

God of Trash

- Chapter 15. A Natural Alliance

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BOOM!

The earth shook. The house trembled. A wave of force blasted into Rhys and Tarais, sending both of them stumbling back. Black smoke billowed out of the windows, chimneys, and doors of the house.

Rhys looked at Tarais. "Should we, uh, help?"

Tarais stood casually, her hands clasped behind her. "No, this is fine."

"Is it?" Rhys muttered to himself.

A few seconds later, Sorden came staggering out of the door, chased by a gout of dark smoke. She coughed heavily, waving her hand in front of her face, then looked up. Finding two students in front of her, she beamed. "Good afternoon! Anything I can help you with?"

"Er, anything we can help you with?" Rhys returned.

Sorden looked at him, lost, then glanced over her shoulder at her still-smoking house. She laughed. "No, no. I was experimenting with a new pill formula, and it didn't work out, that's all. This happens all the time."

Pillmaking is more dangerous than I thought. Rhys eyed the black smoke for another beat, then put it to the back of his mind and smiled. "I've discovered a way to farm herbs on the mountain. Would you be interested in purchasing my herbs?"

She raised her brows. "Let's see the herbs you've made. Depending on their quality, I might be interested."

With a customer-service smile, Rhys drew out samples of his herbs and offered them to her. "If you're interested, I'm willing to offer you a twenty-percent discount below market price in return for your protection."

Sorden chuckled. She took the herbs from him and examined them. “We’ll see, we’ll see.”

Rhys tucked his hands behind his back and waited. He closely watched her. This was his first time seeing an herb examination. What she looked for would tell him a lot about what to work toward in the future.

Sorden gave them a quick visual inspection. She glanced up, and seeing Rhys’ eyes on her, gestured him closer. “The cut at the base of the herbs is a bit crude, but the shape and quantity of the leaves is good. There’s no damage from bugs, which is impressive, especially on this mountain. Nor is there any sun, heat, or water damage. These herbs appear to have been grown in a very controlled, stable environment.”

He nodded. Half of that was true. The environment was incredibly stable, since he’d grown all the herbs in the space of a few hours rather than over a few weeks or months. Controlled, not so much, but so be it.

“Before a deeper internal examination, their aura is also good, bright and healthy. If I didn’t know better, I’d guess they were grown with mana constantly piped into them. You rarely get this kind of aura, even with farmed herbs. It’s something you see with herbs that grow naturally near mana springs.” She glanced at him again. “If you found a mana spring... I’m not going to look into your business, but be aware, the other students will be *very* interested in finding it. That kind of resource should be reported immediately to the school.”

Rhys nodded slowly, digesting her hint. She was basically warning him that the stronger students would steal it from him, so he was better off reporting it to a teacher and getting the credit for finding a resource for the school, rather than hiding it for himself and risking another student taking his glory from him by force. *Of course, I didn’t find anything like that. But I should keep in mind that the other students might want to discover my trash secret eventually. No—Tarais is already enough warning of that. I need to closely guard my mana generation secrets. This school only needs one Trash Lord, and that’s me!*

Sorden turned back to the herbs. She closed her eyes and examined it with her mana. One second passed. Two. Three.

Her eyes shot open. She grabbed Rhys’ hand. “Forget a twenty-percent discount. I’ll buy these herbs from you at market price *and* provide backing for you. However you’re growing these herbs, keep doing it. If anyone interrupts you, I’ll personally make sure they never dare bother you ever again.”

Rhys grinned. “Of course. I knew I was right to bring them to you, Professor. You were the first person I thought of, and I never considered going to anyone else. Only someone as dignified as you could see the full potential of these herbs.”

Beside him, Tarais gave him a look.

“Good, good. A good student like you knows to trust your professor,” Sorden said, patting his shoulder in a familiar way.

“Yes, of course,” Rhys agreed, as someone who had been to exactly one class in his learning career.

She pocketed the sample herbs and reached into her pocket. “When you grow more herbs of this quality, reach out to me. I’ll be happy to buy—”

“Er, excuse me, but...” Rhys drew all the herbs out of his storage ring and set them in piles beside her.

With every pile, Sorden’s eyes grew wider. She darted from pile to pile, checking the herbs from each one. “Impossible. Impossible. How are they all that high quality?”

Rhys bowed. “Please allow a student to keep his secrets.”

“Naturally. You can keep all the secrets you want, as long as you keep supplying me with herbs this powerful. There wasn’t a single impurity in any of these herbs. Not a single one. How—”

Rhys smiled mysteriously. *There aren’t any impurities because I put all the impurities in me.* Not that he was going to admit that. Someone else might muscle in on his market.

Sorden raised her hand again. “Don’t tell me. Here.”

She reached into her pocket and drew out an unrealistically large bag. There was absolutely no way the bag could have fit in her pocket, but in the face of a giant bag of money, Rhys didn’t question it. He accepted the bag and checked its insides.

Gold glittered back at him. An immense quantity of gold, more gold than he’d ever seen in person in any life. Rhys immediately choked the bag shut and hid it in his storage ring. *Holy shit. I’m rich!*

“Are you locked to these herbs? That is, could you grow other herbs?” Sorden asked.

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“As long as the growing process is simple. If it requires a particular time, location, light, soil, or water, I cannot grow it... or would have a more difficult time.”

“What if I supplied the soil and water?” she asked.

Rhys considered. "I won't guarantee it, and I can't say how quickly I could get it back to you, but I could try."

"That's good enough for me." She turned toward her house, only to find black smoke still issuing forth. She rolled her eyes and clapped. A gale-force wind burst from her palms and instantly cleared the smoke from the house... along with most of her lighter-weight personal items. Waving her hand, she called her personal items to her and walked back inside with the practiced air of someone who had done this a thousand times.

Tarais stared at Rhys. The second Sorden disappeared, she leaned in. "How did you grow herbs that even impressed Professor Sorden? I've never seen her this excited about Tier 1 herbs before."

"Let a man keep his secrets," Rhys intoned, looking at her from under his eyelids.

She rolled her eyes at him.

Sorden came back out with a small pot and a jug of water. Rhys accepted them and put them in his storage ring. Once he'd stowed them, she held up a small, star-shaped seed pod. It reminded him of star anise, almost, but it was a shimmering white instead of dark.

"This is a Star Ice herb. Despite its name, it doesn't need cold or nighttime light. What it does need, is incredibly pure mana. I've never been able to generate pure enough mana for the seed to sprout instead of wither. This is my last seed." She took a deep breath, then handed it over to Rhys.

Rhys carefully accepted it. Despite the weight of Sorden's words, it was incredibly light. So light he barely felt its weight on his hand.

"I won't blame you if you failed. I've failed enough times that I... my heart has a snag whenever I attempt it any more. In my current state, I think I could never accomplish it. I'm too hung up on the process. But you... you've already succeeded to produce pure enough mana. If you could successfully sprout this Star Ice seed, I would pay you twice as much as I've paid you so far. No—five times as much."

Rhys' eyes widened. *Hooooooly shit! Hell yeah! Easy, too easy!* If all the seed needed was pure mana, then he could absolutely provide that. It wasn't even hard. In fact, it was the default.

Beside him, Tarais stared with her jaw dropped. She looked Rhys up and down, confusion shining in her eyes. *What is this student? How is the trash collector this good at growing herbs?*

Externally, he nodded with a serious expression and put the seed carefully into his storage ring. "I'll do my best."

"Water it with the Glittering Dew once an hour while it's receiving mana. Replenish the water if the soil gets dry," Sorden informed him. "That's all it takes. It's a relatively easy herb."

Rhys nodded. A smidge of concern welled up in him at that. He could provide mana, but when he was acting as a conduit, that was all he could really do. Under the enhanced, faster growing process he could induce, would the seed need watering more often? And if it did, could he do anything about it? He was pushed to his limits just channeling the mana. He didn't have the time or mobility to do anything else.

He looked at Tarais. She glanced around her, then frowned and pointed at herself. "Something on my face?"

"No... I'll tell you later." Rhys looked away. He didn't want to give away any of his secrets, even obliquely. Not that he didn't trust Sorden, but well, he had no reason to trust Sorden. She was a more powerful mage with access to far more resources than him. She backed him because of his technique, but this whole time, she'd deliberately refused to even ask for hints as to how he did it. Rhys understood perfectly. If she knew how to do it, she'd be tempted to eliminate the middleman, as it were. Sure, she might not. She might be a good person who valued her students, or a lazy person who didn't want to do all the hard work herself. But better for all of them if he simply didn't tempt her.

Instead, he'd broach the subject once he was out of Sorden's hearing range. He nodded at Sorden. "If that's all, then I'll take my leave."

"Please. And don't forget to come to class, unless it interferes with growing the herbs!" Sorden replied cheerfully. She waved as the two of them walked away.

Rhys nodded. Sorden was a woman with her mind in the right place. Who needed class when you could spend your time doing far more important things?

Of course, it wasn't as if there was no value to learning. Now that he had the piles of trash under control, and would only need to do weekly trash pickup, plus had a technique that made him stronger based on the amount of trash he collected, there was no reason not to check out the classes. Before, when he'd had trash-tier stats and no ability to grow stronger, it would have been foolish to go to classes. The other students would bully him, and he'd have no option but to take it. Even going to the one potion class he had, had only been out of necessity, and not only that, but he'd been bullied there. Not effectively, but the effort was made, and that was the point.

But mostly he was considering going to class because he had to wait for trash to accumulate before he could attempt growing Sorden's Star Ice plant. Not only that, but

he had no idea how much mana her seed required. He wanted at least twice as much trash as the first batch of herbs had taken before he'd attempt germinating it, just to be sure he had enough. And that might not be enough. The seed was at least a Tier 2 herb, from its aura. Between Tier 1 and Tier 2, the power required to grow things didn't increase linearly. It increased exponentially. Ten times the trash might be a better idea.

And maybe that was overkill. After all, he'd grown dozens of herbs with the first garbage pile. If he poured all of an equivalently sized pile into this one seed, maybe it would be enough.

Better safe than sorry. Still, that only meant even more waiting. He frowned. He had to find a way to generate more trash, faster. Either that, or...

Rhys turned toward the top of the mountain. This whole time, he'd remained on the lower half, where disciples were allowed. The top of the mountain was for the most powerful members of the school. A small, select handful of experts at high Tiers lived up there, secluded from the student and teaching life of their lessers.

Kind of like academia in my world, Rhys thought.

He hadn't been allowed to pick up garbage up there. The upper half of the peak was just as overridden as the lower half had been, but that garbage... even the scent of it was already a force at the Tier 2 level. If he could burn that glorious filth, the mana he could gather from a single scrap would outshine all the garbage he'd burned so far.

If he could handle it at all. It was powerful stuff. His mana systems had been pushed to their limits handling that first pile. He was pretty confident he could now handle a bigger pile of low-Tier trash, thanks to the strengthening he'd received from pile number one, but the mana he'd be able to obtain from that upper-region trash...

Rhys shivered in anticipation. He dragged his eyes away. *Later. For now, I'll strengthen myself until I can take on that trash. Once I'm ready, then I'll go make my case to the Schoolmaster.*

When they were far enough from Sorden, he nodded at Tarais. "Are you open in about..." He paused for a moment, mentally calculating the accumulation speed of trash. "...Four weeks?"

That would get him a regular-sized pile of trash, with no intervention or discovery of new piles of trash on his part. He planned to go trash-hunting, too, but four weeks was the bare minimum of time he'd need to have the minimum trash required to attempt growing the seed. The piles he'd picked up wouldn't re-accumulate, but then, trash *did* decay over time. Lots of it had already decayed in his first pile, and he'd lost out on lots of wonderful trash. Plus, the older low-Tier trash like this was, the more mana it decayed, so the existing piles of trash hadn't had as much mana trapped inside them as the new ones.

The higher-Tier trash on the top of the mountain was different. It held its mana. The whole time he was here, it hadn't decayed. In fact, the mana might have enriched itself ever so slightly.

Tarais considered. "I'll be available. Why?"

"Come to my house in four weeks' time. I have a job for you," Rhys replied mysteriously.

The job, of course, was supplying the seed with water. He wanted the absolute minimum number of people to know about his trash technique. Tarais had already seen him using it, so he wasn't too worried about bringing her back to see it again. Plus, something about her told him that she didn't have much interest in trash techniques. Her loss, but nonetheless, something that made her all the more trustworthy.

She nodded. "Certainly."

And now, with nothing better to do, all his affairs settled, and no needs but the passage of time to let trash accumulate... it was time for Rhys to do something he rarely did. Something he'd actively avoided as much as possible in his first life. Something he was loath to do even in this one, even with the promise of fireball-shooting on the line.

It was time to go to class.

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

Chapter 16. Go To Class

It was still early enough in the day for classes to be proceeding. Rhys strolled around the main square, considering his options. Potions again... but he might as well attend a few other classes just to learn what they were. Plus, potions were mostly rote memorization. He'd only attended a practical lesson to learn how to operate a cauldron. Now that he'd done that, he pretty much just needed to read recipes and follow them. He had enough practice cooking for one that he could manage that much.

Basically, he didn't want to attend any class that was designed to force small children into rote memorization. He already knew how to memorize things, and had the discipline to do it, besides. He'd gain more out of reading a book than attending one of those classes.

The other thing was, as Straw had indicated, this was less a *school* and more a *gathering of fish*, or rather, mages. The classes were generally shaped around what the elder mages wanted to teach, rather than what low-level mages needed to learn. Sure, there were a few designed for the children, like Sorden's potions, a mana-gathering class, and a class about how to gain, and then activate, skills, but aside from the bare essentials necessary to qualify as a mage, the rest of the classes were completely random. 'Advanced Astronomy,' that appeared to just be astronomy, 'The Search for Nightdark Truffles and the Usage of Pig-type Beasts to Find Them,' that seemed to be a rote-memorization kind of cooking class, and 'On the Appreciation of Mustelids,' which, when he peeked his head in, really was just about appreciating ferrets. There was nothing magical about the class, but also a shocking lack of live mustelids, which was unfortunate. He considered attending that one, but reconsidered when he saw the entire lecture hall was vacant and the professor, an old man in tattered clothes, was rambling on to himself. He tucked that one into the back of his mind for later, but left it behind for fairer waters for today. Best to skim the waves before he plunged deep, as it were.

The mana-gathering class was meant for Tier 0 mages, so he was already too high-Tier for it. Not only that, but it really was the most basic of basics. Rhys listened for long enough to understand he already understood everything they were teaching, but no longer. He popped his head into the skill class in hopes it might teach him something like an ignition skill, but the teacher was focused on teaching young mages how to activate their first skills, rather than teaching useful skills. He listened for a while, but quickly understood that there was nothing worth learning here. When the teacher suggested advanced students might attend the library to read skill manuals in hopes of learning skills from their pages, he stood up and outright left. If the teacher was telling him to go to the library, he certainly didn't need to stick around here.

Rhys didn't go to the library immediately, however. That was definitely a rest-of-the-day, maybe rest-of-the-four-weeks kind of task. Instead, he headed to the final remaining basics class: the martial arts lesson.

He heard the class before he saw it. Dozens of children, shouting throaty cries with each blow. They walked through basic forms one strike at a time. He stood at the back, watching with his arms crossed. There was nothing wrong with their practice, but the fighting style was... how to say? Simple. Compared to Straw's dynamic style, or even Bast's scrappy streetfighting, it was very *pure*. Purehearted. Clean. Straightforward. Nothing wrong with that, especially for beginners, but it wasn't anything he needed to learn. He'd be better off continuing to practice what he'd already learned from Straw and Bast.

Rhys turned to leave, only to find himself inches from an absolute wall of muscle. Rhys stumbled back, startled. A huge bulk of a man loomed over him with a manic smile on his face. He reminded Rhys of his high school gym teacher, though slightly less balding and a little more handsome.

“Why so quick to leave? There’s no need to be shy. Come on, join in on the fun!” The man pushed Rhys toward the field of practicing disciples.

“I’m just here to observe,” Rhys excused himself, and tried to dodge around the man.

The man’s body blurred. He blocked Rhys’ way once more. “It never hurts to grow stronger. Even a dedicated mage can use martial arts.”

“I agree, I agree,” Rhys said, and dodged the other way.

Again, the man blocked his way. “If you agree, then why not join in?”

“I have my own technique I’d rather practice. *Alone*,” Rhys emphasized. He faked a dodge to the left. The man appeared to block his way, and he whirled around and dodged right, fleeing at top speed.

A hand closed around the back of his neck. Rhys dug his heels in, only to be lifted bodily by the throat. The man marched him to the front of the class. Rhys struggled the whole way, kicking and punching, but his attacks bounced off the man’s powerful body.

“So, you think you’re too strong for lessons?” the man rumbled, loud enough that the whole class turned and stared. They stopped practicing forms, and simply watched instead.

Rhys kicked the man in the gut. This time, the man released him. He flipped head-over-heels and landed, instantly pivoting to face the man. There was definitely something to learn from this man. He had never thought that he was the strongest martial artist in the school. He’d only thought that learning a whole new style—one built for beginners, at that—wasn’t worth his time.

But if this man was going to give him pointers, one-on-one, then he welcomed the challenge. He hadn’t really had a chance to test his strength on anyone but Straw and Bast. And he hadn’t gotten to test his strength at all since he had empowered himself with trash and impurities. His spat with Tarais hardly counted, since he was empowered by his active impurity-burning technique during that fight. *That* was a test of how high he could possibly push his limits, the answer of which was: high enough to fight up a Tier. What this was, right here, was a test of his base strength. Without empowering himself actively with any techniques, how far could he go?

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Rhys and the man faced each other. The man stood there, one hand raised, the other behind his back. He wagged his fingers, clearly inviting Rhys to attack.

It was a trap. Of course it was. He'd fought Straw enough times to recognize that. But what was he going to do, not fight? The man was testing his strength as much as Rhys was. What this really meant, was that he was offering Rhys a free hit. And Rhys, well, he was a trashy guy. If someone offered him a free hit, he wasn't going to turn it down.

Rhys called on his mana and charged in. He struck the man's chest with all the strength he could muster.

His fist landed on the man's open palm instead. The man's eyes were wide, surprise clearly written on his face. He flexed his hand. "Interesting. That's a powerful strike, there. Who taught you how to do that?"

"Do what, put mana in my punches? Isn't it obvious?" Rhys asked, hopping back. The man had blocked. That meant he'd considered Rhys' strike dangerous.

On the other hand, Rhys' fist was now a bruised mess. He took the opportunity to sip his potion and heal the wound quickly. The man's hands and body were tougher than they looked. Maybe even magically enhanced at a passive level. Thus far, Rhys had only considered mana as a way to empower his strikes. Defensive empowerment had always been out of his reach. But if he could learn a technique to invest it into his body, and transform his body into something tougher... That was something worth considering. His body was pretty trash-tier right now. If it was possible to make it more powerful, there was no reason not to.

He'd tried to empower it the standard way by slowly imbuing it with mana, before, under Straw's tutelage, but he'd never had much success. This man, though, had a body more defensive than Straw's, as far as Rhys could tell. He could punch Straw without taking damage, for example. That implied that the man had some kind of technique or skill that helped him empower his body. If that was the case, then maybe, with the help of that technique or skill, Rhys could succeed where he'd failed before.

The man grunted. "My name is Cynog. You are?"

"Rhys," he replied.

Cynog raised his brows. "That's why I don't recognize you. You've just arrived! So, you're the Strawman's disciple."

Rhys lowered his head. That wasn't how he wanted to be known, but he didn't have an option. "Yes."

A few of the other students took a second look at him. They knew him as the garbage collector, not as the Strawman's disciple. They frowned at one another. He heard whispers behind him: "Not him, surely." "No way." "He's...?"

Cynog paid the whispers no mind. He gestured at Rhys once more, one hand still folded behind his back. "Let's see what the Strawman taught you. Hold nothing back. If you can get me to lift my other hand, I'll acknowledge that you don't need to participate in our class."

Rhys drew his broken sword. He didn't activate Trash Intent, not yet. Holding it slightly behind him, he faced Cynog. This time, he was going to make the man use both hands. He'd be taking that hand out from behind his back whether he wanted to or not.

This battle wasn't favorable to him. He'd always been the weakest one in his skirmishes with Straw and Bast, but both of them were high-speed fighters. Rhys was good at backstepping and dodging, parrying and gaining space. He wasn't good at full-frontal assaults on powerful tanks. Telling him to 'hold nothing back' in this situation was... it wasn't that he was holding back, but that this situation was highly non-optimal for his strengths.

But if this is a weakness of mine, that just means it's one I have to shore up. If I face a powerful tank in real battle, I can't just say, 'oh, I'm sorry, I'm not good at that.' The tank would simply take control of the battle and crush him underfoot like an empty soda can. This was an opportunity to test his techniques against tanks.

For a few seconds, the two of them stared at one another, watching for weaknesses. Rhys gathered his mana. His body grew warm as the mana coursed through him, and his limbs strengthened. He kicked off the ground and darted close, drawing back his free hand.

Cynog watched him come, his hand ready to block. He shifted his stance for Rhys' left-handed strike.

At the last second, Rhys activated Trash Intent. He swept his sword forth, striking toward Cynog's chest. The glowing blade arced through the air.

Cynog widened his eyes. Faster than Rhys could track, he yanked his hand out from behind his back and caught Rhys' wrist mid-swing. The blade glowed, humming a hair's breadth from his flesh. "Weapon intent...? No... but it's similar. What is this?"

Rhys twisted his wrist free and hopped back. He'd succeeded, but that was all. He had no illusions about the gap in strength between him and this man. If Cynog was fighting seriously, he wouldn't stand a chance. Even with the man standing still and letting him strike him, totally off-guard, he couldn't get past the man's defenses to try Trash Intent on his tough skin.

It wasn't that he couldn't learn anything, it was just that the class wasn't worth it for him. If Cynog was willing to teach him more than the bare basics, he was willing to learn. Especially if he'd teach Rhys that defensive body strengthening technique.

Cynog lifted his hand before Rhys could charge in again. “Enough.”

Rhys hopped back, putting a little distance between him and Cynog. The blade flickered out, leaving nothing but the broken stub of a sword again. He could keep it active for longer, but there was no need to show the entire student body exactly how long he could use Trash Intent.

Cynog waved his hand. “I’ll concede that you don’t need to attend class. You can go.”

“Will you teach me how to strengthen my body like yours?” Rhys asked.

“Would you tell me all your secrets, if I asked?” Cynog replied.

Rhys lowered his head, acknowledging it. On second thought, he probably wouldn’t be able to comprehend Cynog’s technique, anyways. Not if it didn’t have anything to do with trash. His stats were bad at everything, unless they were aimed at his obsession, his path. The idea that he could strengthen his body’s toughness was already enough for him. Stronger defenses would make it easier for him to survive in this world, when he could easily be just another piece of garbage, thrown away on the side of the road. He could let the connection between defenses and trash brew in the back of his mind while he worked, and see if he couldn’t figure it out.

He put the scrap of sword away and walked off. In the end, he hadn’t found a class for him. It wasn’t entirely unexpected. They taught classes for normal students, not people who were trash. That meant he only had one place to go.

It was time to investigate the library.

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

Chapter 17. Chilling in the Library

The library sprawled over a good chunk of the mountainside. It stood tall, its façade as grand as any of the lecture halls. The steps leading up to its front door were dusty, and when Rhys pushed on the door, it creaked and halted an inch in, its hinges all but rusted shut. He frowned and pushed harder. The rust broke off with a crack, and the door swung open.

Almost before he stepped inside, an indolent voice called, “Who goes there?”

"No one," Rhys shouted back.

There was silence, then a grunt that echoed through the vaulted halls. "Better be."

Black-and-white checkered tile spread underfoot. Rich, dark wood clad the walls. Shelves bent in the middle, laden with books. Some were tidy and neat, but the majority were stuffed full of books, so overstuffed that books were practically oozing out at the seams. Stacked in lines, then pushed in horizontally, and even squeezed at odd angles into the gaps remaining, until they spilled out onto the floor and stacked up in pillars around the floor. And the shelves weren't merely capped at human height. They climbed from the floor, all the way up to the twenty-foot ceilings. Here and there, rolling ladders offered a way up, but the books that spilled forth from the shelves meant their wheels weren't particularly operational. The scent of dust and old books filled the air, along with a mysterious spicy scent he couldn't quite place.

Rhys turned the corner. A massive desk was tucked to the left, in the first nook available. Behind it sprawled a man who was Cynog's opposite in every possible way. Feet kicked up on the desk, he lazed in a massive cozy armchair. Long limbs only served to emphasize how bone-slender he was. His hair spilled down his back, not in a way that said he cared for it, but simply indicated he hadn't had it cut in a long time. He didn't have a beard, but on closer inspection, fair wisps on hair clung to his jaw, too pale and thin to qualify as any sort of organized facial hair, but simply the result of his extreme languor. He wore white-and-black robes that fell back at his hips, black narrow-legged trousers so tight as to qualify as leggings, and a simple black belt. Of all the teachers, he was one of the simplest-dressed ones so far, barring the man in rags ranting about ferrets. Even Cynog had worn gold bracers, leg guards, and a matching bejeweled belt. This man wore no gems at all.

A book rested in one hand, and his eyes scanned across the page at speed. He reached the end of the book and set it down, a satisfied expression on his face, then stretched in his chair and yawned wide, like a cat in a beam of sun.

He and Rhys' gazes met, and he grumbled in his chest and ran a hand over his face. In the space of a moment, his hair organized itself, his face grew clean, and the facial hair vanished. He put on a very-strained smile. "How can I help you?"

Reclusive is a kind way to put it, Rhys reflected. The man was an absolute slug. Sure, he was skinny, but that was probably only because it was too much effort to get up and eat. From the dust underfoot, no one—not this man or anyone else—had trodden the halls of the library in a long time. It seemed there was an unspoken understanding not to disturb him.

Luckily, Rhys was a bit too trashy to pick up on such subtle social cues, so here he was. He stepped forward and nodded. "I'm the garbage collector. Are there any books you're looking to get rid of?"

"Huh? Oh, sure." The smile vanished. He yawned again and waved a hand. A dozen boxes floated toward Rhys, all of them empty. As they passed by the shelves, books jumped off them of their own will and flew into the boxes, where they stacked up in messy heaps.

"That's a lot of books," Rhys commented. Wasn't he supposed to be protective of books? Why was he so willing to toss these, then?

"Eh. They're all garbage. Um..." He paused to yawn. "The kind of nonsense fake mages sell mortals, hoping to make a quick buck. None of them hold a real technique. At best, you'll waste your time. The worst of them can even lead hopeful mages astray, onto dark or mistaken paths. They're a bit dangerous, so I've been meaning to get rid of the extra copies for a while now."

"Extra copies?"

"Mmm. Those fakers produce these a dime a dozen and fill the world with this nonsense. Pretty much every mortal town will have five or six 'manuals' on display. Just from students who mistakenly thought they would 'get ahead,' or earnestly believed they could become a mage from this bullshit, I've collected hundreds of copies of these things. Of course, I've got one copy of each archived. I wouldn't dream of giving those up. But I don't need a thousand copies of bullshit manuals in various states of disrepair hanging around my library. Gods know I've already got enough books to protect." He shook his head, gesturing at the disarray around them.

"I can see that," Rhys said.

The lazy man stretched again, once more reminding Rhys of a cat lounging in the sun. "I'm Azarian, by the way. Azarian the Librarian. Friends call me Az. And you are?"

"Rhys. Garbageman," Rhys introduced himself for a second time.

The tale has been illicitly lifted; should you spot it on Amazon, report the violation.

"Hmm. You should find a rhyming profession as well. Or change your name."

"You could call me Rhys the Recycler. It doesn't rhyme, but it aliterates," Rhys tried.

"Heh, Rhys-cycler," Az said. He nodded, and a real smile appeared on his lips. "I like you, Rhys."

Rhys nodded, not sure how to respond to that. Then again, maybe it was simply one trash recognizing another? Az was a different kind of trash than Rhys; Rhys had nothing, while Az had it all and frittered it away lazing in this library. All his potential and skill, wasted in doing nothing but lounging at his desk and reading. His aura was no weaker than Cynog's, somewhere at the upper limits of Tier 3, but Rhys wouldn't put a

penny on Az, if he were to face off against Cynog. Unless, of course, the challenge was something literary, or maybe a race to have the best snooze as quickly as possible.

The boxes filled and stacked up near the entry hallway. There were easily ten, maybe fifteen boxes, and each one large enough that Rhys could curl up inside. He eyed them a little uncertainly. With his mana boosted strength, could he carry all of them? Let alone stacking fifteen boxes at once... maybe if he was burning impurities, but... He shook his head. This was going to be a multi-trip job.

As he stacked up the boxes, Rhys decided to press his luck. He leaned toward Az. "You wouldn't happen to have any... *trashy* literature hanging around the library, would you? Anything a little less than highbrow?"

Bam! Az sat up so sharply Rhys didn't see him move and slammed his hand on his desk. A metaphorical thundercloud brewed around his brows, his frown as deep as the darkest ocean. "In my library? You insult me, sir. No! Not a single piece of *that kind of*... I hesitate to call it literature! Absolutely not. I would never. Get out, before I—"

A book fell off his desk, knocked there by the force of his thump. It fell open to reveal a finely illustrated page with a very fine illustration of a young lady on it. Her collar was a little more than undone. Entirely missing, in fact. And the blouse, too. Her entire dress seemed to have gone missing, in fact. Not only that, but her cheeks flushed in a very unchaste way.

Rhys blinked at the book, then slowly looked up at Az. He hadn't meant *that* kind of literature, just trashy scifi and fantasy—pulp fiction, as it were—but, well, if Az was offering... it wasn't as if he wasn't a man of culture at times, himself.

Az flashed forth. The book vanished off the floor, and Az reappeared behind the desk, stuffing something hurriedly into his shirt. He narrowed his eyes at Rhys. "You saw nothing."

"No, no, I understand. Well, that kind of literature is still a bit too rich for me yet, but if you had some pulp fiction lying around, I certainly could be persuaded to entirely forget such a rosy page," Rhys replied, fighting the urge to laugh aloud.

Az snapped his fingers. A dozen additional books joined the garbage manuals in Rhys' box.

Rhys nodded. "Then we have an agreement, sir. And, ah, best of luck with your *literature*. I suppose I can look forward to receiving your recommendations in another few years?"

"Of course. Any time," Az said, quickly recovering. He still stood behind his desk, one hand pressed against a somewhat unstable stack of books to keep any more from tumbling down.

Rhys looked the stack of books up and down. They were well-worn, with cracked spines and tired bindings. He looked away rather than see too much and learn more about Az than he really wanted to, but quietly shook his head at himself. A man of culture indeed!

Leaving Az to his studies, he quickly ferried the garbage books out onto the steps in three groups of five. From there, he hauled the books back to his hideout. Rather than just throw them in the garbage, though, he put the boxes in his cave, back where the rain and elements wouldn't easily damage them. Garbage manuals? His eyes shone just thinking about it. Garbage! Manuals! Oh, the things he could learn!

Most people might read instructions and simply think of them as the way to accomplish something. But that was wrong. No matter what set of instructions, it was always colored by the biases of the person who had written them. An expert carpenter might leave out the lathing process and simply say 'turn out four chair legs,' while an amateur might focus overlong on the way to put hammer to nail. An artist would spend time telling you how to carve patterns into its back, while a dyes-man would focus on the minutiae of setting the wood stain. The way someone described something, the things they focused on and what they left out, could tell him as much about the person who had written the instructions as the instructions could tell him about how to do the thing he'd set out to do. And, of course, the places where the instructions were hardheaded or wrong... there were always things the original instruction writer had done incorrectly, that were simply mystifying to the reader afterward.

Those didn't tell him how to accomplish the task. Ordinary people might simply throw those steps out. But to Rhys, that was only part of the challenge. Could he understand where the original writer of the instructions had gone wrong? Could he figure out what they'd misunderstood, or comprehended incorrectly, by seeing their incorrect instructions? And from there, there was always the possibility that he could read the wrong way, and put together how to do things correctly, simply by knowing what *not* to do.

Bad tutorials were just another kind of garbage. No less precious than any other trash for being wrong, or stubborn, or fundamentally misunderstanding the process. No, in fact, moreso because of that. If he was merely given the correct instructions, he'd only know one correct way to get there. If he had the wrong instructions, he was free to imagine a dozen correct ways to complete the task.

Now, he had before him manuals that weren't only accidentally wrong, weren't only hardheaded, but were deliberately, intentionally incorrect. If someone *intentionally* sabotaged, that sabotage simply told him where the most important steps were. And now that he was in a mages' school, if he ever got stuck, he could always go back to the library and look up the same process, to see if he couldn't come at it from two ways. In that way, by looking at the trash and the good, he could put both together and come up with an answer no one had ever come up with before. Not only that, but he could also tie all the techniques within these manuals to his path, which meant a passive boost to his comprehension. When he was done, the books could hit

the trash heap and empower his attempt to grow the Star Ice seed. What wasn't to love?

Filled with anticipation, Rhys opened the first manual.

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

Chapter 18. Truly Trash

Rhys read through the manuals at a blazing speed. His mana could enhance his mental qualities as well as physical, and his already high reading speed was only boosted further by his empowerment. Many were the same, or copies of a copy. He read all the unique ones, even the copies whose only unique contribution was fresh misspellings. The ones that were truly nothing but carbon copies landed in the trash heap, waiting to feed his next excursion into herbalism. In the end, he had about a box and a half full of manuals. In the end, he even gained a skill from it.

Speed Reading 4

Most of them were truly trash. They were so obviously wrong, so utterly backwards, that they served more as entertainment than education. He chuckled as he read them, shaking his head from time to time.

Others were more insidious. They described a real process or a real technique, but fudged the details just enough to leave prospective mages on the completely wrong track. Any mortal who tried to ascend to magehood from their techniques would not only waste time and effort on the wrong thing, but might even lock themselves out from magehood altogether, just as Az had told him they would. For example, one book recommended that prospective mages brew their own mana potions, then drink them—not dissimilar to how Rhys himself had awakened. However, the formula it gave for mana potions was just wrong enough that whoever followed that recipe would be so laden with impurities they wouldn't stand a chance of awakening their ability to sense mana at all. Even Rhys winced at that one. If he'd found that as a child, before he'd gained magehood, even he, with his optimal path that led directly to a technique to handle impurities, would have been ruined.

He thought back to the manuals in the town's bookshop and shook his head. If he'd foolishly bought those spellbooks, and hadn't recognized the problems with them, he really would have been much more worse off than simply down a few gold. Losing out on his own potential was one thing, but when he thought about how he could have

accidentally sabotaged Bast, a talent so rare he was learning under the Sword Saint, the continent's most powerful martial artist, he gritted his teeth in leftover anxiety. Ruining his own trash talent was one thing. Ruining someone that rare was a crime.

Luckily, he hadn't, so he simply put the book aside and moved on to the next.

This one was the most promising, and the one he had deliberately put off for late, though he didn't quite have the patience to put it off until last. It had a big fireball on the cover and promised to teach the reader to do the same. His dream! Since he'd first arrived, he'd wanted to throw fireballs from his palms. This manual almost certainly wouldn't teach him how to, but it was at least a step in the right direction. Or... in the wrong direction, but the point was, it was a step, and fireballs were somewhere in the vicinity of that step.

Disappointingly, though, it was complete nonsense. There was a fairy-tale story of a man who stared at the sun all day, every day until he went blind, then a very long, very bullshit incantation. The manual didn't even mention mana, let alone anything approaching what he'd actually need to cast a spell. It joined the garbage heap, and he moved on to the next.

One manual after another. After a while, they all started to blur into one. He kept reading, but his mind wasn't on the material. Instead, he pondered the totality of the manuals. Why had someone created these manuals? Clearly, to hold young mages back. It was pitiful that there were experts so lacking in self-confidence that they'd spread these books to sabotage the younger generation.

But not all of them were pure sabotage. The one about fireballs seemed more like a children's fairytale. Some of the other manuals read like a mortal's attempt to emulate magehood, and their deluded surety that they'd delved its deepest secrets, while not understanding the least thing about being a mage.

As he considered the manuals, he began to see patterns. Repeated themes. There was something to them. Whether intentional or accidental, there was something deep within the manuals that touched on a truth. All their lies, taken together, pointed at one hidden... something. The shape of it eluded him, slipping out of his mind every time he tried to put it all together. He sat back, folding his legs and pouring his all into investigating the truth he sensed behind the falsehoods.

The manuals hovered in his mind. Their words rushed by, over and over. They overlaid one another, washing together into a blur of black ink in his mind. Thousands of words, all saying the same thing, and nothing at all. The truth he'd sensed lurked somewhere in those words, so close he could feel it, and yet utterly unreachable. Rhys pushed himself. He delved further into the words. What was he missing? Why couldn't he understand?

No—no! I've been going at this the wrong way this whole time. The only way to understand this trash, was to abandon his reality, his knowledge, everything, and *believe* in this trash.

Rhys abandoned himself. He abandoned his identity, his magehood, his knowledge. Lower and lower, he descended into the depths of the trash. The longer he went, the further he delved, the more he immersed himself. He lost track of who he was. Of who he'd been. No trace attached him to reality anymore. His only reality was the trashy manuals, and their twisted words. But now he was a naive child. Now he drank up every word and returned for more. This was his path to magehood. These manuals were his lifeline. Without them, he had nothing.

In the depths of his heart, he cried out the fireball incantation until his voice went hoarse. He chased down the ingredients for the mana potion and brewed it, desperately believing in its powers. He meditated under the moonlight and struck strange poses in the center of town, doing anything to channel that elusive thing known as mana.

He chased, and chased, and chased. In his mind, he lived out an entire life as a mortal, trying to awaken mana with no hints but these horrid manuals. Impurities weighed him down, and thin mana in the air eluded his grasp. From a child to a friendless adult, ignored by all those who had called him friend, loved by no woman. From an adult to the crazy elder, hidden at the edge of the village away from sight, still shouting his fireball incantation every morning.

His dream-life drew to an end. He sat in his hut, breathing heavily. The fires of his life petered out. An entire life wasted, lost to the trash manuals. And yet, in his heart, he still clung to them. Still refused to believe they were trash. There was truth in them. From the beginning, he'd sensed it. Here, at the very end, he still sensed it.

This story is posted elsewhere by the author. Help them out by reading the authentic version.

The old man's head dipped on his shoulders. The very last breath of life left his chest. In reality, Rhys' heart slowed, and his breathing drew to nothing. He had lost himself so fully that he had become one with the dream. If the man died, so did he. He was the man, and the man was him. There was no distinction.

The endless practice. The potion brewing. Even the incantation. They circled his mind as the lights drew down. Darkening to nothing, but the darker it got, the brighter the truth glowed. It had been a faint star, but with each passing moment, it grew brighter. Brighter. *Brighter.*

The old man's eyes snapped open, and at the same moment, so did Rhys'. He snapped back to reality. His magehood. His skills. His success, even, pushing the impurities that had slowed down the old man out of his body.

And at the same time, the truth slipped out of his hands.

No! Rhys tried to slip back into the dreamworld, but the trance had broken. The truth was lost—

But it wasn't. Deep in his mind, the truth welled back up. Rhys breathed out, immersing himself in it once more.

To spend a life immersed in incorrect practice, yet learn a truth. To spend a life immersed in correct practice, yet lose it.

The irony of it made him smile, but that wasn't a useful truth. He searched deeper. What else? What had the old man discovered?

Effort alone isn't enough. Luck and talent also play a role. There is no overturning the heavens without one or both.

No, that wasn't it, either. A useful thing to note, but not what he was looking for. A specific truth, locked in the manuals. He knew he'd seen it. What was it?

The answer came in the form of a sensation, not easy words or a concept easily understood. He let it flow through him, investigating it, letting the sensation tell him what it was. An emptiness. A dearth of expectations. A hollow depth that meant nothing he did mattered, and nothing he could do would ever matter. And under all that, beneath everything—*freedom*.

Rhys' eyes widened. At last, he understood. He had been trash. Not merely someone with bad stats who'd tried hard and found a few scraps of success, as he was in reality, but true, utter trash. He had been no one, and he'd had no one. He wouldn't be missed. In fact, the townspeople would have celebrated his death, as a burden lifted off their shoulders. He had experienced a lifetime as trash, and now he understood what it meant to be trash. To live and die as trash. Not just as a trash mage, but as *humantrash*, pure and simple. The refuse no one wanted. The kind of person ordinary townsfolk wouldn't even acknowledge as existing.

He locked that sensation away in his heart. He didn't have an immediate use for it, but he knew that he had unlocked some form of essential enlightenment for his path. In fact, his mind felt faster now, and his heart, more resilient.

A skill message appeared before his eyes for just a second before fading away.

Enlightenment 1

Rhys stood. It wasn't what he had sought, but it was what he'd needed. And, in fact, a more powerful strength increase than he'd bargained on. He'd expected a new technique. Instead, he'd gained insight into his entire future path. Between the two, he

knew which one was more valuable. But in some deep part of his heart, he cried, just a little bit. No fireball? Why did fireballs elude him so?

I'm heading back to the library. Rhys brushed off his robes and marched forth from his cave house, back to the main square. A week or so had passed while he was in his dream world, and some trash had accumulated. More than he'd expected, even. Rhys walked past. *I'll get it later. I'll... I'll... dammit!* What if someone else picked through it? What if the good herbs dried up or blew away?

He turned on his toe and dashed around the school. At top speed, he collected the trash. When his treasure was all safely hidden away in his protected hollow, he turned his feet back toward the library.

Az looked up as he walked in, once more putting his book down. "Back for more?" he asked.

Rhys opened his mouth, then froze. He hadn't even touched the novels he'd asked for. He'd been so immersed in practice he'd totally forgotten!

"I—I've been busy," he muttered, but he knew it was a poor excuse.

Az knew it too, from the lazy eye brow he cocked in Rhys' direction. He shook his head in silent disapproval, but said nothing.

Ashamed, Rhys lowered his head and scratched the back of his neck. An avid reader like him, failing at such a small, basic task? He really was an embarrassment to all readers everywhere. But there was nothing he could do now but press on, past his shame. "I was wondering if you have any tomes on fire spells. Specifically fireballs."

Az shook his head. "At your level, you're welcome to research any low-level mana basics or low-tier skills, but anything like a fireball is beyond my ability to acquire for you. I could point you in the direction of ignition spells, but that is the limit of what you're authorized to access."

"Even considering the depths of our friendship?" Rhys asked, eyeing the precarious stack of books on Az's desk.

"That's what allows you to stand there and blithely interrupt my reading."

Rhys scowled, but quickly schooled his expression into a flat smile. *Oh, well. I guess fireballs are a powerful spell, after all. They can't just let the lowest level students run around nuking one another with fireballs before they hardly know how to be mages. That's a surefire way to end up with a school full of psychopaths.* "I'll take a few tomes on ignition."

Az waved his hand. A dozen tomes swirled around and landed in Rhys' arms. "Return the books I loaned you in good condition, and I might feel a little more inclined to offer you the rarer tomes."

Rhys raised his brows. A second later, he saluted. Protect the books? He needn't have said a thing. Rhys loved books. He'd return them in the same condition they were lent!

Az had already turned back to his reading. Getting the message, Rhys turned and left him to it. He got the feeling Az was already a little annoyed at being interrupted so close in succession--even if it was a week, the man clearly wasn't used to frequent visitors--and made a mental note to give the guy a little longer to reset before he came to visit again. Unless he tore through the books and needed more, in which case, Az would simply have to understand his need for fresh books.

Putting the freshly borrowed books in his storage ring, where the novels already resided, Rhys headed back out into the sunlight, only to thump into a broad, muscular chest.

He looked up, slowly. Simple, martial-styled robes. Short hair. A brutish face with a jawline as broad as his shoulders. Cynog smiled down at him.

"You impressed me on your previous visit. Don't waste your time in that dusty old building. Come, let's practice!"

Rhys swallowed. "Practice...?" Cynog was powerful. There was a lot Rhys could learn at his hands. He'd meant to seek him out eventually, but he'd figured it was something he'd have to do, on his own time. For Cynog to show up, grinning so broadly, excited to see him...

A sinking feeling came over Rhys. He'd just escaped his daily brutal beatings at the hands of Bast and especially Straw. Surely practice didn't mean the same thing to Cynog as it had to Straw? Straw was a living weapon, after all. Cynog was just a martial artist. Surely he had more sense and compassion than—

"Indeed! And what better practice than battle?"

Rhys reached for the doorknob behind him. "Sir, I'd love to practice, but maybe later, after I learn ignition?"

A meaty hand snatched him up by the robes. Rhys barely had time to react before he found himself flying through the air, thrown bodily away from the library. "Lesson number one. Don't question your superiors!"

Ah, fuck, Rhys thought, and braced himself for a beating.

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

Chapter 19. Combat Practice

Cynog threw the student into the air. When this bug had crawled into his class, he'd thought he would simply teach a fly a lesson. Give a deserved beating to a child too big for his britches, and send him to do horse stance until he couldn't stand straight.

Instead, he'd been impressed. Impressed, and more importantly... embarrassed. Challenging a child in front of all the other children, only to have to admit that the child was correct, and he truly did not belong in Cynog's class? Rage burned in the warrior's heart. He couldn't accept such humiliation.

Yet, the emotion he felt wasn't only rage, but also excitement.

Once, Cynog had possessed a bright future. He'd had exceeding talent in his small martial clan, and shone out as a star amongst mortals. When he was selected by a mage to attend a true mage school, he had received the well wishes and adulation of everyone in his village.

But when he'd arrived, he'd found out that the school was a trash-heap of a mage school, looked down on by all other mages. The lowest, weakest, least capable staffed it. One of the professors was out of his mind. The only two talents locked themselves away in the library or were truly devoted to the cause of teaching children low-level potions. The upper school was out of reach, too, limited only to the Schoolmaster's closest, most powerful friends.

Thus, Cynog had found himself in a dead end. His star was dead. There was no longer any hope of ascension, no longer a dream of becoming the most powerful. He would burn out here; this was all the more he could reach for. He'd failed to ascend to Tier 4 several times now, and with each failure, it only grew harder to try again. He played professor because if he didn't, no one would teach the children any martial art, but he did it without hope. No one with any real talent ended up at the Infinite Constellation School. This was where trash filtered down from all the other mage schools, where the dropouts and those too untalented for any other school to pick them up landed.

And then this child arrived.

At first, he'd thought nothing of him. Rhys, kidnapped by the Strawman. No—the disciple of the Strawman. Just another child with no talent, who none of the other schools had been willing to pick up. He hadn't taken any particular interest in him. When he heard the kid was picking up the trash around the sect, he'd approved, but distantly. There was no reason to take any notice of it.

Not until Rhys had flaunted into his class.

The kid landed, skidding over the earth. He didn't hesitate, but turned and fled. Cynog gave chase, letting the kid get a little breathing room. Rather than overwhelm him with his higher Tier, he wanted to see what the kid could do for real. He hadn't missed that the kid was a bit lost, attacking an immobile target. Whatever skills the Strawman had taught him, they couldn't be fully utilized in such an artificial facsimile of combat.

So it was time to turn up the heat. Let the kid take his field of choice. And see how deep those skills of his really were.

A grin played over Cynog's face. He cracked his knuckles. For the first time in a long time, he felt himself longing for the thrill of battle.

"Show me, boy!" he shouted. Silently, he added, *something to hope for*.

--

Ahead of Cynog, Rhys glanced back. He sped up, sprinting toward the forest. Forest terrain was the most familiar to him. He wasn't sure he could lose Cynog, not when the other man could overpower him in every meaningful, and most meaningless, ways. He was in it to win it. Until Cynog tired of the chase, he had to fend the man off.

He checked the sun. If Cynog had class at the same time every day, then he had three hours to run. He gritted his teeth. Not the number he wanted to see, but not a number he couldn't deal with, either. He drew his sword stub and kept running.

This forest wasn't familiar to him, but all forests had the same cadence. He jumped from tree to tree, building some distance between him and Cynog. The man wasn't moving at his full speed, but instead, handicapping himself. In other words, this was truly a lesson, not a life-and-death battle.

Of course, he had no illusions about what would happen if he got caught. Straw had beaten that into him, literally, a great many times. All that remained to be seen was whether Cynog would be as merciful as Straw or not.

I'd rather not find out, to be honest. He ran on.

As he ran, he familiarized himself with the forest. The places where footing was good, the places it was bad, where he had enough room to swing his sword, and where he didn't—he noted all of them. He led Cynog in a loose arc that doubled back on the area he'd surveyed. The man wouldn't be content to chase him forever. Eventually, he'd make his move, and Rhys wanted to be familiar with the lay of the land when he did.

That is, if Rhys didn't move first.

They doubled back over a flat span on the mountain. Cynog laughed loudly. His voice boomed off the rocks ahead of Rhys. “Are you going to make your move, or keep running around this mountain forever? I’m happy to get a bit of running in, but I thought we were fighting!”

Now. Rhys landed on the branch in front of him and kicked it hard. The branch bent, then recoiled, throwing Rhys toward Cynog. The man kept running for a step, then raised his hands, skidding to a halt—right over the loose shale. It didn’t matter how good Cynog’s horse stance or footing was. The flat, loose stones slid over the stone underfoot, and Cynog was carried with them. His raised fists sailed under Rhys, and Rhys slashed down at the man’s back, activating Trash Intent on the way down. His blade met Cynog’s skin—and the glowing blade of Trash Intent shattered.

If you encounter this story on Amazon, note that it's taken without permission from the author. Report it.

Mana recoiled, shocking up Rhys’ wrists. It twisted like poison, eroding his mana passages. He gritted his teeth in pain as he landed behind Cynog, then immediately jumped away.

“I commend you for your efforts, but boy, if you’d stood and faced me, I would’ve prevented you from hurting yourself so foolishly. Such a low-Tier intent skill could never break my skin,” Cynog boasted.

Rhys hopped into the trees and rubbed his wrists, checking the damage. It wasn’t as bad as he’d expected. The reinforcement of his mana and mana passages from the first round of trash ignition had made his attacks stronger, but they’d also reinforced his flesh. He’d taken damage, but it wasn’t the shredding, dangerous damage it could have been.

He eyed Cynog warily. One round of empowering himself wasn’t enough to jump two tiers, it seemed. Cynog was at Tier 3, and he couldn’t even scratch the man. But then, if one round of trash was enough power to jump two tiers, everyone would be absorbing trash, and not only that, but he’d be a godly talent. He couldn’t be a godly talent, so that simply couldn’t be possible.

Honestly, I don’t know that any number of trash absorption layers could let me defeat Cynog. Even threatening Tarais—not defeating her, just threatening her so she backed down—required him to be actively burning impurities. The unfortunate (or fortunate?) downside of that technique was that he no longer had any impurities to burn, save the tiny tidbits in the bottom of his core, and those tidbits wouldn’t ignite. Still, facing Cynog, he was pretty sure that even if he burned impurities, he wouldn’t be able to defeat the man. Scratching him wasn’t even a sure bet.

That didn't mean he was giving in. No—why *would* he give in? He already knew he was trash. If he gave up because he had no chance of defeating his opponent, he never would have duelled Straw or even Bast.

Rhys spun the sword stub around in his hand and charged at Cynog again. While the man was on poor footing, he could test his speed without allowing Cynog to use his full strength. The majority of power in a blow came from the feet, after all. Without a good foundation, Cynog had nothing in terms of power.

Nothing for a Tier 3, anyways. Which turned out to still be a lot of power.

Rhys swung at Cynog's head. The man's eyes glittered. Slipping and sliding, he blocked Rhys's attack and sent his hand rebounding. Rhys didn't give up. From under his robes, he drew a piece of wood and hammered it down toward Cynog's head. But the piece of wood was clearly not long enough to hit Cynog.

Cynog frowned. "You're better than—"

Rhys' eyes flashed. *Trash Intent!*

As he brought the scrap of wood down on Cynog's head, a chair made of the same shimmering light as his sword materialized and bonked the man on the head. Since he knew he couldn't actually cut or break into Cynog, he just smashed him and released the Trash Intent for the rest of the swing. The bit of wood scooted by Cynog without touching him, saving Rhys from any recoil, even the physical kind. The small bit of wood had far less momentum and backswing as well. Rhys wielded it like a dagger, yanking it back just to whip it at Cynog's head again.

Cynog's hand snapped out. He blocked the chair formed of light with his forearm. Turning his hand around, he tried to grab the chair, and managed it, but only for a moment before Rhys released Trash Intent and yanked the wood out of his reach.

"Interesting! That's an unusual weapon intent. I've never seen one so flexible before. In fact, I've never seen a chair-shaped weapon intent. How did you do that?"

"Would you tell me all your secrets if I asked?" Rhys returned, throwing the man's words back at himself.

Cynog chuckled. "I like your spirit, boy." He lunged toward Rhys, sweeping his dinner-plate sized hands wide.

Rhys backpedaled, but too slow. Cynog's hands slammed together. The percussive force of the impact swept out from his palms and smashed into Rhys' chest. He flew backward and crashed into a tree. His head cracked against the trunk, and dark spots danced in front of his eyes. Before he recovered, Cynog was on top of him. He desperately blocked, but the blows hammered down on him. Cynog obviously held

back. If he hadn't, Rhys would have died in one hit. Instead, Cynog beat him black and blue. Rhys heard a bone crack, and as the sickening pain sunk in, he realized something.

Cynog wasn't going to stop. He was holding back, but that was the extent of it. If Rhys couldn't escape, this might be it for him. At best, he'd get pummeled unconscious. At worst, he'd die. In this kind of school-in-name-only, he was pretty sure there were no punishment for killing a student. He'd die unnoticed and unloved, and no one would mourn him.

Rhys gritted his teeth. *Not here!*

He still clenched the bit of wood in one hand. As Cynog's fist flew in, he activated Trash Intent. Cynog smashed his Trash Intent chair into tiny pieces. The reverberations of the backlash smashed into his whole body, far greater than it had been for smashing the blade, but Rhys was able to buy himself space. Just a few centimeters, but it was enough. He dropped down off the side of the tree and whirled, fleeing into the forest. His shoulders screamed from the pain, one of the bones in his chest or upper arm broken and wobbling around. Rhys yanked out the potion and took a sip, letting the concoction enhance his Self-Regeneration. Putting it back away, he sprinted on into the forest.

Cynog laughed and gave chase. "Come back here. I'm not done with you!"

Rhys grimaced as his shoulder snapped back into place. He sprinted away.

The two of them continued on like that, Cynog chasing, Rhys fleeing, breaking out into a desperate melee, then fleeing again. Every time he used the chair to escape and the chair shattered, cracks appeared on the stub of wood. The cracks grew deeper with every block until it finally exploded into splinters.

Rhys noted it numbly as he ran away for the hundredth time: at the end of the day, trash was just trash. Even an Intent didn't make it invulnerable or all-powerful. At its core, it was still something someone else had thrown away. It would still shatter when he put enough stress on it.

The backlash wore at his body, but his trash-and-impurities enhanced body could take it. Self-regeneration was still too slow to heal him in combat, but he could tell that out of combat, a little sip of potion and the powers of regeneration would patch him right up. If he kept doing it nonstop for weeks, he might reach the point of irreversible damage, but Cynog wasn't brutal enough to do that. When it came time for his class, Cynog left, and Rhys finally dared to come down from the trees. He took a swing of potion and breathed out, exhausted.

It had been a hard lesson, but a good one. He'd learned a lot about fighting a much-higher realm opponent who was actually interested in cornering him, as opposed to Straw's light-footed hit-and-run style, and he'd learned a lot about Trash Intent, too. Its

limits, how to use it, when to hold and when to dissipate it, how to use it offensively or defensively.

“Same time tomorrow!” Cynog bellowed from the distance.

Rhys stiffened. He turned slowly. *No... Damn it!* Regret flowed over him. He shouldn't have tried to get out of the basic martial class. He might have gotten to the library faster, but as a result, he'd signed up for a beating twice as long as the class would be.

He sighed. At least it was a helpful beating. He *was* learning a lot. If only it were a little easier to learn, without getting the beating along the way.

At least Cynog had to go teach his class, which left the rest of Rhys' day open to recover, practice on his own, and read up on fire spells. His eyes shone. *Fireballs!* At last! He scurried off to his cave, eager to start on the manuals.

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

Chapter 20. Fireballs

Rhys sped through the fire spell manuals, only to find himself completely lost. It was like the words were oil, and his mind was water. He had to read every word a dozen times before it sunk in, and even then, he struggled to comprehend the meaning.

He leaned back, letting out a breath. The problem was obvious. It wasn't trash, so it was hard for him to understand it. He couldn't easily comprehend the manuals due to their lack of familiarity with trash.

Even so, he refused to give up. He picked up the manuals and pored over them again, forcibly putting the words into his head. He'd lived an entire lifetime as a trash mage, who was never able to so much as sense mana, but had never given up. He wasn't going to throw in the towel this easily. The words might be hard to understand, they might not stick in his mind, but he wasn't going to give in. He was going to learn an ignition spell, whether the ignition spell wanted him to learn it or not!

He studied the manuals deep into the night, poring over the words over and over again. At last, enough of the spell stuck in his mind that he felt he could give it a shot.

Day broke in the distance. Rhys lifted his hand. Carefully, he dragged his mana through the shapes indicated in the manual, pressed it into a form, and then pushed.

Nothing.

Gritting his teeth, he threw himself into the manuals again. Only when Cynog showed up with a roar did he abandon them. The two of them sparred for the allotted three hours, and then Cynog ran off to class, and Rhys limped back to his manuals. Once more, he forced himself to keep reading over the manuals.

Comprehension eluded him. Words flashed past his eyes, but meaning refused to materialize. It was like he was reading in a foreign language, but he recognized the words. The words meant something to him. He just couldn't put it together past that base level understanding.

No, it's like reading high level math, he realized. He could 'understand' the letters and symbols of $e^{(i\pi)} = -1$, but he didn't actually comprehend anything about what that meant. It was just letters and numbers to him, with a few symbols mixed in. It might mean something to mathematicians, and it had probably meant a whole lot to Euler when he'd written it for the first time, but it was gobbledygook to Rhys. That was exactly what reading these manuals felt like. It didn't matter how many times he forced himself to read the manual over and over again, it wouldn't matter.

He lacked some fundamental understanding about the formulas on the page that he would never be able to intuit out of nowhere, because he wasn't a math genius. If he had a good teacher, he might be able to learn them even though he wasn't a math genius—or in this case, an ignition spell genius, but where was he going to find a teacher like that in Infinite Constellation School? The only instructors who actually did their jobs had their hands full getting the lowest level mages up to snuff, and from there, mages were expected to figure things out on their own.

Rhys sighed, putting the book down. Was it impossible? No. But for now, he was beating his head against a wall, and as a piece of trash, he didn't have a head hard enough to beat it down.

But that was fine. He was still young. He still had plenty of time. He could learn these spells later. Putting the ignition manuals safely back in his ring, he returned to his other pursuits. Namely, recovering from Cynog's beatings, and practicing Trash Intent.

There was more to Trash Intent than just making blades. As long as it had been thrown aside, he could reform its general shape with Trash Intent, given he had a feeling for its general shape. That part mystified him a little. With the nub of wood, he'd tried materializing a table, a staff, even a stool, but only a chair had ever materialized. It was as though the object knew what it had been, and wanted to be that thing once more. Trash Intent gave shape to the object's desires, not Rhys'.

Trash Intent. It was in the name, he realized, one afternoon when he was sitting there, sifting through the trash for a new weapon-slash-shield. *Trash Intent*. The trash became what it intended to be, not what Rhys intended it to be. It became what it had been, in its glory days. A thought came to Rhys. He grabbed a broken table and materialized its

missing legs, then poked at them. They felt like wood. Even the cracks on its surface had filled in. But it was only wood.

If this is based on the object's intent... I wonder if I can draw out its full potential? The things it wanted to become, the things it dreamed of, before it became trash.

He laughed at himself a little. Did things dream? Did they have desires? But then, when he could materialize the intent of objects, it wasn't that far-fetched. Besides, if he could draw out the full potential of an object, or even pull out *more* than the full potential of an object... Rhys' eyes shone. If he could use this to polish a sword into the perfect blade, to turn a table into a bulwark, to transform a mirror into a reflective shield, how powerful would that be?

He released Trash Intent on the broken table. Steadying it against his body, he activated Trash Intent again, but this time, he poured everything into it. All his mana, and not only that, but his belief in the table. In what the table could have become, at its utmost potential.

Trash Intent activated and instantly began sucking Rhys' mana down. His mana dropped at a shocking rate. The table soaked it up, thirsty as a camel in the desert. He gripped it tight, even as he felt his mana draw down to nothing. Uncapping his mana potion in one hand, he sipped it down. One little sip at another, still pouring all his mana into the table. The potion drained. One quarter. One half. Three quarters.

Just as Rhys began to doubt that he had enough potion to finish the technique, Trash Intent keened out, then halted. He took a deep breath and steadied himself against the table, on the verge of pitching over from exertion. Almost afraid of what he'd see, he slowly looked down.

A shining, perfect table stood before him. Not a scratch remained in its surface. Its Intent legs were indistinguishable from its original legs. Its wood glowed, so perfectly polished the surface had a sheen to it. The legs stood firm, ready to stand until the end of time.

This wasn't the table he had repaired with Trash Intent. This was the table, as it had been at its most perfect. In the glowing moments immediately after it had been made, before anyone had touched it, before a cup rested on its face or a knife scratched its surface, *this* was the table the carpenter had turned, oiled, and polished with love. He'd drawn out, not its full potential, but its absolute most perfect moment.

But I failed because I didn't have enough mana. Something like drawing out its full potential, or even polishing it beyond its potential—all that was possible once he got stronger. Rhys looked down at the table, and his heart pounded in anticipation. *I can't wait.*

He released the Intent on the table, unable to hold it any longer. The sheen vanished. The scratches returned. The table immediately listed over once more as two of its legs ceased to be. Rhys sagged as well, exhausted, mana all but spent. It was an awesome technique, but not one he could use in battle yet. Not until he had significantly more mana.

Rhys turned, looking at his trash pile. It had been about two weeks of training with Cynog and reading the manuals, and the trash had begun to stack, but it still needed to accumulate before it reached the heights where he'd ignited it last time. He needed at least that much trash to bother igniting it.

A case of literary theft: this tale is not rightfully on Amazon; if you see it, report the violation.

Maybe four weeks was a bit premature for that seed, Rhys thought, then shrugged. He could always ask her to push the meeting back if he had to.

He tossed down the last swallow of the mana potion. It put a decent quantity of mana in his core, but he wasn't anywhere near full of mana. He'd scraped together a second mana potion out of the trash pile, but he hesitated to use it. He'd already drank one mana potion today. He didn't want to drink too much at once, and lose his Less is More bonuses. Instead, he settled down to absorb mana—then paused.

If I'm going to absorb mana anyways, why don't I get dinner and a show? Nodding to himself, he stood and jogged into the school's central square. As always, *On the Appreciation of Mustelids* was running again today, and as always, no one was in attendance. Rhys poked his head in the room, scanning an empty lecture hall, while the teacher ranted on at the front. Why would anyone attend, anyways? It was a trash class about a trash topic no one would ever use. Clearly nothing but the teacher's excuse to rant about a topic they cared about, whether it was helpful to anyone else or not. A fluffy elective that would do nothing but pad a student's credit hours while offering no valuable information.

That's right. It's trash! Rhys grinned and sat down in the back of the class. He steadied his breathing and began to meditate, while the teacher's voice droned on through his head. He didn't listen attentively, but he didn't completely ignore the man's lecture, either. It really was a lecture on mustelids, on ferrets and all the beasts in the ferret family, from otters to ermines, but Rhys had always liked biology. He didn't mind learning a little bit more about some fluffy little critters. He was just sitting still, wasting his time doing nothing but absorbing mana anyways, so why not pick up a little passive education along the way?

The old man didn't acknowledge his arrival. He droned on about badger-ferrets and the unique distinctions between them, the polecat, and true badgers. His voice was even and smooth, and if Rhys had been trying to listen instead of passively listening while he gathered mana, he probably would have fallen asleep. As it was, it was the perfect

environment to gather mana in. Just enough noise to keep him focused and drown out all the background noise that might have distracted him, but not enough noise to pique his interest. It was the perfect white noise.

Lo-fi old man beats to absorb mana to, he thought to himself, and chuckled.

With the small change in his itinerary, his days drew on again. He battled Cynog in the mornings, and absorbed mana with the mustelid man in the afternoon. Three days into the lecture, he found himself pondering on the man's topic of choice. Mustelids. They were hardy and adaptable creatures. Tiny little carnivores, fearing nothing. Desired for their fur, and hunted down across all the land.

But they weren't trash. They were beloved. Adorable in life, and used for their fur in death. Nobility searched for them. Their furs went for high prices at auction, and live ermines, stoats, sables, and ferrets were beloved pets of many high-ranked nobles or mages. In a certain way of thinking, they couldn't be further from trash.

Tiny furry creatures. Scrabbling around, fearing nothing. Eating everything in sight. His mind left mustelids behind, and wandered to a distinctly trashy creature instead: the humble rat. No one liked rats. They were chased out of cities, chased out of villages, chased out of houses. Their nests were destroyed, and they were even driven out of the trash. But they persisted anyways. They didn't let that stop them. No matter how little someone might want them around, so long as *they* wanted to be around, they'd get there.

And not only that, but they were clever. Smart little beasts that could keep their trails clean and get in and out without anyone noticing. Even if they were considered trash, they were quite capable and impressive creatures, with many admirable skills. Stealth, speed, burrowing, rapidly building a house, not letting a wall tell them no—all skills even a human mage found desirable.

He furrowed his brows. There was something about that. Something... it was on the tip of his tongue, but he just couldn't put it together. When the time came to fight with Cynog, he stood, but reluctantly. *I'll be back. There's something about this old man's speech that's speaking to me.* It wasn't the words exactly, but something about it. The gist of it. The ideas he put forth. It was just that his comprehension wasn't high enough for it.

He checked his skills, to see where he was on all that.

Rhys Foundling | 14 | Foundation Building (Tier 1)

Title: Trash-born

Skills:

Hunger Resist 15

Survivalist 29

Pain Resist 40

Scavenging 39

Less is More 33

Sewing 8

Blow Mitigation 16

Self-Regeneration 13

Mana Manipulation 8

Poison Resist 14

Improvised Weapon Proficiency 10

Heat Resist 9

Acid Resist 10

Impurity Resist 15

Trash Intent 8

Alchemy 2

Herbalism 7

Speed Reading 6

Comprehension 5

Enlightenment 1

He'd gained a few new skills that he hadn't expected, like Comprehension, but when he thought about it, what had he been doing, slamming his head against the ignition books? And maybe the lecture had helped it tick up, too. Enlightenment he'd seen pop when he was working on the fake manuals, so that was no surprise. The rest of them had grown as he'd expected, with Improvised Weapon Proficiency, Trash Intent, and

Impurity Resist showing good growths from his combat and trash-absorbing experiences, despite being harder skills to level.

Strangely, none of his active skills, spells, or techniques showed up on the skill list, with the notable exception of Trash Intent. The System didn't list his impurity burning technique, or his trash-absorption technique. *Maybe that's because they're techniques and not skills?* Or maybe they were just too trashy for the System to acknowledge. He considered for a second, then shrugged. As long as they worked, it didn't matter if they showed up in the System or not.

Rhys eyed his Comprehension and Enlightenment skills. One of those, if not both, needed to be higher if he was going to put together... whatever it was he wanted to figure out from the mustelid lecture. But what was better to level it up, than to keep going to the lecture? Plus, he could keep grinding whatever it was that was tickling at his brain about the mustelid lecture at the same time.

With that decided, he rushed into the battle with Cynog. As he'd fought, he'd discovered more about Trash Intent. Things like too small a piece wouldn't form intent. Likewise, if he couldn't visualize the thing associated with the piece of trash, the Intent wouldn't form. There was also an upper limit to the size of Trash Intent he could create, but that had more to do with the amount of mana he had than the limit of the skill itself. Currently, something like the dinner table was the limit of what he could instantaneously draw out the intent of. If he spent a little longer, he could manifest something one-and-a-half times longer, but that was basically useless in battle.

He kept getting beaten by Cynog, but he rarely took backlash anymore. He'd spawn the intent for an instant, then destroy it a second before Cynog's blows landed. The trash still created space between him and Cynog, but by retracting it before Cynog smashed it, he prevented himself from taking damage. That, plus Blow Mitigation, meant he took much less damage than he had at the start.

Even so, he knew it was artificial growth, to some extent. He knew how to fight Cynog now, like he'd known how to fight Straw. If he faced a new opponent, he'd still be lost way he'd been the first time he fought Cynog, when Cynog didn't fight like Straw. But then again, he reasoned, the more fighting styles he learned how to fight against, the better he'd do in the long run. If he eventually learned to fight against all the fighting styles in the world, then he'd be unstoppable.

That was still a long ways away, however. Just like whatever he was trying to comprehend in the lecture hall. The sensation stuck in his head every time he went in there, but he could never get past that starting thought. He left the hall dissatisfied for the thousandth time and pursed his lips, crossing his arms as he faced the square. What was he doing wrong?

Maybe I need to sit there and do nothing but attempt comprehension until it sticks. He nodded. That might be it.

The four weeks had almost passed. Today was the final day before the end of the four weeks. It was an arbitrary timeline he'd set for himself, but, looking at the trash, it had piled up sufficiently to give the seed a try. It felt richer in mana than his first round of trash, and besides, he'd be pouring it all into one big seed, so he was fairly confident in success, but nonetheless, a little anxiety twisted in his gut. This was Sorden's last seed. If he failed this...

Rhys shook his head. He couldn't think about that. He needed to focus on success, or else he'd fail for sure.

He nodded at Cynog as the man approached. "Tomorrow, I'm going to be busy, and after that, I might need some time to comprehend something."

Cynog nodded. "Understood. It's been a long time since we've had a talent like you. I may have been a bit overeager in training."

"A talent?" Rhys gave him a look. *What is this?* "I'm no talent."

"For a sect like this, you're a world-shaking talent," Cynog replied.

Rhys pressed his lips together. He tried to keep it in, but he just couldn't. He took a deep breath.

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