

Chapter 131. Disregard Women, Acquire Soda

Korii came out to meet them, intercepting Rhys with a hand on her sword and a wary expression on her face. She looked Sable and the skeleton up and down, then, in a forcedly neutral tone, asked, “Who is this?”

Sable hopped free. She stood at a distance, the skeletal limbs on her back shifting subtly to prepare if Korii lunged. Korii noticed, and adjusted her stance, readying an attack. The tension between the two was palpable, both of them on edge, waiting for the other to make the first move.

With great effort, Rhys clambered free of his comfortable perch and landed on the ground, then snapped his fingers, dismissing the skeleton. It vanished back into his core, and Korii stared in surprise. He nodded. “Sable, Korii. Korii, Sable. She’s an old friend. Someone I met out in the forest, who I’ve known for a while. You can trust her.”

Korii narrowed her eyes, but stood upright, lowering her hand from her sword. Sable stood as well, tucking her skeleton arms behind her back.

Korii glanced at Rhys. “Every time you go out into the forest, you come back with another beautiful woman. How mysterious.”

Rhys blinked at her, then realized: he’d gone to town and come back with Lira and Mouse, then headed out to free the other camp and come back with Sable. A line passed through his mind, one he’d read in a few too many trashy novels: *My parents raised me as a traditional man...*

He waved his hand. He wasn’t building a harem, he really wasn’t! It wasn’t his fault that the powerful mages he kept running into were female. For that matter, wasn’t Korii being sexist for pointing out that all the mages he’d recruited were female? She wouldn’t have pointed out if he’d only recruited men, after all. There was nothing wrong with women fighting and being powerful. In fact, he was all for it. The more, the better! The fact that he’d just happened to recruit all women had nothing to do with his efforts. It was all a big coincidence, a big coincidence!

“Yeah, so? I recruit the mages I find. Do you want me to start turning aside women because they’re female and seek out male mages in particular?” Rhys challenged her.

Korii retreated a step, taken aback. “Not at all, it’s merely that your predilections—”

"What predilections? It's not as if the fact that I like women means I'm going to run into more women. Women are fifty percent of the population. If you flip a coin six times, you wouldn't make a point of having flipped heads three times, would you? But because they're women, and I'm a man, obviously it's because I'm horny and not because it's an honest coincidence, huh?"

"I think it's a bit strange that all your old friends are women," Korii pointed out, crossing her arms.

"I have male friends! Three male friends, just like I have three female friends! They're just... busy," Rhys finished awkwardly. One was a cat, one was the Sword Saint's apprentice, and one didn't know he was a boy, but they counted, right?

"Uh huh," Korii said, giving him a look.

At last, Rhys realized her point. In this world, where mages were just as likely to be male as female, there wasn't much point in making a big deal out of him mostly recruiting women; it was just as he'd said. Flip a coin six times, and getting heads three times in a row was notable, but not extreme or strange. Instead, it was the fact that they were all his friends, and all women. In Korii's eyes, he was the girl who only had male friends, the person who could only get along with others because they were the opposite gender and somewhat attracted to him, because otherwise his personality was too obnoxious.

It wasn't true! He did have male friends, and they really were indisposed right now, busy doing other things and not here to show Korii. Not only that, but in the case of Lira and Sable, they weren't really *friends*, per se, but colleagues who shared a common goal, and even Mouse was more like a kid that he doted on despite her weird stalkery habits, rather than a real friend. To be honest, it was a bit embarrassing for him to admit that his only real friend in this world was probably Bast, rather than anyone he'd recruited, that these were all people who he had formed an alliance with, whom he introduced as 'friends' to keep himself from having to launch into long explanations every time. *Well, maybe Ev counts as a friend, too*, he allowed, but he wasn't really sure where she fit in the male/female split, given her tendencies, and he was pretty sure she hadn't figured it out, either. But the point was, Korii's supposition was actually the furthest thing from the truth! His only friend was male, okay? He was a different kind of socially inept, dammit!

From her perspective, though, he was desperately covering up his inability to connect with people of his own gender... in other words, he was an inept loser who needed more socialization, and was too awkward to connect to people who weren't attracted to him.

Rhys pursed his lips. "Where's Blake? I'll show you..."

"Show me what?" Korii asked, taken aback.

“True male bonding,” Rhys said firmly.

Sable rolled her eyes and sauntered past, brushing by Rhys without a word.

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“Sable, wait,” he called, but she ignored him, her tail swishing behind her like a cat’s.

He watched her vanish into base, then turned to Korii. “Did I do something?”

Korii laughed. “No, but I did. She likes you.”

“What?” Rhys looked at Sable’s back, then back at Korii again. “We barely know one another. And what do you mean, ‘likes me?’—wait, were you deliberately making me sound like a scumbag to see if she’d react?”

Korii grinned. She shook her head. “A crush is a powerful thing.”

“First off, she doesn’t like me, we’ve barely met. How can she like me if she doesn’t know me? Secondly, don’t sabotage my few chances. I don’t get many, you know,” Rhys admonished Korii.

“Could’ve fooled me,” Korii said, glancing over at Mouse and Sable.

“Oh, shut up. They really are people who share a common goal. They... we, most of us, hardly know one another. Especially Lira. I’m pretty sure she’s just here to do her own thing, whatever that is.”

Korii nodded. “Wise words. Water sprites are notorious for luring young men into watery graves.”

“I’ve picked up on that, believe it or not.”

“Mark my words, though. Sable? She likes you.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Rhys said dismissively. Girls didn’t like him. He liked girls. No, actually, it was more like, he admired them from afar, while they lived full lives without him.

Plus, he couldn’t forget the age issue. True, he didn’t know Sable’s actual age, and it was very possible that she was older than him, including his original life, given how mage lifespans and agelessness worked; once one entered the path of magehood, one’s aging slowed and slowed, until, at Tier 3, it was almost imperceptible, and at Tier 4, it stopped altogether. She could have been Tier 2 for decades, and given that she was close to breaking into Tier 3, if she wasn’t a genius at Bast’s level, she probably had been. But even so, without knowing her actual age, he had to treat her as if she

were the age she appeared—nineteen, twenty or so—and not a fully mature adult. To be quite honest, she still looked like a child to him, and he wasn't sure she ever wouldn't. It was like entering college, and seeing all the upperclassmen as adults, then leaving college and looking back, and all the seniors looked like babies. But then, he was also frozen at eighteen-or-so years of age, so maybe it was just something he'd have to get over as he continued growing as a mage. True, his physical body was still eighteen-or-so right now, but there was a long, long lifespan ahead of him. At two hundred, his body wouldn't look much older than it did right now, and that assumed he didn't progress to Tier 4 and freeze his age altogether.

He'd expected this world to have an entirely different moral system, since geniuses could freeze their ages relatively young, even before ten, in extreme cases, but it turned out that those extremely rare geniuses remained at a child's maturity in some respects, and usually weren't interested in adult play, so the morals remained the same, more or less, with a few exceptions. No one would bat an eye at a pair of 'eighteen-year-olds' with a family of ten or more, some of them even appearing older than their parents; everyone knew it was simply that the parents were better mages than their children, and probably had existed for hundreds of years at their young appearance, whereas the thirty-looking child was probably actually thirty years old and still struggling with the first steps of magehood. That had been one strange disparity—that mage classes could hold people up to fifty years old in the same room as five year old geniuses. From what he'd heard, at smaller schools even worse than his Infinite Constellation School, the kind of tiny school that wouldn't get invited to the subjugation of a Remnant Weapon in the first place, it was extremely common for students to be as old as fifty or sixty, and all the Tier 2 or 3 mages would be white-beards and white-buns, old men and women at the limits of their lifespan with wisdom twinkling in their eyes.

Of course, that wasn't the only way to appear old. Some mages deliberately burned their age away, progressing themselves manually to twenty or thirty in appearance, or even all the way to their white-beard age. Rhys didn't really get that. He'd been old once, and it had sucked. Who'd get old deliberately?

Then again, maybe later down the line, he'd let it happen. It wasn't as though he was all that attracted to eighteen-year-olds; they really did look like children to him. If he aged himself up to his mid-twenties, old enough to appear adult but not old enough to start feeling the aches and pains, and convinced whoever fell in love with him to do the same, then maybe he could see it happening. But that aside, he was going to cling to his youth this time around, and *really* enjoy it, for as many long, long years as he could.

He waved his hand, pushing all these thoughts away. He was flattered that Korii thought Sable was into him, but all it was, was the delusion of a woman who was looking at things too hard. Now wasn't the time for love, anyways. He had an empire to topple, and more importantly... soda to make!

"She does. It's very obvious."

“Yeah, yeah. Go tease someone else,” he said, and brushed by Korii.

The people he’d saved from the mines had made a nice kitchen for him by now. It was a little dented and busted up, but that was fine by Rhys. He found a big, deep pot and trooped over to the stream to fill it. As he knelt, Lira emerged from the water just downstream, and he grinned. “Right on time. Wann help?”

Lira waved her hand. Clean water splashed into the pot. Hefting it onto his shoulder, Rhys trooped it back to the kitchen. There, he added sugar, then muddled herbs, testing the flavor of the sugar-herb water in small quantities until he reached a flavor he liked. It wasn’t cola—cola was far too complicated—but rather a lemon-limey flavor, the kind of simple flavor that was easy to imbue. It would have been easier if he were using citrus fruits rather than herbs, but the merchant they’d raided hadn’t had citrus fruits, so herbs it was. Herbs were dry, anyways, which kept him from having to worry about watering down the sugar water, and he had to use a smaller quantity of them to flavor the water, to boot. Plus, potions were made from herbs, and some of these herbs had healing qualities. He still had to imbue the soda with healing properties, but he’d do that second. Better to start from something that tasted good, then add goodness to it, rather than try to make a nasty potion taste good. How many times had he seen companies marketing ‘delicious’ health food, only to taste it and find it was still disgusting? Whereas, on the other hand, junk food crackers and such would often use fortified flour or boast about containing vitamins, but still taste like delicious junk food. Flavor came first, and benefits second.

He noted which herbs he’d used, and set a few sprigs aside to give to the raccoon and rats when he returned to the farm. Before him sat a pot of sugar water with muddled herbs; an excellent start, but not an ending. He took a deep breath. Now came the hard part: carbonation.

Come on, carbon dioxide! You’re trash, right?

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

Chapter 132. Byproducts

Rhys lifted his hands over the water and activated Trash Manipulation. He didn’t immediately latch onto any object or pull anything toward him, but simply stretched out Trash Manipulation, searching for everything he could sense around him.

Instantly, his senses lit up. The entire kitchen, the trash still stuck in the earth below, the hood hiding their operation from prying eyes from above—all were trash. Rhys took a deep breath and let it out, resisting the urge to roll his eyes at himself. *Right*. It was his hideout, his stronghold. There was so much trash here it was blinding. Singling out carbon dioxide in such a cluttered environment was a fool's errand.

It was a deliberate choice to surround himself with trash, and in most cases, like an ambush or invasion, or even general-purpose training, it was a great idea, but in this moment? He'd have to spend twice the time and twice the effort just to tell if he could sense carbon dioxide, when even the air was laden with trash particles and impurities.

"Hey, Lira! Watch this pot. Don't get in it, and make sure it stays clean, okay?" Rhys shouted.

"Why me?" Lira asked, looking up from cleaning her long, dangerous nails.

"You're the most likely one to climb in. We aren't selling bathwater yet, that's a future endeavor! Keep the pre-soda safe, I'll be right back!"

He left the garbage heap behind and jogged into the forest, away from the trash, the sewage entrance, and everything else that made his hideout a great location for a trash mage like himself in particular. When the air grew clear, and he couldn't see a single scrap of garbage floating around under the trees, he finally slowed. A mossy spot at the foot of a large live oak beckoned him, and he sat down, resting his back against the enormous tree with its wide-ranging branches. He'd always had an affinity for live oaks, the monstrously enormous things with their branches that grew as far out as up. As a child, he'd climbed one in his parents' front yard, before they got divorced. As an adult, he'd admired them whenever he came across them, particularly enjoying the one in the park nearby, before he'd stopped going outside. They were beautiful, and about the furthest thing from trash that he could imagine.

Clean air flowed around him. A spring ran gently in the background, trickling along the rocks. Soft, lush earth supported vines, undergrowth, and moss, and birds sang in the near distance. Rhys took a deep breath and let it out. This place was clean. This place lacked trash. This place was the ideal place to seek out the human byproduct, aka trash, known as carbon dioxide.

He folded his legs and rested his hands on his knees, feeling the urge to enter a truly meditative stance. It wasn't strictly necessary, but it felt right. Closing his eyes, he breathed slowly, settling in to meditate.

Mana flowed in, clean and fresh... and flowed right back out as he breathed out, with only the slightest amount of accumulation in his core. Rhys almost laughed, except he didn't want to lose concentration. He'd spent all his time working on trash cultivation, so he'd forgotten just how trash his talent was when he wasn't working with trash. Truly, this was a pathetic level of talent. He thought back to his early days, when Bast and he

had been getting chosen by schools, and Bast had been fought over, while the teachers didn't even want to look at him. Now that he knew more about the world, he really understood it. Looking at his raw, normal talent, he was the kind of mage who would waste their entire human lifespan just attempting to gather enough mana, who, when he was an old graybeard, might be able to progress to Tier 2 and prolong his life enough to be a whitebeard by the time he hit Tier 3, his strength at that point meaningless as the end of his life rapidly progressed. Luckily, he'd discovered his true skill with trash, and was able to almost keep up with a once-in-a-century genius like Bast instead of wasting away trying to cultivate by the ordinary routes.

Still, he wasn't trying to absorb mana. No, to the contrary; his deep breathing was for the purpose of generating as much carbon dioxide as possible, to make it easier to sense it around him. He extended his Trash Manipulation all around him, breathing evenly as he did so. Unlike the cluttered environment of his stronghold, there was little for Trash Manipulation to latch onto here. A discarded skeleton, left behind by a predator; a pile of ash from a long-abandoned campfire. He extended his senses further, deeper into the world around him. Bug carcasses loomed large in his vision, lit up like neon embers in the darkness of the forest. Further. He had to see more. Even smaller trash. Things beyond the limit of his normal vision. He needed Trash Manipulation to be more sensitive, more delicate, to sense further and detect more detail. He focused, focusing on nothing, on sensing, on reaching out. More. More. *More.*

Everything else fell away. He no longer felt the moss under his legs or the cool breeze on his skin. His entire self was absorbed in sensing deeper and further with Trash Manipulation. Time passed. Hours, then days. Lira stumbled upon him, only to retreat without disturbing him, and tell the others not to disturb him either.

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Smaller and smaller. He saw spores, discarded on plants where they could never copulate. Pollen lying on the dust. And still he couldn't see carbon dioxide.

No... I'm thinking of it wrong. He was trying to see individual items, when he should try to see masses of things. It would take immense effort to see individual gas atoms, but that was ridiculous. No one saw individual water molecules, for example; they saw puddles of water, and they didn't need to see the individual molecules to make out the puddles. Rhys refocused. Instead of looking smaller and smaller, he blurred his vision and looked at the air, at the middle distance, at nothing and everything. *There's trash in this space. Trash all around me. Sense it. I can sense it!*

A faint glimmer of light appeared, but only for a moment before fading. Rhys exhaled, and the light returned, clouding out from his mouth. Rhys gestured, calling it into his hand, where he held it with Trash Manipulation. For a time, he sat there, just breathing and generating carbon dioxide, until at last he opened his eyes and stood, carrying his ball of gas with him. His eyes shone with effort and excitement. He'd done it. He'd

generated carbon dioxide! Now all he had to do was dissolve it into the water and sugar, and hey presto, soda!

Lira looked up as he walked in. "Look who's back."

"Was I gone long?" Rhys asked. He'd lost track of time, but it had probably only been a few hours, right?

"Only five days," she said, shaking her head at him.

Rhys stopped dead, stunned. "Five days?"

"Five days."

"Really? Wow." Rhys made a mental note not to fall into meditation while he was on time constraints. "Anything happen?"

Lira gestured.

Rhys turned. A huge pile of bagged potato chips sat on the other side of the space.

"Well. I guess it's time to open our stores. But first..." Rhys sent the ball of gas forth from his hand and lowered it into the liquid. It was strange to see a bubble of gas sitting at the bottom of the vat, not moving at all. He went to release it, then stopped himself. If he let go right now, it would just escape the water in one big bubble, without dissolving at all. Instead, he shook the bubble back and forth as he slowly released his control on it. Tiny little bubbles escaped from the big bubble and swirled into the liquid, carbonating it just like he wanted.

"Wow... sparkly," Mouse whispered, her eyes big.

Rhys jumped. "Whoa! Where were you?"

She turned to him. Her round glasses turned completely white as the light shone off them. "I've been right here beside you the whole time."

A shudder ran up Rhys's spine. He rubbed the back of his neck and laughed lightly. *She can be real creepy when she wants to be.*

He finished carbonating the soda, then slowly, worshipfully, drew out a cup and a ladle from his storage ring and dipped the ladle into the drink. He lifted it out and ladled it in, then took a sip.

It was... it was okay. Definitely recognizable as a soda, but lukewarm. It did have that fizz, but, well, lukewarm soda was... Rhys made a face, then turned to take in the whole room. "Does anyone have ice magic?"

Lira raised her hand.

“Can you make some ice cubes and put them in the vat?”

Lira nodded. She walked over and held her hand over the vat. Ice materialized in shards and blocks and fell into the soda with a splash.

Rhys waited a few seconds for the ice to cool the surface liquid, then took another dip. This time, he closed his eyes as the sweet, delicious, spritzzy taste of soda flowed over his tongue. *Perfect.*

He turned to the room once more. “Come on over! Take a taste. Let me know your thoughts! I need to improve this to make it utterly delicious, so don’t hold back!”

This round was just a taste-tester, a proof of concept. He couldn’t just throw soda that conformed to his tastes into this world and expect it to take off. It was like when people had taken ice to the tropics, thinking they had a slam dunk—after all, who didn’t like a cold beverage?—only to find out all the people in the tropics were so used to lukewarm drinks that they considered ice, and cooled drinks, disgusting. Sure, they’d won them over in the end... or done other horrifying colonial things to them, he really wasn’t sure, but the initial hesitation was a reminder that every culture had its own preferences, and just because something was an instant win in one culture, didn’t mean it would even succeed in another. His tastes weren’t the be-all end-all of deliciousness, and different places had different senses of taste, let alone different worlds. Once he adjusted soda’s flavor to the tastes of this world, then he could begin to mass market it alongside his already-perfected potato chips, and his potato fries and ketchup. There was nothing better than a cool soda with some hot fries, and he wanted to introduce as many people as possible to that combination.

Korii took a sip, then wrinkled her nose. “Bubbly.”

Blake tossed back his cup, then raised his brows. “Whoa. You aren’t kidding.”

Lira raised her brows. “That’s good.”

“O-oh!” Mouse exclaimed, startled, then nodded happily and gave him a thumbs up.

Silently, Sable stalked up. She held her cup out, and Rhys filled it. Maintaining eye contact, she raised the cup and drank.

Despite himself, Rhys grew nervous. There was no reason to attach any particular importance to Sable’s opinion, but now that Korii had suggested that she might be interested in him, he couldn’t help but be aware of her. It was impossible. Girls couldn’t be interested in him. But even though he knew that, it still made him weirdly nervous around her, just because Korii had suggested it. He rubbed the back of his head and smiled, waiting for her verdict.

She lowered the cup, then nodded, just once. “Passable.” With that, she turned and walked away, still carefully carrying the cup.

Passable? I'll take it! Rhys turned to the rest of the group. “Alright, everyone! Let’s get this show on the road. Pack up the chips and the fries, and I’ll brew up a big vat of draft one soda. It’s time we open shop.”

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

Chapter 133. Open Shop

The mages were efficient. By the time he brewed up another vat of soda, the chips and fries were already stored away in storage rings and ready to be transported. Rhys put the soda in his ring, and he and a few of the less-recognizable mages set out for the city... but not before Rhys made everyone a fresh pair of robes from the cloth in the garbage. He went for shades of red and yellow, since they were colors meant to incite hunger, and bright and bold enough to form the foundation of their brand. The clothes ended up looking a bit harlequin, due to the small scraps he was working with, to the point that they ended up almost checkerboarded with panels of red and yellow, but he shrugged internally. It was most important to attract attention when they were starting up a new brand, so why not do it with their uniforms, too?

As for their faces, he couldn’t do much right now, but he colored everyone’s hair, including his, black with charcoal, and used it to darken their eyes and define their chins a little better. Once they got to the city, he’d buy makeup and wigs, but for now, these clumsy disguises would have to do. He’d chosen those who were the best at disguising their auras in the first place. Not those who could completely suppress their aura—those had a different job—but those who could change their aura to be different from their own. They’d be disguising as foreign mages, after all, rather than mortals or local mages, so they didn’t need *no* aura, but just an aura that anyone who’d encountered them in the mines wouldn’t recognize. The other mages had done some scouting, and apparently foreign mages didn’t wear pins, but instead had some kind of paperwork that the city mages could demand to see. Mouse had snuck into the city and peeked at some papers, then worked with Lira to provide a decent copy of the visa, and today, Rhys carried those papers on his person.

Having outlandish clothes and strange makeup didn’t hurt their alias as foreigners, either. True, it wasn’t like he knew what any region nearby’s clothes actually looked like, but did most of the Empress’ good soldiers know, either? He had the vague sensation that what he was doing was somehow not morally okay, but given that he wasn’t trying to replicate any actual country’s attire, it was probably okay... right?

He had the money from their attack on the traders, plus a few more gold pulled from the guards at the farm. The herbs from the farm he couldn't sell—they were too hot, since the authorities would be on the lookout for a large quantity of these herbs on the market—but they were healing-type herbs, so he could use them to imbue his sodas with a healing effect. He put that to the side for now. The first thing he wanted to do was get the store working, then expand the network of stores outward, from city to city, and become the rot that killed from within—but naturally, the first step in all that was to open their very first shop. And that was what the gold he'd gathered would go toward... just as soon as he found someone in the city who'd sell him real estate.

Rhys wandered the streets of the city, a little at a loss. He didn't know how to buy real estate in this world. Hell, he was a bit shaky on how it worked in his world. He didn't want to try the guarded, mage-only part of the city; that was far too much a risk, especially when they needed Mouse to consistently get past the guards. Instead, he walked the city near the gates, close enough that mages could see the shop regularly, but not so close that they'd be under the guards' watchful eyes at all hours.

It turned out, he wasn't the only person who'd noticed what a fine opportunity this was, and few buildings were open in the area of obvious prime real estate. The few that were, largely had rent prices posted that were far out of his purchase price. Rhys found himself circling further and further from the gates, until, at last, he stood in front of a run-down shop with reasonable rent posted. He stepped closer, peering into the windows to get a look at the interior.

"I wouldn't bother, if I were you," a gravelly voice advised him.

Rhys turned. An old man stood behind him, shaking his head. "It's cursed, it is. Filthy hole that ruins everything it touches."

Oh? That sounded promising to Rhys. He lifted his hands again and peered harder into the window. The man was right about one thing, at least; the building *was* filthy, full of garbage, dust, and some indescribable layer of gunk on the ground. Rhys licked his lips. He was excited just looking at it. What a formidable layer of filth! That would do great in his trash star.

"Everyone who's tried to open a building has lost their business. Don't bother," the man continued.

"Who owns this building?" Rhys asked, ignoring his warnings.

The man narrowed his eyes. "Have you heard nothing, kid?"

"No, I heard all of it. I think it sounds fantastic. I want to rent."

For a few more moments, the man stared at him, then harrumphed. "Kids throwing their money away. Fools. Don't blame me when you lose everything."

The other mages behind Rhys glanced amongst one another, uncertain, but Rhys just stared the man down. *A warning?* Interesting. His mind went to a certain show about four friends and a dog solving mysteries in their van. Could it be that this was that kind of 'warning,' and this man actually wanted this real estate, and was only warning them off to gain it for himself?

Rhys snorted at himself and waved his hand. That was too outlandish, far too outlandish. No, it was far more likely that this man was just superstitious, or at worst, was trying to warn them off because someone with great power and authority wanted this property instead. Not that Rhys cared. He needed a storefront, and this looked like a good one.

"So... the landlord?" Rhys prompted the man.

Quick footsteps rushed around the corner. A teenaged boy came running, huffing and puffing. At the sight of the old man, he bared his teeth. "George! Are you scaring off our buyers again?"

"Just giving them some good advice," the old man grumbled. "Not that they wanted to hear it." With that, he finally walked off, leaving them alone.

The boy turned to Rhys and his group. "Sorry about that. You're interested in renting the building?"

Rhys nodded.

"I'm Jacques, by the way. Oh, and sorry, but the building comes as-is... there's nothing we can do about that. Since dad died... it's not possible for us to clean it. Are you still interested in the building, knowing that?"

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"I wouldn't have it any other way," Rhys assured him.

Jacques gave him a funny look, but didn't comment on it. "Then, would you like a tour? See what you're getting into?"

Rhys waved his hand. "That won't be necessary. How much is the down payment?"

"Down payment? Sir... it's just a rent. You're not buying the building."

"No, I..." Rhys took a deep breath. *Right. This world hasn't come across the idea of making people pay down payments to live in rental apartments yet.* Even the Empire wasn't that evil. He beamed. "Right. How much is rent?"

“Five hundred gold for the month. You understand, it’s near the mages, and even in this condition, it’s still—”

Rhys reached into his storage ring and handed over two neatly wrapped bags. “While you count that, we’ll get started on cleaning it up.”

“Er—wait! You’re foreigners, right? I’ll need to see your papers,” Jacques said, almost apologetically.

Rhys laughed lightly and drew out Mouse’s forgery. “Of course.”

Jacques glanced at him, then looked over the papers, then back at him, then quickly handed them back. “Looks good. Then... go ahead. I’ll be counting back in my rooms, but I can see the shop from our apartment.” He pointed across the road, up at the second floor. “So don’t get any funny ideas.”

“No need to fear,” Rhys reassured him.

Jacques hesitated one last moment, thinking to himself, then handed Rhys a key. “It’s not final until I finish counting the gold, but if I don’t come back down here, assume it’s yours.”

“Shouldn’t there be some paperwork?” Rhys asked.

“Er... right! I’ll run upstairs and draft it up, and we’ll sign once I see you’ve all got the gold present and accounted for.” Jacques touched a hand to his forelock and ran off.

Rhys smiled. This was exactly what he’d been hoping for. An inexperienced landlord who didn’t know what he was doing, and was unlikely to do anything too predatory, while also not checking the paperwork too closely. The location could be better, and the building was a wreck, but the building he could fix, and the location wasn’t awful. Really, it was incredible that he’d gotten such a good location at such a good price! The old man was suspicious, but he wasn’t worth giving up this location over, especially if his complaints really boiled down to a bit of curse energy and some trash. Now, if he was warning them off of some actual criminal plot, whether his or someone else’s, that was entirely different... but Rhys was willing to test that. Come whatever may, he was relatively confident that he and his fellow mages could handle it. He was Tier 3, and Lira and Sable were Tier 2, which meant that as long as the imaginary plot that he had no proof existed only involved people who weren’t at the school-leadership level, they could probably take them on.

In conclusion, this was only a good decision, and there were no possible detriments whatsoever!

Rhys breathed out. *Why do I feel like I’ve bit off more than I can chew?*

In any case, that was a problem for future Rhys. He unlocked the door and pushed it open. It groaned, the hinges squealing. The front door hadn't been used in a good, long time. He and the other two mages he'd brought with him stepped inside and closed the door. Rhys turned. "Cover the windows."

The other two mages nodded and rushed to pull dusty curtains across the front of the shop. With the windows secured, Rhys pulled in, calling all trash to him. Dust, dirt, and the deeply-ingrained layer of filth on the ground and every surface of the building rushed toward him. A few seconds later, they stood in a clean space, though not one ready for business.

It had once been a tavern, and there was still a run-down bar and a few half-functional tables and chairs standing around. The walls and the bar showed signs of water damage and rot, and when he checked upstairs and in the kitchen, the roof and the outer walls showed leaking damage as well.

He nodded to the other two. "Can you fix that?"

One, a female mage, tilted her head. "Didn't you bring Olen for that?"

Rhys looked at the male mage and raised a brow.

He waved. "Hi. I'm a wood mage. I used to be forced to do timber reinforcements in the mines because I had basic woodworking skills from my early days of magehood."

Rhys gestured with a smile. "Then I invite you to begin work! You and me, let's set up the kitchen."

The female mage nodded. "Sure." She headed into the back, and the two of them got to work setting up their friers and stocking the shelves. More than once, Rhys encountered cockroaches and ants, but since they were considered pests, he simply absorbed them. The female mage saw him, and tapped his shoulder.

"Want me to get rid of those?"

"You have a technique that takes care of bugs?" Rhys asked, startled.

She nodded. Lifting her hand to the cabinet, she gently touched the edge. The ants turned sharply, then crawled up her finger and vanished under her sleeve. "One of my techniques allows me to manipulate and attack with bugs."

"Oh, me too!" Rhys said.

"Really? Did you also study under Tallie?"

Rhys coughed. "I, uh, just made it up the other day. But I've got plenty of bugs! So feel free to take these if you need them."

She blinked, staring at him. "You... made it up?"

"Uh, you know. Like you do!" Rhys said, grinning awkwardly. Most people read manuals or learned from experts, sure, and even he had techniques he'd learned that way, but was it really that strange to come up with his own technique? He hesitated a second, then added, "It's related to my path."

"Oh, you also walk the Path of Bugs?" she asked.

"It's related," Rhys said, not wanting to give away too much. She could probably guess his path if she'd been paying attention at all, but he still didn't want to just give it away if she hadn't figured it out for herself.

She nodded. "It's not a very well respected path, but there's strength in bugs that many people don't realize. The power of a colony is a frightful thing. Did you know that there are bugs that share a great sense of purpose, even among hundreds of their kind, and work together in greater synchronicity than humans to accomplish incredible goals?"

Rhys nodded. "Ants, right? Ant colonies are pretty cool."

"You know about..." She stared in shock. "And you're not even on the Path of Bugs...?"

Rhys gave her a look, then realized: sure, in his homeworld, that was common knowledge, but in this world, that was probably secret knowledge relegated to the highest ranks... or at least those past the initiate level, of the Path of Bugs. It was the kind of thing that could be determined by watching ants for a long time by any old mortal, but... Rhys's brows furrowed. Could that be a way of stepping on to a path? That is, comprehending some truth about the world, even while still a mortal, but which contained secrets of the world or of a path? It hadn't worked for him, but he hadn't been in this world when he'd realized, or rather, been taught about ants. Did the knowledge have to occur to someone of their own realizations, from their own studies, for it to count toward a path or magehood? It was like the difference between creating calculus and being taught calculus. One required lots of thought and intelligence, and the other required reading a book and some practice.

Of course, that assumed it worked in the first place... but when he thought about it, paths had to start somewhere. Someone had to make the first realizations about some sort of innate truth in order for any path to be created. Maybe one wasn't required to be a mage, to step onto a path. Maybe realizing a path was a way to step onto being a mage. After all, there were many ways to become a mage. Learning at a school, sensing mana on one's own, drinking mana potions, burning trash and absorbing the mana from it... lots of ways. Perhaps a path was also a way to become a mage.

He cleared his throat. “I read about it in a book. Don’t worry about it too much. Come on, let’s finish up setting up the kitchen, then move a few more people out here, and get our store going. It’s beyond time to start selling chips.”

She nodded, and the two of them went back to cleaning and putting up gear in the kitchen.

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

Chapter 134. Grand Opening

They opened the next morning, spreading a Grand Opening banner made of scrap fabric, which one of the mages good with a brush and with decent handwriting had fixed up nicely. SNACK SHOP was blazoned on their shop’s signboard, under an image of delicious fries in an iconic red holder that Rhys definitely hadn’t stolen from a certain clown back home. He’d wanted to make it fully iconic, with a moist soft drink cup sitting behind the fries, but his artist had gotten lost when he’d tried to explain what he wanted, then spent ten minutes explaining to him that making something appear wet required a great deal of mastery with a brush, mastery that they, as someone who painted for fun and didn’t pursue art seriously, did not have, and so he’d settled for piping hot delicious fries instead.

They didn’t hide inside their storefront, either, but stood out front. Rhys had appointed the two cutest, one male, one female, and gotten them good wigs and decent makeup, and they served as the face of the shop, with a brightly-colored umbrella shading their semi-mobile trash-cobbled snack stand and fresh fries boiling in oil. At first, the mages and mortals passed them by, but as the fries finished cooking, and beautiful golden potato slices sat gleaming under the sun, a few came by to check them out. When they stopped by, they were also offered chips and a free soda trial; currently, Rhys still wanted to run that one through taste-testing before he worked on giving it an ephemeral healing effect, and he wasn’t satisfied with his small-scale sample of people who were likely biased toward pleasing him. Rhys had stopped by the farm and picked up fresh potatoes, and he and the other mages were hard at work in the back, cutting, slicing, and preparing the fries and fresh chips, with Rhys mostly working on imbuing them with various magical effects, at whatever low level he could manage without other mages outright realizing what he was up to.

As time ticked on, their sales ticked up. Things went slower than at the tournament, but that was to be expected. The tournament had been a profitable gathering of people without many resources prepared to refresh them, whereas this was a city, where people doubtlessly had their own ways of acquiring foodstuffs, and his snack shack was but another method of finding food. It was the difference between having a captive

audience, and an audience he shared with a great deal of other shops. Of course he'd be moving product more slowly.

One student in a bright white uniform swung by. He looked down on the shabby shop and scoffed, then derisively tossed them a coin and took some fries, ignoring the proffered free drink. He didn't stop or slow, but tossed a few in his mouth as he walked away.

His feet stuttered. He slowed for a step, stunned. For a moment, he shuddered, then glanced over his shoulder and hurried off without another word.

Rhys raised his brows. *Hopefully that's good...*

Noon hit, with the sun directly overhead. The shack out front ran low, and Mouse ran the freshly-cut fries out. She scurried back with a traumatized expression on her face, and shot Rhys a terrified look. "They're coming!"

Rhys stepped forward, concerned, and peered out the window. A line of white-coated students marched toward the stall. He tensed, hiding his aura, but tightly gripping his broken sword. That many students? Had they been discovered? If he had to, he'd fight with everything he got to make sure everyone else got out.

The students approached, the haughty boy at their lead, and mobbed the stand. "One order!" "I'll take two!" "I just want a bottle of that red sauce!" "Three bags of chips, please!"

The shop's faces were almost instantly overwhelmed by orders. Rhys pushed out a few more people to go help out front, hurriedly tugging wings on their heads on their way out the door. When they were gone, he turned to the rest of the mages.

"We've got to double production. Wash, peel, cut, soak, in double time! Go, go, go!"

A smattering of salutes answered him, and they rushed back to their stations. Hands blurred, sweat ran down brows. Even Rhys, used to the rush, was pushed to his limit as a seemingly endless stream of students clamored for more, more, *more*. Their ketchup stocks ran low, and he had to cut off students from buying bottles, reserving it as a topping for those who bought fries alone. The potato chips flew off the shelves, and before long, the bags the mages had painstakingly built up ran low, too. By the end of the lunch rush, they were down to the dregs; the dregs of potatoes, the dregs of ketchup, the dregs of bagged chips. Soda had run out long ago, to rave reviews, and Rhys made a mental note to ramp up production, add a mild healing component, and start selling. As the lunch rush died down, all the mages slumped at their stations, exhausted.

Rhys clapped. "The dinner rush is just around the corner. Come on! We need to prepare before it begins."

The mages' eyes dimmed. He could sense it without speaking to anyone; the morale in the room was low.

Rhys glanced outside, then gestured the outdoors workers in; in the gap between lunch and dinner, no one purchased anything, not even snacks. With all his mages arrayed before him, he crossed his arms and looked down on them. "What are we doing?"

"Selling chips?" one mage asked.

Rhys shook his head. "Try again."

"Raising money for the insurgency?" another mage asked quietly.

Rhys shook his head once more. "No!"

"What are we doing?" an exasperated Blake burst out, frustrated.

A grin on his face, Rhys snapped his fingers and pointed at Blake. "We *are* the insurgency. That food we sold today, do you think it was just food? Yes? Anyone?"

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A few mages raised their hands.

Rhys swept his hand out, as if to cut their hands down. "No! It was poison. Poison that will corrupt their bodies and souls alike! Every bite is soaked in subtle impurities, full of a poison that will eat away at them without realizing. The Empire's next generation? The pride of their academy? All infected, blighted, brought low by impurities. And we will spread it further. To the next town. To the next academy. Until the entire Empire is united by a chain of snack shops, all selling the same insidious illness. All snatching the Empire's richness, health, and value from its very heart, from within. We will strike. No... we *have* struck," he said, making eye contact with Lira. "But while we are based in this city, we bare a crucial weakness: our location. They can find us and crush us with ease. What, then, when we operate snack shops in a dozen cities? When we own the hearts and minds of half the Empire's citizens, and a logistics chain that allows us to strike anywhere, anywhen; when we can not only attack, but strike with blinding speed on any city, any camp, any location we please, and vanish once more, with no sign of our passing? Think, then, of what we will have in our hands." Rhys held his up, and clenched it shut. "Victory."

In the front row, a female mage's brow furrowed. She raised her hand. "This plan you speak of... won't it take decades, if not longer?"

"We're mages. We have the time," Rhys said confidently, settling back. His eyes flashed. How many times had he seen a trashy villain execute their plan too early, when they could simply outwait the hero? An immortal lich who moved during the human

hero's lifespan, instead of going back to sleep for a century; an ancient vampire, who needed to kidnap the hero's sister while the hero was young and powerful, instead of waiting a decade or two for the human to grow old and decrepit; an immensely powerful force from beyond the universe, who simply had to creep onto the scene during the human hero's ephemeral youth? *They were mages. They had time.* He would *not* become the not-long-enough villain. No. He was patient. He could wait.

"What about the mages in camps?" a male mage protested.

"I already have plans to free them. It will be a continual effort, but one that will grow easier with time," Rhys assured him. Doubtlessly the Empire was already putting together a strike force against those who broke into camps, and he had no doubt that it would continue to grow stronger as long as he kept striking camps, but he had the initiative; and beyond that, he, too, could get stronger. In fact... it was a long ways off, but ultimately, the insurgency would split into two: those who ran the shops, and did no evil, and those who did naught but evil (in the Empire's eyes), while using the shops as refresh locations and travelling spots.

Another mage raised his hand. "What about taxes?"

Rhys opened his mouth, then shut it. For the first time, his expression flagged, and his hand lowered. He hadn't thought about taxes at all. Taxes! *Taxes.* The bane of Al Capone, one of the greatest criminal minds in recent history. He couldn't overlook taxes!

A second later, he beamed and pointed at that mage. "What an excellent point! Can I trust you to look into that?" Without waiting for the man's response, he moved on to the next question. *Ah, the power of delegation!*

The questions settled down from there. The exhaustion faded from the mages' eyes, replaced by a sense of purpose and a deep resolve to overthrow the Empire. This, too, was but a stepping stone toward domination of the Empire, but a small, incremental step toward their eventual victory. They turned back to the produce as men and women changed. They didn't cut potatoes, they created the poison that they would inject directly into the Empire's veins... no, that they fooled the Empire into taking itself! Rhys looked over them with a smile before turning back to his own small role in this whole process.

The dinner rush went well, if it was quieter and more dominated by working mages than the military students, and then they closed up shop for the night. Rhys kindly let the tired mages rest in the upstairs section of the building, where guests might have once shared the large, long attic for the night, back when this was a tavern, though with the promise that they'd all have to break and run for supplies at dawn. For his part, Rhys bumbled around the kitchen cleaning up while everyone else vanished upstairs, until it was only him alone in the room. Only then did he turn to the empty soda vat and drag a small cauldron out of his storage ring. It was time to imbue his soda with healing properties.

The few potions classes he'd attended had given him a basic understanding of what it took to create a simple healing potion, and these herbs from the farms were one of the most important components of the most basic healing potion. The herbs themselves had a low concentration of impurities, as expected from the strict standards of the Empire, but Rhys had other intentions. He drew out a small quantity of impurities and imbued them directly into the herbs, deliberately lowering the herbs' quality. He could have added them at any time, but imbuing them into the finished potions would be suspicious if a skilled alchemist picked apart the soda, as he was sure the Empire would eventually do. After all, impurities didn't just appear in potions, apropos of nothing. They were introduced by something; for example, sub-par ingredients. This way, there was absolutely no proof that he was deliberately poisoning the Empire. Instead, it looked as though he'd simply cut costs and used low-quality ingredients. The fact that it also helped obfuscate the origin of the herbs didn't hurt. After all, who would deliberately lower the quality of the herbs they'd stolen, except for a madman like Rhys?

After his efforts with consolidating impurities, making a basic healing potion was the opposite of difficult for Rhys. He finished it up and took a sip, then made a face. *Bitter!* A second later, he swirled it in his mouth, trying the flavor again. It was bitter, but so was citrus juice. If he used the sugar, sweet, and flavor components of citrus and mixed them in with this bitter liquid, would that mitigate the bitterness and disguise it into a kind of artificial lemony flavor?

It wasn't unheard of. Back home, if you wanted a watermelon-flavored sweet, use pear juice; if you wanted cherry flavor, use pomegranate. Once people discovered artificial colors and flavors, it only got even more complex. One didn't need the actual juice in order to simulate the flavor. In fact, in some cases, the actual juice only got in the way. Watermelon, for example, was too watery and sweet, with none of the tang the melon flesh held, while pear juice had sweetness and tang, whereas cherry juice had an unpleasant muskiness to it that wasn't present in fresh cherries, while pomegranate juice remained clear and pure. If he wanted citrus soda, he in no way needed citrus juice. It was nice to have, but not a requirement. Rather, he simply needed to figure out a chemical way to mimic the shape of the citrus flavonoid... or, well, put together a bunch of flavors until he got the sweet-bitter-tangy flavor of citrus.

He poured the potion into the vat, then turned to fetch Lira, only to hear a strange shriek from the other room. Rhys froze. The other room, completely devoid of life, with all the mages upstairs? He extended his mana, but still felt nothing. Despite himself, a chill ran down his spine. Was there something to the old man's warning after all? A curse?

He grinned. *Oh, I hope so.*

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Chapter 135. A Curse? Oh Goody!

Rhys held his breath and pulled his aura in. Stepping quietly over the floor, with the help of some decrepit floorboards he'd insisted Orlen not fix and Trash Step, he approached the other room. The shriek was quiet, only loud enough that his enhanced ears heard it, and muffled, as though it came from beneath the building... though, to his knowledge, the building had no basement. His heart beat faster in excitement. Was it a ghost? Ghosts were pests, weren't they? And besides, they came out when a human died. They could be considered a human byproduct, and therefore, trash. And curses he'd already established as trash, so if the ghost happened to be paired with a curse, even better. He crept closer, peeking out into the next room. He didn't want to scare his precious guest away.

There was a creak, then a long, slow groan. The room laid in shadows, and it was darker with its windows drawn than it would be usually. He had to utilize his enhanced mage vision to see at all. The room looked the same as it ever did, for all that, nothing more than an empty tavern with rotting tables and chairs sitting out around the space. They hadn't opened the inside of the store to customers, and Orlen had been pushed to his limit fixing the building, so he'd left the furniture as it was for now. His eyes flashed from table to table. Were the tables haunted? Or maybe it was the very ground the store stood on that was cursed? Whatever it was, Rhys was ready.

Another creak. At last, there was motion in the room, as a panel in the center of the room swung upward of its own accord. Rhys held his breath. A hidden trapdoor, opening on its own? No, could it be? Were the previous owners of the tavern killers, or maybe cannibals? Did they throw the unquiet dead into the basement, then disguise it so no one would ever discover their crimes? He licked his lips in anticipation. A mob of cannibal corpses would make a nice addition to his rat and bug swarms, though... the corpses would be the eaten people, not the cannibals. Still, even so, the corpses would surely be rife with vengeance, and therefore curse energy. In the worst case, he got curse energy, and that was still valuable.

Footsteps, clanging on an unseen ladder. That wasn't very ghostly, but maybe they were corporeal ghosts, or, as others knew them, zombies. He'd met several skeletons, too—in fact, curses seemed to favor skeletal forms. It wouldn't be surprising if he was dealing with a skeleton, here.

A head poked up through the floor. Rhys crouched behind the wall, watching from the darkness. It swiveled, left and right. It looked very human, and his mana senses told him it felt very alive, as well, but... but maybe that was just part of the curse! Yeah. It was an illusion, for sure!

He turned back. "The coast is clear. Move, move!"

“The hell’s the rush for?” a second very human voice complained.

The first voice scoffed. “Some idiot rented this place, so until they move out, we gotta keep it quiet! I’ve already called Jona, and she’ll do the usual cursed routine, but until then...”

“Why don’t we just kill ‘em all in their sleep?”

“Edgar says they’re mages, and one of ‘em’s scary strong. He might just be a mortal old man, but he’s never been wrong before.”

The second man laughed. “What would a mortal know about mages? I say we see for ourselves.”

In the darkness, Rhys reached for his sword. These men were no curse. If they were going to threaten his people, then he’d put them down.

The first man cuffed the second man in the head. “We came here to move product, not start bullshit fights. What does the boss always say? Keep your head down, stay out of the Empire’s eyes, and for the gods’ sake, keep your merchant’s permit. The Empress doesn’t look too close at our ‘potions,’ as long as we don’t act stupid and, I don’t know, kill innocent merchants.”

Rhys frowned. *Wait... no way.* He was starting to put all this together. A hidden tunnel. ‘Potions.’ Not wanting the Empress to look too hard at their business. These guys were criminals of some sort, and it sounded like drug dealers. Moreover, the Empress granted them cores anyways? Wasn’t this the exact situation her core manipulation was supposed to prevent?

Then again, who knew? Maybe she strategically wanted certain families, clans, or worst of all, ethnic groups, to become addicted to drugs. It wasn’t unheard of for a ruler to allow criminals to lurk in the background so they could weaken, create scandals in, or even entirely ruin clans and noble families the ruler disagreed with. On the other hand, assuming the best of the Empress, maybe she was just overloaded. It made sense. She had to exchange all the cores in the nation. Even with delegating her power through staves, she was still a busy woman. She couldn’t take her time to deeply investigate everyone who she granted a core. Plus, who knew? Maybe it was just that a corrupt official aligned with this gang had a core-shifting staff, and the Empress just didn’t bother to look into that corrupt official’s justification for granting these random low-grade schmucks cores. He didn’t know, but what he did know, was that there were a billion ways corruption could take place, even, no, especially in such a tightly controlled empire like the Empress’. No system was perfect, and one that hinged on a single human being so heavily was bound to have tons of exceptions.

A moment later, he had to suppress a snort of disbelief. He’d really been right. The old man really *had* been trying to warn them off this building because of some crazy plot he

had in mind... or rather, was related to. This building was apparently connected to the local gang's tunnels of some sort. They had ways to sneak in and out of the city with their contraband, and this apparently linked to one of those routes. It was exactly the kind of crazy plot that'd show up in that show about four friends and their dog, but it wasn't too far-fetched, either. He remembered reading about crazy tunnels under borders to ferry drugs from country to country. This was just a miniature version of that, in a highly restrictive environment where it made sense to move drugs into the controlled zone of the city.

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He frowned. But if they were doing tunnels anyways, why not just use the sewers? Sure, the sewers stank, but they were such a convenient route into the restricted part of the city! This house didn't even lead into the restricted part of the city, so why bother? True, they could skip the checkpoints at the city's edges, but they had merchant badges, and the guards didn't always check storage rings.

Maybe it's just a safe point within the city, or a halfway house, or maybe they're worried about that 'sometimes' check on the rings. He still didn't get why they wouldn't just use the sewers, but then, not everyone was as educated and high-thinking of a trash maniac as him. The sewers *did* stink, and they were *usually* full of shit, when Rhys hadn't just wandered through and sucked it all up.

I should go back to the sewers. Revisit the library, while I'm at it. Rhys tucked the thought into the back of his mind for later and turned his attention back to the gangsters ahead of him. He wasn't going to let them use his store as a pass-through for their illicit business. The only illicit business happening in this store was his, and his alone. He was a little curious what this 'Jona' was going to do, especially if she was the one who made the store haunted—he could almost *taste* another curse coming his way. But first, he had to deal with these chuckleheads.

The two men continued to whisper-fight for a little longer, standing over the trap door. Rhys listened for a while, extending his mana-senses to make sure there was no one down the trap door, then walked forward, still moving silently. The first man looked up sharply as he closed in, and his eyes widened, but before he could shout, Rhys's hand wrapped around his mouth and slammed him backward, knocking his head against the floor hard enough to knock him out. The other man jumped and reached for his weapon, only for a *thunk* to echo through the room. He, too, hit the floor, revealing a shivering Mouse behind him, holding onto her sword with both hands. She looked at Rhys. "They were bad, right?"

"Yeah, they're drug dealers. Come on, let's take care of them," he said, pushing the two bodies back down the trap door.

"K-kill them?"

Rhys froze. He turned to her, confusion written all over his face. "Why would I waste such glorious trash? Don't you know what these criminals have?"

Mouse looked down, then back up at Rhys. "D...drugs?"

"Well, that, but we aren't drug dealers. Drug dealing is for the lazy and those who want to get rich. We're in it to win it; we won't take down the Empress with a little nose candy."

"A little... huh?"

Rhys waved his hand. "Not important. The point is, you're overlooking the most important, obvious thing these criminals have. Think about it. They have fields, growers, distribution networks, clients, hell, even secret tunnels and unthinking, fearless, stupid lackeys. In short: *logistics*."

Mouse stared at him, lost.

"We aren't going to rot the Empire from within by selling potato chips in one small outpost of a city. We need to reach the whole Empire. In other words, scale up, build our networks, hire, develop new farms, find new workers, the whole nine yards. Sure, we could work hard and get there eventually... or we could hijack a prebuilt network, with large, functional farms and an impressive network for distribution," Rhys explained. "I don't know about you, but I'd rather take the easy route, yeah?"

Most of society considered drugs trash, even if a small portion considered them better than gold. Almost everyone could agree that drug *dealers* were trash. This network... wasn't it built for Rhys? He almost felt bad about taking it over, except they were drug dealers, and deserved none of his sympathy. The scum of the earth, and ripe for Rhys's picking.

Mouse slowly nodded as she caught on. "Er, so... you're going through this tunnel?"

"Duh. Fastest way to their boss," Rhys replied, crouching.

"Should I go see if anyone else wants to join?"

"Nah. I'll be enough on my own."

"Vetoed."

Both Mouse and Rhys looked up, startled, as a cold voice sounded in the hollow room. Sable stalked toward them, the white bones the only part of her visible in the gloom, so that they almost seemed to float through the shadow. She glared at Rhys. "I'm coming."

Rhys shrugged. Why not? He wasn't the only one who needed to level up. It wasn't like he was the kind of alpha chad who thought he and only he could take on the dealers; he'd just thought that he wouldn't need reinforcements for such a minor task. "Sure."

"M-me too!" Mouse insisted.

Rhys nodded. "Good call. You can act as scout." With that, he hopped down into the trap door, shifting his feet at the last second so he didn't land on the dealers. Sable hopped down after him, silent and graceful as a cat, and Mouse followed with a squeak. Rhys dragged the two dealers in one hand, since he wanted to ask them some questions when they woke, and they set off down the tunnel.

The tunnel was a simple thing. A one-way earthen path through the earth, it had an organic edge to it, the sides rounded and soft, as if some natural effect or creature had carved through the ground. It was a far cry from the mines Rhys had been imprisoned in, with their squared corners and timber reinforcements. These tunnels had no reinforcement at all, to the point Rhys began to suspect that the walls had been deliberately left soft so the criminals could bring it down on an intruder's head at any moment. He swept his mana ahead of them, just in case they had planted such a booby trap, but sensed nothing. Rhys put a hand to his chin. Bast had been sent off to deal with an incursion of Impure Beasts. The sewers were full of excrement from high-Tier beasts held by the Empire. Could it be? Did the criminals, too, hold a beast, some kind of burrowing monster, and all the features of this tunnel were nothing but the convenience features associated with letting a burrowing monster create your tunnel network?

Hold on, could that be why it ends at that random house near the gate, instead of inside the gate? Rhys considered for a second, then waved his hand. He could ask the criminals that when they woke up. For now, he simply sped up a little bit, excited to finally see these magical beasts he'd heard so much about. Magical beasts! They were a staple of magic worlds, and yet, he'd seen none so far... barring a certain tuxedo cat, but Az could turn into a man, and he wasn't sure the cat counted as a 'beast' in the first place. He was a cat, after all, a domestic housecat, not a tiger or a lion. 'Beast' just didn't feel right, when applied to something so tiny and adorable.

They marched on through the tunnels in silence. At last, one of the criminals in Rhys's grasp shifted, coming awake. Rhys gestured to the girls and sat the criminal up against the wall, crouching down to be eye level with him when he awoke. He put on a big grin and waited, deeply anticipating this moment. The time had come. It was time... to act like a trashy villain!

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

Chapter 136. No Curses Only Dealers

Jay blinked awake, lost. He looked around him, dazed. He'd been in the safehouse, so why was he back in the tunnels? Had he blacked out again? Another digging accident, maybe? He started to stand up. "That fuckin' overgrown rat—"

A gentle but firm hand pressed him back to the ground. Jay fought against it, but he might as well have fought a steel beam. He jerked back, suddenly far more awake. His vision cleared, revealing that it wasn't Nant before him, but some kid he'd never seen before with a maniacal grin on his face. The kid smelled a bit funny, but more than that, he exuded an indescribably terrifying aura, something toxic and oppressive and chilling like a curse, that left Jay feeling as though a slimy, filthy piece of trash held his shoulder in place, rather than a clean hand.

His eyes jumped over the boy's shoulder, to a girl who looked like death itself, clad in the bones of what were doubtlessly her victims. He swallowed. This was no good. No good at all. These two were scarier than anything Jano had in her arsenal... *no, they might even be scarier than the boss.*

A timid cough came from empty air to the other side of the boy, and he jerked, startling as he realized a second girl was here as well, a tiny, mousy thing that had somehow slipped his notice, despite standing right in front of him. She cringed where she stood, as if she wanted nothing more than to vanish, but he recognized that empty aura around her. That belonged to only the most successful assassins, who learned how to entirely cancel their presence. Of the three people before him, she might be the most terrifying of all.

Jay swallowed yet again. *I'm fucked.*

Rhys let the man stew in silence for a few beats, then finally opened his mouth. "Good morning, sunshine! If you cooperate, we won't have to—"

"B-boss, I'll take you directly to the boss!" the man burst out without hesitating.

Rhys blinked, taken aback. He looked at the man, then over his shoulder at the girls. Were the three of them really so intimidating...? Sable, sure, but him and Mouse?

A moment later, he cleared his throat. No point looking a gift horse in the mouth. Sure, this was probably a trap of some kind, but this man was no higher than Tier 1. He posed no threat to anyone here. His boss was probably the only one who could put up a fight against the three of them, and honestly? Rhys relished the challenge. Still beaming, he thumped the man on the shoulder. "Up and at 'em! We've got a long night ahead of us, and a boss to visit!"

The man jumped to his feet. He looked around, then spotted the other man lying nearby. Without a word, he ran over and slung the man over his shoulders, then gestured for Rhys and his party to follow. "Right this way, sir and ma'ams."

Rhys didn't need the man to lead him down the one-way, straight tunnel, but he didn't stop the man. If he wanted to lead, then Rhys would follow. He kept his hand on a weapon in case the man tried some kind of funny business, ready to attack or defend. Behind him, Mouse scuttled silently, and Sable strutted, her bone armor quietly clattering as it swayed. The man started to jog, and they all took off, easily keeping up with them. If he'd had any thoughts of escaping, they were banished when he peered over his shoulder and saw them following him, not a drop of sweat on their foreheads.

The tunnel came to an end, and they stepped out into the forest. Pale moonlight silvered the leaves and lit the grasses and sleeping flowers in thin white light. The man jogged on, heading confidently into the forest. Now that there were directions they could go, and alternate routes to take, Rhys actively swept his mana senses all around him as he went, searching for anything and everything. A few times, he reached out and absorbed some cache of trash as they passed it, the remains of someone's picnic or the scraps of a carcass from a hunt.

Ahead, the man took a sharp left turn. Rhys's senses alerted, and he jumped forward and grabbed the man by the shoulder. "Not that way, friend. Unless you intend to fall into a pit?"

He could sense it, just up ahead. The pit was full of blades, each of them dripping with powerful poison, enough to badly injure, if not harm, a Tier 2 mage. The pit wasn't trash in any way, but the body in the bottom of it was, and the poison was full of impurities, making it easy for Rhys to sense.

The man paled, and sweat ran even faster down his face. "R-right, I... th-there's another way..."

"Wonderful. I'd hate to lose such a useful guide," Rhys said, and left it at that.

The man nodded aggressively and ran on.

Rhys turned toward the pit as they passed it, lifting his hand, palm-up, toward it. The impurities in the poison and the body in the bottom alike lifted free of their holds and flowed toward him, the body breaking down as it flew into him.

The man glanced back and caught a glimpse of the poison vanishing into Rhys, and swallowed visibly. He glanced ahead of them, then gestured for Rhys to follow him to the right. "There's, ah, there's a nest of poison badgers straight ahead. We're better off going around. Wouldn't want to rile some Impure Beasts."

Rhys lifted his hand. "Repeat that?"

“There’s—there’s a trap ahead! Please, I’m sorry—”

“No, no. The part about impure...?”

“Im...impure Beasts?” the man asked.

“I thought they were a world-shattering problem. There’s some *right here*?” Rhys asked, his eyes starting to glitter.

“There’s, well, they’re just like mages. They can become world-shattering problems, but they start as normal beasts with some curse power and impurities,” the man quickly explained, starting to sweat. “They really are on the straight-ahead path... I’m not trying to double-cross you, I swear, please believe me!”

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“Excellent.” Rhys set off down the straight-ahead path.

The dealer shuddered. “Sir! I’m, I’m really telling the truth! Once those things bite, they never let go, and the venom in their fangs is enough to seriously injure a Tier 3 mage like yourself! You have to—”

A hand touched his shoulder. The man jumped, startled. Mouse adjusted her glasses and cleared her throat. “He’s an impurities maniac. Just... lead us there.”

“Lead you... to the badgers?”

Mouse nodded.

The man looked at Rhys, then at Mouse, then at Sable, who stood there with a bored expression on her face and cleaned her claws. At last, with a hearty final swallow, he nodded and led them back on the first path he’d been using, toward the poison badgers. They didn’t have far to go before the man stopped. “Their den is just ahead. Any further, and you’ll be attacked.”

Rhys didn’t need to be told; he could already sense a powerful source of impurities emanating from up ahead. Mixed with the impurities was some kind of... anger, vicious and endless. He gestured for the others to stay back and progressed alone. His first encounter with Impure Beasts... he couldn’t help but be excited.

Two pinpricks of red light appeared in the darkness. With a low bark-roar, it rushed out of the ground at Rhys, fangs gleaming white as it darted toward his ankles.

Rhys reached out his hand. He could just absorb the impurities, but he wanted to try something else. This badger was absolutely laden with impurities, filthy with them. Since that was the case, could he, maybe... manipulate them?

He clenched his hand, exerting all his will toward the badger. The impurities within its body froze all at once, and it toppled over, likewise frozen as all the taint laced through its muscles, bones, and blood refused to progress toward Rhys. At the same time, a huge quantity of mana rushed out of his core to fuel his usage of Trash Manipulation. Rhys's hand shook, and his face went pale. This badger was no joke. It was only Tier 1, but holding at Tier 1 Impure Beast still with his Trash Manipulation took all he had. He didn't want to think about Tier 2 Impure Beasts, or beasts on his tier or higher. A technique like this simply wouldn't be possible.

With the badger frozen, Rhys approached cautiously. If the impurities were a part of it, then he wanted to respect that, the way he respected Sable's curse energy. But if it was infected with impurities, if impurities had been foisted upon it, then there was nothing to hesitate over.

The badger laid under the moonlight, panting heavily. Its face wrinkled in pain, and its whole body was riddled with tainted streaks of discolored fur, its exposed skin strewn with raised, purple veins. It snarled as he approached, struggling against his hold, and Rhys's mana took another hit. He took a deep breath, then gestured, calling the impurities out of the badger. The animal was clearly unwell and in pain. He could at least relieve its pain.

The badger's breathing evened. Without any impurities in its body, Rhys could no longer restrain it, but neither did he have to. The badger rose to its feet and shook its head, confused. It looked at Rhys and gave him a grumpy glare, then begrudgingly nodded its head and went to wander off.

"Hey, not so fast. Come on, I saved your life. Don't you want to repay me?" Rhys pointed out.

The badger growled, clearly unwilling. Rhys sighed and was about to turn away, when a second pair of pinpricks glittered in the gloom. Almost faster than his eyes could catch, a second badger leaped out of the den—and lunged for the other badger, not Rhys.

Rhys widened his eyes. It was trying to reinfect the badger he'd healed, over attacking Rhys? What a strange reaction. And on top of that, it, too, looked to be in pain... so why?

There was no time for thought or questions. The badger closed in. Rhys tossed out a large plank, summoning its full wall self into reality with Trash Intent. The second badger slammed into his hastily-summoned wall and fell back, stunned. Rhys gestured, calling its impurities into him as well.

He hadn't noticed it with the first badger—or rather, he'd been losing so much mana keeping it restrained that it hadn't been a huge addition—but drawing the impurities out of the badger took a great deal of mana as well. He still gained more from the impurities

than he lost in mana, but it was a close call for once, instead of an easy trade. It was as if the impurities were sticky, or wanted to stay in the badger. They didn't want to leave.

The second badger's eyes lost their red sheen, and it slowed, looking around. It nodded at Rhys in gratitude, then, seeing the other badger wander away without doing anything, cuffed it and pointed at Rhys. The first badger grunted in annoyance, but reluctantly nodded.

"Glad to help," Rhys said. It looked like they didn't want to help, so there was nothing he could do, even though the farm really could use some new hands, especially with the potential for many new farms in the near future. He sighed. *Oh, well. It's not like every creature I help is going to be grateful. I should be happy to have the impurities, not looking for more.*

The second badger turned to Rhys and barked. It started to walk toward its den, then turned around, looking over its shoulder to make sure Rhys was still there.

Rhys nodded. "I'll wait."

The badger turned around and ran into its den. A moment later, it emerged, carrying a baby badger, its eyes shut, its jaws toothless... that writhed and raged in its jaws, its tiny body laced with the same veins the adult badgers had sported moments ago.

Rhys stared. "Your children, too...?" He grimaced. It made sense. Impurities were things that could be bioaccumulators in his world—in other words, poisons that were spread through the womb and to the children. It was horrific to see an infant inflicted by impurities like this, but then, it did make sense. At the same time, he couldn't help but wonder: did this mean there were Impure Beasts who had never known what it was to be clean? These badgers had understood that they were cleaned, but if there were Impure beasts who were born into it the way Sable had been, then in that case, the impurities would be an essential part of them. He couldn't consider all Impure Beasts the same.

He tucked the thought to the back of his mind and bent, absorbing the impurities from the first infant. The infant stopped writhing and relaxed, instantly falling into a quiet, sound sleep. The mother badger picked it up by the scruff again and carried it back into her den, dragging out a second pup, then a third, then a fourth. By the second, her guard toward Rhys was lowered, and by the fourth, she barely bothered to pick up the third and retreat with it first.

When the last infant was cured, she rounded on the male badger, who was still wandering away. She chased after him and cuffed him with her claws, then bit the back of his neck, scruffed him, and dragged him back to Rhys. Dropping the male badger at his feet, she looked Rhys in the eye and rumbled, smacking the male badger, then nodding at Rhys.

Rhys laughed. “You’re sending him with me? How about it? Are you willing to come?”

The male badger grumbled, but lumbered over to Rhys’s side and stood beside him. The female badger barked, looking at the den, then Rhys.

“You’ll come once the kids are older? I understand. Can you trace my scent?”

She bounced in place, indicating a yes.

“Good. I have some farms that need some powerful overseers,” Rhys said. He looked over his shoulder at the others. “Come on, they’re safe now.”

Mouse nodded, and followed after him. Sable scoffed and walked on. The dealer stared in shock, then shook his head and ran to the front of the line. “Yes, yes, this way, sir! Is there anything else you want to see on the way?”

Rhys snorted. Was he really that intimidating? He waved his hand. “That’s enough. Let’s head straight to your boss.”

“Of course! Right away, sir!” The man rushed on, glancing back to make sure the others were following.

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

Chapter 137. Boss Fight

As promised, the man led them straight through the woods. They didn’t even grow close enough for Rhys to sense any other booby traps, which was unfortunate; they’d been an empowering experience. The badger walked along at his heel, his earlier hesitation forgotten. Now that they were travelling together, it seemed that he had accepted his fate. Was travelling together his holdup? Rhys laughed quietly, but he got it. Social engagements were hard work. Back in his homeworld, he much preferred to spend all his time in his room. He probably still would here, if not for the fact that he couldn’t get stronger or use magic if all he hid away all the time. That wasn’t the path for him, not in this world, anyways.

Ahead, Rhys sensed life: heat, mana signatures, and lots of trash, thrown thoughtlessly aside and lying all around on the ground. His hand twitched, wanting to absorb it all, but he held himself back. There was no need to alarm the boss. They could have a civilized and convivial meeting, and *then* Rhys could absorb all the camp’s trash, after they came

to an agreement about the dealers ceasing their production of worthless drugs and instead turning to the truly profitable market: potato farming.

He turned to the criminal. "You've done enough. You can stay back, now... though if a fight breaks out, and you join it, I won't—"

"Sir is too gracious! I will never forget my debt to sir!" the criminal exclaimed, backing away. He looked like he wanted to flee, but a glare from Sable, and he instead set down his friend and sat beside him. "I'll just sit here next to this tree, why don't I? Wait for your luminous self to be done?"

Rhys snorted. Not knowing what to say, he simply nodded and walked away. He didn't really care if the criminal stayed or left, but on the other hand, the farm needed good, hardy workers, and this dealer was nothing if not hardy, given how quickly he'd woken up and how fast he moved with his unconscious friend on his shoulders. He wasn't going to turn the guy away, but if the dealer decided to hoof it, he wouldn't be too surprised.

He strode forward, putting his hands behind his back and a serene smile on his face. Sable and Mouse followed, Sable at his shoulder, Mouse hanging back and cringing a bit, eyes darting back and forth. The criminals' base was simple, a series of ramshackle wooden buildings that blended into the woods, mixed with a few semi-permanent canvas tents and a large stable currently occupied by a few horses and a hearty-looking wagon. A few toughs stood up from the campfire and approached Rhys, touching their weapons or cracking their knuckles in anticipation.

"Got lost, kid?" one of them asked.

"Not at all. I heard of an opportunity to acquire a logistics network and put it to much better use. Is your boss around? I'd like to discuss my acquisition of your criminal society in a civil manner," Rhys said evenly.

Mouse cringed harder. Behind him, Sable let out an amused chuckle. She'd sensed the same thing Rhys had: none of these men were above Tier 1, and the boss's mana signature wavered somewhere between Tier 2 and 3. They were no threat to her or Rhys alone, let alone the two of them together with Mouse. Mouse wasn't much of a fighter, but it didn't matter when her stealth skills were as good as they were; she didn't need to fight, when all she had to do was sneak up and one-hit ko the enemy. He felt a vague pang of guilt at the memory of Bast doing exactly that repeatedly to poor Mouse, but put it to the back of his mind. That was just proof of how good the technique was!

The thugs met one another's eyes. The biggest of them chuckled, taking the lead, his smile showing off his missing teeth. "I don't think ya understand what's gonna go on 'ere."

“Do I not? Illuminate me,” Rhys said, unable to resist the urge to exchange some trashy pre-fight dialogue.

“Nah. I’m gonna crack yer head, then that pretty girl’s head, and if there’s anyone else here, I’m gonna crack their head open, too,” he declared.

“You’re certainly welcome to try. And when you fail, you’re welcome to bring us to your boss.” Rhys drew his broken sword. “If there’s anyone left, that is.”

At the sight of his broken sword, the thugs exchanged a look and chuckled. The lead one shook his head and advanced. “This is gonna be fun.”

“For one of us, certainly,” Rhys agreed. He looked at Sable. “Don’t kill them.”

She nodded.

Dirt burst up behind him as he charged the thugs. White flashed alongside him as Sable lunged in as well. The thugs rushed to meet them, but none of them could match up to his or Sable’s speed. There was a blur of violence, Rhys’s glowing Trash Intent matched by Sable’s shining white bones, and all the thugs were laid out on the floor, bruised, bloodied, and groaning. Rhys had avoided killing any of them; the farm needed workers, after all, and these men looked big and strong, perfect for potato farming. They were probably already farming, so he might as well point them at the right kind of farming, right?

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He pointed his sword at the man who’d challenged them in the first place. “I’ll say it again. Where’s your boss?”

The man spat blood defiantly at Rhys. “Kill me. I’m dead anyways, since you beat me.”

Rhys snorted. “Nah. You’re my all-important farm labor. You’re staying alive whether you like it or not.”

Confusion and shock spread over the man’s face. He looked Rhys over, then slowly laid back down, exhausted. “I won’t tell you. Find him yourself.”

Rhys shrugged and turned to the rest of the crowd. “Anyone else wanna help? I won’t leave until I get my answer.”

One of the other guards glanced left and right, then raised his hand. “He’s right over there, in the big building!”

“Fuckin’ Gian. Gods-damned coward,” the defiant man grumbled.

Rhys saluted the man. "Appreciated. All of you, stay healthy. I'll need my hearty farm workers when I'm done negotiating with my new subordinate."

The defiant man looked over. He squinted. "Jay? Not you, too."

Jay laughed. "I want no part of this battle. I'll pledge allegiance to whoever wins that battle."

The door to the largest building flew open as Rhys approached. A stringy man with a bulging potbelly swaggered out, hands on the swords bristling from his wide belt. He squinted around at the men on the ground, bruised and battered, then glared at Rhys and Sable. "You the ones beatin' up my men?"

Rhys smiled. "One and the same."

"Tryin' to take over my operation?"

"I sure am, but probably not the way you're imagining."

The man drew one of his swords. Jewels encrusted its handle, and a gold dragon curled over its hilt, spread wings acting as a handguard. He brandished the sword at Rhys. "You'll find me a harder target than you imagined. I am... *the* Logan Waters."

With a flourish, he unleashed his aura. A Tier 2 aura struck Rhys and Sable, unusually hot and powerful for Tier 2.

Rhys looked at Sable. "Who's Logan Waters?"

"Don't ask me," she replied.

Logan looked from one to the other, shocked. "You've never heard of me? The escapades of the notorious bandit, Logan Waters? The man who stole the Crimson Flare Orb?"

Rhys shook his head. "Sorry, nothing doing. Never heard of you."

Logan harrumphed. He brandished his sword again. This time, as he spun it, fire sprung up on its blade. "Let me show you the power of the man who's mastered the Crimson Flare Orb."

"It doesn't look very mastered," Rhys said, eyeing the man's potbelly. He could sense it, now that the man had drawn attention to it: his potbelly sang with an enormous orb of fire mana, far outcrying his somewhat pitiful core. In fact, Logan was actually only Tier 1, it was just that he could bring out the power of the Crimson Flare Orb to the Tier 2 level, and that was what gave him the illusion of possessing a Tier 2 magehood.

He looked at Sable. "Can you handle this?"

She laughed, stepping forward. An ominous aura burst out around her.

Rhys touched her shoulder, asking her to wait a moment. "His potbelly is actually—"

"I know," she said dismissively.

Rhys raised his brows, then sighed. If he could sense it, then of course Sable could sense it, too. He was the one who'd forgotten his trash-tier talent in everything that wasn't trash. Sensing other mages was a valuable skill, so naturally, his ability was lower than average. He released Sable, letting her continue walking forward.

Logan chuckled, shaking his head at the approaching Sable. "Should've listened to him. I'm out of your league, girlie."

Sable flexed her six bony limbs. All the other bones on her body shuddered and shifted bizarrely, moving of their own volition. Her claws flexed, and her eyes narrowed. "That's my line."

In the background, Rhys punched the air. *Hell yeah! One of the best lines in trashy books! Can't think of a comeback? Just hit 'em with the anime equivalent of "I am rubber and you are glue."* It was the ultimate kindergarten argument, upgraded for the coolest of cool guys and the most awesome of dark antiheroes, and he was here for it.

Logan snorted and pointed his sword at Rhys. "You won't be so jubilant in a moment when I roast this pretty thing on the bone. Now come here, darling. Let's get this over with."

Sable needed no more invitation. Her eyes flashed, blazing with a hint of the red light Rhys had seen in the badgers' eyes. Logan slashed at her, and his sword burned through her head and into the chest... of her afterimage. He whirled in time to see three bony limbs surging his head, and slashed the air in response. A raging hot fireball spun from the tip of his sword and closed in on Sable's face. The bones of her headdress trembled, then grew to several times their normal size, closing around her features. The fireball slammed into the bone helmet harmlessly, leaving behind naught but a scorch mark on the bones.

Logan, who'd expected to see Sable retreat, stared in shock as she continued to press the offense instead. Bony limbs whirled at him from the left and right, while she clawed at him with her hands and feet. His sword moved at speed, barely parrying the barrage of blows, but he couldn't block all of them. One after another, attacks got through, sneaking past his defenses and wearing him down with cuts and slashes.

Logan shouted, and opened his mouth wide. Power built up in his jaws. Rhys expected Sable to jump away, but she stood still instead, continuing to hammer at Logan as

though she hadn't noticed. He frowned, then caught sight of her tail, stuck into the ground behind her. She'd anchored herself? But why?

The power built. Scorching heat radiated off Logan, to the point Rhys could feel it where he stood. He called forth a few pieces of trash and put them between him and the battle, prepared for a cataclysmic blow. Surely Sable was confident in her plan, but... why wasn't she escaping? Surely she didn't think she could take this blow? Hell, Rhys was pretty sure it would badly injure him at Tier 3 if he took it head on. *I thought Sable was a quick and agile kind of fighter. Why's she just standing here to take this?*

The power in Logan's mouth built to a fever pitch. He reared back, preparing to launch his fire breath. Rhys held his breath, leaning forward. If he had to jump in, he would, but—surely Sable knew what she was doing...? Surely?

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

Chapter 138. Calamity

Just as Logan leaned forward to spit fire, the earth erupted behind him. A flash of bony white shot out of the soil and pierced through the back of his head, bursting out his eye socket. He pitched where he stood and bucked back, his mouthful of flame shooting harmlessly into the sky as Sable manipulated her tail to point his head upward. She hadn't anchored herself by sending her tail into the earth; she'd used it to sneak around behind Logan and attack him from behind. Rhys nodded, finally understanding. He breathed out, quietly relieved. He'd trusted Sable, but still, that had been frightening to watch.

Logan bucked as he bled out, kicking against the bony appendage that speared through him. His remaining eye dimmed, and he finally slumped to the floor. Sable retracted her tail with a derisive yank, splashing blood and dirt as she freed it from Logan's body and the earth alike. Not wasting any time, she knelt and used the blade side of her tail's end to slash open the man's potbelly. The Crimson Flare Orb rolled out, and she picked it up and carried it over to Rhys.

Rhys nodded at her, palming the orb, then holding it up for all to see. It was beautiful, in a gristly kind of way; past the blood that streaked its surface, its interior was a raging ball of endless fire, as if the glass orb encapsulated the heart of a bonfire, or a very tiny star. He smiled at the thugs. "Negotiations with your boss have failed, so we're progressing to the hostile takeover part of our plan. Would anyone else like to resist? I

promise you, working under me will be no more troublesome, or illegal, than working under Logan poorly-surnamed-Waters. Should've called himself Logan Fires, honestly."

The thugs glanced among one another. At last, the defiant one clambered back to his feet, groaning and aching the whole way. He nodded at Rhys. "The Waters family lead the most powerful crime syndicate in this area. We'd be fools to take your hand."

"Oh, do they? Awesome. Point them at me, and I'll take care of the problems. It's a boss's job to take on risk for his employees," Rhys declared, thumping his chest. He didn't really mind a fight, and Logan hadn't exactly impressed him. Sable had basically played with him, and still easily slain him. He was sure the upper echelons got more powerful, but, well, there was a big power gap between Logan and himself, and he was pretty sure he could handle anything the Waters family threw at him.

Besides.... His eyes glittered, and he smiled. He wanted logistics, farms, the whole nine yards. If he merely took down one small gang, that was whatever. But to find out that the small gang was led by a larger crime syndicate? It was everything he'd hoped for and more. He needed to get stronger, so why not smash a crime syndicate and take it over while honing his own strength in battle? He could always fall back on trashy impurity-based techniques if he couldn't win, and, at the very least, throw his attackers off for long enough to escape. If he took Lira, Sable, and Mouse with him, he could strengthen his most powerful allies at the same time. It was a win-win situation, and even in the case he lost, he could escape and recover. Truly ideal. Rather than a threat against him... he was a threat against this crime syndicate.

Rhys grinned. This was his kind of hostile takeover.

The thugs glanced among one another. The leader stepped forward. "We can't defy you, but if we remain here, the syndicate will burn us to the ground. If you must take us alive, then you have to relocate us."

Reasonable enough. Mages in this world did seem rather zero-sum, scorched earth kinds of people. Rhys thought for a moment. He didn't want to take these people to his original farm for several reasons; the chance of betrayal, the risk the syndicate would find his farm, even the chance they'd simply alert the Empire, if they figured out he was more than just a hostile criminal group, and actually part of an insurrection. No, that was no good. But there was plenty of undeveloped land nearby, so he nodded firmly and gestured. "Bring everything you need for farming and distribution, and come with me."

Long term, he'd simply overtake the entire syndicate, and acquire their fields and buildings as well as their workers, but for now, he needed to make sure they didn't try to send him a message by massacring his hard-won workers. With that in mind, he turned to Sable. "Can you tear this place up a bit, spread some of his—" he gestured at Logan "—blood around the place, so it looks like I killed everyone at a glance?"

She nodded, unbothered, and turned to her gristly task.

Rhys gestured to the workers and Mouse, and he led them across the land, away from the city and their camp and tunnel alike. Out in the boonies, not far from the Impure Well where he'd found Sable, he left the criminals, setting them to the task of clearing the land and preparing it for cultivation. With them set to task, he headed back to the tunnel. Sable was waiting for him there. He looked up at the tunnel, thinking. This was a valuable entrance and exit from the city, but if the crime syndicate knew about it, wasn't it simply asking for them to come through it and attack them?

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He pinched his chin. On the other hand, if he collapsed the tunnel, that was the same as admitting that the people on the other end of the tunnel were responsible for the destruction of the camp, but closing off their chance for retribution. It would force the criminals to find another way to attack them, whereas, if he left it open, he knew where the criminals would attack from. He could basically expect that the criminals would figure out that they were the ones who'd attacked the camp; he'd left too many hints, including the two criminals who knew exactly who'd attacked them, and where. But leaving it wide open... He nodded. Better to invite them into a place where he could battle them without the Empire taking too much notice, rather than to let them choose the avenue of attack, and risk the Empire poking around at his snack shop.

Leaving the tunnel open didn't guarantee they'd attack him from it, but the criminals also had to hide from the Empire, so they both benefitted from a discrete battle rather than open war.

He looked at Mouse and Sable. "We can expect an attack through this tunnel in the near future. Would one of, or both of, you like to guard it?"

Sable laughed darkly. "I'm better suited to battle than cooking. Leave me in the darkness. If I need help, I'll send a pulse of mana."

"Send one whether you need help or not. I want to know if they attack, and who, and where from. I'd rather attack than be attacked. Once we know enough, we can launch a counterattack, but if you just quietly kill them all, we'll never be able to return fire."

"I understand," Sable said, nodding.

"We want to absorb them into us, as... farming sub-contractors, basically, and distributors. Once we have franchisees, we'll need to have a supply chain in order, and better if we have the supply chain before we have franchises," Rhys explained.

"Franchises?" Mouse asked.

"True evil, and a way to make even more money than the snack shack," Rhys said. They'd see when they reached that point. Until then, it was too much to explain.

Mouse nodded, a little hesitant, but said nothing else.

"You two head back. I have one last errand to run," Rhys said, nodding at the badger.

The badger looked up at him and huffed, as if to ask, 'how much further do we have to go?'

Mouse and Sable vanished into the tunnel. Rhys held his hands out to the badger, offering to pick it up. The mammal gave him an exhausted look, deeply considering, then sighed and shifted, letting him pick it up. Rhys scooped it into his arms and took off, speeding into the forest.

He headed off, not toward the criminals, not toward his trash heap hideout, but toward Purple Dawn. He set the badger down right in front of the raccoon, who looked at the badger, then up at Rhys, and spread its hands. He could almost hear its voice: *What am I supposed to do with this?*

"Raccoon, meet badger, badger, raccoon. I'm going to need you to take on more workers, because we're about to expand in a big way. Multiple farms kind of big. This guy's pretty tough, and you're going to need new overseers soon, the kind who can keep the littler guys in line when you aren't around. Think he's a good candidate?" Rhys asked.

The badger gave him a long-suffering look, then huffed, turning to the raccoon. The raccoon looked it over, top to bottom, then nodded appraisingly. It gestured for the badger to follow him. The badger lumbered away, grunting under its breath.

Rhys watched them go, nodding in satisfaction. To be honest, he preferred to use animal workers, it was just that he didn't know the extent to which the raccoon could expand its underlings in a short time. If it could, then he didn't have to hold back as much on killing the thugs, and consequently, didn't have to worry about betrayal from unwilling human workers strongarmed from drug work into potato work. But he couldn't rely on an untested capability, so he was building both in parallel; the raccoon could work on expanding its workers, while Rhys gathered humans, and he would see which one became mature first, then lean into that route. Personally, he hoped it was the animals, but the humans were cheap, easy labor.

Since he was in the area, he absorbed the impurities from the rats and other animals before he left, and took a fresh load of potatoes back to the shack, utilizing the tunnel to return. As long as they were going to leave it open, he might as well use the tunnel himself. As he walked, he heard the faint clattering of bones overhead, and looked up to find the pale outline of a bony figure on the ceiling.

"Hey, Sable," he said.

"More potatoes?" she asked.

Rhys shrugged. “Gotta feed the fry addicts, what can I say? All for the downfall of the Empire.”

Sable chuckled, and clattered off.

Back in the snack shack, he tossed the potatoes down and returned to his soda experiment. He tossed the potion into the water, mixing it up, then tried it again. It wasn't too bad; honestly, it tasted about as bitter as unsweetened soda water did. Of course, he'd be making it carbonated yet, which would add a bit of bitterness as the carbonic acid formed between the water and the carbon dioxide, but he should be able to mask the displeasing edge to the bitterness with some citrus juice and the most important ingredient: heaps of sugar.

I need to look into growing some sugar beets. Even on his homeworld, the primary source of sugar wasn't sugar cane, as some people supposed, but beets. Sugar beets, burned with bones to purify out their sugar. Refining sugar was a little more involved than frying potatoes, but he'd done some outright alchemy, so it was nothing outside of his ability to accomplish. He'd have to purchase sugar otherwise, and given that it was a somewhat involved process to refine it, it'd be a costlier ingredient to procure than potatoes. If he wasn't already a potato farmer, he would have prioritized sugar beets, since potatoes were relatively cheap to procure, but as it was, he could always turn around and pick up sugar beets now that he'd established his snack shack, to fuel the most expensive portion of his soda production.

The night passed by. Rhys tinkered with his soda and dreamed of sugar beets, waiting for the first light of dawn to launch once more into snack shack madness, all while the criminal underbelly slowly discovered what he'd done.

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

Chapter 139. Water Syndicate vs the Snack Shack

Business continued to flow freely. Potatoes flowed out, fried into delicious golden chips and fries, and gold flowed in. A few days passed. Rhys checked on the raccoon's farm and watched as the raccoon grew the next generation of farmers, and swung out a few times to make sure the ex-criminals got to work putting their powers to good use, producing potatoes, tomatoes, and continuing to set up Rhys's second farm. Rhys poked around in town, looking for someone selling sugar beets or sugar beet seeds, but there wasn't much of an agriculture market in this city, as developed as it was, not to mention that most mages weren't overly interested in agriculture, since they didn't have

to eat. He wanted to head out into the surrounding rural areas, talk to some mortals, and source himself some seeds, but with the criminals hanging over his head, he couldn't leave the shack unattended. He was the sole Tier 3 in their arsenal, and as competent as Sable and Lira were, they weren't Tier 3; if a Tier 3 or worse, 4, showed up, he'd be the only one who could stand a chance against them.

Sable hung out in the tunnel. Rhys always paused to exchange a few words when he passed, to make sure she didn't get bored, but honestly? She seemed happy with her seclusion in the dark. He didn't know what kind of monster her father was, but given Sable's limbs and tail, he seemed likely to be some kind of bug-based monster, maybe a scorpion. Scorpions liked the dark and hiding under stones, so maybe Sable shared that proclivity. He didn't know, but she seemed happy, so he wasn't going to force her out of her happy place. Not when it also helped him out.

The Crimson Flare Orb wasn't much use to him offensively, given his low affinity with fire and fire-based techniques. He offered it to the other mages, but none of them were interested. Mouse took a good look at it and finally explained that it was an orb meant to be slotted into a larger armament—basically, a mana battery for fire-elemental mana. It had high power output, as he'd seen, but took a great deal of time to get going, as he'd also seen, which meant that even though it allowed a Tier 1 mage to access Tier 2 fire spells, realistically, it couldn't be used in combat by a single mage, since it took too long to heat up and fire... as he'd seen in Logan and Sable's battle. As a mana battery powering some kind of city-defense level armament, it was perfectly acceptable; after all, it was the kind of weapon that could be fired at an enemy army from a hundred miles out by some grunt with little training. Still, what made it useful for long-ranged city-level conflict made it not too much use to a mage engaging in one-on-one combat, since a real Tier 2 mage could easily dispatch a Tier 1 mage faking Tier 2 with such a clumsy orb.

Looking back on it, he recalled Logan bragging about his prowess and his orb. Had it all been a bluff, meant to dissuade him and Sable from attacking? He pursed his lips. A weaker or more cowardly Tier 2 mage might've been scared off, but he was Tier 3, and Sable was a high-class, aggressive Tier 2 mage who didn't hesitate to charge into any battle. It had been a poor misread of his opponents, when what he should have done was stall for time to charge up the orb... though thinking back, he'd bought himself some time chatting with Sable, hadn't he? Ultimately, Rhys had to concede that Logan had played his orb perfectly. Logan's real mistake was that he was using trashy tactics against opponents who were even trashier, who weren't playing mind games or three-dimensional chess, but instead the simplest, trashiest game of all—raw might.

At the end of the day, they'd won, Logan had lost, and now he had an orb of fire no one wanted, that he had to figure out how to utilize. With no better use for the orb, he chucked it under one of his oil pots... where it became a convenient, easily configurable, and highly regular source of heat, so he immediately put one of the more enchanting and engineering-inclined mages to work manufacturing a series of heat coils to distribute the heat from the orb evenly across all the vats that required heat. It was

nice to not have to run around searching for fuel or powering the fire with his own mana, too, so that was an added bonus.

He was standing in the kitchen, chopping potatoes for chips, when an urgent pulse of mana rushed to him from Sable's location. Rhys dropped his knife and ran, and Lira, who'd been appraised of the situation, chased after him. They were still using a stand out front instead of inviting guests in to the store, due to the furniture's run-down nature and the potential of criminal incursions, so there was no one to worry about when he ripped open the trap door and dropped into the tunnel. Lira followed after him, splashing down in a self-made puddle. They ran along the tunnel, toward Sable's mana pulse. The sounds of fierce battle echoed along the tunnel the second they stepped inside, growing louder with every passing second.

Around a turn, and the fight came into view. Sable clashed with a group of battle-scarred men. The majority of them were Tier 1 or so, but hanging in the back, one of the men emanated a powerful Tier 2 aura, at the upper limits of the Tier, if not on the verge of breaking into Tier 3. There was a bored expression on his face, but as Rhys and Lira appeared, his expression brightened. Over Sable and the underlings' battle, he pointed at the two of them... no, at Rhys. "Finally, a warrior worthy of my intervention. Lloyd Waters, at your service!"

"I think Sable's worthy enough of your intervention," Rhys countered.

"Someone so easily bogged down by my underlings isn't worthy of my blade. I take it you're the one who killed my younger brother?"

Rhys blinked. Logan Waters had been in his forties, easily, with the receding hairline and pot belly to match. Lloyd, on the other hand, looked in his mid, maybe early thirties, not quite youthful but with the strength and vigor of a man in his prime. Between the two of them, he would've called Lloyd the younger and Logan the elder... but that was using mortal logic, not mage logic. Lloyd appearing younger just meant the man was more skilled, and able to freeze his age younger.

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He waved his hand, pushing his extraneous thoughts aside. "No, that was Sable, actually, but if it's a fight you want, I'm happy to provide. It's been too long since I last fought."

"Then she's the leader?" Lloyd asked, giving Sable a doubting look.

"No reason why she couldn't be, but if you were being strict about it, I'm the leader. By the way, how many brothers do you have?" Rhys asked.

"Three, now that you've killed Logan."

Rhys nodded, spinning his broken blade casually. “So I only have to kill four more of you before I can face the big bosses? Good to know.”

Lloyd’s face turned dark. He drew his sword and held it out in one end, pointing its tip toward Rhys as if he could stab Rhys from where he stood. Even though the men were between them, Sable and the underlings’ fight taking up all the space in the tunnel, sharp killing intent reached Rhys. “You’ll die for underestimating me.”

“Underestimate, nothing. It’s simple math. Or do you not understand math? I thought drug dealers were at least capable of algebra.”

“You think we’re mere drug dealers?” Lloyd asked.

Rhys spread his hands. “Yeah? What else do you do, murder for hire? Human trafficking? I’m not going to be impressed, but it’ll help me justify slaughtering you.”

They were bad-guy words, but he was in his villain era, so it felt right. As he spoke, Rhys breathed out a plume of invisible toxic air from the trash fire burning inside him. Using Trash Manipulation, he kept the toxic gas compressed into a tight ball, then sent it flying toward Lloyd. Trash Manipulation struggled to handle a mass of gas. It took an immense amount of concentration on Rhys’s part, but he kept it wrapped up tight and slowly floated it toward Lloyd, over the ongoing battle and past Sable and the underlings.

Lloyd laughed. “We’re the premier criminal syndicate in the Empire. There’s nothing that we can’t accomplish.”

“If this is all the better the Empire’s criminals get, then... damn, I guess the Emperess’s anti-crime techniques really are effective,” Rhys said, shaking his head. The trash gas bobbed along. All it wanted to do was flee upward and disperse. It took every ounce of Rhys’s will to keep it compressed. In a battle, he’d completely be unable to concentrate long enough to use this technique, but in an exchange of trash talk, he had plenty of mental power to spare.

Lloyd narrowed his eyes. His grip on his sword tightened. “You won’t be saying that when you meet my older siblings.”

“But I can sure say it when I meet you!” The invisible ball of gas finally floated over to Lloyd, and Rhys released it—or at least loosened his hold. It burst from a tiny compressed ball of dense poison into a big amorphous cloud of poison that fell over Lloyd. To be honest, Rhys had no idea how powerful this gas was, or how useful this attack was going to be; he’d just wanted to use Lloyd’s little brother Logan’s delay tactics against Lloyd. It was a good idea, so why not give it a shot? It hadn’t worked for Logan, but then, unlike Logan, he had plenty of backup plans and tactics. This was but his opening move, the first pawn shifted in chess.

Lloyd stared at Rhys for a second, confused why his final declaration had been so enthusiastic, until the clear gas swirled around him, sucking into his lungs and decaying his flesh where it touched his skin. He dropped his sword and staggered back, beating at his skin, but the more he touched the gas and thrashed in it, the more the gas coated his body. Lloyd screamed, tearing apart piece by piece. With his last breath, he charged Rhys, but before he made it to his underlings, his body came apart and fell to the floor in a rapidly-decaying pile of mush.

Rhys blinked. He looked at the pile of goo, then at his hands, then touched his mouth. *Is my breath that bad...?* How was the gas staying in his core without destroying him? Especially with how his core was functionally ruined mess.

His mind went back to his early days, repeatedly reforging his body in Infinite Constellation School. Back then, he'd forced his body to take all kinds of abuse and grow stronger, more capable of handling acid, trash, impurities, and everything else. He raised his brows. *I guess all my hard work is paying off.* He'd worked hard to hammer his body into better shape from the trash form he'd started off with, and now, it was able to handle all kinds of hideous filth. Including, apparently, the kind of intensely toxic fumes that could melt a Tier 2 mage outright.

Rhys clapped and turned to the underlings. They still fought with Sable, but with less vigor now that their boss had been killed in short order. "If you don't want to be melted like your boss Lloyd, stop fighting. I'll spare your life if you join my team, and work on my farm instead."

One of the men glanced back, distracted. Sable lashed out, disarming him. He threw his hands up and surrendered. Once one of them surrendered, the rest quickly followed. Rhys dusted off his hands, pleased with a job well done... though a little uncomfortable with the puddle of filth he'd turned Lloyd into. He'd really expected that to be the first move in a salvo, not the final word in their exchange.

He reached out toward it, absorbing the Lloyd soup and the remnants of the toxic gas into himself alike, then clapped and turned to the newly-acquired farm workers. "Lira, would you lead them to their workplace? There's some previous thugs... er, farm workers there, and they can join them." He turned to the newly acquired farmers. "You can ask them anything. They'll show you the ropes. And don't worry, we pay well."

Lira snorted, dissatisfied. "Didn't even get to fight, and now I've got to run errands..."

"I can walk them there if you'd rather," Rhys offered.

She waved her hand. "Might as well do something useful."

"Sorry about that. I really had no idea that was going to kill him," Rhys said apologetically. He'd really expected it to simply weaken him, as a test, and then he'd hand the fight off to Lira to finish, but things had gone a little sideways along the way.

“Remind me never to let you test new techniques on me,” Lira commented. She turned to the thugs. “Come on. Best get moving before he decides to use you as test subjects instead.”

The criminals jumped up. A few shot Rhys looks of horror, while others simply ran to Lira’s side, not even daring to look back.

“I’m not going to—” Rhys sighed. Nothing he could do about that. He had melted their leader, and it had been an accident, but he didn’t usually go around accidentally melting people. Still... given that that was all these people had seen of him, he couldn’t exactly blame them for their fear, even if it was misplaced.

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

Chapter 140. An Unexpected Visit

Rhys stared into the vat, thinking. The sun was finally setting after a long day of chips and fries, and he was back at his usual efforts at refining his drink offerings. He had his soda more-or-less ready to go; all he needed was a steady source of sugar to sweeten it. He couldn’t exactly put his soda into full production when he relied on random merchants bringing enough sugar into the city for him to continue making it. He didn’t want the rush of a short-lived fad—trashy though they might be—but the long, slow, insidious infiltration of soda into the lives of every mage in the Empire. If he was going to turn this incredibly-mild-healing-potion-slash-soft-drink into a profitable sales leader, then he needed a steady and low-cost source of sugar. After all, that was ultimately the secret of soft drinks: a steady and low-cost source of sugar, utilized to make the ultimate of delicious, cheap, and unhealthy drinks.

Bzzz. A strange buzzing echoed from the yard behind the tavern. Rhys left the vat, and his thoughts, behind, and wandered out to check on the source of the sound. The backyard was a tangled mess, all weeds and trash, which he’d left there with great sadness in his heart because if he hadn’t, his yard would have stood out from all the other shops’ back lots. It wasn’t a large area, just a small ten foot by five foot space meant to be... who knew? An herb garden? A holding space for trash? In any case, the source of the buzzing noise was immediately apparent. The female mage who’d helped him clean the building stood in the small yard, focused intently on a small flock of honeybees. Her eyes were glazed yet intense in the way that told Rhys she was doing something important and magical, so he stood nearby and waited for her to finish.

At last, she breathed out and blinked, then looked up, meeting his eyes. “Good evening, Rhys.”

“Good evening...” Rhys abruptly realized he’d never caught her name, and cleared his throat in embarrassment.

She laughed good-naturedly. “Kuyie, my name is Kuyie.”

“Kuyie. I, uh. Couldn’t help but notice that you’re handling honey bees this afternoon.”

“Indeed I am.”

Rhys stood there for a second, a little awkward and uncertain of how to broach the topic, then decided to just go for it. “Could we use the bees to secure our source of sugar?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” she said, beaming. She turned to the bees. “Ordinary bees couldn’t keep up with our demand, not without a full-scale honey farm, but I’ve been working with these bees for a while now, imbuing them with mana. They can produce far more honey than the average hive, in shorter timeframes as well. The only problem is that they need nectar to create honey. Flowers. And we’re in a city.”

Rhys grinned. “That’s no problem at all. We’ve got farms. Plenty of plants out there. Surely some of them need to be pollinated.”

“You would allow me...?” Kuyie asked.

“Sure, why not?”

She shrugged. “Some farmers fear what our enhanced bugs can accomplish, or worry that we might test our dangerous bugs on their crops. And to be fair, some less responsible bug mages have, in the past, caused the decimation of crops, then vanished. I suppose you have magic, so it’s not as though you’d be powerless, but...”

“Oh. Yeah. Well, if you decimate my crops, I’ll decimate you,” Rhys joked.

Kuyie bowed deeply, a serious expression on her face. “I will take great care. I appreciate that you’ve put your trust in me, and will do everything in my power to keep that trust.”

“No, it was a...” Rhys pursed his lips. Right. In this world, he had the power to kill people, and not only that, but he was stronger than her, and no one seemed overly concerned about law and order. A threat to kill or harm someone wasn’t funny in this world, unless their power levels were equal, or Rhys was the weaker one. He rubbed the back of his head. “Sorry. That was a joke.”

“Oh.” Kuyie looked at him, then smiled. “Good.”

“As long as you’re making delicious honey, we’re all good.” Rhys smiled awkwardly and backed away. He waved one last time, then ran for it, too embarrassed to face her again.

Still, that was one problem solved. Plenty of problems still to go. Like the rest of the Water Syndicate. He didn’t foresee the next sibling being much more powerful than Lloyd or Logan, but if they kept scaling up like this, eventually, they’d get real strong. And if they had two parents still surviving, or parents and grandparents, or hell, great- or great-great grandparents, or even great-great-great-ad-infinity, given mage lifespans...

Rhys waved his hand. No way did the Water crime syndicate expand more than two... maybe three generations. At some point, the elder mages had to stop caring about petty crime. Maybe they still cared about crime, sure, he wouldn’t take that away from elder mages, but drug dealing? At the very least, they should’ve ascended to higher realms of drugs that were powerful enough to effect stronger mages, drugs powerful enough to outright kill mages on the level of the Empire’s ordinary mage citizenry. No, no. He might have to prepare for grandparents, he almost certainly had to prepare for parents, but something beyond that would be ridiculous.

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Of course, that presupposed that the elder mages, the grandparents and so on, hadn’t simply died by now. Mage lifespans weren’t infinite, at least not until the higher tiers, and at Tier 3, though Rhys could expect to live somewhere between two to five hundred years, he wouldn’t live forever. If the grandparents of a small crime syndicate hadn’t ascended past Tier 3—and since they were a small crime syndicate, Rhys was pretty confident they weren’t geniuses at magehood, either—their children were old enough that their eldest child was somewhere in his forties, it wouldn’t be insane to expect that the grandparents and great-grandparents and so on were simply flat-out dead.

It also assumed that the grandparents had been mages at all. They could’ve been mortals. True, with four grandparents, it wasn’t impossible that one of them was a mage, but it also wasn’t impossible that they were all mortals. After all, who would start a small crime syndicate, a pair of mages with connections and money from their mage parents, or a desperate pair of once-mortals elevated to magehood with no resources, who had to desperately scabble for money and everything else the whole time? The latter pair seemed far more likely to resort to crime than the former to Rhys, but who knew? Maybe they were a pair of bored brats who’d spawned the Water Syndicate for fun in their free time.

Rhys sighed. It wasn’t really important, in the end. He’d find out if the Water Syndicate was backed by secret powerful elders when he got there. Actually, the more he thought about it, the more likely it sounded. How could they operate without at least one powerful backer? Still, would that powerful backer step forward if someone else stepped

in and gently realigned their crime syndicate's business practices towards something yet more profitable?

No, I think they might protest that, even if I wasn't killing all their children-slash-grandchildren-slash-great-great-grandchildren. He sighed again, then shook his head and looked around him, pulling himself out of his thoughts. After all that, all he'd decided was that they definitely did or did not have a backer, which was exactly where he'd started; at the end of the day, it didn't matter until they showed up or didn't, and there was really no point in worrying about it until it happened.

He was currently in his persona as the red-and-yellow harlequin-suited charcoal-smearing foreigner from an unspecified foreign country, so it wasn't as though it was too dangerous to wander the city, but if some guard decided to cause problems, he could still get in trouble. It really wasn't a good idea to just run around randomly like this because he got flustered over an awkward social moment with a coworker.

Still, he didn't want to go back yet. It'd be embarrassing to admit defeat and run home with his tail between his legs, and plus, it wasn't as though Kuyie's bees would have made soda-quantities of honey in the last ten minutes. He didn't often leave the shop, or his various hidey-holes and trash pits. He might as well go see the sights, do something fun for once.

Rhys paused. *What do I do for fun, nowadays?* Back home, he usually read... reading...

He reached into his robes and pulled out a small red book. On his sword, the straw-doll charm came to life and stared up at the book in... it was hard to tell, with such a small face, whether it was worship, excitement, or abject horror. He moved the book back and forth, and the straw doll gazed after it with big, wide eyes, refusing to let it out of its gaze.

Rhys lowered it, gazing at the unmarked cover. The little red tome had fallen out from between two books, squeezed out of view... or had it fallen out of a larger book? Or maybe it was wedged behind a row of books. *I think it was that one, but it's frightening that I can't remember.* It felt as if something was slowly wiping the knowledge from his brain, or maybe confusing it, mixing it together until he couldn't trust his own memories. Something didn't want him to remember where this book had come from... or was it that something didn't want him to remember the book at all? It had slipped his mind until this moment, despite him remembering, now, that he'd made several notes to himself to remember it.

Either way, it only made him want to read the book even more, if something was trying to make him forget it. If they wanted him to forget it and discard it, didn't that mean this book was trash? And if this book was trash, then its knowledge was essential to him. He wandered a little further, looking for a place to pause and read, then plopped down on a low wall and dove into the tome.

It was horrific reading. The absolute worst. The writer seemed to barely have a grasp on the language they wrote in, and a maddeningly awful scrawl to match. It was like picking apart a doctor's chicken scratch while reading Middle English at the same time, as if *Canterbury Tales* was written by Rhys's family physician who'd only today discovered fountain pens and as a result, left big blots of ink all over the pages between thin, faded text that suddenly transformed to ink so bold he struggled to make out the letters as they ran into one another. The entire thing was nothing more than the most garbage associated with any written form of any language, all heaped into one garbage book that, even when Rhys comprehended the individual words within it, didn't seem to make much sense. It wasn't even trash literature. It was just trash.

Rhys furrowed his brows. He wasn't going to give up just because it was hard to read. He'd read the *Canterbury Tales*, all of them, even the borderline pornographic ones! He could do this!

Speed Reading engaged, working hard for the first time since he'd gained that skill. He read the text over and over; it was short, thankfully, even if it seemed to be nonsense. Slowly, something started to emerge from the garbage. Some deeper understanding. Something he struggled to put words to, so much so that he began to sympathize with the writer. He'd thought they were garbage at their job, but it turned out, they were simply trying to convey something that was so difficult to explain with words that the easiest way to do it, was to make no sense and hope that someone in the distant future tried hard enough to understand them that they could accomplish something akin to comprehension.

At last, he sat back, letting out a slow breath. The void. The void, huh. He didn't understand it any better, and yet, he felt as though he'd inched closer to some valuable conclusion.

Speed Reading 14 > 24

He gazed up at the sun, then startled. It had been evening. How long had he been sitting here? No, forget that—how had he not noticed it growing dark, then bright again? It wasn't just morning, but... he looked up, squinting. The sun was almost dead overhead. It was almost time for lunch rush! He put the book away in his robes and rushed back to the shop, locking away his insights into the back of his mind, and made a note to keep checking in on them. He didn't want to lose this information as well to whatever eroded his memory of the book.

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

