

Chapter 121. Have You Committed Any Economic War Crimes Today?

The three soldiers landed, dismounting their swords with well-drilled motions. They turned toward Rhys and the others, looking them up and down.

Rhys harrumphed and stepped forward. Before they had the chance to speak, he crossed his arms aggressively and glared at them. "You're late!"

The leader, a man with a red sash across his chest, stepped forward. "What happened here?"

"We were beset by some bandits! Luckily, we dealt with them, but can you imagine? If they were more competent, we'd be dead before you showed up! Rapid response force, my ass!" Rhys snapped, annoyed.

The leader crossed his arms back at Rhys. "The amulets are only to be used in dire straits. If you are not on the brink of utter destruction—"

"We could have been! No—we were! It's fortunate that I was able to turn the tides, or else these brutal bandits would have had our heads. I can't believe it took you so long. But fortunately, I was stronger than my underlings feared, and able to defeat the bandit leader," Rhys said. He uncrossed his arms, putting his hands on his hips instead, and shook his head, letting out a breath as though he'd just now gotten his anger under control. "Still... we lost good men today. Merchants who didn't have to die, who died because of your incompetency. Your barracks will be hearing from me."

"You can file a formal complaint with the barracks captain," the leader intoned, clearly used to hearing this kind of diatribe. He flicked his wrist, and his travelling sword left its sheath and hovered before him.

The other soldiers turned to go. One glanced back, rolling his eyes, then leaned toward the other. At a whisper, but one that he knew full well Rhys could hear, he asked, "Why do we let merchants have cores at all? They're just a bunch of weak cowards."

"Shut up, or are you volunteering for caravan duty?" the other muttered back.

The first one shot his friend a narrow-eyed look, but said nothing. The two of them mounted their swords as well, and all three vanished into the sky.

The three of them stood there for a few more beats, watching the mages retreat into the sky. When they were so far Rhys could no longer sense their auras, he let out a sigh of relief and crumpled, exhausted. He ran his hair back and looked at the others. "Thank goodness."

Korii nodded, too relieved to speak. Blake walked over to the mage who'd been hit by the merchant's attack, the one whose name Rhys couldn't remember. He knelt, then shook his head.

Rhys grimaced. That was unfortunate. They didn't have much manpower, and they couldn't afford to lose any of it. Looking at the man's body, something tickled at the back of his mind, something he hadn't done in a long time: trashomancy.

He pursed his lips, thinking. It probably wouldn't work on anyone here, since none of them had been thrown away, but it was something worth thinking about. Something to consider for later.

For now, though, it was time to rob this caravan. He clapped, summoning Lira and Mouse out from the bushes. "Everyone load up. We strip this thing down, break it down to nothing, and take the whole thing with us. Boards, wheels, and all. The horses... we'll send them back home. We don't need them."

"Won't that be suspicious, that we 'survived' the ambush, only to immediately vanish?" Korii asked.

Rhys shook his head. "Only if the soldiers ever check up on us, or someone comes looking for this specific caravan. The soldiers aren't going to look for us unless we do something to remind them, and if someone comes looking for us, they'd have to find those specific soldiers to find out that we fended off an ambush... and even then, it's not as if it's impossible that the bandits came back and finished off our 'weakened caravan.' As long as we vanish the whole thing, no one should look into it too hard."

Korii nodded, and all of them got to work unloading the caravan, then breaking it down. Rhys checked the bodies for good gear, but aside from the lead merchant's Nine Glitters Armor, or whatever it was called, there wasn't anything particularly standout. He stripped that off the lead merchant and handed it to Korii, who was about the deceased merchant's size. A different merchant had a storage ring packed full of charcoal, which Rhys added to his new collection of rings. He finished checking the merchants and joined the rest of his party in stripping down the caravans. They removed the foodstuffs, then broke down the wagons themselves, down to the boards and nails. Those they tied into bundles, and loaded onto Blake's back. The horses ran off the second Lira cut their traces, speeding back to their home stables.

When everyone was loaded up and everything was ready to go, Rhys did the final, macabre task of carrying the merchants off the road and into the woods, where they would rot away out of sight, out of mind. It was a wasteful end for them, but there was

nothing Rhys could do about that. They'd chosen to become merchants for the Empire. They knew the consequences.

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He held his hand out, trying to absorb them, but he already knew it wouldn't work. They weren't trash. He was the only one who'd cast them away, and as a result, they didn't qualify. He lowered his hand and pushed leaves over them instead, not only hiding them, but kick-starting the decay process, too. He added the man they'd lost, then pushed more leaves on top, not wanting to separate out their man too much, but wanting to separate him a little; he deserved better than the merchants, but this was all the more they could give him right now.

Maybe later, when everything's said and done, I'll come back and give him a real burial, alongside everyone else who died in the mines.

He lowered his head for a moment, then turned and rejoined the others, adjusting the heavy barrels lashed to his back. They all looked outlandish, loaded with barrels and boxes beyond what any human could carry, only able to hoist them thanks to their mana-enhanced physiques.

"Let's get out of here before the soldiers come back," Rhys said, and ran off into the woods.

They didn't head directly back. Instead, they made a pit stop in a cave on the way back, spending the night there so Rhys could investigate the merchant's pins and so that any tail or investigation had a chance to catch up with them, and consequently, they had a chance to detect and deal with any investigation or tail. Mouse took to the forest to watch, and Rhys extended his aura as far as he could, but neither of them detected anything.

As for the badges, they were enchanted to make it hard to forge them, if not completely impossible, but as far as he could tell, there was nothing to link them to a particular merchant, trace the merchants, or call home to their original manufacturer if they were tampered with. Then again, he considered, investigating the badge further, those were all things *he* considered common because he was used to an age of constant surveillance and electronic devices that tracked everyone's every move, if only to sell them more products. This world probably hadn't come up with half the concepts he was looking for yet, or if it had, they were only in high value, very specific products, not in the chaff one handed out to merchants for a small fee as the price of doing business. Hell, even in his world, it wasn't as though every child's toy was going to be tracking the kid's movements, so maybe he was being paranoid to expect something like that.

Nonetheless, the badges lacked tracking features, so that was one less thing to worry about. He shared the good news with the others, and mostly got confused looks as they tried to understand why he was looking for such specific and rare enchantments.

In the morning, they set off once more. The goods they ultimately stashed at a few hiding spots out in the woods, in case someone had a method to track the goods, with Rhys only bringing the bare essentials for the first batch of potato chips and ketchup... and a tub full of sugar, and the storage ring full of raw meat and herbs, and the storage ring full of charcoal.

Okay, so maybe I brought a little more than the bare essentials...

He had assembled a decent kitchen out of trash, with the help of the other mages from the mines. Tossing some charcoal under the kettle, he got the tomatoes boiling down, while he started heating the oil for the potato chips in another. By now, the potato chips were almost an afterthought; he called a few of the other mages over to watch him make them, then handed off the chip-making to them, only stepping through at the end to imbue them with the hint of a path that made them so addictive to mages and mortals alike. The cut he and the others could do wasn't quite as fine or regular as Bast could, but then again, he couldn't expect ordinary mages to measure up to the Sword Saint's Apprentice.

With the chips under control, he turned his attention to the tomatoes. These were just normal tomatoes, not the vitality ones he'd grown earlier using his own mana and body, but nonetheless, he could develop that same sense of vitality into ordinary tomatoes... by feeding it in manually. Taking a deep breath, Rhys hovered his hand over the boiling tomatoes, then burned his trash star hotter than usual, feeding the excess mana into his body, where it naturally converted to vitality, then pulling it back out before his cells could overgrow and forcing it into the tomatoes instead. If he'd done it to raw tomatoes, they would have burst into seed and transformed into brand new tomato plants in his hands, but feeding it into the cooking tomatoes just meant he pushed it into something where all it could do was store the vitality, rather than use it itself. It was the same principle as feeding vitality into a potion or healing pill; feeding it in too early would simply grow more herb, but feed it in later, and it would absorb and hold on to the vitality.

"What are you making? A health potion?" Korii asked, peering over his shoulder. She frowned. "Tomatoes as the base? They aren't particularly imbued with vitality..."

"No, no. Watch and learn," Rhys said. He poured in the vinegar, then added a sprinkling of salt and sugar. He sniffed a few of the herbs until he found some that matched his memory of ketchup's flavor profile, then tossed them in as well. Just like how the chips didn't actually imbue anyone with a path or enlightenment, the ketchup he wanted to create wouldn't restore anyone's vitality, but only give them the illusion of refreshment and restoration, without actually granting it in any meaningful quantity. After all, he didn't aim to help the enemy, but hinder them.

For that purpose, he deliberately didn't absorb any impurities from the potatoes or the tomatoes, or even the kettles he cooked them in. The more impurities the better—though he said that, it wasn't true; he had to keep the impurities low enough that mages couldn't sense them, or else all was lost. He wanted the absolute maximum percentage of impurities that mages could ignore, enough that they'd think, 'oh, a bag or five isn't bad,' and only realize they'd harmed themselves ten bags in, when they could no longer break free of their addiction.

Of course, potato chips didn't go with ketchup, so, after he showed some of the mages how to construct bags and found them a good enough source of trash to get them started, he went back to the potatoes and started cutting them differently, into rectangles instead of chips. It was time to craft the true backbone of his new soon-to-be franchises: french fries.

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Chapter 122. Crafting Fries

Rhys cut, soaked, and dried the potatoes, then immediately stored them in the charcoal storage ring, which he'd emptied of its previous contents. Fries couldn't be pre-prepared like chips; or, at least, they couldn't be pre-fried. Even the trashiest fast food establishments fried their fries on-premises, and that was saying something, in a world where most of their food was precooked, frozen, then 'prepared' on-site via microwave and heat lamp. True, fast food fries were half-cooked and frozen first, but the final dip in oil was still on-site. Fries simply didn't work without a fresh fry. Of course, on the other hand, fryers weren't hard to operate, even for untrained minimum-wage employees, and Rhys needed nothing but a few wire baskets to replicate the fast food restaurant's fryer in this world, where his employees weren't teenagers who didn't know better but adult mages with more capability and skill than they knew what to do with.

He imbued the fries with the same hint of his path as the chips, though he knew he should do something else. If he kept doing the same trick, eventually, someone would pick up on it. It was just that it was such a good trick, he didn't want to stop using it quite yet. Then again, it was trashy to keep reusing the same trick over and over until it was well and fully worn out, so it wasn't *against* his path to keep things the same. It just struck him as a good idea to start working on someone else, so that whenever his first trick wore out, he had something else to fall back on, like the vitality tomatoes.

Speaking of... he looked at his hand, though truly, he directed his eyes inward, at his core. Imbuing the tomatoes with vitality had considerably drained his trash star. It still

had plenty of energy for now, but it would run down sooner or later. He had to replenish it from somewhere.

He twisted his lips, thinking. This couldn't be the Empire's only trash heap. For one, it had been mostly mortal trash, not mage trash. For two, the Empire had consigned lots of books and artifacts that didn't meet its qualifications to the garbage, but he'd found none of them here. That meant there *had* to be other trash heaps, and not only that, but more powerful trash heaps. They just weren't here. They were somewhere else, probably deeper into the Empire.

Deeper in the Empire. He looked around, taking in his underlings. They were highly competent, and as long as he imbued the raw materials with vitality and his path, they were capable of taking them to the finish line once he showed them how. He'd walk them through starting their first store, then hand the reins over to someone—probably Korii—and run off into the Empire to find more trash to refill his trash star. The downside of his purely-trash-based cultivation technique was that when he ran out of trash, the star stopped burning, and he ceased to be a mage once more. The activation conditions required far more trash than continuously burning trash did, as well, meaning he really did not want to run out of trash or let the star burn down. He bit his lip, gazing at the star. Did he have enough energy to wait that long? To wait until everything was set up and ready to go? He was already running low...

Rhys snapped his fingers as a thought came to him. He'd amassed all his original trash from the mines, but he knew for a fact that the mines he'd come from weren't the Empire's only labor camp. All the other camps surely had as much trash, if not more, than the mines had, plus, he gained more manpower by hitting the other camps. On the downside, attacking the mines meant drawing attention to himself, right at the critical juncture where he wanted the absolute minimum of the Empire's attention.

Or does it? He raised his brows, thinking. Sure, the Empire would think the camp attacks were related, but what if he made them appear as if they weren't? Freed the workers, gave some of them cores, then vanished back to the wilderness from whence he came, let them run wild and distract the Empire while he quietly enacted his true plan over here at its newest city. It was a kind of awful thing to do to the people in the camps, when he knew he could save them from a harsh death at the hands of the Empire by recruiting them, but... he couldn't save everyone. And it wasn't like he was going to tell them to unalive themselves, either. They were free to do whatever they wanted. Run away, fight, even follow him back. Sure, it was neglectful, but it wasn't cruel. If anything, he gave them more freedom than he had with this first batch, where he'd knowingly, willingly, strong-armed them into fighting alongside him, by taking their cores if they left. There'd been intelligence in the decision, since the Empire would kill anyone who had a core, but they could blend in without one, but at the same time, who would say no to a core? Having been elevated to a mage again after so long ground underfoot as a mortal once more, who would say no and become weak again, to be stomped on?

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Rhys sighed aloud. No matter what he did, whether he collected them or set them free, it was manipulative. Once he utilized his strength to give them back their cores, he'd inherently incurred a debt they could not repay. At that point, anything he asked of them could be considered compulsion. It was a messed up situation, and he had no idea what to do about it, so... he shrugged to himself. If it was compulsion no matter what, then he just wouldn't worry about it! Nothing he could do, so he'd just do what he wanted. It made sense to him.

Korii glanced at him. "Something on your mind?"

"There was, but I think I've resolved it," Rhys said. Once he got over the need to be a good person, it was pretty easy to callously set the people from another camp free, and let them do whatever they wanted, damn the consequences. Then again, it wasn't like he *ever* had the ability to control other people. He was honestly worrying a little too much about it. It was like worrying that some random high schooler would start smoking cigarettes because he walked by smoking. Sure, it was a bad look, and it might influence their ultimate death, but he really couldn't be blamed for other people's bad decisions. ...Or that was what he told himself, anyways.

It's no fun being the guy who has to make tough decisions. He'd rather be the nobody at the bottom of the ladder, who was just following orders. If there was a war crimes tribunal waiting for him at the end of all this, his odds weren't great.

Then again, this seemed like a might-makes-right world, and by that logic, not only were his actions correct, but everyone he released from the camps took their destiny into their own hands, and had the responsibility to gauge their might and determine their route from there. Their bad decisions were truly their own, from that moral perspective. He was pretty sure that argument wasn't going to win over any philosophers, but then again, he didn't really care about philosophers' opinions.

Philosophers were the guys who showed up after everything was said and done, and determined who they thought was right and wrong... which was the trashiest possible take, in Rhys's opinion. They were the ultimate armchair referees. They had no say on the actual play of the events, or on people's take on anything as it happened, but afterwards, when everyone had hindsight, they decided 'good' and 'evil,' as though they had any right. Armchair refs, each and every one of them. In other words, the worst kind of people.

Rhys drew a set of raw fries out of the ice water he'd been soaking them in, and walked over to the hot oil. The other mages gathered close as he dropped them in, watching the little potato sticks bob in the oil. He waited until they were golden brown, then gestured, calling them out with Trash Manipulation and setting them into some paper he'd drawn the filth and impurities from. Putting them to the side, he grabbed a broken

cup and poured some freshly-made ketchup into the bottom of it, then stepped back for everyone to take a bite of the fresh fries.

Korii took a bite. Her eyes got wide, and she put a hand over her mouth. "So good!"

Blake frowned, unconvinced, then took a bite for himself, and melted. "No way..."

All the other mages fought their way forward, each taking a fry and dipping it in a bit of ketchup reverentially, almost worshipfully. Rhys gazed on, nodding with approval. As it should be. Junk food, finally worshipped, as was its right!

When everyone had had a taste, he took the final fry, dipped it in the last of the ketchup, and allowed himself a taste. Hot potato exploded on his tongue, mixed with the perfect amount of salt, and the vinegary, tomatoey ketchup provided the perfect sweet-salty-acidic counterpart to the salty starch of the potato. He closed his eyes, relishing the flavor.

I never thought I'd taste this. Not in this world. But here he was. In another world, full of magic, and eating potato fries. Life couldn't get any better.

And then he opened his eyes and smiled. It was time to get the ball rolling on all his endeavors. *Time to cause a little chaos.*

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

Chapter 123. Easy as 1, 2, 3

Rhys instructed his underlings on how to craft chips, ketchup, and fries, and left them to get started on their industrial-scale endeavors. He set off, taking only Lira with him. When they were far enough from the hideout that no one could sense them anymore, he turned to her. "I'm going to free another camp's worth of prisoners."

"You already freed a camp of prisoners? And for that matter, there's prison camps?" Lira asked.

Rhys frowned at her, then raised his brows. "Right. You were stuck in the sewer."

"I was, but I'm starting to wonder if maybe I didn't have the worst of it," Lira replied.

"No, you... you probably did have... well, you had it really bad," Rhys said, not wanting to compare levels of suffering or trivialize any of the horrible things that had happened to the other mages in the mine.

Lira nodded, understanding. "It was bad everywhere, wasn't it."

Rhys took a deep breath. He nodded. "Yeah."

"Why'd you take me?" she asked.

"You seemed like a competent fighter with a grudge, who's good at melting away when she needs to hide. Also..." Rhys grimaced. "Sorry, but I don't think I can use you as a fry salesman. You're too distinctive. Even if I disguise your face, your aura is still too unique, and over a long time—"

Lira raised her hand, cutting him off. "I get it. I'm a water sprite."

"I'm not trying to be rac... speciesist, but—"

She waved her hand. "Don't worry. I don't want to be a fry salesman in the first place. I'd rather fight."

"Oh, good. Well, that's that, then," Rhys said, relieved.

"And you are right. As long as there's a fresh water source nearby, I can easily escape any situation," Lira said.

Rhys nodded. "Excellent. That's exactly what I need."

"So, where are we going?"

Rhys pointed. "When I was in the mines, we heard about another camp nearby. A farm that grew spiritual herbs. They'd send the worst-off of the miners there instead; only the people who were too far gone to benefit, even if they ate the herbs. It's huge, and right next to a river for cheap irrigation. What do you say?"

"Sounds good to me." Lira smiled, showing off her shark fangs. Her hands clenched, and long, almost needle-like fangs slid out from under her fingernails.

Rhys stared. "Creepy."

"Men instinctively fear what hunts them," Lira replied, sheathing her claws.

"That's... deeply fair." Rhys turned and ran, speeding between the trees. Lira followed after him, lowering her umbrella for a moment. A white blur chased a dark smudge, the both of them hurtling through the forest.

As they ran, Rhys glanced back. "How long can you be dry for?"

"Huh?"

“Your umbrella’s always up. I assumed you always have to stay wet, or something.”

Lira chuckled. “Oh, that. I can stay dry for days, if need be. I get uncomfortable without my umbrella, but it won’t kill me for quite some time. It’s like... if you stood still in a cold river for hours, you would be uncomfortable. Like that.”

Rhys opened his mouth in an ‘O’ as he understood. It would be somewhat insane for someone who died if she got dry to flaunt about in a might-makes-right world like this; it’d be too obvious to simply grab her umbrella and leave her out to dry, literally. For it to simply be a comfort thing, a kind of feint where anyone who went for it, simply wasted their first move, made far more sense.

“Of course, I prefer to be wet at all times, but it is rather like how you prefer to be dry,” Lira added.

“I get it.”

They ran on. Leaves crunched underfoot, and sunlight dappled over the ground around them. Once, Rhys sensed mages and diverted around them, not wanting to charge into them, but realizing how obvious it would be if he stopped dead instead. He touched the badge on his chest, then turned and tossed another badge to Lira. He still hadn’t determined if the merchants’ badges were in any way registered to their given merchant or not, but he had determined that there was no callback or trace function, so they were good enough to use for bluffing, at least. He’d investigated them with his mana, but the little twinkle of mana he got back didn’t tell him clearly whether they were identified to a merchant or not; still, given that he’d successfully bluffed the Empire once, he knew that one, they were good until closely examined, and two, that the Empire wasn’t overly excited to closely examine them, even in somewhat sketchy situations.

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Lira caught the pin and pinned it to her chest, understanding the assignment without further instruction. On they went, climbing up the mountain on the other side of the city. The other auras reached out and scanned theirs, and at that, the pins gave a tiny response. The auras retreated, and the soldiers they were attached to never appeared at all.

Rhys raised his brows. Interesting. So it didn’t have a callback function, but it did have some kind of long-range signal that the other mages could read and understand at a distance. It was convenient, since it meant they didn’t have to bluff their way through another encounter with the Empire, or, in fact, even show their faces. On the other hand, if there was a way to identify who was using the pins, or even track the pins on their won, the Empire would know these pins were in the region before the attack on the farm.

Rhys gestured Lira in. She closed the distance, quickly reaching his side. “We abandon the pins after this. They’re burned.”

“Why?”

“Don’t worry. We’ll put ‘em somewhere we can find them again, in face my guesses are wrong, but if I’m right, then we need to abandon them immediately afterward.”

Lira shrugged, but nodded. “If you think so, then I’ll do it. We don’t have many of these, though. We shouldn’t throw them away so easily.”

Rhys opened his mouth, then shut it. He frowned, pinching his chin as he ran. Throw away. *Throw away. Hmmm.* Something about that tickled his brain. He could feel a solution at hand, but he hadn’t quite reached it yet.

“Let’s worry about the farm first,” Rhys said, putting the thought to the back of his mind. He smiled at Lira and sped up, and she sped up to match him.

Past the city and up the mountain. The trees came to an abrupt end. Rhys stopped just within the trees, watching from within their shifting shadow. Lira drew up beside him, and as she drew to a halt, she unfurled her umbrella once more. Rain pattered down, its sound swallowed up by the breeze.

The air was thin up here. It didn’t matter much to them, but to the once-mages who tiled in the sun, it *mattered*. They paused now and again to suck deep breaths of air, or just to rest. Others, more acclimatized to the low oxygen, labored on, their eyes dull and heads low. Compared to the creamy-skinned mages they’d been, untouched by age and the sun, they were now wrinkled, dried up like raisins in the sun. Some bore visible wounds, not just from carelessly tending to the herbs, which flourished around them, spreading their frilly green leaves to the sky, but from human attacks, sharp cuts from blades and dull blows from whips or clubs.

Despite that, there were no guards. No fences. As far as Rhys could tell, the mages simply wandered around tending to the fields of their own volition, though he knew that couldn’t be true. He wanted to extend his aura, but killed it back at the last second. If he released it now, he’d reveal his presence, and the battle would start before he’d figured anything out at all.

His hand shook. Rhys clenched his teeth, physically fighting the urge to leap in, and damn the consequences. Here he stood, right here, with all the power in the world, and the ability to save these mages, and all he did was stand and watch. He felt more powerless than he’d ever felt before. It writhed under his skin, demanding release.

Not yet. Just a little longer. This was no scouting trip. If he couldn’t figure it out, he’d launch his attack anyways and simply bear what came, but maybe, if all it took was another few seconds, then—then he’d hold out. He scanned the fields slowly, looking

among the mages for the white uniforms of the guards, the telltale tingle of mana, anything. Nothing. He sensed nothing but the mages, laboring away.

One of the mages stumbled, and instantly, a sharp cut appeared across her chest, not deep enough to kill, just enough to hurt. She numbly climbed back to her feet, too tired even to cry out.

Rhys lifted his head, searching the area. Where had that come from? There had to be guards. He'd always known it, but now it was confirmed. And yet, he still had the same question: where were they?

Before he could finish searching, his question was answered for him as a figure in gray swooped down on a sword. He crouched on his sword, hovering over the woman, and laughed. "Twice today? You're in a lazy mood, aren't you, taking so many breaks."

Rhys narrowed his eyes. It was transparently obvious that the woman wasn't taking a break. She'd stumbled, and that was all. But this guard wanted to make it into a bigger problem, regardless of reality.

The mage woman shook her head numbly and walked on, reaching out to check on the next herb.

The guard smacked her hand out of the air. "What are you doing now? Trying to harvest it too early?"

She mumbled something, pointing on the plant. A beetle sat on the leaf, eyeing the plant's nascent flower bud. She hadn't been going to harvest the plant at all, but rid it of the pest.

"Sabotage? Three faults in a row. You know what that means. It's time to go to the special punishment room," the guard said, clicking his tongue.

The woman cringed, but didn't run. She knew there was no escape. All around her, the other prisoners averted their eyes. There was nothing they could do. Nothing any of them could do.

Lira glanced at Rhys, whose hand had clenched so hard it threatened to cut into his flesh. "You know we should wait until night."

"I know."

"Are we going to?"

Rhys drew his broken sword. At that, Lira chuckled. "I didn't think so." She swished her umbrella around, folding it in, then drawing a thin, flexible blade from its center.

Rhys tossed his merchant's badge away, and so did Lira, and like that, the two of them strode out into the field.

The guard turned. "Haa? Where'd you come from? Wait... you have mana signatures? You're not—"

Rhys dashed in, closing the gap before he could finish the words. A single blue rat flew out, launching itself at the guard ahead of Rhys. The guard startled and batted it away, and Rhys reached him, separating his head from his neck with a single stroke. He reached up, hauling the man off his flying sword and simultaneously absorbing him, then mounted it for himself.

Lira hopped up behind him. "Don't steal all the fun for yourself."

Overhead, more guards shouted, startled by their appearance. They darted down, reaching for their swords and summoning their mana. Rhys rushed up to meet them, his eyes full of vengeance.

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

Chapter 124. Eyes Full of Vengeance

Rhys charged at the nearest guards, and they charged down at him. He narrowed his eyes, then flicked his fingers at one of the further guards, who hung back, murmuring words to himself as he gathered mana for a spell. A rat crawled over the man's shoulder, and he startled and batted at it, only for a second rat to appear, and a third, and a fourth, until the tiny beasts swarmed him, chittering as they gnawed at his flesh. He screamed, batting at them, but his blows did little. The rats consumed him, leaving nothing behind, then consumed themselves, vanishing once more.

This was the technique Rhys had learned in the mines. This was the ultimate form of his rat-summoning.

The newly-consumed guard's sword drifted in the wind, wandering toward them. Lira kicked off the back of Rhys's sword and flew through the air. She landed on a guard's shoulder, jumped again, and flipped around to land feet-first on the abandoned sword, her slender sword outstretched. Suddenly flanked, the guards floundered, not certain whether to attack Lira or Rhys first.

Lira and Rhys met one another's eyes, then nodded. Rhys jumped left, while Lira took the right half. The guards swiftly fell, and Rhys absorbed them just as quickly. He stored their energy separate from their bodies, as usual, letting their bodies become trash, while their energy he stored around the exterior of the trash star, to be absorbed later, if he didn't find any mages who wanted to take on the responsibility of being reinstated. He leaned forward, flying toward the abandoned flying swords, and pulled out two pieces of wood trash. Using the two like chopsticks, he fished the flying swords out of the air and stored them in his storage ring. He could use those later, either here or back at the base with his potato-chip-makers. Given how the merchants didn't ride flying swords, he assumed sword-flying was restricted to the military and the aristocracy in the Empire, but that didn't mean he couldn't use flying swords when he attacked the Empire, just that he shouldn't when he was going around as an innocent junk food salesman.

He and Lira landed. The farm workers looked up, their eyes big and empty, shellshocked more than anything. Rhys stepped forward. "You are all freed. If anyone wants the danger and responsibility of a restored core, follow me. I can't guarantee anything, except that you walk into death; I cannot, and will not, keep you safe. You might follow me and die for no benefit. Even if you receive a benefit, you must continue to follow me until the end of your lives, or the end of the Empire.

"If you are not prepared for that commitment, if you want to simply be free and safe, then go now. Scatter to the four winds and make for the nearest borders. We will fight here, and distract the Empire for as long as we can, to give you as much time to get away as possible."

The prisoners looked amongst themselves. A few of them turned and ran without hesitation, vanishing into the forest around them. There was no barrier around the farm; Rhys didn't know why, but he suspected it had to do with how the herbs grew. It was possible that a barrier would interfere with the flow of mana and prevent them from growing properly. They were absorbing mana passively from the soil and air, at a low rate; he was close enough to be able to sense the motion of mana in the air, flowing into the plants. It wasn't infeasible that a barrier would alter their growth. In any case, he was grateful for the lack of a barrier, since it made it easier to handle the escapees.

A few of them stepped forward. Their eyes were hardened, without a single scrap of hope left. These men and women marched to their death, but they marched with their eyes wide open, hoping to take down one guard on their way to hell. Rhys nodded. He glanced over them, then chose the one who looked the most committed, the most willing to fight until they or the Empire were dust, and put a hand on their shoulder. Power flowed from him into the young man, and he focused, coursing it into a core.

The young man startled. He looked down at himself, then raised his hands, marveling at the return of mana. "I'm... whole again?"

"Come. We have work to do," Rhys said. He turned and marched off, further into the farm, toward the buildings and barracks in the near distance. As he walked, he absorbed the impurities from the plants and soil around him, sucking all the trash and filth into himself. The plants behind him sparkled, brightening under his influence.

"Pick the plants and take them with you. Feel free to eat as many as you want," Lira added, bending to pick a few of the herbs herself.

Rhys nodded. There was no point leaving the impurity-free herbs for the Empire. "We take everything. We are the locusts. Nothing should remain behind us."

The once-mages nodded. They ran off, all of them spreading out over the fields and harvesting plants as quickly as they could. It was the same task they'd been doing, but now, they were doing it for themselves, and their eyes shone with hope and possibility. The restored mage took an entire three rows for himself, hopping from plant to plant and leaving not even the roots behind. Rhys glanced at him approvingly. With the rootstock, they could try replanting these herbs back in his garbage garden patch, and beyond that, try testing them as a flavor ingredient in their junk food. Plenty of junk food took flavors from herbs, whether it was onions and garlic or savory spice mixes. He had no idea how a magical herb would serve as a flavor component, especially when magical herbs were usually quite bitter in his limited experience, but it was worth a shot.

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As he walked, Rhys glanced at the bugs and pests on the herbs. He could absorb them easily; after all, pests were universally considered trash by farmers. His own words had sparked a thought in him. *We are the locusts*. He'd absorbed the essence of rats and become capable of summoning a swarm of rats. If he absorbed enough bugs... He raised his brows. There were infinite skills available to him through the route of bugs. In fact, he wouldn't be surprised if bugs were an entire path unto themselves. Still, through the path of trash, he could easily access the path of bugs. Bugs loved trash, and trash loved bugs. The two were enveloped in a harmonious cycle, where bugs grew stronger from trash, and trash broke down into more useful items like compost and earth thanks to bugs. From a certain perspective, Rhys had even dabbled in the path of bugs before, with his accelerated compost creation.

Of course, that was passive, or neutral association with bugs, where bugs and trash were locked in their harmonious cycle and enhancing one another. What he wanted now, was instead the aggression of bugs; stinging, biting, or even devouring bugs like locusts that he could use offensively, not unlike the rats. The rats took a good chunk of mana to summon, and had no secondary effect. He still hadn't finished his efforts with creating a mage-infecting disease, so they could only devour things to death. On the other hand, mages were easier to inflict with poisons than diseases, and bugs naturally possessed poisons. If he could summon a swarm of poison-bearing bugs and set them on a mage, then even if the mage survived or dismissed the initial onslaught, he still

gained the benefit of the poison. That, and a sting or bite could be an irritant to distract or slow mages, and prevent them from casting a spell or completing an attack even if they did little damage. It was a route worth pursuing.

Rhys continued to absorb the bugs, but he stored them away from the rest of the trash for later study. He could always use more attacking spells. For a guy who styled himself—and thought of himself—as a mage, he sure didn't have a lot of spells. It didn't keep him from calling himself a mage, because he was trashy like that, but it did mean there was a little twitch in his heart, crying out for more spells. The fireball was forever beyond his reach, but that didn't mean all offensive spells were impossible. Things like rats and bugs, throwing impurities, and other trash techniques he hadn't thought of yet, he still had plenty of offensive spells open to him. He just had to think along the lines of his path, rather than thinking about generic offensive spells, and then he'd succeed. After all, his talent was garbage if it wasn't aimed at garbage.

More guards emerged from the buildings as they approached, and other fields, full of other mages, looked up, aware of their actions, but uncertain how to proceed. At the sight of Rhys's glowing Trash Intent and Lira's eerie smile, the guards immediately charged the two of them. Rhys snapped his fingers, and the nearby storage hut trembled. A stream of rats burst out of it and charged the guards, overwhelming the first. A second turned to help the first deal with the rats, and the rest kept charging.

Beside him, Lira gestured. The plants nearest a guard withered, and a bolt of water leaped forth and pierced the guard's side. He cried out, stumbling.

There was still time before the remaining guards reached them. Rhys paused, then smiled. With all the impurities and filth he'd sucked up, there was a fair bit of cursed power mixed in. He still didn't fully understand cursed power, but there seemed to be more of it when there were negative emotions or impurities mixed into the person's blood. Given that he'd been absorbing lots of guards and guards' energies, there were plenty of negative emotions and impurities that came with it, which meant he'd taken in some curse power. Now, he drew out that curse power and pushed it into one of the lumps circulating around his trash star.

Bone fingers pushed through the earth directly ahead of where the guards were running. The ones in the rear saw it in time to jump back, but the first three had no time to react. Skeletal hands surged out of the earth, clasped over the guards, and dragged them down. They had time to scream before their bodies crunched into the earth. There was no magic to the actual killing; the skeletal hands pulled downward, the guards' bodies impacted the earth, and the hands kept pulling, crushing the guards against the suddenly-frozen ground. A patch of frozen ground remained, covered in icy blood and frozen chunks of meat.

Rhys staggered, his vision going dark. He barely caught himself before he hit the ground, and pressed a hand to his forehead. It was the first time he'd used the curse to kill, and it had taken more out of him than he'd expected. His blood darkened with

impurities, and his mana shuddered, some of it darkening to curse power as a result of using the curse to attack. The backlash was severe and immediate, and to anyone but Rhys, would have been crippling. However, for Rhys, he simply stored the impurities in his trash core and drew the curse power out of his mana, storing it around the outside of the trash star as a ring. If the trash star was Saturn, then the cursed power was Saturn's rings, and the curses were its moons.

"Are you okay?" Lira asked.

Rhys shook his head and straightened, shrugging it off. "I'll be fine." He gestured, calling the rats from the first guard, who was now almost totally devoured, to the second guard who'd gone to help him. The curse was powerful, but unlike standard techniques, he couldn't immediately use it in combat. It was something best used when his enemies were at a distance and had no way to immediately punish him during the backlash. As much as he could trivialize the backlash, it still took him out for a few seconds, and as he well knew, a second was an eternity in battle.

Luckily, his melee skills were relatively polished, thanks to Bast and Straw, so he didn't have to worry too much about overrelying on curses.

On his hilt, the Straw doll shuddered. It looked up at Rhys and chittered hungrily.

"You want curse power? Sure," Rhys said. "But not now. Later."

The Straw doll grumbled in dissatisfaction, but simply went inert again.

The guards were almost on top of them. Rhys slashed the air and charged, ready to meet them.

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

Chapter 125. Killing Farm

The few remaining guards who hadn't been thinned by Rhys and Lira's attacks charged. Rhys charged to meet them. He struck with his sword, knocking the first guard's weapon aside, then gripped the guard's face and pulled, drawing the man's energy and body into his trash star. Lira struck. Her sword swirled, dancing like a whip. It swirled past the guard's sword and slashed deep cuts into his arm. He released his sword and stumbled back, directly into Rhys's waiting hand. Rhys gripped his skull tight and pulled, drawing out his energy, then his body.

The guards here were all Tier 1 and 2, or else he wouldn't be able to absorb them so freely. He struggled to absorb people at his Tier unless they were severely injured or dead, on top of the basic path limitation. If they were a lower Tier than him, though, it was ridiculously simple to absorb them. They barely even made a dent in the massive storage space around his core. Of course, there was also that void in his core, that hole to somewhere that he didn't understand anything about, but that... was something he was better off not thinking about. At least not in the middle of battle.

The last of the guards fell under his and Lira's combined onslaught, with the newly-reinstated mage barely getting to combat before the fight was over. He stood around awkwardly, looking a little out-of-place. Rhys quickly absorbed the remaining guards, then turned to the ones who were following them and pointed out another two former prisoners. "You two, step forward."

"There's more guards coming. You, come with me. We'll keep them off him," Lira ordered, gesturing at the other mage. He nodded and jogged over to her side, and the two of them ran to meet the next set of guards.

Rhys smiled at the two he'd chosen. "This won't take long. It might hurt, but it should be over quickly." He lifted his hand.

The first one stepped forward, placing her shoulder under her hand. The resolve in her eyes told him she wasn't going to give up no matter what. He closed his eyes and poured power into her, forming a core as quickly and robustly as he could. She clenched her teeth in pain and sweat rolled down her brow, but she refused to make a noise, until at last he released her shoulder, and she stepped back and gasped in shock, then raised her hand. A fireball whooshed into being in her palm.

Rhys gave her palm a longing look. "Treasure it," he said quietly.

"I will, of course I will. I'll treasure this core until the end of my days," she promised.

I meant the fireball... oh, well. Rhys put his hand on the next man's shoulder and pushed power into him, reforming his core.

As he reformed the man's core, he turned his attention to the bundle of bugs in his core. He'd absorbed hundreds, no, thousands as he'd walked through the fields, all of them pests. There were beetles, flashy, petal-eating things with nothing but their carapaces and wings to help them survive. There were centipedes with their long, slinky bodies and venomous fangs, and millipedes with their rounded tops and hundreds of tiny legs moving in sync. Grubs, too, joined the mix, caterpillars and pupae of all descriptions. There was a bundle in his core of just ants, some of them fiery, with a powerful venom in their bite, or simply large fangs. Flies, undesirable worms, silverfish, roaches, wasps and hornets, every kind of bug except for spiders, which weren't pests and didn't threaten the plants in any way.

For the most part, he could separate their attacks into two types: venomous and non-venomous. The venomous ones had stings and irritants, for the most part, not deadly poisons, though a few of the centipedes, especially the ones with a hint of mana to them from gnawing on the herbs, had truly dangerous venoms, but they were rare among the garden pests he'd absorbed. Some of the venomous ones stung, others bit, but they all delivered their venom through puncturing the skin.

Of the non-venomous ones, they primarily attacked via biting, and had powerful jaws and a bad temper as their defenses. Since he didn't want to go around biting people, he rejected that as something to take on himself, but instead used it to inspire the spell he was cooking up in his head.

Biting. Stinging. Venom. Not a real attack, not meant to kill, but meant to harm, irritate, dissuade, annoy. An attack he could use as a warning, or to distract from a real attack. A completely and totally trashy attack that would never kill anyone, but one that could be more essential to his battle power than any killing attack would be. After all, why dodge a weak attack? And yet, an irritation could cause a critical distraction exactly when he needed to strike hard, and end the battle.

He finished building the man's core and stepped back, still lost in thought. The man fell to his knees, thanking Rhys, but Rhys didn't register it at all. Instead, he raised his hand and called forth the bugs, summoning them back from his core; or rather, not summoning the actual bugs, who had long since bit it, but instead, their essence. The bug essence swarmed around his hand, taking form into a swarm of translucent stinging, biting, buzzing, immensely irritating bugs.

A notification popped up in the bottom corner of his vision:

Bug Swarm acquired!

The man he'd given a core to, and all the other ex-mages who were following him, stared in confusion. He'd been repairing the man's core, then pulled a swarm of bugs out of him? A few of the mages edged away from the man, who awkwardly touched his core. Was it all okay in there? He wasn't infested, right? Surely that wasn't where the savior had gotten all those bugs from... right?

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Rhys waved his hand, and the swarm of bugs zoomed off, a pale streak of blue light surging through the air toward the other guards that Lira and the re-cored mages fought against. One of the guards swung his sword, about to strike a serious blow against one of the mages. The mage whirled, raising his recovered sword from one of the other guards to block, but too slow. His eyes widened in fear.

The bugs reached the guard and swarmed around his face. They clawed, bit, and stung at his delicate facial skin, wriggling into all his holes, his nose, his ears, his eyes and even his mouth. He screamed and clawed at the bugs, dropping his sword in his shock, and the mage whirled and slashed the guard's chest open. Blood gushed and the bug-swarmed guard dropped to the ground.

Rhys raised his brows. It was different than the rat swarm, in that it took less energy, activated faster, and was harder for the opponent to shove off, escape, or kick away. Though the damage the bugs did was truly negligible, he could see a future where the bugs could burrow into human orifices and do horrifying things within. It was an irritation technique for now, but it was a technique with potential. In the future, who knew how powerful an insidious technique like that could become?

He turned to the rest of the mages. "I only have enough mana for this many cores right now. We'll have to press on."

The other mages nodded. The one man saluted and raced off to join Lira, running as if he couldn't get away fast enough. The rest of the mages seemed relieved as he ran away. Rhys frowned, confused. Maybe they were annoyed by him getting a core first? That didn't seem correct. He cleared his throat. "Is he... good? Er, I mean, he wasn't a bad person to give a core to, right?"

"No, no. He was one of the best of us. Someone who went out of his way to support people who were injured in the fields," one of the women reassured him quickly.

Then why...? Rhys looked after him one last time, then shrugged. This group surely had complex interrelations the same as the mines had had plenty of drama and interactions, even among the prisoners. He'd kept his head down there and focused on his escape plan, so he didn't even fully understand that, let alone entering a totally different camp with its own interactions and relationships. He couldn't understand everything in one go.

Rhys sensed a blast of energy hurtling toward him, too fast for the un-cored mages to escape. He whipped around, looking up, and found a huge fireball hurtling down on them from above, burning so hot he could feel it seconds after he saw it. The other mages noticed and screamed, some scattering, others hunkering. Rhys stepped forward, summoning out a large piece of brick wall from his storage ring, and used Trash Intent to recreate it to its original wall size. The fireball slammed into it and burst it apart, but lost all its energy in the process. Both the fireball and the wall broke into smithereens.

Rhys stumbled back, swallowing blood as the backlash from his Trash Intent breaking hit him. It'd been a long time since he'd felt that pain, but with this fireball, he had to absorb it, or else the mages were in danger; dismissing the Trash Intent as it struck might lessen its power enough for him to survive, but the other mages would die.

A guard with bright red hair chased after the fireball, laughing as he hurtled down toward Rhys. "So, you blocked? I acknowledge you as worthy of fighting me!"

Oh, gods. One of these, Rhys thought, already feeling a headache come on. They were ever-prevalent in his trashy manga, the battle maniacs who craved a good fight more than anything and went out of their way to antagonize others and test their strength. Sure, it could be fun, but more often, they were just obnoxious, and this guy seemed the obnoxious type.

A second later, he paused, looking over the man again. Spiky red hair, male... He raised his brows. "Sir, how do you feel about getting stepped on?"

The red-headed mage gaped. "I... what?"

He glanced over his shoulder at Lira. On one hand, this guy didn't seem nearly strong enough to earn an audience with the Empress; on the other hand, Laurent had apparently qualified, so who knew? He cleared his throat loudly, hoping that Lira would hear him, but she was busy with the low-ranking guards and keeping the re-cored mages from killing themselves in their urgency.

I guess I'll have to ask her later. Or... fish for hints. Rhys grinned, amused. One of those sounded like far more fun, so why not?

He drew his sword and pointed it at the man. "There's nothing shameful with a humiliation kink, you know. Unless you want it to be shameful, I guess. It is a humiliation kink."

"What... what the hell are you talking about?" the red-headed mage asked. He crossed his arms and struck a pose, summoning a wreath of fire to circulate behind him. "I'm Feran, a bold and powerful fire mage! I've been accused of sadism before, but never masochism! Good to meet you!"

And just like that, I've learned too much. Rhys struck a counter-pose, not wanting to miss out as long as they were doing poses. "And I am R... Rend, the mysterious and powerful yet indescribable mage!"

As much as he wanted to play along, he really shouldn't give his real name. But on the other hand, what was better than an edgy name for no reason? He only got to choose so many aliases in his life, and he'd already named one Rina, which was a classy, fantastic alias... but it wasn't the absolute trash tier over the top edgy name, and what kind of person dragged to another world *didn't* give themselves a name like that? Honestly, so far, he'd been so shockingly reserved that he was surprised at himself for doing so well for so long. Now that he looked back at himself, he really had only developed one classy alias. How could it be? Even in the real world, he'd called himself god_of_trash! He'd had myriad email addresses and near infinite online usernames! This... this was insane! He'd gone too long under but two names!

But luckily, he could now be Rend, mysterious, powerful, indescribable. He let out a relieved breath, finally feeling at home, as if a final piece had clicked home after a long, long time without it.

Feran frowned at him, tilting his head. “Are you okay?”

“In the head? No,” Rhys—no, *Rend*, replied. He beamed.

“And now I know too much,” Feran complained.

Rhys glared at him. How dare he, honestly, when he’d been the first to draw that line? He whirled his sword. “When two men of our caliber meet, there’s only one way this can end.”

“With me grinding you into the dirt under my heel?” Feran asked.

Rhys laughed. “You aren’t a tall, big-breasted woman!” And with that, he charged.

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

Chapter 126. Dumpster Fire

Rhys charged at Feran, boarding the flying sword he’d stolen earlier mid-step. Feran’s eyes gleamed with a feral light fitting of his name, and he slashed at the air, sending slices of fiery energy at Rhys as he closed in. Rhys cut them down with slashes of Trash Aura. To his surprise, the Trash Aura ignited when it met the flame, burning both up in a conflagration rather than simply clashing and dissipating. He frowned. Was it because trash was inherently flammable? (Or, at least, flammable garbage was, but it was all the same to Rhys.) It did make sense. If he struck at metal with acid, the metal would melt. If he struck ice with water, the water would freeze. Hit fire with trash, and the trash burned up.

He closed the gap, and the two clashed. Feran was at least Tier 3, and their strength matched, but Feran’s swordwork was inferior to Rhys’s. They exchanged a few blows, and then Feran summoned a fireball in his free hand and threw it at Rhys. Rhys knocked it away with his Trash Intent sword, but the bright light blinded him for a moment, and that was all Feran needed to put some space between them. He dashed into the sky, summoning another fireball and instantly lobbing it at Rhys.

Rhys slashed it down, chasing after Feran, but now that Feran had distance, he kept it. They raced over the sky, all while Rhys's internal clock ticked on. The Empire would send reinforcements eventually. The longer Feran dragged this fight out, the closer the Empire got.

"I thought you all followed the Emperess' path. How do you wield fire, then?" Rhys accused Feran, trying to distract him and slow him down. The bugs weren't a good match; they'd just get burned up en route.

Feran brandished his sword, then went back to throwing fire at Rhys. "I'm of noble blood. Unlike the common folk, we're allowed to pursue our own paths."

"What about your cores?" Rhys asked.

Smugly, Feran grinned. "She takes them ceremonially, and they 'belong' to her, as do all cores, but it's only a ceremony. At the end of it, she returns the cores to us. This is the core I was born with. In fact, it's considered shameful if you need to rely on the Emperess to acquire a core with better talent for your child, among the nobility. Your bloodline should possess enough talent on its own, without any intervention."

"And your noble house is?" Rhys asked. If this Feran wasn't Lira's enemy, and he suspected he wasn't, then it seemed highly likely to him that he belonged to the same noble house as Lira's enemy did. It was a step in the right direction.

"You must truly be from outside the Empire if you can't recognize House Infernon."

"Your family sure loves names that end in 'n,' huh."

"Huh?"

Rhys waved his hand in between cutting down fireballs. "Nothing. What's a noble like you doing on guard duty, then?"

Feran's expression turned ugly. "Nobles should be upright and dignified at all times. Drinking in the daylight hours is improper, and certainly flirting with common women is beyond the pale."

"How unfortunate," Rhys deadpanned.

"What about you? Where are you from? You have your own path, your own core," Feran asked.

"Didn't I say? I'm unknowable, unassailable, an enigma within an enigma. Rend, the unknown," Rhys boasted.

"That sounds more like a command than a title."

“Says Mr. Fire Inferno,” Rhys shot back.

Feran barked a laugh. “I like you. Why don’t you join the Empire? The Empress is always willing to overlook a little aggression in return for a powerful foreign fighter like yourself. I could even see to it that you went through the nobility’s ceremonial core-exchange ceremony rather than a true core exchange, if you preferred.”

Rhys drew his hand back, calling forth the power to summon the rat swarm. “I would rather die.”

“An opponent of the empire, then? Then I suppose it’s time I get serious.” Feran’s eyes narrowed, then began to glow. Fire streamed out from his eye sockets and danced in his hair, flowing down his back like a waterfall. His power spiked, surging far higher than its initial level. This whole time, their power had been more or less on par, with Rhys and Feran both somewhere in the lower half of Tier 3, neither of them fighting seriously, but merely probing their opponent. Now, however, Feran’s power surged to the peak of Tier 3, on the verge of breaking into Tier 4. Rhys braced himself, stoking the trash star in his heart to hotter flame. Since he’d escaped the mine, he’d burned it low and slow, moderating its power to keep it from spiking anyone’s attention or burning through the trash too quickly. Now, he pushed it to full flame, preparing to use his full strength.

Feran had been hanging back, but now he closed the distance. Rhys barely had time to prepare as he flashed in, little more than a blur of red-hot flame against the sky. Feran struck at Rhys’s neck, his blade trailing flame. Rhys barely raised his sword in time. Trash Intent met flame, no, Flame Intent, and Rhys’s sword ignited in his face. In the split second he had before it burned away, Rhys pushed Feran back, making just enough room to dismiss the Trash Intent before it broke and hit him with backlash. He recreated his Trash Intent blade, but knew he couldn’t use it against Feran meaningfully, not when Feran could ignite it at any moment.

He threw out his hand, summoning the rats on Feran. They swarmed him, but only for a split second before the fire coursing over Feran burned them away. The stench of fur and cooked meat filled the air, and though Rhys had summoned them, essentially creating them wholesale, he still felt a bit bad for the rats.

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Rhys fell back. Fire truly was his weakness. Not only in terms of what he could learn, but also in incinerating trash with no mercy. Trash Intent ignited. Trash Aura, likewise. The rats burned under Feran’s fire cloak. The bugs... he hadn’t tried, but would almost certainly meet the same fate as the rats, being the same attack, but smaller, more flammable, and with different attributes.

He tossed out his impurity daggers. Feran threw out a half-dozen firebolts, which sought through the air and seared the impurity daggers to nothing, burning them up. Rhys grimaced. *Not good.*

Feran laughed at his retreat and whirled his hand. A horse made of fire materialized beside him, and he mounted it. Fire surrounded his sword, forming the shape of a lance around it. His flying sword sheathed itself, and Feran galloped through the air toward Rhys, refusing to let him retreat. "I don't know what kind of mage you are, but it's clear you have no answer to fire. You die here."

Rhys grimaced. He tightened his grip on his sword and activated Trash Intent again. Resolutely, on the back foot, he shouted, "No! I refuse!"

"You don't have the right to refuse." Feran galloped toward him, drawing back the lance. Rhys jumped, but Feran tracked him with his lance. He stabbed him out of the air, long before Rhys's sword could reach.

Rhys gasped. The pain seared into him, burning and piercing all at once, as he sagged down the lance. He reached out toward Feran, but his arms weren't long enough to reach.

"Foolish. You should have accepted my offer while you—" Feran coughed. He touched his lips, and his fingertips came away bloody. Confused, he looked at his hand, then up at Rhys.

Rhys laughed, his face contorting as the pain of laughing dug into him. He nodded at Feran. "You burned it. All of it. My impurity daggers. My Trash Intent. My rats. And now my blood. All made of filth and impurities. What do you think is in this air around us? The air you're breathing and drawing mana from, even as we speak?"

Feran coughed, spitting blood. Disgust flashed over his face. He slashed his lance, throwing Rhys to the ground. Rhys dropped through the sky, trailing blood, only to weakly wave his hand, call the flying sword over to him, and drop onto its flat. He gripped his gut, unable to stand, but able to sit, if he slumped a bit. Circling slowly to the ground, he laughed at Feran on his flaming horse. "Do you feel the impurities in your blood, poisoning you? In your lungs, your bones, your heart? You thought you were winning, but you were signing your own death warrant. The more you fought, the more you poisoned yourself. How does it feel, to have caused your own demise?"

Feran coughed harder. He sagged on his flaming horse, only to widen his eyes as he realized: the burning horse only spread the impurities more. He dismissed it and the lance, but it was too late. He was laden with impurities, the air all around him thick with them. Turning, He went to flee.

Rhys snapped his fingers. The bugs appeared, swarming Feran's face. He beat them away, still flying off, but slowed to fight them, his attention split. Rhys gestured again, and the impurities in the air around Feran materialized into a knife, then slammed into the sword under his feet. The impurities struck the sword and infiltrated its metal, corrupting it. It shattered under Feran's weight, and he dropped out of the sky.

Rhys took control of the shards of shattered blade with Trash Manipulation and pulled upward, dragging them through Feran's body like the fragments from a frag grenade. Feran screamed in pain and summoned his flames to defend himself, only to start coughing profusely again. He hit the ground and tried to climb to his feet, only to sag back to a sit.

Rhys flew down and hovered before Feran, sitting on the sword. He couldn't stand, so the best he could do was to sit menacingly over Feran, a smug expression on his face. "No counter to fire? Wrong. I'm nothing but a counter to fire."

Feran glared at him. He opened his mouth to say something, but his eyes dimmed. He sagged to the ground, the life leaving him.

Rhys coughed a few times, badly injured. He drew out a health potion—having used some time to brew one or two in between cooking potato chips and developing the insurgency—and took a small sip, letting Less is More take over. His body healed slowly. He bent feebly off his sword and absorbed Feran, then looked up and took a deep breath, calling all the impurities he'd released into the air back into himself, along with the shattered remnants of Feran's flying sword and everything else he'd used during the fight, to the extent that he could. He winced as he moved, clutching the hole in his side harder. As much as he'd acted like he was on top of things, and everything was going according to plan, he'd really discovered halfway through the battle that Feran burning his trash didn't rid it of impurities, then used that to his advantage. True, he already knew that burning trash released impurities into the air, given his cauldrons and burn pits up until this point, but he simply hadn't known whether this quantity and strength of impurities was enough to stop someone like Feran. Clearly the answer was yes, but was it his plan from the start? No. He'd been honestly losing that fight, grasping at threads.

I wasn't going to lose. He still had more up his sleeve. As long as he'd touched Feran, for example, he could have directly imbued the man with impurities, and there was always the option of burning the trash star to supernova or simply chucking rats at the man until he got past the fire through sheer mass, and a few other attempts. It hadn't been going well, but it hadn't been a guaranteed loss, either.

Still, this was a wakeup call. He took a slow breath, sitting up with some effort, and sipped the potion again. He was stronger than ever before. Tier 3, with a 'core' based on his path that empowered his path skills more than his normal core did, but there were still geniuses out there. At the end of the day, he was a trash talent, and he had to work hard to match up with and beat those who were true talents. He hadn't been working hard on levelling up lately. He hadn't been slacking; he'd been busy with other pursuits, but he had neglected his own strength. This was a reminder that that wasn't an option for him. He had to constantly work on getting stronger through some means or another, or else fall behind.

He turned slowly, minding his wound, and searched out Lira. If his guess was right, then being Tier 3 meant Feran was the strongest guard around. Now that he was defeated, it meant they were more or less safe from the guards.

Lira stood in the middle of a circle of dead guards, flanked by the re-cored mages. She looked across the farm and locked eyes with Rhys, then gestured him over. "Come clean up, and let's get out of here."

Rhys nodded. He floated over, not willing to trust his legs with his current state of bloodloss. Holding out his hand, he absorbed the guards, then nodded at the mages. "You're free to go. Do as you wish. Remember, you were never here, and you never saw us."

The mages nodded. They ran off, scattering to the four winds. Rhys gave Lira a tired smile. "Come on. Let's get home."

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

Chapter 127. Return

They took the long way back, taking their time to let Rhys sip his potion and recover, and tracing a long route away from their hideout to mislead anyone who tried to come after them before finally winding their way back to the hideout. Rhys wasn't completely sure how mages tracked one another, or if there were tracking skills at all, but nonetheless, it was worth the effort to avoid getting followed home.

He felt a little uncomfortable about setting the re-cored mages free, but there was nothing he could do about it. He didn't know these mages; he didn't know them at all. Not their personalities, their allegiances, their pasts and futures, what had happened within the farm, nothing. Inviting them back to the hideout would be an immense risk, when he didn't know if he was inviting an Empire-favored narc directly into the heart of the operation. He pinched his chin, then sighed. He needed branch offices, or something. All kinds of things that got easier, once his junk food stores got off the ground, and he had money, access, inventory, all the things he needed to actually oppose the Empire. Right now... He sighed, putting his head in his hands. The flying sword glided on beneath him, supporting the weight he couldn't support himself.

"Something troubling you?" Lira asked.

"Everything."

She harrumphed, the sound almost like a laugh, and said nothing. They both had their own troubles to ponder, and neither could dismiss the other's.

The biggest problem that bothered him was the classic serial killer's problem—in other words, triangulation. Almost every armchair sleuth would tell you that one of the easiest ways to lock down a serial killer's location was to track where they killed. They'd head out in all directions, sure, but they usually wouldn't go further than a certain radius from their home, which made it possible to triangulate their general location. Not the most helpful for a serial killer, who might live in a major population center, but for a squad of insurgents living in the woods? A real problem.

Should we move bases? Or maybe... Maybe it was time to take the trucker approach. Returning to serial killers, it was postulated that the most successful, hardest to track serial killers were long-haul truckers, who could travel thousands of miles between each kill, and who spent all their time moving around on the road. It was impossible to triangulate a trucker-killer's home base, because their true home base was their truck, and their truck was always on the move. An isolated kill a thousand miles from another isolated kill would almost never get connected, especially if the trucker-killer targeted those at the fringe of society, whom the police wouldn't bother looking too hard into: poor people, homeless people, addicts and runaways. He couldn't learn anything from 'targeting those at the fringe of society,' not that he wanted to—after all, his targets might be completely disregarded by the Empire, but the camps themselves were symbolic, political statements: herein lies the fate of anyone who opposes the Empire. Upending the camps meant opposing the Empress directly, and the Empire knew that as much as he did. He'd placed a giant target on his back just by acting against the camps at all, let alone overthrowing two of them.

No, he couldn't learn that part, but he could learn the other part—wandering around, hundreds and thousands of piles at a time, and attacking randomly on the go. He nodded to himself, resolved. His next attack would be hundreds of miles away, on a camp further away from this one, not in another direction, but in the same direction; then, just when the Empire decided they had him dead to rights and reinforced another camp in that direction, he'd shoot off in the opposite direction, and start taking that line down.

He thumped his hand into his fist, enlightened. If that was his course of action, then he had a clear route ahead of him. He needed a movement technique, and not one like Trash Step, which activated in particular circumstances and gave him surefootedness and a stronger stance in trashy terrains, but one that allowed him to cross great distances at speed. He needed a movement technique that trivialized distances, one that ate up the miles like they were feet.

The problem was, that sounded like a profoundly un-trashy movement technique. And not only that, but he valued it, which made it even harder for him to learn. Rhys sighed again, exhausted. His path could be incredibly troublesome at times. Sure, it was nice to be able to take garbage techniques and refine them into something worthwhile, but it

was frustrating to know that as soon as he set a goal, if he couldn't see a trashy path there, then his goal was almost certainly cut off from him forever.

He rubbed his forehead. *No, no. I'm thinking of this wrong.* Rather than starting at the result he wanted, valuing something, and making it unobtainable to him, he needed to start from the technique, then refine it into what he wanted. That was the truth of his path, the deepest secret to his success—the ability to refine trash into what he wanted and needed.

But how? He wasn't wrong about Trash Step. It wasn't a speed- or distance-optimized movement technique. It was for power, for surefootedness, for trivializing the debuff inflicted by trashy terrain and allowing him to move at full speed and fight with full power no matter how bad the footing, but it wasn't for crossing vast distances with lightning speed. He clenched his hand, then opened it, looking at the emptiness held within. How to refine that...? How to reforge it into something useful? Practice, maybe? But he didn't have time. Every second he wasn't breaking people out of camps was another second the Empire was harming them, inflicting real pain and danger upon them.

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Rhys grimaced, thinking, thinking, then abruptly sat up, so sharply the wound in his chest sent a jolt of pain through his body. "Ow, ow—" He sipped his potion, and the pain abated.

"Just drink it already," Lira muttered, rolling her eyes at him. "What are you doing, anyways? Some sick form of training? Trying for Pain Resistance, or something?"

"No, it's a skill," Rhys didn't explain, and went back to his thoughts.

"It doesn't work if you're enjoying it," Lira shot back, ignoring his retort.

Rhys shot her a smile, not least because his troubles were fading away. Taking a moment from his thoughts, he nodded at her. "That kid I defeated... did he look like the man who threw you in the sewers?"

"Kid? He was older than you."

"So? Did he?"

Lira thought for a second, then nodded. "Same pointy brows and wild red hair, yeah. His personality was different, but..."

"I'm not saying they're the same person, don't be ridiculous. No, that kid, his name was Feran, of House Infernon. If he looks like the guy who had you put in the sewers, isn't it possible that the guy you're looking for is from House Infernon, too?"

Lira raised her brows, then sighed. "Sure, it's a good thought, but what does it get us? It's not like we can go mingle with high society."

"First off, never say never. By the time we're done with the food, high society will be *begging* us to come to their fetes."

"Uh huh."

"Second off, the library opens directly to the sewers, doesn't it? We can run that same route in reverse and borrow books on House Infernon whenever we want," Rhys pointed out.

She raised her brows. "The library connects to the sewers?"

"Yeah, it—oh, right. You were in the sewers, so you never saw the library. Yeah, Mouse and I were coming back from the library when we found you. We can go to the library whenever we want."

Lira blinked, staring at Rhys. She shook her head. "In that case, then, I suppose I'll go read up on House Infernon... with the assistance of someone who doesn't risk soaking the books on the way back?"

"Of course. No problem," Rhys said with a beaming smile.

She made a face. "You're looking forward to sucking up that filth, aren't you?"

"Why would I be? What? Me? Don't be ridiculous," Rhys said, still smiling.

Lira rolled her eyes at him one last time and went back to walking on.

Rhys returned to his thoughts, and his solution. He had the horse bones in his core, the ones from the rider under the Impure Wells. That horse... wasn't it possible that, if he summoned the curse, he could call forth the horse and ride it? He only had two bones, but maybe that would be enough, with Trash Intent, to summon just the horse? He lifted his hand and pushed curse power into the bones. They trembled, then burst out from his core, taking form into... larger versions of themselves. Two large bones hovered before Rhys in the air, radiating powerful curse power, an eerie aura emanating from them.

Lira blinked. "What?"

Rhys sighed. He snapped his fingers, dismissing the bones. "I made a mistake." That wasn't what he'd wanted, but in practice, he'd discovered a problem. It was hard to use curse power and mana at the same time, especially on the same thing. The curse power corrupted the mana as he tried to use it, so all he ended up doing was empowering the bones further rather than using Trash Intent on them to fill in the gaps.

He twisted his lips. There had to be a solution to this, a way past it. He'd used curse power and mana before at the same time, he knew it. It wasn't impossible. It was just that Trash Intent was such a power-intensive skill, such a focus-intensive skill, that he couldn't easily keep the two separate in his mana passages, and the two ended up merging. The merged mana and curse power simply became curse power, and fed the curse, but didn't create Trash Intent.

Really, I should look into that. As far as he could tell, aside from a dark energy of vengeance and filth, curse power was more or less equivalent to mana, in terms of being a form of energy which one could use to power spells. Curse power spells were called curses, and ordinary spells were called spells, but the principles were the same. Technically speaking, it should be possible to create a version of Trash Intent, or any other technique, using curse power. If it was, then he had a second version of Trash Intent to use; if it wasn't, then looking into why not would help inform him on how curse power and mana both fundamentally worked, and the differences between the two of them.

Still, that wasn't what he was here, trying to do, so he shook his head and snapped himself back into focus. He summoned forth the bones, then called forth his mana again. Once more, the two blurred together and merged into ordinary curse power. Rhys dismissed the bones again and took a sip of his potion, using the break to corral his thoughts. His brows furrowed. It seemed so simple, but... was it possible? Could he really separate the two through such a basic, nigh overly-simple, method?

He lifted his left hand and called forth curse power, pushing it into the bones in his core, then expressing it out in to the world through his left hand. In his right, he called forth mana, forming the mana into trash intent, then applying it to the bones.

This time, the two didn't merge. He'd separated the streams across his two arms, and so he could use both powers without them corroding together. He almost laughed at how simple it was, except that the hard part laid before him. Trash Intent gripped the bones, bringing forth their intent, their objective. He pushed his mana into it, encouraging it to take form. The horse, the skeletal horse, in a form he could ride!

"Come forth, my skelly boy!" Rhys shouted, as the Trash Intent formed around the bones and took shape. The blue energy wobbled, translucent and shapeless, like a block of gelatin, then suddenly coalesced. Bright light flashed out. Rhys held his breath, excited, then blinked, startled.

Huh? That's not... well, it is, but...

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

Chapter 128. Skelly Boy

Trash Intent took form around the two bones, forming into a solid shape. It swirled, whirling around the bones, then firmed all at once, and a figure stood before Rhys. He stared, slightly confused. “Huh?”

A skeleton in armor stood before him, head down, shoulders folded in. At his mental prodding, it began to walk, keeping pace with him and Lira.

Lira raised her brows. “You did ask for a skelly boy. That’s a skeleton boy if I’ve ever seen one.”

“I... it was just a figure of speech...” Rhys stared at the figure a little longer, gobsmacked, then shook his head. He wasn’t a bone identifier or a master of bone shapes. He’d thought these were small horse bones, its... knuckles, or knee bones, or something. Apparently they were the rider’s bones, instead? He frowned. That wasn’t what he needed at all! He needed a movement technique, a horse!

“What? What did you want?”

“A horse. I wanted something to move me faster around the area,” Rhys explained.

Lira looked at the skeleton, then at Rhys. “Yeah? What’s the problem?”

“I... wait, you think I should ride *him*?” Rhys asked, gobsmacked for a second time.

“Why not? He’s a projection. He’d held to the same exact limitations that a horse would be—in other words, the strength of your projection technique and mana. In fact, in a certain way of looking at it, he’s better than a horse. He’s smaller, so he’ll require less mana to maintain,” Lira explained, as if this were all very reasonable.

Rhys ran a hand through his hair, looking at the skeleton. It didn’t look very human... or, at least, he wouldn’t feel like he was riding a person. He was riding a monster, a skeleton monster. And riding skeleton monsters... that was trashy *and* cool, right? A skeletal horse, skeleton tiger, skeleton wolf... adding skeleton just made them even cooler and more intimidating. It was like the headless horseman riding a horse skeleton, but... *But I’m riding the horseman*, Rhys thought, still a bit taken aback. He looked the skeleton up and down one last time, then frowned. Then again, any port in a storm, right? If this was the solution to his problems and the only thing holding him back was social mores, then wasn’t he depriving hundreds of mages from freedom because he was afraid he’d look stupid? He couldn’t imagine anything crueller than that.

So, taking a deep breath, he stored the flying sword in his storage ring, gingerly took his weight, and reached out for the skeleton. The skeleton bent, picking him up piggyback

style, at his command, but a second later, he shrieked in pain and had it set him back down. He gripped his stomach, in deep pain.

“Don’t be stupid. Piggyback requires too much core. You need another hold, one that keeps your wound from taking stress and weight. Here.” Lira picked Rhys up with shocking ease and set him in the skeleton’s outstretched arms. “That should be better for you.”

“A princess carry?” Rhys spluttered, feeling somewhat like he’d lost something along the way. His dignity, maybe? His pride as a man?

“Yeah? What’s wrong with that? So afraid of being called a princess that you’d rather aggravate your injury?” Lira asked, crossing her arms and giving him a look. “Some people get called princess all the time, and it’s never killed any of us.”

Rhys considered, then nodded. She was right. What was wrong with looking a little silly, if it meant he could rescue mages? Pride as a man? What was that, when the surviving mages looked back on these days, a hundred years from now? Nothing but chaff on the wind. The lives of real people, on the other hand—those were worth worrying about.

Besides, it wasn’t like he’d get locked into princess carry just because he got carried this way once. He relaxed a bit, enjoying the comfort of the carry, then looked at Lira. “Do you mind if I test its speed?”

“Go ahead. Actually, there’s a stream nearby. I meant to abandon you and swim back, so this is quite convenient for me,” Lira said.

“I... I guess this works for everyone, then!” Rhys said, not sure what else to say. A strange mix of feelings were whirling around in his chest. She’d meant to abandon him? But then, he’d meant to abandon her, so... it was all good in the end! Convenience for everyone!

Lira nodded, agreeing.

Rhys waved farewell, and pushed the skeleton to take off. Lira kept pace for a while, testing her speed against the skeleton’s, but before long, Lira began panting, face red, struggling to keep up. At last, she fell back, letting Rhys run on alone. Rhys waved over the skeleton’s shoulder, and Lira waved back, then walked off into the forest toward her stream.

The skeleton ran at speed. He couldn’t keep up with the skeleton if he was running, but it was sure nice to ride along in its arms and put in no effort. He sipped his potion and relaxed, getting a little used to the being-carried experience. All he needed now was a snack, maybe some potato chips, and he was set. The forest rushed by all around him, deep green leaves and huge trunks passing by on all side, the scent of composting leaves and fresh growth filling the air. Air ruffled through Rhys’s hair as the skeleton ran,

refreshingly cool. It was like riding a four-wheeler through the woods, but without the danger or effort part, and only the fun parts. Like the world's smoothest rollercoaster, but Rhys got to decide where it went and what it did. Honestly, it was fantastic.

Stolen novel; please report.

"Do you mind if I call you Skelly Boy?" Rhys asked conversationally.

The skeleton, being a construct made of cursed energy, bones, and Trash Intent, said nothing.

"I'm going to call you Skelly Boy," Rhys decided.

As they ran on, Skelly Boy started to slow. Rhys looked up, a little confused. His wound was healed, he was just enjoying being a piece of shit and riding along with no effort at all. He hadn't given the construct the order to slow, nor had he run out of cursed energy or mana; both the skeleton and the Trash Intent didn't take much mana to activate, at Tier 3, and since all he was doing was keeping it active, without trying to reinforce, strengthen, or alter the intent in any way, the maintenance cost was low as well. He pushed the skeleton a little, urging it to move on, and it took a few faster steps, then slowed again, turning toward the right.

Groaning and huffing, Rhys put in a little bit of effort for the first time since he'd started his ride and sat up enough to peer to the right. He didn't see anything, but maybe the skeleton sensed something? He frowned, looking up at Skelly Boy, then back to the right. What would he be sensing? Another—his eyes widened—another Impure Well?

It made sense. The skeleton had come out of an Impure Well, both pieces of it. Like called to like in magic, pieces of the same thing reaching out toward one another, especially with curses. Was the skeleton sensing another piece of itself?

Rhys nodded, deeply approving, and let the skeleton walk in the direction it wanted to, settling back down to ride again himself. What a fantastic mount! Not only did he have to put in absolutely zero effort, but he also got an auto-Impure Well sensor? If it was true, it was almost too good to be true. Powerups, bonus trash, and new pieces of the skeleton in one fell swoop? A mount that sought out its own powerups? He couldn't imagine anything better.

Well, maybe a skeleton horse, he thought, sighing, but there was nothing he could do about that. The bones were what they were, and Trash Intent wasn't powerful enough to make a horse from a man.

Besides, the aesthetic of getting carried around by a skeleton warrior was pretty cool. He couldn't ride it into battle in the extremely comfortable princess carry, no, but he could always clamber up to sit on its shoulder or something and look cool. He ran through a couple poses in his head, trying to come up with the best one, and pursed his

lips. There really wasn't an ideal carried-by-a-human-skeleton mount pose—they all looked silly in some way—but maybe he would just arrive on his mount, then stand in front of it, and *then* look cool. He nodded. He could live with that. And if someone like Feran brought their own mount, then he'd just have to look silly, and his opponent would have to deal with it. Better than being without a mount and getting railed by his opponent.

The horrific, familiar scent of an Impure Well hit his nose. Rhys perked up, taking a deep breath and extending his mana to confirm it. The skeleton ran on, then came to a halt before a pair of boulders leaning against one another. Somewhat reluctantly, Rhys climbed to his feet and walked over, peering around the boulders, then saw it—the familiar gunk, welling up from under one of the boulders. An Impure Well, just for him, sitting here waiting for him, all alone in the woods. It wasn't surrounded by trash, the way a lot of them were, but maybe it was just too far from humanity for it. That, and the rock capping it, maybe meant someone had come across it and closed it off, rather than deciding to use it as a trash pit.

Something strange caught his eye. He tilted his head, looking more closely at the leaning rocks. One of them, the one next to the Impure Well, looked normal, if a bit more corroded on its wellward side. The other boulder, the one capping the well, was the strange one. It had lichens all over it, but not on its left side. There was a depression in the earth just beside the Impure Well that was about the size of the boulder's left side, and scratch marks on its bottom. He frowned. *Am I reading this right?* It almost looked like the well had been capped recently, within the last few years, and maybe even closed from within the well itself, as if something inside the well had reached out and dragged the boulder in over top of it, tucking itself into the well, so to speak.

Rhys snapped his fingers, dismissing Skelly Boy back to his core. He needed all his mana and focus available if something dangerous had closed itself inside this well. It could be anything: a cursed beast, a Remnant Weapon, *anything*, but whatever it was, if it could survive the Impure Well, it was definitely dangerous. He could walk away and leave this obvious trap untapped, but his wound was healed, and the Impure Well was *right here*. Right here! Right in front of him, *reeking* with delicious impurities. Not only that, but he needed more trash. The farm had given him some trash, but it was lower on garbage than a mine or some other dirty operation would be, especially since this world lacked pesticides. He couldn't turn down a great source of garbage like this. And, of course, this was a chance to upgrade Skelly Boy, who he desperately needed to be as fast and as capable as possible, so he could continue to strike prison camps without providing too much data for the Empire to triangulate his movements.

No, he couldn't turn this down. He just had to be ready for a fight. Rolling his sleeves up, Rhys put his broken sword at the edge of his robes, ready to be drawn free, then put both hands on the boulder. Exerting his strength, he pushed, and the boulder slowly rolled, coming free of the well. The end that had been dipped in the well had been corroded right off, and a flat plane was all that remained of it, trailing bits of impure gunk

as it rolled over. Rhys threw his hand out and pulled the impurities into him as it passed, taking the built-up gunk off the stone, too, while he was at it.

He jumped back as soon as the boulder came clear, reaching for his sword, and braced himself for battle. The Impure Well sat there, undisturbed. Its surface gently seethed and bubbled, due to the nature of the filth contained within, but nothing burst out from within.

Rhys summoned a long piece of scrap from his storage ring and gently prodded the filth. The end of the stick melted off, but nothing happened. Growing bolder, Rhys stepped forward.

BAM! Skeletal fingers thrust through the surface of the gunk and slammed down on the edge, the sharp tips of the fingers scraping by Rhys's nose. A terrifying aura emanated from the hand, writhing with filth, impurities, and darkness. He jumped back, startled, and drew his sword, instantly feeling out of his depth. *Holy shit! Is this a Remnant Weapon?*

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

Chapter 129. A Remnant Weapon

The hand clawed at the earth, fingers curling up on the surface of the earth, and a figure emerged from the filth. Rhys stared for a second, struggling to compute what he was seeing. He'd expected a giant skeleton to climb out of the well, but instead, there were three long bone fingers connected to a small figure's back, then three on the other side...

Rhys blinked. He rubbed his eyes, then stared. "Sable?"

Ernesto's ex-champion clambered out of the Impure Well. She gazed at him with haunted eyes, gunk dripping off her body-sock-and-black-leotard clad body, the bone armor that seemed almost a part of her gleaming in the low light. Like an animal, her eyes reflected the light, empty and devoid of human intelligence.

Rhys put his hands up. "Sable, it's me. Do you recognize me? Rhys, from the tournament?"

She whipped around, glaring. A thousand questions ran through his head—what was she doing in there, had she survived the Empire's march uninjured, where was Ernesto, did she know where Straw was—but Rhys choked them all back and just kept his hands up, silently waiting for her to react to him. She was in fight-or-flight mode right now. If he

made a quick motion or too much noise, she would attack, so he waited for her to calm down and breathe. Sable looked around, left and right, then finally registered Rhys. Her shoulders un-tensed, and she blinked. "You're not the Empire."

"No, I'm not," Rhys agreed. "Are they who put you in there?"

"Put me?" she frowned at him. "No, I hid in there to escape the Empire."

It was Rhys's turn to frown at her. Even he wasn't crazy enough to just... hang out in an Impure Well for an extended period of time. They were horrifically corrosive and they smelled horrible. Sure, he could nullify most of the danger, but even so, it was a disgusting proposition, and for anyone who wasn't Rhys, incredibly dangerous. Why would she go into one deliberately, and not only that, but hide there?

Sable shook herself, shedding the last of the filthy liquid. She gestured. "I'm the daughter of a Remnant Weapon. If not for Ernesto, I would have been imprisoned under the Alliance. What do you think the Empire would do to a monster like me? Especially when the Empress can't take my core and control me."

Rhys pressed his lips together. She had a great point. The Empress allowed Lira to be thrown into the sewers, and Lira was just another race of humanoids. Sable was the child of a construct built to be a humanity-destroying weapon. There was every chance that they'd execute her on sight.

But that didn't answer all his questions. "How'd you survive in there?"

She pointed to the fang dangling from her beaded headdress. "Father's fang. It creates a barrier that keeps out the worst of the impurities and filth. When I was little, I used to live near a well, and hide in it whenever someone got too close. It's how I survived before I got strong enough to hold my own."

He looked her up and down. "But it still lets some through, right?"

Sable hesitated, then nodded.

Rhys held out his hand. "I'll take those for you."

"Are you sure? I have Impurity Resist."

"I do, too. And I can use them to make myself stronger," Rhys returned.

She raised her brows, then delicately extended her hand and laid it in his. The glove brushed against his hand, and the cold bones on the back of her gloves pricked against his skin almost like a cat's claws. He pulled the impurities into himself, and she shuddered, then stretched luxuriously. "I feel so clean."

"It might feel that way, but make sure you take a bath as soon as possible. Apparently this doesn't take scent," Rhys warned her. He walked forward, toward the well.

"Where are you going?"

"Back to my hideout, but first, I'm sucking up this Impure Well," Rhys declared. He hesitated, looking back at Sable. "And that has nothing to do with it being gamer girl bathwater, okay? I was going to absorb it before I knew you were in it, just so we're clear."

"Gamer... what?" Sable asked, squinting.

"Don't worry about it. From the bottom of my heart, don't worry about it. By the way, hold up, we need to talk some, but I think I'm gonna invite you back with me... but I gotta slurp this thing before we talk. It's way too distracting." He knelt and reached down, then thought about it for a moment. He could reach the well now, sure, but it would go down as he absorbed it, and not only that, but he wanted to get the bonus bones at the bottom as well so his Skelly Boy moved even faster. Standing up here got him none of that. He backed up, then ran at the well.

Sable watched him, her brows furrowed in utter confusion.

He gave her a jaunty wave, hopped into the air, and curled up into a ball. "Cannonball!"

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Rhys slammed down into the Impure Well. Impurities started to splash everywhere, only to whirl about in midair and rush into his core instead. He plunged down into the liquid, greedily absorbing it as he fell. Impurities, trash, and gunk flowed into his trash star, rejuvenating it and growing the trash star back up toward its original size. Compared to the farm, this gave him much more trash mass and high quality impurities.

I suppose I should expect to mostly free people when I head to the camps, and look for Impure Wells to feed the trash star. Of course, he had Skelly Boy now, aka his auto-Impure Well sensor, and from the sounds of it, Sable knew where a few Impure Wells were, as well, or at least one. Lots and lots of Impure Wells for him to slurp up, and keep his trash star burning.

Impurities rushed into him, scything into his trash star. He dropped into the well like a stone, sucking out impurities below him to burrow deeper and deeper, while more impurities poured into him from above. He was a vacuum of impurities, a whirlpool forming on either side of him as the impurities poured in so quickly that the entire flow of the well was altered. They swooped into the trash star and ignited, joining the rest of the trash plasma within. Down, down, down, into the darkness of the well. Curse power awaited him in the depths, and another duel with the rider. He already knew what

awaited, so he kept a hand on his sword, ready to attack. The key to the rider was to fight him before he got his charge started, and since he knew what was coming, there was no reason to wait. He was going to attack the second his feet touched the ground.

Sadly, the second Impure Well he'd run into didn't have any hidden chambers with mysterious warriors holding sunlight swords, and, for that matter, the original sunlight sword was hidden away underground back at Purple Dawn, where he'd hastily hidden a few items in the ground before getting captured. He hadn't recovered them yet because the majority of what he'd hidden was too recognizable, like Rina and Betsy's outfits or the aforementioned sunlight sword, and besides, they were irreplaceable artifacts and he was in a very dangerous scenario, where he was likely to get his gear taken from him and misused by the Empire at any moment, but he at least knew where they were, to come back to them later. He hadn't simply buried his storage rings for two reasons. One, they had relatively strong magical signatures, and were easy to find; two, if the Empire found none of his gear, they'd get suspicious and go hunting to find his real gear, whereas handing them the majority of his gear meant they wouldn't search for the truly valuable artifacts. Of course, it meant he'd lost all his gold, and he was still a little bitter about that, but he had a plan to get it back.

But who knew? Maybe this Impure Well would have a hidden chamber, too. There was no telling until he got there.

He landed on the earthen floor, slurping up the last of the impurities. Rhys stayed on his toes and kept his head on a swivel, waiting for the rider to appear. As the curse energy coalesced and the rider took form, Rhys instantly charged in, hacking apart the bones even as they formed together. The rider materialized for a split second before Rhys tore it apart, then absorbed its curse power and the remnant bone. He brushed off his robes and looked around, walking the outer walls to make sure he missed nothing, but like the second well, there was no chamber here, either.

Huh. Wonder what it was about that first well? Maybe someone just tried to challenge the curse in its center and failed, or something? He shrugged to himself, then bent his knees and leaped, clearing the top of the well in two easy bounds. Dusting himself off, he turned to Sable. "So, where were we?"

She stared at him with wide eyes. "What did you just do?"

"I absorbed the filth. What? Is there a problem?"

"How? That's... even the Alliance couldn't figure out what to do with the Impure Wells. You can't just absorb them like that."

"Never let someone tell you never," Rhys told her confidently. She gave him a look, but he didn't explain any further. Instead, he nodded. "So how did you end up here?"

"I was fleeing the Empire, and the Impure Well in Purple Dawn Academy was dry," she said. Her eyes narrowed.

Rhys coughed. "Right... sorry about that."

"It does make a lot more sense now," she said.

Quickly changing the topic, Rhys furrowed his brows as he realized something. Sable was Ernesto's student, no, his champion, but she was fleeing the Empire alone? "Ernesto didn't help you?"

She laughed. "Ernesto fled before the Empire attacked. He abandoned all of us, all of his students, and escaped with his experiments alone."

His experiments. That reminded him. "Was Straw one of his experiments? That is, was one of his experiments composed of a lot of straw or hay?" Rhys probed.

Sable tilted her head at him. The beads swayed across her forehead. "Why... Oh, that's right. You're the Strawman's disciple, aren't you."

He nodded. She already knew, so there was no point holding back or hiding the truth.

"He did take what he had of the Strawman with him, but he didn't have the whole Strawman. The Alliance insisted on keeping the majority of the Strawman locked away, so he couldn't reform. Ernesto only ever had a small sample of him."

"That's unfortunate... but good to know," Rhys said. He patted the tiny Straw doll hanging from his sword. It meant there was no reason to poke around Purple Dawn any longer, but if he ran into Ernesto or an Alliance stronghold, it was worth looking into. He nodded to her. "You didn't have to tell me that, but I appreciate that you did. Thank you."

She harrumphed. "Ernesto abandoned me, knowing that I would die. There's no reason to remain loyal to him any longer."

Rhys nodded. In his opinion, Sable never had any reason to remain loyal to that shitstain to begin with, but then again, it wasn't like he'd understand what it was like to be the child of a Remnant Weapon, coursing with cursed energy, unable to throw off the negative association the Alliance had with her father, called a monster for the bones that grew out of her, which she'd never asked for or wanted. From her perspective, he could see even an asshole like Ernesto becoming a savior, the one person willing to give her any chance at all to become a mage, despite all his personality issues and selfish goals.

"You have two options, Sable. Are you going to try to escape, and reenter the relative safety of the Alliance? Or do you want to fight with me, and take down the Empire?"

She crossed her arms. The spider arms on her back put their tips on her hips. “Well, someone sucked up my hiding spot, so...”

“Sorry about that,” Rhys muttered.

Sable shook her head. “Someone would have found me eventually. I didn’t want to spend the next decade or century locked in that place, slowly getting more and more corrupted. Once the initial attack was over, I meant to emerge, but it’s hard to keep track of time when you’re surrounded by impurities, slowly invading your body and mind.”

She took a deep breath, thinking, then turned back to him. “I’ll fight.”

“Excellent. Welcome to the team.”

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Chapter 130. Homeward Bound

Once more, Rhys mounted his skeleton warrior. The skeleton was a little larger now, and faster, what with the extra bone he could use to make a more complete projection. Sable perched on its shoulder, while he lounged in its arms. It was just too comfortable down there. Plus, it was his skeleton! Of course he got the best seat. It’d be crazy to hand it over to a random person.

Internally, Rhys considered ways to make his travel even more comfortable. He could string a hammock between its arms, but that might sway too much. Maybe if he had it carry a throne? That would look cool as hell, but the ride might be a bit too bumpy. *Hmm*. He wanted maximum comfort, not maximum aesthetic. Now that he’d discovered what it was to travel in comfort, he couldn’t go back. He needed something soft, something that would absorb the blows of the road. A big soft cushion, or maybe a big fat beanbag chair?

A memory floated to the top of his mind. Once, he’d gone over to a friend’s house as a child and discovered that they slept on, not an ordinary bed, but a bed-sized beanbag chair. He’d sunk into the beany depths, hugged by the form-fitting softness of the beanbag bed, and almost passed out right there, it was so soft and comfortable. That was what he needed: a beanbag bed chair! He could see it right now, the absolute dominance of rolling up on his enemies, being carried by a skeleton in a big fat beanbag chair, while he lounged, casually crunching on some chips and sipping some soda... which was something he had to get a move on.

Soda ruled the world in his original world. Human beings would do anything to suck on some interesting sugar water. Soda, too, might actually be an easier sell to mages, who were not used to eating, but *were* used to drinking potions. Rhys pinched his chin, moving on to his next great idea. Yes, that would be it: *soda*. Soda was the next junk food on his agenda. Potato chips he could probably sell to the youth, trick them into poisoning themselves, but adults would be more wary. Sugared potions, aka sodas, would be the way to get adult mages.

He did have a large quantity of sugar back at the hideout, and thanks to Lira, a basically endless quantity of pure water. What he needed was some method of carbonation. Bubbles were essential to the soda experience; otherwise, it was just brown fruit juice. As for what to put in it, he could start simple, by making it a delicious health potion, then expand to mana potions and other potions. He didn't want to overuse his enlightenment imbue techniques, since the mages would get wise to them eventually if he hammered them out there, but surely there was something else he could put in the potions to lure them to keep drinking. After all, there was a certain cola brand that had started from a flavored cocaine drink, and potions were meant to enhance the body in some way or another; he could slip addictive enhancers in there without anyone questioning him too deeply. Sugar was itself addictive, too, so it didn't hurt to put maximum sugar into the potions, too.

He *would* have to investigate the Empire's drug laws, assuming there were such things, though he suspected the answer was no, and that it was just that addictive potions were considered low-quality and not worth consuming. He twisted his lips. That was the other thing; mages were used to drinking potions, yes, but they also had high standards. If his drinks were outright addictive, using known addictive substances, then they'd get rejected by the mages. *No, I think the better play is to make good potions, then load them up with sugar.* Rather than having to seek out addictive substances, his supply chain would be simpler, and the simple addiction loop of sugar would be way easier to trap people in than a more obvious addiction loop. How many people in his world would say they weren't addicted to sugar, after all, but refuse to drink anything but sodas? Caffeine was also an option, he supposed, but compared to magical herbs, it wouldn't have as positive or strong an effect. Magical herbs that were non-addictive but served as stimulants, that was the sweet spot. They wouldn't get auto-rejected by the snobbish mages for being 'low quality' addictive potions, but nonetheless, they would have the same addiction loops as any stimulant did, whether the substance itself was addictive or not.

He nodded. Yes, that was the angle. Not going so far that only degenerates would reach for the filth, but nailing that everyday garbage that everyone could appreciate, degenerate or not. True degenerate trash was fun, and sometimes he'd go there, but when he was trying to sell a product to the mass market, he had to restrain himself and keep things reasonable, with just enough garbage that it would slip past the average person's filter without feeling scammy. After all, although he appreciated true degenerate filth, only degenerates would reach for it, which made it less trash than the truest form of trash: the overly processed mass market garbage that was palatable to

everyone yet insidiously dangerous, that would shorten one's lifespan in a gentle, delicious way, to the extent that the drinkers would make excuses to keep drinking, but not get pressured by their peers to stop.

He also wanted to try his hand at alcohol, but soda was more prolific. Truthfully, he knew that tea and coffee outpaced soda back on his home world, and even fruit juice outpaced soda, but given that fruit juice, tea, and coffee were one, not trash, and two, required good ingredients to actually taste good, he'd rather stick with soda. Plus, he was pretty sure fruit juice ranked higher than soda because of health initiatives and incentives, plus crazy health-conscious parents feeding their delicate, precious children who couldn't possibly eat anything unhealthy, except those chickie nuggies that were the only solid food they'd eat. If people were just allowed to drink whatever, who'd reach for an apple juice over a delicious soft drink?

In any case, it was irrelevant; only soda qualified as junk food, and therefore trash. For all his pondering, though, he still didn't have a source for carbon dioxide. Sodas were carbonated drinks, and that was an absolute requirement, as far as he was concerned. In his world, carbon dioxide would be gathered from somewhere, perhaps the fermentation of beer, or created via chemical processes, then injected into the soda, but carbon dioxide existed all around them right now. In fact, it could be considered a discarded product of the body's oxygenation processes—that is, trash. He pinched his chin. Was it possible to use Trash Manipulation to gather expelled carbon dioxide, then inject it into water as if it was from a pressurized container, therefore carbonating the water? It sounded possible, and he'd used Trash Manipulation on smoke before, but using it to separate a gas from the natural composition of air sounded far more difficult than that. Still, it sounded like a path ahead, and something to try once he got home.

"You've been quiet," Sable commented.

"I was thinking about things," Rhys said. He stretched and slightly adjusted his position for optimal lounging, tilting his head back to look at her. "Why? There something you want to talk about?"

"No, just... Last time we met, we were enemies. Now you're inviting me back to your hideout with no reservations. It's a little crazy to me."

"Is it? We weren't deadly enemies or anything, we just fought in a tournament."

"I was Ernesto's champion. Your school was at stake," she pointed out.

Rhys shrugged. "I guess. I had a lot of tricks up my sleeve, so I was pretty confident I wasn't going to lose. Even if I did lose, it's not like I'd give up. I'd keep fighting back against Ernesto until he gave up and moved on."

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He'd held back against her, honestly. Not because he was a better fighter or anything like that, but because it was so utterly devastating to release the full power of his impurities against anyone he didn't mean to kill. Even if he could absorb them afterward, there was still lingering damage like acid and burning that remained behind. The fact that Sable had forced him to use any impurities at all spoke to how difficult the battle had been. Still, he recognized that impurities were something of a cheat skill, not truly indicative of his battle prowess. If he hadn't had them, fighting Sable, who effectively had six blades attached to her back and almost a dozen more strapped to her hands and feet before they even started talking about weapons... he was definitely the one at a disadvantage.

She hummed neutrally. "What happened between you and Ernesto? I never got the full story."

"No?"

"He told me to fight you. That was enough."

Rhys raised his brows. A little too obedient for his blood, but then, wasn't her father a construct, a weapon the Demon King had built? Why give a weapon too much free will? Straw had... well, he definitely had free will, but there was always an odd sensation to him, as if he wasn't quite human... *duh*, Rhys thought. Still, there was something to that. As if Straw hadn't had too much of his own will, even if he made plenty of his own choices. He couldn't really put his finger on it, or put it to words, but nonetheless, he felt as though he understood why she'd show such obedience; Straw had seemed as if he were willing to give someone that obedience, if only he found the right person to be obedient to.

He waved his hand. "It's a long story. He wanted my school's Impure Well, I got there first, he wasn't happy about that, and so on."

"So you have a history of absorbing Impure Wells, then."

"I intend to keep doing it, too, so watch out," Rhys joked. He looked at Sable. "Surely you weren't planning to keep hiding in wells?"

"It's a last-ditch thing, but it is oddly comforting. You know, one theory is that Impure Wells were created by the Demon King, as hiding places for his soldiers and ways to intimidate and oppress the people around them; he could always threaten to burst the well and flood the community with impurities, injuring mages irrecoverably and cutting off any mortals' chances of magehood... or so the story goes."

Rhys looked at her. "You doubt that?"

She gestured at herself. "I can hide, but I still get impurities. I don't know father, but aside from you, I don't think anyone can step into an Impure Well with impunity. If you

ask me, I think the Demon King used the Impure Wells because they're convenient, but I don't think he created them."

He tilted his head. It was an interesting thought. If they were the Demon King's, then they were only as old as the Demon King, and a problem that vanished with him, leaving a mess for Rhys to clean up, but that was all. If they weren't created by the Demon King, then some other process Rhys didn't know about or understand was creating them, and he'd have to absorb them all, then comprehend and overcome whatever that process was. If he was really brought here to clean up the world's trash, and therefore the Impure Wells, would absolute existence summon someone from another reality just to clean up a static set of entities that were no longer being created, and not only that, but limited to the regions where the Demon King had ruled? He doubted it. Then again, it could be that there were more types of trash than just Impure Wells, so maybe they were the Demon King's creation.

He shrugged. It was something to keep in mind, but he had no way to confirm or deny anything. He simply had to keep going, keep learning and discovering more information, until he could figure out how everything worked out.

He nodded at Sable. "The Empress seems pretty bad, but I don't know how bad the Demon King was. Was he worse than this?"

She laughed. "You really aren't much of a student, are you?"

Rhys smiled, having the good graces to at least look a little embarrassed.

"He was much more powerful than the Empress. The current Sword Saint can go toe-to-toe with the Empress in a solo battle with no-one interfering, and he wouldn't stand a chance against the Demon King. He'd struggle to fight one of the Remnant Weapons, centuries after the Demon King's defeat, let alone the Demon King himself."

Rhys snorted. "I saw that play out in real time, you don't have to tell me." The Sword Saint had teamed up with a number of other mages, including the rose-wielding Lady Illya, in order to take Straw down. He hadn't seen the Sword Saint's battle, and he presumed he took care of Straw quickly, since he arrived to take Bast away shortly after, but still; he'd needed assistance to take down Straw, rather than facing him himself. That said enough about the scale of the Demon Lord's power, that he'd been able to not only dominate but create beings on the power level of Straw.

Sable nodded. "Not much is known of his reign. What records were kept were heavily censored, and most of them were burned in the war to take him down. The previous Sword Saint is the one who actually took him down, and she died in the final battle, after the most powerful mages, martial artists, and adventurers fought their way into his castle and banded together to take down his armies. Due to the Demon King's interference, she couldn't pass on all her arts, or even the true form of them, to her young disciple, and she died in the final fight, meaning she had no chance to correct her

teachings afterward. Some people call her 'the last true Sword Saint,' since the Sword Saint's arts, passed down since the founding of our region, were lost with her death."

"And the rest of them?" Rhys asked, though he could already guess the answer.

"The other mages, martials, and adventurers strong enough to hold their own with that ancient Sword Saint were likewise tainted, heavily injured, or killed in that battle. In one fell swoop, the region lost its most powerful echelons of power, but in return, we took down the Demon King." She paused, giving him a sad grimace. "In truth, the Alliance is a desperate attempt to keep the region safe from the surrounding regions by a bunch of factions who would kill each other as soon as look at each other, were all things equal. The fact that our region, Orphela, is seen as destitute after the Demon King's destruction is likely the only thing keeping invaders out... and even then, when a conqueror comes through, well..."

"The inevitable happens," Rhys finished for her. Many things made more sense now; why they Demon King was no longer, but they struggled to face the Emperess; why the Emperess wasn't seen as quite as terrible as the Demon King, while being unquestioningly a terrifying force of oppression. He took a deep breath, then smiled. "If the cream of the crop all got killed, then it's left to us trash to scramble our own freedom, huh?"

"I suppose," Sable said, giving him an odd look.

"Then again, if the Alliance is so desperate for power, why not utilize the Remnant Weapons?" Rhys asked.

She pursed her lips. "I know Straw is a friend to you, but... to most of the Alliance, he's a monster, a horrifyingly corruptive influence that's as likely to destroy this region as our neighbors. Imagine you have a tiger on a leash. Do you feel safe?"

"No. That thing's gonna whip around and eat my face—oh," Rhys said, realizing her intention. He nodded. "I guess... I mean, I don't agree with it, but I do understand their perspective better, now."

She shook her head. "I'm glad I was able to provide basic history to you."

"Hey. Don't knock it. My librarian likes porno books and the orphanage gave me some political bullshit instead of learning. Basic history can be hard to come by," Rhys countered.

"What about your academy? Once you became a mage, that is."

Rhys laughed. "You're kidding. I was the janitor, not a student. A standard curriculum? You can forget it."

He left out that he willfully ignored anything like a standard curriculum, having become beyond inured to standardized education in his first world.

Sable blinked, looking at him in a new light. She tilted her head, and the fang drifted across her forehead. “Huh. We may be more alike than I thought.”

I dunno about that, Rhys thought, but he kept that to himself, knowing she’d take it the wrong way. It sounded like he was saying ‘you and I aren’t alike at all!’ when what he meant was, ‘I’m a stubborn-ass gremlin from the underworld of the deep internet, there isn’t a scum like me in this whole world.’

Instead, he turned to face forward. “We’re almost back. Try to look as un-threatening as you can.”

Sable gestured at the bones protruding from her body.

“I realize it’s a challenge, but...” Rhys said with a laugh. “Where’d that cloak of yours go?”

“Corrupted by the well,” she said.

Rhys paused, once more feeling a little embarrassed. After a second, he waved his hand. “I’ll make you a new one. Come on. Home’s just ahead.”

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