

H. Academy 451

Chapter 451 103.1 - Training and Guides

It seemed I was not allowed to leave.

Reina stood and gestured for me to follow her. She led me to a door at the back of the room. As she opened it, I felt a surge of mana, more concentrated and powerful than anything I had sensed before.

"Follow me," she said, her voice steady.

I followed her through the door, and as we stepped through, the environment changed drastically. The room opened up into a vast, cavernous space. The air was thick with mana, and the atmosphere felt almost electric. It was as if we had stepped into a different dimension altogether, one closer to the core of the entire realm.

The walls of the cavern were lined with intricate runes and glyphs that pulsed with a faint, otherworldly light. The ground beneath us was smooth, almost glass-like, reflecting the shimmering patterns from above. The entire place radiated power, and I could feel the energy coursing through my body.

Reina turned to face me, her eyes glinting with a mix of authority and curiosity. "What do you know about your eyes, Astron?"

I took a deep breath, steadying myself against the overwhelming presence of mana. "I know that my eyes give me heightened perception and observation abilities. They allow me to see things others can't and to analyze and process information at an accelerated rate. They've been instrumental in my combat and investigative skills."

Reina nodded, her expression thoughtful. "That's a good start, but there's much more to it. Your eyes are not just tools for observation. They are connected to the very fabric of reality, capable of perceiving the underlying structures of mana and energy. With proper training, you can unlock abilities far beyond what you currently possess."

Her words resonated deeply, and I felt a sense of anticipation building within me. "What kind of abilities are we talking about?"

"Kind of abilities that are endlessly potential. Reina smiled slightly. "But for starters, though, we will not be focusing on the new things. We are going to train your basics."

The moment she said that I knew what she meant. From the moment that I was reawakened, or my soul merged, I was able to use [Perceptive Insight]. At first, I thought it was something that helped me observe things at a faster rate and copy those.

But then I realized there was many more things that this trait was capable of, especially how it helped me understand the concepts that were hard to understand.

However, aside from all those, there was one thing: this trait was somehow different.

'It can evolve.'

A trait that shows that it is a stagnant ability, yet at the same time, it is a trait that can evolve. That was basically something that was unique and was something that was against the very basic concept of the status window.

Reina's eyes bore into mine, her expression intense. "What do you think are the most important basics of this ability? And do you believe this ability has any downsides?"

I took a moment to gather my thoughts. "The most important basics would be understanding and control. It's not just about observing but about interpreting and acting on what you see. The ability to process and analyze information quickly is crucial, but so is the discipline to use that information effectively."

Reina nodded, her eyes never leaving mine. "And the downsides?"

I hesitated. "The downsides... It can be overwhelming. The constant influx of information can be distracting, even debilitating, if not managed properly. There's also the risk of becoming too reliant on it, potentially overlooking simpler, more intuitive ways of understanding and reacting to situations."

"Good," Reina said, her tone approving. "You've grasped the fundamental aspects well. Now, let's delve deeper. Your ability to see and understand is just the beginning. You need to learn how to filter and prioritize the information, how to focus on what's essential, and block out the rest. This will be crucial in high-pressure situations where your senses could be overloaded."

She began to move, her steps fluid and deliberate, leading me to a series of concentric circles etched into the floor. Each circle was inscribed with intricate runes that pulsed with a soft, rhythmic light.

"This training ground is designed to enhance and refine your perceptive abilities. Stand in the center," she instructed.

I moved to the center of the circles, feeling the mana in the room intensified. The runes glowed brighter, and the air around me seemed to hum with energy.

"Now," Reina said, her voice steady, "focus on the runes. Use your ability to perceive their structure and their flow of mana. Tell me what you see."

I closed my eyes for a moment, centering myself. When I opened them, I let my [Perceptive Insight] take over, honing in on the runes. They were more than just symbols; they were conduits for mana, each one intricately linked to the others, creating a complex network of energy.

"The runes are connected in a lattice," I began, my voice steady. "Each one channels mana to the next, creating a continuous flow of energy. The patterns are precise and designed to maximize the efficiency of mana transfer. There are variations in the intensity of the glow, indicating different levels of mana being channeled through each rune."

Reina nodded, her expression unreadable. "Good. Now, filter out the unnecessary details. Focus on the primary flow of mana. What is its purpose?"

I narrowed my focus, blocking out the peripheral details.

For the first time, I thought of doing such a thing. During all the times that I had used [Perceptive Insight], I had never thought of doing something like filtering.

The primary flow of mana was a current running through the central runes, converging at the very center where I stood.

"It's a stabilizing force," I said. "The mana converges here to create a balanced, controlled environment. It ensures that the energy in this space remains stable, allowing for precise manipulation and control."

Reina's eyes gleamed with approval. "Excellent. You're beginning to understand. Now, let's push it further. Try to interact with the flow. See if you can influence it without disrupting the balance."

I took a deep breath, extending my senses further into the flow of mana. I focused on a single point where the currents converged, willing the energy to shift slightly.

I released my mana from my body and then controlled it as a thread to work with the flow of mana.

It was a delicate process, requiring both precision and restraint. Mana responded, but not as I had hoped. Instead of flowing smoothly with the current, it seemed to resist my influence, almost as if it were rejecting my interference.

'What's going on?' I thought, narrowing my focus even more. The mana threads I had extended wavered, struggling against the existing flow. It felt like trying to force two mismatched pieces together; the fit was wrong, and the entire structure seemed to strain under the pressure.

Reina watched closely, her eyes sharp and analytical. "You're forcing it," she said. "Mana is not just energy; it has its own rhythm, its own way of moving. You need to attune yourself to it, to become a part of its flow rather than an external force trying to bend it to your will."

I nodded, absorbing her words. Attuning myself to the flow of mana meant more than just seeing it; I needed to understand its essence, its natural state. I closed my eyes again, reaching out with my senses, not to control, but to harmonize.

Breathing deeply, I let go of my previous attempt and focused on the feel of the mana around me. I imagined myself as part of the flow, not separate from it. Slowly, I extended my mana again, this time not as a forceful thread but as a gentle touch, seeking to merge with the existing currents.

The resistance I had felt before began to ease. My mana started to weave into the flow, not disrupting it but complementing it. It was a subtle difference, but it made all the difference. The currents of mana accepted my presence, and I felt a sense of unity, a balanced connection.

"Better," Reina said, her voice softer now. "You're starting to understand. Mana is a living force, and you must work with it, not against it. This harmony is the foundation of all higher-level techniques."

I opened my eyes, seeing the runes glowing steadily. The mana flowed smoothly, and my influence is now part of the greater whole.

'Wow.....'

I was really impressed seeing that, but there was a question in my head.

"Now you might be wondering, why did we focus on your mana control while I had said that I would be training you for your Eye abilities?"

I nodded, my curiosity piqued. This was exactly what I had been questioning. Reina smiled, hearing my unspoken thoughts. "Good."

With a flick of her hand, something in her eyes changed. They shimmered, and an intricate logo appeared, glowing faintly with a mystical light. It was a circular emblem with a central symbol resembling an eye, representing hidden knowledge and vigilance. Surrounding the eye was an ornate pattern of intertwining lines and runes, symbolizing the interconnectedness and secrecy of the organization. The outer edge of the circle was adorned with ancient script, glowing faintly, hinting at the magical nature of the emblem. In the center of the eye, a small, glowing gemstone shimmered with changing colors, adding an element of enchantment.

The moment her eyes transformed, I felt a flux of information rushing towards me. It was overwhelming, a torrent of data that threatened to engulf my mind. Quickly, I created an anchor within my consciousness, grounding myself and preventing my thoughts from drifting apart. The experience was intense, but I managed to maintain my focus without losing myself in the process.

After a second, Reina's eyes closed, and the intense flow of information ceased.

She raised her index finger, and from the tip of her finger, a small thread of mana rose. It was a delicate, shimmering strand, pulsing with the same harmonious energy I had just learned to attune to.

These sounds continued to come forward.

"Do you see this?" Reina asked, her voice calm and steady. "This is the mana that the organization uses to communicate around the world and to another dimension. Psions attributed by an [Authority]."

I watched the thread of mana, fascinated by its delicate beauty.

I watched the thread of mana, fascinated by its delicate beauty. It pulsed with a harmonious rhythm, almost as if it were alive.

"When you are able to influence the external mana flux, it means you will also be able to read it," Reina continued. "And reading it means deciphering it."

She let the words sink in before she elaborated, "Yes, it is another way of obtaining information, and maybe the best way to. Even the brain has a flux of mana inside it. This skill allows you to perceive the underlying structures and patterns in everything, including thoughts and emotions. The brain's activity, after all, is just another form of mana flow."

What she implied was clear.

If I was able to master this technique....I would even be able to read the thoughts of other people.

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Filtering.

Assimilation."

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"This is why we will be focusing on two things for the time being. Filtering and Assimilation."

I nodded, understanding the importance of what she was saying. This training was not just about controlling mana but about mastering the way that it was manipulated so that I could use it as an extension of my eyes.

In fact, even now, I am pretty sure that my mana control levels are a lot better than many people here, but what I lack is experience in this precise way of manipulating mana.

"For the next six hours," Reina continued, "you will stay in this room and practice. Your objective is to influence the flow of mana and decipher the message contained within this thread."

She left the thread of mana hovering in the air, its delicate strands pulsing with energy. "Normally, mana psions dissipate after a certain period. However, because this location is a special place within the dimension, the thread will remain stable for more than nine hours. Use this time wisely."

I watched as Reina stepped back, her eyes observing me closely. "Remember, this is a test of both your control and your ability to understand the deeper currents of mana. Take your time, focus, and don't rush. Master the flow."

With that, she left the room, leaving me alone with the shimmering thread of mana. The atmosphere in the room was charged with energy, and I could feel the weight of the task ahead of me.

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Taking a deep breath, I sat down and began to focus.

The first step was filtering. I needed to isolate the thread of mana from the surrounding energy and understand its unique flow. Closing my eyes, I extended my senses, reaching out to the thread.

The process was slow and meticulous. I could feel the external mana flux around me, and I carefully started to filter out the unnecessary noise. It was like tuning a radio to a specific frequency, blocking out the static and focusing on the clear signal.

As I filtered out the surrounding mana, the thread's pulsing rhythm became more pronounced. It was a delicate balance, maintaining harmony with the external flux while isolating the specific flow of the thread. It required intense concentration and precision, but gradually, I could feel the thread's unique energy standing out.

Next was assimilation. I needed to merge my mana with the thread, not just to influence it but to become part of its flow. This was a more complex task, requiring me to harmonize with the thread's rhythm and integrate my energy seamlessly.

And I also needed to do this while keeping the filter on in my head. In a way, that was something that required me to multi-task, which was a taxing thing on its own.

Multi-tasking itself is not a problem unless you are doing some actions that are in contrast to each other.

"Huff...."

I took a deep breath, steadying my mind for the challenge ahead. Multitasking efficiently while keeping the filter on was crucial. This meant I had to maintain a delicate balance between two distinct tasks, ensuring that neither interfered with the other.

'Start with the basics,' I thought. I closed my eyes again and focused on the filter, keeping it active in the back of my mind. The goal was to make this process as natural as breathing. I needed to isolate the thread's unique flow while also preparing to merge my mana with it.

The initial moments were challenging. The filter required constant attention to block out the extraneous mana, but I needed to ensure it didn't consume all my mental resources.

I let the filter become a background process, something my mind could maintain without direct intervention.

Gradually, I felt more comfortable with the filter running passively. It was like a second layer of awareness, constantly sifting through the mana around me. With the filter stable, I turned my focus to the assimilation process.

I extended a small strand of my mana, allowing it to flow towards the thread. The initial resistance was still there, but I remained patient. I kept the filter active in the back of my mind, ensuring that the external mana flux didn't disrupt my connection with the thread.

The key was to be gentle, to let my mana flow naturally without forcing it. The thread's rhythm was delicate, and I had to match its pace. Slowly, I began to weave my mana into the thread, becoming part of its flow.

The process required intense concentration and precision. I maintained the filter while synchronizing my energy with the thread's rhythm. It was a dance of sorts, a careful balance between two tasks that demanded my full attention.

As my mana began to merge with the thread, the resistance eased. The thread accepted my presence, and I could feel a connection forming. I kept the filter active, ensuring that the external mana flux didn't interfere with the delicate process.

With each passing moment, I became more attuned to the thread's flow. The whispers of information grew clearer, and I could start to decipher the message within. The thread's unique energy resonated with mine, creating a harmonious connection.

Time seemed to blur as I continued the process. The room around me faded into the background, and all that mattered was the flow of mana. The filter remained active, sifting through the extraneous energy while I focused on the thread.

At that moment, I knew.

I was in the flow state.

After what felt like an eternity, I felt something clicking in my head. As if the taps of the barrage were open, I felt like the information started flowing right into my head.

It was a weird feeling, something that I was feeling for the first time. When Reina had used her eye and started an influx of information that moved like a wave of tsunami overwhelming me, this time it was as if I was drinking on a small rivulet that I had made on my own.

The analogy was clear in my mind. Finding the right frequency of the psions was like tuning a radio to the correct station. The moment I found the right frequency, the data hidden within the psions became accessible. But without a computer interface or screen to show me the exact frequency of my own mana, I had to rely on something else—how it 'felt.'

This process was akin to a safecracker trying to find the correct rotation by listening to the subtle sounds the mechanism made. Every slight adjustment, every fine-tuning, was based on the sensations and feedback I received from the mana. It required an acute sensitivity, a heightened awareness of the intricate dance of energies.

As I delved deeper into the thread, I realized that the feeling I needed to grasp was one of resonance. When my mana resonated perfectly with the thread, it created a harmonic vibration, a seamless flow where my energy and the external psions became one. It was a delicate balance, a precise alignment that unlocked the hidden information.

With this newfound understanding, I continued to experiment, adjusting the flow of my mana, seeking that perfect resonance. Even though I had already deciphered the information, mastering this feeling was a lot more important and was my main focus.

While the message that Reina had left was deciphered, there were many more small threads of mana that were scattered around this place.

Thus I used them as a practice.

Each time I got closer, the information became clearer and more coherent. It was a meticulous process, requiring patience and an unwavering focus.

However, after finding myself successful at deciphering what Reina left for me, I was not able to decipher any other message at all.

None of them seemed to resonate with me.

No, it was as if

'It is even hard to sense them or filter them.' Why did this happen? After checking it without looking to decipher, I found out that the mana that was being used in those threads was of a higher rank, and the formation was a lot more complex.

What did this imply?

It implied one thing.

Even if I was able to master my eyes and was able to sense the mana to some extent, I was still bound by the ranks of my own magical power and mana capacity.

The realization struck me with clarity. If my mana wasn't at the same level as the threads I was trying to connect with, it was no wonder I couldn't decipher them. I nodded, acknowledging this limitation. It made perfect sense. Using my own mana to connect to the threads meant that if the connector didn't match the receptor or the target, the goal couldn't be achieved.

As I reflected on this, I decided to take a break and check out the message Reina had left for me. I opened the package and let the influx of information flow into my mind.

Reina's voice echoed in my thoughts, calm and instructive. "The psions attributed by [Authority] are classified into seven ranks. These ranks determine the complexity and power required to access and manipulate them. What you have just deciphered is classified as the first rank, which can be accessed by those with a magic power of at least rank 3."

I absorbed the information, realizing the significance of what I had achieved. Reina continued, "Since you are able to see and manipulate this rank-1 psion, it means you can now affect the flow of mana at rank 3. This is an important milestone in your training."

The message elaborated further, detailing the next steps in my training. "From now on, your assignments will be to come here at the hours I will send to you and practice speeding up this process. The goal is to reach a point where you can achieve this resonance and deciphering in the blink of an eye."

Understanding the importance of this, I decided to stop for the day, feeling the mental and physical exhaustion from the intense session. But I also felt a sense of accomplishment. Progress had been made, and the foundation for my future training was solid.

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Returning to my room after the training session, I felt a wave of exhaustion wash over me. The mental strain of the exercises, combined with the intense focus required, had taken its toll. I closed the door behind me and walked over to my bed, sitting down heavily.

I had been training and studying for a long while in the academy, but I had never felt such exhaustion before. Even with my own talents, learning such a thing seemed to be taking its toll on me.

For a while, I just sat there, my mind buzzing with thoughts. The training with Reina had been enlightening, pushing me to understand my abilities on a deeper level.

At the same time, I thought about Dakota.

'Isn't the usual procedure would be contacting your disciple in one way or another? Is she busy or what?' I had expected Dakota to contact me, perhaps to discuss my performance or to schedule further training sessions. But there had been no word from her as if she deemed there was no reason to reach out.

Was she testing me in some way? Or perhaps she had other priorities that demanded her attention? I couldn't be sure, not that I could do anything about it.

'Now, let's see. Dakota mentioned that my smartwatch's functions would be elevated.'

With nothing else pressing to do, I decided to explore the new functions of the smartwatch the organization had provided. The device had vibrated earlier, indicating an update, and I was curious to see what additional capabilities it now offered.

I activated the smartwatch and navigated through the menu. The interface was sleek and user-friendly, a testament to the advanced technology the organization possessed. I noticed several new icons and options that hadn't been there before.

First, I checked the training schedule. As expected, nothing was shown there, as Dakota already said that I would be having this around night. Therefore, I did not pay much attention to it. But from the design, it seems the training here is also not that easy, just like it will be in the academy from now on.

Next, I explored the communication functions. The smartwatch had an encrypted messaging system, allowing for secure communication with other members of the organization.

There were also options for video calls and voice messages, though it is not like they are advanced or anything.

I found a new section labeled "Resource Access." Curious, I opened it and discovered a vast library of information at my fingertips.

There were documents, research papers, and training manuals on a wide range of topics, from

But there was a catch there.

'As expected. Nothing in this world is free.'

If you want something from someone, you need to show them something that is useful. That is the basic requirement of this world: transactions.

The smartwatch had a section dedicated to a currency system. The organization operated with its own internal currency, known as [Arcanum Credits]. These credits were awarded for various activities: completing missions, contributing to the organization outside of assigned missions, or achieving notable accomplishments as a trainee.

Curious about my current balance, I navigated to the currency section. To my surprise, I found a decent amount of Arcanum Credits already at my disposal. The reason was immediately apparent—a note indicated that I had been awarded credits for achieving the first rank in the examination.

'Interesting,' I thought. 'So, they're not just about training and missions. There's a whole economy within the organization.'

With these credits, I could access more advanced resources, purchase special equipment, or even secure private training sessions with experts. It was a clever system, encouraging members to excel and contribute in various ways.

I decided to explore the Resource Access section further. The documents and training manuals were categorized by difficulty and specialization. Basic resources were free, but more advanced materials required Arcanum Credits.

I browsed through the options, noting the various topics available. There were detailed guides on combat techniques, magical theory, and strategic planning. Each document had a brief description and a price in credits.

'To think that they have such access to the information that is hidden in the Valerian Government. The fact that such a thing can exist is insane.' It was very hard for me not to get aggravated as even the best hacker organization in the world, [Horde], would not be able to access these documents. That meant the rogation ran deep in the government.

I scrolled through the list, considering my options. The combat techniques section was particularly interesting. There were advanced [Art Manuals] on close-quarters combat, long-range tactics, and even specialized weapon training.

Given my [Weapon Master] class, these resources could be incredibly valuable.

As I explored, I kept an eye on my balance.

It showed that I had 500 Arcanum Credits. I wasn't sure how far these credits would go, so I decided to check the prices of various resources.

Combat Techniques:

Basic Close-Quarters Combat Guide: 50 Credits
Intermediate Swordplay Manual: 150 Credits
Advanced Dagger Techniques: 300 Credits
Long-Range Tactics for Bow Users: 200 Credits
Mastery of Mixed Weapons: 500 Credits

Magical Theory:

Fundamentals of Mana Control: 100 Credits

Advanced Elemental Manipulation: 250 Credits

Theories of Arcane Constructs: 400 Credits

Special Equipment:

Enhanced Training Gear: 100 Credits

Advanced Combat Armor: 400 Credits

Custom Weapon Modifications: 300 Credits

'The prices vary quite a bit,' I thought, calculating how best to use my credits. From how things looked, the more advanced a knowledge was, the higher the price would be. There were even many other books and manuals that I had no access to. It seemed, being a trainee, you were limited by the authority to some extent.

Of course, from the sessions part and the structure of this place, I knew that the trainees here would already be taught many things just like we were educated in the academy.

There were most likely combat teachers of each weapon, some specialized professionals for magic and mana control, stealth, and many other things.

Therefore, aside from the combat techniques that one would get from here, there would already be many things that would be taught by the instructors here.

'For the time being, there is no need for me to look for special combat techniques. My own weapon art is already hard enough to master.'

Aside from this, I looked at the ranks. Just like every other place in the world, this place also has its own hierarchy.

The ranking system was clearly laid out:

Initiate

Adept

Guardian

Warden

Sentinel

Archon

The One

I remembered that Reina was listed as a Sentinel, the third-highest rank in the organization. This was no surprise, given her extensive knowledge and the authority she wielded.

'So Reina is not only experienced but also holds a significant position of power here,' I thought. It seemed the person who ordered her to vouch for me was Archon.

I also saw my own rank listed as Initiate, which was expected. As a new recruit, I was at the entry-level, with much to learn and prove. The ranking system provided a clear path for advancement, motivating members to strive for higher levels of achievement.

I also saw that there were sub-ranks for each main rank. Just like how Initiate had sub-ranks for each proficiency and test, there were other ranks inside it as well. There were many things that I saw there, and all of them proved how intricate the structure of this place was.

'As expected from a place that is built on secrecy and knowledge.' It made sense for such an organization to put so much importance on this.

From how I had observed things, Dakota seemed to hold respect for Reina, while the trainees respected her a lot.

'She must have been a warden.' The Sentinels held the utmost authority inside the base, but they were not responsible for its management. They were more like elite operatives, tasked with specific high-level missions and training responsibilities. Their influence extended beyond the base, making them crucial assets in the organization's larger operations.

On the other hand, there was only one Archon for each base. Archons reported directly to 'The One,' the leader of the organization. They held the utmost austerity everywhere and were incredibly powerful. Their presence commanded respect and fear, and their decisions were absolute.

Most of the Adepts were agents scattered around the world, actively participating in missions. They were the backbone of the organization, gathering intelligence, executing covert operations, and maintaining the organization's influence. Guardians, more like captains of the agents, also worked outside frequently and held the authority to command the workforce if necessary. They ensured the smooth execution of missions and managed field operations, maintaining order and discipline among the Adepts.

Wardens, on the other hand, were those who did not actively work outside. Though if required, they could do so, there was no necessity for them to constantly move around.

'From how it looked, with her past, Dakota must have worked as an adept and then became a Warden after becoming an instructor.' The hierarchy in the organization was as such, and the higher rank you were, the more Arcanum Credits you would have, most likely. However, there is a high chance that with the authority that one has, there is no need for one to use Arcanum Credits for anything.

After checking how the hierarchy worked and resting for a while, I decided it was time to train more. There was no point in wasting time. The more I trained, the faster I would progress. With renewed determination, I left my room and headed toward a special training area I had noticed earlier.

The halls were mostly empty as I made my way through the facility. Most trainees were likely engaged in their own training sessions or lectures as the time for their training was yet to end. The quiet was a welcome change, allowing me to focus on my goals.

I reached the special training area, a section dedicated to physical conditioning and combat training. The space was equipped with advanced equipment designed to push the limits of strength and endurance. Various machines, weights, and combat dummies were arranged in a meticulously organized manner.

But my goal was the place that was at the end of the day.

Gravity Room. From now on, I would be training myself here under the gravity.

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I reached the end of the hall, where the entrance to the Gravity Room awaited. This was a place designed to push trainees to their physical limits by increasing the gravitational force, simulating extreme conditions to enhance strength and endurance.

I had trained in the Academy's Gravity Room, where I had worked up to enduring 3x gravity. However, this time, I decided to challenge myself further.

Stepping into the Gravity Room, I took a deep breath. The room was sterile and plain, with reinforced walls and a control panel near the entrance. I walked over to the control panel and adjusted the settings, setting it to 4x gravity.

As the gravity increased, I immediately felt the weight pressing down on me. Every movement became more difficult, and the strain on my muscles was intense. But this was exactly what I needed.

I started with basic exercises, pushing my body to adapt, and followed that with the more complex ones. It was a classic routine for me, as I had practiced my body movements under gravity.

As I continued, I integrated combat drills into my routine. Shadowboxing under 4x gravity was a completely different experience.

Every punch and kick required immense effort, and my movements were slower and more deliberate. But this forced me to focus on precision and control, refining my techniques.

Then, as I was in the middle of a particularly grueling set, the door to the Gravity Room opened. I paused, glancing over to see who had entered.

A man stepped inside, his presence commanding attention. He was around 21 or 22, with a chiseled body and a physique that spoke of intense training and discipline. His hair was dark and cut short, framing a face that was both rugged and sharp. His eyes were a striking blue, with a piercing intensity that seemed to see everything at once.

'Military presence, but not a regular fighter. It is a little different.' He nodded at me, acknowledging my presence before moving to the control panel. With practiced ease, he adjusted the settings, and I watched in surprise as the display showed 15x gravity.

He stepped into the center of the room, and the increased gravity settled over him. His movements remained smooth and controlled, a testament to his strength and experience.

I nodded to myself, thinking about how there were monsters everywhere in this place. But I didn't voice it out. After all, it didn't matter to me. I had my own goals to achieve.

"Huff....Huffff...."

And just like that, I had depleted my whole stamina, reaching the limits of my body. At this point, with the lack of nutrition and other things, I was already feeling my head spinning from everything. My muscles burned, and my breathing was labored.

At this point, it was time to end the training and grab some food.

As I left the Gravity Room and made my way towards the cafeteria, my smartwatch buzzed with a new message. I glanced down to see a message from Lyra.

[Hey Astron! Kael and I are heading to the cafeteria. We're waiting for you. Join us!]

Looking at the message, I realized that the other trainees must have also finished their daily programs and were gathering in the cafeteria.

The cafeteria was bustling with activity. Trainees filled the tables, chatting and laughing, a stark contrast to the solitude of the training rooms. I scanned the room and quickly spotted Lyra and Kael at a table near the center. They waved me over-enthusiastically.

"Hey, Astron!" Lyra called out, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "Come sit with us!"

I made my way to their table and sat down, but on one hand, I felt like Lyra was really similar to Julia. Whenever she spoke, it was always like an exclamation mark at the end of it.

Kael gave me a nod of acknowledgment, his usual composed expression softened with a hint of a smile.

"You look like you've been through a lot," Kael remarked, noting my exhausted state.

"Just finished a session in the Gravity Room," I replied, taking a deep breath. "Decided to push it to 4x gravity."

Lyra's eyes widened. "Wow, 4x? That's impressive! How do you feel?"

"Exhausted, but it's worth it," I said. "What about you two? How was your day?"

"We had a pretty standard day," Kael said, leaning back in his chair. "Some combat drills and strategy sessions. Nothing too intense."

Lyra nodded. "Yeah, today wasn't too bad."

"I am pretty curious. What is your routine for the day? How do the things work here?" I decided to ask. Even though I already got a basic grasp of the things, I still wanted to get an overall idea since my training regime had yet to be updated.

Lyra's eyes sparkled with interest at my question. "Well, since you asked, I'll give you a rundown of my routine. As you know, I specialize in illusions, so my main focus is on improving my mana control and refining my illusion techniques."

She leaned forward, her enthusiasm evident. "Every morning, I start with a session of mana control training under Instructor Lysara. She's amazing—really strict, but she knows her stuff. A lot of trainees are in those sessions, not just me. We're all working on controlling our mana flow, enhancing precision, and extending our mana reserves. It's intense but incredibly rewarding."

Kael nodded in agreement. "Instructor Lysara's sessions are tough but essential. Even those of us who don't specialize in magic benefit from her training."

Lyra continued, "After the mana control session, I have specific training scenarios designed to improve my illusions in team settings. These exercises are meant to enhance my ability to create believable and effective illusions during combat or reconnaissance missions. We work on creating distractions, misleading enemies, and providing support to our team members through visual and auditory illusions."

She paused to take a bite of her food before going on, "In the afternoon, I focus on physical training. It's not my main focus, but it's still important. I work on my agility, stamina, and basic combat skills. This part of my training is kept brief but intense to ensure I can keep up physically if needed."

Kael chimed in, "My routine is a bit different. My abilities are more physical and combat-oriented. I start my day with strength and conditioning training, focusing on enhancing my physical power and endurance. This is followed by combat drills where I practice different martial arts and weapon techniques under various instructors."

He leaned back, thoughtful. "In the afternoons, I participate in tactical strategy sessions. These are designed to improve our decision-making and leadership skills. We're given hypothetical missions

and have to plan and execute strategies, often with unexpected obstacles thrown in to keep us on our toes."

Lyra nodded. "Yeah, Kael's training is more rigorous in terms of physical combat. He's a powerhouse on the battlefield."

Kael smiled slightly at the compliment. "We also have regular sparring sessions, both one-on-one and team-based. It helps to hone our skills in real-time scenarios and understand each other's strengths and weaknesses."

Listening to their routines gave me a better understanding of how things worked here. The training was tailored to each individual's abilities, ensuring everyone could maximize their potential.

"Thanks for sharing," I said, appreciating the insights. "It sounds like both of you have intense but rewarding schedules."

Lyra grinned. "It's tough, but we love it. You'll find your own rhythm soon enough. Once your training regime is updated, you'll see how everything fits together. They are really thorough in preparing the trainees for the missions, and the analysis department is always the best. "

"I see." I nodded my head as I understood how things worked in this place. It seemed there were many special trainings for special scenarios.

That made sense. From how it looked, this organization prepared the trainees for more specialized stations contrary to Hunter academies.

For most of the Hunters, the most important thing is being ready for danger whenever the time comes. Gates can open at every moment, or a villain can make an appearance. In a way, Hunter needs to be versatile, while for the organization, it seemed everyone had a role.

After finishing the meal, I returned to my room. The moment I reached it, my smartwatch vibrated, indicating a new message. I opened it and saw that my training regime had been updated.

The schedule displayed was intense:

5 A.M.: Four hours of one-on-one training with Warden Dakota as her official disciple.

9 A.M.: Two-hour break.

11 A.M.: One hour of body acrobatics training.

12 P.M.: Two hours working on developing stealth abilities and mastering the art of erasing presence with Instructor Kennet.

2 P.M.: One-hour lunch break.

3 P.M.: Training with Reina

Seeing the schedule, I couldn't help but feel a mix of excitement and apprehension. The training was rigorous and demanding, but it was also exactly what I needed to push my limits and improve.

'A whopping four-hour block with Warden Dakota...' I thought, recalling the intensity of our previous encounters. 'This is going to be intense.'

Body acrobatics and stealth training with Instructor Kennet made sense as well, given my need to improve my physical capabilities and stealth techniques.

And ending the day with Reina promised to be enlightening and challenging, especially considering her unique insights and guidance. At the end of the day, developing my eyes was one of the most important things that I needed to do for myself as well.

On the other hand, there was another thing that needed to be addressed.

Each of the lessons would have an objective, and if the objective was confirmed by the instructor, then my schedule would be updated.

This meant I had more chances of improving myself in different manners, depending on how quickly I met the objectives.

'The faster you are, the more resources you are going to access.'

I even suspected that there were certain things that needed to be achieved before I could be sent to the missions.

'And I am going to do exactly that.'

It seemed I had a new goal now. Being able to meet the requirements of being sent to missions in two weeks.

And the next day, I stood face to face with the woman that had become my master.

"Disciple, you are here.

Chapter 455 103.5 - Training and Guides

What is a [Martial Artist]?

When the question is asked, the answer is clear: those who use their bodies for the sake of fighting.

But to truly understand what it means to be a Martial Artist, one must delve deeper into the essence of martial arts itself.

Martial Artists are individuals who have dedicated themselves to the pursuit of physical and mental excellence through rigorous training and discipline.

They sharpen their bodies, transforming them into weapons that are always available, always ready. For them, the body is not just a vessel but an instrument of power, precision, and grace.

They train tirelessly, honing their muscles, bones, and senses to peak conditions. Every movement, every breath, is a testament to their commitment. Their bodies become repositories of strength and agility, capable of withstanding and delivering tremendous force.

In their hands, the simplest gestures can become deadly. A punch is not just a punch; it's the culmination of years of practice, the perfect alignment of muscle and bone, and the precise timing and focus of energy.

A kick is not just a kick; it's a devastating blow delivered with the power of a sharpened mind and a conditioned body.

"But, how can one achieve such a state? How can one reach such a state where one can fight against a sword with one's body? What do you think of this, my disciple?" Dakota asked, her eyes fixed on Astron.

Astron took a deep breath, considering her question. "I believe it comes down to several factors, Master," he began. "First, there's the physical conditioning. A Martial Artist needs to build their body to withstand impacts and deliver powerful strikes. This involves rigorous training, strengthening muscles, bones, and tendons."

Dakota nodded, gesturing for him to continue.

"Then there's a technique," Astron continued. "Knowing how to move, how to strike, and how to defend. It's about precision and control. Every movement needs to be efficient and effective. And, of course, there's the mental aspect. A martial artist needs to have a sharp mind and be able to anticipate and react to their opponent's moves."

"You're on the right track," Dakota said, a hint of approval in her voice. "But there's more to it."

Astron looked at her, eager to learn.

"Physical conditioning and technique are crucial, but they're just the foundation," Dakota explained. "What sets a true Martial Artist apart is their ability to integrate their body and mind with the flow of energy – mana in our case. This is what allows us to match and even surpass the power of weapons."

She demonstrated by raising her hand and channeling mana through her arm. The air around her hand seemed to shimmer with energy.

"Mana enhances our strength, speed, and resilience just like it does for every other Awakened who use weapons," Dakota continued. "But it's not just about raw power. It's about control and harmony."

A Martial Artist learns to synchronize their movements with the flow of mana, making every strike more powerful and every defense more effective."

Astron nodded, absorbing her words. "So, it's about finding that balance between physical prowess, technique, and the flow of energy."

"Exactly," Dakota said, a small smile playing on her lips. "Do you know what the most crucial thing that you were lacking was when we sparred yesterday?"

Astron furrowed his brow, deep in thought. "I know I struggled with integrating my mana into my movements," he admitted. "And my body didn't seem to respond the way I wanted it to."

Dakota nodded, remembering the spar. Astron had displayed an insanely good combat awareness, and he was already proficient with his body to an immense degree. However, there were two things he lacked.

"First, controlling your body while your mana is flowing inside," Dakota began. "It's as if you've learned how to fight with your body to an immense proficiency but at the same time learned nothing about mana at all. It's like when you trained, mana didn't even exist. That's your first flaw."

Hearing this, Astron did not show any reaction, but at the same time, he knew what she said was true. After all, there was no Mana on Earth.

"That is right." He replied. "When I was a child, I had been trained to use my body even though I was non-awakened."

"That is understandable. Though I must admit, whoever trained you was of a different breed."

"That is correct....." Astron nodded once again, but his eyes turned cold for a split second as if he had remembered something that he did not wish to. Dakota, not realizing this, continued to say her words, explaining his second flaw.

"In any case..." Dakota said. "As a Martial Artist, you need to learn to harmonize your mana with your movements. It's not enough to just be physically strong; your mana needs to flow seamlessly with every action you take."

–SWISH! With a focused breath, Dakota channeled her mana into her hand, her aura shimmering with energy. She threw a punch into the air, and the force of her strike released a powerful shockwave. The wall before her bore the brunt of the impact, cracking under the pressure.

"See that?" Dakota said, lowering her hand. "If you can't use mana, you can't use skills like this. And in battle, you won't always be able to close the distance. To influence the outside world and control the battlefield, you need to master the flow of your mana."

Astron observed the damage. He could see the potential power that could be harnessed through proper mana control.

"I understand, Master," he said, his voice resolute. "I need to be able to integrate my mana with my movements to extend my reach and influence in combat."

While he had always been using his weapons to exert his mana, this part was where he was lacking. Without the [Celestialith], the effectiveness of his mana that is coated on the weapons became way worse than when it was used on it.

Therefore, for the sake of increasing his strength, he did not focus his body too much and instead focused on his direct combat capabilities with weapons. If not for his immense quick reflexes and quick judgment time, he would not be able to overcome many battles that he was in.

"Exactly," Dakota replied. "This is what sets a Martial Artist apart. We don't rely on weapons to channel our mana; our bodies are our weapons. But for that to work, your mana and your physical movements must become one."

She demonstrated another technique, this time focusing on a defensive move. With a swift motion, she channeled mana into her arms, creating a barrier of energy that deflected an imagined attack. The air around her shimmered with the intensity of her mana, showcasing the potential for both offense and defense.

"Defensive techniques are just as important as offensive ones," Dakota explained. "You need to be able to protect yourself while maintaining the flow of mana. It's about balance and control."

"How do I start integrating my mana like that?"

"We'll begin with the basics," Dakota said. "First, you need to understand the flow of mana within your body. Close your eyes and focus on your breathing. Feel the energy circulating through you."

Astron did as instructed, closing his eyes and taking deep, measured breaths. He concentrated on the sensation of mana coursing through his veins, feeling the familiar warmth and power it provided.

While using his [Shadow Leap] or previously [Dash], he would always coat his body with mana to increase his strength.

But because they were both [Skill]s, he was not able to understand the basic principle behind it. Since, by definition, while [Traits] were innate and needed to be understood to be improved, [Skills] came in a way that would just be triggered by imagining. One did not need to know the exact mechanism underneath.

Dakota watched him closely, seeing his concentration deepen. "The most basic way for Martial Artists to use their mana effectively is to create a virtual core inside their bodies," she began. "This core isn't something that exists in reality, but Martial Artists visualize it to help order the mana within their bodies. Controlling the flow of mana while also fighting is very hard and complex. The virtual core simplifies this process."

Astron opened his eyes and looked at her, intrigued but also thoughtful. "But creating such a core would mean there are two different heads acting in the body, right? Wouldn't that slow down the reaction of the mana?"

The concept here was pretty similar to how Digital and Analog Electronics worked. If Analog Electronics were indelibly efficient and fast, it would also be a lot harder to make incredibly precise adjustments with the huge amounts of variables that would need to be accounted for.

For Digital Electronics, the case was much easier because of the limited variables. That was what the Virtual Core aimed to do.

Dakota smiled, impressed by his insight. "You make a good point," she said. "It's true that having a virtual core can slow down the immediate reaction time of your mana. However, this is a trade-off. It sacrifices some efficiency for simplicity and consistency. The virtual core acts like a regulator, making it easier to control and direct your mana during combat."

"So, it's a balance between control and efficiency."

"Exactly," Dakota confirmed. "For a Martial Artist, it's more important to have a steady, reliable flow of mana that enhances every movement rather than trying to micromanage each burst of energy. Over time, as you become more adept at using your virtual core, you'll find ways to optimize that flow, making it both efficient and powerful."

'An interesting concept. I did not know Martial Artists did such a thing. There was no mention of such cases in the game.' Astron thought. And then he took a deep breath, closing his eyes again to focus. He visualized the virtual core within his body, a central point where his mana would gather and be redistributed.

The concept was new, though not strange, and he could see the potential benefits.

"Imagine your virtual core as a sphere of energy at your center," Dakota instructed. "Feel the mana gathering there, becoming more concentrated. As you breathe, let that energy spread out through your limbs, enhancing your strength, speed, and resilience."

Following her guidance, Astron felt the mana pool in the place that he imagined as the core, a warm, concentrated ball of energy.

With each breath, he directed the mana outward, feeling it flow through his body. The sensation was different from when he used his skills; it felt more controlled, more deliberate.

"Good," Dakota said, observing his progress. "Now, try to maintain that flow as you move. Start with something simple."

Astron opened his eyes and took a step forward, focusing on keeping the mana flowing smoothly from his virtual core to his limbs. He threw a punch, feeling the enhanced power from the mana. It wasn't perfect, but it was a start.

"You're getting it," Dakota encouraged. "Keep practicing. The more you do this, the more natural it will become."

Astron continued to practice, each movement becoming more fluid and powerful as he integrated the flow of mana with his physical actions. Dakota watched, noting his focus.

'Not bad. He's getting right to it on his first try. It seems he can internalize the concept a lot more easily. That is good. We will be able to start focusing on stances soon.' "You will practice your Virtual core and movements for one hour. And then, we are going to start practicing the combat arts."

"Understood."

"...."

"Master."

With that, she left, leaving her disciple right there.

Chapter 456 103.6 - Training and Guides

I closed my eyes, focusing on my breathing and the sensation of mana pooling at the center of my being. Visualizing the virtual core as a concentrated sphere of energy, I felt the mana gather and pulse with each breath. It was a strange but invigorating sensation.

'Alright, let's see how this works,' I thought, taking a deep breath and allowing the mana to flow from the virtual core through my limbs.

Contrary to how you would think, there are no cores in this world for the Awakened to use mana. The mana itself that belongs to you is not stored in a specific place in your body. Rather, the concept is a little bit different.

It is stored everywhere across the body itself and even around you. The more strong you get, the more mana around you that you can easily influence. That is also the reason why high-ranking hunters are able to be influenced just by walking around.

'Virtual Core.'

In a way, it acted as the second brain.

I opened my eyes and took a step forward, feeling the energy spread out. My movements felt more deliberate, the flow of mana enhancing my strength and speed. It was similar to how I would enhance myself while fighting against others, but at the same time, there were some differences.

–SWOOSH!

I threw a punch, and while it wasn't perfect, I could feel the difference.

'It's about control,' I thought to myself, repeating the motion. 'It's not just about power but about channeling the energy efficiently.'

With each movement, I focused on maintaining the connection to the virtual core, ensuring the mana flowed smoothly.

I practiced basic punches and kicks, each strike becoming more fluid and powerful as I integrated the flow of mana.

The process was slow and methodical, but I could feel myself improving.

The virtual core acted as a regulator, making it easier to control the energy and direct it where I needed it most. It was a balancing act, requiring both physical and mental focus.

'I see.' As I continued, I began to understand the nuances of the technique.

'The longer you use the Virtual Core, the more mana you are going to spend.'

In a way, for the sake of directing your mana into a special place and redirecting from it, you were bound to lose your energy. And if you were to constantly do that, you would spend a lot more.

TAP! TAP! At that moment, my ears picked up a sound. She was walking slowly, possibly not to alert me, but with my senses developed, she had missed the mark.

Dakota returned, her eyes assessing my progress. "How do you feel?" she asked, her tone serious but encouraging.

"Better," I replied, feeling the burn in my muscles. "I can feel the difference. The mana flows more naturally now."

"Hmm...." She said, walking over to me. "Not bad. You have already grasped it."

It seemed she was already expecting me to understand how the core worked.

'Then it must be an easy job.' Considering this was something basic for the whole [Martial Artist] community, it made sense for it to be simplified.

"Now, we'll start incorporating this into more complex combat techniques."

With that, Dakota stood right before me, her posture relaxed but radiating a controlled power. She looked at me with a serious expression and began explaining what we would be doing next.

"How do you think martial arts were first developed?" she asked, her eyes locking onto mine.

I thought for a moment, considering the question. "Martial arts were likely developed through observation and necessity. People needed to defend themselves and started to observe the movements of nature, the way animals moved and fought."

Dakota nodded, a small smile playing on her lips. "You're correct. Humans imitated the beasts. Just like we are Awakened and able to use mana ourselves, beasts were also able to harness their mana and use magic of their own. And most importantly, they were beasts with strong bodies like weapons."

She took a step back and assumed a stance, her movements fluid and controlled. "Humans observed the powerful, efficient movements of these beasts and began to imitate them. This was the foundation of martial arts—learning from nature and adapting those lessons to our own bodies."

As she spoke, she demonstrated a series of techniques, each one flowing seamlessly into the next. Her movements were precise and powerful, embodying the principles she was describing. "We harness the energy within us, just like the beasts do, and we learn to move with the same efficiency and power."

She stopped at that moment, looking at my eyes.

"Which type of beast do you think this style originated from?"

I simulated her movements in my head, noticing the fluidity and power behind each strike. The way she moved, the grace combined with raw strength, the swift, precise attacks—it all reminded me of a predator in the wild.

"A tiger," I said after a moment. "Your movements resemble those of a tiger."

Dakota nodded, a small smile forming on her lips. "That's correct. The tiger is a symbol of strength, power, and grace. Each Martial Artist uses a different combat art, much like any other weapon. Some arts are specialized in speed, others in strength, and some in explosiveness."

She turned to look at me, her gaze intense. "For me, the style I mainly use is called [Tempest Fang]." Her eyes seemed to shimmer with energy as she continued. "It's an art-focused heavily on explosive strikes, overwhelming the enemy with a constant barrage of powerful attacks, like a tempest raging in a storm."

As she said this, she demonstrated a rapid series of strikes, each one delivered with incredible force and precision. The air seemed to crackle with energy as her movements created shockwaves.

"The key to [Tempest Fang] is to maintain relentless pressure on your opponent," Dakota explained. "You don't give them a moment to recover. Every strike flows into the next, creating a chain of attacks that becomes nearly impossible to defend against."

I watched closely, absorbing every detail of her demonstration. The way she channeled her mana into each strike, the fluidity of her movements, and the sheer power behind each attack were awe-inspiring.

"And to be able to achieve such a result, your understanding of the basic movements must be perfect so that not even for a split second, the flow is broken. Which is what we are going to focus on from now on."

Dakota stepped back, giving me space. "Let's start with the fundamental strikes. We'll build from there. The goal is to make each movement seamless, flowing from one to the next without any hesitation."

I nodded, ready to begin. "Understood, Master."

She demonstrated a series of basic strikes, each one executed with precision and grace. "The [Tempest Fang] has three main stances," she explained. "Each stance serves a different purpose and strategy. The first stance is called [Gale Stance]. It focuses on quick, successive strikes to overwhelm your opponent. The second stance is [Storm Stance], which emphasizes powerful, explosive attacks designed to break through defenses. The third stance is [Cyclone Stance], a more advanced form that combines speed and power to create a relentless assault."

Dakota began with the [Gale Stance]. "This is the easiest stance to start with. It's about speed and precision. Watch closely."

She demonstrated a series of rapid strikes, each one flowing seamlessly into the next. Her movements were fluid and controlled, a perfect example of what I needed to achieve.

"First, you need to master each strike individually," she said, showing the first basic strike. "We'll start with this."

I mimicked her movements, focusing on the exact positioning and execution of the strike. Dakota watched carefully, correcting my form and providing feedback.

"Good. Now, the next strike," she continued, demonstrating another swift, precise attack. "Remember, it's not just about speed. Each strike must be controlled and accurate."

I practiced the second strike, feeling the energy flow through my body. As I moved, I visualized the virtual core within me, channeling mana into each motion.

"Excellent. Now the third strike," Dakota said, moving seamlessly into the next attack. "Maintain your focus and control."

I repeated the process, mastering each individual strike. The repetition was intense, but I could feel myself improving with each attempt.

"Once you've mastered each strike, we'll start combining them," Dakota explained. "The key to [Gale Stance] is the transitions. Each strike must flow into the next without any hesitation."

–WARP! Just at that second, something appeared right before me. It was a small manual.

"This....." I was about to say, was this manual the thing that I thought?

"You are right," Dakota said. "This is the manual of the [Gale Stance]. Though I am not doubting your memory, if you wish to answer some of your questions, you can refer to this manual. It may be precisely helpful for how to make your mana flow in your body."

I nodded, taking the manual and flipping through its pages. The detailed illustrations and descriptions provided valuable insights into the stance's mechanics and the flow of mana required for each strike.

"I will leave you alone in this place until 9 A.M., as indicated in your program," Dakota said, stepping back. "Remember, the key is to internalize these movements and the flow of mana. I can't remain with you all the time, and it's crucial for you to develop the ability to learn and adapt on your own."

"I understand, Master," I replied, bowing slightly in respect.

Dakota nodded; her expression was serious but encouraging. "Good. Keep practicing, and don't hesitate to refer to the manual if you need guidance. I'll check on your progress later."

With that, she turned and left the training area, leaving me alone with the manual and my thoughts. I understood the importance of this time alone.

I took a deep breath and began to practice again, focusing on each strike individually.

'Fist.'

'Repeat.'

'Fist.'

'Repeat.'

The manual provided valuable tips on how to channel mana more effectively, and I incorporated those insights into my training.

As Dakota exited the training hall, she couldn't help but reflect on Astron's progress. She had initially expected to spend more time on the basics, but Astron's rapid assimilation of concepts was impressive.

'He's advancing faster than I anticipated,' Dakota thought, her steps measured as she made her way down the corridor. 'I underestimated him a little.'

She considered the implications of this realization. Astron's potential was immense, and he had the drive to match. If she pushed him harder, he could reach levels of mastery that few ever achieved. But to do that, she needed to speed up his training regimen.

'We can't waste time on the basics for too long,' she mused. 'He's ready for more advanced techniques, even if it's earlier than usual. His ability to internalize and apply what he learns is exceptional.'

Her thoughts drifted to the next steps in his training. She needed to introduce him to more complex concepts and techniques, ones that would challenge him further and unlock his full potential. As she considered this, she glanced at her smartwatch, where a new document had just appeared.

Everchanging Glyph

"I need to get this one today."

It was a body imprint.

Chapter 457 103.7 - Training and Guides

"Do you always wake up this early?" Kael asked as we walked back to the cafeteria.

"I do," I replied.

"Do you not sleep?" he inquired further.

"I do," I said simply, not bothering to elaborate.

Kael chuckled. "You're a man of few words, Astron."

Lyra, bouncing along beside us, chimed in. "He's probably just focused, right? Always thinking about the next step."

Though it seemed like she had misunderstood something, I decided not to elaborate. I could not say when I slept; I remembered certain things, could I?

"Something like that."

As we entered the cafeteria, the smell of freshly prepared food filled the air. The place was already bustling with trainees, each one readying themselves for the day ahead.

Lyra and Kael joined the line with me, grabbing trays and selecting their breakfast. I opted for a balanced meal, focusing on protein and vegetables to replenish the energy I'd expended during my early training.

"You must have had an intense session with Dakota," Kael commented as we found a table and sat down.

"....." I looked at him as he said those words. How did this guy know?

"Don't look at me like that. The word has already gotten out."

"The word?"

"Yes. Miss Dakota had announced that she would be taking you as her disciple. I never knew you were a [Martial Artist] as well."

"I see." It seemed that people did not have many secrets in this place. Well, considering what type of organization they were, it made sense. I assumed that these guys would be sent to missions together sometimes. Thus, they need to trust each other.

And from how it looked, the other trainees here did not look at me with weird gazes either. Even though some of them were discerning, it was not because they were looking down on me. They were just seizing a newcomer, and it was a pretty normal thing to do.

I decided not to delve too deeply into my occupation. "I could have become a [Martial Artist], but I never had the time or anyone to teach me."

Kael nodded, understanding. "That makes sense. It's not something you can just pick up without proper guidance."

Lyra chimed in, "Well, you're in good hands now. Dakota is one of the best. You'll learn a lot from her."

"I believe so," I replied, focusing on my food.

We continued eating in a comfortable silence, each of us lost in our thoughts. The cafeteria buzzed with the energy of trainees readying themselves for the day. It was a reminder of the rigorous schedule and the constant push to improve.

After we finished our breakfast, we stood up to leave. Lyra and Kael headed off to their respective training areas while I made my way to the physical training section to continue my regimen.

"Catch you later," Kael said, giving a small wave.

Lyra smiled brightly. "Good luck with your training, Astron!"

"Thanks. You too."

After separating from them, I pondered.

"I have two hours until the next training," I muttered to myself.

It was acrobatics, a part of my training regimen, that the analysis team had decided I needed to improve. Reflecting on my recent mission, where I had infiltrated the facility, it was clear that my acrobatics and body agility were not up to par.

Even though I had trained in acrobatics and combat to improve my body, I hadn't placed much importance on it, only occasionally practicing. It made sense that I looked lacking in that area.

The fluidity and precision required for such movements were crucial for someone in my position, especially with my [Weapon Master] class. My lack of focus on acrobatics had become a noticeable weakness.

"Instructor Tianna, huh?"

I heard about this person from Kael and Lyra. She trained them both in acrobatics.

'It seems this place puts a lot more importance on flexibility. Even a mage like Lyra was not exempted from the training.'

"I need to visit the bath section," I muttered to myself.

I had decided to rest my body in the bath section, a special area designed for trainees to recuperate after intense sessions. Dakota had instructed me to visit this place, which explained the two-hour break in my schedule.

Making my way to the bath section, I noticed how the facility was meticulously organized to ensure the trainees could optimize their performance. The path to the bath section was serene, with soft lighting and a calming ambiance.

Upon entering, the sight of the bath section was impressive. It was a large, well-maintained area with various pools, each designed for different purposes. There were hot baths for relaxation, cold baths for muscle recovery, and even a few specialized pools infused with healing minerals.

'First, thirty minutes of cold bath and then one hour of Mineral Bath 3. I see.'

Checking the note Dakota left me, I made my way towards the location.

"It seems everyone is here," I muttered to myself as I entered the acrobatics training area.

It was a grand lecture hall filled with mats, gymnastics equipment, and an intricate setup of parkour obstacles, resembling a huge urban landscape.

I noticed many other trainees already present, their eyes discerning as they looked at me. I didn't recognize any of them, but it was clear they were evaluating me just as I was evaluating them.

Instructor Tianna, a tall woman with an athletic build and an air of confidence, stood at the front. Her sharp eyes scanned the room, settling on me for a moment before she spoke.

"Looks like we have a new trainee here," she said, her gaze fixed on me. "Since that's the case, I'll summarize the basics for a little. This should be okay for everyone here, correct?"

The trainees remained silent, a collective nod signaling their agreement.

Instructor Tianna turned her attention fully to me. "Why do you think we have a class like acrobatics, Astron?"

I took a moment to think, considering the various aspects of our training and the demands placed on us as operatives. "Acrobatics training is essential for improving our agility, flexibility, and overall physical conditioning. It allows us to navigate complex environments efficiently, which is crucial for missions that involve infiltration, escape, or close-quarters combat. It also enhances our ability to adapt to unexpected situations and terrains."

Instructor Tianna nodded approvingly. "That's correct. As expected from a student of Arcadia Hunter Academy. You are pretty good with explanations." She said, winking. This lecturer looked slightly different from others, especially Dakota and Reina. Weirdly enough, she looked cheerful.

"Acrobatics training is not just about being able to perform impressive moves; it's about practical application in real-world scenarios. It's about having the physical capability to handle any environment and the mental agility to adapt quickly. Whether you're navigating through an urban

landscape, climbing a building, or dodging attacks, acrobatics can give you the edge you need to succeed."

She gestured to the parkour setup behind her. "Since the trainees besides you all have completed the first three stages, they will be training differently. You will start from the stage one."

She explained that the course was divided into stages, each increasing in complexity and difficulty. "After each stage, you will be tested. Every trainee here has a different goal for this course. Since everyone has a different occupation, not everyone will need complete mastery over acrobatics. The requirements vary."

As she checked my profile, her eyes widened slightly. "It seems the occupation that is planned for you requires you to complete seven stages to pass this course..." The moment she said this, I saw some of the trainees giving me a pitiful look.

It seems this course was not something they liked too much, especially the seven stages.

"To think the analysis team gave you such a goal...That's quite an extensive requirement, indicating a need for a high level of stealth and agility. It seems your occupation is quite stealthy indeed."

I nodded, understanding the implication. From how Reina had always talked to me and how she said things like 'Organization expects much from you,' they put a lot more expectations. This seems to be one of those.

Instructor Tianna continued, "We'll start with the basics and build from there. Pay close attention to the techniques and focus on mastering each stage. This will be crucial for your development."

"Normally, I like to teach everything in detail, but considering the goal set for you, I suspect that you won't need it. I'm going to show you what you need to do once. After that, you'll be left alone to train. When you feel like you've mastered stage one, come to me for a test."

I nodded in understanding. This approach suited me perfectly. My life had always been about quick adaptation and mastery through observation. Once I saw something, I never forgot it.

Tianna moved to the starting point of the course, demonstrating each maneuver with precision and fluidity. She explained the techniques briefly as she executed them: balance on beams, vault over

low walls, jump across gaps, and roll upon landing to minimize impact. Her movements were seamless, and each transition was smooth and controlled.

"Remember, efficiency is key," she emphasized. "Every movement should have a purpose. Conserve your energy and focus on precision."

I watched intently, absorbing every detail of her demonstration. When she finished, she turned to me with a nod. "Now, it's your turn. Practice until you're confident, and then come to me for a test."

With that, she left me to train on my own. I took a deep breath, mentally reviewing what I had just seen. I began the course, focusing on each technique. Balancing on the beams required steady control and focus, and vaulting over the walls needed precise timing and strength.

As I moved through the obstacles, I made adjustments to my approach, refining my technique with each repetition. The jumps required explosive power, and the rolls demanded a perfect blend of coordination and timing. Each maneuver became more natural as I practiced, my body adapting to the demands of the course.

After several rounds, I felt like I already mastered it.

Recently, I have been using my [Shadow Leap]. Since it was an ability that helped me teleport a short distance, it was quite efficient for such parkours. But before that, I only had [Dash].

It only helped me to move faster, and because of this, I would eventually move around on my own. It seemed that the first stage of training was something that I had already done.

Thanks to the fact that she had shown the basics to me, the movements became smoother, and my transitions became more fluid. I repeated the stage two more times until I was sure I had mastered it, ensuring each step was deliberate and controlled.

Satisfied with my progress, I approached Instructor Tianna for the test. "I'm ready."

She nodded, leading me back to the starting point. "Show me what you've learned."

I moved through the course, executing each technique with precision and efficiency. Tianna watched closely, her discerning eyes noting every detail of my performance. When I finished, she nodded approvingly.

"As expected. There was a reason why the analysis team gave you such a goal. It looks like it won't take too much for you to reach the seventh stage. I will see you tomorrow."

With that, she dismissed me as the one hour of training had met its end. On the side, I saw some other trainees giving me a weird look.

'They must think I am a monster.'

It wasn't that unfamiliar.

Chapter 458 103.8 - Training and Guides

After finishing the acrobatics training, I made my way to Instructor Kennet's session, focusing on developing my stealth abilities and mastering the art of erasing presence.

When I asked Kael if they were taught this one as well, they said they were. But it was hard.

Apparently, Instructor Kennet was someone who put importance on perfection. This training area was a stark contrast to the previous one. It was dimly lit, with various obstacles and hiding spots designed to challenge one's ability to remain unseen. The environment was perfect for honing stealth skills, with shadows and dark corners offering numerous opportunities to practice blending in.

But, aside from that, nobody was there.

'Or he is already behind me.'

The moment I thought about this, my body moved on its own.

SWOOSH! My head was tilted to the side, and then, from the corner of my ear, something went past.

"Ho...Not bad," the man said, retracing his hand back. His half-naked body was lightly clothed, his chest line wide open, showing a chiseled but not overly muscular frame.

He had an aloof demeanor, but his eyes were cold, the kind of cold that only comes from taking many lives without any ounce of regret. The eyes of someone who had lived in the shadows of blood.

I straightened up, meeting his gaze without flinching. "Instructor Kennet, I presume?"

Kennet nodded, a faint smile playing on his lips. "Indeed. Welcome to your stealth training, Astron. I see you've already got good instincts. That's a start."

His presence was intimidating, a testament to his experience and skill. But I had faced intimidating figures before; I was here to learn and improve. And he was not targeting his killing intent to me, as well.

He turned to look at me, observing me from head to toe. "Lean body, indicating agility and speed. You have a natural ability to move silently, and your instincts are sharp. Your balance and coordination are commendable, suggesting extensive training in physical combat."

Kennet's eyes narrowed slightly as he continued his assessment. "You're ambidextrous, aren't you? I can see it in the way you shift your weight and use both sides of your body evenly. That's a rare and valuable trait, especially for stealth and combat."

'This guy.....He is pretty good....'

I am not particularly trying to hide details like this as they are not that disadvantageous for me, even if they are known. But at the same time, I am not particularly showing them off, either. If someone is going to know about such traits of mine, they need to be at least good.

And this lecturer.....He was good.

I nodded, acknowledging his observations. "Yes, I've trained to use both hands equally."

"Good," Kennet said, a hint of approval in his tone. "Being ambidextrous gives you a significant advantage in combat and stealth. It allows you to adapt quickly and use your environment more

effectively. It's clear you've had extensive training in various disciplines, but there's always room for improvement."

He stepped closer, his gaze piercing. "Your body language shows that you're constantly aware of your surroundings, a necessary skill for someone in our line of work. But awareness isn't enough. You need to become one with the shadows, to erase your presence completely."

Kennet's tone grew more intense. "To achieve this, you must control not just your movements but your very essence. Your breathing, your heartbeat, your energy – all of it must be in harmony with the environment. This isn't just about hiding; it's about becoming invisible to the senses."

"I see." I nodded after hearing his words. This was something that I had already heard before. It was not something new to me. "But, instructor. How long are you going to keep them hidden there?"

Kennet's smile widened at my words. "What are you talking about?" he asked, but the glint in his eyes showed that he knew exactly what I meant.

"The trainees you've hidden all across the arena," I replied, my voice steady. "You've placed them in strategic positions to observe and possibly test me."

Kennet clapped his hands with a hearty laugh. "As expected, you're pretty good. Most wouldn't have noticed them so quickly."

He glanced around the dimly lit room, and suddenly, the hidden trainees began to reveal themselves. One by one, they emerged from the shadows, each looking slightly impressed and a bit wary.

"Well then," Kennet said, still smiling. "Since you've left such an impression, you won't mind if I give you some special attention, would you?"

I shook my head, meeting his gaze with determination. "That's what I was aiming for already."

"Good," Kennet replied, his smile turning more serious as he turned to the other trainees. "Today, you are all going to be training on your own. Until I deal with this cocky guy, at least."

The other trainees nodded at his words as their eyes looked at me with a clear glint.

'These guys....They did get competitive.'

It seems they disliked the fact that they were discovered this quickly by a newcomer. But, well, I had seen many who were better at erasing their presence, and I had a special cheat that helped me see them. "Understood, sir."

The trainees dispersed, moving to different sections of the training area, their eyes still casting glances my way. They were clearly motivated, irked by my quick recognition of their presence.

Kennet led me to a different part of the training area, his demeanor shifting to one of intense focus. "We're going to see your limits today," he said. "I want to see how far you can go and what level you are at. Are you ready?"

I nodded. "I'm ready."

Kennet gestured to the obstacle course. "For the first test, we'll assess your skills as a non-awakened. No mana use, no special abilities—just pure footwork and technique. Move through the course without setting off any alarms."

I nodded again. However, this guy probably would not expect what he is going to see right now.

Kennet started the timer, and I began navigating the obstacle course.

Every step was crucial. The course was designed to test balance, agility, and precision. I moved carefully, my footsteps silent as I maneuvered around obstacles, under beams, and over barriers. My focus was on maintaining perfect form and avoiding any missteps.

Halfway through, I encountered a particularly tricky section with narrow beams and multiple sensors. I took a deep breath, visualizing the path ahead, and continued with measured precision. Each movement was deliberate, ensuring I didn't trigger any alarms.

As I finished the course, I glanced at Kennet. His eyes were widened, clearly impressed. "You finished it without a single alarm," he said, almost in disbelief. "Were you a thief before you became an awakened or something? Just what kind of life did you live?"

I remained silent, my expression neutral. Since even if I had explained, no one would believe it, not that I would explain it in any case. At the end of the day, there is nothing remaining of that place, as I ensured that is the case.

Kennet shook his head, chuckling. "Well, expecting someone like you to have a normal past is like expecting bread to bake itself."

He crossed his arms, studying me. "You've got the fundamentals down, that's for sure. There is no need for me to work on the physical aspect." He said as he raised his finger. "But you must also be aware that the physical skills are nothing if you can't erase your presence with mana. After all, in an Awakened world, nobody is going to listen to your steps. They are going to sense your presence."

"Understood."

"Good. Now, we'll test your skills when the mana is also included."

Kennet led me to another section of the training area, where a series of intricate wards and sensors were set up. "Just like acrobatics, we divide this training into stages. Each stage will increase the sensitivity of the wards you'll be working against. For now, we'll start with stage one."

He pointed to a series of markers and obstacles. "Stage one is designed to test your basic ability to suppress your mana and move undetected. The wards here are less sensitive, but they'll still react if you make any significant mistakes."

I nodded, taking in the layout. The goal was clear: move through the course without triggering the wards.

"Remember," Kennet said, "this isn't just about avoiding physical detection. You need to suppress your presence and make it seem as if you're not even there. Use your mana to blend with the environment, to become part of it."

"Understood."

I took a deep breath, feeling the flow of mana within me. Focusing on the task ahead, I began to move through the course. I concentrated on suppressing my mana and reducing my presence as much as possible.

The first few steps were cautious, testing the sensitivity of the wards. I felt the familiar tingle of mana detection as I moved closer to the first obstacle. Adjusting my flow, I minimized my presence further, feeling the wards relax as I passed by without triggering them.

Each step required careful attention. I could feel the wards' faint hum, something that I had not felt before. It seemed it was heavily related to the [Perceptive Insight], as nothing else would explain it.

And just like that, while trying to erase my presence as much as I could, I moved forward and finished. Reaching the end of the course, I turned to face Kennet. He observed me with a discerning eye, noting every detail of my performance.

"Hmm....." There was an expression on his face that was different than before, as if he had figured something out. "Kid....Have you been using a stealth artifact?"

And then he asked.

The moment he said this, I knew what he meant. Though, I still decided to ask.

"Why do you think so?"

Kennet's eyes narrowed slightly as he studied me. "While you're good at controlling your body and evading radars and wards, you're not as proficient at erasing your presence. It's as if you've never learned this skill or tried to do it before. But your movements suggest you're used to something else doing it for you."

I nodded, acknowledging his observation. "That's correct. I've been using an artifact to erase my presence before." That was not true, but there was no need or way for me to reveal [Shadowborne] here, as that could make things tricky a lot.

Hearing this, Kennet nodded his head, a faint smile playing on his lips. "It seems not everyone can be perfect. But that's alright. It means we have a clear starting point." He said, looking at me. In his eyes, I must look more normal now. "We'll begin from scratch and build your skills from the ground up."

"We'll begin from scratch and build your skills from the ground up."

After saying this, Kennet gestured for me to follow him to a different part of the training area.

"First, we'll focus on the basics of presence suppression. It's not just about minimizing your mana output but about making your presence indistinguishable from the environment."

Kennet demonstrated, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. As he exhaled, it was as if he blended into the shadows around him. His presence faded, becoming almost imperceptible.

I followed Kennet to a secluded part of the training area, away from prying eyes and ears. The space was dimly lit, with shadows dancing along the walls from the flickering torches.

"All right, kid," Kennet began, his voice barely above a whisper, "the key to erasing your presence lies in understanding and manipulating your mana flow. This isn't just about hiding; it's about becoming one with your surroundings. You have to think of yourself as a drop of water in an ocean—indistinguishable from the rest."

He stood in the center of the room, his posture relaxed yet focused. "First, you need to learn to control your breathing and heart rate. When you're calm, your mana flow becomes more steady and easier to manipulate. Close your eyes and take slow, deep breaths. Feel your heartbeat and try to sync it with your breaths."

I did as instructed, closing my eyes and focusing on my breathing. Inhale, hold, exhale. Slowly, I began to feel my heartbeat slowing down, matching the rhythm of my breaths. The ambient sounds of the training area started to fade away, replaced by the steady thump of my heart.

"Good," Kennet's voice broke through the silence. "Now, imagine your mana as a gentle stream flowing through your body. It's calm and undisturbed. You need to smooth out any turbulent spots in your flow. Visualize it becoming a part of the air around you, dissipating into nothingness."

I visualized my mana as a calm stream flowing gently through me. With each breath, I willed it to spread out and blend into the environment. It was a strange sensation, like trying to dissolve myself into the air.

"Excellent. Now, let's take it a step further," Kennet continued. "Your mana has a signature, a unique imprint that others can sense. To erase this, you must learn to mask it with the surrounding

mana. It's like painting over a canvas—you need to blend your signature with the ambient mana so that it becomes indistinguishable."

He walked over and placed a hand on my shoulder. "Feel the mana around you. It's in the air, the walls, the ground. Let your mana mimic its frequency and texture. It should feel natural like you're a part of the environment."

I focused on the mana around me, feeling its subtle presence in the air. What I am doing here felt pretty similar to the one with Reina. They were showing parallelism in many ways.

'I see....That is why it was always said that most awakened are able to use many different things even if they are not specialized in one. At least this will be the case for beginners.'

While this may look like a beginner practice, most of the awakened would be able to do it to a certain extent.

Slowly, I let my mana harmonize with it, adjusting its frequency and texture to match. It was like tuning a musical instrument, finding the right pitch to blend seamlessly with the ambient energy.

"You're getting it," Kennet said, a hint of approval in his voice. "But remember, this is just the beginning. You must practice this until it becomes second nature. Only then can you move without being detected."

He stepped back, his presence once again becoming imperceptible. "Watch me closely. I'll demonstrate a more advanced technique."

As I watched, Kennet seemed to melt into the shadows. His form blurred and faded until he was almost invisible. I could sense him, but only faintly, like a whisper at the edge of my awareness.

"The trick," his voice came from the shadows, "is to move slowly and deliberately. Sudden movements can disrupt the mana flow and make you detectable. When you move, think of yourself as a part of the environment—fluid and natural."

Kennet reappeared before me, his presence solid once more. "Now, you try. Blend your mana with the surroundings and take a few steps. Move slowly and deliberately, keeping your breathing and heart rate steady."

I closed my eyes, focusing on blending my mana with the environment. Taking a deep breath, I took a slow, deliberate step forward. The floor felt solid beneath my feet, but I imagined myself as a shadow, fluid and indistinct.

With each step, I tried to maintain the flow of my mana, keeping it harmonized with the ambient energy. It was difficult, requiring intense concentration, but I could feel myself becoming less noticeable, my presence fading into the background.

"Good," Kennet's voice came from beside me. "You're starting to get the hang of it, but there are some things that you are mistaking."

I stopped and turned to face him, eager to learn from his insights. Kennet stepped closer, his discerning eyes scanning my form.

"Firstly, your breathing," he said, placing a hand on my shoulder. "While you've managed to slow it down, it's still too unnatural. Remember, the goal is to make every aspect of your presence blend seamlessly. Try breathing through your nose, taking shallower breaths. This will reduce the sound and make it less noticeable."

I nodded and adjusted my breathing, taking quieter, more controlled breaths through my nose.

"Secondly," Kennet continued, "your footsteps. You're placing your feet down too heavily. Even if you're blending your mana, a heavy footfall will give you away. Try rolling your foot from heel to toe, letting your steps flow naturally. Imagine the floor beneath you as water, and you're trying to create as little ripple as possible."

I practiced the new walking technique, rolling my foot with each step and trying to make my movements as smooth and silent as possible.

"Better," Kennet said, nodding approvingly. "But there's still another mistake. Your mana flow is good, but you're focusing too much on the output. Instead of just pushing your mana out, let it circulate through you and the environment. It's a subtle difference, but it will help you blend more naturally."

I closed my eyes again, envisioning my mana not just flowing out but circulating in a harmonious loop through my body and the surroundings. It took a moment, but I began to feel a more seamless connection with the environment.

Kennet observed me, a faint smile on his lips. "Remember, such small mistakes can happen all the time because everyone's body is different. No one can be the same, and everyone needs to change a different aspect of themselves for the sake of being in sync with the environment. That's why, while I can point out some of your mistakes, I won't be able to do it for everything."

He stepped back, giving me space. "The key is self-awareness and constant adjustment. You'll need to learn to feel when something is off and correct it on your own. This isn't just a technique; it's a mindset. Always be aware of your surroundings and how you fit into them."

I nodded. 'But, Mister Kennet. What would you do if I said I had already grasped how to do it?' I closed my eyes and began to move. My breathing became almost imperceptible, my steps as light as a whisper. I let my mana flow through me and blend seamlessly with the environment, circulating in a harmonious loop. Each movement was deliberate, controlled, and fluid as if I were a part of the shadows themselves.

Kennet's eyes widened, and for the first time, I saw his mouth open in astonishment. He watched me, his usually composed demeanor replaced by an expression of genuine surprise. As I continued to move, he shook his head slowly, unable to hide his amazement.

When I finally stopped, standing perfectly still and blending into the surroundings, Kennet let out a soft chuckle. "At this point, I'm just speechless," he admitted, shaking his head in disbelief. "You've already understood what you need to do."

He took a deep breath, composing himself. "There's nothing more I need to show you for today. You've grasped the fundamentals far quicker than I anticipated. Now, it's up to you to train in this place until you make this second nature to yourself."

Kennet gestured around the training area. "Use this space to practice. Test yourself against different environments and scenarios. The more you adapt, the better you'll become. Keep honing your skills until you can do this without a second thought."

"Understood, Mister Kennet."

"Sigh....What a rigid guy you are....." He smiled, his expression returning to its usual calm and composed state. " I'll check on your progress from time to time, but for now, you're on your own. Remember, self-awareness and constant adjustment. Those are the keys to mastering this technique."

With that, Kennet turned and walked away, leaving me alone.

"One Reddish Hydra Serpent Steak and one Ironhide Boar Roast, correct?"

"Yes."

"Understood. It will be ready in 5 minutes."

I settled into my seat, the quiet hum of the dining hall a stark contrast to the usual chatter of my companions, Kael and Lyra. Today, I was eating alone. They had both been called away on urgent matters, leaving me to fend for myself.

Soon enough, the waiter returned, carrying two steaming plates. The Reddish Hydra Serpent Steak and The Ironhide Boar Roast were both thick, juicy cuts of meat, their exterior perfectly crisped, and their scent mingled with the spices.

At least, thanks to the scents, they were not looking as disgusting as they did.

"Enjoy your meal," the waiter said with a polite nod before retreating. I picked up my utensils and was about to focus on my meals, but then I suddenly sensed a bunch of presence around me.

"Would you mind if we sat here?"

I looked up to see four guys standing there, looking at me. There was no hostility in their eyes; in fact, their gazes were pure and clear. Sensing no threat, I nodded my head and said, "I don't mind."

"Thank you," one of them said with a warm smile. They pulled out chairs and sat down, their expressions a mix of curiosity and respect.

"I'm Locke," said the one who had spoken first, extending his hand. "These are my friends: Jarrod, Malcolm, and Finn."

I shook his hand, noting the firm grip. "Nice to meet you, Locke. I'm Astron."

As they settled in, I returned to my meal, cutting into the Reddish Hydra Serpent Steak. The first bite was an explosion of flavors, rich and slightly spicy. I could feel the energy coursing through me with each bite, a testament to the high nutritional value of the rare meat.

"We couldn't help but notice you eating alone," Jarrod said, his tone casual. "Figured we could join you and maybe learn a thing or two."

I raised an eyebrow, curious. "Learn? From me?"

"Yeah," Malcolm chimed in. "Everyone is talking about you, you know? Since you are recommended by Miss Reina and Miss Dakota's disciple."

I nodded, a bit surprised at how quickly news traveled. "I see. What do you want to know?"

Locke leaned forward, his eyes glinting with curiosity. "Actually, we were wondering about the Arcadia Hunter Academy. None of us have been to an academy before, and we're curious about what it's like. What kind of place is it?"

I paused, reflecting on my time at the academy. "Arcadia Hunter Academy is a rigorous and challenging place. It's designed to push students to their limits, both physically and mentally. The training is intense, and the instructors are some of the best in their fields."

Finn nodded, clearly intrigued. "What kind of training do you do there?"

"Everything from combat training and survival skills to strategy and tactics," I explained. "We have classes on monster biology, magical theory, and even team coordination exercises. The academy aims to create well-rounded hunters who can handle any situation."

Malcolm leaned back in his chair, his expression thoughtful. "It sounds intense. How do they ensure everyone keeps up with the pace?"

"There are regular assessments and evaluations," I said. "And if someone falls behind.....They are gone."

"What? That is ruthless."

"The world is ruthless. You guys must also know this, no?"

"Right." The guys nodded their heads, absorbing the information. Then, Jarrod leaned in with a curious look. "We've heard that the most well-established families send their children to Arcadia Hunter Academy. Is that true? Do you know any heirs of important families?"

Hearing this, I couldn't help but think of a certain red-haired someone and a purple-haired one. And for some reason, my mouth became uncontrollable.

It was curled up for some reason.

"I do."

Chapter 460 104.1 - Everchanging Glyph

While a certain someone was training in a special place, a young girl sat on her bed, looking at her smartwatch. Irina was glaring at the screen, frustration clear on her face.

The last message she had sent to Astron glowed on the screen: [Hey, it's been a while. Are you free to talk?]

She had sent several messages over the past few days, each one met with silence. The absence of a reply was starting to get under her skin. Irina clenched her fists, her annoyance growing with each passing minute.

'That bastard,' she thought, her teeth gritting. 'Does he think he can just ignore me like this?'

She scrolled through the messages again, each one a reminder of the time she had spent waiting for a response: I need to talk to you about something important. Are you there? Seriously, this is getting annoying. Answer me.

The last message was sent hours ago, and still, nothing. She felt a pang of worry mixed with her irritation. Astron was always difficult to reach, but this level of unresponsiveness was unusual even for him.

'Is he training somewhere remote again?' she wondered. 'Or is he just ignoring me on purpose?'

Her mind raced with possibilities, each one more frustrating than the last. She knew he was dedicated to his training, but there had to be a limit. After all, she was asking for his time, something he had promised to give her.

"Ugh!" Irina groaned, flopping back onto her bed. "Why is he always like this?"

Staring at the ceiling, she contemplated her next move. She could try to find him, but knowing Astron, he was likely in a place that was difficult to access or even locate. Still, the thought of confronting him in person was becoming more and more appealing.

'But, how do I even find him.....I wish I had just put a GPS on his body....'

She thought, imagining how it would be if she did such a thing. Being able to track every bit of his movements, learning about him, and then suddenly making some surprises.

".....Urghk.....Then I would be no different than a stalker....." Irina groaned, rolling over on her bed. She pulled her fingers to her lips, lost in thought.

'No, this is insane,' she thought, trying to shake off the ridiculous idea. Yet, the thought lingered.

Her mind wandered back to the last time they were together, the warmth of his presence, the intensity of their conversations, and the feeling of his lips on hers. She felt a blush creeping up her cheeks.

"I've missed this feeling..." she whispered to herself, her fingers gently brushing her lips. The memory of their kiss made her heart flutter, a mix of longing and frustration welling up inside her.

'Why does he have to be so difficult to reach?' she thought, her annoyance resurfacing. 'He promised me that week, and now he's vanished.'

She rolled over again, burying her face in her pillow. The frustration of wanting to talk to him, to be near him, and the helplessness of not knowing where he was gnawed at her.

'Bastard....When you make your appearance, I am going to make you pay for this....' Irina resolved her feelings, a determined glint in her eyes.

Just then, the door to her room creaked open, and Esme stepped in. She was Irina's personal attendant, always calm and composed, and her presence was a comforting constant in Irina's life.

"Good morning, Young Lady," Esme greeted, her voice gentle but firm. "It's time to start getting ready for your day."

Irina sighed, looking at the woman who had just entered. The fact that she could still show her face like this even after all the things that she did.... It was mind-blowing.

Sitting up reluctantly, Irina grumbled. "Already? It feels like I just woke up."

Esme gave her a sympathetic smile. "I know, but you have a full schedule today. We need to prepare for your training session and then the meeting with other heirs."

"Tch." Irina clicked her tongue as she saw the ever same routine happening once again.

'A puppet child standing in the front.....As usual....'

Esme's presence, once a source of comfort, now felt like a reminder of the expectations and responsibilities weighing on Irina's shoulders. Despite the outward calm, Irina could sense the calculated precision behind every action Esme took.

Irina didn't like Esme, nor did she like the responsibilities that came with her position. The constant pressure to live up to her family's name and to be the perfect heir was exhausting. She longed for the freedom to be herself, to make her own choices without constant scrutiny.

As she got ready, her mind kept drifting back to Astron. With him, things were different. He didn't see her as just the Emberheart heiress; he saw her as Irina. He challenged her and made her feel alive in a way that her duties never could.

'I miss him,' she thought, a pang of longing hitting her chest. 'At least with him, I feel like I can be myself. I don't have to put on a show or follow a script.'

On another part, at the south of the Valerian Federation, a ship slowly descended to the ground, its engines humming softly as it settled on the landing pad. The ramp extended smoothly, touching the ground with a gentle thud.

"My Lady," a voice called out, resonating with a calm authority.

A butler, impeccably dressed in a tailored suit, appeared at the base of the ramp. His posture was perfect, and his expression was one of composed professionalism.

Following the butler's appearance, a line of maids instantly formed on both sides of the ramp, each one bowing deeply in perfect unison.

The air was filled with a sense of anticipation and respect as the maids maintained their positions, heads bowed and hands clasped in front of them.

The butler, standing at the front, took a step forward and spoke with measured elegance.

"My Lady, I have come to take you to the hometown," he announced, his voice carrying a tone of reverence and duty.

Following that, a figure slowly walked forward. Her purple hair flowed down, and her bright eyes and blue eyes looked at the butler with a smile.

"Alfred!" Maya exclaimed cheerfully, her face lighting up with genuine happiness.

Alfred, the ever-composed butler who had watched over Maya since she was a child, maintained his rigid posture. Despite his stoic exterior, there was a hint of warmth in his eyes as he regarded her.

"My Lady," he replied with a slight bow. "It is a pleasure to see you again."

Maya's smile widened, and she moved forward with a lightness in her step. She reached out and placed a hand on Alfred's arm, a gesture of familiarity and affection. "It's so good to see you, Alfred. You've been missed."

Alfred's expression softened ever so slightly, a rare display of emotion for the seasoned butler. "The feeling is mutual, My Lady. The estate has not been the same without you."

Maya chuckled, her laughter ringing out like a melody. "Well, I'm back now. And I can't wait to see everyone."

Alfred nodded, his composure returning. "The ship is ready, My Lady. Shall we proceed?"

Maya glanced at the maids, who were still bowing respectfully. "Thank you, everyone. You may rise."

Alfred made a sweeping gesture, indicating the path to the ship. "This way, My Lady," he said, his voice as composed as ever.

Maya followed him with eager steps, the maids falling into formation behind her. The ship stood majestically, its sleek design hinting at the luxury within. As they approached, the doors opened with a soft hiss, revealing the opulent interior.

The inside of the ship was a marvel of modern design and comfort. Plush seating, ornate decorations, and the finest materials adorned every surface. The soft lighting created an inviting atmosphere, and the subtle hum of the ship's systems added to the feeling of serenity.

Alfred led Maya to her cabin, a space that epitomized elegance. The room was spacious, with a large bed draped in luxurious fabrics, a sitting area with comfortable chairs, and a view screen that could display any scenery she desired. The decor was tasteful, blending traditional elements with modern amenities.

"Your cabin, My Lady," Alfred said, opening the door and stepping aside to let Maya enter first.

Maya stepped inside, taking in the sumptuous surroundings with a satisfied smile. She turned to Alfred, who remained at the door, ready to assist with any requests.

"Is there anything you require, My Lady?" he asked, his tone attentive.

Maya shook her head initially, her mind already drifting to thoughts of home. But then, a spontaneous desire surfaced. "Actually, Alfred, I think I would like a glass of red wine."

Alfred's eyes widened slightly, a rare display of surprise for the seasoned butler. "Really, My Lady? As I recall, you generally dislike drinking."

Maya nodded, her smile tinged with a hint of mischief. "Yes, but today feels like a day for celebration. I think a glass of wine would be perfect."

Alfred inclined his head respectfully. "As you wish, My Lady. I will bring it to you shortly."

Maya settled into one of the plush chairs, feeling the tension of her journey begin to melt away. The thought of a glass of red wine seemed fitting, a small indulgence to mark her return.

True to his word, Alfred returned promptly, carrying a tray with an elegantly crafted glass and a bottle of the finest red wine. He poured the wine with practiced precision, the rich, crimson liquid catching the light as it filled the glass.

"Your wine, My Lady," Alfred said, handing her the glass with a graceful bow.

Maya accepted the glass, taking a moment to appreciate the aroma before taking a sip. But she wanted to be alone at that moment.

"Thank you, Alfred. This is wonderful."

Thus, she had satisfied the butler, who was waiting for her approval. "You may leave now."

With that, he quietly left the cabin, leaving Maya to her thoughts. She took another sip of the wine, savoring its rich, complex flavors. The room's quiet elegance offered a sense of calm, yet beneath the surface, her thoughts were anything but peaceful.

Raising her hand, Maya looked at the ring on her finger, its surface glinting softly in the ambient light. Slowly, she caressed it, feeling the familiar weight and texture under her fingertips. As she did, a small bag of red color materialized before her eyes.

With a sense of ritual, she reached for the bag, her fingers trembling slightly. She bit into it gently, whispering, "Junior..."

Her eyes turned crimson as the blood touched her lips, the familiar sensation overwhelming her senses. As she fed, she pulled out a small picture from a hidden pocket within her dress. The image was of a young boy with striking purple eyes and a serene expression.

Yet there was a small sense of craziness in her eyes, something that sent shivers down to Alfred's spine.

'My Lady.....Just what had happened to you....'

He could not believe his eyes.