, and she even trained two of [Holder]s before.

As the fight continued, Dakota's keen observation skills picked up on a unique trait in Astron. Beyond his quick reflexes and adaptability, there was something more profound at play.

His ability to internalize the things he observed and rapidly integrate them into his fighting style was exceptional.

'He's not just observing; he's assimilating,' she realized. 'This goes beyond simple mimicry. He's using a form of "observational learning," but at an accelerated rate.'

In psychology, this ability to rapidly learn and internalize observed behaviors is often referred to as "modeling" or "observational learning," concepts popularized by the researchers. (You may refer to Alber Bandura for this case)

However, Astron's proficiency seemed to transcend ordinary observational learning. His brain was not only absorbing the information but also adapting his neural pathways to incorporate these new skills almost instantaneously.

'It's as if he has a heightened form of neuroplasticity,' Dakota thought, watching him closely. Neuroplasticity is the brain's ability to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections throughout life.

In Astron's case, this ability appeared to be extraordinarily advanced, allowing him to adapt and integrate new combat techniques at a rapid pace.

The more they sparred, the more Dakota saw Astron's potential. He was like a sponge, soaking up the nuances of her movements, the flow of mana, and the precision of her strikes. Each time he stumbled or made a mistake, he quickly adjusted, refining his approach with every exchange.

'He's not just learning; he's evolving in real-time,' Dakota mused, impressed. 'With proper guidance, he could become a formidable fighter, perhaps even surpassing many of his peers.'

As the sparring session continued, Dakota pushed Astron harder, testing the limits of his adaptability and resilience. She could see the strain in his eyes, the fatigue in his movements, but he never gave up. He kept pushing, kept adapting, and kept learning.

By the end of their session, Dakota was thoroughly impressed. Astron's ability to internalize and adapt was unlike anything she had seen before.

And that was the perfect ability to have for a [Weapon Master] class.

'Indeed. If it is him, then it might be possible.'

She remembered her certain friend who had lost his life on the battlefield.

"Man.....I wish I was at least able to see the advancement of my class....Damn....."

Those were his last words.

'Elias....Maybe he can do it?' Thinking that, she decided what she needed to do.

"You did well, Trainee Astron. How about becoming my disciple?"

The offer was made, and Dakota could see the recognition in Astron's eyes. She knew he had the potential to rise to greatness, and she was willing to guide him on that path.

'He has a long road ahead,' she thought as she observed Astron's reaction. 'But with dedication and hard work, he'll get there. I'll make sure of it.'

Just like that, she waited for him to reply. However, of course, even if he had refused, it was not like he had a choice. She could easily take him under her with her authority.

'That woman, Reina, can cause some problems, but it is fine.'

Though it seemed she did not need to have such speculations as the young man before him nodded his head.

Though he was breathless and tired, with blood flowing down from his nose and his arms bent in some sort of weird way, he still showed his resolve.

'He's got a nice pain tolerance as well,' Dakota noted. 'He didn't even make any noise at all, and his eyes are still clear even in these conditions.'

She realized that her last attack had been a bit excessive. Even though she had limited herself to the maximum, that attack she had used landed perfectly, and once it had landed, such injuries were inevitable.

'Indeed.....We have found a gem here,' she thought while tossing him a potion.

"Drink this," she instructed her tone firm yet with a hint of approval.

Astron caught the potion and quickly drank it, the healing properties working to mend his injuries.

As he drank, Dakota observed him closely. 'He's resilient, adaptable, and has an extraordinary ability to learn and internalize. With proper guidance, he could become a true master of his class.'

She saw the determination in his eyes as he finished the potion. Despite the pain and exhaustion, there was a fire burning within him—a drive to improve, to succeed.

'He's going to go far,' she thought. 'And I'm going to make sure he gets there.'

Dakota smiled slightly, feeling a sense of pride and responsibility. She had found a worthy disciple, someone who could potentially surpass even the greatest ones.

"Rest up, Disciple," she said. She checked her smartwatch. "It is now 7 A.M. You will have your examination at 9. Get something to eat and refresh yourself. You will need to put on a good show there if you don't want to embarrass Reina and me."

"Understood."

Dakota raised an eyebrow, her lips curling into a playful smirk. "That's not quite right, you know."

Astron paused, confused. "What do you mean?"

She crossed her arms and tilted her head slightly. "You're missing something."

He blinked but did not realize.

".....Are you that clueless, or are you doing this on purpose.....Disciple?"

As she asked this question, he seemed to understand finally.

"Ah..." he said, nodding his head. "I understand...Master."

Dakota's smirk widened. "There it is. Much better."

Astron nodded, a faint smile appearing on his face despite his exhaustion. "Yes, Master."

"Good. You may leave," she said with a satisfied nod.

As Astron turned to leave, Dakota watched him go, a sense of satisfaction settling over her. She had found a promising student, one who would push boundaries and strive for greatness. She would ensure he had the training and guidance needed to unlock his full potential.

Chapter 446 102.1 - Examination

You did well, Trainee Astron. How about becoming my disciple?"

Her eyes held a mix of curiosity and determination as she waited for my response. Despite my exhaustion, it seemed I had achieved what I essentially wanted. Dakota was someone with immense experience and skill; a chance to learn from her was going to be invaluable.

I nodded despite the pain coursing through my body. My arms felt like lead, and I could taste blood in my mouth, but I pushed through it.

Dakota's expression softened slightly, tossing me a potion. It seemed something about me had resonated with her this time. "Drink this."

I caught the potion and downed it quickly, feeling the healing properties work almost immediately.

"Rest up, Disciple," she said, checking her smartwatch. "It is now 7 A.M. You will have your examination at 9. Get something to eat and refresh yourself. You will need to put on a good show there if you don't want to embarrass Reina and me."

It was normally scheduled to happen at 8 A.M, but it seemed she wanted to give me some time. And that was a good thing as I was really tired, not only physically but also mentally. I never thought using weapons that I was not familiar with would take such a toll on my body.

"Understood," I replied.

Dakota raised an eyebrow, her lips curling into a playful smirk. "That's not quite right, you know."

I paused, confused. "What do you mean?" I also was not expecting to see a smile out of nowhere, as she always struck me more as a serious type.

She crossed her arms and tilted her head slightly. "You're missing something."

I blinked, trying to piece it together. I really did not get what she meant.

".....Are you that clueless, or are you doing this on purpose.....Disciple?"

Until hearing this, as she pressed on the word 'disciple,' I realized what she meant with them.

'So she has such a quirk. Noted.'

I thought in my head, playing along. It looks like people here all have cultivated some weird habits. Kinda understandable, as exceptional people tend to be like that, myself included. "Ah... I understand... Master."

Dakota's smirk widened. "There it is. Much better."

"Yes, Master," I said, somehow feeling a bit amused despite my exhaustion.

"Good. You may leave," she said with a satisfied nod.

As I turned to leave, I felt satisfied.

My first goal of coming here had already been achieved.

'Getting someone competent to teach me at least one special weapon.'

The academy taught everyone how to use [Federal Swordplay], not because everyone used the sword but because everyone needed to learn how to fight against someone like that.

After all, not every Hunter or Awakened would be fighting monsters. Naturally, they would be teaching other weapons as well, but if you don't have the necessary occupation, you would not be admitted as a trainee under an instructor for guidance since the manpower is already important.

Thus, I would eventually need to reveal my [Weapon Master] class, but it is better to hide it for the time being as I still don't have the proper excuse to give as to how my occupation changed from a [Daggerist] to a [Weapon Master].

However, I am planning to get it during this break period, and then I can consider revealing it when the time comes.

The second goal was to improve my own body and parameters. Recently, my progress had already been slowed down, and I needed to get stronger faster than ever. For this, many resources are necessary, and I need to prove that I am talented and have enough potential to invest.

The third one was a bit different.

'I need to find where that thing is.'

For the sake of completing the thing that I had been theorizing about, I have found out that I would need a special element. A key that was a singularity in this world, and that thing can not be found easily, as even with the game's knowledge, it is supposed to appear only a year later, and I don't want to wait that long.

'So, I can only use the resources in this place.' Since this place is the net source of many different information and the location where the webs are merged, that could be possible.

And my last goal had recently appeared.

'Improving my eyes. Whatever, maybe the reason why I was able to get [Keen Eye] and [Eyes of Hourglass] might have been for a different reason. And if that is the case, then they also hold the key for another improvement.'

Now, I had three clear paths ahead of me, and having a clear path meant one thing.

The speed of my improvement would increase with a clear goal.

As I left the training grounds, my mind was already planning the next steps with clear goals in mind. My body was still recovering, but the potion had worked wonders, and I was ready to refuel with a good meal.

On the way to the cafeteria, I spotted Lyra and Kael waiting for me. Lyra's face lit up with a happy smile, and she waved her small hands energetically.

"Good morning, Astron!" she called out cheerfully.

"Good morning," I replied, returning her wave with a nod.

Kael stepped forward, his expression curious. "Did you go to the training grounds already?"

I nodded. "Yes, I did."

Kael raised an eyebrow, impressed. "That's a bold move to train before your examination."

"I wanted to familiarize myself with the environment and the clothes I'm wearing," I explained. "Getting comfortable in the new setting helps me focus better."

Lyra clapped her hands together. "That's smart! I'm sure you'll do great in the examination."

Kael nodded in agreement. "Preparation is key. It's good to see you're taking it seriously."

We continued walking towards the cafeteria, the morning light casting long shadows across the corridors. The facility was slowly coming to life as other trainees began their routines.

As we entered the cafeteria, the aroma of freshly prepared food filled the air. The space was vast, with various stations offering a wide range of dishes. The sleek, modern design of the cafeteria matched the rest of the facility, emphasizing efficiency and functionality.

Lyra bounced ahead, her excitement palpable. "Let's grab some breakfast! You need to eat well before your examination."

'I was already planning on doing that....'

I rolled my eyes inwardly but did not say much.

We approached the serving area, and I quickly scanned the options available. The cafeteria offered a diverse selection of foods, but I was particularly interested in the special monster meats I had found after scanning the menu yesterday. They were known to enhance specific physical attributes, which I needed to focus on improving. In the game, it would be a small buff; in the real world, things were much more important. Even little details like these would accumulate a lot.

And I already selected what I would be ordering.

Reddish Hydra Serpent Steak: A special type of monster that is not that popular in the world right now. Since its meat smells a lot, it is not preferred by gourmets or by the general public.

However, there is a catch with this one. The monster's muscles are known for having strong muscle fibers, and normally, eating that meat would be expected to make the eater's fibers resilient and flexible as well.

But it doesn't do that.

Why? The answer would be revealed three years later in the timeline.

The meat of the Hydra Serpent contains special types of muscle fibers that have mutated along a different path, resulting in unique, complex proteins. These proteins can significantly enhance

muscle resilience and flexibility, but human bodies cannot directly digest them. The reason? Our digestive systems lack the specific enzymes required to break down these complex proteins.

However, if paired with Ironhide Boar meat, the solution presents itself. The Ironhide Boar is renowned for its dense protein content, promoting muscle density and overall strength. More importantly, the enzymes present in Ironhide Boar meat can help break down the complex proteins in Hydra Serpent meat, allowing the body to absorb and utilize the beneficial properties.

Then why had I not used this combination in the academy?

It was because the academy did not have these two, and even after looking in the Mananet, I was not able to find any provider for this at all.

But, here, that was not the case.

'How nice....'

I selected my combination, ensuring I would get the most out of my meal:

Reddish Hydra Serpent SteakIronhide Boar Roast

I added some leafy greens and a mix of grains to balance the meal, ensuring I got the necessary vitamins and minerals as well.

Lyra watched with curious eyes as I made my selections. "You're...Really, really particular about your food, aren't you?"

"I am."

"You must really have a specific stomach."

I shrugged. "It's not about the stomach. It's about getting the most out of what I eat. Certain combinations can make a big difference in training and recovery."

Lyra giggled. "Well, to each their own. But I've never seen anyone choose Hydra Serpent Steak and Ironhide Boar Roast together. You have a weird taste."

'Not like I want to eat this disgusting food....'

But of course, I did not say it and instead opted to use my classic move.

"It is always better to train your stomach for the sake of being prepared for any situation," I said, taking a bite of the Hydra Serpent Steak. "In emergency situations, you won't always have the luxury of choosing what to eat. It's important to be able to consume whatever is available without hesitation."

Kael nodded thoughtfully. "That's a good point. Being adaptable in all aspects, including diet, is crucial."

Lyra wrinkled her nose. "I suppose that makes sense, but I still think it's weird."

"It might be weird, but it's practical."

As we continued our meal, I focused on the unique flavors and textures, reminding myself of the benefits each component provided. The conversation shifted to more casual topics, and I found myself enjoying the camaraderie.

After we finished eating, it was time for me to head to the examination area. Lyra and Kael walked with me, their expressions supportive and encouraging.

"Good luck with your examination, Astron!" Lyra said, giving me a thumbs-up.

"Indeed, you probably got this."

Somehow, I found these two weirdly warm. Somehow, these two did not feel that repulsive to be around.

"I should not disappoint then."

"Indeed."

As we parted ways, I headed back to my quarters to make any final preparations and then walked to the examination side.

As I arrived at the examination site, I saw that Dakota was already there, along with many different trainees. The atmosphere was charged with anticipation, and everyone seemed focused and serious.

Dakota stood at the front, her posture rigid and authoritative. She acted as though she didn't know me, maintaining a completely professional demeanor. This was, after all, an official examination.

Chapter 447 102.2 - Examination

As I arrived at the examination site, I saw Dakota already present, standing with an air of authority. Around her were numerous trainees, all focused and serious. The atmosphere was charged with anticipation.

Dakota stood at the front, her posture rigid and professional. She acted as though she didn't know me, maintaining a completely professional demeanor. This was, after all, an official examination.

She stepped forward and addressed the assembled trainees. "Good morning, everyone. Today, we have a newcomer who will be tested. Please give him your attention. This is Astron Natusalune."

The trainees turned their gazes toward me, their eyes assessing and calculating. It was rare for them to have a new candidate at this point in the training, and they were clearly curious about my abilities.

Dakota continued, "Astron comes to us from the Arcadia Hunter Academy. He has been recommended by Miss Reina herself."

A murmur went through the crowd at this announcement. I could feel their scrutiny intensify, their interest piqued by the mention of Reina's endorsement.

One of the trainees stepped forward, a tall and lean young man with sharp eyes. "Miss Dakota, is it true that Miss Reina recommended him?"

Dakota nodded. "Yes, that is true. Astron is here on Miss Reina's recommendation."

The trainee nodded thoughtfully, his gaze lingering on me. "I see. That's quite the endorsement. But, I wonder how capable he is to be recommended by such a figure."

His words were just as I had expected and was told. After all, it was said that Reina was basically a role model for many people here, though I was not that much aware of her achievement.

And considering that I was nominated here by their idol, it was not that incomprehensible for them to want to see my skills.

After all, there were many such phenomena on Earth, too. People checked their idols' private lives, constantly tested their partners, etc., to see if they deserved 'them.' However, that doesn't mean what they are doing is right. After all, they are just outsiders.

But that is one of the things that most humans possess. Thinking that they are entitled to interfere with another person's life.

As I contemplated this, I sensed a familiar presence entering the area. The weight of the steps and the commanding aura were unmistakable. I turned my head to the side and saw Reina standing there, her gaze fixed on the scene before her.

Dakota also sensed Reina's presence and shifted her attention to her. Following Dakota's lead, the other cadets turned as well, eventually noticing her. The murmur of conversations ceased, and an air of respect and anticipation filled the room.

Reina walked forward with an air of quiet authority, her eyes briefly meeting mine before scanning the crowd. "Good morning," she greeted, her voice calm yet commanding. "I see you're all here to witness the examination."

The trainees straightened, their expressions a mix of awe and respect. "Miss Reina," they chorused, acknowledging her presence.

Reina nodded in acknowledgment before focusing on Dakota. "I thought I'd observe the examination myself."

"...." Dakota will throw a quick look at Reina, seizing her. But, the look in her eyes was not filled with reverence like others, and there was a faint glint there.

Still, she gave a small, respectful nod to her. "Of course, Sentinel Reina. We're about to begin the physical capability tests."

'Sentinel Reina This is my first time hearing about his.' I thought inwardly. It seemed there was more to this organization and ranks than I had learned, but well, that was to be expected as this was just my first day in this place.

Reina's gaze returned to me, a hint of a smile playing on her lips. "I have high expectations. Show them why you're here." Yet, in this smile, there was a sense of coldness there.

It seemed that the results that I had shown in the academy were still not enough, and they wanted to see something more.

'If that is what you want, you are going to see something good.'

Since I decided not to hold back, at least in terms of my physical and mana capabilities here, I should show a good sight, no?

Dakota stepped back, giving me space to prepare. "We'll start with a test of your combat capability." While she was saying that, there was a faint smile on her lips.

It seemed the small test that she did with me this morning and keeping it to herself somehow made her feel different.

'In Reina's presence.'

I sensed a small rivalry between her and Reina, though it may have been a one-directional rivalry as well.

Dakota's voice carried clearly across the room. "Astron Natusalune's main weapons are daggers and bows. Since that is the case, the first test will be a dagger test." She turned to me, her eyes sharp and focused. "Take your position, trainee."

I nodded, understanding the gravity of the situation. "Understood." I moved to the designated area, feeling the weight of everyone's gaze on me.

Dakota continued, "This test will push you to your limits. It may be a bit overwhelming, but it is necessary to gauge your true capabilities."

"I understand," I replied, steadying my breathing and focusing my mind. I readied my daggers, feeling the familiar weight in my hands.

SWOOSH! Dakota nodded,

"Start."

and with a quick command, the test began.

The training dummies activated, moving with surprising speed and precision. They were programmed to mimic real combat scenarios, making them formidable opponents. Even now, their faces have turned from a robot to a completely real human.

I took a deep breath, feeling the weight of the daggers in my hands.

SWOOSH! The first dummy lunged at me, its blade slicing through the air with deadly precision.

—CLANK! I sidestepped, bringing my dagger up to parry the strike. The clash of metal echoed in the room.

—SWOOSH! Yet, of course, there was not only one of them.

Before I could counterattack, another dummy closed in from the side, aiming a swift stab at my midsection.

—SLASH! I twisted my body, narrowly avoiding the blow. Yet, because he was using a spear, the spear's length was not close enough for me to attack.

At least, that was what it was supposed to be.

'Come here.' –GRAB! Since the moment I had evaded the strike, I had already clasped the spear right under my feet, making it stab to the ground.

–SWOOSH! Then threw the dagger right through the neck of the dummy.

–THUD! It was so realistic that the body had its neck oozing blood, and blood spurted from his mouth, staggering.

The dummy staggered back, clutching its neck as simulated blood spurted from the wound. The sight was unnervingly realistic, a testament to the advanced technology behind these training simulations.

–SWOOSH!

At that moment, another dummy charged at me, this one wielding a large axe. Its movements were powerful and deliberate, each swing aiming to cleave me in two.

I ducked and rolled to the side, feeling the rush of air as the axe blade whistled past my head.

CLENCH!

As I rose from where I was, I pulled the dagger back. The small threads that I had connected to it shone bright, and at that second, the neck of the guy between me and the dagger was cut down.

Yet the dummy was not dead. He was shining in red.

'A berserker.'

They had a special skill that, even if they had a deadly blow, they would be able to prolong the certain death.

And the closer they were to death, the stronger they became, just like how the dummy before me was. The strength that I could sense from him was so advanced that, with one hit, it would be my end.

CRACK! The dummy's knees buckled, but it recovered swiftly, swinging the axe in a wide arc. Just as I had expected, his speed was much higher than his previous ones.

But, in my eyes, they were still slow.

SWOOSH! I leaped backward, avoiding the deadly blade by a hair's breadth.

–FLICK! THUD! With a quick flick of my wrist, I threw my remaining dagger at its head. The blade embedded itself deep into its forehead, and the dummy collapsed to the ground, twitching as its systems shut down.

Yet suddenly, I sensed a presence.

SHIVER! My body shivered as my ears picked up a special sound of the air getting compressed. Someone was behind me at that split second. Even his heartbeat was erased as if this dummy was taking the shape of a real assassin.

'Indeed, even from the start, there was one more hiding.' This one had activated [Blind Spot], a skill allowing it to teleport short distances, making its movements unpredictable. It disappeared from view, only to reappear behind me, its sword poised to strike.

I spun around, instinctively bringing up my arm to block. The sword grazed my arm, but I managed to deflect most of the blow. Using the momentum, I delivered a powerful kick to the dummy's chest, sending it staggering back.

Without hesitation, I retrieved my fallen dagger, spinning it in my hand before driving it into the dummy's heart.

As the dummy flickered and fell, I felt a sudden gust of wind. Another opponent had activated [Wind Blade], sending a crescent-shaped projectile hurtling toward me.

I dodged to the side, feeling the razor-sharp wind slice through my clothing. The dummy followed up with a flurry of strikes; its blade imbued with wind energy.

I parried and dodged, each movement precise and calculated. The enhanced speed of the wind attacks made it difficult to find an opening, but I remained focused.

Timing my move perfectly, I sidestepped a horizontal slash and closed the distance, plunging my dagger into the dummy's side. The wind energy dissipated, and the dummy fell, deactivating with a flicker.

"Stop."

Just as I rose from my feet, I heard someone calling me. It was Dakota, looking at me with weird eyes. "The test is over."

Maybe I might have overdone it.

But I could see one thing.

The eyes of the guys that were watching me were all widened.

Chapter 448 102.3 - Examination

Reina watched Astron leave the training area, heading to a designated room to rest before his next test.

The trainees whispered among themselves, clearly impressed by the display of skill they had just witnessed. No, it was not just a mere impression.

Their eyes were wide open. None of them had ever seen someone obliterate a squad of enemies this fast. It was clearly something that they had never seen, something that they could not make sense of.

Reina turned to Dakota, a satisfied smile playing on her lips.

"Impressive, wasn't it?" Reina asked, her tone carrying a hint of pride.

Dakota nodded slowly, still processing what she had just seen. "Indeed, it was. I knew he was skilled, but I didn't expect him to handle the test with such efficiency and precision."

Reina's eyes sparkled with a mix of amusement and satisfaction. "It's not just his strength that sets him apart. It's his ability to adapt and think on his feet. Did you see how he handled the berserker dummy? He didn't just react; he anticipated its movements."

Dakota crossed her arms, her expression thoughtful. "He used the environment and his own limitations to his advantage. The way he manipulated the threads to retrieve his dagger and then used it to disable the berserker... That was remarkable."

Reina nodded, her gaze still fixed on the door through which Astron had exited. "He has a natural talent for combat, but more importantly, he has the mindset of an observant. That's what makes him valuable."

Dakota looked at Reina, a hint of curiosity in her eyes. "You seem quite invested in his success. More so than I've seen you with other recruits."

'For what reason, I don't know, is she putting this much importance on him?'

Dakota was already aware of his class as [Weapon Master], but that wouldn't make him this important. Though his class was not that bad, it was not like there weren't any better. She just saw someone she knew inside his eyes, and that was why.

'Was it the Eye? Just because of that?' Reina's smile widened, but there was a glint of something more in her eyes—something colder. "He has potential that could be very useful to us. And he's motivated by something powerful. It's not just about strength or skill; it's about what drives a person. That kid has a drive that can be harnessed for great things."

'Indeed, that is the case.' Dakota thought.

"But, is that it?" She still pondered.

Reina, seeing her enthusiasm, smiled. "It seems you have taken fancy of him."

Hearing that, Dakota did not hide her thoughts; after all, the fact that she had tested him before would already be revealed to the organization, as she had no reason to hide it.

While she could hide Astron's [Weapon Master] occupation from other trainees, she could not do the same to the organization. And she had an inkling that they already knew as well.

".....Indeed. I am considering taking him as my disciple."

Reina raised her eyebrows in surprise. "Considering taking him as your disciple? Even if his main weapons are daggers and bows?"

Dakota nodded her head, her expression serious. "That kid can also be a [Martial Artist]. He has a natural talent for it."

Reina's curiosity was piqued. "How do you know this?"

Dakota met her gaze steadily. "I confirmed it myself this morning."

At this, Reina displayed a knowing smile. "It's good to see you motivated once again. It has been a while since I've seen the 'Fist of the Tempest' in action."

Dakota's eyes sparkled with a mix of determination and pride. "It's been a while since I've found someone worth training. But that kid... he has something special. He reminds me of a certain someone."

Reina nodded thoughtfully. "If you see that potential in him, then perhaps you are right. The organization could benefit greatly from having him trained under your guidance."

Dakota smiled a rare expression that softened her usually stern features. "Let's see what is to come."

Just like that, five minutes had passed, and Dakota stood up. The trainees, still murmuring among themselves, quieted down as Dakota took her position at the front once more.

She addressed the group with her authoritative tone, "The next test will demonstrate Trainee Astron's proficiency with the bow. Prepare yourselves to witness his skills."

Astron stepped forward, his demeanor composed and focused. He carried a compound bow, sleek and fitted with slight enchantments to enhance its capabilities.

The bow felt familiar in his hands, a weapon he had trained with extensively.

Dakota nodded at him, a silent acknowledgment of his readiness. "Take your position, trainee."

Astron moved to the designated area, feeling the weight of everyone's gaze on him once again. He took a deep breath, steadying his nerves and focusing his mind.

"We'll start with the bow test," Dakota announced. "This will push you to your limits, but it is necessary to gauge your true capabilities."

"I understand," Astron replied, his voice steady. He notched an arrow, feeling the familiar tension of the bowstring.

"Begin," Dakota commanded.

The training dummies activated once more, moving with surprising speed and precision. They moved with agility, some wielding shields, others with weapons aimed at attack.

Astron wasted no time. He drew his bowstring back, his eyes locking onto the first target.

TWANG!

The arrow flew through the air, striking a dummy squarely in the chest. The enchanted arrowhead exploded upon impact, causing the dummy to stagger back and deactivate.

SWOOSH!

Another dummy charged at him, this one faster and more agile. Astron quickly notched another arrow, aiming for the dummy's legs. The arrow hit its mark, causing the dummy to stumble. Without hesitation, he fired a third arrow into its head, deactivating it.

The trainees watched in awe as Astron seamlessly transitioned from one target to the next, his movements fluid and precise. He was not just reacting to the dummies; he was anticipating their movements, adapting to their patterns.

One of the dummies activated a shield, advancing towards Astron with a methodical, defensive stance. One of the most known enemies of the archers was that towering piece of metal.

Shields.

'Now, let's see.' Astron assessed the situation, then quickly drew a special arrow from his quiver. Yet this arrow was imbued with something.

Around the tip, a slight energy was shining.

Many people would not notice, but those with experienced eyes did. Especially Reina and Dakota.

Dakota could not easily discern what was happening there as it was not her specialty, but Reina could.

'Using the air around to make the arrow rotate constantly and cause friction the moment it hits. You are not planning to deal with it in just one arrow.' It was a good technique that was developed by the Elven Archers. However, implementing it was not as easy as it looked.

TWANG!

The arrow flew straight and true, penetrating the shield. Just as Reina had predicted, upon impact, the arrow's angular momentum focused on the tip, creating intense friction. The energy around the tip caused it to heat up, burning through the shield and creating a hole.

Astron didn't waste a moment. As the arrow drilled through the shield, he notched another arrow, this one aimed directly at the hole created by the first.

TWANG!

The second arrow flew through the hole and struck the dummy behind the shield, deactivating it instantly.

As he continued, the difficulty increased. More dummies appeared, some wielding ranged weapons, others employing stealth tactics. One dummy, cloaked in shadow, fired a volley of arrows at Astron.

He reacted swiftly, using his bow to deflect some of the arrows and dodging the rest. He then drew a rapid-fire set of arrows, unleashing a barrage that took down multiple dummies in quick succession.

A particularly formidable dummy emerged, this one imbued with magic. It conjured a barrier of wind around itself, making it difficult to hit.

At least, that was how it was supposed to be, as the moment he saw the wind barrier, he had already thoroughly analyzed it.

And the moment he analyzed it, it was over.

TWANG!

The arrow flew through the air, cutting through the wind barrier and striking the dummy in the center. The barrier dissipated, and the dummy was deactivated.

'What?'

To this one, even Reina was surprised as she did not expect such a thing to happen at all.

"Stop," Dakota's voice rang out, signaling the end of the test.

Astron lowered his bow, breathing steadily. This time, the reactions were not as intense as the first one, as while his ability with the bow was not that bad, it was not that overwhelming.

However, at the same time, this also stemmed from the fact that many were not able to comprehend what he did to the shielded dummies.

Most assumed that he just overpowered them, but that was not the case.

Dakota stepped forward again, her voice carrying a tone of authority. "The next phase of the examination will test your skills in observation, investigation, infiltration, stealth, quick thinking, and judgment in crucial scenarios."

Dakota motioned to a section of the training area that was set up with advanced Virtual Reality (VR) equipment. The setup resembled an urban environment with buildings, alleyways, and hiding spots, but the technology made it incredibly realistic.

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Dakota motioned to a section of the training area that was set up with advanced Virtual Reality (VR) equipment. The setup resembled an urban environment with buildings, alleyways, and hiding spots, but the technology made it incredibly realistic.

"You will navigate through this environment, identify key targets, gather intelligence, and avoid detection," Dakota explained. "You will have to use your skills in observation and quick thinking to succeed."

"You will be given missions that would need to be accomplished, and each of them will test one type of skill."

"Understood."

Astron nodded his head and accepted the device, feeling its weight in his hand.

He took a deep breath, focusing his mind on the task ahead. As Dakota signaled the start of the test, the VR environment around him activated. The realistic urban landscape materialized, complete with sounds, smells, and the feeling of the wind against his skin. It was as if he had been transported to a real city.

And just like that, the second part of his test began, as he appeared right in the city itself.

"Now, for your first mission....."

With the mission shown.

Chapter 449 102.4 - Examination

"...What do you think Lyra?"

Kael asked, looking at the dummies that had been pierced by the arrows.

"Just as expected.....He is not normal, just like us." Lyra replied. However, in her reply, the childlike sound was far, long gone. Her eyes were focused, contrary to her childish appearance.

"Indeed," Kael replied. "He was also not raised normally." He mumbled, his memories surfacing once again—the memories of childhood. The memories of them alone, though it was far, long gone now with this place taking them in, those memories still made them what they were today. They would never be able to forget it, nor did they want to.

After all, only by not forgetting where they came from could they appreciate the opportunities that they are given today.

On the other side of the exam part, Dakota continued to talk.

"You will be given missions that would need to be accomplished, and each of them will test one type of skill."

Astron nodded as the VR environment around him activated, transforming into a bustling urban landscape complete with realistic sounds, smells, and the feeling of the wind against his skin.

"Understood."

He took a moment to orient himself, noting the impressive realism of the simulation.

"Now, for your first mission," Dakota's voice echoed through the VR, guiding him through the initial steps. A holographic display materialized in front of him, outlining the details of his first task.

Mission 1: Observation and Investigation

Objective: Identify and gather intelligence on a hidden enemy base within the city.

The mission and the objective were clear. And since this was a test to measure, no complex missions were given.

'For a normal individual, it should take around 25 to 30 minutes. But, those with the eyes will be different.' Dakota analyzed as Astron moved through the city streets, his senses heightened.

He blended in with the crowds, taking note of subtle details that might indicate enemy activity. His eyes scanned for anything out of place: unusual traffic patterns, concealed surveillance devices, and suspicious individuals.

He did all of these in just five seconds.

'Even with his Eyes....This is just something else....'

Reina thought. She had seen her fair of eye users, but none of them did it as fast as this one.

For him to be able to move this efficiently, he both needed to be talented at it and, at the same time, needed to have some experience.

'The reports of the Local Awakened Security in the Western Uxbridge seem to be true. Even then, he was careful about the surveillance.'

Being someone of a higher authority in the organization, she had quite a deep access to the information. Especially things like these, where documents of lower level security of the federal government are required.

As Reina was thinking about all the set things, Astron was already reaching the end of his investigation. He soon spotted a nondescript building with an unusually high level of security.

Astron approached cautiously, noting the presence of hidden cameras and guards in civilian attire. It was evident that he was careful and good at spotting cameras, something that most of the trainees would attain as a skill after they were trained for it.

And that was not the end. He also identified one of the executives. After that, he silently approached the executive and stole the device. There was also a deception there, as the device that was the target was actually hidden behind the executive's neck, and there was a dummy device to make it harder to get stolen.

However, those with clear eyes would see the mana flow and would identify which one was real.

After taking the correct device, he found a map of the city with strategic points marked inside. He took photos of the documents and transmitted them back to the control center. His thorough investigation was completed, and Astron moved to the next task.

"First mission completed. Elapsed time: 7 minutes, two seconds. A new record." Dakota whispered in a voice that only Reina could hear.

'Indeed. Master would not make a wrong choice like this for such an important event.' Just as she thought, Astron moved to the next task.

Mission 2: Infiltration and Stealth

Objective: Infiltrate a secure facility and retrieve a classified item without being detected.

Astron took a moment to steady his breathing as he prepared for the next mission.

The urban environment shifted, transforming into a high-security facility brimming with advanced surveillance systems and high-ranking wards designed to detect magical intrusions.

The stakes were higher, and the challenge was evident.

He moved towards the facility with practiced ease, blending into the shadows and avoiding the guards' patrol routes. His stealth abilities, while not as powerful as his investigative skills, were still formidable. He relied on a combination of physical agility and keen observation to remain undetected.

'As per the record, he does not have a stealth ability aside from a passive that thins his presence. Though that passive may be helpful in daily life, in situations like these, it will not make much difference.'

Reina's analysis went on.

'But aside from that, the same skills that he had shown while stealing the device in the first mission are still evident. That is not bad; we won't need to spend too much training him in the basics. The academy must have put some importance on this in their curriculum.'

As Reina predicted, Arcadia Hunter Academy did put importance on how to move stealthily. Rather than because of infiltrating some places, it was to make sure the cadets would be able to efficiently navigate in the dungeons when they were full-fledged Hunters.

But, that would not help here, as this rather required advanced knowledge and experience, which Astron had from somewhere far away.

In any case, in the mission, the high-ranking wards posed a significant challenge. As he approached the building, Astron could feel the pressure of the wards pressing against his mana. He slowed his pace, carefully analyzing the flow of the magical barriers. He knew that any mistake could alert the entire facility to his presence.

He waited patiently, timing his movements with the ebb and flow of the wards. This required intense concentration and a precise understanding of the magical patterns. It was a delicate dance, one that required both skill and patience.

Astron approached a side entrance, recognizing it as the least monitored point. He used a small device to disable the electronic lock, slipping inside without triggering any alarms. The interior of the facility was a labyrinth of corridors and security measures. He moved cautiously, avoiding cameras and bypassing laser grids.

Despite his skills, the high-ranking wards slowed him down significantly. He had to stop several times to wait for the right moment to pass through a barrier or avoid a guard. The pressure against his mana was relentless, forcing him to rely more on his physical abilities and strategic thinking.

Reaching the secure storage area, Astron faced another challenge: a heavily fortified vault. He examined the complex locking mechanism, using his keen observational skills to find a pattern. It took time and patience, but he eventually cracked the code, opening the vault silently.

Inside, he found the classified item—a small, intricately designed data chip. He carefully retrieved it, ensuring he left no trace of his presence. The return journey was just as cautious as he navigated the facility without setting off any alarms or traps.

Emerging from the facility, Astron transmitted the data back to the control center, signaling the successful completion of the mission.

"Second mission completed. Elapsed time: Twenty-four minutes, fifty-four seconds. Excellent work," Dakota announced, her voice filled with approval. Even though his infiltration abilities were slightly less impressive than his investigative skills, Astron's performance was still remarkable.

Mission 3: Quick Thinking and Judgment in Crucial Scenarios

Objective: Rescue a hostage from a highly volatile situation.

The VR environment transformed once more, placing Astron in a bustling marketplace. The atmosphere was tense, with civilians unaware of the danger lurking. The mission details flashed before him: a hostage was being held by a heavily armed assailant in a nearby building. The situation was volatile, and any wrong move could result in casualties.

Astron assessed the scene quickly. He noted the positions of potential cover, the location of the hostage-taker, and the safest routes for extraction. His eyes scanned the building, identifying entry points and weak spots in the structure.

He moved swiftly, using the market crowd as cover to get closer to the building. Timing his movements with the patrols of the assailant, he reached the back entrance. He disabled the lock and slipped inside, navigating the narrow corridors with precision.

As he approached the room where the hostage was held, he heard the agitated voice of the assailant. Astron knew he had to act quickly to avoid escalation. He created a distraction by knocking over a stack of crates in a nearby room, drawing the assailant's attention.

In the brief moment of distraction, Astron moved in. In his hand was a dagger that was shining grey.

–SWOOSH! He threw the dagger with precision, aiming not to kill but to incapacitate. The dagger was aimed at a specific spot on the assailant's body.

'The brachial plexus.' Dakota thought. She was very well-informed of human anatomy as she was a [Martial Artist] who used her body as the weapon itself.

This network of nerves runs through the shoulder and upper arm, controlling the muscles of the arm and hand.

'By targeting this area, he intends to make the arm threatening the hostage limp, reducing the risk of an involuntary reaction that could harm the hostage. Not bad.'

The dagger pierced the exact spot where the nerves were concentrated, just above the clavicle. The scientific basis for this tactic is that the brachial plexus controls the motor and sensory functions of the arm. When these nerves are damaged or disrupted, it can cause immediate paralysis or weakness in the arm.

–THUD!

The assailant's arm went limp, the weapon falling from his hand. The sudden loss of control over his arm caused him to stagger, his attention completely diverted from the hostage. Astron moved swiftly, using the moment to disarm and subdue the assailant. He secured the assailant with a quick, efficient movement, ensuring there was no further threat.

She had already confirmed that he was also knowledgeable about things related to human anatomy as she tested him with different weapons.

Astron quickly secured the hostage, guiding them through the building and out to safety. The entire operation was conducted with remarkable efficiency and decisiveness.

"Final mission completed. Elapsed time: 11 minutes, thirty-eight seconds."

Dakota announced. But she was not finished.

"The total time elapsed in missions: forty-three minutes and thirty-four seconds."

And the entire room went silent.

Chapter 450 102.5 - Examination [Interlude]

"Final mission completed. Elapsed time: 11 minutes, thirty-eight seconds." Dakota announced. But she was not finished.

"The total time elapsed in missions: forty-three minutes and thirty-four seconds."

Dakota paused, letting the weight of her words sink in before continuing. Well, it was not like she did not want to speak, but the reactions of the trainees here were just too fun to see.

Many of them were talented on their own to be sent to the missions in the future. But, of course, none of them had seen such scores on their first try.

That was just.....Not normal, even amongst the abnormal.

"The Intelligent Grading System of our AI assistant has ranked Astron as follows: First in investigation, seventeenth in stealth, and first in judgment."

The trainees exchanged murmurs of surprise and admiration. Ranking first in both investigation and judgment was a significant achievement, and even his rank in stealth, while not at the top, was highly respectable given the complexity of the tasks and the high-ranking wards he had faced.

And he also did it without using any type of stealth-related skills. The cadets that were ranked higher than him in terms of stealth all either had a [Trait] that was related to stealth or a [Skill] that would make it convenient for them.

But, he had none of those aside from using the [Mana Suppression] to erase his own presence, which was something everyone here could do if they wanted and was not something that was related to their traits.

Dakota stepped forward, her expression one of approval. "Trainee Astron has demonstrated exceptional skills across all categories. His investigative abilities are unparalleled, and his quick

thinking and judgment in crucial scenarios are exemplary. His stealth, while slightly less impressive, still shows great promise and adaptability."

The trainees turned their attention to Reina, noting her satisfied expression. Though she wasn't overjoyed, the look of approval on her face spoke volumes about her confidence in Astron's abilities. Without a word, Reina slowly turned and began to leave, her presence having made its impact on everyone present.

Dakota continued, "With this examination, a specialized training program for Trainee Astron Natusalune will be created to optimize his development. This program will be ready by tonight, and training will commence tomorrow. This is the classic way we do things here, and Astron will be no exception."

The trainees, all of whom had experienced this process themselves, nodded in understanding. They knew the rigorous training that lay ahead for Astron and respected the process that had shaped their own abilities.

Dakota then turned to Astron, her expression serious but supportive. "Astron Natusalune, from this moment on, you are officially a trainee. I will now update your smartwatch status."

She took out her own device and tapped a few commands. Astron's smartwatch vibrated, indicating the update. "Before, your access to some of the functions was limited. Those limits have now been removed. As a trainee, you will have broader access, though there will still be some restrictions. All trainees here share these limitations."

Dakota concluded, "Welcome to the team, Trainee. Train hard, stay focused, and you will achieve great things."

With that, she turned to take her leave, but before she did so, she stopped.

"To all trainees present," Dakota's voice carried a tone of authority, "today's schedule will start in five minutes. Everyone should get ready immediately."

The trainees, upon hearing this, immediately realized the limited time they had left. There was a brief moment of hesitation; then, they quickly dispersed to prepare for their respective training sessions. Some of them threw a last glance at Astron, curiosity and respect evident in their eyes.

I watched as the trainees hurriedly moved to get ready, feeling their gazes on me. Every action and decision I make from now on will be under scrutiny. 'Not that it is important.' In the first place, I was never a man of an impression, as I did not care.

Before I could do anything more, my smartwatch vibrated, indicating a new message. I glanced at the screen and saw it was from Reina.

"Meet me in this place, 3rd floor, south wing. – Reina"

The location was clearly marked on the map displayed on my smartwatch. I pondered for a moment about what this meeting could be about.

'She's most likely going to discuss my performance.' I was pretty satisfied with how I had handled the examinations. I had shown enough of my capabilities to make an impression without revealing everything. Though it would be evident that they would have questions and possibly some understanding, I did not care.

'Garrett already knows about that day....To some extent.'

Regardless of how cursed that day was for me, the evidence was there, and they would know about it. Thus, they can also understand my motives to some extent.

As I was about to leave, I noticed Lyra and Kael approaching. Lyra, in her childish form, was jumping around happily.

"You did so good, Astron!" Lyra exclaimed, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

Kael nodded a small smile on his lips. "Indeed, you've shown remarkable talent. Your performance was impressive." But there was something weird that I was feeling from the two.

Why?

As if their impression of me had changed. Now, there was something different. Lyra in particular.

'Her illusion abilities are really annoying.' It was hard to picture what exactly was there, as her face illusion was much more potent than others.

Still, I decided to play along. "Thanks," I replied. "I just did what I had to do."

"You made it look easy," Lyra said, still bouncing around. "I knew you were special!"

"Well, I wouldn't go that far."

"I would; I would. Who would have known you were also like us?"

"Like you?"

"Ah..."

"It is nothing." Kael's expression turned serious while saying that. "Keep up the good work, Astron. We're all here to support each other."

Their words lingered in my mind as I made my way to the conference room. There was a shift in their demeanor, a subtle change in how they viewed me.

It was almost as if they saw me as one of their own now, something more than just a new recruit.

Something that I had particularly noticed about Kael. How was his body trained to be on alert all the time? I myself am always alert as well, and I never let my senses go, even for a split second. Every time an attack can come from somewhere, that is how I was grown up.

But for Kael, it is a bit different. Rather than being on alert to defend himself, he matches Lyra's movements.

'They are from somewhere chaotic.'

It seemed for them, things were not that simple either. However, right now, my main focus should not be on them.

Reaching the third floor, I followed the map's directions to the south wing. The place that Reina called me was a room at the end of the long corridor. I took a breath and pushed open the door.

Inside, Reina was waiting. She looked up as I entered, her expression unreadable.

"Take a seat, Astron," she said, her tone neutral.

I sat down, feeling the weight of her gaze on me. Being able to exert such pressure on me just by her gaze was remarkable indeed.

'Probably a passive skill.' Since no one can do such a thing just physically.

At least to me.

"You wanted to see me, Miss Reina?"

"Yes," she replied, her eyes narrowing slightly. "The organization is satisfied with what you have shown so far. In the time you were free, you have developed yourself to a satisfactory extent, which is just as we had hoped. Your performance in the examination was impressive, and while the analysis unit will be working on a detailed training program for you, I wanted to speak with you directly."

I nodded, listening carefully.

"We won't dwell too much on the examination since the analysis unit is already handling that. Instead, I have a question for you," Reina continued, leaning forward slightly. "Why do you think you were assigned to me, out of all people?"

I took a moment to think. There could be several reasons, but I needed to narrow it down.

"I can think of a few possibilities," I began. "It could be because Garrett was the one who had found me, and you are close to him. But that is too much of a shallow answer, as you could have just been

a bridge for another one if that was the case. However, given your unique role in the organization and your expertise, I believe the main reason is related to my 'eyes.'"

Reina's lips curved into a faint smile. "Very perceptive, Astron. Indeed, your eyes are the main factor. The organization has a vested interest in individuals with unique abilities, especially those related to perception and observation. Your eyes set you apart, and that's why you were assigned to me. Our goal is to develop your abilities to their fullest potential. And for that to happen, you will need a guide. While you can develop them on your own, it will take some time, and time is a resource that can never be recovered."

"Indeed," I replied, understanding the significance of her words.

Reina nodded, her eyes meeting mine with a serious gaze. "That's why I will be your guide. My eyes are similar to yours in many ways, and I can help you unlock their full potential much faster than you could on your own."

'Just as I had thought. Not everyone in the organization knows about the eyes, nor do they learn about it.'

The news was both good and bad at the same time, as the more exceptional you became, the more responsibilities you would have. And that means less time for other things.

'Not that. I can return now, nor did I ever have the chance to do so.' Thus, I decided to go with the most NPC response.

"I understand. I'm ready to learn and improve."

"Good," Reina said, her expression softening slightly. "Since you have accepted the offer to become Dakota's disciple, you will be officially registered under her and will likely spend a significant amount of time training with her. Her training sessions will be registered in the system for the training schedule, but that won't be the case for my own sessions."

She paused for a moment, her eyes meeting mine. "I will use my authority to create a dedicated training space for us. I will send you the time intervals I have arranged for your training with me."

"I understand."

But as I turned to leave, Reina's voice stopped me. "Today, I happen to be free all day. Your training starts right now."

It seemed I was not allowed to leave.