

Chapter 101. Dinner Time

The speeches were just as boring as Rhys dreaded they would be. He didn't even need to sleep any more as a mage, and he still fell asleep a half-dozen times during the ceremonies. Eventually, Bast nudged him awake, and he followed Bast up to the stage to receive second place, which was a silver medal and a small sum of gold. Laurent stood awkwardly beside them to take bronze, refusing to make eye contact with either of them. Whether that was because he'd finally clued on to the Empress's plans, or because he'd figured out Rina's true identity, Rhys didn't know, but it was awkward standing there next to someone he knew would soon be his sworn enemy. At least Laurent had washed his hair and put on a new uniform, so he wasn't rocking the two-tone red-white look, though honestly, Rhys wasn't sure it was an upgrade. He'd been pulling it off, and who didn't like two-tone hair, at the end of the day? Sure, it'd been a weird stripe of red horizontally bisecting his head just behind the bangs, which was a weird place to put a chunk of red hair, but it was better than the all-white look. Then again, it did kind of turn Laurent from a tampon into a used one, so...

Rhys coughed, suddenly unable to unsee the Empress's whole army as a giant pack of tampons. Her boat looked like a tampon ad in his eyes, suddenly, all the soldiers standing up stock-straight at the rails of the boat. *Ah, the eternal struggle of all-white designs.* That, and doing *anything* in an all-white costume was a nightmare. Eating? Nope. Drinking? Better be water. Sitting? Check the chair first, and don't even think about the floor. The only thing worse than an all-white design was a design in white satin. At least most fabrics didn't stain when they got wet, unlike satin, the hellbeast that it was. He still held a grudge against a certain RUBY series and his female friend's obsession with the magical girl from it that wore all white. Why was she shiny white? Why did her dress only look good in satin? Why did the creators of that series hate him on a personal level? All questions he could never discover the answers to.

Bast glanced at him, raising a questioning brow behind his mask at Rhys's cough. Rhys waved his hand subtly. It was just him being silly, not a serious cough.

The ceremonies concluded, and they were shuffled off the stage for the Tier 3 competitors to take the stage. Ev had taken second place under a swordsman. As for Tier 1, Walter had come in third. Rhys didn't recognize any of the Tier 3 or 1 competitors aside from Ev and Walter, so he clapped politely like everyone else when they took the stage and were handed their medals.

There were another few speeches, all by pompous members of the teaching staff at Purple Dawn. One of them even apologized for the Schoolmaster not being there, at

which Rhys rolled his eyes. Couldn't even see it to the end, that guy. He sure hoped that Purple Dawn's Schoolmaster had some grand plan that he was working on this whole time, and that was why he wasn't here, but he was pretty sure the guy was just a coward and didn't want to risk his life even a little bit. It wouldn't be so bad if he'd at least evacuated his school first, but it seemed like Purple Dawn's Schoolmaster believed in 'every man for himself' as much as most mages around here seemed to. Oh, Rhys was sure there would be a last-second evacuation order, and the Schoolmaster would turn out to have been innocently on vacation this whole time, unwinding and totally unaware of anything going on back home, what do you mean he wasn't present for the tournament?—but he wasn't going to buy it. He'd seen that kind of face-saving bullshit play out a million times back in his home world, and honestly, he was tired of it. He'd rather take a leader who owned up to getting the hell out of dodge over one who lied and pretended they just 'happened' to be elsewhere any day. At least the first leader admitted they'd done wrong and basically gave up any chance at ever being a leader again, as they should, because someone that cowardly should never be a leader. The second one still thought they had a chance, and that pissed Rhys off more than anything else, not least because somehow, despite all logic, reasoning, and morality, that second leader *was* right, and sometimes idiots *would* fall for their transparent lie and reelect them.

Not that Schoolmasters were elected, but still. He'd rather have someone who owned up to their mistakes over someone who lied their way out of them, any day. Unless Purple Dawn's Schoolmaster had a rock-solid reason to abandon his school to the Empire, the guy was quickly moving to Rhys's permanent shit list. He held grudges. He was trashy like that.

At last, it was time for the food to come out. Rhys had slumped down in his seat again, on the verge of drifting off, but he sat bolt upright at the scent of delicious food. The first course was a delicious lemony chicken soup, one with a mysteriously silky broth. Every bite warmed Rhys to the core, and invigorated his newly-formed vitality-soaked body. The tomato had been obvious, an absolute blast of vitality, so much so that it had hurt. This food was subtle, a warm trickle that quietly boosted every part of his body without harming him or posing any risk of harm, but for all that it was subtle, the vitality contained within it was no less pure or powerful than the tomato had been. No... it might have been more powerful, if all he looked at was the purity and strength of the vitality in the food, and disregarded the small quantity this soup contained. If he hadn't already imbued his body with the vitality from the tomato, he could have attempted the same here. The primary difference was that this soup held far less vitality than the tomato, so he could only strengthen a tiny amount of his body with it, whereas the tomato had held such a huge quantity of vitality that he'd almost harmed himself eating two of them.

There were still many courses yet to come. Rhys finished his soup, licked his lips, and sat back, waiting for the next course. So far, his experiences with imbuing food with mana were limited to cheap tricks for the potato chips, and borderline harmful techniques for the tomatoes. This delicate, subtle, yet powerful food prickled his mind, drawing forth the possibilities of magical cooking. For now, all he needed were cheap

tricks, but in the future, maybe he could pursue the path of magical cooking, just for fun and deliciousness? What was more trashy than pursuing a random path for hedonism's sake, after all? And food was supposedly the way to a lady's heart, not that he would know. But maybe in the future, it would be a good thing to have in his back pocket.

It would have to wait until he figured out how to survive in the Empire and then how to release Straw, but it was something to consider, if he ever came upon a block of free time. Of course, it was outside of his path, so it wouldn't do much for him in general, but who knew? Maybe he could find a way to bring it into his path. Or maybe he'd just pick up some bonus skills for fun. That was an option, wasn't it? Everything didn't have to be dead-focused on his path. He could take some time and work on other skills.

Can I? Rhys wondered, as the next dish appeared in front of him. Salad this time, a big pile of rabbit food. Wrinkling his nose, he took a bite of the crunchy salad to be polite, and almost died from how delicious it was. Leaves were not supposed to taste this good. They had taken lead, and transmuted it to gold. Not only that, but some of these herbs and plants were clearly medicinal. Their power washed through his body, opening his mana passages and unblocking choke points as they scoured away impurities. Rhys pulled the impurities they lifted out of his body into his core and piled them up there in preparation for the next trash star, but nonetheless, it was good to see his body refined, and the impurities put to use, rather than rotting away in the wrong part of his body.

Still... was it an option for him to pursue random skills for fun that weren't related to his path? He was trash. He had trash skills and a trash body, a trash foundation and a trash fate. If he didn't put everything he had into his path, he'd fall behind, and who knew? Mages had long lives, but the secrets of higher-level magic took a long time to figure out, especially when one was forging their own path... or so he'd read, in the books he'd borrowed from Az. Maybe he was so trash that he'd run out even his long lifespan and die before he achieved immortality or godhood or whatever, if he did anything but keep his eye on the prize. A flinch could mean death for a mediocre, no, *lacking* talent like him. Looking away from his path for an instant might mean losing out on the precious seconds he needed to obtain insights that let him progress to the next stage, versus die out like a nobody and return to dust, without even a name recorded.

As the empty salad plate retreated, to be replaced with a hunk of dark red meat that Rhys couldn't identify, not that it mattered—it was delicious, and so was the molten-caramel-colored jus it was drenched in—he shook his head. His instincts were right. He couldn't veer off his path. He needed to pursue it to its end. Once he'd accomplished that, then he'd have plenty of time to pick up extra skills, faff about, do whatever he wanted. Until then, though, he couldn't let anything get between him and advancement, or else he might never see the end of the path he walked.

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That was the most important. It was why he was here, probably, not that absolutexistence had given him any more pointers since his arrival, but more

importantly, mages could live for ages, millenia, even, under the right conditions, with the proper advancement. His route to eternity was through the trash, whether he liked it or not, and honestly, he was pretty happy with it. Other people had to fight over resources and battle for the optimal herbs and most perfect mana, while he got to slop around in the filth and *still* get stronger. If he could choose... well, he probably would've chosen something that could cast fireballs, but aside from that? Trash was a great choice. There were literally no downsides, except for being filthy and smelling like trash and having to spend most of his life in this world in trash piles, but those were all tiny downsides compared to the awesome power he could unlock through the trash, that no one else seemed to understand how to unlock.

His mind drifted to the Impure Wells. There had been one in Infinite Constellation that was full of trash and absolutely toxic as a result... or maybe it had been toxic to start out with, and them adding their trash had actually diluted the horrifically toxic sludge it had begun as? Either way, the one here in Purple Dawn was exponentially worse, as it was full of pure curse power, which was pure nasty and hideously corrosive. If Rhys didn't have ways of dealing with it, he didn't know what he would have done. He shook his head, saying a silent prayer for all the idiots out there using curse power. It *really* wasn't a good idea. Unless they were like Sable and had some bloodline or technique to mitigate the damage curse power did, they were basically throwing away their future in return for power right now. After all, curse power let one use curses, which were highly powerful and well above the level of the mage using them, usually—Rhys would have absolutely dominated in the tournament if he had used that cold hands one, though obviously that was a bad idea, using the illegal power in front of god and everyone when he had a sentence on his head from Ernesto already—but curse power was so destructive, now that Rhys had experienced its full corrosiveness, that using it was basically throwing your future away for power now. He'd done Walter a service by taking the curse away from him. Really, Walter ought to thank him. Avenging his family was all well and good, but Rhys was pretty sure Walter's family wouldn't want him to throw his life away to avenge them. Better that he grew up strong the normal way... though given that he was still Ernesto's student? Rhys wouldn't be surprised if he was still using curse power. He glanced down the table at Walter, extending his mana to sense the boy's mage powers. As expected, there was a tiny gleam of curse power in Walter's mana. It was well-hidden, better than before, even, but it was there nonetheless, the corrosive gleam of curse power tucked away under Walter's mana.

Rhys pinched his chin, regarding Walter thoughtfully. *I wonder if he found a new curse? I'd like to have a few more to use for when I need them.*

Walter noticed him looking and narrowed his eyes, glaring death at Rhys. Rhys smiled and waved a little, then turned back to his meal, secretly deeply satisfied with himself. *I finally got to be my favorite type of villain!* There was nothing better than the ice cold, fake-nice villain with the knowing smile and the friendly wave, who wanted nothing but failure for the young, plucky main character. Not that Walter had main character energy, but gods... he loved those kinds of villains more than anything else, except maybe cat

girls. And boys? Rhys considered, then shook his head. No, that kind of villain beat out cat boys. Unless they were cat boy fem boys, but that was its own discussion.

Of course, he didn't have a grand evil plan for Walter or anything, but it sure was fun pretending like he did. And who knew? Maybe Walter *would* consider Rhys's plan to repeatedly mug him for curses as a grand evil plan. Then he would *truly* be the best type of villain—yes, the kind who was just fucking around, but just happened to fuck around in a way that fucked up the main character (not that Walter had main character energy)! Rhys's grin grew even eviler as the thought sunk in, and he nodded menacingly to himself.

Down the table, Walter squinted, confused more than anything. *What the hell is he doing?*

The meat retreated, replaced by a soft, delicate piece of white fish swimming in a buttery broth. Rhys took a bite, and felt pure mana and deliciousness melt on his tongue. The pure mana in his core reacted, melting and swirling around. He'd thought all the droplets were merged, but now, he discovered that they had actually remained discrete, until this moment. They mixed together into... *something*. Almost a lake, but not quite. Rhys stared at it, then widened his eyes. He felt as though he'd gotten a glimpse of the next step. Not this step, not the one he was building up to, which was something about filling up his core with those golden droplets, but the one after it. What happened with all the gold after he condensed it into a core.

Damn, this meal is amazing, Rhys thought. In all kinds of ways, whether it was flavor, power, or even comprehension and hints of the future of magehood.

Impure Wells really seemed to attract trash, and he didn't just mean himself. Every single one he'd encountered so far was either filled with trash, or hidden under a trash pile. It wasn't a mind-blowing coincidence, since both Impure Wells were toxic in their own way, so it made sense to pile trash up in or around them. It was like throwing trash in a swamp or dumping bodies in a bog; it just made sense, at least until people figured out that swamps and bogs were actually valuable ecosystems in of themselves. Still, it was an interesting coincidence that the ones he'd found so far were either treated as their own trash pit, or buried under a trash pit. Something worth noting for later, in case it turned out to be important. Who knew? Maybe it was just a trashy coincidence with no deeper meaning. But given absolutexistence's question about trash, and the fact that the Impure Wells appeared around trash heaps or pits... he couldn't help but wonder if the two were related.

At last, dessert came out, a fine, delicate cake so light and airy that it seemed to float off the plate. It went down easy, and reinforced all the gains Rhys had made throughout the meal, locking them in so he wouldn't lose them over time and helping his body process them. He sat back, patting his stomach and letting out a sigh of relief. So good. This food put his trashy potato ships to *shame*. It wasn't even close, not even a little. The

fake enlightenment he could give people had nothing on this truly impressive series of buffs.

Bast nudged him. “Nothing like the orphanage, huh?”

Rhys cut a glance his way, raising a brow. “Nope. Nothing at all.” It was crazy to think that they’d started out scrapping over moldy bread crusts, and now, they were filling themselves with the finest cuisine in the lap of luxury. Truly mind-boggling.

“Thanks for picking me, back then. For not holding a grudge,” Bast said quietly.

“Thanks for believing in me,” Rhys replied earnestly. They’d just been two kids in the muck. Nothing to make them stand out from anyone else. But now? Now they were the two finalists in the tournament. Rhys had the freedom that came with a scrap of power, and Bast was the Sword Saint’s apprentice. Both of them had come a long way, and they still had a long way to go.

There were trials to come, and dangers looming, but for a moment, for one glorious moment, they sat in warmth and comfort, full of delicious food, and just enjoyed one another’s company. Just two orphan boys, who were now so much more than the scrappy, filthy kids they’d once been. Rhys glanced at Bast, and for a moment, he saw that boy he’d seen when he’d first arrived, just a little bit more muscular than the other kids, a cruel glint in his eyes and no one on his side. And then he blinked, and Solaire once more sat beside him, cloaked in white, his powerful master not far from his side.

The other contestants started to rise. Dinner was over, and it was time to enjoy the rest of the festivities outside this room, whether it was the festival or the dances among the other students. Bast nodded, starting to rise.

Rhys smiled. He patted Bast’s shoulder. Knowing a tiny glimmer of what was to come, of what he would face, and Bast would be protected from, he said, “I’ll see you later. But no matter what, remember, I’m always on your side.”

“Of course. And the same for me,” Bast pledged, and Rhys could tell he meant it. “I said it when we were kids, didn’t I? I’ll follow you to the ends of the earth. That hasn’t changed.”

“Then I’ll need to grow into a great leader, if I’m going to lead the next Sword Saint,” Rhys joked.

Bast nodded, dead serious. “You’d better,” he said, and walked away.

Rhys stared after him. He reached out, so startled he tried to stop Bast from leaving. *Wait—seriously? I can’t actually do that. What kind of earth-shattering general would I have to be, to be able to lead the next Sword Saint? I’m just some trash! Hey, come back! I don’t need that pressure!*

Bast was gone. Rhys lowered his hand and chuckled to himself. Fine. If that was how it was going to be, he accepted the challenge. He'd show Bast. No one was going to underestimate trash when he was done!

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 102. The Quiet Before the Storm

Rhys was full, but only of food. He still had plenty of room for mana. That, and in the afterglow from that fantastic, cultivation-boosting meal, he wanted to try another round with the curse power-mana transition. His everything had been smoothed, detoxified, strengthened, reinforced, and empowered, and he could still feel some of those subtle and mysterious effects lingering in his body and mana infrastructure. He didn't know that absorbing a bunch of curse power and turning it into hyper-pure mana under the meal's effects would do anything, but it was worth a shot. Better than not trying, anyways. As long as he had bonuses active on his body, why not try to squeeze every last ounce of bonus out of those bonuses? The other kids were wasting it, going to dances or whatever. They should go focus on leveling up their magehood, the same as Rhys!

Then again, they probably aren't trash. Other mages had the leeway to seek out useless skills and spend their time hanging out with friends and having fun. Most of them weren't so absolutely locked to working on their skills, techniques, and spells all the time to avoid falling behind, unlike Rhys, who had to work hard or lose out.

He walked down the wall of the ravine and down into the depths, where a little hole marked the place the Impure Well had been filled in. As he descended, he came across a man, picking up the loot from the hidey-hole that had previously been hidden in the trash. The man jumped at seeing him, then fumbled out his sword, holding onto the smuggled goods with his other hand.

Rhys walked past with a little wave. "Good evening. Don't mind me."

The smuggler followed him with his sword, then, seeing Rhys was about to walk off, hid the smuggled stuff into a storage ring and chased after him, sword bared. "I can't let you live, now that you've seen my face."

"I saw nothing, but if you touch me, you'll die," Rhys replied, still walking away.

The smuggler paused. Their resolve, and consequently their mana, fluctuated, as uncertainty chipped away at their will to fight. They must have been an underling or something, weaker than the real smugglers, because his Tier was only two, the same as Rhys's, and between the two of them, Rhys's mana burned brighter. This man was barely a threat to Rhys. Only with some kind of earth-shaking item or gear could he hope to defeat Rhys.

"You saw me in the tournament, right? That was only a thousandth of my true potential." He turned suddenly, facing the man. This close to the Impure Well, it was easy to draw forth its curse energy, and he fed it into the curse circulating around his core, giving it just enough power to appear, but not fully manifest. Projections of a pair of enormous skeletal hands materialized around him, one hand on either side of him. He smiled at the smuggler as the wind whipped up around him, a dark light playing over his body from the curse power he was using, his eyes in shadow save for the distant gleam of blue mana in their depths. "Out here, where no one will see our battle and no one will ever find your body, would you like to try me?"

The smuggler inadvertently backed away a step, then forced himself to freeze. His shaking hands held the sword tight, and a final sort of resolve burned in his eyes.

"Or you could leave and pretend you never saw me," Rhys hinted. "I don't care what you're up to out here. Smuggling, grift, whatever, doesn't bother me. I'm not a Purple Dawn student. Purple Dawn's business isn't my business, so you can rest assured that I don't give a single shit about your plans."

The smuggler hesitated.

Rhys snapped his fingers. The projections rushed forth from beside him and closed in on the smuggler.

The smuggler held his ground until the bones loomed over him, and the cold sensation of the curse fell over him, then turned and ran.

Bluff 7 > 10

Rhys stood there, watching him go. He really didn't care about the smuggler. He could have beaten him, sure, but there was no need to commit violence if he didn't have to. Just because the world's logic was to attack everyone on sight, didn't mean it had to be Rhys's logic as well. Scaring off the smuggler worked just as well as killing him—no, better, because no one would come after Rhys later to get vengeance for their dead underling or friend or whatever. Sure, the smuggler could tell someone about Rhys having a curse, but one, he'd already successfully hidden the curse from the Alliance, and he was confident he could do it again, and two, if the man was dumb enough to try it, Rhys would reveal that he was the smuggler. They were comrades, bound by their crimes, and between the two of them, Rhys was confident *he* could hide his away. Was the smuggler so confident? He doubted it.

With the smuggler taken care of, he descended to the depths of the ravine. The floor had sunken considerably as he'd sucked in the curse power, leaving the floor about six feet below ground level. Rhys hopped in. The muddy earth splashed around him as he landed, and curse power instantly welled up and filled his body. Rhys took a deep breath, sucking it in deeper, all the way into his core. It was time to begin the process once more.

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This time, he knew what he was getting into, so he pulled out some tomato seeds ahead of time and held them in his palm. He might as well grow a few more vital tomatoes while he was at it. They invigorated him on their own, but they were also the key component in his very important, no, essential task of making ketchup for his potato fries. A bit curious about what he could grow with this technique, he drew out some potato buds and held them loosely in his other hand. Vitality ketchup on vitality fries? It sounded like a fantastic combination to him. So what if it was a bit of an overload? That was the whole point! Junk food was about excess. Eating to excess, fat to excess, salt to excess, sugar to excess. If he wasn't going too far, he wasn't going far enough. That was just how junk food worked.

Once more, he pulled curse power into himself and condensed it into super-lumps of curse power in his core. Just as he had the first time, he added impurity after impurity to his core. Unlike the first time, his core was now half-full of the dense mana. There was less room for the impurities in his core. He filled up every ounce of space with the impurities, then paused, a bit lost. He couldn't push beyond his limits like this, but he also couldn't use this new mana yet. He needed to burn as much curse power as he had the first time in order to finish filling his core, plus a little to make up for the droplets he'd gotten outside of this Impure Well, but there was no way to fit any more impurities in his core.

Who says they have to be in my core? Rhys kept condensing impurities, but pushed them into his mana passages. When his passages filled up to the point he could barely circulate mana, he started shoving the condensed impurities into his body, in his muscles and in the gaps around his organs. He'd lose some of the power strengthening his body, but then, was something that strengthened his body really a loss? It sounded like a gain to him.

More and more curse power flowed into his body, until he struggled to draw more energy. The floor had sunken considerably by now, and he now stood ten, maybe fifteen feet below the floor level. It almost felt like this layer of mud was floating on the impurities, and by sucking out the impurities, he was lowering the mud raft. By now, it could go no further, which either meant there was nothing more, or that he had to dig down to find whatever remained at the bottom. No—there was definitely more curse power. He could no longer reach it from here, but he could definitely dig down to find more.

Rhys shoved the last dribble of his ordinary mana into the impurities, and they ignited. Pure mana burst out in every part of his body. It couldn't even flow through him, since every space and every gap was full of the dense impurities, which were rapidly transforming into pure mana. He was a human-shaped lump of pure mana, and his body and mana passages were suffering for it. It was as if he'd immolated himself inside and out with boiling water. There was no escape. The mana filled him up on all sides, and there was no shedding the heat.

Rhys clenched his hands around the seeds and the buds. The potato buds instantly took root in his body and sucked out some of the excess mana and vitality, since they were ordinary plants that simply needed mana or vitality to grow. The tomato seeds took a little longer to grow. A few of them exploded, and one outright burst into flames, but he'd fished out more seeds this time, and as a consequence, three of them burst to life and helped to suck excess power out of his body.

All the while, Rhys bathed in the pure mana. His whole body was inundated in it, and every ounce of him soaked it in. The pure mana wasn't destructive, like the earlier energies had been, but instead, it strengthened him on its own, even without his guidance. His body grew stronger, and the vitality he'd ingrained in his cells last time grew more intense.

Self-Regeneration 55 > 60

Heat Resist 18 > 21

In his core, more gold mana condensed. It filled up his core, and he felt a profound transformation take place, one he himself barely understood. The strange sensation rushed over his whole body, and the gold orb in his core solidified, becoming something real. There was something more to it, though. More he could do. Rhys hesitated, then reached out and pushed at the orb. It moved, soft and malleable. Instantly, he knew what to do. He pushed it from all angles, condensing it down as if it were an impurity. Down, down, down, until it was a small orb, bigger than the seed-sized condensed impurities, but far smaller than it had been. Now it was a shiny marble, big enough to pinch between his fingers, but infinitely harder and denser. He could use this mana now; he understood it instinctively. At the same time, he knew that these golden orbs were what he needed to advance. If he used the mana in this golden orb lightly, he might lose his advancement, and if he condensed more in the future, he might advance again. The gold mana was far purer and more powerful than ordinary mana, to the point that it was almost incomparable, but to condense even a droplet of the gold mana required far more input than ordinary mana.

Core Formation (Tier 2) > Golden Orb (Tier 3)

Potato sprouts rose from one hand, and tuber-heavy roots dangled through his fingers. In his other hand, tomato vines coiled up his arms and across his chest, laden with fat red fruits. The second he reached Tier 3, he had no longer needed to vent either mana

or vitality; his more powerful body could handle more of both energies now. He stripped the fruit from the tomato vines and removed the tubers from the potato's roots, then put the plants away. Right now, while the fire was still hot, his buffs were still going, and he'd just advanced, he wanted to focus on continuing to level up. Instead, he drew out his broken shovel and dug down.

His newly Tier 3 body was so strong that the mud splashed away like water. A few digs down, and he broke through the mud into a pool of pure curse power. Down below it, at the very depths, something terrifying yet familiar awaited him. Rhys's eyes shone, and he grinned. It was time to condense more of the gold orbs, and firm up his Tier. And maybe, if his guess was right, he'd get another bone from that horse-and-rider curse he'd found at the bottom of the first well. He couldn't use it with one bone, not really, but with two? More? Who knew what he could accomplish.

He took a deep breath, and jumped into the hole.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 103. Cursed Holes

Rhys plunged into the curse power. The curse power was dense enough to become a liquid, but it didn't support him at all. He sunk straight down into the depths of the well. Curse power poured directly into his body, soaking into every pore and sliding through every vein, coiling into his core. It would have been insidious, but Rhys drank it up like a gamer sucking down toxic energy drinks. *More, more. Give me more!*

His technique was the same. Compress, compress, compress, ignite. He drew out the potato plants and pulled out a new handful of tomato seeds to continue growing his crops whenever the vitality grew overwhelming, but his body was different now, and it took far more to overwhelm it. Down, down, down. The black liquid swirled around him, translucent enough that the sun could be seen overhead, but too murky to see the bottom. Rhys gazed straight down, as he condensed another golden orb in his core. There was something at the bottom of this well. The first bone he'd captured from the first rider trembled, as if it sensed its compatriot. Another piece of the same curse was at the bottom of this well.

As he plunged, a thought wiggled at the back of Rhys's mind. What if this curse was pieces of Straw? Immediately, he dismissed it. The timeline didn't add up. Infinite Constellation School had been tossing garbage in the hole for far longer than Straw had been imprisoned, and that skeleton at the bottom, the one who had held the sunshine sword, he still possessed right now, too afraid to use it in fear it would shatter, had died a long, long time ago, presumably fighting the very same rider Rhys had vanquished.

Plus, Straw wasn't a rider, nor did the rider look anything like Straw or emit anything like the kind of pressure Straw let off.

Still, he felt like the thought wasn't far off. Maybe it wasn't Straw, but a different Remnant Weapon. Some other cursed being built by the former demon king, torn apart and scattered over the lands.

Was that Straw's fate, then? Rhys frowned, worry creeping up from the back of his mind, but pushed it down. Straw was a Strawman, at the end of the day. Even if he was torn apart, he'd still survive the experience. Not only that, but the sensation he got from Straw, and the sensation he got from a fragment of this cursed being, were incomparable. Straw was... a weirdo, and sometimes he'd felt stranger danger around the guy, but ultimately, he was just a guy trying to live his life, who'd had an unfortunate history the Alliance couldn't overlook. This curse felt actively malicious, as though, were it reformed, it would tear the Alliance down with its own two hands (and four hooves). Comparing the two, the relatively harmless Straw was probably just imprisoned somewhere—somewhere Ernesto could access, at that—whereas this one had been ripped to shreds and sealed away with extreme prejudice. *To put it simply, Straw is like a red-colored numbered dog who's valuable experimental material, and this rider is more like the dangerous silver-haired man who picked length over girth.* Both could be considered 'evil,' from a certain perspective, or at least, 'nonhuman,' but one of them was actually a nice guy deep down, and the other one wanted to hijack the Planet for Jenova... or whatever.

No, wherever Straw is, I bet he's in one piece, Rhys decided, nodding. If he was wrong, at least now he knew to also look for a dismembered or pieced apart Straw. *Damn, if they really did tear him apart... talk about a straw in a haybale.* He shook his head. Hopefully they hadn't torn Straw apart to, well, straw. Even if he spent the rest of his life looking, he wasn't sure he could find all the bits of straw that went into a Strawman as large as Straw had become, when provoked. That thing had been massive. Bigger than the town they'd been in. He had to believe in Ernesto's greed and desire to have the whole Straw here to study... that, and he wasn't sure whether tearing Straw apart to absolute shreds would kill the man or not. Probably, right? Otherwise, what would constitute death for the construct? Burning and nothing else? It was the kind of hardness that would let Straw survive the destruction of all the former demon king's weapons, he supposed, but damn, what an impressive hardness if so.

I kind of doubt you have to go that far to kill him, but who knows? He already had vitality embedded in his cells and a body with high Self-Regeneration. If his skills kept scaling like this, he could very well see a distant future where someone had to crush his every cell to kill him. It was a distant future, to be sure, and he wasn't sure Straw was that powerful... but it was possible.

Guess I won't discount that possibility, then.

As he thought, he continued to suck in curse power and condense gold orbs in his core. He had the distant feeling that he was doing this whole magehood and levelling up thing wrong; he could recall a few novels that had this kind of power style, and he was pretty sure the protagonists had only made one gold orb, not lots of them, but it seemed to be working, so who was he to tell this world that its cultivation system was a little wonky? Besides, this was reality, and that was novels, so between the two, wasn't this one the more likely one to be the 'true' answer?

Or maybe this world's just weird. All things were possible, after all. It wasn't like he understood the basic mechanics that made magic tick. In the terms of his homeworld, he was doing chemistry, not physics, bashing together chemicals to see how they'd react without understanding the basic mechanics of how electrons moved from chemical to chemical during the reactions to form the new materials that came out the other side. And he *certainly* wasn't doing mathematics, or figuring out the theoretical basis from which physics could be derived, though honestly, sometimes he kind of got close, like when he pondered the basis of trashiness or considered the deep implications of a new skill. One way or another, though, he definitely wasn't doing physics.

Rhys hit the bottom of the well. He stood there, sucking in curse power. From here, he could already see bones shivering up from the floor of the ground, taking the shape of the horse and rider once more. He lifted his hand, and the rider paused, taken aback.

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"Give me a moment, okay?" Rhys asked.

The rider froze. Whether it was obeying him or not, Rhys didn't hesitate. He sucked in powerfully. Curse power rushed into him from all directions. He compressed, then ignited it, compressed, then ignited. Another two balls took form in his core, and the last of the curse power drained away. He dusted off his hands, then drew his familiar broken sword and assumed a defensive stance. Lifting his free hand, he egged the rider on with a simple beckoning gesture.

"Come on, big boy. I've got a hankering for bones, and only yours will do." He paused. "No, that didn't come out right. Let me try again."

The rider reared and charged, lifting a spear in one hand.

Rhys sighed. He lifted his sword to meet the rider's charge. "Fair enough."

The rider closed in. The horse's hooves pounded the muddy earth, splashing up gunk as it ran. Rhys spread his legs and narrowed his eyes, holding his sword up, full of resolve. He'd meet this rider's charge, or die trying!

The second before the rider's spear and his sword met, Rhys tossed a chunk of heavy metal at the rider and jumped to the side. The rider whiffed, racing on toward the wall, and the metal landed in its lap. Rhys stuck his tongue out at its back. Only idiots would try to meet a rider from the ground. He'd get thrown around like a chew toy if he tried to hold his ground.

The rider grabbed the metal and held it up, meaning to throw it away. Rhys pointed. The chunk of metal became a heavy cauldron, and the rider slid to the side, almost falling off its horse.

Yes! Rhys dashed in, running toward the side opposite the side the rider was falling off the horse. He jumped up and kicked the rider from this side, pushing it further off the horse. The rider fell sideways, thumping to the ground beside its horse. Rhys pinned it down and hammered it, just like he had on the stage with Bast, but this time, he hit harder, hammering the skeleton's head. He didn't use any tricks or traps, just his raw strength at his newly-gained Tier 3. The skeleton clawed at him, but it could only scrape his skin, and his empowered regeneration healed such shallow wounds in a few moments. Rhys kept hammering, until his knuckles started to ache and bleed. Those wounds didn't heal immediately, too large and deep to close in a moment. The skeleton cracked, but didn't break.

The horse paced nearby, worried for its rider. It half-reared as if to kick or stop Rhys, but fell back, afraid it would also hit the rider.

Rhys summoned the heaviest item from his storage ring, a block of stone that had been chipped off a cornerstone, and lifted it over his head. Activating Trash Intent, he slammed it down on the rider's head, letting the weight of the cornerstone hammer into its skull.

The skull cracked open. The light left the rider's eyes, and it died.

"Oh. Well, that was easy," Rhys commented, deactivating Trash Intent. He frowned. The skeleton was dead, but it wasn't melting away yet. Why not? Wasn't that all it had taken to kill it last time?

A rush of white from the corner of his eye. Rhys collapsed, falling flat, and barely dodged the horse's hoof as it rushed by his head. The horse pounded over him, racing away over the muddy earth. It turned about, snorting in displeasure. Smoke coiled up from its nostrils as bright flames glowed in its eye sockets.

"You too, huh?" Rhys asked, pushing himself to his feet. He strode forward, pulling out his sword again to point it toward the horse.

The horse lowered its head. Snorting again, it charged. Mud flew, splattering its bony legs. It closed in on Rhys.

Rhys threw out a dozen small objects from his storage ring, activating them at the last second. Stiff, sharp metal and sharp rocky implements materialized over the ground. It was remarkably easy to activate his Trash Intent over the group of objects, where previously he'd struggled to activate it on two; a clear mark of his progression in power.

The horse dug in its hooves, struggling to stop before it collided with the objects. While it was still fighting to stop, Rhys dashed in, racing over the dropped objects with Trash Step. The horse jerked back, but it was too late. Rhys slashed, severing its relatively thin spine with his Trash Intent sword. The horse's long neck and heavy skull crashed to the ground.

This time, the rider and the horse both melted away. A single bone remained, half-sunken into the mud. He stepped forward, picking up the bone, and it instantly melted into his hand and reappeared in his core, next to the first bone he'd found. Rhys grinned. One step closer to whatever curse this was. A mount, probably, or maybe the ability to summon the horse and rider both? Either way, he was excited to see what came next.

He looked around, hopeful. There'd been a secret room at the back of the previous well, hiding a skeletal warrior and his sunshine blade. Was this one the same?

No cracks in the wall jumped out to him. Rhys frowned, furrowing his brows. He walked around the entire space, running his hand over the wall of the chamber. Like the first, the bottom of this well was larger than the top, with an elliptical chamber easily as large as a high school's lunch room. Unlike the first, he found no break in the wall, no hidden chamber housing secret skeletons or awesome but fragile swords.

Huh. Guess that wasn't a common point across all wells? Rhys shrugged to himself. He'd only seen two wells so far, so it wasn't a surprise that some things would be different between them. It wasn't like he knew everything about the wells, after all.

Abruptly, the ground lurched under his feet. Rhys swayed where he stood, then looked up. An earthquake?

A clump of earth dropped toward him. He jumped back and barely dodged it before it slammed into the ground in front of him. The ground kept shaking, and more lumps fell off the walls overhead, crashing down toward Rhys.

Rhys widened his eyes. Pushing off the ground, he jumped up, hopping from wall to wall. The well continued to shake, and more and more earth fell down toward him. Three jumps up, and he couldn't jump any more. There was too much earth. He could only crawl up, jabbing his hand into the earthen wall to make a hold, then pull himself up again, as clods of earth and stone crashed against his head and shoulders. At last, sunlight loomed, flickering through the muddy lumps. He hauled himself out, only to find himself staring at a dark sky and a cold silver moon. Fire burned bright in the forest all around him, and beyond it, Purple Dawn was immolated, soaked in intense flame.

A fleet of white warships, counter to the moon, followed one as black as the night overhead. A barked order echoed over the crackling flames, and fire as bright as the sun burst from their thousands of cannons. Lead, lit with brilliant magic, pounded into the walls of the fortress, sparking off blasts of blue as they hammered into the barriers around the academy.

Rhys stared, still half sunk in the well as it fell apart all around him.

It had begun.

END BOOK 2

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 104. It Had Begun

The battle was as swift as it was decisive. In a mere night, the Empress overwhelmed the Academy and flattened everything within. Although it sounded as if she bowled over the Academy and showed off her military might, it wasn't much of a fight, truth be told. The Sword Saint had been summoned to the border, and the rest of the faculty, powerful mages, and even promising apprentices had beaten a measured retreat not long after the banquet, leaving a husk of a city behind. History would mark it as the beginning of the Empire's invasion, but aside from that, there wasn't much to say about it. There were no heroes, no bold final stands, no ferocious battles with life and death on the line. The Empire hammered the city from afar, then swept in afterwards to collect the refuse.

And it was refuse that remained. The unprivileged, the weaker mages, those without connections or backing, and the flotsam of a dozen small schools who hadn't gotten the notice to retreat in time; that was what was left. The sacrificial lambs, too weak to protest their own fate, were swept up by the Empire's wave and dragged out to sea to die. They would be forgotten, naught but the nameless victims of a faceless war, their names wiped out from history, no more than a footnote's worth of statistic.

Those who survived, for some did survive, were dragged before the Empress. Forced to their knees. Faces pressed against the battle-stained deck of her warship. And, one at a time, the Empress harvested them, reaping the cores out of their body like ripe fruits from the vine, storing them in the raging heart of her warship, in the depths of her vault, or gifting them to her most loyal soldiers. The remains, now doubly refuse, were thrown into the mines. They no longer had cores, but they still possessed their powerful, resilient mage bodies; compared to true mages with cores, they were nothing, but compared to civilians, they were a powerful labor force, where one mage could perform

the work of ten mortal laborers—a hundred, if their Tier had been high enough, and they'd invested enough into reforging their body.

At the Empress's side stood her trusted lieutenants and one young man, who had only just recently taken third place in the tournament. One after another, he watched as the mages he had battled against days earlier were forced to their knees and divested of their cores. No expression showed on his face. His uniform was neat, and his hair was perfectly tied back. There was no hesitation in his body, not an ounce, and why would there be? This was the way the world should be. Righteousness was being reasserted, the wild savages brought into civilization. There was no reason to hesitate, when there wasn't a single shadow on his spotless conscience, when he was the force of good, the power of light, fighting back this primitive shadow.

Thump. Another mage, driven to their knees. But for the first time, the young man's expression shifted. He almost made to take a step forward, then halted, visibly restraining himself.

The Empress paused. She looked at her young protégé, a ghost of interest on her face. "You know this one?"

"Ma'am! He was a worthy contestant in the tournament!" Laurent barked, snapping a salute.

"Is that so? Worthy of becoming one of my soldiers?" the Empress asked. She reached down and gripped the mage's chin, lifting his head. A passable face stared back, a bland smile on its lips.

"In my unworthy opinion... yes, ma'am."

She turned to the mage. "What do you say? This is a rare opportunity, and shouldn't be taken lightly. I won't give you a second chance."

Rhys let out a dry laugh. "With all due respect, ma'am... I'm nothing but trash."

Rhys wasn't particularly loyal to his school, or the Alliance. What he was loyal to, was his freedom. Looking around him, at the white-coated white-haired soldiers who were given their cores by the Empress, who lived only to serve the Empress, he saw no freedom. He could remain a mage, but he would lose his soul, and that was a price he was unwilling to pay.

There was no fleeing. The Empress's aura hammered down on him, pinning him in place. She might as well have been a god, and him, an ant. If he twitched, if he breathed, if he thought, he would die. He could defeat Laurent, maybe fight off one or two of her soldiers... and then he would die, meaninglessly, without having accomplished anything.

No. He had a plan. A desperate, insane plan, but a plan nonetheless. His path was trash. If he wanted to walk it, then he had to embody it. If he died here, if he lost everything, then he simply wasn't worthy of magehood from the beginning, and he would have never made it to the top from the start.

His eyes were resolute. He had chosen his route. He would see it to the end.

Laurent stiffened. "How dare you! The Empress offered you a gift, and you throw it aside? You should be honored! You should—"

The Empress lifted her hand. Laurent instantly fell silent. She stepped back, gesturing for Laurent to step forward. He did without hesitation, hiding his confusion.

"Remove his core," she ordered.

"Ma'am?" Laurent asked, looking at her.

A bolt of mana passed from the Empress to Laurent, and he stiffened, standing even more bolt upright than he had before.

"Remove it. Do it yourself."

Laurent froze. Whether it was hesitation or confusion, loss or some internal moral struggle, it was impossible to say. After a single heartbeat—no, not even that—he stepped forward. "It is my honor!"

"I can remove a core painlessly, but it takes some time for those I delegate power to, to accomplish the same finesse." The Empress crossed her arms. There wasn't a cruel light in her eyes, like Rhys had hoped to see. Instead, he saw worse. Or rather, he saw nothing. He wasn't reflected in her eyes at all. He was a bug, an animal. He wasn't being punished. He was being *trained*.

Laurent knelt. He put a hand to Rhys's chest. "This is your last chance. I will still remove your core, but you can throw yourself at the Empress's feet. Beg forgiveness and pledge your loyalty. You'll live comfortably, more comfortably than you did at a no-name school, and—"

This book was originally published on Royal Road. Check it out there for the real experience.

Ptew. A glob of spit splattered over Laurent's face. Rhys bared his teeth at him in almost a smile. "Stop barking and get it over with, bitch."

Laurent's face turned steely. He lifted his hand and plunged it home.

Screaming echoed over the ship. The mage in his grasp convulsed. And then it was done, and he held the gleaming orb in his hand.

“Oh? Tier 3. How wonderful. Indeed, he was commendable, to reach Tier 3 so soon after the tournament,” the Empress commented, taking the orb from Laurent. Laurent stood there, staring. The lower-ranked soldiers dragged the unconscious body away, and still he stared, not at the figure or at the ground, but at his hands. For the first time, there was a mark on his perfectly-clear conscience.

And that was it. Just another number in a statistic, and that mage vanished into the mines, never to be heard of again. Hard work, like all the others, supported by thin gruel and muddy water, now that they needed to eat and drink again, chipping away at the walls until the vein was mined down, then digging deeper, in the sludge and the grime and the filth. There was no hope. Their cores were gone, their magehood shattered. Not a scrap of mana would enter a single mage’s body—no, they were no longer mages. Not mages, not mortals, but something lesser than both of them. Husks. Husks without hope, their every waking moment policed by the Empire’s soldiers, their short nights without dreams, because dreams were no longer allowed to them.

In this manner, three years passed.

Down in the depths, a husk worked on the stone. Flakes came off the vein and landed on the ground, where they’d need to be collected later. A thousand other anonymous husks moved around them, clad in the same filthy rags, soaked in the same grime that no amount of water could fully remove. They were gray people, dressed in gray, their skin gray from lack of sun and the ever-persistent rock dust, their hair gray, their hearts gray. No one had a name anymore, except for ‘Prisoner!’, and none of them were happy to hear it. Their fate had been cut off, their future washed away. Nothing remained.

Except for this husk. A smile spread over his lips as he chipped away at the wall, manic, on the verge of breaking, his eyes wide. Every motion hurt, every second of his existence was pain. And yet he worked on, always grinning, even as he sunk deeper in the filth of the mine. Not an inch of skin was visible under the layers of caked-on dirt. Not a single hair retained its original color. Even his eyes were a muddy brown-green, as if they, too, were filthy.

A boot slammed into his shoulder. He fell to the ground, sprawling in the dirt. A guard in a gleaming gray uniform—not gray from the rock dust, but gray by design—stood over the prisoner, arms crossed. He was only Tier 1, the lowest rank of mage possible, and the core he’d been given was tattered and old, on the verge of winking out entirely. This was punishment duty, and his furrowed brows and dark demeanor indicated he knew it. “Prisoner! State your cadre!”

The grimy figure mumbled something, slowly pushing up from the ground.

The guard glared. “Louder!”

“7E!”

The guard kicked him again, lifting him off the ground and throwing him into the wall.
“That’s 7E, *sir*, from you!”

“7E... *sir*.”

The guard’s gaze darkened. He chased after the prisoner and kicked him again.
“With *respect*. You treat me with respect, prisoner! You don’t—”

Another guard caught the first by the arm. “Stop. You’ll kill him.”

The first guard looked down. The prisoner convulsed. Blood ran from his nose and eyes, and dribbled out of his mouth. He snorted. “So fragile? Pathetic.”

“He has a death wish. Been volunteering for waste duty and the most toxic mines since day one. Don’t give him what he wants,” the second guard warned.

The first guard glared down at the prisoner for one more second, then spat and turned away. “Piece of shit doesn’t deserve the rest. He should keep working here for eternity.”

The second guard laughed. “It’ll feel like it, won’t it? What a pity, to have a mage’s lifespan and durability, but become absolutely powerless. Sometimes I wonder if our Empress is *too* cruel.”

“No such thing, for these savages.”

The two guards walked away, chatting as their boots faded away. Behind them, the prisoner slowly stopped convulsing, then sat up, wiping the blood off his face. He looked at the pile of slag beside him, then reached out. His hand shook, body deteriorating from all the toxins coursing through it. His palm landed on the detritus, and he pulled inward.

The gunk rushed into him. Through his arm, past heavy buildup of impurities, beyond his shattered mana passages, into the hole where his core should have been. There, they joined a star. A star that was denser, heavier, and more toxic than any star he’d made before. One that loomed in his body, building and building, but never able to ignite. That one spark he needed eluded him, as mana refused his call. His core had been removed, his future cut off. The world of mages was denied to him.

But he didn’t give up. Not for a second had he given up. For the last three years, he’d sought out trash, filth, garbage and refuse, and absorbed all of it. No matter how toxic, how disgusting, he’d pulled it all into him, and without a core to shield him from it, paid the price. Some nights he laid awake with fever. Some days, he spent the whole day convulsing in bed, his hands clawed against his chest, scratching invisible spiders off

his skin. Some days, he staggered around with no energy, skin as pale as the grave, vomiting up everything inside of him.

And yet, he persisted. This was his path. This was his lifeline. They could take his core away. They could take mana away. They could even take the System away. But they couldn't take trash away. He was in a world full of trash, surrounded by it, reveling in it. All the trash belonged to him, even if he couldn't ignite it or process it anymore... at least, for now.

Every time he'd made a trash star, he'd wondered: what if he made it larger? Denser? Heavier? What if he kept piling trash on and never ignited it, piling up impurity after impurity until it collapsed under its own weight and ignited, the way a true star did?

Now he had no other option. With no mana, he couldn't ignite the star. With no core, he couldn't properly contain the trash. So he simply sucked it in, and in, and in, piling it up in the hole in his body the way he always had, more and more and more, no matter how many side effects and ailments he took on. More, more, more, more... and in that way, three years had passed.

Had he doubted? Of course he'd doubted. He'd doubted every second of the entire route to this moment. But what else could he do? What other route was available to him? So he'd pressed on. Just a little trash wouldn't do it. Just a little harmless toxicity wasn't enough. Piling and piling, compressing, pounding it down, forcing it inward so he could hammer more on top—all for this moment. All for this day.

Rhys narrowed his eyes after the guards, and pushed, compressing the star down with all his might. The trash trembled, unwilling to compress anymore, and yet, he kept pushing. Pushing and pushing and pushing and pushing, until—

A spark.

FWOOSH!

The second guard looked back. "What was that sound?"

"What sound?" the first guard asked.

"That... boom, or whatever," the second guard said.

Silence.

"You heard it too, right?" The second guard turned, looking at his compatriot.

Nothing stood there. Nothing but a suddenly dark, suddenly deep shadow.

"Billor...?" the second guard wondered, looking around.

A gray hand wrapped around his mouth. He screamed, but too late. The hand muffled his scream, then pulled him backward, into the shadow. There was a crunch, and then silence.

Rhys loomed out of the shadow. His body crackled with power. Impurities burned away within his entire body, strengthening him, but also casting a bright red glow on the inside of his skin. The trash star burned at a low, steady rate, so that only a translucent, almost invisible smoke rose off of him; except for the stench of burning trash, he might have been an ordinary mage. He cracked his knuckles, and lifted his eyes upward, out of the mine, to the camp where they kept the prisoners.

It was time to overthrow these pitiful heavens.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 105. Overthrowing Prison

Rhys pressed a hand on each body, filling them with mana or whatever filthy energy his trash generated, then sat back to wait. There would be rats for the bodies, he knew it. He'd seen it happen often enough, the rats swarming the bodies of deceased prisoners. They ate no better than the prisoners—no, worse, because they got the scraps the prisoners left behind. The beasts were starving, and fresh meat was fresh meat.

They came. Slowly, quietly. First one rat, darting out of the darkness to nibble at the guard's ear. Then another, this one bold enough to try the eyes. Then another, and another, and another, until a swarm of gray-brown bodies writhed over the dead guards, tearing them to pieces. As they ate, they ate Rhys's mana, and with it, they grew more maddened, more desperate. Their eyes began to glow a foggy green-brown, their teeth sharpened, and their chitters grew louder. The mana filled them, consuming them, until it colored every piece of pitiful mana that existed in their tiny bodies, then overwhelmed it, then reforged it, making them *more*, making them *strong*.

The rats stopped eating. Only skeletons remained. Rhys snapped his fingers, and they whirled, all facing him. The two of them shared one mana, one thought, one mind. He felt their hunger, and they felt his hatred, his desires, his need for revenge. He'd spent too long here to remain neutral, to see it from the outside, to be 'walking his path' and no more. The guards were brutal. They attacked children, women, and men with impunity, forced themselves upon those they favored, played games with the prisoners' minds and bodies. They had left the path of humanity, and strode upon the path of beasts instead.

So it was fitting that he killed them with beasts.

Rhys strode forth. He was in the deepest part of the mine, where the most toxic stones existed. Magical mines, it turned out, were little different from non-magical mines, save that some of the ores within them possessed magical properties for the better, but also for the worse. He'd seen prisoners die from touching the wrong vein, or lose their minds from seeking after the wrong ore. The guards just laughed and sent more bodies into the depths, careless of the casualties they incurred. Careless, but no longer. He would make them care. Even if it was only in the last heartbeat of their worthless lives, he'd make them regret it.

As he walked, the rats darted out. They rushed off to their homes and hidey-holes, calling forth the other rats, sharing their newfound mana with them. Their eyes, too, changed to a murky green-brown, and they dashed out to join the swarm, following their Rat-King, their savior. They connected to him, and felt the future he promised, the song of a fat meal and fresh meat, and that was all they needed to know. He was their King; he would lead them to glory.

He swept past the other prisoners in Cadre 7E, the rats at his heels. One of them stood at the sight of him and stepped forward to block his path. His eyes flicked at her numbly, registering her face. He recognized her, her once-blonde hair desperately smeared with mud to avoid the guards' lustful eyes, her pretty face ruined with silt and grease to become unappealing, so she could survive. Her name... he forgot. Names weren't meaningful down here. The guards beat those who remembered them and dared to use them. He'd kept his name close to his heart, and never spoke it, but he knew there were prisoners down here who no longer had such a treasure, who had been completely, utterly forgotten. She wasn't one of them, but casting his eyes to the side, he saw a wreck of a man who had, a skin-and-bones figure who even now gazed at the wall with hollow eyes and chipped endlessly at bare stone, unaware he wasn't mining a vein any longer.

"Where are you going? They'll beat us all if one of us abandons our post," she reminded him, with a voice full of fear. The guards' beatings were worthy of her terror. They held nothing back, seemingly forgetting that the ones they beat no longer had any magic, and if they had imbued no regenerative powers into their bodies during their magehood, they had no ability to heal beyond that of a mortal. Prisoners came back broken, if they were lucky enough to come back at all. He glanced at her arm, at the lump on her forearm where it had healed wrong. It was their reality, but no longer.

"They won't beat anyone anymore," he murmured, and gently pushed her aside. When they were both reduced to their bodily powers, their strength had been about equal, but with his renewed power, he could move her aside as easily as he might move a child.

She stumbled aside, then blinked and stared at him, shocked. "You... how?"

"Follow me. I'll get all of us out of here."

"I'll get the others," she said, and ran off.

Rhys watched her go, then walked on. There was no point in waiting. In fact, it would be better to go ahead. The other prisoners would only be a liability to his first strike. After the first strike, then he would need their help, but at first, it was better if he went alone. They still had their empowered bodies, but no more. No skills, techniques, mana-empowered punches or spells. They could fight, but not meaningfully against the mage guards. Tier 1s could easily overwhelm them, save the few higher-Tier body-focused mages who needed high-Tier guards even without their cores.

Stolen story; please report.

Rhys flexed his hand, looking at the back of it as he walked on. If he had to estimate, he was at Tier 3 with this trash star, as long as it kept burning. He had no idea if it connected him to the System, or if he had skills again, and he was kind of afraid to find out, but he had access to his techniques and spells now, one way or another. He would have to keep feeding the trash star to remain a mage, but that was no problem. He absorbed trash as he walked and breathed. He was surrounded by trash, wallowing in it. The other people around him were trash, so he could absorb their exhaled breath, their filth, anything they created. The mines were coated in rock dust, which was nothing but more trash, not to mention the slag, the human effluent, and the discarded scraps of clothes, eating utensils, and even long-abandoned bodies. All of them went into the trash heap in his soul.

And the guards, well, the guards were the worst kind of trash. He lifted his head, gazing ahead. He looked forward to the next ones. He had some ideas he wanted to try out, and they were just the subjects he was looking for.

Up ahead, a guard stood in a nook, separated from the other guards, as he lit a pipe. He looked up to find Rhys approaching and furrowed his brows. "Prisoner! What are you—"

Rhys pushed off the ground. Trash Step sped his feet, and he reached the guard in the space of a breath. His hand landed on the guard's face and gripped it tight. He could have twisted so easily, snapped the man's neck, but he didn't. Instead, he looked the man dead in the eyes and drew inward, pulling on the man's life force, mana, vitality, everything, the same way he drew in all kinds of trash. Because that was all this man was: a tiny scrap of human refuse that hadn't discovered he was trash yet. That was okay, though. Rhys knew what he was. And he intended to use this man like the filth he was.

The man didn't have time to scream. His face paled, his body went limp, and he collapsed to the floor, dead. Rhys chased him down, instantly putting a hand on the man's core, but he sensed nothing. He frowned. His second experiment would need a living subject, which meant it would have to wait.

“Jones, what was that? You messin’ with that girl again? I told you, wait ‘til after work. I’ve gotta file reports if you do it on the job,” a jovial voice complained from around the corner.

Wait, but not long, it seemed. Rhys gestured. The rats swarmed and devoured the body, bones and all, in a heartbeat. He flicked his wrist, and they melted away, vanishing into a thousand tiny crevices and shadows. Rhys pressed himself up against the nook, turning slightly away and cupping his hand to his face just like Jones had done. They were about the same height, about the same weight. He wouldn’t pass for Jones for longer than a second.

A second was all he needed.

The guard stepped around the corner, out of sight of anyone on the other side, and Rhys yanked him into the nook. The guard struggled, instantly trying to shout, but Rhys pressed his hand over the man’s mouth and smothered his voice before he could get anything out. It was almost comical, the ease with which he pinned this man down and kept him from shouting, when these guards had lorded it over them for years, beating down dozens of them with ease; but now he had mana, or a facsimile of it, and his Tier 3 cultivation had returned. Between a Tier 1 and a mana-less mortal, the winner was obvious; between a Tier 1 and a Tier 3, the winner was equally obvious.

Just like with the previous guard, he drew the man’s energies into himself, but unlike the first one, he paused seconds before he killed the man. He eyed him, engraving into his mind that this man was trash, nothing but filth. It wasn’t a hard task. He only had to bring to mind the horrors he’d seen over the last three years, and the man became a worm before his eyes. In that worm, though, was a bright spot of mana. A core, that the Empress had deigned to give this shitstain of a living being—not ‘of a human,’ because this thing could not be called human. His eyes narrowed. He plunged his hand into the man’s guts and reached for that ephemeral spot of light.

The man pitched against his hold. He felt wet heat press against his palm as the man vomited blood, then began to shudder into death. He dragged out the core, only to find his hand empty. Just like the first, the core had died with the man.

Rhys twisted his lips. It seemed the Empress’s signature technique wouldn’t be replicated so easily. Then again, if it was easy, wouldn’t everyone go around trying to rip out everyone else’s cores? It made sense that it was hard, because otherwise, battles would completely revolve around core-ripping and involve no actual combat. On another day, he might have found the image of mages revolving around one another, hands bared, each trying to pat the other’s stomach amusing, but not today. There was too much darkness in his heart today.

In any case, he’d confirmed one thing: cores weren’t purely physical organs. Or rather, they weren’t physical things at all. They were something else. Some kind of spiritual or energy-form, simplified by the limits of human understanding into an ‘organ,’ when in

reality, they seemed to exist on another plane, or exist in a purely intangible format. Ripping out other people's cores was about more than a quick jab and a deft hand. There was some fundamental comprehension he was missing. Some understanding about cores that he personally lacked, and until he figured out what he was missing, he might as well drain a lake with a sieve or kick a clay ox into the ocean, for all the progress he would make.

He shrugged, turning his gaze upward. There were more vermin ahead. Plenty more chances to refine his technique. And if he couldn't figure it out, at least he didn't waste his time. After all, vermin had to be exterminated. Filth had to be expunged. He was the ultimate trash heap, and he needed to confine all the garbage into himself before he'd be happy.

"Samren...?"

Rhys tossed the body to the rats and pressed himself into the nook again. He wasn't aware of it, but a ghost of a manic smile clung to his face. More twisted lambs to the slaughter. And he was a willing executioner.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 106. Lambs to the Slaughter

"What's going on over there? Jones? Come out here," a guard demanded.

Rhys clicked his tongue, tossing the latest body away. The rats swarmed without him prompting, growing used to the flow of these battles, if Rhys's one-sided assaults could be called battles. He'd managed to lure two more people into the nook, but it seemed like he'd reached the limit of what this guard station was willing to send forth without investigation. He subtly extended his energy, sweeping the cavern ahead of him. Three guards remained, grouped up near the exit of the next chamber, their weapons out, bundled up in a defensive formation. They didn't react to the sweep of his energy, though he didn't know if that was because they couldn't detect it, or because they weren't looking for an attacker with mana. This energy... it was probably mana, but he needed some time to be sure of it. Time he could spend breaking himself, and everyone else, out of this hellhole of a mine. He'd figure it out after he got free.

Three mages, two Tier 1, one Tier 2. Rhys stretched. It was go time.

"Jones? I'm warning you, if this is a joke—"

Rhys rushed out from behind the corner. The rats came with him, surging in a wave, a carpet of brown-black-gray fur. He gestured, and the rats raced ahead of him, charging the guard on the left. The guard had enough time to raise his sword before the rats swarmed him, and then he was too busy screaming and batting at his body to deal with Rhys or anyone else.

Rhys closed in on the center guard. The center guard stepped forward, sensing Rhys's Tier, and the Tier 1 guard backed away. Fire crawled up the center guard's arms. He struck with his sword, and a wave of fire blasted through the air at Rhys.

A projection of a green-brown translucent rat appeared on Rhys's shoulder. It leaped off and met the oncoming wave, neutralizing it. Before the man could fire off another blast, Rhys was on top of him. He punched the guard's head hard enough he heard a crack, then opened his hand and grabbed the guard's shoulder. He sucked the guard's energies into him, feeding them directly into the trash star.

The guard's eyes glittered. With the last of his strength, before Rhys finished drawing his energy away, he slashed Rhys in the side. His sword carved through the thin robes Rhys wore and directly into his flesh. Blood poured down, and bone shone from beneath, the cut deep and gruesome.

Rhys didn't scream. He barely reacted at all. After all the time in the mine, that level of pain meant almost nothing to him. He simply drew the man's energy in more powerfully, fueling it into his vitality instead. His wound closed, the muscle knitting, the blood running in reverse, the skin sealing shut, and then it was as if the wound had never happened at all, except for the gash in his robes. The guard stared, wide-eyed. The last thing he saw before he died was Rhys reach out to his robes and seal the gash in his clothes shut. It was trash, after all, these robes made from the thinnest, most garbage fabric that was meant to be thrown away. A little bit of mana, Trash Intent, and Trash Enchanting, and the cut sealed right over as though it had never been.

He raised his brows. "I like these robes."

The final guard, the one not besieged by rats or otherwise dead, turned and fled. Rhys watched him go for a few beats, then dropped the guard he was holding. His body blurred. A hand curled around the fleeing guard's mouth, jerking him to a halt and silencing him all at once. The guard trembled, and the stench of urine filled the cavern, more than it already did.

"Hold still and cooperate. I'll try to make this painless," Rhys promised, right in his ear.

The guard directly passed out, going limp in his grasp. Rhys looked at him, then shrugged. Made it easier on him this way.

Rather than trying to rip the man's core out immediately, Rhys rested his hand on the man's back, feeling for the most powerful concentration of power. With the man

unconscious, he could spend a little time to probe the man's body, sending pulses of power in to sense where his mana was. He couldn't sense where a mage's mana was from the outside, the way Ev could, but this close, when he could directly push his aura and energy into the other mage's body, he could track the flow of mana regardless. It took him a few moments, but then he found it. The man's core was about where Rhys had expected it to be, maybe a little higher, but in about the same place as it had been for Rhys. He lifted his hand to pierce into the man's body, then paused. The core wasn't a physical object, or at least, not a fully physical object. If he killed this man or even disrupted his mana passages too much, the man's core would vanish. He needed something else. A way to delicately remove the core without killing or injuring the man too badly. No... without harming his physical body at all. Even Laurent had been able to do it, once the Empress had given him her power. It had to be possible.

Of course, the Empress's path likely concurred with stealing other people's cores, and she had far more time and practice than he had. He wouldn't be shocked if it took him years to figure out how to do it, or even if it was completely impossible.

Stolen story; please report.

Still, he couldn't let all his fellow prisoners stay coreless forever. He had to figure out something, and the most obvious solution was to do exactly what the Empress had done to them, to their captors, then give his fellow prisoners their cores. The implementation was the only issue. He was like a trashy health company promising everyone he could sense thousands of diseases through a tiny blood drop when really he didn't know anything about the technology or biology at all, nor had he developed anything that would come close to letting him do any of that, except he hadn't promised anyone anything, he'd just set goals for himself in his heart, and he hadn't asked for money, either, so he also wasn't scamming anyone.

Damn. I really have a long way to go to hit peak trash, Rhys realized, raising his brows at himself.

He drew inward, using the same technique he used to suck trash into himself. The man's energy willingly rushed to him, and for a fleeting moment, he felt the warmth of the man's core—and then it dissipated, absorbed into his body.

Rhys wrinkled his nose and lowered his hand, dropping the now-dead mage to the floor. It wasn't easy, removing people's cores. No wonder it was the Empress's signature unique move. It might even be impossible for him to learn.

In the distance, an alarm blared. The rats moved to swarm the newly-dead mage, but Rhys held his hand up, and they paused. He kicked the man over. In his hand, the man clutched a tiny gem, one that emanated powerful mana. He didn't know what it did, but at a guess, it sent messages, or an alert. The guards knew. They'd come looking.

Rhys unlatched the man's belt and yanked it free from his gray uniform, fastening the swordbelt around his hips instead. He considered taking the man's uniform, but between the piss stain and the hatred he personally felt toward it, he couldn't. The sword wasn't trash, so he wouldn't be able to use Trash Intent with it, but that was fine. He was higher Tier than most of the guards, save a few captains and the warden. He wouldn't need a sword until he faced the few Tier 3s in the camp.

The Tier 4 warden was a problem in of himself, but he also rarely spent time in the camp, preferring to enjoy life as opposed to suffer in the hellhole that was the mine. His rooms were rarely lit, and the other guards regularly complained about him vanishing into town and not doing his duties. If Rhys was lucky, he wouldn't be here at all.

The problem was, his luck was trash tier just like the rest of him, so he wasn't holding out hope for that. The important thing here was that he freed his fellow prisoners. Even if it took him another three years, he could collect trash again and escape again. They couldn't hold him anymore. Not that he planned to get caught, but in case he was, he could always break out again. Enough times of that loop, and he was sure they'd catch on, but he didn't intend to get caught once, let alone more than once; still, it was deeply reassuring to have a get-out-of-literal-jail-free card in his back pocket.

He looked down at the cleaned bones at his feet. Maybe he was going about this all wrong. The future for him wasn't about stealing cores. That wasn't his path. His path was trash, and he should stick to that. He could accomplish anything, as long as it was trash. The only problem was that he wanted to empower other people, and they...

Were trash. They were trash. They'd been thrown away by their academy and their Alliance, and then trashed by the Empress when she stole their cores. Yes, they were trash, and the guards, the guards were a different type of trash, but still trash. Rhys frowned, putting a hand to his chin. He could feel a thought wiggling at the back of his mind, almost coming to words, but not quite. Something about that... trash to trash, trashy people and trashed people, two types of garbage... connected...

Footsteps. Rhys pushed the thought to the back of his mind for later and turned, one hand instinctively reaching for his sword. The footsteps came from behind, though, deeper into the mine, and it was his fellow prisoners who rounded the corner, led by the girl with the ash-smeared hair. Some in the party stared at the sight of the dry bones at Rhys's feet, but the girl, and most of them, ignored them. She closed in on Rhys and nodded, pausing to check the other guards for weapons. She tossed the first sword she found to another mage in the party, then strapped the other one around her own waist. Straightening, she met Rhys's eyes. "Where to next?"

"Is this everyone?"

"Everyone who's willing to come."

Rhys nodded, understanding the finality in the woman's voice. There was no time to try and convince everyone in the mines. Those willing to come, would come, and those who chose to stay behind would have to fend for themselves. That was the only way they could succeed.

He looked at the survivors, counting them. Ten. Fewer than he'd expected, but then, there had been revolts before. Some had even gotten this far. Rhys had never believed in those, because they'd been doomed from the start, nothing more than some martial mage with a powerful body getting lucky a few times, who was doomed to fall when the higher-Tier mages showed up. This was different... but without showing the prisoners personally, there was no way for Rhys to convince them, and he lacked the time to collect each and every one himself. They came, or they didn't, but he had to move on.

Rhys gestured the woman closer. "There's something I want to try. I can't guarantee it's going to work, but if it does, it might give you a temporary source of mana. The one thing I'm sure of, is that it's going to hurt. Are you willing to—"

"Yes."

Rhys met her eyes. She gazed back, resolute. What was a little pain, after the last three years? What was a little pain, in the face of everything they'd suffered? What was a little pain, when it meant that she had the chance to inflict vengeance upon the ones who'd taken so much from her?

Rhys nodded, a small smile on his face. He reached out his hand, and she took it.

Garbage, holding hands with garbage. Within Rhys, trash sourced from trash. Garbage to garbage, trash to trash. He took a deep breath, and pulled out a strand of power from his core, coursing it down his arm into the woman.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 107. Trash to Trash

Rhys grabbed a clump of energy that still hadn't merged into the trash star. There were a few lumps like that, all of them the energy he'd drawn out of the guards. The energy clung to itself, taking a little longer to merge into the trash star than ordinary trash did. The energy passed through his hand and into the woman's hand, but he didn't release it yet. He kept dragging, pulling it through her body into the place where her core had been. She scrunched her face in pain and bit her lip, refusing to scream. Rhys sensed

the damage inside her, the places where her passages were ripped and torn where the core had been ripped out, but he also sensed what her body wanted to be—what it knew it could be. He activated Trash Intent, and a core took shape inside her, reconnecting to her mana passages. The mana he'd pulled from the guard fueled it, forming its shape. The woman gasped as she felt the core inside her, but Rhys wasn't done. He narrowed his eyes. He needed to fix it in reality, make it take physical shape, or else the second he released her hand, it would vanish.

He had captured more than just mana from the guard, but also his vitality and any other energy he could absorb. Now, he fed the vitality into the woman, growing new cells from the mana passages. He fed the vitality and mana into her ruined mana passages and repaired them, growing them back along the shape that Trash Intent gave him. A core and mana passages weren't entirely physical, but they weren't entirely non-physical, either. Mana and vitality went into forming them, and he poured both into reforming hers.

All the mana he'd gathered from the one guard vanished into reforming her core. Rhys drew out the mana of another guard and kept going, forming the last of her passages, then pushing further, shaping it into her core. At some point, he ran out of energy again, and drew out the mana of yet another guard. He transitioned from using Trash Intent to Trash Enchanting as the core took form.

It was shockingly easy, but only because there was no mana in her body. Without preexisting mana, there was nothing to oppose him as he reformed her core. He could create ghostly rat forms, and if he thought about it, if he used vitality and had some rat cells, there was nothing to keep him from recreating life. In comparison, reforming the woman's core with vitality and mana, when he had pieces of her mana passages and her natural body to start with, not to mention lots of experience reforging his own core, was almost trivial.

The core he rebuilt wasn't up to the standards of the one she'd had before. Her body was at least Tier 2, but the core was only Tier 1. Even so, it was a massive jump in power for someone who had been unable to process mana to be able to process mana once again. She could use spells, empower her body with mana, activate any techniques she knew... and potentially even Tier up again, with enough time and effort. It wasn't a perfect, ideal solution, but it was better than nothing.

And from the look on the woman's face, better than she'd imagined possible. She gasped and stepped back. Putting a hand on her stomach, she looked up at him. "H-how...?"

"Try it out. I don't know how long it'll work, or if it'll work when I'm not here, but it's better than nothing."

"Of course. I... thank you."

Rhys nodded, smiling earnestly for the first time in a long time. “My pleasure.”

She looked over her shoulder at the other mages. “Can you do it again? For everyone?”

Rhys shook his head. “No.”

“Oh, of course not. I shouldn’t have pushed—”

“Not yet. I need more guards.” Rhys’s eyes shone, and he clenched his fist. He knew how to do it, and he knew what the materials were. Now he just needed to put it all together and get the ball rolling. Nine more people to empower? It’d taken him three guards’ worth of mana to empower the woman. That was twenty-seven guards to go. Easy, simple math.

She nodded, understanding. A flicker of doubt crossed her face, but she quickly pushed it down. “Let’s go.”

Rhys nodded and strode up the passage, gesturing for the others to follow. Their eyes had been dead, full of the resolve of those who had given up, who were going to their graves on their own terms, not fighting for freedom. Now, though, their eyes were bright. Hope shone out from within them, and their hands clenched. The one who’d received a sword from the guards’ bodies drew it, testing it out for the first time, and another one ran backward to fetch the swords from the previous sets of guards.

He didn’t rebuild his own core. Since he could only rebuild them to Tier 1, he was more powerful without it, working on pure garbage. True, he did have to continuously stoke the trash star, but that was fine; that was well within his abilities. To be honest, it was a deliberate decision to not reforge his core. Working on trash and trash alone felt more *true* to himself and his path, as if, rather than something that held him back, it was something that pushed him to be stronger, to push himself to the limits of his path and beyond, to constantly exercise those spiritual and magical muscles, and he was curious how far he could go with this new, strange mana system he’d built.

He was confident he could reforge a rebuilt core to Tier 3, given enough time and materials, but that wasn’t the point. He wanted to try this new technique out, working on garbage alone.

“I’m Korii, by the way,” the woman said, walking alongside him.

“Rhys,” he replied.

No more was said. No more needed to be said. They strode ahead, climbing the passages, fight burning in their eyes. From ahead came shouting and the clatter of boots. Four guards rounded the corner, weapons already in their hands and mana glowing on the blades. Rhys and Korii charged, while the prisoners with swords formed up around their fellows.

This far down, the guards were still largely low-Tier. Two of them were at Tier 1, and the other two were Tier 2. Rhys closed in on the higher-Tier mages, leaving the lower-Tier ones to Korii. Two hands, and two mages. Each one slashed at him, launching the same well-regulated blast of sword aura at him. He dodged, having seen the regulation attack many times, and closed the gap in an instant. His hands landed on their faces, and the battle was over. Two bodies hit the ground.

Korii clashed with one of the Tier 1 mages. The guard held his own for a few moments, but Korii's higher-Tier body gave her the upper hand. She overcame his defenses and cut him down. Blood splashed over the wall.

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Before the guard could gurgle his last, Rhys rushed up and absorbed his energies. He turned to the final man, only to find that the rats had already taken care of him. Nothing remained but a stark white skeleton.

Rhys checked the energies inside of him, then turned to Korii. "Who else is good at fighting and won't panic in a pinch?"

The Empire had kept them largely separated from their fellow students and anyone they knew, since it was easier to control them that way. Still, they couldn't split up all the Purple Dawn students, and he'd seen Korii hanging out with other former Purple Dawn students early in their time in the mines, before they'd been truly ground underfoot, when some people had still held on to hope. Even if she wasn't, she'd still have a better chance of knowing someone than Rhys, who'd come here with Ev, Az, and no one. He hadn't seen anyone he'd known down here in the mines. If Ev was captured, she'd been taken to a different camp, though given how tough she was, she might have escaped. Az was... well, Az, and he wasn't too worried about the cat man. Bast had escaped outright. He hadn't seen Mouse since he'd descended into the mines; on one hand, he was worried about her, but on the other hand, her path had been to remain unnoticed, to blend into the background. If anyone was going to survive the invasion, it would be unobtrusive Mouse.

Korii glanced back, then nodded at one of the men. "Blake, come here."

A blond man stepped forward, excitement in his eyes. He kneeled at Rhys's feet and offered his hand up.

Rhys pulled him back to his feet. "There's no need for that. We need warriors, not servants." He gripped Blake by the shoulder, and coursed the energy he'd absorbed into the man, rapidly rebuilding his core.

More boots hurried their way. Korii stepped forward, raising her sword. "I'll defend you. Stay focused."

Rhys snapped his fingers, and the rats raced over to Korii's ankles. "They'll fight with you."

"Understood." Despite her response, Korii gave the rats a slightly uncertain look, but she simply turned back toward the entrance and raised her sword again, resolved to fight no matter what.

Two guards rounded the corner. One had just long enough to shout before the rats overwhelmed it, while Korii rushed the second one and quickly took him down. Another guard raced down the corridor a second later, only to find the two dead guards, an armed prisoner, and a mob of rats. His eyes flew wide and his feet pedaled at the ground, instantly going for the retreat. Korii didn't let him get far. Her sword flashed, and the man hit the ground with a thump.

Rhys finished with Blake, and one of the armed prisoners offered Blake his sword. Blake nodded his thanks, then turned to Rhys. "I cannot thank you enough. My life is henceforth—"

Rhys raised his hand. "No need. I'm just trash. From here on, your life is going to be worth so much more than trash. Don't lower yourself by pledging yourself to me."

Blake's jaw gaped. He quickly shut his mouth and bobbed in a bow, jogging over next to Korii to hold the line.

Rhys made a quick circle of the chamber, absorbing all the trash that remained, then returned to the front lines again. He strode upward, with the two restored mages on either side of him.

Guards rushed down toward them, and they cut them down. The rats swarmed, running over one another and circling around Rhys. Occasionally, one or two rats crawled out from the walls and the dark cracks and joined the swarm. They moved slowly, taking the time for Rhys to reforge cores for the other prisoners. It was good practice for Rhys, but more than anything, it raised their combat power exponentially for each mage he could return a core to. They couldn't truly use spells, since they didn't have any stored mana, but they could at least breathe in and start storing mana, and use it later, or pull the mana from the air and directly use it to empower spells and enhancement techniques. It was an instant boost, and a slow roll as each one regained mana and became able to cast more and more spells and techniques.

As they climbed, they passed other groups of prisoners, working on the mines, sleeping, resting, eating; there was no meaning to the passage of time down here, and any particular prisoner was likely to be on a different day/night schedule than any other. Some of the prisoners just stared at them with dead eyes, no hope left to be moved, no belief left to extend; but some jumped up and joined their climb. Some of the dead-eyed prisoners sat up abruptly as they realized that the climbing prisoners had mana and jumped to join the climb, while some were too insensate to react at all. There was no

time to save everyone; reinforcements would come eventually, and even at his strongest, Rhys was one Tier 3 mage. They had to escape before the Empire realized the true scale of this revolt, or all Rhys's efforts would be for naught.

Upwards. Onwards. A river of blood flowed from the guards, and their energies vanished into Rhys. Once the original ten prisoners had cores, they simply pressed upward. It wasn't that the other prisoners didn't deserve cores, but they couldn't take the time to wait for all of them to get cores. Ten cores was one thing; a hundred cores was another. Ten cores, and they could escape before reinforcements came; a hundred, and they'd be doomed to failure as an Empire warship rolled in. The first ten prisoners shared what Rhys had done with the newcomers, and the newcomers extended the information outward. Some of the things Rhys heard at the end of the game of telephone were frankly insane, painting him as some godlike, saintlike persona. Rhys snorted, rubbing the back of his neck. It was embarrassing, but... for now, there wasn't any point in fighting it. The prisoners needed something to raise their morale, and he was willing to be that thing, if that was what they needed.

Up, up, up. With ten prisoners with Tier 1 cores slowly filling with mana and bodies far beyond that, Rhys not only had the power advantage over the guards, but also the numbers advantage. Tier 1 and 2 guards melted before them, since effectively, every prisoner was a Tier 1 who could fight over their Tier, and Rhys himself was capable of fighting at least one Tier up. A Tier 3 guard managed to slow them for a good twenty seconds before Rhys and the rats defeated them, and they climbed on. Higher and higher, with more prisoners following them with every passing floor, as the prisoners saw the giant mob of prisoners and decided to take their chances. They set their eyes upward and climbed, believing in a future that wasn't this mine, endlessly chipping away at rock for resources that other mages would use.

Fresh air. Rhys turned, startled. He'd almost forgotten what it tasted like, down in the eternal dust. He approached it, following that sweet trace. Guards rushed to block his way, and he cut them down, absorbing them, compiling their energies for more cores in the future, once they escaped and were as safe as they could be. Even with the trash star burning, there was plenty of room inside him for their energy. He didn't quite understand where it was stored, but it was something like the void where his core had been, was still large enough to hold the core that had been, and that core was capable of holding massive amounts of energy, so as a result, the empty space that should have held his core could hold just as much.

A iron door barred their way, rusted and barred. The prisoners stopped. Rhys stepped forward, approaching the door alone. He put his hands to the bar and pushed, lifting it out of its frame, then tossing it aside. One hand to either door, he shoved, and the hinges groaned as the doors gaped.

Sunlight streamed in. Rhys lifted a hand, blinded. Tears streaked down his face, cutting paths through the film of dust that coated him. At last. At last. At last. He was free.

The blindness passed. He lowered his head, looking down from the sky, down to the walls that still barred them in, down to the small army of guards blocking their way, and the Warden at their head. Their eyes locked, and the Warden smirked, drawing his sword. Black metal glimmered in the sunlight. This sword was not the regulation blade all the members of the guard received, but the unique weapon allowed to those who exhibited talent and loyalty toward the Empress. This man had skill enough to be recognized by the Empress. He was a threat like no one else who stood before him.

The Warden leveled his blade at Rhys. "You've gone far enough, but this is the end of the road, prisoner."

"My path doesn't end here," Rhys replied, and charged.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 108. Pitiful Heavens

Rhys charged directly at the Warden, drawing his sword as he closed in. The Warden whirled his sword. The two of them clashed. The Warden parried his strike and instantly forced him back, his strength overwhelming Rhys's easily. Rhys hopped back, meaning to get some distance, but the other mages were behind him, and if the Warden got past him, the newly-raised Tier 1s stood no chance, let alone the mages still without cores. The Warden gripped his black blade in both hands and struck down at him, and he had nowhere to go.

His core had been taken, but not the clumps of impurity that circled it. Why would they be taken? They were filth, not worthy of an Empress's eye. But to Rhys, they were the highest grade of trashure.

In all the energy he'd drawn from the guards, he'd drawn plenty of curse energy. It was something to contemplate for later, but for now, the most important thing was that he had curse energy, and he was far from afraid to use it.

The curse energy met one of the clumps of impurities, and two skeletal hands rose out of the ground to encapsulate Rhys. The Warden's blade hammered into the bone, cutting a deep mark in the bone, but failing to shatter it. With the strike arrested, Rhys dropped the curse and closed in, darting under the Warden's raised arms to thrust at his stomach.

The Warden dashed back, almost too fast for Rhys to follow. He raised his brows, lowering his blade to give Rhys a serious look. "Not only have you recovered your

magehood somehow, but you also wield spells I've never seen before. Tell me, have you ever considered working for the Empress?"

"I considered it, sure, and I considered it right into the trash where it belongs. The Empress can get fucked," Rhys replied adamantly. His stance on the Empire hadn't weakened, for being confined in its mines. Rather, he opposed them even more strongly now that he saw the filth the Empress allowed under her reign.

"A pity." The Warden's eyes hardened, and he slashed his blade. A hyper-pressurized blade of water leaped out and closed in on Rhys, hurtling through the air with the speed to cut diamond. Rhys had no option but to dodge, but the Warden knew that. He was there before Rhys landed and slashed sideways. Rhys jumped sideways, activating Blow Mitigation with all his might, and the hit still sent him rolling over the ground. Blood spilled over his side, soaking into his robes, and a deep gash cut into his side. With a moment, he could close it forcibly, but not with the Warden breathing down his neck. The man chased after him, closing the gap between them in a heartbeat.

Rhys rolled over, moving with shocking speed and agility even to himself. The Warden's sword struck into the ground, throwing up dust, but it missed Rhys, who rolled right into the center of the depowered mages. The Warden stared after him, confused, and Rhys stared back, with no answers to give.

Trash Step 9 > 11

Rhys raised his brows. *Huh, could it be? Trash Step doesn't just work on trashy ground conditions, but also on trashy movement techniques like rolling around or... I don't know, hitting the griddy?* So much opportunity! To think, he'd been sleeping on such a deep and mysterious technique for this long. Trash Step still held a myriad of mysteries within it, that he needed to steadily study to unlock!

Not only that, but it seemed the System recognized his trash star as a form of mage power. He wanted to check his status and see what the whole thing looked like, but now wasn't the time.

All this flashed through his mind in an instant. The Warden blurred again, chasing after him. Before he could reach, Rhys reached out to the nearest prisoners. "Give me your impurities!"

"Huh?"

There was no time to explain. Skin met skin, and Rhys yanked the impurities out of their bodies. They screamed for a moment, then stared in shock and awe at their newly refreshed bodies.

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Rhys, on the other hand, held the impurities within his hands. He didn't absorb them into the trash core, but instead, squeezed them out, into a puddle of impurities in each palm, then pushing some of his most precious impurities into them. From there, he compressed the impurities with mana, forming small black blades, speckled with brown and gray. The blades themselves looked filthy, as though a good scrub might clean them, but Rhys knew there was no amount of scrubbing that would clean them. They were filth themselves, and there was no changing the fundamental property of the blades.

The Warden chuckled, seeing the tiny blades. They each fit within Rhys's palm, more like real-life shuriken than daggers or even knives. "Is that the best you can do?"

Rhys stood slowly. He held the blades in his palm and stared down the Warden. "I've been holding back. Since the beginning—no, since my very first battle, I've been holding back. Today, for the first time—" He raised his hand and pointed at the Warden. "I'll fight with all my strength."

The Warden gave him an unamused look. He continued advancing.

Damn. That speech always gives them pause in my favorite trashy anime. In any case, it was partially correct. In almost all of his battles, he held back, because the absolute limit of his powers could not only kill, but permanently cripple anyone who survived. Until today, he hadn't had any desire to injure someone so thoroughly.

But now, thanks to the Empire, that was no longer true.

The Warden loomed over Rhys and the others. He glared down at them with dark eyes. "I'll give you one final chance. You, and all of you. Your ringleader is injured. He cannot meaningfully fight me any longer. Give up now, and you will be permitted to return to the mines."

"I would rather die!" Korii snarled.

"Then die."

"No, you!" Rhys shouted, and lunged at the Warden. To his credit, the Warden jumped back, too battle-hardened to disregard even a foe he considered defeated and near death. Rhys's stabs went short, but he released the blades and sent them flying with Trash Manipulation. They hurtled after the Warden, buzzing through the air like wasps, and struck him from either side.

The Warden took another step back in shock, then looked down and laughed. The blades clattered to the ground, unable to pierce his skin.

Korii stepped in front of Rhys, resolved. "We almost made it. If the timing had been better, we could have escaped. Thank you for giving us hope in our final moments."

The Warden approached once more, expression steely.

“It’s too early for that,” Rhys replied. He pointed at the blades, forcing them to levitate with Trash Manipulation. That wasn’t all. Trash Intent shimmered over each blade, then Trash Aura. The blades sharpened, strengthening to their absolute limit. Blood ran from Rhys’s nose at the complexity of the task, but he narrowed his eyes and pushed on, refusing to let it stop him. He flicked his fingers, and the blades darted forth once more, striking the same spot they had the first time. The same spot, where impurities had already ever-so-gently weakened the Warden’s skin. The same spot, where Rhys knew he didn’t guard. This time, the blades pierced home, hurtling into the Warden’s body with a spurt of blood.

The Warden scoffed. “The pitiful last howling of a dying dog.” He lifted his sword.

“Explode,” Rhys said, and released everything. Trash Intent, Trash Aura, Trash Manipulation, and the Trash Manipulation that kept the knives in their knife form. Three years’ worth of impurities from mining work, plus some powerful impurities from Rhys’s personal stash, blasted the Warden’s body from within.

The Warden’s skin blackened. Purple bruises crawled over his body, and his veins turned black one after another. He stumbled, his cheeks bulging as he forced himself not to vomit. His face turned white, then red, then green, and he stumbled, then dropped to his knees.

“What... how...” he muttered, through numbing lips.

“Die without knowing,” Rhys said. He climbed to his feet, moving slowly to not aggravate his wound—Trash Body let him keep moving and suppress the pain, but it did nothing to keep his wounds from worsening—then raised his sword. He brought it down hard, severing the man’s impurity-weakened neck.

The other guards stared. The battle between them and the Tier-1 prisoners had been even, but now, with the Warden dead and Rhys standing over him, triumphant, their morale flagged. The rats leaped out of the shadows and dragged one down, and the rest quickly fell to the prisoners.

Rhys rested his hand on the Warden, absorbing his waning energy and retrieving those impurities. There was no point wasting good poison, after all. The prisoners watched as he went from body to body, absorbing whatever he could manage. When he was done, he turned to them.

“I think it’s time to blow this joint.”

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 109. Break Out

Tall stone walls blocked their path, with mages mounted atop them pointing powerful spells their direction. At the far end of the prison compound, double doors led out into the world beyond. Rhys led the charge, fending off the long-range blasts of magic wherever he could, and dodging them where he couldn't. The other re-cored mages joined him in defending the coreless, and swords flashed as they parried bright bolts of light. A few more guards reluctantly charged them, uninterested in losing their lives meaninglessly to prevent a few prisoners from escaping, but unable to defy orders. Rhys cut them down, one and all. All of them had participated in the horrors within the mines. Not a single one of them deserved to live.

A scream split the air behind him as one of the mages fell, dropped by a bolt from on high. There was no saving him; there was a hole where his heart had been. Gesturing for the others to keep running, Rhys doubled back and rested his hand on the man's body and pulled out the impurities and filth within him, compressing them into a single knife. A bolt of magic closed in on him as his killer loosed another round. Rhys sidestepped, then flung the knife, using Trash Manipulation to send it far further than it should have been able to fly. It whistled through the air and stuck into the mage's neck. If the blow didn't kill him, the impurities would. Rhys whirled and ran on.

As much as he would have liked to end every mage in the prison, they were on a timer. The sirens echoed in the clear air, calling for reinforcements, and already, faraway ships in the distant skies turned their noses toward the mines. Rhys rejoined the other prisoners at the door, where they slammed against it with no avail.

"What's going on?" he asked.

Korii saluted—an unnecessary gesture, but there was no time to correct her now. "Sir, the gate is sealed. We can't get past."

"Sealed?" Rhys put his hand on the double doors. A pulse of magic responded to him, the doors absolutely shimmering with energy. The magic was pure, incredibly so, and it allowed nothing within or past it. It was an absolute seal, locking them shut.

Bolts rained down on them. The cored mages formed up, batting them back with sword flourishes and mana blasts of their own. They could hold for now, but they couldn't hold forever, even without the Empire's ships ever drawing nearer.

Rhys looked back across the prison yard, at the Warden's body. If anyone had the key, it would be him. But there was an entire field of mages throwing magic spells between him and the body. Fire sizzled down into the earth, and opposite it, bolt of acid spluttered on the ground where a mage deflected it. With the group, he'd had cover, and the mages had been forced to spread their targets. Alone? Alone, he wasn't so sure.

"Everyone, give me your impurities," Rhys requested, holding out his hand. A few mages hesitated, but others reached out immediately. Every time a hand touched his, he absorbed all the impurities in their body. A few people screamed or pulled away, but they always put their hand right back in his.

One after another, he formed black knives formed from impurities. He counted along the wall. Five, ten, fifteen... sixteen dull knives sat in his hand. He stepped forward, breaking through the defensive line, and held his hand aloft.

"Sir—"

The first two knives flew, slamming into the mages on the wall. They stumbled and fell, clutching their throats. He walked forward evenly, sending out the knives as he walked two at a time. Some tried to dodge; he simply waited, using Trash Manipulation to seek them out until his knife finally found their skin. Others tried to parry, only to find that knives were only a convenient form, as the impurities decoagulated into a filthy liquid and reformed on the other side of their blade or shield. One after another, the mages hit the floor, and the bolts flying from the walls decreased one after another until no one fired any more magic.

"Huh. I guess I did have the time," Rhys muttered to himself. He knelt by the Warden's body and quickly searched it for a signature matching the wall. A small bejeweled disc dangling from his belt caught his eye, and he yanked it free, taking the man's belt with him while he was at it. No one had taken his sword, but it looked valuable to Rhys.

He sprinted back across the field and handed the Warden's belt and sword to a stunned Korii. Smiling, he held up the disc. "Here, let's see if this works."

He pressed it against the door, and the seal shimmered away to nothing. The mages pushed, and the doors swung open to reveal two startled, pale door guards. They had enough time to draw their weapons before the prisoners ended their miserable lives.

Rhys glanced backward, sighing. It was a pity about those impurities, but he really had no time to run along the wall and collect them. Instead, he absorbed the door guards' impurities, then gestured to the group. "Come on. We need to get some distance between us and the prison before reinforcements come."

Korii and the others nodded, and they walked out of the compound and into the forest. For the first time in ages, they were free. Free, and surrounded by lush greenery, the chirping of birds, the warmth of sunlight, a thousand tiny things Rhys had forgotten he'd missed, down in the mines. He took a deep breath, letting it all wash over him, and felt mana flow into his lungs alongside clean air. He was free.

Free, but not for long if he dawdled here. He led the others away, heading out into the trees. With his mage senses, Rhys could hear civilization nearby, but that was all the more information he had. He'd passed out after they'd removed his core, and come to in

the mines. He had no idea where they were; they could be in the Empire, or just outside Purple Dawn Academy, and it would be all the same to him. Ultimately, it didn't matter. Either way, his goal was the same, and his location only changed his starting gambit, but not his plan.

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Once they were far enough from the prison, he turned and addressed the prisoners. "If you want to live a peaceful life, leave now. No one will hold anything against you. I will not give you a core, because giving you a core within the Empire is the same as putting you back into a camp, but when all is said and done, if I still survive, I will make every effort to heal you, but it will have to wait until the Empire is undone.

"If you wish to fight, then come with me. I cannot guarantee you will survive, but I can guarantee that it will not be easy, and that the path ahead of us is painful. Still, no matter what, I intend to overthrow this tyrannical Empire, or at least push it back, out of our lands. I ask that you make your choice now. Either way, I cannot guarantee your safety, but if I let you leave here with no core and knowledge of where we who oppose the Empire intend to go, then that is the same as handing the Empire our location. I'm sure you understand."

The prisoners looked amongst themselves. They considered, some talking to one another. A few turned and directly walked away, either defeated and dark-eyed, or holding the hand of another mage—those with nothing left to give, or with something left to lose. In the end, about twelve remained, less than half of those who had followed them out. Of the original ten, only eight had survived their escape. Four others had stepped forward from the rest of the prisoners, those who had battlescars and the will to fight burning in their eyes, or a dark, fathomless vengeance reeking from their every move.

Rhys nodded in approval. "Welcome. Our counter-attack begins now. Once we're somewhere safe, I'll see to it that everyone I can give a core to, receives a core, but for now, we need to keep moving."

Based on the number of guards he'd absorbed, he should be able to give cores to most of them, but who knew? Maybe there would be more guards along the way. He led them toward the sounds of civilization, sure of two things: one, that it was easier to hide a needle in a haystack than on bare ground, and two... that civilization always, always, *always* generated garbage. Human garbage, garbage garbage, wastewater, filth, grunge, and all kinds of worthless shit that Rhys couldn't wait to get his hands on.

He looked into the space where his core had been. He was able to hold a startling amount of energy, now that he didn't have a core. He'd absorbed all the energies of several Tier 3 guards and the Tier 4 Warden, and he barely felt half-full. It was as though, without a core, there was no limit to the energy he could hold. As if there was

some kind of hole not just in his body or his metaphysical mana system, but deeper, all the way through reality, that gave him access to some kind of near-limitless storage space.

The trash star floated in darkness, in the void where his core had been. At first, it seemed to stand in space about as large as his core had been, but the longer he stared, the more he saw, like gazing up into the starry sky at night. There was a darkness inside him, an emptiness where his core had been, deep and impenetrable. The closer he looked, though, the more he found boundaries. The ragged edges where his core had been. The walls of his body, or at least, the space in which his core rested. He circled the trash star, keeping his back to the burning lump and his eyes on the walls of his old core.

At the very back, there was a place where there was nothing but shadow. He peered into it, and only found more shadow. Darkness stretched in all directions, infinitely deep. It was still within the confines of his core, and yet not, a hole that was a hole and wasn't a hole. It had limits, and yet, the further he peered inside, the more that opened up before him. It was a limitless space within a limited space. Impossible. Completely trash physics. Nonetheless, here it was, this gaping, endless, non-place.

The longer he stared into it, the darker it grew, until he turned back and could barely see the light of the trash star in the distance. Startled, Rhys turned around and focused on the trash star, flying toward it.

Something moved in the darkness, something hungry, something that had laid in wait for far too long. A shapeless shape reached for him, something he couldn't define and yet had to define, something close to madness, and he felt the near-brush of it eroding his mind. A world-devouring force closed in around him, so vast that he was naught in its wake, not even a nematode, merely a dust mite, and it was pinching him to death with the tiniest effort it could exert. Faster, faster, with the trash star as his anchor, hurtling toward it, while that thing chased him—was in front of him—wrapped around him—was within him—

The heat and the light of the trash star blossomed before him, and Rhys heaved a sigh. He no longer felt the presence. Once more, there was nothing but his familiar trash star, and the usual wreckage where his core had been, and the darkness nothing more than an odd shadow in the space.

Well, that's horrifying, Rhys thought, raising his brow. Was that something that happened whenever the Empress removed cores? Or had he just 'gotten lucky?' He snorted. With his trash luck, who could tell? He was just the kind of guy to pull the same trash unit from a gacha fifty times in a row, in a feat statistically less probable than pulling the focus unit, the actual desirable one—that was how bad his luck had been back home. Here, things had been looking up... but who knew? Maybe his bad luck had merely been waiting, hanging in the wings for the ideal opportunity.

Still, the thing, whatever it was, seemed to have no interest in the energy he could store out there, so there was no reason *not* to use it. Sure, he shouldn't go in there, and he wouldn't, but he would be a better man than he was if he decided not to use whatever advantage came his way, no matter how garbage that advantage was, or what side effects it inflicted on the world around him. Until he'd extended his consciousness into that hole, nothing had bothered with it, and now that he'd removed his consciousness from it, nothing chased him out of it. It was either uninterested, or couldn't be bothered.

My intrusion is probably equivalent to when a fly gets in your house, Rhys decided, nodding. If the fly was inside, he'd swat it with all the effort in his body, but if it flew back outside of its own volition, live and let live. As long as it wasn't annoying him, he was happy to let it be someone else's problem.

"Sir?" Korii asked, and Rhys startled back to reality. He looked down and found his hands pale and shaking, as if he'd just encountered death.

Probably because I did, he thought, chuckling under his breath. He waved her on. "It's nothing. Let's press on. We should be there by evening, at this pace."

"Sir." Expression resolute, Korii marched after him.

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 110. New Hideout

As it turned out, the sun was low in the sky, but not yet setting, when they reached their destination, the time somewhere between afternoon and evening. They smelled it well before they reached it, even the coreless mages' noses wrinkling in disgust. Rhys breathed deep, sucking down the sweet, sweet airborne impurities that came with it. This was going to be a gold mine, for sure.

Filthy water flowed down the barren land where once a burbling brook had flowed. A heap appeared through the trees, a massive, flat field, covered in piles and piles of garbage. Beyond it, a glittering city stood, the Empire's hastily-built outpost rapidly exploding as mortals and mages alike conceded to the Empress's rule and made their homes near the seat of her power. Rhys didn't hold it against them. It was trashy behavior, but people had to act like trash to survive in desperate situations, and someone local might as well benefit from the invasion. Better than all the money going back to the Empire's citizens and leaving this region totally bereft of economy in its inevitable wake, when the Empire either moved on, or someone finally forced them out of the region and back to their shitty dystopian home country. He preferred the second, and he intended to make his own progress toward that goal, but if someone else came

by and overthrew the Empress, he wasn't going to complain. He'd happily celebrate on the back of someone else's effort like the garbage human he was.

But until then, as far as he knew, it was up to him. Rhys pushed through the forest and reached the edge of the trash pile, taking a moment to really take it in. It towered overhead. The Empire must have built on top of an old city, because there was old trash in the heart of the pit, but the massive heap of trash atop it was brand new, overflowing with mana, and ripe for the plucking.

So Rhys knelt down, and drew in only the most garbage of the garbage pile, the old trash in the center of the pile that had accumulated from the mortal city and had almost no mana in it. It didn't matter, so much, how much mana the trash had—or rather, better said, the mana in the trash was a bonus. Right now, the primary property Rhys was concerned with was mass, to keep the trash star ignited. Quantity over quality, though quality was always nice to have.

The pile hollowed. It wasn't easily visible from the outside, but the center of the pile opened up. The trash overhead groaned, wanting to collapse in, but before it could, Rhys gripped it with his mana. One piece, two, three—his nose bled, and Rhys dropped the attempt. It wasn't possible. He couldn't see each piece of trash as itself and attempt to hold it. He didn't have enough mana, not even after the prison breakout.

But who said he needed to sense each piece of trash? Why not treat it like the garbage it was, like the background scribbles in a low-budget anime that were meant to represent trash? No animator ever wasted their time drawing out each trash object when it was so much easier to just scribble a brown lump and move on. Looking at the pile, Rhys unfocused his eyes, hypnotizing himself: it wasn't many pieces of trash, but one giant piece of trash. This whole pit, was nothing but one big piece of trash. One singular lump, that he could control alone. It wasn't a thousand itty bitty pieces, no. It was one. One big, shapeless hunk, and there was no reason to consider it as anything else. Just one... enormous... slop, one big scribble!

The weight of the pile landed on Rhys's metaphorical shoulders. He grunted, bracing himself as the full heft hit him. The trash star trembled, but held, under yet more immense forces within itself. He Didn't want to hold it for too long, but instead, gripped it all with Trash Enchanting and fused it all in place. His mana zipped over the pile. Wherever there was metal, it coursed through them, adding heat until they melted together. Wherever there was cloth, it knitted around its neighbor. Wherever there was wood, it took form and braced the trash beside it. On and on, until at last, Rhys released the pile, and it remained in place despite its hollow core, externally identical to how it had been to begin.

Blake stared. "What... what was that for?"

“Our base,” Rhys said matter-of-factly, and walked toward the pile. A half of a table, slapped crookedly at the edge, served as the door from the way he’d carved the trash, and he pulled it open and crawled inside.

Blake pinched his nose. He grimaced. “He can’t be serious.”

Korii walked past him, following Rhys into the trash. As she passed, he caught her arm. “You *aren’t* following him, are you?”

She looked over her shoulder at him, then at the others, some of whom hesitated as well. “Where else would the Empire overlook so thoroughly? Where else can any of you say would be as good of a hiding spot? We could take up an office in the city, spic and span, but we would be found. We could hide in the woods, but our mana signatures would give us away, and it’s not as if we can claim to be a group of hermits, when all mages are the Empress’s, or nothing. If you’re hesitating, then go, but if you aren’t willing to crawl through this much filth, then you don’t have what it takes to take down the Empress.”

At that, at last, Blake’s eyes widened. “It’s a test! I understand. Thank you, Korii. I was too blind to see the mountain before my eyes.”

Korii gave him a small, knowing smile and a nod, and crawled after Rhys.

Deeper in the pile, Rhys, who’d been listening in, flushed just a little. *Er, it wasn’t a test, though?* He’d just thought it was a good hiding spot. He rubbed the back of his neck, then shrugged. It wasn’t like everyone could understand the immensity of trash, after all, and Korii was completely right about his reasoning for making this his hiding spot—not to mention that he also got an instant power boost if the Empress found his hiding spot, and he was forced to burn this hiding spot and go all out in battle. The hideout was literally built of his fuel, after all. It was like putting a pyromancer in a wooden house, except he wouldn’t harm himself by burning it all down.

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He only had to crawl for a little further over the earth before he found more of the old trash. Rhys absorbed it, hollowing out the inside of the shell of a trash heap he’d created. He climbed to his knees, then his feet. Little rays of sunshine shone through the chinks overhead where the trash didn’t fit perfectly together, and the breeze blew freely through the newly-hollowed space. It wasn’t a perfect shelter, but it would do for now. They could always fix up the holes later.

The others joined him within, staring around at the trash shell overhead in amazement. Rhys gestured them forward. There was no time to waste. “Anyone who doesn’t have a core, line up over here. Those who do, line up over there. I’ll be taking the impurities from those who do have cores, and giving those who don’t have cores new cores. You don’t have to enter the other line after you receive your core,” he added quickly, as one

of the recruits raised her hand, “since now that I have time, I can take your impurities and give you a core all at once. After everyone is equipped, we’ll talk strategy. I suspect we’ll mostly be investigating and infiltrating for now, but I welcome any ideas from any of you.”

Korii frowned, deep concern showing on her face. At last, she spoke. “What about you, sir? Where do the impurities go once you have them?”

“Rhys. My name is Rhys. And don’t worry about that. Trade secret.” He winked, but she still didn’t look reassured.

Huh. That always worked in my superhero movies, when the hero just said something snarky and winked. He dropped the silly attitude and smiled at her. “I really do mean it. Don’t worry. Impurities only make me stronger. I know it sounds insane, but it really is true.”

She still looked unconvinced. *Come on! I went the Mary-Sue earnest and trusting route, and you still don’t believe me?* Rhys wracked his brain, trying to come up with a way to convince her without giving too much away. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust these people, but he had barely met them; he had no reason to trust or distrust them. On the other hand, even if he trusted them all intrinsically, the Empire was an overwhelming power that wasn’t afraid to use horrible means to extract information. Torture, death, even magical torture techniques that trapped the mind in an endless illusion of pain... everything was on the table. He couldn’t simply give out information about his path now, when the Empire might do anything to twist it out of them later.

Of course, he had already told some members of the Empire what his path was to their faces, but that was different. No one would believe *him* if he said his path was trash, but if someone else said his path was trash? That was totally different, and way more believable. He didn’t really get it, but it was an intrinsic feature of human psychology. Just like how if someone told him the ice cream they made was good, he wouldn’t believe them, but if someone else told him the ice cream that person made was good, well, now that was worth checking out, the news of his path would sound far more legitimate out of anyone else’s mouth, so he couldn’t simply let it get around.

He thought for a few more seconds, then snapped his fingers. “Do you remember those knives I threw?”

She nodded, slowly. “Those were...?”

“They were made of impurities. I use your impurities to make knives like that. They’re highly effective, even on high-Tier enemies. I’d share them, but they’re difficult to wield... if you aren’t highly skilled at the right technique, you’ll end up giving yourself impurities as much as the target. But even so, they’re highly valuable weapons for me, and they let me fight over my Tier.”

Korii's eyes widened. Her head bobbed up and down. "I understand now. I apologize for drawing out information on your secret technique." She turned and glared at the other mages. "We heard nothing."

"Not a thing," Blake vowed. The other mages shook their heads as well, resolute expressions on their faces.

Rhys raised his eyebrows. *It's not a secret technique... whatever.* It wasn't as if information on that particular technique was valuable, since there was almost no way to keep him from using it even if the opponent knew how it functioned, but if they were going to treat it as a secret, he wasn't going to stop them. It was always better to have two aces up your sleeve than one. Besides, if any of them did get targeted, they'd think of this moment as his 'most secret technique,' and give the interrogators useless information. At the end of the day, it was nothing but beneficial to him.

"If that's resolved, then come!" he ordered, and the mages quickly fell into two lines.

One after another, the coreless mages stepped forward. Rhys gave them a new core, drawing out their impurities at the same time. To his surprise, he did have enough energy, but on the other hand, he had absorbed nearly the entire prisons' worth of guards' energy. He frowned, a little confused, then realized: it was hard for him to quantify how much energy he had, now, because some of it pushed out into that hole in his core. He had a nearly infinite energy storage space now, but at the cost of being unable to easily gauge how much energy he'd stored. Rhys considered, then shrugged. Of all the tradeoffs in the world, it certainly wasn't the worst one. Infinite anything in return for a finite anything was worthwhile, and when the finite thing was an inability to judge capacity unless he seriously focused, well, it basically didn't have a drawback!

Except for whatever that shapeless monster thing is that's lurking back there... Rhys waved the thought away. It was fine. He was way too tiny to be worth that thing's time. Maybe in a few tiers, he'd have to worry about it, but for now, he was fine, perfectly fine. Yeah. It definitely wasn't a problem lurking in the back of his mind at all times, that he just couldn't stop thinking about.

Rhys sighed. *I've gotta figure out more about that thing.* If he knew it, he wouldn't fear it, even if it was overwhelmingly powerful, since understanding was the first step to defeating. If he didn't understand it, all he could use against it was raw power, but if he understood it, he could figure out its weak points and how to destroy it.

There was nothing for it. He'd have to find a library (and hopefully, a particular library cat). But first...

He looked at his newly assembled mages and smiled. "Anyone have any grand strategies?"

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

