

Chapter 141. Less is More

Time passed. Their profits grew, and Rhys purchased the building outright, then started shopping for their next location. In the meantime, he had a few of his underlings build a second cart, then walk the streets with it and record their sales at each location they stopped at. The more they wandered the city, the more they learned about the best places for sales. As expected, anywhere near the mage school did well, but surprisingly, so did the areas near any gate, where the adult mages who worked day in, day out, doing gods knew what for the Empire, could stop out and grab a quick salty snack.

Honey started coming in, and Rhys started selling his weak potion soda. The students took to it like flies to—well, honey, while the adults were a little more reserved to it, unused to cooled beverages or sweet potions.

Rhys frowned, thinking on it, then snapped his fingers as the answer came to him in a flash. Obviously! Adults liked soda, sure, but what did they *need*? What did they crave more than life itself? Coffee and energy drinks! For adults, flavor was secondary; the chemical effect on the body was far more important. So, he'd plunged back into the sewers, raided the library for potion books, and popped back out to practice stamina potions, concentrating them over and over again until the other mages made him practice outside, because the fumes were too fierce for them to focus anymore, and their hands wouldn't stop shaking. Lira, a little more delicate to water vapors as a water sprite, insisted he not get too close to her, lest she start buzzing around the building. Using the concentrated stamina potion and the weak healing potion, Rhys developed a second drink with a higher concentration of active ingredients. It was more bitter than his soda, not carbonated, and meant to be served hot, cold, or iced, just like coffee.

Lira eyed the strange, brownish fluid from a distance as he wheeled it out for its first test run. "Are you sure about that? That stuff is downright toxic."

"I know. Isn't it great?" Rhys replied enthusiastically. The potion was laden with traces of impurities, of course, but even better, it was the most trashy beverage available outside of cheap beer: an *energy drink*. Even if his victims—ahem, patrons—didn't get too badly impurified, they would still get physically and emotionally hooked on the upper... ahem, energy drink. Serving it in the mornings would only cement his power over them, hooking them to using it to wake themselves up. Sure, mages didn't need to sleep, but plenty did it as a luxury, and even if they didn't, conditioning their bodies to expect a surge of energy in the morning every day meant he could count on them to have a zombie phase every morning when he rescinded his drinks.

It was the *perfect* plan. He couldn't be more excited.

"I'm not sure 'great' is the right word," Lira replied, crossing her arms skeptically. "You're strengthening the enemy."

Rhys winked. "*Exactly.*"

"I don't get you," she muttered, and walked away.

"Sable hasn't said anything?" Rhys called after her.

Lira shook her head in the distance. "But I'm listening!"

He nodded. With Lira and Sable watching the tunnel, one of them a little more at a distance than the other, he could safely go peddle his new wares. He could still retreat to the shop if they sent an urgent summons and get there within a few minutes, so even in the worst case that the Water Syndicate finally stopped nickel-and-diming them and launched an all-out attack, he wasn't too far to help. Lira and Sable were capable fighters, and that was totally discounting Mouse and everyone else in the store. All of them together could hold against almost anything in the superior defensive formation of the bottlenecked tunnel for the amount of time he would need to drop everything and run back.

He really doubted that the Water Syndicate was going to stage a front-on attack, even after their first attempted attack which ended in failure. At the end of the day, the Water Syndicate was a criminal enterprise, in the Empire, where the Empress kept calm and civility with an iron fist. If they acted aggressive, they'd get slapped down, just the same as Rhys and his people would if the Empress became aware of them. It benefitted both of them to keep things under wraps, *underground*, if you would, so he had no reason to expect anything but for them to attack through the tunnel.

True, the more siblings he killed, the more likely they were to launch a more risky full-frontal attack, as he slowly aggravated them more and more... Rhys pursed his lips. That was no good. He hadn't considered that angle. People driven into a corner could do crazy things, and he was inadvertently driving them into a corner.

Then, maybe next time, we take the initiative, Rhys thought to himself. There was no reason to keep allowing the Water Syndicate to decide when and where their battles were fought. He, too, could control the time and place of battle. All he needed was a little creative questioning, and he was pretty sure he had plenty of levers to pull to make the truth come out, as it were. In fact, he could even go question one of his good farm workers... but that was a stone too far for him. Sure, he could casually ask around, but pressuring or torturing them was right out. Using a little creative aggression on a fighter in the heat of battle to coerce the location of the enemy base out of them was one thing—still reprehensible, but not utterly disgusting. Attacking those who had surrendered out of nowhere? No. That was too far. Even Rhys had to draw the line

somewhere, and that was where he drew his. He might be in his villain era, but he wasn't bad to the bone, and he really didn't want to do anything he couldn't proudly tell Bast about later. Now, it was true that 'proudly tell Bast' wasn't much of a line, given Bast's proclivities and general lack of care about all kinds of violence, but it was still a line. And it was important to have lines in life.

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He thought all this as he pushed his cart along, heading out to where the fry cart was parked. The first one was still parked in front of the kitchen, but he'd moved the second to a place where lots of adult mages frequented, near the tall, featureless buildings he'd come to realize were this world's... or maybe the Empire's, version of office buildings. A few mages stood in line at the fry cart. At this hour, there weren't too many of them, but there were still more than zero, which was victory to Rhys. He drew up alongside the fry cart, tossing his frontmen a smile, then started hawking his wares.

"Delicious coffee! Get a perk in the morning. Tired? Sleepy? Have a delicious pick-me-up in a cup! Hot or cold, it's delicious either way! Morning coffee!"

It wasn't coffee, and it was honestly disrespectful to coffee to call it coffee, but there was nothing he could do about that. He hadn't seen any coffee beans, and while the world was large and it had tomatoes, so it probably had coffee somewhere, it probably had them somewhere far away from here. In any case, the absence of coffee beans was actually an advantage. Some enterprising young fellow would have certainly discovered them and created some kind of potion or brew out of them if they were in the area, but since there were no coffee beans to be found, these people would be totally taken aback by the idea of an energizing drink.

Well, not totally taken aback. Stamina potions were a thing, after all. His real pioneering move here wasn't developing something new, but marketing it differently. Just like a certain fruit-based technology company, he had nothing to share that other companies hadn't already developed, and the specs on his potion were honestly pretty watered down and weaker than actual stamina potions. But, just like a certain fruit-based technology company, he was selling it as something new and exciting, something that was truly groundbreaking: it was a drink, not a potion. You didn't take it when you were deficient, you took it when you wanted a boost and a refreshing sip. All he had left to do was get people hooked on the brand, then raise the price, so they were locked into drinking his not-coffee and had to pay the higher price for his lower-quality goods.

It's not exactly like the tech world. I can't exactly lock them in, Rhys knew, since with tech, one could deliberately build an entire ecosystem that deliberately didn't work with anything else, then sell it as 'better,' somehow—he'd never bought into that particular scam, and didn't understand why anyone did, when he was looking in from outside. With drinks, on the other hand, all he needed was for one person to unlock a formula somewhat like his and sell it at a lower price, and he'd lose a significant percentage of

sales. Sure, people would still buy into the scam; people went out of their way to purchase Starmucks, after all, when all that coffee had going for it was the ‘prestige,’ but he wouldn’t get the same degree of lock-in one could with technology. Rather, once competition showed up, he’d have to head directly into the 1930’s, and do all the competition things outlawed in his world, like, for example, taking massive losses to offer a product at an unsustainable price, knowing that once all the other businesses went bankrupt and he dominated the market, he could raise prices again to make up for it. It wasn’t good for the Empire’s economy, writ large... but that was just a bonus, as far as Rhys was concerned.

A haggard-looking mage stumbled over and handed Rhys some coins. He traded them for a trash-paper mug, and the man sipped it, eyes rimmed by dark bags, his face pale. As the stamina drink rushed into him, he took a deep breath. The dark bags receded some, and color came back to his face. He looked at the cup, then at Rhys, and nodded in appreciation before staggering off.

Rhys smiled, then looked down at his hands. *What was that?* A skill had activated without his acknowledgement, one he had never expected to activate outward at all: Less is More. It had flared when the man had sipped the stamina potion, and Rhys had briefly sensed the stamina drink growing more potent for the split second of that first sip. *Less is More can activate on others?* He hadn’t expected that. Wait, but then... did that mean he could use less poison to inflict more damage? Fewer impurities to cause greater gunk? No, he’d already known that—but doing it without having to attack? Until now, he’d actively drank something, or actively stabbed someone, then used Less is More. But this... he simply handed a man a cup, and the skill still pumped up the stamina-boosting effect of the drink. Rhys rubbed his forehead as the full magnitude of this new discovery hit him. Inflicting Less is More on others was incredible. He could kill with a trickle of weak poison in a cup of drink that his opponent would think was too weak to harm them, and save lives with a single swallow of potion administered close to him, without him even visibly intervening. As the next customer approached, Rhys paid close attention to Less is More, pasting a big smile on his face. How far could he affect them from? How much could he affect them? How well could he target this new external skill? As the mages slurped down their stamina drinks, Rhys almost forgot to collect their coins, he was so focused on the activations of Less is More.

Almost. He still collected his gold. Gold was more important than anything else, except maybe overthrowing the Empire, and even that could be accomplished with enough gold. He was just trashy enough to know he could purchase his happiness, if by happiness he meant the downfall of the Empire.

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Chapter 142. Going on the Offensive

The more he watched, the more he understood. Less is More could reach outside of his body, but not far; only a five-foot radius or so, at best. He couldn't target its abilities; in other words, he couldn't make the impurities worse without making the potion better an equal amount. On the other hand, he could push more mana into the skill to make it activate more strongly, though Less is More was always kind of funky with receiving *more* of anything, and at the end of the day, he wasn't sure if he'd actually activated it more strongly by giving it more mana, or if it was simply that the mage in question had sipped it more gently, meaning that Less is More had activated stronger as a result, and the mana he'd input was meaningless. A little voice in his mind whispered, *that one's probably more correct*.

Still, he could rein it in or even turn it off entirely. Not for himself, but for the outside his body effect. He didn't have to go around making sure he only used a little bit of poison on someone for it to be most effective, but if he only had a little poison, he *could* turn it on to make it more effective. It was a somewhat irrelevant ability, since he could also take a single step back and remove his target from the skill's pitiful external range, but it was worth noting anyways. Better to know the limitations of his skill than to be in the dark.

Though, now that he was thinking about it, Less is More was both his first skill, and the skill he knew the least about. For the most part, it was intuitive; the less he took of something, the more effect it had. But what did it mean? What were its limits? How did it play into trash? These were all things he hadn't really investigated.

Rhys pinched his chin. He'd been too busy using it to survive to investigate it thoroughly at first. Later on, he'd focused more on his trash aspects and other parts of his path, and neglected his first skill. Sure, it still came in handy every now and again, but it was a minor passive buff, the kind easily disregarded in any game system.

Is there something more to it? It was his *first* skill. In a certain way, if he allowed a tiny amount of religious fervor to settle over him, he could see it as absolutexistence's only hint, though a part of him considered that absolutely ridiculous. It was equally likely that it was simply a random skill he'd gathered thanks to licking up drops of potion, and it being his first was because he'd been acting strange, not because it was some kind of cosmic hint. Was it vitally important, or the result of fucking around and finding out—finding out a positive thing, for once?

Given my tendencies... more likely the latter than the former. A god wouldn't give trash like him a special ultimate skill. Cheat skills were the property of heroes, not talentless trash. Bast probably had one, but him? Nah. Less is More was just some trash skill, but it was a nice trash skill, and he was proud of it for being wonderful, useful, delicious

trash. Still, it never hurt to learn more about trash. He'd certainly never hesitated to dive into a big, steaming pile of trash, literal or literary. Why stop now?

He was running low on coffee when a quiet ping of mana caught his attention. The first haggard mage he'd served was still lingering around, perhaps seeking another sip like his first hit. Rhys handed the guy the rest of the vat and ran. "Give it to the fry shop when you're done."

The haggard man blinked after Rhys. He stared after Rhys for a long second with his dead eyes, then slowly raised the vat to his lips and slurped.

Rhys ran through the streets. Like the trash skill it was, Trash Step activated intermittently, surging him ahead when he stepped on uneven ground or ran past a pile of trash. Rhys appeared to race ahead smoothly, then stutter back to an ordinary run every time the footing changed. He was used to it, but to the outside eye, it appeared as if his movement technique were fragile, and only worked occasionally. Not that Rhys minded; better if people thought he was a weak mage with a pathetic, semi-operational movement skill, rather than a Tier 3 mage. For all that, he made it back to the shop in record speed, rushing inside to throw himself down the trap door, then sprint all out in the trashy dirt footing to close in on the battle. He could already hear it, the distinctive sound of steel on bone resonating down the tunnel. The muddy footing told him Lira was down in the tunnel, too, and yet they'd still called for his help. Whoever they were fighting, had to be quite powerful. Was the next sibling that much of a jump in power? Or was it that more than one had showed up this time?

They had already killed two siblings, after all. If it was Rhys's battle, he'd send two next time, if only so one could escape and tell everyone where all their fighters were vanishing off to. Of course, he had no intention of letting anyone escape... but it was how he'd play it, if he were on the offensive side of this battle.

A white blur rushed toward him, hurtling down the tunnel. Rhys reached out his arms and snatched Lira out of the air, catching her in a sodden lump. In his mind's eye, she swooned in his arms, touched his chin, and desperately gasped for help... but in real life, she did a flip turn and kicked off of him, directly back into battle. Rhys blinked, watching her go. She spun around the corner in a column of water, and the sound of fierce battling came from the other side.

"You're welcome...?"

Shaking his head, he ran after her, drawing his broken sword as he ran. He turned the corner and found a melee. Dozens of underlings, far more than ever before, poured down the tunnel, pushing even Sable with her extra limbs to the limit. Lira assisted with crowd control, sending columns of water hurtling into the underlings to push them back. Honestly, the two of them struggled, but they held the line.

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The problem was the stronger mages, the two men who had the same kind of face as Logan and Lloyd. One was slender, with a narrow chin and thin shoulders, while the other had broad shoulders and huge muscles, plus a squared chin, but the rest of their faces were very similar. The muscular one stood at the front of the mess of underlings, hammering at Sable's limbs at this very moment, while the slender one stood at the back, waving a fan that emitted strange light. Every time it emitted a new light, the underlings changed, whether they grew stronger, weaker, enraged, or calm. They moved with unusual coordination for a mob of criminals, too, as if someone were controlling them with a fan that emitted multicolored light.

Rhys snorted. He charged toward the battle, and the muscular man shoved away from Sable and barreled toward him. A mad grin stretched across his face. "You look strong!"

Rhys hopped the man's bear hug, leaving a handprint of impurities on the man's shoulder in return. The big guy stumbled, and Rhys hopped over the underlings to close in on the slender man with the fan. The slender man widened his eyes and jumped back, lifting the fan high. As he waved it, sending a beam of light hurtling at Rhys, he shouted, "Larry, you fool! You're supposed to keep him pinned down!"

"He's too fast, Leonard!" Larry shouted back.

"Your family had a theme, huh," Rhys muttered. One was meaningless, two was a theme, three was a pattern and four was an obsession. It was strange how their family had known these siblings would all be taking the L, but hey, Rhys had to respect the hustle. At least they knew what they were about, and he certainly couldn't agree more that they were all big Ls.

He ducked, but Leonard shifted his fan lazily, and the beam fell on him. Instantly, rage filled Rhys's heart. He wanted nothing more than to beat Larry's face in—with his bare hands, if possible. So he rushed forward, and punched Leonard in the face.

Leonard staggered back, clutching a broken, bleeding nose. "W-why? The spell affected you!"

"The fastest way to fight him is to beat you first," Rhys told him, closing the distance and hooking a leg behind Leonard's. Leonard stumbled, and Rhys swept his feet. The skinny man hit the ground hard, but clung onto the fan.

Rhys chased him down, tossing the sword aside to beat the man with his bare fists. Leonard smacked him with the fan, and the rage left him, replaced with a serene calm. In his calmer state, Rhys realized two things: one, that Leonard was not very strong on his own, and two, that the man was a bit of a coward, crying through his broken nose even now, and that he'd probably break pretty easily if he threatened violence. Instead

of continuing to beat the man, he jumped up and instantly kicked the man's hand, kicking and stomping until Leonard released the fan. He kicked the fan across the tunnel. Leonard whirled and threw himself after the fan, only for Rhys to make a grabbing gesture. As Leonard reached out, two bony hands pushed through the earth to form a cage of bone around him. He threw himself against the bars of the bones, reaching as far as he could. His fingertips scraped the fan.

Rhys picked the fan up. He wafted it a bit, fanning himself, then turned to face Larry, who was still facing off against Sable while Lira played crowd control. He waved the fan, willing it to weaken Larry. A beam of dark purple light shot out and fell on Larry.

Instantly, Rhys felt a strong pull on his mana. He raised his brows, shocked at how much mana the tool took. Did Leonard have a huge mana pool, or was his talent with tools just that bad, that he had to use serious quantities of mana to keep up the skill? Either way, it wasn't something he could casually use the way Leonard did.

On the other side of the room, Larry stumbled as he suddenly weakened. Sable instantly crawled over him, climbing up his chest and onto his back with her blade-tipped limbs. With each step, her limbs plunged into his flesh, leaving bloody wounds behind. Larry reached for her, but sluggishly, unable to keep up with her quick movements now that Rhys had weakened him. Sable's tail darted forth a dozen times, stabbing his thick back over and over. Purple fluid leaked out behind it, and his body instantly began to shrivel from the poison in her tail. Lira blasted all the unempowered underlings with water, knocking them to the ground.

Larry roared. He reached over his shoulder and threw Sable off, tossing her into the wall. She struck with a meaty *thump* and tumbled to the ground. His body swelled, changing shape. Fur pushed out of his skin, he leaned forward, and his muscles bulged further, threaded with thick veins. He charged like a gorilla, running on his knuckles, and pushed directly through his underlings, sending them flying. Rhys barely had time to look up before a monstrous wall of flesh closed in on him, thu-thu-thumping over the wet ground.

Oh, shit! He threw himself back and away, but he wasn't fast enough to completely dodge. Larry ducked his shoulder and smashed Rhys into the wall, pinning him there with his muscular body. Blow Mitigation took some of the hit, but not enough. Pain slammed through Rhys, and he felt the sickening sensation of at least one broken bone. His vision flickered, and only Trash Body activating kept him awake. The gorillaified Larry roared in his face, opening his mouth wide.

Rhys giggled. "Oh no, you squeezed the burps out of me." He spat a ball of compressed trash gas directly into Larry's roaring mouth.

Larry pulled back his arm, ignoring Rhys—then gagged. He staggered backward, clutching his throat. His eyes widened, and he opened his mouth, trying to scream, only to find that his throat was already melting away. Down into the lungs, the heart, the

chest cavity; Rhys could trace the corrosive gas as it passed through Larry's body by the strong lump of impurities within it. Larry gagged a few more times, then fell back, no longer moving.

Rhys stumbled over, giving Larry a kick. He turned toward the rest of the fight, barely staying on his feet. His mana was low from the fan, and now he was badly injured, thanks to Larry. His whole body wanted to sleep and rejuvenate. Even now, he was only standing thanks to Trash Body. He could feel a bone grinding in his leg, but somehow he could stand on it; at Tier 3, Trash Body was truly an impressive skill. The underlings stared in abject horror at Rhys, who'd just beaten their two bosses and looked like a zombie, yet still stood, while Lira and Sable just stared.

"Make sure you don't let Leonard get away," Rhys told them, and passed out.

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- Chapter 143. The Creative Application of Force

Chapter 143. The Creative Application of Force

Rhys blinked awake, then sat up. He laid on the floor of the second story of the tavern, in someone's bedroll. As mages, they didn't really need to sleep, and as a result, they didn't have beds; it was an expense they could afford to skip. The bedroll he laid in smelled strongly of must and mildew, as if it hadn't seen the sun in a long time, and instead spent a long time in the bottom of someone's storage ring, or maybe in a garbage pit. Rhys idly sucked in all the impurities on the bedroll, then climbed to his feet, brushing down his robes. He looked around. *What am I doing here? What's going on?*

He thought back. The last thing he remembered was the coffee... no, that wasn't it! He'd run to the tunnel, and the battle, Larry and Leonard...

Rhys patted down his robes, then checked his storage ring. A fancy new fan sat there, ready for him to use it, sell it, or throw it away. He breathed a sigh of relief. If nothing else, at least he'd stripped Leonard of his weapon before passing out. He drew the fan out and fanned himself idly, not activating the spell on it, least of all because he wasn't sure his trash star could handle another usage.

He hadn't really used magical artifacts until this moment. He hadn't had the chance to. The few he'd found in the trash were, well, trash. A thrown-away storage ring. Items of that magnitude, that took so little mana to activate that almost every Tier 1 mage from a reasonable background would have one from childhood. Today, for the first time, he'd used a high-level, complex, powerful magical artifact. The kind a criminal syndicate would prize and give to its higher command. And it had nearly wiped him out.

The trash star was still burning, but weakly. It was on its last legs, desperately in need of an infusion of trash. He was pretty sure the fan wasn't supposed to take that much mana; it was just that his talent at handling magical artifacts was so trash that it took such a huge toll on him in particular.

The Crimson Flare Orb hadn't taken so much mana to activate, but then, it was essentially a mana battery for a big weapon he didn't own. Of course it didn't take much mana to activate; it was a thing that held mana, not a thing that required mana to activate. From a way of looking at it, the fan was the weapon that the battery (the orb) was supposed to slot into. It wasn't, but that was the difference in the two artifacts. One held mana that was supposed to be supplied to something else, which was currently powering his oil pots, and the other was the thing that mana was supposed to be supplied to. The two weren't compatible, because the fan didn't take fire mana, and the Crimson Flare Orb wasn't subtle enough to change its output to match what the fan desired, but hypothetically, as he'd touched on earlier, the two were the two pieces to the puzzle. The AA battery and the toy dog, except one of them was a D battery and the other was a drawing pen that required AAAA batteries.

After all, if the Crimson Flare Orb didn't output power, Logan couldn't have used it to pretend to be Tier 2. The fan, on the other hand, had been used by a proper Tier 2. That was the most critical difference; the most important thing about the two of them.

He gave the fan a wistful look, then hung it on his belt with a sigh. He could always give it to someone more suited to it. It was a pity that using magical artifacts on his tier or higher wasn't in his immediate future, at least as long as they weren't trash, but he had plenty of subordinates who could use a powerful weapon or two. For now, he needed to go find whatever his underlings had done to Leonard. He had a few questions for the guy, and some creative force to apply.

Rhys climbed down from the loft-slash-second-floor where they slept-slash-meditated when it was nighttime and they decided to rest, rather than keep going, because at their core they were still monkeys with circadian rhythms, and found the kitchen bustling with motion. Even without him there, everything continued to move. Chips got cooked. Fries got fried. One particularly industrious mage was even attempting to make his 'coffee,' and the attempt... wasn't bad. It wasn't perfect, and it wouldn't have the same magic (informal) without Less is More, but it should do the trick in a pinch. Lira and Sable looked up as he walked in, Lira chuckling and Sable turning away as if she didn't care.

“Good morning, princess,” Lira greeted him. She thumbed over her shoulder at the rapidly-vanishing Sable. “She was all worried about you, you know. Wouldn’t leave your side. I had to go and just about pull her away from your side just to get her in the kitchen, and you know Sable never goes to the kitchen.”

Rhys glanced after her. “Really? Why? Oh... does she feel guilty because I ‘got hurt’ in her presence?”

“No need for those air quotes. You really were quite hurt. Even I was a little scared when potions didn’t do much for you, but your regeneration skill kicked in while you were sleeping. Didn’t know you had one of those, incidentally, thanks for sharing.”

“Yeah, cuz you share all your skills,” Rhys snarked back. “Next time, just give me little dribbles of potion. It’ll help more.”

Lira squinted at him. “Are you afraid of potions, or something? Mr. Trashman is afraid of a few little impurities from a little potion?”

Rhys reached into his robes, only for his hand to come up empty. The Empire had taken all the impurity potions he had on him, and the special one, the one he’d needed a particularly resilient bottle to handle, was hidden with the sun sword underground. He lowered his hand, then shrugged. “Not the impurities. I just have a weird set of skills that’s optimized that way. Anyways, let Sable know it’s not her fault. We’re all combatants. If I, or she, gets hurt in the line of duty, that’s just the price of doing business.”

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“Oh, yeah, *that’s* what’s bothering her. You haven’t noticed that she likes you, birdbrain?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m trash.” Sable deserved someone fitting of her status and stature, not a trash gremlin like Rhys.

“She doesn’t think so.”

“And more’s the pity. Hey, Lira. Where’s our guest? The one I captured with the bone hands,” Rhys clarified.

Lira pointed down. “Where you left him...? That spell didn’t deactivate when you passed out.”

“It... didn’t?”

“Well, it’s a curse, right? Curses aren’t known for being easy to dispel,” Lira pointed out.

"Huh." Rhys had to admit she had a point. Curses were virulent, nasty things, known for hanging out long past when their caster wanted them to go away. He hadn't been thinking of the bone hands like a curse, but now that he was... of course they'd stay around. He probably had to do some ritual to dispel them, or would, anyways, if he wasn't a ball of curses and trash himself. He nodded at Lira. "Thanks. I'll be right back."

Lira nodded and turned away, then glanced back at the last second. "Oh—we sent Mouse down there, since he harassed anyone else. Since she's, you know. Partially invisible. Was peacefully reading the last I saw her, with poor Leonard moping in his cage."

"Good call," Rhys replied. He turned away, frowning at himself as he did. He was starting to forget Mouse, when she wasn't immediately around or directly in his vision. Lira had a reason to remind him about Mouse, and even then, it had been an afterthought, almost forgotten. Mouse's blend-in skill was getting slightly ridiculous. It was as though she were wiping herself directly from the universe, rather than merely going unseen. True, it wasn't at that extreme yet, nowhere near, but he could see the future where she simply vanished. Not just from the eye or mana senses, but from people's perception and memory as well, where she was an unseen, unfelt, unknown existence that barely existed at all.

He ran a hand through his hair, a little terrified. *What kind of monster have I created?* By giving her a little nudge toward her path, he'd helped her transform from a shy wallflower, to someone the ever-vigilant Empire ignored for years, to someone who he personally had trouble remembering, even when he was reminded about her. If she didn't want to be seen, she could even sit quietly right beside her victim, and they wouldn't acknowledge her in the least.

A shiver ran up his spine. *It's a good thing she's on our side.* If she was on the Empire's side, there'd be nothing they could do; the battle would already be lost.

Fortunately, Mouse wasn't much of a combatant, though a tiny bit of Rhys, the part of him that was less concerned with his personal safety and more worried about optimizing *everything*, really wanted to see what kind of a monster he could create by teaching her proper swordform, or better yet, how to stab someone quietly in the back for a one-hit-kill. Her skills were more than ideal for an assassin. In fact, she would be an insanely powerful assassin, what with being able to entirely erase herself.

Then again, maybe that's just the baseline expectation for assassins? Mouse had been utilized by a spy by her school already, so maybe she was just an average-skill for someone pursuing the hidden route; on the other hand, he was pretty sure her skill also made her school overlook her, so he doubted they'd been utilizing her to her full extent, or even, necessarily, realized what a valuable unit they had at hand.

The real question is, how did I get so lucky? Rhys wondered. A moment later, it came to him. Mouse was throwing herself away. She wasn't hiding to grind her skill, or grow

more powerful; she earnestly, from the bottom of her heart, wanted to be left alone and ignored, not utilized. Her whole existence was defined by hiding away from society and ducking every possible social advancement, or, in other words, by 'throwing away' her future as a powerful assassin to hide in a corner and read books instead. Rhys respected it—hell, he'd dreamed of such an ideal existence many times in his youth and adulthood and sometimes even now—but society didn't. A life spent idly was a life wasted, said society. Thus, Mouse was trash, and thus, she had fallen into his hands.

Rhys dropped down into the tunnels. Sable was there, but at the sight of him, she scuttled onto the ceiling, into a particularly dark crevasse, and sat there, not looking at him or saying anything. Rhys glanced at her, then snorted and walked on. If she wanted to be left alone, he'd leave her alone. He wasn't delusional like Lira, thinking she might like him. Someone else had suggested it too, or maybe it was just Lira? Either way, she was clearly projecting her own romantic hopes onto Sable and Rhys. There was nothing between them. They'd barely exchanged greetings.

Around the corner, he came upon a seated Mouse, buried in a book as he'd been promised, and his own curse. The bony hands still thrust up from the earth, and in their grasp, they held a haggard and frustrated Leonard. He perked up at the sight of Rhys and leaned forward, gripping the bones that barred him in. "Let me go! You have no right to hold me here!"

"And you have no right to attack us, so that makes two of us," Rhys pointed out, without skipping a beat.

Mouse looked up at Rhys's voice and shut her book, quickly scurrying out of the scene. Rhys watched her go, making a note to chase after her and give her more trainings later, then turned back to Leonard. He smiled sweetly. "Do you know where you are?"

"In my family's tunnels, which you've rudely stolen from us, the rightful owners?"

"I highly doubt you have the requisite permits to burrow under the city. No, that's not correct. Where you are, is in my hands." Rhys gestured, knitting his fingers together, and the bones shifted, changing their grasp to grip Leonard a little tighter, just as Rhys's fingers knitted a little more tightly.

Leonard ducked in the cage, edging away from the cold bone. "So? It's a creepy cage, but—"

"It's not a cage at all, in fact. It's a curse that's meant to kill. In fact, it's taking significant willpower to keep those hands from bearing you down into the cold earth right now," Rhys informed him. It was a bit of a lie. This close to the curse, he could, in fact, 'feel' its desire to bear the man to his untimely death, but that was all. He didn't feel any overbearing desire to see this to its end. He could stand here all day, or leave Leonard caged for another dozen days, and it wouldn't change a thing. But it did apply a little bit of pressure, and he didn't mind that at all.

Leonard started to sweat. “This isn’t a curse. It can’t be.”

“It can, and it is.” Rhys dragged the stool Mouse had been sitting on over and sat atop it. He desperately wanted it to be a chair, so he could sit on it backward and fold his hands over the top like those ‘cool’ teachers and detectives in trashy movies, but it was only a stool, so he had to settle for a smarmy smirk and a lean forward, hands on his hips. “So what do you say, Leonard? You know what I want: the location of your base. We can do this the easy way, or the hard way. It’s all up to you.”

Sweat dripped down Leonard’s forehead. He glanced at the fan dangling from Rhys’s belt, and swallowed. All at once, he opened his mouth—

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Chapter 144. It’s All Up To You

“To the northeast!” Leonard burst out.

Rhys blinked. He hadn’t expected it to be this easy. Was Leonard lying? *Well, it doesn’t matter. I have enough men to verify without going myself.* Rhys reached into his robes and drew out a trashy book he’d been reading, presenting the rear leaves—the empty pieces of paper at the end of the book—and a pen. “A map, please.”

“Is this all you need? Am I free to go?” Leonard asked, accepting both.

Rhys shrugged. “I haven’t seen the map yet, have I?”

“I’m not good with pain. I don’t want to die,” Leonard murmured, almost to himself. He glanced at Rhys, then back at his map, and grimaced. “You’d better kill all of them. I don’t want them coming after me.”

“Worry about me coming after you right here, right now, then about your family,” Rhys advised him, desperately wishing he had his backward chair for his villain act. There was nothing cool or villainous about sitting on a stool. He felt like a granny squatting by her grandchild’s side to hold his hand, or a grandpa lugging around the old easy-sit to a school football game.

A moment later, he paused. “Did you just tell me to kill your family?”

Leonard glanced at him. “Better you than them, at this point. You seem like the kind to give a quick death, as you did to Larry.”

“That was...” Rhys raised his brows, startled. Apparently their scales were totally different when it came to painful deaths. He personally ranked ‘melted from the inside out by toxic gas’ pretty high on the scale of ‘deaths he didn’t want to personally experience,’ but clearly he was the fool here. In this world, clearly they didn’t stop at toxic gas immolation. There was a near infinite realm of further, more painful deaths beyond organs melting while you still lived, and Rhys didn’t want to know anything about it. He nodded slowly. “I’ll take that under consideration.”

“Plus... my family never gave a fuck about me,” Leonard grumbled. “Family this, family that, go clean the stable, you skinny fuck. You’ll never amount to anything, because you like to read and *actually learn* about the world instead of wandering the countryside fucking idiot maidens and sucking down strength potions. Fuck ‘em. I’m not gonna get tortured to death by some clown maniac for them.”

Rhys clicked his tongue, shaking his head. “First off, it’s maniac clown, thanks. Secondly, eh? Yeah? Clowns? What do you think?”

“Fuck clowns,” Leonard spat, with almost more feeling than he’d just put into dressing down his family.

“I know, right? Why do fast food places love them so much? I don’t get it either.” Rhys pushed off his knees and stood. “If you keep cooperating like this, I really have no problem setting you free. I could even look into putting you in charge of a farm.”

“Farming?” Leonard pulled a face.

“Don’t knock it before you try it. It’s a lot of sitting around doing nothing, since my rats... ahem, my underlings do it all. Lots of time to read and learn.”

Leonard harrumphed. “They don’t allow non-military mages to access the library. I only hung around my family because they had a contact who could smuggle a few books out a year. There’s no way you can—”

“Oh, the library?” Rhys reached into his storage ring and pulled out a half-dozen tomes. He occasionally wandered the sewer path back to the library, sucking up filth and retrieving whatever tomes the mages under his care wanted while he was there. He couldn’t find everything, and he often had to bring Mouse along to access the more secure regions of the library, but thanks to Mouse’s semi-invisibility and Rhys’s unmitigated sewer access, they basically had full access to the entire selection of tomes.

Leonard’s eyes bulged. “H-how—”

Rhys flourished his hands, sending the tomes back into his storage ring. “Well... we’ll negotiate that later. For now, you can stay in there.”

“In the curse? You’re kidding. This thing could kill me at any moment!” Leonard snarled.

“I know. I’m the one controlling it,” Rhys informed him.

Leonard squinted. He’d finished his doodling on the map, and now stood there, pen and map held loosely in one hand. “I sense no curse power on you.”

“Yeah. I turn it on and off. You know how it is,” Rhys said with a shrug. He took the pen and map back from Leonard, checking it to see if things made sense. The area Leonard circled was a part of the nearby mountains Rhys had never been to, so it was a possible hideout. That didn’t mean it was what Leonard said it was, but it was at least worth checking—in other words, not a place that Rhys could immediately count out as being their hideout.

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“You can’t ‘turn it on and off.’ It’s a taint on your very core, your, your soul, your being. Even if you swap cores, curse power will be sunk deep into your body—”

“Guess I’m just built different,” Rhys interrupted him, smirking as wide as the horizon. He waved his hand and walked off. “I’ll see you in a bit. If you keep cooperating, full access to the library is within your options!”

He wasn’t foolish enough to let Leonard loose before they beat the guy’s family. For all he complained about them, family was still family, even abusive family. If he’d been abused his whole life, there was every possibility they’d abuse him right back into the place he’d tried to escape from. He’d seen it happen, back in his first life, with friends who deserved so much better. Knowing that they were being treated like shit and realizing that they were in an abusive relationship didn’t stop people from going back to their abusive families and boyfriends, even if it was dead-obvious they should simply avoid them from the outside of the relationship. Whatever forces were keeping them there in the first place, would put them right back in it, as long as they remained close to those people. Even if Leonard was dead serious about everything he’d said, there was nothing he could do to make Rhys trust him, because of the dynamics of those relationships.

Plus, Rhys wasn’t dumb enough to think someone who changed allegiances so easily and tactically would immediately give their whole lives to fight for his cause. If Leonard’s family, or worse, the Empire, threatened him, there was every possibility that Leonard would jump ship just as fast as he’d hopped on Rhys’s ship. At best, Rhys figured, he’d wait until after the battle, then stick Leonard on some distant, low-yield farm that wouldn’t harm their operations even if the Empire were to completely demolish it. Just like Leonard had yielded to him, he would yield to the next source of power or threat of pain, and Rhys had no illusions about that. He was fundamentally someone Rhys couldn’t trust. Still, any port in a storm, and any help against the Empire was worth it.

Menial, low-trust tasks still needed to be done. Might as well put someone he couldn't trust on a near-useless task if he could afford it.

He headed back up to the tavern, pretending to ignore Sable flinching back into the darkness as he passed. "Keep an eye on Leonard," he requested. There was no reply, but he knew she'd heard him by the dry skitter of bone on the ceiling.

Back in the tavern, he turned to Mouse. "Here. Can you scout out this location and let me know what's going on here?"

Mouse took the map and looked it over, then looked at Rhys. "Why?"

"Why? You're the one best suited to scouting—"

"Not 'why me,' why?" she clarified. "Why are we checking out what's here?"

Rhys nodded at the floor. "Leonard said that's where his family is. I don't outright trust him, but there's no reason not to check it out, especially with your advanced stealth skills. I don't want you to fight, just take a peek and run away."

"Advanced... stealth skills?" Mouse squeaked, pointing at herself.

"Ah, I mean, your natural tendency to be overlooked," Rhys clarified. Thinking back on it, when she'd been trying to be stealthy, he and Bast had caught her right away. It was only when she was hanging back, being a wallflower, and blending in that she was able to so easily wipe her entire self from existence.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Mouse murmured, fading in on herself even where she stood.

"Yeah, that's it. Do you want Lira to come along, in case a fight breaks out?"

Mouse looked shocked. "What about you?"

"Me? What do you mean?"

She glanced around, then leaned in. At a whisper, she said, "You'll be the only real fighter left behind."

Rhys snorted. "I'm our only Tier 3. I'm deliberately staying behind in case this is a trap. If someone attacks, I can handle it."

"Are you sure?"

He nodded. "I'm sure."

“Then... I’d like Lira. But you won’t be in danger, right?”

“No, no.”

Mouse hesitated another beat, then glanced at Rhys. “D-do I have to talk to her...?”

Rhys put a hand over his mouth, barely muffling a laugh. Too cute. There was something innately adorable about Mouse’s shyness. Maybe it was just him, but the combination of glasses and shy and bookish was just too cute when it was all packaged together in one mousy-haired girl.

He took a deep breath, stifled his laughter, and waved his hand. “Nah. I’ll go talk to her. Hey, Lira!”

Mouse shrunk where she should. “You could’ve just said no...”

Lira looked over from where she sat, lounging in one of their soda vats, before Rhys turned the water into soda. It wasn’t very sanitary, but Rhys wasn’t going to point that out. He’d have to charge more if he admitted it was gamer girl bath water, after all, and it was important that soda was cheap.

Of course, he didn’t really mind that Lira kept lounging in his water. In his world, it wouldn’t be very sanitary, but in this world, Lira seemed to have a natural, low-level purification effect, and she could create new fresh water, besides, without them having to lug heavy vats back and forth from the streams, so it really worked out in his favor that she seemed to treat them like her personal tubs.

She flicked her hair out of her face and raised a brow. “Yeah? What?”

“Mouse is gonna scout out the area Leonard pointed out for us. You mind going along to make sure she stays safe?”

“Sure. I was getting bored here, anyways.” Lira hopped out of the water, executing a dynamic spin in midair, then landed and walked over, pulling out her umbrella with a casual flourish, as if she’d done it a million times before.

Rhys resisted the urge to fist pump. *Hell yeah*. It was awesome when people did cool mage things for absolutely no reason at all. He was all for it. In a world where everyone was a top tier acrobat, why not move with a bit of showiness every now and again?

“Remember, you’re just scouting. Don’t get in trouble. We’ll come back with an actual attack force later,” Rhys reminded them, or rather, Lira in particular. He wasn’t at all worried about Mouse going on the offensive randomly, but Lira might.

“I’m not in a hurry to rush to my grave,” Lira said. She waved, putting a hand on Mouse’s shoulder to escort her out through the tunnel. “We’ll be back before you know it.”

Rhys nodded. “See ya.”

Mouse waved one last time, then ducked her head and followed Lira into the trap door. A faint spark of worry appeared in Rhys’s heart, but he quickly suppressed it. They’d just be stopping by for a glimpse, and Mouse’s stealth techniques were far superior to anyone else’s. They’d be fine. Definitely. For sure.

For sure. He took a deep breath and looked after them. Surely this fear in his heart was unfounded. Surely.

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

Chapter 145. Trash for the Trash God

Rhys wandered through the sewers, absorbing trash as he went. This was close enough that he could return in a flash, but not so far that he had to worry about the others handling a member of the Water Syndicate alone. He sighed, a little frustrated. He wanted to go search for the Syndicate himself, but now that he had an establishment, he had to protect it, too.

This is annoying. I need a better solution.

He lifted his head, looking at the filth he sucked in. The sewers were pretty clean nowadays, with his constant efforts, but he was still just one guy, and he wasn’t walking the sewers on the daily. There was enough filth to make it worth it. Still, it was diminishing each time, while his needs for trash grew greater.

I need a way to get more trash.

Two problems. He sighed again, frustrated. What could he do? Something to gather more trash... to move instantaneously.

“The garbage truck!” he said aloud, then laughed at his own joke. As funny as a garbage truck would be, they didn’t exactly move instantaneously, or even quickly—since it wasn’t as though he truly needed instantaneous movement. Rapid movement would be fine.

Still, maybe there was something to that? Back at Infinite Constellation, he'd gone around collecting trash. In this city, let alone the Empire, that couldn't possibly be a solution. It was too large. If he spent all his time gathering trash, he wouldn't gain enough to make his efforts worth it. He needed something else. Something that congregated the trash, but more consistently than 'whenever someone got annoyed enough to haul their junk to the garbage heap.' That was far too slow. It was a good way for him to suck up historical trash, and—speaking of historical trash—he did fully intend to investigate the Empire for wherever it'd thrown out those valuable artifacts that were inconvenient to its rule, but it was somewhat useless when it came to ongoing trash, or a constant rate of trash absorption. Especially with his trash fire, he was currently insatiable when it came to trash, or at least, close enough that it felt that way. He needed more. More and more trash!

The Empire produced more than enough trash. It was absolutely filthy with garbage. Filth everywhere, piled up by every door. If he gathered it all, he'd have more than enough. Enough, even, to advance once more, if he was lucky.

But how? That was the thing. How could he acquire all the trash produced in the Empire? The Empire was a vast thing, absolutely enormous. There was no way for him to manually gather all the trash in one place. Like he'd just thought, it would take way too long.

He paused, the knee-deep water sloshing around him. Wait. There was something else. Something associated with the trash truck. Those ubiquitous bins, whether silver, black, green, or blue, and sometimes even exotic colors like yellow or purple: the humble, long-serving rubbish bin. The big kind, the kind kept outside and rolled to the street every Sunday, or whenever the trash truck came by. What about those?

Not a literal set of garbage bins. That would still require manual pickup, and though he could cobble together a trash service with his underlings, it wouldn't be worth it. They wouldn't be able to expand his chip empire, and since that was his real Empire-toppling enterprise, that was more important than strengthening himself right now. After all, once the Empire ate it, he could go back to happily levelling his own core, rather than his trash star, with no intercession by some bullshit repressive government. Thus, Empire toppling took precedence over seeking strength. That didn't mean that he couldn't seek strength, or that he didn't intend to seek strength—no, he did, absolutely—but that he couldn't dismantle his current efforts to realign his people to something as selfish as strengthening himself.

"Then, what if they all just teleport garbage to me?" Rhys said aloud. He walked on, continuing to absorb trash as he walked. He didn't have a teleportation technique, but he did have something like it, didn't he? Rhys touched his chest, where the little red book sat. The void. The hole in his core that led to the void let him store trash and mana on its far side, then absorb it back into himself. What if he connected all the trash cans to the part of the void near him, then absorbed the trash into his core from there?

He was close to a breakthrough on the void. Connecting cans to the void should... *probably* be possible. He pursed his lips, then turned and walked back toward his base. He had to give this a try. It was too good an idea to ignore!

Rhys took the sewers back to their old base. It was easier than heading to the shop, then routing around from the tunnel's exit to the base, and kept the two from being too obviously connected, too. New trash had been dropped off since he'd built the base, and he headed there now, in search of some raw materials. There wasn't anything in the trash as convenient as plastic, but there was plenty of pottery, wood, and scrap metal. Not enough metal, unfortunately, to forge metal trash cans, but wood and pottery... Dirt and trees, in other words, if he thought about it that way. The wood scraps he considered closely, then brought together. Using his trash-to-vitality technique, he poured vitality into them, then urged the scraps to grow together. Some refused to respond, too far gone to ever come back, but others burst into life. They grew together, knitting into a big, woven bowl of sorts, almost like a basket, but sturdier, built of wood rather than scraps of grass and reeds. It wasn't ideal, somewhat misshapen and strange-looking, but right now, he didn't need a perfect basket, just a good-enough receptacle to test his void-teleport technique on. Once he nailed that down, he could go back and start perfecting baskets, but given how this technique might even rip the basket directly into pieces, he wasn't going to spend too long forming it perfectly.

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He called the void to mind, diving into the depths of his core to come face to face with that gap once more. It was a slippery concept to hold in his head, but with some effort, he pinned it down. The void was emptiness. He couldn't grip emptiness any more than he could grip water, but he could hold it in a bucket, and he had a bucket right in front of him. He took the sensation of the void and poured it out, into the basket in front of him.

Nothing happened.

Rhys pursed his lips. He looked at his woven wood basket, then at his hands, then considered the void within himself once more.

This isn't going to be easy, is it.

--

Lira glanced over her shoulder. "Come on, Mouse. We're almost there."

Mouse hung back, cringing in on herself. "I don't know. This doesn't feel right."

She lifted her head, glimpsing the world around her before she looked back down. It didn't feel right. Any of it. There was nothing wrong with the scenery. They stood at the mouth of a peaceful-looking ravine. A few deer stood nearby in the forest, chewing on

the undergrowth, and birds sang from the trees. By all accounts, there was nothing wrong with this place. But something about it made Mouse's heart race, the same as standing in front of a crowd of people, or considering entering a busy party. It felt like a thousand eyes would lock onto her the second she took another step.

"We're going to go up and around, anyways. Don't worry about it," Lira assured her, lifting her skirts to hop up the wall of the ravine.

Mouse looked after her. She hesitated another moment, then followed, but skirted around wide, wandering through the woods rather than walking on the edge of the ravine, as Lira so boldly did. There were no mana signatures from within the ravine, but that in of itself was suspicious, since the ravine should be as full of life as the rest of the forest. The ravine being devoid of life was enough for Mouse to want to call it good enough and turn tail, run back to Rhys and tell him their findings, but no, Lira *had* to know *for sure* what was within.

Even Mouse knew that Lira was right, and that this was their actual objective, but she instinctively didn't want to get any closer. Every fiber of her body screamed for her to back away and escape. Any closer, and they'd see, they'd see her... but this was their goal. Lira was right. She couldn't turn away yet.

Mouse crept closer, sneaking from tree to tree, while Lira wandered along, walking the edge. She glanced at Mouse and laughed. "There's nothing to hide from, silly mouse. You can walk in the sun."

Mouse shook her head resolutely.

"You look like prey right now," Lira warned her, shaking her head.

Mouse froze, hesitating behind her chosen tree.

Lira sighed. "That's not making you look less like prey. Come on out."

No motion.

Lira tilted her head. "Mouse?"

"Who are you talking to, little water sprite?"

Lira whipped around. A huge form loomed over her, cast to a silhouette by the sun beaming directly over their shoulder. They crossed their arms and shook their head. "What are you doing, sneaking around out here?"

"What? Is a water sprite not allowed to wander in the woods? It's like you've never seen a water sprite before," Lira snapped, immediately going on the offensive. From where she stood, hunkered behind her tree, Mouse didn't miss the way Lira's hand tightened

on her umbrella's handle. She was scared, as she should be. Mouse couldn't sense the figure's power level, which meant they were at least a Tier stronger than her, if not two. All she knew, was that they felt immensely powerful. Even more powerful than Rhys.

"Not in the Empire."

"Are you a soldier, then?" she challenged them.

A laugh. "I'm not going to report you, no. I'm no cop."

Lira went to shove past them. "Then good day."

A hand clasped her shoulder. "But I have to know. Why are you sniffing around our base?"

"Sniffing? I was just walking through the forest. You're the one who jumped out of nowhere and grabbed my shoulder. You're being very rude, you know."

There was a long pause. The shadowy figure looked down at Lira, and Lira stared defiantly back. After a moment, they lifted a hand to their chin. "I suppose... are you really just a wild water sprite who happened to take the wrong path?"

"Wrong path? I wasn't aware there was a 'wrong way' through the forest. Isn't this land uninhabited? It belongs to no one," Lira asserted.

The voice scoffed. "Or that's what you thought I'd say." It kicked off the forest floor, and their enormous body blurred out of sight.

Behind her tree, Mouse hunkered. She clasped her hands over her head and squeezed her eyes shut, desperately wishing to not exist at all. *I'm not here, I'm not here, I'm not here!*

A massive paw wrapped around the trunk. A shadow fell over Mouse. She froze, crouched down, holding completely, utterly still, as if she were a statue. Mana rushed through the space in a wave, far greater than she could ever overcome, and washed right through her. She wasn't a leaf on the wind, she was the wind. Something so insignificant that no one should ever even think to look for her.

"...Was I mistaken?" a low voice rumbled to itself. The shadow retreated. A large form approached Lira once more.

Lira harrumphed haughtily, though, perhaps in recognition of what was to come, she spun her hand, transforming her umbrella back into its bracelet state. "Then? Am I free to go, o' lord of the forest?"

“No. Whether it’s merely your misfortune or intentional, you’ve grown too close. You’re one of us now.” The figure swooped Lira up. She struggled, but to no avail. It couldn’t be overthrown.

“Let me go! My father will—”

“What father? Where’s your colony, hmm? Your partner? Water sprites never wander alone. Haven’t you been expelled, you pitiful thing? What, grow too interested in humans? Foolish child. Come along. This is better than being alone, isn’t it?”

Lira struggled harder, but the figure carried her off with ease. Behind the tree, Mouse remained hunkered for a long, long, long time, until the sun set again. Only then did she dare to jump up and run off, fleeing into the forest with silent footsteps.

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

Chapter 146. Emergency

Rhys hovered in his core, contemplating the void. He thought he had a good enough comprehension of it to manipulate it, but that clearly wasn’t the case, when it refused to so much as come when he called. He didn’t understand it at all, or maybe, his understanding was so mistaken that he couldn’t correctly call it.

The void was a space that held garbage, and it had been thrown away by the Empire, at least, so it should qualify as garbage or garbage-related, in Rhys’s opinion. Still, the fact that something was trash-related didn’t equate to him instantly having genius-level comprehension in it, and while he didn’t think he’d have to work twice as hard for half the result, he at least had to expend ordinary effort to understand it, or perhaps even something beyond ordinary effort, since the void seemed only tangentially related to trash, but still; it was close enough to qualify as trash, so he wasn’t throwing his effort into an infinite hole, like he did when he tried to learn fireballs. This was a route worth pursuing, and he was confident that he could succeed, but it wouldn’t be easy, or quick.

Still, the end result was a can that could instantly warp trash to Rhys at any point, even during battle or when he desperately needed trash, so it was worth his effort. He focused on the void while recalling the words of the book at the same time. He still hadn’t fully comprehended the book, or to be honest, made much progress on the book, but it seemed worthwhile to attempt understanding it while considering the void at the same time.

Time passed. Rhys sat before his basket, immersed in his contemplation. The words from the book whirled before his eyes; he’d memorized them long ago, with how many

times he'd read it. At the same time, the void stood before him. It wasn't much to look at, just an empty, hollow hole in space. It didn't whirl or swirl. If he didn't stare at it, it slipped out of his sight, vanishing into a wrinkle in space once more. If he stared at it too much, it closed in on him, threatening to overwhelm him. He had to look at it without looking at it, which was an exercise in of itself without also thinking about the book, but he insisted on keeping the book in his mind at the same time. There was something to that. Something kept shivering at the back of his mind when he recalled the book's words and gazed into the void. The two slowly overlapped, like when he crossed his eyes and started to see two images at once, but in reverse, the two comprehensions slowly merging back into one. What he'd thought was nonsense wasn't nonsense, not before the void. There was a truth to it, a strange echoing truth that only existed in his mind in those brief moments where he held both the book and the void in his perception at the same time. The nonsense began to make sense. The void began to unravel into truth.

A kind of understanding came to him, vague and fuzzy though it was. The void was everywhere, and nowhere. It was everything and nothing. Connected and disconnected. It existed without and within, was a part of the world and completely apart from it. Defining it was impossible, because it was a thing that defied definition, yet it could be defined by its defiance. It was emptiness. It was a lack, not a thing. Trying to hold it wasn't like trying to hold sand, it was like trying to hold the absence of sand; like trying to cup your hand and insert it into a bucket of sand, letting the sand completely cover your palm, then pull your hand out without taking a single grain of sand with it. Like trying to put your hand in water without getting wet.

Yeah, that's definitely the cleaner analogy of those two, Rhys thought, chuckling at himself. Either way, the problem remained the same: how did he take 'nothing' and attach it to 'something?' There wasn't anything to attach to anything else. Or rather, the basket was sitting there just fine; it was the void that was the problem. Knitting something to nothing was a tall order, and the more he considered it, the harder it seemed to become. If he wanted to knit water to the basket, that would've been difficult enough, but to knit the idea of a dry hand underwater to a basket? The absence of not just water—water would've been easy enough, he could've just waterproofed it—but *everything*, to knit that sensation into an object... he was starting to wonder if such a thing was even possible. *It's magic. Magic can do anything*, he told himself, but this particular kind of magic needed him to understand how to do the anything first, and since he didn't understand, he couldn't do it.

Maybe that's what lessons and tomes do for other people, Rhys realized at last. There were no lessons and no tomes for trash-magic. No one had bothered to put them together, for some reason, and his talent was so trash at non-trash magic that he couldn't utilize base tomes or lessons the way other people could, but if he wasn't trash-talent at non-trash magic, then probably, tomes and lessons would explain the understanding part of magic to him, and he wouldn't have to comprehend it all on his own.

Retreating from his mental space, he drew out the red tome and looked it over again. Was that what this was supposed to do? Read this tome and understand the void, thanks to what it said? He snorted, putting it back away. It felt like the tome had actively made his understanding worse, since he was struggling to figure out how it fit into what he understood the void to be, except that the void made so much more sense when he thought about the tome at the same time, so he couldn't abandon it. He sighed aloud. Probably the fact that the tome did an absolute trash job at explaining the void only made it *better* for him, not worse, but it didn't help him emotionally. It was still frustrating as hell.

"Rhys? Are you—oh, I'm so sorry."

Rhys glanced over his shoulder. Korii stood there, looking aghast to have interrupted him in the middle of comprehending a topic. It was a rude thing to do, generally, but Rhys didn't care much about politeness among mages, and it wasn't like he'd announced he was going to wander off to study the void, so she wasn't in the wrong at all. Plus, if she'd come here looking for him, it was probably important. In fact, it was probably about the whole reason he was out here, focusing on the void rather than cooking: because he'd needed a distraction from worrying about Mouse and Lira's quest. It was probably fine. There was no reason to be worried. Mouse was the stealthiest mage he'd ever met. But he knew nothing about their enemy's strength at their hideout, and he felt guilty for not going himself, so he couldn't help but worry. He knew his decision made sense. Someone had to protect *their* home base, so the Water Syndicate couldn't take it down while he was out scouting the Water Syndicate, and between scouting and protecting the home base, protecting the home base was far more important. What he worried about, was that the Water Syndicate had the same priorities, and their base was consequently full of Tier 3 mages while the weak Tier 2s got sent out to attack him.

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It was possible. Unlikely, especially in the Empire, but possible. After all, his tavern was only a small holding. If the Water Syndicate was small, then they were throwing their whole manpower against him to overturn his small holding, which would be a significant portion of their value. If they were big, on the other hand, and this was an insignificant holding which they were putting insignificant strength against—

Rhys shook his head. They'd been sending their children. Surely that meant something.

Logan definitely didn't mean anything.

He had to stop catastrophizing before he actually heard what news Korii had come with. Maybe she'd just come to ask him where the next vat of oil was. As long as he sat here, thinking about a thousand things and also nothing, he'd never find out. So instead, he smiled and stood.

“No, no. I was just getting frustrated and I needed a break. You’re a welcome distraction. What is it?”

Korii stepped aside. At first, Rhys didn’t understand why, but then he blinked, and Mouse was there. She’d always been there, he realized suddenly; he just hadn’t been perceiving her.

“Oh! You’re back. How’d it go?” Relief flooded his system. Rhys looked around. “Where’s Lira?”

Mouse’s face crumpled, and Rhys’s heart plunged. He stepped forward, feeling the need to do something, anything, though he didn’t know what. “No.”

Mouse held her hand up, choking back tears. “She’s—she’s alive, probably. She bluffed, and I think they—” She took a deep breath. “She’s alive. Last I saw, she’s alive. She got captured.”

“What happened? Specifically. In detail,” Rhys clarified.

Mouse took a deep breath, then began. Rhys listened closely, frowning at parts, like where she described how strong the figure felt, or how suspicious they were of people poking around their edges. They were powerful and vigilant. Large? Small? He’d been considering the children the way he’d consider a mortal family’s mortal children, but that wasn’t right. These were mages. They’d been alive for hundreds of years, potentially. They could easily have dozens, and with a little work, hundreds of children. It was a horrifying concept to him, as someone who didn’t like children and had never wanted to have them, but he was sure there were people to whom that proposition sounded amazing. Probably sex-havers.

...Which wasn’t the point. The point was, he’d thought he was killing five-of-maybe-at-most-ten children. He could have instead killed five-of-five-hundred children. That was a staggering difference in scale, and something he hadn’t taken into account at all. He doubted that they had five hundred children, but still. True, Logan *had* said he had three more brothers, which should mean one more after Larry and Leonard, but who knew? Maybe he had three brothers and seventy-two sisters. Maybe he was lying. Maybe he had three full-blooded siblings and five hundred half-blooded siblings, or maybe he was thinking too small for the Water Syndicate, and the ‘single pair of parents’ he’d been assuming this whole time (*for no damn reason*, a little voice whispered in his ear) was actually one man and his giant harem, or a dozen pairs of adult siblings and their children, or a multi-generational family with lots of aunts and uncles and one grandparent set of patriarchs over all of them, such that Logan could truly only have three more siblings, and yet still belong to a huge, sprawling Water Syndicate.

Now that I’m thinking, that kind of makes the most sense, if it’s a huge family divided into areas-slash-segments. Then the Water Syndicate could be small enough to invest significant effort against Rhys’s little snack shack (the local crime family, headed by the

L-brothers' parents), yet large enough to involve a large overall territory and powerful mages who had no right being bothered by a small-scale takeover of a single tavern.

What had those thugs said? "The Waters family lead the most powerful crime syndicate in this area." The most powerful. If it was just one family and their semi-competent Tier 2 siblings, then that made no sense at all. If it was many branches of one large multigenerational family, and this was merely one semi-competent branch of it, then that painted a very different picture.

Rhys licked his lips, trepidatious, and yet also excited. He'd bitten off a lot. Was it more than he could chew? Or had he simply taken on the fastest way to accelerate his plan to rot the Empire from within with trash? If this went well, then he would have made incredible advancements in his ultimate plan.

His excitement was tempered by Lira's situation. He narrowed his eyes. First, he had to get Lira back. Then... then, the rest of the Waters Syndicate. If he couldn't take them over, then maybe he could negotiate. And who knew? He wasn't going to rest on his laurels. He intended to continue growing stronger and stronger, until he could overcome everything. Why not use this Syndicate to initiate his ability to grow stronger?

I'd like my core back before I make a significant advancement... Rhys's thoughts trailed off. He looked down at the trash star within him. Did he? Was that his route? Did he need a core at all? If he had formed his own version of a core, according to his path, was that not superior to the trash-tier core he'd been born with? The System... didn't seem to mind? As long as he had a core and *some* magic, it didn't protest the source of it. In fact, getting hung up on the core at all was all on his part, and nothing from the System side. Hadn't Lira said, too, that her internal construction was so different that the Empress couldn't remove her core? Maybe it was very human of him to care at all. And if the Empress could remove cores but not non-cores, wasn't his trash star a distinct advantage?

None of that mattered. Not right now. Rhys dusted off his shoulders. "I'm headed to the base. Mouse, you and Sable guard the tavern. I'm going to get Lira back."

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

Chapter 147. Dangerous Levers

Rhys didn't hesitate. He'd already made up his mind, so he had to move immediately. After all, there were two options: he waited until they forgot about Lira, then attacked, or he attacked immediately, before they had a chance to move Lira around or seriously injure her. From Mouse's telling of the situation, he chose to act immediately. If they'd

known for sure that Lira was sent here, or that she had backing, then it made more sense to wait, and act as if she was low-value, but they didn't. They hadn't seen Mouse, and Lira had claimed she was alone. They might have doubts about Lira's claim, but that was different than one-hundred-percent expecting someone to come after her. If he acted now, they would still be caught up in doubting, and wouldn't have decided one way or another, whereas if he waited, they would decide their doubt one way or another. They might decide it in Lira's favor, but they might not. Now, before they decided either way, he would strike, wipe out what he could of the Water Syndicate, absorb the rest, and rescue Lira.

No, wait. I've got that backwards. Rescue Lira, then the rest of that. A little shine of fear lived in the depths of his heart. Someone more dangerous than him. Someone far more dangerous. Not strong enough to notice Mouse, but what did that mean? The Empire had overlooked Mouse.

The rest of him pushed back against that fear. He had impurities, poison, and trash by the buckets. What could this mystery figure do against that? Even the Empress feared impurities. If this mage started stronger than him, he could simply impurify them down to his level. Long live debuffs! Long live poison!

Unless the powerful mage oneshot him from across the world. Unless he got headshot from the other side of the map. Unless—

Rhys took a deep breath. All his hellish FPS memories had nothing to do with this situation. The chances the mage could, or would, execute him from miles out without him being able to even react were low. He wasn't going to get spawnkilled. He wasn't going to get hammered every time he poked his head out of cover. He wasn't going to get wallbanged. Safe, safe, safe. He'd be... not safe, but not ok'd without even knowing which direction the bullet had come from.

This wasn't an FPS world anyways, thank goodness. *Well, I'd already be dead if it was.* He'd had no talent at FPSes and no twitch reflexes to speak of. But in this world, he could sense things with his aura. He wouldn't get surprised. Even if the mage was way stronger than him, he would be able to react and at least run away, if not respond.

Why am I so scared? He'd fought before. He'd even fought way stronger mages before. So why—

But no, he knew it. It was because of Lira. Because Lira had been captured. Until now, he'd been winning. He hadn't lost anyone. None of his foes had demonstrated the ability to easily capture the warriors under him, with such strength and acuity that his men and women weren't even able to fight back. From Mouse's telling, the guy had just scooped up Lira. Forget fighting back. Forget resisting. Just swooped her up and taken her home. It... it spooked him more than he'd expected it to.

Sure, the Empire had taken his friends away, from a certain way of looking at things, but that was one thing. The Empire was the Empire. Above-board. So incredibly more powerful than him that it didn't bear thinking about. This was the Water Syndicate. A secret, hidden force that he knew near-nothing about, except that one of its members was capable of capturing Lira single-handedly and suppressing her to the extent that all she could do was flail like a little kid being kidnapped by an adult.

Rhys took a deep breath. *Stop panicking. I don't panic. I've been de-cored by the Empr... by a little white tampon asshat with what felt like a rusty spoon. I spent three years in the mines. I don't panic.*

The image of Laurent as a tampon with a face and little stick arms and legs actually did improve his mood, and Rhys moved on, steadier than before. Not steadily, because Trash Step didn't work like that, and the ground was a mix of knotty tree roots (trash footing) and soft, rich earth (not trash), but steadier. His eyes narrowed, and his thoughts narrowed to a laser focus. Lira. He'd go there, announce nothing, hit the Syndicate so hard they'd feel it for months, rescue Lira, and then, if everything went well, behead their regional leader and install himself in their place.

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I didn't realize how much my people mean to me. That was what this was, start to finish. He was intimidated by whoever had attacked Lira. The prospect of taking on the Water Syndicate alone with no backup made his heart race, but he was marching on anyways. The part that really scared him, the part that actually made him hurt when he poked at it, was the thought of Lira, captured, in danger, threatened unfairly by a dangerous force, all because he'd overestimated her and underestimated the syndicate. She was one of *his*, not anyone else's, and she'd undertaken the mission on his orders, because he'd thought she could handle it. She hadn't been able to, and that was his fault, and his responsibility to rectify it and save her.

Some dim part of him was a little proud that he wasn't hesitating. Another part was terrified of the same. His people were a serious lever. If an enemy realized it, they could seriously harm him. That part of him wanted to stop and think about the long term implications of rushing to save Lira, of what it might indicate to those who wanted to harm him later.

The unhesitating part smacked that part of him in the face. So what? Was he supposed to become a coward and a loner because of that? What a trash conclusion—*something to store away for later*—but honestly, it was something that had always annoyed him. “I have to be alone for your sake.” Ugh. Serious eye roll. He was tired of that line. Never worked out in any of his trashy comics either, so he'd never understood those loner arcs. Since the weak people around the hero would always be captured regardless of whether they were around the hero or not, why push them away? No. Hold them close, utilize their unique skills, grow stronger from their strengths, and if they got caught...

If they got caught, then he'd just have to be strong enough to steal them back.

He'd been slacking lately. He'd been so focused on taking down the Empire from the inside that he'd neglected his own personal growth. But he couldn't neglect that. He'd known it, and knew it still. This plan of his wouldn't work as a low-rank Tier 3.

Eventually, the Empire would realize his tier, and place warriors at all the camps who could oppose him, if they hadn't already; they only didn't already have Tier 3 or 4 warriors there because they needed little to suppress the workers, and no one was going to enter the Empire to free them. The longer he fought, though, the more likely they were to beef up their guards, and Rhys had to be ready when it happened.

He closed his eyes, trusting himself to Trash Step for a few beats. He wouldn't neglect it any longer. He'd get stronger. First, by mastering the void and distributing trash cans all over the Empire that could suck up all their trash, and possibly even act as a teleportation network for him, if everything went right. After that... well, if the trash cans really worked the way he hoped they would, they'd be an ideal way for him to discover new Impure Wells. He'd suck up all the Empire's wells, and then...

And then, he didn't know. Look for pieces of Straw? That could happen in coordination with the wells. Find new curses? If nothing else, the rider's skeleton would get more filled out. Hopefully some horse would show up in the mix at some point. Reforge the sun sword? He was tempted, but was still afraid he lacked the skill. He hadn't tried swordsmithing at all, and the sun sword... he got one shot at it. If it went wrong, that was it. No more sun sword.

Maybe I should look for a talented swordsmith, rather than DIY-ing it. It was a very un-trashy thought of him. Treating a priceless artifact to a DIY makeover was the ULTIMATE trashy thing to do. Why, he could think of a fantastic image of Jesus Christ that had been absolutely DIY'd into something... *unrecognizable* was the best word, back in his homeworld. Sure, he couldn't hope to restore the sun sword to its pristine glory that way, and he might in fact destroy it past salvage, but for him, wasn't that the same as improving it?

Rhys chuckled under his breath. *I'll keep it in mind.* He still wasn't sure he wanted to touch the sun sword at all. The immense power in it far exceeded what he'd felt from Aquari, and she was a Schoolmaster. To this day, he could still treat it as an ultimate weapon. A last-ditch attack with his all behind it, that, if his gauges of power were at all accurate, would inflict a serious blow to the Empress herself. Not a killing blow, no, but a serious blow.

He touched his storage ring. He'd brought it. It, and his corrosive potion. Just in case. Ideally, neither would come into play, but he wanted all options on the table. He'd use the potion first, but if it came down to it, he'd use the sun sword to free Lira. He wasn't leaving here without her.

Seriously, that second, hesitant voice whispered, *your people are a dangerous lever.*

And the Water Syndicate was about to find out how dangerous.

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

Chapter 148. Full Frontal

Mouse had given him a map and a very detailed rundown on how to reach the Water Syndicate, and it wasn't hard for him to locate it with her map and description. He wasn't directionally gifted himself, but he wasn't challenged either, so he only got lost once or twice before he encountered one of her landmarks and knew to adjust his path. Her notes included a bunch of circles around the particular ravine and an extra set of red lines around the upper edges of the ravine along with the words EXTREME DANGER!!!, which would have been funny if Lira's life wasn't on the line. As it was, he took her words to heart and did exactly what the Water Syndicate wanted him to do. Without hesitation, he marched directly into the ravine's mouth, throwing himself to the belly of the stone beast.

This was not going to be subtle or stealthy. He was charging in, and he was doing it head-on. They were getting the full frontal, whether they wanted it or not.

I should've worn a trench coat, he noted amusedly, not that this world had something like that. The secondary implications of that thought hit him like a train, and he laughed again, more darkly. Oh, yeah. This was definitely trench coat territory.

Since he was in his villain era, he had decided to dress the part. He'd borrowed some black robes and red face paint, smearing the latter across his forehead and letting it drip all the way down his face and dry in globs. It ran down his face in rivulets, collecting in his eyelids, then dripping down again, as though he was crying blood. His fingers had been dyed crimson by the effort, and he left them that way. A wide-brimmed, dark hat with hanging veils finished the look. It obscured the facepaint for now, but sometimes, the most important part of a costume was the moment of reveal. Being able to easily remove some small component to show someone a surprise, even in a passing moment where someone called his character's name in a hallway, was something he'd done a few times to great effect back in his cosplay days, and when he was going for dramatic effect, there was nothing wrong with leaning on those days a little more than usual. It wasn't as though he thought the surprise would make anyone pause in battle—though he wouldn't mind if they did—but rather, his character motive today was the battle-frenzied madman.

It wasn't his actual motive, but since he'd realized he had dangerous levers, he'd also realized he needed to hide them. If he came here as Lira's vengeful boss and failed, lost, or otherwise had to retreat before he found Lira, Lira would be in danger, and far more danger than she'd been when he'd started, at that. No. Especially if the Water Syndicate was larger than he'd thought, he wanted to rescue her while giving the minimal information about himself away. Therefore, he was a battle-crazed madman who'd come here to test his skills. His sword skills were enough, from his days with Bast and Straw, to manage to appear that way against the low-level members of their group, and if he started pulling out esoteric skills later, then the Water Syndicate would simply assume he'd gotten serious and been forced to actually fight with all he had, including his dirty tricks, when in reality Rhys was nothing but a box of dirty tricks.

He was using this world's philosophy of 'hold some skills back to disguise your true strength until you're pushed to your limits' against it, and he wasn't afraid to admit it. Besides, it really made more sense than a lot of armchair fighters thought it did. Sure, in a world with guns, why worry about 'concealing skills' when one bullet ended the conversation regardless? But in a world with magic, if he one-shot every low-tier mage with his highest-power skill, not only did he waste mana and trash, but he also revealed his strongest attack right out the gate. Other mages could watch him fight and learn how to counter his strongest move. When he fought those mages, who were at his power level, later, their ability to counter his strongest move, his ace, without revealing or using their own ace, would leave him at a significant disadvantage, and could even be the difference between life and death.

Now, a slow battle of escalation was ridiculous, too; there was no reason for every battle between Tier 3 mages to start with Tier 1 swordplay and a slow escalation through the ranks of Tier 2 before finally hitting Tier 3. Although Rhys did enjoy reading those battles, he had to admit, yeah, real battles didn't work like that; unless there was an extreme need to conserve mana, they'd simply start by striking one another with their Tier 3 moves and escalate from there, and even in a situation where they needed to conserve mana, it might earnestly be cheaper in mana to start from Tier 3 skills. But still; spells weren't bullets, and magic wasn't a gun. There was a reason aces were left in the hole, rather than being fired off right off the bat.

Of course, if he saw an opportunity to decapitate the head of the Water Syndicate with a quickshot from his ace skill, would he hold back? Probably not, but it really would depend on the situation. If there were a dozen other powerful mages around who he'd have to fight afterwards, it would depend on whether he could defeat all of them without his ace, too, since they'd have seen it and have a chance to counter it.

Not that Rhys was going to complain too loudly. If most people thought it was a trashy way to fight, then who was he to argue it wasn't? He wasn't a hundred percent sure how his trash path interacted with abstract concepts like that, but if he could eke a boost out of it, he wouldn't complain. Of course, he was talking about a complex, abstract concept that had mostly been perceived as trash back on his homeworld, while it was generally accepted as a fact of life here, so who knew if he could boost it with his path or not?

Future considerations. For now, he'd rescue Lira, crush the Water Syndicate, then subsume it, then go ponder the void until he could make his trash cans.

Rhys almost laughed, then let himself laugh aloud. What a ridiculously easy set of goals he had before him. Certainly, certainly, he could complete them with no problem, right?

"Hello there, young man. You seem a jolly fellow. I wonder what a jolly fellow such as yourself is doing in this neck of the woods?"

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Rhys looked up, keeping his head slightly bent so the veils hid his facepaint completely, while angling his chin so the gap in the veils aligned with one of his eyes. His lone visible eye locked onto the other man's, and the two of them gazed at each other for a beat.

He'd known the man was following him for some time now, though he'd pretended to be ignorant. This man, whoever he was, hadn't felt particularly powerful to Rhys, so he wasn't surprised that he wasn't facing the terrifying giant Mouse had described, but rather a wiry figure in green robes with a snake swirling over them. The wiry man perched in a nearby tree, leaning against its trunk lazily, one leg dangling down, the other propped on the branch. From his pose, Rhys would've thought he'd been sitting there all along if he hadn't been tracking the man's mana signature for the last half hour.

It turned out that hanging around Mouse was a great way to train his passive detection abilities. It wasn't as though he'd been actively trying to sense Mouse all the time, but he did sometimes try to find or sense her, and even when he didn't actively seek her out, the same part of his mana sense that passively kept track of everyone and everything magical around him had been passively tracking Mouse, to the extent it could. On top of that, he'd had every single mage under his leadership learn a mana-signature suppressing or disguising skill. There wasn't a single person around him that wasn't suppressing their aura to some extent or another at all times, and yet, Rhys had been casually using his mana signature to detect them this whole time, subconsciously straining a little harder than usual without realizing it. As a result, even though he hadn't noticed, his mana senses had become extraordinarily sensitive to low-grade, disguised, and hidden signatures, and the man in the tree now was no great talent, so he'd stood out to Rhys like a beacon.

It was honestly a little embarrassing how easily he'd picked the guy out. If he told the man, he imagined Mr. Snake Robes would be mortified. Still, he wasn't here to brag about his mana senses, so Rhys arched a single brow, as if he was trying to suppress a reaction, when really it was the opposite: he was trying to express a reaction.

The effect of arching one brow was diminished by the veiled hat, but that was the price he had to pay for fashion.

At last, it registered that the man had asked him a question and expected an answer. Rhys knew why he was here, and he knew what he was going to do, but to the man and the rest of the Water Syndicate, he was just someone wandering in the woods in gloomy robes. He was so laser focused that he'd forgotten that from outside, there was nothing at all to indicate anything special about him.

He cleared his throat. "I'm merely a jolly fellow wandering through the woods. Is there a problem with that?"

Knowing what they'd done to Lira, he knew the answer, but why not play along?

Snake Robes clicked his tongue. "Really. A stray merchant, lost from his caravan? Or are you a student from one of those military academies, full of righteousness, who *just happened* to get lost down this ravine by *total happenstance*?"

Rhys raised his brows. A certain tampon-looking white-haired student with far too much righteousness for someone who scooped the cores out of people with all the dexterity of a drunken monkey came to mind, and he gave Snake Robes a look. "What if I was?"

Snake Robes snorted. "Then I would advise you to find another route. You aren't ready for this one yet, child. The Empire doesn't care as much about your bones as you think it does. You'll rot here with all the rest, and there will *not* be a military force that comes down upon our heads to eradicate us. The Empress has her hands full with the war. That Sword Saint of theirs was more powerful than she expected, apparently."

"Oh?" Rhys quickly repressed the excitement that welled up at hearing that the Sword Saint was still alive. It wasn't as if he'd doubted it. If the Sword Saint died, he was pretty sure the rest of their region would go belly-up pretty quick, and there'd be no war, no more work camps, no more fighting. The Empress wouldn't be distracted by the fighting, and she'd focus on consolidating the territory she'd taken instead. Rhys would suddenly find his little chips and fries operation far more scrutinized than it was during wartime, and his dreams of taking down the Empire from the inside would grow far more distant, without the external pressure of a war to cause damage from the outside at the same time that he damaged the inside.

Why am I pretending? I'm just glad that Bast is still alive. If the Sword Saint was alive, then his apprentice was almost certainly alive as well. If the Sword Saint was dead, then Bast was definitely dead as well. It wasn't as if the Sword Saint being alive guaranteed his friend was, too, but the odds went up. Way up. Way up. Way up.

It was very like him to get analytic when faced with something so emotional. His and Bast's relationship was... weird, to say the least, and he hadn't been lying when he'd explained it to Az, but to say it wasn't as genuine as it was calculated was...

No, or rather, the calculation is how I explain it being genuine?

The end result was, he didn't want Bast to die. And he really would do everything in his power to keep it that way.

"Why are you smiling?" Snake Robes asked.

Rhys touched the edge of his hat. "You really wouldn't believe me."

"Try me."

Instead, Rhys drew his sword. An unbroken one. The broken one stayed close at hand, hidden in his robes, but that was for later. For now, he was going to commit to the bit. A wandering swordsman who'd stumbled upon the ravine and decided to dispense a little justice. And since Snake Robes had so kindly reminded him that 'wandering swordsman' wasn't really a thing that happened in the Empire, it was time for a little improv on his backstory. He wasn't just a wandering swordsman, but a dissatisfied military student who was here to impose his righteousness on this ravine by *dressing up* as a wandering swordsman.

To himself, Rhys thought, *Who would've expected all my time roleplaying and playing DnD would come in handy?* As a chronic lazy asshole who couldn't be assed to make a character ahead of time, he was the number one most skilled at adapting his backstory on the fly—a truly trashy skillset that had most DMs suspicious of him not putting in the effort, if they didn't figure it out and become outright enraged instead. So today... today, he was Evil Laurent, and Evil Laurent was here to impose Lawful Good upon all the evildoers, and probably suck their cores out, too, while he was at it. In the name of the law, of course. And righteousness, or whatever.

I promise I'll do it more gently than the real Laurent. Not that anyone here will survive the experience.

Snake Robes raised his brows. He unwound from the tree and dropped soundlessly to the ground, almost like a snake uncoiling from a branch. "You'll regret this, kid."

He wagged the sword in a really vague approximation of the way Laurent had opened his volley in their duel and grinned, knowing Snake Robes couldn't see it past all the veils. "En garde."

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