

God of Trash

- Chapter 111. Grand Strategy

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The mages looked amongst one another. At last, Korii stepped forward. “We await your orders, s... Rhys.”

Rhys nodded, deeply pleased. Nothing quite like basking in the real-life playout of a trashy trope, the overly servile underling who struggled not to call the main character ‘sir.’ Not that he had main character energy—no, that was Bast—but even so, what a nice feeling. Trash like him only got to experience this kind of setup once in a blue moon, and if he thought about it, usually it was only when a bit villain set up a gauntlet of foes for the hero to charge through. He pinched his chin, considering, then nodded. Is that was so, then so be it. He’d be the Empress’s bit villain. Every little thing that forced her and her army to focus just a little more energy on keeping the peace, that forced her to expend resources on keeping land she’d already taken, was a little thing in favor of casting her off. He didn’t expect to personally take down the Empress himself, when he was trash, but he was quite happy being one of those people, when the heroes stood up and gave their speech, and said, ‘...and everyone else who contributed—every little thing helped,’ and know that despite the fact that the heroes never knew he existed and would never know, nonetheless, it was him they meant when they said that, that was enough for him.

In other words, he wasn’t mounting an insurgency, or anything like that, though it’d be a sad insurgency with some ten-odd people. No, his goal was to be a thorn in the Empress’s side, to prickle her insistently and irritate her until she could focus on nothing else, to the detriment of her actual goals.

He realized that casting himself as the mosquito meant he was likely to get slapped, but that was fine. What were his other options? To throw himself under somebody? That wasn’t his attitude. He liked his freedom, and though an actual army might be a better effort in the end, he wasn’t suited to regimented military training, or regimented military work. Besides, he was doing this to retain his personal freedom. If he threw away his personal freedom to take on the Empress, all he’d done was give up on his ideals in order to fight someone he disliked, and he could never get behind that kind of thinking. He’d throw away his ideals, sure, but perhaps... perhaps freedom was the one he couldn’t let go. The hope at the bottom of Pandora’s box.

Running, he'd already thrown away. He wasn't going to run. This was a battle that must be fought, not fled from, because to flee it meant to abandon all hope of a different future. If the Alliance was retreating to fight another day, then that was fine, but there had been three years of another days by now. He couldn't rely on anyone else to fight his battles for him. If he was going to stand up and hold his ground, then he did it now or never.

Rhys lifted his head at last, his mind made up. He looked at the mages before him. "Just to confirm, but are you all ready to give up your lives in our quest? I can't guarantee any of you will make it out alive. No... in fact, it's very likely that, by this time next year, there won't be two of us left to return to this space."

Some of the mages glanced at one another at that, murmuring amongst themselves. Rhys steeled himself. They might be less a mosquito, and more a single flea. Still, he pressed on, because this was the difference between him and the Empress: free will.

"If you want to flee, if you would prefer to take your chances and run back to the Alliance, I'll have to take the core I gave you back, but I won't hold anything against you. This is your last chance. If you don't say no here, then consider yourself dead, already given to the cause."

Korii stepped forward first. "To run is to surrender, and I will never again surrender to the Empire."

Blake stepped forward next. "No matter what filth we have to crawl through, I'm at your side."

One after another, the other mages stepped forward, resolve shining on each face, and Rhys realized that he'd been foolish. They already knew what he was asking them, and they had already decided to fight to the death, if need be. It would be rude of him to keep asking—no, even asking this much had already been rude. He bowed, understanding. "Then let me lay forth our strategy."

His plan was simple. Everyone focused on regaining their strength, whatever shape that strength had taken. Whatever they needed, Rhys would procure for them. He was pretty sure his strength didn't register to other mages unless he deliberately released his aura, since it was based on trash, and he no longer had a proper core, so he was the most mobile of all of them. They would focus on techniques to disguise and hide their auras. When every one of them had regained as much strength as they could, and could disguise their auras, then they would risk their first attacks—ambushes, as though by bandits.

Not everyone knew aura hide or disguise techniques, although apparently they were relatively common among mages, especially higher Tier ones. Those who were willing to share their techniques would teach the others, but Rhys knew himself how hard it

could be to learn a technique that wasn't suited to you (like fireballs). Still, that amounted to one thing, at the end of the day:

Rhys needed to visit a library.

The rest of the day was spent meditating, for the other mages. As for Rhys, he spent it coercing some old trashed robes into a new piece of clothing. His hair, which had been ragged and filthy in the prison, he combed out with a broken comb and some Trash Intent, then pulled back into a half-up, half-down style popular with men in this region. It wasn't as good as dyeing or cutting it, or better yet, a wig, but on the other hand, the Empress and her cronies had only seen him with his hair in a ponytail, so hopefully this was enough to slide past... not that he expected anyone to remember him, save a single white-haired soldier apprentice. And what was the chance he'd run into him on his first day back in civilization?

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Rather than smearing his face, he headed out to the river they'd passed in the forest to wash off all the gunk from being a prisoner, and get the trash funk out of his new clothes in one—though of course he drew in the impurities first. From the filth, a cleaner him emerged. He stretched, dressed, and as the sun rose over the horizon, set off into the forest, rounding the city to come at it from the opposite side from the prison. He encountered a road after some time and walked along it, joining the merchants, pilgrims, and other wanderers on the road this early.

To his surprise, some of the merchants had mana signatures. Thinking about it, it only made sense; the army needed suppliers, and the suppliers would have to acquire and guard magical supplies, which meant fighting beasts (from his limited readings of Az's holdings, beasts usually guarded any kind of magical resource, if beasts themselves were not the magical resource) and fending off bandits, and especially out here this far on the border, they couldn't have squashed every magic-wielding bandit. Plus, the merchants would have to keep up with the front lines to supply logistics support to the army... well, merchants at that level were probably considered part of her military, but nonetheless, someone had to acquire the raw materials, and it seemed the Empress had been forced to acknowledge reality there and realize that she required specialists with mana who knew where and how to harvest magical goods, who didn't necessarily have the ability or desire to join the military; and besides, forcing every merchant to abide by military regimens would leave big gaps in the army's logistics, whenever x merchant who was the only one who knew how to find item y had to go participate in the battle and left the entire army without item y. He felt a bit disappointed at the discovery—his group's attacks would be less laughably easy—but on the other hand, it presented opportunities. It meant that the other members of the resistance could enter town, as long as he figured out what it was that marked merchants as allowed to have mana.

He casually looked over the merchants as he walked, and noticed they all wore a small white badge at the front of their robes, ringed in miniscule gold text. Was that it? Were there any secrets to it? He wasn't about to hare off and kill a merchant just to find out their badges were attuned to their mana and unusable except by that merchant. Patience was of the utmost importance right now. Move too quickly, and he'd get caught. Better to ride quietly, blend in, and slowly figure out how to acquire what he needed—and what he needed to acquire.

A gate loomed. Rhys joined the line of those seeking entry and braced himself to face scrutiny, but the guard just gave him a cursory glance and waved him in. It seemed they hadn't heard of the prisoners breaking out of the mine... or perhaps they had, but Rhys in his clean clothes and fresh appearance simply didn't meet their expectations of a prisoner. Whatever it was, he walked easily inside, and found himself in a massive city.

It was the largest one he'd faced yet. It must have been home to mages at some point, because there was an ancient castle upon a hill that was totally apart from the rest of the city. The castle had recently been expanded, with sparkling fresh white walls sprawling out from the hill and into the city, and parapets and towers that stretched upward, offering long arms into the sky for the many airships to dock. Most of the airships were gleaming white, of the Empire, but some were colorful; perhaps from countries friendly with the Empire, outside of its reach? No matter how big and sprawling a country was, or how grand its conquest ambitions, there would always be countries it couldn't conquer, or hadn't conquered yet. Rhys noted that as well; they could also become 'foreigners,' though that was riskier than becoming merchants. Foreigners drew eyes and questions in ways that blending in as a merchant wouldn't.

Away from the castle and its impressive multi-level airship dock, houses stretched in all directions, some of them grand, others simply large, barracks more than houses, and most of them, the largest quantity, low and squalorous, barely a step above slums, only a step above slums because there were actual slums beyond their borders. The walls separated the low-rank houses from the true slums, with the slums open to whatever lurked beyond the walls. He looked upward, toward the finer houses. If there was a library, it would be up there. He wasn't sure if a 'mortal' like him would be able to enter it, but that was fine. He was fine with a little breaking and entering, if that was what it came to.

Despite Az's pledge to escape before the Empress's arrival, Rhys couldn't help but find himself hoping he found a familiar library cat out on the streets of the city. He kept his eyes open as he closed in on the upper part of the city just in case.

The houses grew nicer around him, until finally, he came to a second wall. This one was taller and nicer than the first, and the guards appeared more attentive. Ahead of him, a woman in fine robes entered, and Rhys followed naturally after her.

Two spears materialized in front of his nose, barring his way. The guards glared. "No entry to mortals," one rumbled.

“Sorry! I must have gotten lost,” Rhys apologized, and turned back. He walked calmly away until he was out of the guards’ sight, then turned, following the streets alongside the wall until he found a segment of the wall all alone, unattended at the back of a now-dead-end alley. He eyed it, reaching out a hand to sense it. As expected, there was a barrier that would not only prevent his entry, but, if the way it pulsed was any indication, also alert the guards when he tried in the air over the wall.

There’s more than one way past a barrier. Rhys knelt, examining the ground.

As he pressed his hand to the earth, a soft cough sounded out from behind him. Rhys startled and whirled, only to find no one there. On guard, he looked left and right, searching for the source of the sound. He didn’t want to extend his aura here, in the city, so looking was the limit of what he could do, and he found nothing.

Another cough. He looked around again, and finally found the source of it. His eyes widened. “You!”

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Chapter 112. Seeking a Cat and Finding a Mouse

Rhys stared. “Mouse?”

The gray-brown haired girl adjusted her big round glasses and gave him a nervous smile, nodding. He looked her up and down, then realized he sensed mana from her. Instinctively, he jumped back, only to pause and squint. Mouse wasn’t wearing a uniform. Sure, neither had the woman he’d seen enter the upper area, but he was sure the Empire had nobility and everything that came with it, and doubtless an intelligentsia and upper class, which that woman probably fit into somewhere. Mouse, on the other hand, was an enemy. She would have been recruited into the lowest cadre of soldiers, but instead, she stood before him, wearing the same filthy robes she’d worn back in Purple Dawn Academy.

He shook his head, trying to shake off his shock. “How’d you evade the Empire?”

“Er, j-just like how I did to you just now. They, um, overlooked me. It’s like what you said, I just focused on being unseen and drawing power from that, and they never saw me. Everyone else got rounded up, but not me.” She gave him a nervous glance, then looked down. “T-this is the first time I’ve t-talked to someone since.”

Rhys rubbed the back of his head. This was suspicious, insanely suspicious, but on the other hand, he himself had vouched for Mouse's unseeable attributes, and neither had he seen her, at Tier 3, until she'd chosen to reveal herself. The ones looking for students had been no higher than Tier 3, and he could believe that some of the students had been overlooked in the rush to collect everyone, let alone the girl whose special attribute was being overlooked. Sure, they might have gone back and done a more complete second sweep, but by then, some of the students could have run, or hid, or... whatever Mouse did. He nodded at her, deciding to try her out. "How'd you end up here?"

Without a word, Mouse turned and pointed. Rhys followed her finger. On the mountain looming over the town, from the direction he'd entered from, the remains of Purple Dawn Academy crumbled away. The once-proud castle was shattered, and the walls laid in ruins. Already, the town that had been around it crumbled into the forest, overcome by new growth.

That answers that. He shook his head. "How have you survived so long here, all alone?"

"I just stayed quiet and did nothing." Mouse glanced down, shuffling her feet. "I felt so powerless, watching everyone else... but if I acted, they would have found me. This was the only way to save myself, hiding among the people, blending in like a nobody..."

Her voice was laden with guilt. No wonder. She was the only survivor of the Academy, the sole escapee. Anyone would feel guilty from that, let alone someone as shy and introverted as Mouse. Rhys sighed deeply and ran his hair back. Trust her? No?

If she's on our side, she's too valuable to ignore, he decided. He'd start by extending his trust just enough to test her. He wasn't leading her back to his hideout, but he'd test things out for a little longer. If she tried to betray him or give him away, he'd kill her and forget about this, but if she helped, if she showed her commitment, then there was no reason to keep her out of the group. In fact, she could be a massive asset, with how easily she could escape detection. As long as she was actually on their side, he couldn't let her go, but if she wasn't, the damage she could do was equally immense. Hence why he absolutely had to test her.

"Can you get me to the other side of this wall?" Rhys asked.

Mouse considered. She glanced over at the gate. "I... can get through, but take someone else?"

"It's fine. Just think of me as an extension of yourself," Rhys said confidently. He didn't actually have that much confidence in her, but with her type, the more confidence he exuded, the better she would perform. Sure, he was deliberately pressuring her into high performance, but if he was right, she was the high-tension type-A kind of person who'd respond well to a little pressure.

As for his advice... to put it bluntly, it was bullshit. That wasn't the important part, though. The important part was to say something, anything, so that she would challenge her understanding of the situation and either take it to heart, or realize that what he was saying was bullshit, and self-criticize enough to figure out what she actually needed to do.

Mouse blinked up at him. "Will that work?"

"Sure!" Rhys said. *Who knows?* He prepared his very best smile for the guards. Usually, he could make the same mistake twice before anyone really started kicking up the effort to consider him deeply, but he had the feeling he'd really have to turn up the charm for these guards if Mouse did fail.

On the other hand, this was exactly the test he needed. If she turned traitor and tried to turn him in, no harm, no foul, he killed everyone he could and hoofed it back to the hideout to find a new disguise, a new hideout, and a new city to fight from. It was risky, but the only person he risked was himself, and given that he could burst his power and immediately hide without any risk of exposing himself via mana or auras, he was the best person to test this theory. If she didn't, it didn't mean he was home free and he could trust her, but it was a big step in the right direction.

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Once more, they approached the guards. Mouse gripped Rhys's arm. The closer they got, the tighter she gripped him, her nails digging into his flesh even through his imbued trash robes. One of the guards stared into the middle distance, his eyes completely glazed over, not paying a single lick of attention to what was before him. The other one looked at the ground, eyes flickering in a pattern, counting the floor tiles or daisies or something. As the two of them approached, the second guard glanced up.

Mouse's hands tightened. She scooted closer to Rhys, all but hiding behind him. Her heart beat wildly, and as close as she hugged to him, Rhys could feel her heart beat against his arm.

The guard's eyes locked on to them, and then unlocked. His gaze wandered away, back to the daisies.

Mouse took a deep breath, gulping it down. She stood frozen, but Rhys dragged her onward. Who knew how long her skill would work, when she barely understood it and could only activate it at random anyways?

They passed through the gate. Rhys felt something pass over them, but even that thing found them disinteresting, and let them move on without notifying anything, as far as he could tell. There was no pulse of mana, no change in the gate or barrier's aura.

Damn. Mouse's skill is impressive.

"You uh... you notice something?" the daisy-counting guard asked abruptly.

Mouse jolted. She trembled, deeply afraid, but for all that she was even more frightened, her aura only diminished.

"Huh? Nope. You seeing ghosts again?" the other guard replied.

The daisy-counter wrinkled his nose. "Shut up."

They passed around the corner, and finally, Mouse gasped a relieved breath and released Rhys's arm. "S-sorry about that. I've never done two people before, and I... I wasn't sure..."

"No, thank you, Mouse. That was amazing," Rhys said honestly. Erasing her own presence was one thing, but making the two of them almost invisible to the guards? That was incredible. He glanced at her. "You've come a long way in the last three years."

"I, um. It might sound weird, but I thought about what you said a lot. About leaning in to what works for me, even if it doesn't make sense to anyone else. At first, I had a lot of close calls, but, um, you were right. T-this, I think it's... it might be, my path. And the more I, um, practice it, the better I get... not just at blending in and being overlooked, but at everything." Mouse glanced at him, looking for confirmation of some sort.

Rhys nodded, a smile on his face. He patted her shoulder. "That's what I was talking about. I'm glad to see you've come so far."

The fact that she had a path, no, *her* path, reassured him almost as much as her successfully getting him past the guards had. Anyone who received a core from the Empress received the Empress's path as well. If Mouse was secretly on the Empress's side, then either the Empress had made an exception for one inoffensive, non-stand-out, wallflower of a mage who worked hard to be as unexceptional as possible... or Mouse wasn't on the Empress's side.

Her loss. Rhys nodded at Mouse. "Do you know where the library is?"

"Do I know where the library is? Do I know..." Mouse giggled and adjusted her glasses, and for a second, Rhys felt a spark of fear go through him, as someone so much less obsessed in the face of an immense obsession.

Is this what it feels like when I go on about trash? he wondered.

She laughed, a laugh that turned into a high-pitched wheeze, then nodded, turning 'normal' again. "Yeah. I know where the library is."

Mouse did, in fact, know where the library was, but if she hadn't, Rhys was pretty sure he could have found it himself. It was immense, with a massive marble façade, and it was conveniently labeled at the top: Her Majesty the Empress' Library. Rhys snorted at the sight. The Empress moved fast... on typical dictator bullshit, anyways. Why did dictators love seeing their names on everything so much? *Bunch'a useless narcissists*, Rhys thought, shaking his head, and followed Mouse into the library.

There was nothing barring them from entering, no check, no barrier, nothing. The wall and barrier on the exterior seemed to be the filter, and once they were inside, they were presumed to be mages, and therefore permitted into the library. Whatever nobility the Empire had, or maybe military mages out of uniform, or whatever—whatever it was, the fusty old lady librarian barely glanced up as the two of them entered. Rhys peered around, hopeful, but there was no sign of his favorite library cat.

"What are you looking for?" Mouse whispered.

"Techniques to hide one's aura. Like what you can do, but an inferior version that anyone can use. A skill, ideally, mediated through the System." If it was a skill, then it was accessible to anyone. Anyone could learn it, with enough effort, as long as their path didn't prohibit it... like him and fireballs.

Mouse thought to herself, then nodded. She went to scurry off.

"Wait. What about eldritch things?" Rhys asked.

Mouse frowned. "What?"

Rhys coughed. *Right. Why would they know that word here?* "Unknowable, immensely powerful beings outside the realm of ordinary human understanding or standard reality."

"Oh... you mean the void. It's a myth. One theory of what lies beyond this world, beyond Ascension."

"Ascension?"

Mouse nodded. She laughed a little, then leaned in. "There's an upper limit to magehood. Tier 1, 2, 3... eventually, you reach Tier 10, and that's it, officially, but according to the myths, that *isn't* it. Once mages get too powerful, they ascend. There's no record of anyone actually ascending. If ascents have happened, they haven't happened in the last ten thousand years of recorded history. Some people still believe in it, but it's mostly considered a myth. Those who believe think there's something beyond the Immortal stage, a new world. After all, Tier 10, or Immortal, is only Immortal in name. The lifespan of an Immortal is immense, but it is not truly endless. If there is such a thing as true immortality, it lies beyond this world, beyond Ascension."

Her eyes glittered with excitement, then dulled. She glanced down and shrugged. “But they’re just myths. Fiction. Everyone told me to stop reading those old books and scrolls and focus on my studies.”

If that was the case, then there was a big scary hunk of fiction floating around in the darkness outside his core. Rhys nodded. “You look for those disguise and hiding techniques. Point me toward those myths.”

“Why?” Mouse asked. “I-I mean, I get wanting to hide... of course I do, I’m me—but why do you want to know about a bunch of bedtime stories?”

Against his own will, Rhys broke into a grin. “Nothing better than a good piece of ‘useless’ fiction.”

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

Chapter 113. Trash Fics and Hidden Techniques

Mouse scurried off, and Rhys headed off to the second story of the library, toward where she’d indicated the void myths awaited him. He kept his head on a swivel, but remained disappointed. No library cats, tuxedo or otherwise.

Rhys sighed. Az had said he’d leave before the Empire got here. The cat had no reason to go back on his word. Although the Empire clearly kept ‘useful’ books, and a few useless myths, he’d seen repressive regimes in his world, and he wasn’t shocked that the Empress burned Az’s favorite smutty fictions, and likely many other books the librarian considered useful, especially when Az seemed like a one-of-each kind of guy, who kept even fake, truly trashy manuals that taught their users how to ruin their potential magehood, but nothing else. Every book was valuable to Az, not just the good, valuable, useful, moral ones. Even if a book ran counter to everything he knew and loved, he would still collect it and share it, if only to show the world an example of what not to do. It was an extreme attitude on Az’s part, but, as a fellow obsessive, albeit one focused on a different topic, it was one Rhys could respect.

Perhaps as expected for books that even Mouse deemed ‘useless,’ the section on Asension and the void was made up of a handful of books. Rhys almost overlooked the entire section, that was how small it was. He picked up every book that even vaguely mentioned the topics, even though he could already sense that most of them would be bereft of information. All of the titles were cautionary, warning the waylaid mage from pursuing the fairy tale of Ascension, laughing at the concept of the void as they worked

hard to debunk it. Still, there was value to be found there. To debunk something, one had to explain what they debunked. To warn someone off, one had to describe what they cautioned against. Just as he'd read the fake manuals to figure out what they deliberately missaid, he could read these and piece apart what they said and didn't say about Ascension, to pick out what little tiny scraps of information remained, and figure out from the contrapositive what the truth was.

It was disappointing, but it was better than nothing. Rhys pulled out the final volume and added it to his pile.

Thunk.

Startled, Rhys turned back. A small red volume, just big enough to fit in his hand, laid on the floor. It had been tucked behind the other books—perhaps deliberately, or perhaps pushed to the back accidentally due to its diminutive size. It had no writing on the cover or spine, and when Rhys opened it, he caught sight of a cramped handwriting, filling every page edge-to-edge.

He leaned in. Was it about the void, or Ascension?

BAM! The library's doors flew open. Rhys turned, gazing over the nearby balcony. A dozen mages in white uniforms strolled in, laughing and chatting, about Rhys or Mouse's age. At their rear, a powerful mage, at least Tier 4, if not higher, walked inside, wearing a finer uniform with glittering epaulets and shining metals, gold braid lighting up the white. Interestingly, Rhys remembered the Empress's personal ship's guards wore only white, with no adornment or medals. This woman was powerful, but she seemed to be of a lower class of powerful than the ones the Empress truly trusted. *A noble?* For the first time, Rhys found himself wondering about the Empire's nobility. The Empress seemed dead-set against it, but at the end of the day, it took time for mages to grow. Years. Decades. Centuries. Since she'd taken over, it had been centuries, but how many people could ascend to Tier 4 in that time, let alone higher? Bast, Ev... and reluctantly, he had to admit, himself, were exceptions, considered talents among talents. Cynog and his ilk were more common, where they would have spent a century to reach Tier 3.

The point was, even if the Empress burned it all down and remade it anew, at the end of the day, she and her personal favorite talents-among-talents couldn't be everywhere, running every part of the country with an iron fist all at once. The nobles who had existed before her rule still existed after she took over. Sure, she had the ability to remove cores and replace them, but the existing noble mages would have not only their magical strength, but also their logistical strength, the stability of the place they historically had ruled over, and the strength of their internal alliances. If every mage in her Empire over Tier 4 or 5 resisted and fought back, as they almost certainly would if she threatened their personal magehoods and paths, she would still have her hands full fighting internal battles... if she could win at all. On the other hand, if she looked the other way a few times, and let a few trusted nobles, ones who likely fought on her side

during her takeover or pledged themselves to her cause early, retain their cores, and therefore their magical prowess, and logistical, social, and political networks in and out of the country, she could skip a lot of the internal strife and get right to what she wanted to do: conquest.

The Empress was insanely powerful, to the point Rhys couldn't even quantify what Tier she was, but at the same time, she wasn't the only insanely powerful mage in her country. There were bound to be a few hidden dragons and crouching tigers out in the hinterlands. She could either live and let live, or fight to the death and risk the death of her country in the process. When those distant mages had lived for untold aeons, and seen the rise and fall of countless countries and conquerors, not only was there a very real potential that she would fail to beat them, but she would be rubbing the cat the wrong way for no reason, when those very powerful mages were happy to close their eyes to her crimes, as long as they, and the things, people, and clans they cared about, remained untouched.

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Of course, he didn't know that either of these cases were true, but looking at the Tier 4-or-so mage in her flashy uniform and her pompous, no-one-can-touch-me attitude, Rhys was pretty sure he'd nailed it. Between the two, she looked like the type to belong to a noble family who'd backed the Empress from the start and received favoritism as a result, rather than someone who had the backing of some unknown ultra-powerful ancestor, especially since she was powerful in her own right, but Rhys couldn't know that.

Everything up until that guess had been extrapolation from his basic understanding of politics in his world, and how these kinds of dictatorships usually worked—in short, it was his understanding of how basic corruption and nepotism worked, and how idealist dictators who thought they could get away with anything fell for the same traps that had made them hate their predecessors and seek to replace them as soon as they came into power themselves, and realized why so much corruption and nepotism existed in the government. But as for guessing this woman's personal situation? That was a shot in the dark.

Her gaze immediately shot to the second floor balcony, and she and Rhys' eyes met. Instantly, she frowned. "Miss Sasent, I believe I reserved the library for my students today. What is this slackard doing here?"

The librarian looked up. Rhys smiled and waved. "I'll see myself out." He turned and swept away, as if he had every right to be in the library. Mentally, he panicked. This was exactly what he didn't need, getting seen this soon after the breakout, by someone who would probably remember him, and not only that, take it up with someone else. He mapped the quickest exit in his head, but he only knew the front door as a way out, which forced him to pass by the students and the teacher in close confines. What did he

do then? He was far enough away that unless the teacher scanned him, she wouldn't necessarily notice that he lacked an aura, but that close, he'd need to project an aura, since it would be more suspicious to lack one, but if she remembered it, and later sensed him again... ugh. It was a mess.

Stop panicking. It's fine. There was no way that mage knew his signature. He knew he hadn't seen her at Purple Dawn or in the mines. This, too, was a section of the town for mages. He was supposed to be a mage here. Sure, it meant liability if she encountered him outside and he had no aura... but it wasn't as if a single brush with his aura would automatically get him identified as a prisoner. As far as he knew, the Empire didn't have a way to distribute the auras of wanted mages. As far as he knew, the Empire didn't know he was alive. This was bad, yes, doubtlessly bad, but in terms of absolute badness, from peachy-keen to *oh fuck*, this situation was really only medium bad. It could be far worse.

He just had to walk ten feet from a high-tier enemy mage who had every right and motivation to kill him, on the off-chance the Empire had released his face as an escapee and she knew who he was. But it could be far worse! It could be! He couldn't think of worse things right now, but he was sure, in moments that weren't these, he probably could think of worse things.

Rhys gulped and headed for the opposite stairs as if he were heading to his execution. *Maybe I should've been the one to go look at hiding techniques...*

"Rhys!"

He turned to find Mouse right beside him, her glasses reflecting the dim sunlight in the library, and startled. "Where'd you come from?"

"I—I've been here for a while, didn't you notice?"

Rhys cleared his throat. He gave her a serious look and a nod. "No, and you should be proud of that." *It's not I who should be embarrassed that I didn't see you... haha...*

She tugged his sleeve unobtrusively. "This way. There's a back exit."

Rhys deflated, all the tension leaving him. "Thank the gods. Thank you, Mouse. Please."

She nodded and led the way, keeping a hold on his sleeve so he wouldn't lose track of her again. Moving quickly, darting across the open spaces and clinging tight to the curves, she led him through the library, down the stairs, then down another set into the basements, then down another to a dank, mildew-scented space full of forgotten books that Rhys was pretty certain Az would go insane with rage about, then mad with excitement over the prospect of lost knowledge. Even he was a little curious, but now wasn't the time. Mouse tugged his sleeve again, and he followed her once more,

twisting and twining through the innards of the library that Mouse seemed to know like the back of her hand.

“Spend a lot of time here?” Rhys asked.

Mouse glanced at him, then bobbed her head in a yes. “I’ve spent most of the last three years hiding in the library. I think there’s depths of it that even the Empire doesn’t know about.”

Rhys raised his brows. *Oh?* If that was the case, then wasn’t it still possible a certain library cat could be somewhere in its bowels with them? “Say, Mouse, have you ever encountered—”

“You’re going to want to not breathe for this next part,” she warned him, and bent, peeling back a rug to reveal a round metal pane set in the floor. She lifted it, and despite her warning not to breathe, the scent still hit Rhys like a bowling ball: the unmistakable, hideous musk of the sewers.

“It’s... it’s the only way out that they won’t be able to find you if they go searching,” she said apologetically.

Rhys rubbed his smarting eyes and swallowed his vomit, and began to smile. “Sewers, huh?”

Effluent. Excrement. The things humans pushed out of themselves were nothing but big old lumps of trash, if he thought about it. Hell, filth could be used as a synonym for trash, showing just how closely the two were related. If he absorbed all this—if he *could* absorb all this, how much more powerful would he get?

Misunderstanding, Mouse trembled. “It’s really not that bad. And it’s better than nothing. Um, I guess if you’re not that scared, there’s a window that—”

Rhys lifted his hand. “It’s perfect, Mouse.”

“Oh! Then, um, shall we?”

Still grinning, Rhys hopped out of the library and plunged into the sewage.

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

Chapter 114. The Sewers and What Dwells Within

The stench was worse than he could possibly have imagined. Even to someone who was used to trash, who spent all day scrambling over garbage pits, this was something else, another realm of disgusting olfactory experience entirely. He could feel it soaking into his pores and newly-forged robes, and immediately knew that he wouldn't be free of the stink until he figured out how to fully absorb and process this reeking mess of filth. It was just that virulent, that unstoppable.

Mouse followed after him, carefully climbing down to the side of the sewers, then turning back to replace the cover on the manhole. She turned and gasped. "Rhys! Get out of the sewage! There's things in there that'll kill even mages!"

"What do you mean?" Rhys asked.

Mouse gaped, her jaw working, but no sound emerging. As she worked on that, Rhys turned to the trash. There was no time like the present.

Experimentally, he drew in, but to his surprise, aside from the sludge immediately around him, nothing moved. He frowned and tried again. Once more, the filth entered him, then stopped, but this time, he was watching, and noticed a tiny ring of fresh water appear around him, only to immediately dissolve back into the sewage. His eyes widened. *Right! Sewage is washed away with clean water, and even disregarding that, sewage is inherently part clean water!* When he drew in the trash, the part that had been thrown away entered him—the filth, the shit and everything else, but the whole mixture wasn't trash. The pure water emerged, separate from the trash. Without something to keep it away from the filth, it immediately vanished back into the filth, but that wasn't good enough for Rhys. It meant he had to pulse his garbage absorption rather than absorb it smoothly, and that didn't sit right with him. It was highly inefficient, not only for absorbing trash, but also because of the pure water he generated getting wasted, one, and diluting his trash, two. He needed something to move the pure water away from him.

He could just use Trash Manipulation, he supposed, but something about that felt dirty. Plus, it took more energy. It didn't feel right that he had to use two skills to absorb a fluid form of trash, that should, hypothetically, be easier to absorb.

"The diseases!" Mouse said at last.

"Aren't we immune to them?" Rhys replied. Mages were also immune to shitting, eating, and pissing, so hypothetically, this was all mortal refuse.

She shook her head hard. "The Empire has a few dragons and several spirit beasts on their side—you know, large magic beasts capable of great feats?"

“Some can transform into humans?” Rhys guessed.

“Some can, but those who chose bodily power instead of human transformation become massively strong instead. And unlike the beasts who choose human transformation, or human mages, they never lose the need to eat and, um...”

“Shit,” Rhys finished for her.

She nodded. “They dump it in the sewage, just like any other shit, but it’s dangerous, to mortals and mages alike. It can sicken even high Tier mages!”

“Is that so?” Rhys asked.

“Yes! So get out of the sewage!” she insisted, offering him a reluctant hand.

Rhys strode forward through the sewage, absorbing it as he went. It was a manual way to overcome the pure water gap, but one that he didn’t mind. “No, I think I’m good.”

“Rhys!” Mouse cried, exasperated.

Disease Resist 1

Rhys chuckled, not entirely surprised to see the skill pop after her warning. He coughed a little, then sneezed, and his stomach seized, but he kept going. He circulated his mana through his body, focusing on empowering his white blood cells, reinforcing them, helping them find new targets, and attack the right filth with an energy and vigor they were heretofore unable to bring to bear. He wasn’t going to stop at a measly single level in resist, and the trash star was hungry. It had diminished somewhat due to his re-coring of his fellow mages; he’d had to supplement the creation of their cores with his own mana a few times, and sometimes, he’d had to rebuild more than just their core, and those parts he was required to fuel with his own mana, the stolen energy unsuited to be reshaped cleanly into anything but a new core. He was sure he could process it into ordinary mana via the trash star and be fine, but as it was, it wasn’t a bad thing to have some core-making energy sitting around, either.

The sewage burned clean and bright, and the trash star accepted it with a hunger he’d rarely seen outside of ideally combustable trash types. Despite Mouse’s continued exhortations, which he mostly drowned out, he walked on, leaving a wake of clear water behind him. Disease Resist leveled up a few more times, and he stopped feeling the side effects of the filth.

At the same time, a little scrap of an idea manifested in his mind. He looked at Mouse. “Do you have a potion?”

“You need a potion? Here!” She thrust one at him, all too happy to offer it up.

Rhys looked at the full vial. “Er, you wouldn’t have an empty one on you, would you?”

“Huh? No.”

He looked at it again, then shrugged and downed it. Never hurt to top up on a few more potion-impurities. Taking the empty vial, he ran it through the water, scooping up the worst of the filth. Not only that; as he scooped it up, he compressed it, concentrating it into something worse, something more potent, something more virulent. He filtered out the ‘pure’ filth, only inviting in the diseased filth, the stuff that attacked his mage-level system. Once he had a sample of a type of disease, he stopped letting it in and searched for another disease.

It was a concept he’d learned of through trashy horror manga: a bug jar. Pack a bunch of poisonous insects into a small jar, and the survivor, the one that killed and ate all the others, was imbued with not only a more powerful toxin, but also a curse. Of course, these were diseases, and he didn’t expect them to suddenly mutate into a curse, but the idea of taking a bunch of dangerous things and making them compete to become the most dangerous appealed to him. Besides, when it came down to it, he was fighting a massive force, one many times the size of his. If he spread a mage-affecting virus through them, it should absolutely shut them down. They had doctors, he was sure, healers, whatever, but were their healers versed in communicable diseases, when most mages considered themselves immune to disease? He chuckled darkly under his breath, imagining the effect of loosing a virus upon a force entirely unused to dealing with disease of any sort, let alone a virus he’d deliberately made as dangerous as possible.

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“W-what are you laughing about?” Mouse asked nervously.

“Oh, just thinking about how the Geneva Convention doesn’t exist here.”

“The Gen... what?”

Rhys waved his hand. “Don’t worry about it. How much further do we have to go?”

“Not much further. We’re almost back,” Mouse assured him. “Are you sure you still want to walk in the sewage?”

“Yep.” Rhys took another step, and his foot slipped on something at the bottom of the sewer. He fell forward, his face descending at speed toward the green-brown sludge.

Mouse screeched in horror and fear. Rhys stumbled forward another step and caught himself, seconds before the gunk entered his every orifice. He straightened, relieved. This stuff couldn’t affect him much when he was walking along, absorbing it as he went,

but he wasn't sure he was ready for a face full of it yet. Maybe in the far future, if he had a burning desire to level up the largely-useless Disease Resist skill.

Disease Resist 4 > 5

Though its rapid progression hinted that such a training regimen might be unnecessary.

The thing continued on underfoot, completely invisible through the thick sewage, providing a continuing stumbling block. Not desiring a shit facial, Rhys fished around with his foot, hooked it under something, and pulled it to the surface.

Mouse screamed.

A woman in once-white robes floated among the sewage, her black hair pooling around her head, face-down in the water. A metal collar wrapped around her neck and connected to a chain bolted to the sewage floor; he couldn't lift her out of the sewage or pull her any higher without breaking the chain. Rhys, who'd seen plenty of death in the mines, didn't blink. He flipped her around, knowing her face might be a bowl of spaghetti at this point.

A beautiful, familiar face stared back at him, frozen in an expression of shocked disgust.

"Lira?" Rhys asked, startled. What was she doing in the sewers?

"Is she alive?" Mouse asked.

Rhys was about to retort no, obviously, she'd been at the bottom of the sewers—but then paused. She was a water spirit of some description. She obviously wasn't happy about her current domicile, if the look on her face was any indication, but weeks—years—of a watery grave wouldn't necessarily kill her. He sent a pulse of mana into her.

A faint beat of mana answered back, along with a slew of horrific impurities.

Rhys's expression hardened. Who had done this? What had Lira done, to deserve this punishment? Knowing the Empire, the answer was probably nothing, but it infuriated him anyways. It wasn't that they were close. He would describe them as acquaintances more than anything. Perhaps partners in crime, if she ever discovered something about Straw. But it was just too much. After so long watching bad things happen to good people, seeing the Empire punish for no reason, destroy lives because someone had been a little insulted, he couldn't take it anymore. He didn't know why Lira was like this, or who had done it, but honestly, it didn't matter. She could have been a stranger. The Empire's tyranny was too cruel, too all-encompassing. Even if she'd broken a law, he couldn't imagine *this* as a fitting punishment, no matter how severe the crime, and knowing Lira, even as little as he knew her, he doubted she had committed some earth-shaking crime against the Empire that he wouldn't fully agree with.

He gripped the chain in both hands and exerted his full Tier 3 strength on it, breaking it, then lifted Lira out of the sewage and set her in the pure water behind him. With all the strength he had, putting his fury at all the pointlessly horrific things the Empire had done into it, all his sadness at seeing a good thing ruined, all his anger at seeing his friends hurt, all his fear that horrible things had happened to more people he knew and cared for, using Trash Manipulation and whatever else he had to, he drew in all the impurities, all the filth, everything around him, drawing in so powerfully that he lifted his filth jar out of the water and capped it, lest it get drawn in as well. Filth flew toward him. Not just in the water, but off the walls, off the sidewalks next to the sewage, out from under Mouse's feet, even out of the cracks in the bricks in the floor of the sewage, all of it closed in on Rhys, then hurtled into the trash star.

Mouse yelped as she hit the floor, jerked off her feet by the filth being ripped out from under her, then climbed back to her feet and stared. Her jaw dropped. "Whoa."

For a hundred meters in all directions, the sewer was clean. Perfectly clean. The stones shone, the mortar was pure white, even the ring marks on the wall from ages of floods and droughts were gone. It was as though the sewer had been built a day ago, and left completely unused. The water was pure, so clean he could see his feet. The walls were clean. The ceiling sparkled. Even Lira and her seemingly uncleanable robes had been restored to their original color, the pale watersprite once more pale and draped in white. The second a piece of filth entered the hundred meters, it instantly flew into Rhys. Nothing was allowed to dirty his radius of clean.

Keeping that going, he turned to Lira. He gripped her by her shoulders and pulled, yanking all the impurities into himself. There was no delicate way to do it, no way to make it hurt less. She was absolutely laden with filth, so completely corrupted that death was knocking at her doorstep. If he didn't do it now, and do it completely, she might die, and Rhys was unwilling to take that risk.

Lira screamed. She bucked against his grip, trying to pull free. Her whole body tightened, then contorted, thrashing about in the water, splashing it everywhere. Rhys grimaced, pained at hurting his friend, but he didn't let her go. Letting her go now would be to leave her in danger, still riddled with impurities, and he refused to do that. He would leave her perfect, better than she'd been before.

The last of her impurities entered Rhys, and he let out a little *oof*. It was a lot. More impurities than he'd ever absorbed at once, and more dense and powerful, too. The trash star darkened, overwhelmed by the sudden influx of impurities and only kept alive by the recent infusion of shit. The impurities worked their way to the center of the star, where they belonged, and the star burst out with greater light than ever before, but Rhys barely noticed, even as his mana surged and his body rejuvenated. He focused on Lira, as her eyes focused and she slowly blinked awake.

"Hey there," he greeted her.

She rubbed her eyes and blinked at him again. “What? Rhys? But you’re dead.”

“Rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated,” Rhys said, immensely pleased to get to use that line.

Lira just blinked at him, lost.

He cleared his throat. “I was sent to the mines after the Empress took my core. Long story short, I broke out, found you here, and fixed you up. How are you feeling?”

Mouse leaned in as he explained himself, then looked greatly disappointed to hear ‘long story short.’

Lira frowned. She looked around, then tested her limbs, flipping around in the water. “I feel... great. What did you do to me?”

“Just absorbed all your impurities. Don’t worry about it. I’m glad you’re feeling better, though. What happened? How did you end up here?”

She sighed. “Long story short, I pissed off the Empress.”

Rhys raised his brows. “That’s not a long story short kind of tale.”

Lira nodded at him. “Then you tell yours.”

“It’s not that interesting,” Rhys said, waving his hand.

“It is,” Mouse insisted, edging forward on the stone sidewalk alongside what had once been sewage.

Rhys sighed. He glanced at Lira, only to see a ‘I’m not telling until you tell first’ expression on her face, so he spread his hands. “It really isn’t all that interesting, but I was stuck in the mines for three years—”

“Three years?” Lira repeated, startled.

“Three years,” he confirmed. “That’s how long you’ve been down here.”

Lira twisted her nose in disgust, then nodded at him. “Go on.”

“Right, so...”

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

Chapter 115. Long Story Short

Rhys told his tale. He skimmed over some things, like the names of the people he'd broken out, or exactly what he'd done to regain his magic, since he wasn't sure of Mouse's allegiance—though he was rapidly leaning toward 'on his side'—but otherwise told the tale faithfully. The whole time, he kept the water clean for Lira, refusing to let anything break his hundred-meter perimeter. At last, he wrapped up his tale. "And that's how we ended up in the sewers, and here we are!"

"You've been busy," Lira commented.

Mouse nodded thoroughly, her whole body bobbing with the effort.

Rhys scratched the back of his head, embarrassed to be praised, then laughed a bit. "Compared to my three years of hard labor in the mines, it feels like I've been slacking off."

"Ha," Lira muttered.

"So what happened to you?" Rhys asked, gesturing at her.

She took a deep breath. "Oh, nothing much. Just, you know, insulted the Empress and personally pissed off one of her best guard dogs. You know."

Rhys gave her a look. "Lira."

Lira giggled—something that made Rhys's heart leap, that she was still able to find humor in things after everything she'd been through—and waved her hand. "Gods. It's so good to talk to someone. I thought I would be down here forever. I thought I would die in the shit in the dark, and never see anyone ever again..."

Her voice trailed off, and her eyes dimmed.

"Lira. What happened?" Rhys reminded her, bringing her back to the moment. For all that she was in good spirits now, she clearly wasn't unscathed mentally. Who would be? He paused a moment, then quickly added, "If it's too hard, you don't have to say."

"No, I want to say. I want someone else to hear the bullshit that happened to me, because I'm sick of being mad at it all alone in the dark." She straightened up, standing out of the water, and steeled herself, then began.

"It was right at the start... right when the Empress was rounding everyone up and scooping their cores out like coring an apple. I got caught, just like everyone else, but when she went to rip my core out, she couldn't find it. Spirits are built different from

humans, and our cores reside somewhere else. She could probably irrecoverably damage my core if she wanted to, but she wanted to take it, and it frustrated her that she couldn't."

"So she threw you in the sewers?" Rhys asked.

Lira flashed him an exasperated look, then sighed. "That was probably enough, to be honest, but I was too stupid to let it lie, so I taunted her. One of her deputies stepped forward—"

"A boy with white hair? Little flat ponytail, all neat and straight?" Rhys asked.

This time, Lira just glared. "Can I tell the story?"

Rhys put his hands up, then zipped his lips.

"No. It was a man with wild, bushy red hair that hung past his shoulders and a hook-shaped scar on his cheek. He offered to 'discipline' me, and I mocked them both."

Lira stopped there. Rhys glanced left and right. His cheeks bulged. He tried not to say anything, tried his hardest, then couldn't hold back any longer and asked, "What did you say?"

On the walkway, Mouse giggled. Rhys glared at her.

Lira laughed. "I was teasing, just teasing. I might have implied that she and he were in a certain kind of punishing relationship, and he was *submissive* to her."

Rhys's mouth turned into an 'O.' "You called her a dommy mommy!"

Mouse blinked. "W-what's that?"

Lira stared at Rhys in shock. "You're just fifteen... eighteen now, and you know about that kind of thing?"

Rhys coughed. "That is... I, er, spent a lot of time in the library."

"How'd you learn about that in the library?" Lira asked, even more shocked.

"You don't go to the library often, do you," Rhys guessed.

She grimaced. "They don't appreciate water sprites in the library, believe it or not."

Rhys nodded slowly. "You're missing out. I can acquire a few *highly informative* novels for you, if I can figure out a way to waterproof them."

"A lady might be interested in that," Lira said coyly, raising her brows at Rhys.

Rhys smiled. *If romantasy and a certain number of gray shades were so popular back in my world, then I'm sure there's plenty of female-oriented erotica... ahem, romance books in this world, too. And if not... erotica has always been classified as trash literature.* His smile turned wily, becoming more of a hungry grin.

Unlawfully taken from Royal Road, this story should be reported if seen on Amazon.

"I don't like that grin," Lira commented.

"That's probably fair," Rhys allowed. He cleared his throat. "So you suggested that Mr. Bushy Hair liked getting stepped on, and the Empress didn't take kindly to that?"

"To be honest, the Empress seemed mostly amused. About to kill me, sure, but amused about it. The man was the one who stepped in and offered to send me to a fate worse than death instead."

"Sounds like someone isn't confident in his sexuality," Rhys commented, shaking his head. It was better to confront one's inner desires and accept them sooner rather than later. Like how he was perfectly in tune with his desire to get stepped on, and wouldn't take offense to it at all. Mr. Bushy Hair should learn to accept his secret desires, rather than reject them. Or, on the other hand, if he knew he didn't like getting stepped on, then he should simply be able to laugh it off. This over-the-top defensiveness only made it more suspicious that maybe he didn't just want to be stepped on, but wanted something even more deranged instead.

It was especially wild because Rhys was 99% sure the Empress would happily step on him if he asked. She just had those vibes—where even if she wasn't into stepping on people, she was at least enough of a dom to be down with debasing any random sub who wanted to receive pain and/or humiliation, *those* vibes. In other words, Mr. Bushy Hair had nothing to worry about with being accused of being a sub in her presence... unless he was masking, and desperately didn't want her to notice that he was a soft subby boy.

Honestly, it sounded like a setup from one of his favorite filthy manga. *Dominatrix CEO (female) discovers her underling is secretly a sub??? (shocked face) My deputy is a massive M, but I'm an S? Long nights alone in the office. Anything could happen during overtime!*

Rhys coughed quickly, waving away the thoughts. *Rage, let's go back to channeling rage at this guy.* He was a scumbag who deserved Rhys's hatred, whether he was also amusingly an erotica trope at the same time or not. He knew some people would find him more despicable for being a highly probable masochist, but that didn't really change anything to him; it wasn't like someone's desire to be forced to their knees and called a naughty boy changed anything about how good or awful they were.

Lira laughed a little, then went flat-faced. "It's... kind of ridiculous, looking back on it, but it's... the last three years..." She shuddered, pulling her arms around herself.

Instantly, he was back in rage mode. Lira shouldn't be in this situation because of some man's misplaced pride. He was glad she'd escaped death as a result, but locking her in a filthy sewer? Filling her with impurities to the point she would have had no hope of living an ordinary life again, let alone returning to magehood? That was insane. Absolutely over the line. If he saw this man, there was nothing that needed to be said, no questions that needed to be asked. He'd kill that man. Preferably in some horrible, twisted method, that he still hadn't thought up yet.

Taking a deep breath, he forced down those emotions. Now wasn't the time. He could use that rage, but *later*. Right now, he needed to get Lira somewhere safe.

"Come with me. I've got a place where you can rest and recuperate," Rhys offered.

"Rest and recuperate? Is that all?" Lira snarled, her own rage coming out in her voice.

Rhys raised his brows. *Never mind, maybe I don't need to come up with that horrible death for that guy. Sounds like Lira has it under control.* He glanced at Mouse, then took a deep breath. She'd helped him out enough, and once, even without prompting. He could trust her. He *should* trust her.

He shook his head. "No. Not just rest and recuperate. Come on. I'll introduce you to the others."

"The others?" Lira tilted her head.

"I didn't break out alone. And none of us are ready to give up the fight." Gesturing for her to follow, Rhys started walking again. The circle of clean moved with him as he continued absorbing all the impurities around them. It was hard to maintain, but that was fine by him. It let him continue to train his impurity absorption, and draw in more and more impurities as he strengthened it. Plus, it kept Lira safe from impurities, and Mouse, too, at that.

Lira blinked, then shrugged and followed after him. "You know, I never got to tell you after the tournament, but I found a hint on... *him*."

"Who?" Rhys asked instinctively, then realized: *Straw*. He nodded. "You'll have to tell me once we're somewhere quiet."

"I'm very quiet," Mouse muttered, mostly to herself.

Lira snorted, glancing at Mouse. She raised her chin and nodded. "You should unbutton that blouse a little. You'd be a real looker with a little more cleavage."

Mouse froze. Her whole face flushed red, and she shook her head in wordless silence.

“Lira, don’t tease Mouse. Not everyone wants to be as sexy as you,” Rhys chided her gently.

Lira raised her brows. “Me? Sexy? You know, this robe I’m wearing is absolutely conservative by water sprite standards.”

Rhys gave her a look, not sure if she was joking or not, but her expression was deadly serious. “What’s risqué by water sprite standards?” he asked, a little frightened to hear the answer.

“Probably full nudity,” Lira said casually.

Mouse coughed, absolutely taken aback.

Rhys raised his brows. “Where do your friends hang out?”

Lira laughed. “Do you remember those myths you heard?”

“What myths? Oh,” Rhys added, as he abruptly remembered: myths about man-eating. *Right. There’s always a catch.*

She snorted. “I’m glad it’s you who found me, Rhys.”

“What, for my sparkling personality?” Rhys joked.

Lira nodded. “It would have been easy to hate humans after... that. Write you all off as a species. But you... in your own, trashy way, remind me there’s something good in all that nonsense. Something worth laughing at, at least.”

Rhys chuckled. “Better laughing at us, than trying to kill all of us, that’s what I always say.”

On the edge of the sewer, Mouse nodded aggressively.

“Yeah... yeah,” Lira murmured, closing her eyes for a moment.

Silence fell over the group. In the quiet, and the newly cleaned sewers, Rhys drew out his books, checking over what he’d picked up. A few books on the void, mostly propaganda... and then, at the bottom of the stack, a small red tome.

Rhys blinked. *Did I grab that one?* He thought back. He’d been looking through the books on the shelf, then found it, then... then the door had slammed open, and...

Did I just slip it onto the pile without thinking? But it was on the bottom, and it's so small. I would have had to specifically carried it this whole time, and I'm pretty sure I didn't do that.

He stared at it for a few seconds, then shrugged to himself. He'd meant to grab it anyways, so it wasn't a bad thing. Still, he made a mental note that the book was probably dangerous, and should be treated with care... but at the same time, probably the most valuable book he'd grabbed today. If the void was so dangerous that it was written off as a myth, then who knew what kind of energy would be imbued in a text actually about the void?

Only one way to find out. He headed through the sewers, aiming for his newfound secret base to find a cozy corner to read his books, and concoct a plan to overthrow the Empire.

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

Chapter 116. New Recruits

The sewers spilled out into a river not far from the garbage heap. A few filthy fish splashed around nearby, eating the filth, and algae and bacteria bred in the bank nearby, soaking up those excessive nutrients. Abruptly, a rush of pure water came racing out of the sewer, washing away the bacteria and splashing the algae and fish with clean, fresh water. The fish jolted, reminded, for a moment, of what had once been, when the river ran clean and their world wasn't a grimy dark puddle, and then a half-dozen shoes plopped down into the mud, and they fled once more, escaping the big, frightening shadows.

Rhys gestured. "It's right up the hill there."

Lira leaned, peering ahead. "Just past the garbage heap?"

"After a manner of speaking, sure," Rhys allowed. It was inside the garbage heap, but that was a form of 'just past,' if you looked at it a certain way and squinted a little.

Lira gave him a distrusting look, but spun the bracelet on her hand, drawing her umbrella, and stepped out of the river.

It was a short walk to the garbage heap, and a quick crawl inside. Rhys went first, only to find a half-dozen mages ringing the entrance, hands out. He lifted his. "Uh... it's me?"

"Who's with you?" Korii challenged.

“Oh—oh. Some new recruits. Friends. You can trust them. Mouse, come on,” he added, as the mousy girl shrank back in the tunnels. He turned back to the mages. “One of them is a master of avoiding notice. She can help you guys learn how to hide yourselves.”

“So she hid from the Empire, all this time?” Korii asked doubtfully.

“Yes. I’ll vouch for her. Mouse, come on.” Rhys reached back and dragged her out. She hung limply in his grip until he stood her upright, and then she stood there, frozen, completely out of place as all the rescued mages drilled into her with their eyes. “She helped me hide from the Empire a few times already. She’s good.”

Korii gazed at Mouse with suspicion, but nodded. “If you’ll vouch for her, then I’ll let it pass. And the other?”

“The *other* spent the last three years at the bottom of a sewer, thanks to the Empress’s dogs,” Lira said, crawling out of the tunnel and stretching to her full height, then unfurling her umbrella once more. Water poured down on her. “If you want to doubt anything, at least do me the favor of not doubting my resolve to destroy the Empire.”

Korii sniffed. Absolute offense flashed over Lira’s face, but Korii nodded. “She smells like it. I believe it.”

“What? She does? I should have absorbed all the impurities from her,” Rhys said. He stepped closer, scanning Lira for impurities, but found nothing. His brows furrowed. *Huh? Is Korii hallucinating the smell, then?*

Mouse coughed. “I wasn’t going to say something, but... yeah. She stinks.”

“So would you, after three years at the bottom of a sewer,” Lira returned.

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“Oh, thank you. I appreciate it,” Lira snarked, rolling her eyes.

“S-sorry,” Mouse mumbled, backing away.

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The other mages nodded and lowered their weapons as well. Mouse glanced around, then stepped forward and offered Korii the books she'd found. "Er, I, I can help, I don't know h-how much, but I can try."

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Mouse looked at him, then nodded. She took a deep breath, and followed after Korii and the others.

Rhys turned to Lira. "I'm sorry about the smell. I had no idea I was leaving it behind. I could try to take it off of you...?"

She lifted her hand. "Figure it out first, then try on me, I have no intention to be your experimental subject. As for the smell, it will wash out soon enough. Water amplifies scents, so although they might not notice the sewage smell sticking to you, they'll notice it on me. Yours will fade with time; mine will fade faster, with the help of this." She raised the umbrella. "For now, though, let's speak of what's important."

"What's important? Oh! Right." Rhys gestured her toward a far-flung corner of the hollowed out garbage patch, away from the others. Korii noticed him going, and called out to one of the other mine escapees. The two of them initiated a very loud sparring match, giving Rhys and Lira the privacy to speak alone.

"You mentioned you found something about Straw?" Rhys asked.

Lira nodded. She reached into her robes and drew out a single golden blade of hay. “When everything was falling apart, I charged into the place I thought was most likely to hold him—Ernesto’s lab—and I found this.”

Rhys leaned in, but he didn’t have to. He could sense the powerful, and more importantly, familiar curse power pouring off it from where he stood. He nodded slowly. It was the opposite of surprising that there were scraps of Straw in Ernesto’s lab, but at the same time, the fact that there were scraps of him in there meant that he didn’t just have to *assume* Ernesto had gotten his filthy hands on Straw anymore, he knew it for certain. Not only that, but it revealed several other things, as well. For example, Straw had to either be in incredibly bad shape or restrained in some severe way, or else he could have easily overpowered Ernesto; he was a Remnant Weapon who’d taken on the full might of the Alliance, not some pusharound weakling that could be easily kept prisoner by someone like Ernesto. The curse power in the straw felt as strong as ever, so it was more likely that he was restrained than severely weakened. He’d expect the curse power in the straw to be weak if Straw was weak; he could be wrong, but it seemed the most reasonable outcome to him.

“Did you get any further?” Rhys asked, looking up at Lira.

She shook her head. “The Empress’ soldiers showed up before I could do much more. But now...”

“Let’s go,” Rhys said instantly. “Mouse, come with us.”

“M-me?” Mouse asked, startled.

“We’ll need you if we run into the Empire,” he explained. He didn’t know an aura-suppression or presence-diminishing technique, and he didn’t have time to learn one. Sure, he could spend a few weeks learning a technique, then head over to Purple Dawn, but one, this was Straw, his former teacher. Before he’d had information, there was nothing he could do but keep looking for information. Now that he did, he wanted to move as quickly as possible to help Straw. If Straw was in a Lira-like situation, where he was in pain or danger every day, or he was so badly injured that it would take time to repair or heal him, then the sooner he could step in and remove him from that situation, the better. Straw would be an immense asset for the anti-Empire team, as a powerful Remnant Weapon with a near-infinite capacity to absorb curse energy, and a higher-Tier mage than anyone else on Rhys’s side, so acting quickly to rescue him was not only what Rhys emotionally wanted to do, but also made a lot of rational sense. Plus, since Mouse could extend her no-notice field to cover at least one other person, there was no reason not to act now. In fact, they could even treat it as training for Mouse.

All that assumed that there were even people guarding the ruins of Purple Dawn Academy. There was really no reason for the Empire to bother, but it could always be treated as penal duty, and they were close enough to the Empire’s new city that it was a reasonable distance from a major settlement to make *sense* as penal duty. He also had

it on excellent authority that a prison breakout had happened just a day or two ago, so the Empire was likely to be on high alert, and more likely to stake people nearby... or maybe pull back their penalized soldiers to base. He didn't know. He wasn't a military guy. The closest he'd gotten to the military was listening to the military nerds chat about a certain measuring-based science fiction minifigure game of forty or so thousand, and he was pretty sure that wasn't an accurate representation of an actual military, not that he'd know.

In conclusion, this was either a terrible or wonderful time to move, but one way or another, Straw was worth moving for, even if it meant taking a small risk. It helped him, it helped Mouse, it helped Straw, and hey, maybe he could even learn how to hide his aura through observing Mouse. Win, win, win.

"I... I can't hide two other people!" Mouse squeaked.

"I'm sure you can figure it out," Rhys assured her.

Lira gestured up at Purple Dawn. "There's a river that runs through the academy. Humans rarely think to pay close attention to what passes underwater. I can swim up to the edge of Ernesto's lab, then lead you the rest of the way."

Rhys nodded. "That works. Where will we join back up?"

"There's a bridge not far past the library. If you don't know where that is, I know Mouse does. Meet me on the far side of that."

"Understood. We'll set off now, and meet you in a moment," Rhys said.

Lira nodded. She exited the trash heap swiftly, almost as if she'd been looking for an excuse to escape, though Rhys knew that couldn't be possible, since his base was super cool and everyone loved it. There was a distant splash.

Rhys nodded at Mouse. "Shall we?"

Nervously, Mouse nodded.

Korii cleared her throat. Rhys turned, a big salesman smile on his face. "Can I help you?"

She nodded over her shoulder. "I appreciate what you've done for us, the manuals and everything... but... I can't be gentle about this. It isn't enough. If we're going to fight the Empire, we need resources. Serious resources. Right now, we can absorb mana and practice, but... it might take years until we regain our strength. Decades. Centuries. How many of our fellow mages will die before we get stronger? We need to—"

Rhys snapped his fingers. "Commercialize."

“—rob the Empire’s merchants or—what?”

He nodded. His mind went to the garbage patch in Purple Dawn, and the wonderful, horrible things he’d done there. “We need money, right? Ultimately, that’s what we need.”

Korii nodded cautiously.

“I’ve got just the thing. You guys practice for now—disguising your aura and just... just disguising in general is going to be *essential* if everything works out. When I get back from Purple Dawn, if I don’t come back with the solution to our resources problem, then we can talk. But if everything is as I suspect it is, then I have a ready solution to put gold in our pockets just *waiting* for us to fry it up.”

“To... what?” Korii asked, squinting.

Rhys grinned like a bandit. “You’ll see.”

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

Chapter 117. Acquiring Resources

The sewers spilled out into a river not far from the garbage heap. A few filthy fish splashed around nearby, eating the filth, and algae and bacteria bred in the bank nearby, soaking up those excessive nutrients. Abruptly, a rush of pure water came racing out of the sewer, washing away the bacteria and splashing the algae and fish with clean, fresh water. The fish jolted, reminded, for a moment, of what had once been, when the river ran clean and their world wasn’t a grimy dark puddle, and then a half-dozen shoes plopped down into the mud, and they fled once more, escaping the big, frightening shadows.

Rhys gestured. “It’s right up the hill there.”

Lira leaned, peering ahead. “Just past the garbage heap?”

“After a manner of speaking, sure,” Rhys allowed. It was inside the garbage heap, but that was a form of ‘just past,’ if you looked at it a certain way and squinted a little.

Lira gave him a distrusting look, but spun the bracelet on her hand, drawing her umbrella, and stepped out of the river.

It was a short walk to the garbage heap, and a quick crawl inside. Rhys went first, only to find a half-dozen mages ringing the entrance, hands out. He lifted his. "Uh... it's me?"

"Who's with you?" Korii challenged.

"Oh—oh. Some new recruits. Friends. You can trust them. Mouse, come on," he added, as the mousy girl shrank back in the tunnels. He turned back to the mages. "One of them is a master of avoiding notice. She can help you guys learn how to hide yourselves."

"So she hid from the Empire, all this time?" Korii asked doubtfully.

"Yes. I'll vouch for her. Mouse, come on." Rhys reached back and dragged her out. She hung limply in his grip until he stood her upright, and then she stood there, frozen, completely out of place as all the rescued mages drilled into her with their eyes. "She helped me hide from the Empire a few times already. She's good."

Korii gazed at Mouse with suspicion, but nodded. "If you'll vouch for her, then I'll let it pass. And the other?"

"The *other* spent the last three years at the bottom of a sewer, thanks to the Empress's dogs," Lira said, crawling out of the tunnel and stretching to her full height, then unfurling her umbrella once more. Water poured down on her. "If you want to doubt anything, at least do me the favor of not doubting my resolve to destroy the Empire."

Korii sniffed. Absolute offense flashed over Lira's face, but Korii nodded. "She smells like it. I believe it."

"What? She does? I should have absorbed all the impurities from her," Rhys said. He stepped closer, scanning Lira for impurities, but found nothing. His brows furrowed. *Huh? Is Korii hallucinating the smell, then?*

Mouse coughed. "I wasn't going to say something, but... yeah. She stinks."

"So would you, after three years at the bottom of a sewer," Lira returned.

"Wait, guys. Wait. You're telling me absorbing all the impurities from someone, or something, doesn't necessarily remove the stink?" Rhys asked, his world shattering from around him. How many times did he absorb his own impurities and assume he'd 'cleaned up?' How many times had he taken 'impurities all absorbed' as 'clean and scent-free?' *Have I stunk all this time?* He lifted his arm and sniffed, but after his time in the sewers, he couldn't tell at all.

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“To... what?” Korii asked, squinting.

Rhys grinned like a bandit. “You’ll see.”

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Chapter 118. The Most Fun You Can Have Outside of a Library

As both of them had expected, Lira was waiting for them by the time they reached the bridge outside the library. Not only waiting, in fact, but swimming loops in the water and spouting it out her mouth out of utter boredom. As they approached, she flipped over in the water to face them. “Took you long enough. What was a pair of young mages doing all alone in the woods that could’ve taken them so long, I wonder?”

Mouse blushed. She shook her head and waved both hands. “N-not that!”

“Organizing the logistics for my hostile takeover of the Empire’s weak snack food market, *obviously*. What else would a couple of young mages do?” Rhys posited, as if he didn’t know what she was hinting at. He nodded. “Come on, show us the way to Ernesto’s lab. I’m excited that we finally have a lead on Straw, and I don’t know how long we have this Academy to ourselves, so let’s keep moving.”

Lira harrumphed and reluctantly climbed out of the water, once more raising her umbrella over her head. "This way. It's not a long walk."

Rhys gestured for her to lead the way, and they set off through the abandoned academy. Three figures, all alone. A ghostly figure in white, carrying a white umbrella up front; behind her, a bizarre man with long hair and a twisted smile; in the rear, a small woman with glasses who barely seemed to exist at all. If someone had glimpsed their little party, they might well have suspected it was some mythical procession as much as a mortal one.

As she promised, it wasn't long before they drew up to a large, nearly-windowless brick building. Tiny slit windows peered down near the top of its three-story height, but that was it. A single door opened at the front, built of sturdy metal and firmly locked shut. It was merely one of a great many buildings lined up along the canal Lira had swam up in, and it didn't appear particularly different from any of the rest of them, save for its lack of windows and the powerful barrier Rhys could sense, woven into the very bricks of the building. He approached and reached for the lock, only for a spritz of blue energy to force his hand back. He looked at Lira. "So... how'd you get in?"

"Rushed it while Ernesto and his boys were getting out," she said. She walked up and tried the lock as well, only to get rebuffed by the same barrier that had stopped Rhys. "They didn't have it locked up yet."

"Well." Rhys glanced at Mouse. "You wouldn't happen to have a barrier-breaking technique up your sleeve, would you?"

She blinked, startled to suddenly have everyone's attention, and shook her head firmly.

"Lira?"

"Not unless there's water involved."

Rhys crossed his arms and took a step back, taking in the whole building. The barrier was kind-of visible at this angle, a faint shimmer just over the surface of the bricks. If he wasn't specifically looking for it, he would have missed it, which was probably why the Empire had missed it; either that, or it was the proverbial needle in a haystack, but one of many enchanted and barriered buildings in Purple Dawn Academy, and the Empire had overlooked it or deliberately neglected it as unimportant. After all, many of the houses and buildings they'd passed also emanated low-level mana auras, either enchanted, strengthened, or covered in barriers, but like this one, they'd been left alone.

Rhys looked over his shoulder, extending his senses back to the library, but as expected, that building's barrier was shattered, its windows broken, and everything within torn free, just as Az had feared. Libraries were targets, after all, especially for a repressive regime like the Empire. Empress Raelgan didn't need anyone seeking a path other than the one she set before them. Supposedly, it was 'her' path, though Rhys

strongly, strongly, *strongly* suspected that the Empress did not share her personal path with her underlings. After all, core manipulation wasn't something one stumbled upon by accident, and despite being able to manipulate trash to create new cores himself, Rhys had to admit that he had no idea how he'd go about yanking a core out of someone else. Sure, he could rip their energy out, but there was a difference between sucking energy like some kind of deranged mana vampire and surgically removing and replacing people's cores like they were disposable batteries, without overly harming or killing the person whose core was removed. It was the difference between being able to drink a soda, which Rhys could do, and being able to fully process and recycle the plastic bottle afterward, which required far more know-how than Rhys's original life had had, and an industrial facility besides.

All that to say, whatever path the Empress fed her underlings, it almost certainly wasn't *hers*, but some 'safe' path that she likely considered nonthreatening.

How did I get here? Rhys walked his thoughts back, and found himself once more outside Ernesto's lab, considering its barrier. He frowned and reached forward, pressing his palm against the barrier. Just like at the mine, it was pure mana, excessively pure and not trashy at all. There was no way he could absorb it. In fact, it was anathema to his path, it was so pure' he struggled to wrap his mind around it, or understand the barrier fully.

Then again, he didn't need to. If the barrier was pure, utterly, completely pure, what happened when it was corrupted? Somewhat reluctantly, Rhys drew some impurities out of his core and pushed them into the pure, pure barrier.

A black mark spread over the bright blue energy, expanding from where his hand touched. The corruption chewed up the barrier, quickly spreading over the entire building. In a flash, nothing remained of the barrier at all, save for some remnant energy in the bricks. Rhys fell forward the half-inch that the barrier had kept him back from the building, and rested his hand against the bricks. More pure mana was stored inside them, in some complex enchantment bound to the very construction of the building; this was the source of the barrier. He'd dispelled it, but not destroyed it, and if he waited long enough, the enchantment would draw enough mana from the air to reactivate.

That was fine by Rhys. He walked over to the lock, only for Lira to whirl her umbrella around and, in some mysterious motion his eyes couldn't quite follow, slice the lock open. The chains rattled as the lock fell to the ground, and she yanked them the last few inches free, then pushed the door open.

It creaked, the hinges rusty after three years of disuse, and swung inward, spilling a narrow slice of light over the dark room within. Stones strewn with straw and a musty smell were both revealed. As it swung further, a workbench and a few chairs appeared, sitting in the big, empty space.

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Rhys stepped inside. He instantly swung his mana toward the straws, curious about their origin, but there was no curse power in this straw. It was merely ordinary straw, the kind used to bed animals and provide better footing for people.

A tiny bit of disappointment echoed in his heart, but he pushed it down and kept moving. Of course they wouldn't have Straw up this early in the workspace. He would've discovered his mentor long earlier if that were the case.

Water poured down as Lira followed him in. He turned to find Mouse already standing beside him, cringing just a little, as tiny and quiet as ever. Lira pointed ahead, at the door at the rear of the workspace. It was a cramped, tiny thing, barely half a person wide, but the desks, though seemingly placed at random, had been spaced to leave it wide open and easy to access. "Down there. Keep going."

"Yes, ma'am." Rhys opened the door to reveal an equally narrow set of stairs, spiraling into darkness. He snorted to himself. *Thank goodness this isn't my world. Hell, thank goodness I'm not in my old body. I wouldn't fit.*

"What're you waiting for?"

"Just admiring the view." Rhys headed down before Lira could ask any more useless questions. He got the impression that she was on edge, though he wasn't sure why. Enemy territory, maybe? Ernesto's lab? She was a non-human, a water spirit or sprite of some sort, so, it was possible Ernesto had targeted her. He hadn't seemed the type to be kind to non-humans. Rather, he was more likely to treat them as experimental subjects. He didn't *know* that for sure, he supposed, but given the gusto with which Ernesto had come for Straw, it wouldn't surprise him, and seeing Lira's reaction now, it would all make sense. It didn't make it true, but it would explain a lot.

The stairs swirled down, down, down, into darkness. At the very bottom, a door hung ajar. Thus far, Rhys's enhanced eyesight had allowed him to see, but below the bottom of the stairs, there was no light at all, nothing that filtered in past the long, spiral staircase. It was as if there was a source of darkness within the room at the bottom of the stairs, something that suppressed light.

All the way down the stairs, bits of straw were strewn, whether tracked down or what, Rhys couldn't say. As they reached the bottom of the stairs, however, that straw began to take on a familiar color and a familiar aura. He knelt, picking up a piece of the straw. It wasn't completely Straw's aura, nor as packed full of curse power as the straw Lira had found, but it was very much familiar to him... as if it were a piece that had fallen off Straw long ago, left in the sun to dry until it lost its aura.

A light shone from behind him. He glanced back to find Lira's umbrella now glowing, like a raincloud lit from behind by the sun. Rhys raised his brows. "Is there anything that thing can't do?"

“Do you want to find out?” Lira asked dangerously.

Rhys licked his lips, a little scared of the way she said it. “You know what? I’ll pass.”

“I didn’t make it through that door,” Lira informed him more helpfully. “It’s ajar... that’s a bad sign.”

“It wasn’t last time?”

“No, it was closed. Ernesto’s students yanked me out before I got any further. If it’s open, then they might’ve already removed everything important.”

“Like Straw,” Rhys said. He looked at the door one last time, then took a deep breath and pushed it open. Only one way to find out.

The pale gray light from Lira’s umbrella spread across the floor. More and more straw was revealed. It was strewn about, then a thick coating, then heaps and piles of it, as if this were a stall, ready for horses. Each straw was different, some free of curse power, some full of it. It was less a needle in a haystack, and more a stack of differently-sized needles. He’d half expected blood and filth, but where would there be blood in Straw? The tattered straws were what served as his blood and flesh, and to see them torn apart meant that Straw had been tortured here, just as if he’d found blood, he would know a human had been tortured. He felt sick to his stomach, but what could he do? Ernesto was long gone, and the main mass of Straw’s body with him.

I won’t give up. I’ll find him. This is a step in the right direction, but I never expected it to be the end of the road.

There was little else in the room. A few broken tools, a stool with a missing leg, the tattered remains of manacles. Whatever else there had once been had been ransacked, torn up and stolen away, more likely by Ernesto and his students than by the Empire. This was the trash, the refuse they didn’t need anymore.

“I suppose it was nothing, in the end,” Lira murmured to herself, disappointed.

Rhys knelt. He stretched his hands out, pulling all the trash to him. He absorbed most of it, the stool, the powerless hay, the broken tools and manacles—but merely gathered up the straw that felt like Straw. That, he pulled into a pile, and when he had all of it, he searched the room until he found a stray piece of twine, then bound the straw up into a bundle. The curse power in the un-bound straw had resonated at its own speed, ignoring all the other curse power, but once he bound it up, all the curse power pulsed at the same beat, resonating with the rest of the straw. He raised his brows and put his hand against it, feeding mana into the straw. The straw pulsed stronger and stronger as the curse power fed on the mana and grew. More and more and more, growing stronger and stronger, until at last, the bound-up bundle of straw shuddered and transformed, whirling about on its own power into a small, doll sized version of Straw. Like a doll, it

was crude, a rough approximation of Straw with his ragged clothes, rather than the human-passing Straw, as if an amateur had made a toy for a child.

Rhys crouched, gazing at it closely. It laid there, completely motionless and lifeless, no more than a Straw doll.

“What the hell,” Lira muttered. She knelt and reached out her hand toward it.

The doll came to life and slapped her away. Its roughly-shaped face opened a crude mouth and bared jagged teeth at her. It skittered away from the puddle of water forming around Lira as her umbrella continued to work its magic, stumbled across Rhys’s boot, and rapidly clambered up his leg to hug his belt. Since the mines, Rhys had worn a stolen sword at his hip, and the doll found it and wrapped its arms around the hilt, dangling down from the crossguard like a sword charm.

Rhys looked down at it. “Straw? Is that you?”

The doll hissed at him, swaying from the sword’s hilt in a threatening sort of way, then closed its eyes and went still again.

Rhys wanted to touch it, but he liked his fingers better, so he satisfied himself with just looking at the Straw puppet. It had Straw’s aura, without a doubt; he was completely sure of that. Whether it was Straw, and had Straw’s memories and personality was another matter, but for now, he could only be satisfied with what he had, and what he had was better than nothing.

He looked at Lira. “You were right. He was here. But clearly, whatever happened, Ernesto moved him during the Empire’s attack. Do you know if Ernesto got caught?”

Lira wrinkled her nose. “He escaped. Left me to rot and ran off with his precious students and research projects, filth that he is.”

“Typical.” Rhys sighed, then dusted off his robes and nodded to the others. “Anyone else have something they want to do in Purple Dawn, or is it time to head back?”

Mouse shook her head. Lira waved a hand dismissively. Rhys nodded at both of them. “Then let’s go.”

It had been a fruitful search for him. His raw materials for potato chips restored, and a hint, at last, to Straw’s location. Now it was time to act on what he had found, and get everything kicked off. He had big plans, and the sooner they started, the better. After all, he had his work cut out for him.

Rhys grinned. The first time, he’d merely had a potato chip stall. This time, he would have a junk food *empire*.

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

Chapter 119. Back to the Beginning

Their trip back was short. Lira descended into the streams, and Rhys and Mouse walked back. They had to pause for an Empire patrol to pass by, but Mouse easily hid their presences, and the patrol passed them without noticing a thing. This time, Rhys paid close attention to her technique. He wasn't quite sure how she did it, yet, but he was getting closer to understanding. It was something like pulling in all her mana, while at the same time exuding a weak aura that was so regular it simply passed below anyone's notice. Not 'no one's here,' but instead, 'there's nothing here worth paying attention to.'

They returned to the hideout to find Lira already there, and Korii and the others gathered around, waiting for him. Rhys beamed. "I've solved all our problems. Are you ready?"

"All of them?" Korii asked.

He wagged his hand. "Alright, I'll admit, the Empire is still a work in progress, but the *rest* of them. Listen up. Here's what we're going to do..."

Everyone listened. At some points, they smiled; at others, they frowned deeply, but everyone listened. At last, Rhys finished, and they all stared in amazed silence, totally on board with his plan.

As *if*. Rhys chuckled to himself at the disbelief flickering from one face to the next. That was fine, though. They didn't have to all understand now. They'd see the light as things progressed, and the money started flowing in.

Korii raised her hand. "We're wanted men. Won't the Empire recognize us when we go to sell our goods?"

"That's what you're asking about?" Blake muttered.

Rhys snapped, pointing at her. "Don't worry. I've got the Disguise skill and the skills to match. We'll have to engage in a little thievery to get the makeup, but I can source the clothes from right here. When I'm done with you, the Empire won't know you from one of their very own citizens."

“What about our auras?” another mage asked.

“That’s what the tomes are for. If you can’t figure it out, you’ll be in the kitchen instead, or working logistics. We’re starting with potato chips, but I’ve got big money in my sights. Once we lock down a source of sugar, oh boy. You’re printing money, at that point.”

One more mage raised their hand. “And we’re selling food... to mages?”

“Yep.”

“Food imbued with magic?”

“Imported from foreign countries by good law-abiding core-free Imperial citizens, yes.”

The mage squinted at Rhys. “Mages don’t eat.”

Rhys chuckled. “They don’t eat now. Just you wait.”

Another mage stepped forward. “Is this really the best way for us to get back at the Empire? Feeding it?”

“This isn’t how we get back at the Empire. This is how we fund our plan to get back at the Empire,” Rhys explained, shaking his head. “Although it is also part of my plan, but that’s complicated. You’ll have to have a little faith.”

Korii stepped forward. She crossed her arms. “I believe in you. You broke us out of the mines and you gave us back our cores. I thought neither of those things were possible, and here we are. This plan sounds insane, but if you told me you’d break us out and give us magic once more, I would have called you crazy back in the mines. I don’t care what the others say. If you say it’s time for us to sell this ‘junk food,’ then I’ll sell junk food. It’s better than pointlessly dying to some harebrained assassination attempt, or harassing nobles for little gain.”

“That’s true. It’s better than becoming bandits,” another mage agreed.

Blake twisted his lips. “I still think this is crazy, but... we’ll find out. If it doesn’t work, though—”

“If it doesn’t work, I’ll be the first one to change my course,” Rhys said. He looked around at all of them, at the believers and disbelievers. “Three years. Three years we were stuck in those mines, grinding away for no purpose at all. Give me three years. If I can’t get this up and running in three years, if we aren’t swimming in money and laughing as the Empire eats itself to death and drowns in cheap alcohol, we’ll change course.”

Korii nodded. She turned, looking at the others. Slowly, one after another, nods spread across the group.

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Rhys clapped. “Then let’s get to work. I need people scavenging the pit, right now. We need cauldrons. The bigger the better. A storage ring, for transporting food. I don’t care if it’s broken or filthy, any kind of storage device will do. We don’t have all the ingredients, either. One team *will* be harassing merchants, stealing everything on any sort of food-based or alchemical supply cart. We’re looking for three primary things right now: salt, oil, and vinegar. If you find sugar, even better. Aim at low-grade wagons. We don’t need high-level mages taking notice of their powerful alchemical reagents vanishing, we want to irritate weak mages with no real magical or political power. Don’t touch anyone wearing a military uniform. Last thing we need is the Empire taking notice before we’ve got the seed funds to kick off our store legitimately.”

“Anything else?” Blake asked sarcastically.

“Thanks for asking. If you could nab a few of the merchants’ pins—you’ll know ‘em when you see ‘em, real obvious—that would be *huge*. They identify them as merchants, somehow, allow them to use mana outside the Empire’s military. I’m sure I don’t need to convince anyone of how useful a pin like that would be?”

Nods all around.

Rhys chuckled, then turned serious. “But don’t try to use them yourselves. Bring them back. I suspect they’ve got some kind of trick to them, and if the Empire picks you up... you’re on your own. We can’t afford to mount rescue operations. Assume no one is coming for you, but keep the faith—if you break, we all die. Everyone bears that responsibility. Do you understand?”

Nods again, but solemn this time, and Rhys was struck with the sinking feeling that he was founding the world’s oddest death cult. He pushed the sensation down and kept going.

“If the Empire doesn’t execute you, you’ll be freed when we defeat them. Though, actually, asking to get sent to a mine isn’t a bad idea. Once we get our resources rolling, we’ll start hitting the mines, break as many people out as we can. We’ll need manpower for every part of our plan. Make sense?”

More nods.

Rhys clapped. “Then hop to. The Empire won’t fall on its own.”

Korii cleared her throat. “Who’s doing what?”

Good question. Rhys squinted, then drew a line with his hand. “This half, search the area and the surrounding trash heap for usable materials. Cauldrons, furnaces, cloth, scrap metal, scrap wood, anything that seems *vaguely* useful, and I do mean vaguely. If it’s fused into our cover, ask me first. This half, you’re researching merchants. Staking them out. Get to know them personally, what they carry, their routes, hell, their character flaws. In a week, we’ll go on the attack, but if we rush this, we lose. If we watch closely and learn everything there is to learn first, then strike, we win.”

“What about us?”

Rhys turned to find Lira raising her hand, Mouse beside her. He nodded. “Learn to hide your aura. You’ll be part of the strike group in a week’s time... along with anyone else who shows particular skill and interest in raiding some merchants. Sound good?”

One last ‘yes.’ Rhys waved his hands, dispersing them. He turned himself, heading out under the trash heap to survey its contents. He hadn’t looked over it closely while he was rapidly procuring them a place to hide from the Empire, and he was sure he’d thrown lots of useful trash into the big heap. Useful things could be removed and replaced with less useful things. After all, he didn’t just need one kettle this time. He needed a whole industrial kitchen, and before long, he’d need a whole industrial *test* kitchen. Countertops, knives, bowls, the whole nine yards.

He lifted his hand, calling down a dented spoon. That went in his robe. A fork with two tines joined it. Not long after, half a bowl.

The Straw doll hissed. It swung around on the hilt of Rhys’s sword and landed atop it, then climbed up to Rhys’s shoulder. Lifting its crude hand, no more than a knob at the end of an arm, it pointed.

“What? Oh, this?” Rhys lifted his hand again, calling down a scrap of fabric. The Straw doll jumped onto his hand and gobbled it up, stuffing the scrap into its mouth. Its body shifted, growing a tiny bit bigger, and the cloth appeared on its head, formed into the shape of a big floppy hat. The Straw doll touched its hat and smiled, then scrambled back down to dangle from Rhys’s sword again.

Rhys chuckled. He shook his head. “You just aren’t Straw without your hat, huh?”

The doll had nothing to say to that, back to its usual insensate state.

Straw wasn’t much of a talker, either, so he wasn’t too shocked. He went back to drawing down bits of trash to add to his kitchen, a plate here, a strainer here. There was plenty of mortal trash, and thus, plenty of cooking implements. That was the one good thing about the Empire; lots of mortals under its purview, due to its Empress’ tight control on cores. It meant they’d be able to start from a foothold in the mortal world, where it was far easier to convince people to eat delicious things, then grow to the mage world. Of course, the foothold in the mortal world was meaningless, monetarily as

well as ideologically, but it was a start, and easy money was easy money. He'd prefer to skip the mortal world entirely, but what kind of foreign traders would bring food into the country for mages only? There was no point. It simply didn't make sense, and anyone could call it out as highly suspicious. Now, if the foreign mages brought food into the country for mortals that *just happened* to grow popular among mages as well, that was another thing.

There was a tiny risk in using his potato chip recipe that someone would recognize it and come looking for him, but it was a risk he was willing to take, and besides, he wasn't going to *end* with potato chips this time. They were but his starting point. His tried and true, early phase, from which he would grow his true business empire. If everything went well, he'd have the kind of empire enjoyed by the few companies in his world that had fully and truly mastered the world of food, the kind where it seemed to be a dozen disconnected brands with nothing in common, until you peered closely at the back of the box to find that familiar logo hidden away on its rear. At the end of his plan—no, even once he entered the mid-phase, he'd be able to abandon potato chips without losing a thing, if he needed to.

He glanced down at the Straw doll and smiled. "We're about to get evil. *Real* evil."

The Straw doll looked up at him with its tiny button eyes and cheered.

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

Chapter 120. Economic Warfare is Still Warfare

Rhys crouched in the woods, not far from the road. Not just one week had passed, but two. His kitchen was all but set up, now, cauldrons reforged and ready to go, bowls awaiting chips, tongs and forks waiting to be used. A pile of potatoes and tomatoes sat in the garbage pile, the tomatoes carefully reinforced with mana to keep them from spoiling, while the potatoes were stored in the cool dark to keep them from putting out eyes. Everything was ready to go. All they needed were those final ingredients: vinegar, salt, oil.

And on this road, on this day, in a few short moments, a caravan bearing all three of those vital ingredients would come rolling down.

Remember, take everything. We leave no hints. This caravan was hit by a bunch of random bandits, Rhys had reminded everyone. If they took the oil and salt and vinegar, and left everything else, and a mysterious shop showed up selling salted potatoes fried

in oil with a tomato-vinegar sauce the next day, it wouldn't take a genius to put two and two together; hence, take everything. There were bandits. The Empire was a monolith from the outside, and to the eyes of its believers, but it was rotten within. The Empress could strong-arm the majority of mages into obeying her rule, but not everyone, not even all of the nobles. Bandits were common; not only rogue mages from within the Empire, but from without, foreign mages who knew the Empire was a weak target, with all its mages consolidated to the military, and few on escort duty for low-level caravans. It was why merchants were allowed to have cores and mana, despite her rule; because otherwise no goods would flow through her country at all. Typical ideologue government: all talk, but no thought to the practical implementation. Still, he wasn't going to complain too loud when it worked to his favor.

Besides, his ambitions were greater than a mere potato chip stand. Who knew what other foodstuffs this caravan would have, that he could transform into transcendent junk food? There was no such thing as useless food. Worst case, they would just have some variety to make their background as foreign food merchants bringing a mysterious new delicacy to town a little more believable.

Of course, it would be safer to transform anything before he sold it, since stealing everything just meant he disguised his true goal, but didn't mean someone else couldn't figure out that a caravan had been stolen from, and a bunch of foreign merchants had consequently showed up with everything in that caravan. But Rhys was a master of junk food. He knew it, had tasted it, experienced it, held it like a lover, had been so incredibly intimate with junk food that he was confident there wasn't another human alive who knew it as well as he did. It wasn't a tough competition in this world, true, but nonetheless, it was a competition he could win. If there was any way to turn this food into any sort of junk food, he would. There was no one better qualified than him.

Rhys yawned, deeply bored. Ambushing caravans turned out to be a lot of lying around and doing nothing. He could imagine it might be interesting for an ambush hunter, like a cat, but for him, it was a lot of boredom. Lira seemed well-suited to it. She'd been floating silently face-up in a puddle near the road for the last four hours, leaving Rhys to wonder exactly how water sprites went about their man-eating. He hadn't expected an ambush, but when he thought about it, wasn't that how alligators and crocodiles operated? And as a water-based predator who preyed on land-mammals, Lira was really just a prettier version of a crocodile, once he thought about it. So, at the end of the day, Lira being an ambush predator made perfect sense.

In the distance, something rattled. Wheels bumped over hard ground, and dust stormed up along the path. The clomp of horses' hooves grew steadily closer. Rhys put his hand on his sword, climbing from a flat lie to a kind of army-crouch. It was an awkward pose, but he had the strength of a mage, and it let him do weird poses like that with little difficulty. He leaned forward, watching the road from within his den of leaves.

Across the road, and all along it on this side, other piles of leaves shifted subtly. Everyone who'd learned a mana-disguising technique was there, who'd wanted to

come, at least. Mouse, too, was present against her will, but mostly because Rhys wanted an absolute expert in the art in case things went bad.

He himself had a weak understanding of a mana-disguising technique, which showed up in his skills as Aura Obscuration, and was only level 3 or so. It turned out they were mostly considered useless, except for mages whose entire game was stealth, and as a mage who wasn't exactly the most stealthy, it qualified as a trash technique for him. It wasn't the most powerful justification, and as a result, he'd still struggled with it, but through hard work and determination, he'd managed to at least manage a basic version of the technique in time for the ambush. As for why he'd come, it was obvious—he wanted to. It sounded like great fun, and honestly, he wanted to work out some of the rage in his heart. These unsuspecting merchants weren't the right target, but they weren't the wrong target, either. Better to attack them than working it out on his allies, or some random citizen, both of which were too trashy a realm of behavior for even Rhys. This was just trashy enough for him.

There was a faint splash as Lira submerged. In the next moment, the caravan rattled into view. One wagon after another, each one laden with goods destined for the Empire's newest city. It was a relatively small caravan, with three wagons in total, plus a smattering of merchant-bodyguards and the primary merchant, the highest-ranking mage here. Five mages total; the merchant-mage was Tier 3, and the other four were somewhere between 1 and 2.

He didn't intend to hold back. These people weren't the Empire's soldiers, but they were the Empire's dogs. He wasn't a good enough person to want to keep everyone alive, because they were all victims of the Empire in the grand scheme of things, or whatever. It was a bad idea to leave witnesses, not least of all because none of the real bandits left witnesses. Leaving the merchants alive would only immediately identify his group as a strange group of definitely-not-bandits, with a strange moral code contrary to actual bandits. If the merchants surrendered, he wasn't heartless enough to kill them, but if they fought to protect the Empire's goods, then they were the Empire's dogs, and they got what was coming to them.

A trashy way of thinking, perhaps, but he was a trashy guy.

The wagons rolled closer and closer. The first of the guards passed the first of the hidden mages, then slowed. He looked around, confused.

"Something wrong?" another guard asked.

The first guard shook his head. "Just... something feels off."

The second guard looked around, then shrugged her shoulders. "There haven't been bandits in these parts since the Empress set up her quick-response unit. Don't worry. Even if someone attacks, the Empire will be here to back us up at a moment's notice."

Rhys raised his brows. *That's not great.* He'd done all the research he could, but ultimately, he couldn't have discovered everything. They were still newbies in the area, who had no connections with the criminal elements who'd know such things, nor any connection to the legitimate units who'd know such things, either. He'd avoided contacting the local criminal gangs because it was so blatantly a bad idea to get *criminals* to keep their secrets. They needed to operate as a legitimate business, and though that meant some underhanded banditry now, it also meant they couldn't afford to be chummy with criminals, who would, if his mob shows were any indication, hold it over their heads later when they tried to go legitimate, and secondly, would likely give up anything they knew if they got caught—and *anything* was too much to give up. He'd thought it wasn't a big deal... but that showed what he knew.

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I did say it, didn't I. We win if we know everything. We lose if we don't. But they'd missed a crucial detail, and now they risked being in the failure state.

Too late to back out now. He could only fully commit, and hope that whatever amulet the guards had to notify the Empire took time. If nothing else, the Empire's response would take time, and that should be long enough for him to act, escape or whatever else they needed to do.

Sure, he could back out, but then they wouldn't have accomplished anything, and no matter what, they'd still face the Empire's quick-response team, unless they attacked a caravan far further out than Rhys wanted to risk pulling goods in from. After all, they had to get the stolen goods back to base one way or another. They were close enough now to carry them by hand and melt away into the forest, but if they were another few miles out, that wouldn't be so feasible, with mostly low-Tier mages and, despite Rhys's requests and dreams, no storage rings. Who knew? After this hit, maybe they'd find storage rings, or the funds to acquire storage rings. Either way, they needed to get this done.

And maybe Rhys was just a tiny bit impatient to get everything rolling. He couldn't lord over a fast food empire until he had his raw materials, and with no gold, there was only one way to acquire them. The longer he waited to obtain raw materials, the longer it would take to get his fast food empire off the ground. Not only that, but his plan to take down the Empire required the fast food empire running; not just started, not just one sad shop in one small city, but *running*. Sure, at Tier 3, he had time, but what he wanted wasn't just to end the Empire. He wanted to end it meaningfully, to restore the cores to all the disempowered mages *before* their lifespans ran out. They weren't quite lowered back to mortal lifespans, what with their empowered bodies and what not, but not all mages had cultivated their bodies, and the level to which those who had, had empowered their bodies, differed strongly. For some mages, it wasn't even a question of lifespan, but instead, how long they could hold out. He'd seen plenty die in the mines, worked to death, crushed in cave-ins, mutilated by falling rocks, beaten to death by

sadistic Empire guards. If they turned back here, if they hesitated, if they waited until they knew everything there was to know about every possible convoy, then mages died. Mages died, because they were too cautious. He would rather risk his life—risk it, mind you, put it at stake, not lose it for sure—than stand back and watch powerlessly while others died, all while he had the power to accelerate their freedom even one day.

So, as the caravan rolled into place, Rhys didn't signal the retreat, but charged instead, instantly closing in on the highest Tier merchant with no hesitation. Leaves flew from his shoulders, and he drew his sword ferociously, striking at the merchant with all his might as though he intended to end this battle in one strike. The merchant barely drew his sword in time. From his clumsiness with it, it was clear the man was no swordsman. Though he was a high Tier mage, he clearly didn't specialize in combat; rather, it was more likely he was an enchanter, alchemist, or something of that ilk. It was somewhat like leveling blacksmithing in a certain game about the Sky's Rim, where it was possible to reach high levels with little or no combat experience, and possess a high level, but lack the skills and powers necessary to actually fight at that tier.

As a result, it was simple for Rhys to angle his sword to cut through the other man's blade, without any real effort on his part.

The merchant scowled and tossed the broken sword away, summoning a second from his storage ring. Before the broken sword hit the ground, Rhys jumped forward and caught it. He activated Trash Intent and slashed upward, cutting through the man's torso at a diagonal angle. His sword impacted armor, hidden under the robe, and bounced back.

The merchant laughed. "You think that broken sword can overcome my Gleaming Nine Lights armor? I bought this from a—"

Rhys whirled with the bounce, rising to a stand and repeating his blow, but this time, he aimed at the back of the merchant's neck. The merchant didn't finish speaking before Rhys's sword separated his head from his neck.

"That's what you get for levelling non-combat-skills only," Rhys informed him, slashing the blood off the broken sword, then dismissing Trash Intent. Technically, he didn't need to do that except for the broken base, but it was so cool to do that rapid slash at the ground after an attack, and he just couldn't resist.

Rhys knelt, checking the merchant's body for important items. He stole the merchant's badge and pinned it on himself, then checked the man's rings. One of them was simply expensive, so he palmed it. Another was enchanted, but he had no idea how or with what; it didn't respond to his mana. He took it anyways, figuring he could sell it if he couldn't figure it out. The third one was a small-scale storage ring, with the space of maybe a small room inside it. He scanned it, then drew back, revolted. The space was full of raw meat. There was a small segment of precious herbs, but the rest was full of meat.

A second later, he shrugged. *Guess they had to transport the refrigerated goods somehow.* It wasn't like this world had refrigeration, and while he was sure mages could whip up ice enchantments to serve the same purpose, a storage ring was a cheap way to accomplish the same. He glanced at the meat again, then shrugged. There were *things* he could create with meat, so he wasn't going to complain at the unexpected windfall. Still—perhaps as expected—this storage ring wouldn't help him transport the goods back to the hideout.

Rhys punted the man's head into the pile of leaves, then looked around at the rest of the ambush. Things were going well. Lira crouched over a carcass, doing something Rhys didn't want to look too closely at, but which involved a lot of blood splatter. Mouse hid, not fighting at all; then again, he hadn't asked her to. She was their get-out-of-jail free card, not a combatant. Korii had already taken down her merchant, and a mage Rhys didn't remember the name of finished another with a short blow, which left two; one struggled with Blake, and the other reached to his hip, where a small amulet shone in the sun.

Rhys snatched up the sword he'd discarded and threw with all his might. It hurtled across the battlefield, whistling as it cut the wind, and impaled the man in the chest—but it was too late. A pulse of mana emanated from his amulet even as he fell.

Shit. Rhys raced over, chasing his thrown sword. He plucked the man's pin off his chest and kicked him onto his face, then turned to the rest of the mages as Blake finally felled his merchant. He whistled, demanding everyone's attention, even Lira's.

"Grab your merchant's badge and put it on, now. Destroy the merchants' faces and surround the caravan. We're the merchants now, understand?"

Lira turned and fled into the woods instead, and Mouse chased after her. A reasonable decision, Rhys realized a moment later; she was a water sprite, not a human, and he didn't know if the Empire allowed non-mages to have cores. Blake stared in confusion, completely lost, but luckily Korii caught on. She tossed Blake a pin and grabbed another for herself. The third mage slumped to his knees, bleeding profusely from the stomach, his robes slashed wide open. He hit the ground with a thump.

Rhys frowned, but there was no time to check on the man or anything else. Shadows fell on them from overhead, and a trio of mages in white uniforms, mounted on pure-white military regulation blades, descended toward them.

This was it, live or die. It was time to see if his gambit played out.

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

