

Chapter 21. Asking for a Beating

Rhys took a deep breath. “No. You’re wrong. I only have average talent, at best. Actually, I’m probably more like absolute trash-tier talent. I struggle to learn any martial skills. In all my battling with you, I still haven’t picked up one tier in Sword Proficiency or Barehanded Combat. My only talent is recognizing my path early, and working hard to bring it to life.”

“You’re young to have already recognized your path,” Cynog flattered him.

Rhys shot him a look. “It’s trash.”

“Eh?”

“My path is trash. The only thing I can reliably learn any skills in, is trash. If a skill isn’t associated with trash, I’m useless.”

Cynog’s brows furrowed. He opened his mouth.

“...Or I would be, if your Schoolmaster, or even you, had evaluated me. But instead, Straw saw value in me. He took me in and trained me, and in doing that, gave me value twice over. Value from his teachings, and value in him taking me in, which made me just interesting to your Schoolmaster for her to take me in.”

“But you’ve comprehended Intent. No matter the Intent, that’s a feat at your age.”

“I only have it because Straw trained me relentlessly toward obtaining an Intent, any Intent. Only because someone else saw value in the trash that was me, and polished me; and only because I then saw the value in myself, and continued to work on it, am I now a ‘talent’ to you. But that’s not talent at all. It’s luck, the dedication of everyone around me, and hard work. Don’t call me a talent. I’m not. I couldn’t be further from a talent. What I am, is a piece of garbage that no one gave up on. Least of all myself.”

Before Cynog could speak, he pointed at the man. “And that includes you. I might have fooled you into seeing me as a talent, but nonetheless, you also chose to polish me and not give up. Think about it, Cynog. If an idiot like me who can only grow stronger by playing with the trash, can be polished to the extent that you mistook me for a talent... how much could you polish all those students under you? I’m still too weak to polish anyone else, but you are an expert. You have that power. With your skill, you could

make those students really shine. But because you dismiss them out of hand as 'not talented,' you don't even try."

Cynog frowned. His brows knitted.

"Thank you, Cynog. I deeply appreciate everything you've done to help me. But when you go back to your class, look at your students, and know that they all started with more potential than me. This time, don't give up on them. Try treating them the same way you did me, and see how much they grow."

Crrrrk.

Rhys had turned away, but he whirled at that sound.

Cynog cracked his knuckles, a slow, evil grin on his face. "So you think you can tell me how to teach? You, a mere student, who's barely been at this sect for weeks?"

Rhys swallowed. He backed away. *Ah, shit. My knee-jerk reaction to defend trash got the better of me.* He'd spent an entire life passionately defending trash in person, on online forums, everywhere he could. In modern society, the worst consequence for his actions was becoming a social pariah and facing the distaste of his coworkers. In a medieval society, the worst consequence for supporting an unpopular opinion was death and torture. In that order, if he was lucky.

Cynog glared at Rhys, slowly frowning deeper. Thoughts whirled within his mind. Not a talent? Impossible. The boy was delusional. After all this time? He wouldn't accept that the boy wasn't talented.

His worldview began to crumble. All this time, was it really his fault? Could he really have polished any of his students into obtaining Weapon Intent, if he hadn't given up on them? He was the one who'd failed? Not his students, but him. Anyone could be powerful, as long as someone believed in them, but he hadn't believed, and so not only his students, but also he had failed to become powerful.

He was the source of his own failure? Not only that, but the source of his entire school's failure to produce martial artists? Him? One of the few teachers who actually put in effort? One of the few who actually tried to help students? This *boy* dared to question him, when he worked the hardest of any of the teachers?

No, it wasn't that the boy wasn't talented. He *was* talented. Cynog was right. He *knew* he was right. Rhys was talented. He was different from the other students. More powerful, more capable. If the boy refused to see it, then he'd just force him to see it.

It wasn't that Cynog's worldview was wrong. It wasn't that he'd been doing the wrong thing all along. That wasn't possible. He refused to believe it. It was Rhys who was wrong.

It had to be.

Cynog's heart hardened, and resolve sparked within him. Resolve to prove Rhys wrong, no matter how far he had to take it.

Rhys saw murder crawl across Cynog's face, and cleared his throat nervously. "It's not that you're wrong, it's—"

"Someone's asking for a beating," Cynog rumbled, and charged at Rhys.

"No no no—" Rhys turned and ran, sprinting off at top speed.

Cynog closed in on him before he got a dozen steps. Rhys threw up Trash Intent, as usual, but Cynog grabbed him bodily by the shoulders, reaching around the end table Rhys had picked for today's shield, and threw him up against the nearest tree. Rhys put the end table between him and Cynog, but Cynog ripped it out of his hands, tossed it away and went right on hammering Rhys. Caught between a tree and Cynog's fists, Rhys had little option but to take the blows. He used Blow Mitigation to lessen them to the extent possible, but he was still getting hammered. His only saving grace was that Cynog wasn't so pissed that he forgot he was fighting a student, and still pulled his blows enough to not kill Rhys.

If you spot this tale on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

Not immediately, anyways. Pressed up against the tree, barely protecting his head, Rhys felt his vision begin to fade. He forced himself not to pass out and took a short breath instead, hissing slightly through the pain. If he stayed here, Cynog might pummel him to death without realizing it. The man had a high estimate of Rhys, but Rhys wasn't actually a talent like Cynog thought. Cynog overestimated him, and that meant that he might accidentally kill Rhys by assuming he could take more than he could. *Especially after that lecture. I basically provoked him into forcing me to recognize I'm a talent.* The only problem was, Rhys was no talent, and if Cynog pushed too hard, he'd die, just like the trash he was.

Something... anything...

His vision flickered. Caught on the razor's edge between life and death, things abruptly became very clear to him. He couldn't sit here and take it. He would die. He had to escape.

But how? His trash had been taken from him. He could use Trash Intent on his sword, but it wouldn't do any damage, and Cynog would knock it away. Cynog was

overwhelmingly powerful. He needed to get out of here, or else he'd die. But to flee, he first had to get away from Cynog's hold. The man had a firm grip on his shoulder. He couldn't escape without breaking that hold.

No, that was wrong. He had another option yet. When he thought about it, between breaking a powerful warrior, and breaking trash, one of them was obviously easier to break.

Rhys took a deep breath, forcing himself back to awareness. He steeled his heart, then delivered a decisive blow to his own shoulder. His bones broke, but for just a second, Cynog's hold on him weakened. He wrenched his shoulder free and ran.

Everything hurt. Every piece of his body was in pain. But he put all that to the back of his mind and ran. Trees lashed past, digging into his wounds. Undergrowth tugged at his ankles, almost toppling him. He swigged his potion to let the healing get started, and desperately pushed his brain to the limit. He was slower than Cynog, weaker than him, and even with all of Straw's techniques, lacked the raw stats to evade his attacks completely.

Completely. A fist flashed through the air, and Rhys threw himself to the side. Cynog's fist took a chunk out of his side, but it didn't kill him. He ran on, pushing himself to the limit. His ears strained. His legs burned, on the verge of overloaded with mana so he could not only run, but also dodge. He threw caution to the wind, pushing his body past its limits just to survive. He was a hare on the run, a pigeon with a bullet lodged in its chest. Even if it meant he died eventually, he'd run on now.

Another punch clipped his shoulder. He flared Blow Mitigation and threw himself into a sideways roll, popped up, and ran on. Air rushed toward the back of his head. A forward roll, and that fist struck his ponytail instead. He grabbed the ground and held himself still. Every wound in his body screamed in pain, gaping wider. Blood spurted over the ground. He held his breath, holding back the scream, and refused to let go.

Trash Body 1

Caught up in momentum, Cynog rushed past him. Just up ahead was a slate field, as Rhys knew better than anyone. The martial artist stepped onto it as he started to backpedal, and instead of instantly reversing, he slid forward, his feet meaninglessly kicking at the loose shale.

Rhys' eyes flashed. He jumped up and sprinted in the opposite direction, charging back toward the central square. One destination gleamed in his mind, one perfect destination that Cynog couldn't tear him out of. His legs blurred. Mana pushed his muscles to their limit, then past them. They began to rip, but he pressed on. He needed to push it past its limits so he could escape. He refused to die here. Even if he turned his whole body into trash in the attempt, he'd do whatever it took to survive.

Cynog growled. He found his footing, whirled, and gave chase. Rhys' hard-earned lead was obliterated in an instant. Still, Rhys ran. He knew nothing but running and dodging. His body accumulated wounds. Before long, no part of him wasn't bruised or bleeding. He was a tattered mess, barely recognizable as human. With no time to sip his potion, all he could do was keep taking hits and keep running, desperately ensuring not a single hit landed on something vital.

"Get back here, you slippery eel. I'll show you martial talents!"

Ahead, the central square, at last. A heavy hit landed on Rhys' lower back, and he let it propel him out of the trees and into the square. He flew through the air, landed on the tiles, and rolled a dozen times, head over heels—at first, on nothing but the momentum of the blow, and then on his own efforts. Just as Cynog was about to reach him, he kicked off the ground and popped back up to all fours. He scrambled off, chasing toward his sanctuary.

"Where do you think you're going?" A hand closed around his ankle. Cynog instantly tightened his grip. Rhys' flesh bruised. He pulled, intending to lift Rhys by the foot.

Rhys' eyes flashed. Determination burned in his soul. He couldn't let himself be caught. Not now, when he was so close.

And he wouldn't.

Gritting his teeth, Rhys clamped onto the cobblestones, sinking his fingernails into the cracks. Flaring the very last of his mana, he pulled.

Cynog laughed. He tightened his grip. "You aren't getting away that easily. There's still more training left for you."

"Easily?" Rhys asked.

Their eyes met. For the first time, Cynog looked his victim in the eyes. Madness burned there, with a determination that verged on insanity. Cynog frowned, shifting back, but he didn't release his grip.

Rhys pulled harder.

With a horrible sucking pop, Rhys' foot came free at the ankle. Splashing blood after him, he fled the last few steps to the library on all threes and threw himself through the door. He lifted his head and, with the last of his strength, shouted, "Lock it! Lock the door!"

"You fool. Of course I wouldn't allow that brute near my books," Az replied lazily. His voice echoed down the hall, the man not so much as rising from his desk.

A heavy weight slammed against the thick wood. Rhys sighed, letting out all the tension in his body. With the tension, his consciousness, too, started to flow away.

Shit... not yet. Fumbling in his robes, he pulled out his potion and downed the rest of it. Rhys set the bottle carefully to the side, then drew a mana potion and slurped down half of it, as well. Less is More and Self-Regeneration both kicked off, and only then, as he felt his wounds closing, did Rhys allow himself to fall into darkness.

“Not coming to greet me? That isn’t very proper of you,” Az’s voice sounded again. It echoed over an insensate Rhys, the boy unconscious as he regenerated his wounds.

There was silence for a few beats. At last, with a heavy sigh and the creak of long-settled furniture, footsteps sounded from around the corner. Az turned the corner, and froze. “You’re just going to bleed all over my library, are you?”

Rhys didn’t reply.

“Hmph.” Az wandered over, then sat down beside him. He reached into his robes and upended a potion on the sleeping Rhys’ face. Rhys spluttered for a moment, but the potion quickly vanished, absorbed into his skin and through his wounds.

Az lifted his head, looking at the door. “What a foolish child, daring to provoke Cynog. He should know none of us ended up in this bottom-tier sect by choice.”

After a moment, he let out a pleased hum. “Except for me.”

Az’s shape shifted. He grew smaller and smaller, landing on four legs, then curled up beside Rhys. A small tuxedo cat in Az’s place settled in to purr the pain away.

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

Chapter 22. Library Cat

Rhys jolted awake. For a second, he laid there, aching and staring at the ceiling. The pain was familiar. Nowadays, he was lucky not to wake up with a crick in his back or a pounding headache. He knew he should live better, lose a few pounds, but damn if his chair wasn’t comfortable. No, that part he understood. The confusing part was the ceiling. Vast and immense, old hardwood vaults interrupted lush wood panelling. His brows furrowed. Now that he was looking around, the walls were a bit off, too. He had a

pretty big library, but he didn't recall the books looking so... leather-bound and aged. Where were all his figures?

A cat shifted beside him. It lifted its head. "Awake?"

Rhys startled. He looked around, taking in the library, and reality began to reassert itself. He pointed at the cat. "You?"

"Me?"

His jaw worked. Many words and concepts rushed through his brain, all of them jostling to emerge from his mouth at once, but none of them succeeding. At last, he managed, "Az?"

The cat sat upright and curled its tail meticulously around its paws. "That is my name."

"You're a cat?"

"You're a human?" Az returned, in an equally shocked but doubly sarcastic tone.

Rhys sat up, all his pain forgotten. A catboy? Right in front of him? What god had smiled upon him? What a glorious moment, to have lived long enough to see a real live catboy right in front of him. A catgirl would be even better, of course, but he wasn't going to question the merciful god who had given him this moment. Catgirls and -boys were the epitome of trashy characters. The absolute peak. There wasn't a catgirl or -boy he wouldn't defend to the death. Add cat ears to any character, and they got better. It was just a fact.

Rhys took a deep breath. All at once, he said, "Can you turn back into human form but keep the ears and tail, lift one leg and curl your hands like paws, and say 'meow' please?"

Az lifted his paw and smacked Rhys hard in his broken bones. A dozen rapid cat slaps landed right on his wounds. Rhys screeched in pain and curled up, trying not to outright scream.

"After I go out of my way to save you," Az complained, retracting his paw. He licked it primly, disapproval all over his face.

"Sorry. I let my foolish past get the better of me. Thank you for helping me," Rhys said, properly lowering his head.

"Mmm. I don't like Cynog much. Anything that lets me make fun of that fool is a plus in my book." Az stretched luxuriously and padded around the corner, back toward his desk. At the corner, he turned back. "You can lie there until you're healed. You're free to read, but be quiet, and leave when you're healthy."

Rhys saluted. He hadn't had time to read for fun lately, anyways. Using his good arm, he scooted up to the bookshelf and put his back to it. His shoulder still hurt, and nothing felt perfect, but overall, he could feel Self-Regeneration and Less is More continuing to work on his wounds. By now, one sip of potion could give him not only enhanced momentary healing, but also longterm slow healing over more than a day.

This whole time, he'd been avoiding looking at his foot. He took a deep breath and forced himself to look at it.

A stub grew out of his ankle. There was a heel, and a quarter or so of a foot, but definitely not a full foot. Still, there was something. He was healing. Making progress.

Rhys let out a sigh of relief. Under the influence of the skill, he hadn't hesitated to sacrifice his foot to save his life. He didn't regret it. If he hadn't lost the foot, he was pretty sure Cynog would've killed him right there, whether he'd meant to or not. It was only afterward that regret had set in.

He wasn't going to complain. He'd done what he had to in order to survive. Not only that, but he was trash, anyways. It wasn't as if having a foot would make him a martial artist, or losing one would keep him from being a mage. But still, having all his limbs? Regenerating his foot? A huge relief.

"Why did Cynog react like that?" Rhys asked. Even for medieval times, it was a bit extreme. Surely he'd noticed that Rhys was just running for the back half—no, for the entirety of 'training.'

"Quiet in the library," Az replied.

Rhys obediently shut his mouth.

"In any case, it's because you challenged his world view. Inadvertently, you told him that he was the source of his own failure, and not only that, but the sect's failure to ever produce a successful mage."

Confused, Rhys blinked. He'd expected to have to explain himself, but Az seemed to know exactly what had happened. A second later, he snapped. "That's right. Cat ears!"

"All mages at my Tier have enhanced hearing, thank you very much," Az replied laconically, drawling out his final words into a yawn.

"So basically, I denied his entire existence," Rhys summarized.

"More or less. I thoroughly enjoyed the verbal beatdown you gave him. Most people are afraid to talk back to Cynog, so it was refreshing to hear him finally get the tongue lashing he deserves."

“Ah, yeah. I figured out why,” Rhys replied.

“You certainly did. How unfortunate. I would have enjoyed listening to you talk down to others much more powerful than you, had you not immediately punished yourself for it.”

Rhys sighed. “No, I probably will keep doing it. I’m... it’s a lifestyle, not a lone mistake.”

“Is that so?” Az poked his head around the corner. He was back in human form, and didn’t sport cat ears, to Rhys’ disappointment. He hummed to himself. “I could enjoy that.”

“I probably won’t,” Rhys admitted, somewhere between sad and embarrassed. Even so, he had no confidence in his ability to keep his mouth shut. He knew he shouldn’t, but—but in his heart, a fire burned. A fire full of rage for the mistreatment of trash. If he didn’t speak up for it, who would? He might have gotten beaten half to death, but he knew he’d do the same thing all over again if he had the chance.

Az rumbled in his throat, a sound not dissimilar to purring. “Excellent.”

He vanished back around the corner at that, and before long, a soft snore sounded from the vicinity of his desk.

If you find this story on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen. Please report the infringement.

Rhys took a deep breath and adjusted himself, then settled in to gather mana and wait for Self-Regeneration to heal his wounds. After that battle, if you could call the one-sided beating that, he’d been completely wiped of mana. Slowly, his bones set and his muscles knitted back together. Blood cleared from his bruises, and his gashes closed. At the same time, his core slowly refilled with mana. Both his potions were completely empty. He would have to buy new ones once he got out of here.

And avoid Cynog with all my might. He had no idea how long Cynog would hold a grudge. For all he knew, the man was already over it, but it was equally possible that Cynog was still completely pissed off and ready to murder. He thought for a moment, then twisted his lips. He’d have to gamble on Cynog not caring. He couldn’t stay locked in the library forever. There wasn’t much trash here, and he couldn’t burn any of it in here. For one thing, fire wasn’t a good idea around books, and for another, he didn’t want to test Az’s reaction to him burning books right in front of him. Even if Az was done with the books, he wasn’t sure Az had absolutely no emotional attachment, especially if he struggled to let people borrow his books because of the damage they might do.

A few hours in, Rhys remembered he had Az’s novels and pulled one out of the storage ring. He could read and gather mana at the same time. For some people, it might be too much disruption to their meditation, but not for Rhys. Sure, a serious topic or a tough piece of literature might distract him, but trashy novels? He practically entered a state of

meditation and-or higher being when he read them, and that was back in his original world. He had plenty of attention span to both read and absorb mana, given how natural reading trash novels came to him.

As far as trash novels went, these were a bit lacking. They had the vibes of Frankenstein, not the true trash heights of a good webnovel. Still, they were lighter reading than the original science fiction literature, and due to this world being high fantasy to begin with, even the novels that were meant to be boring romances or societal commentaries came off as fantasy novels to Rhys. He read on, enjoying his first fantasy novels since he'd come to this world. After a few moments, he was immersed so deeply in the book that he barely felt pain, and in fact, mana absorption came easier as he gained the ability to simply ignore his hurts.

Time passed. He finished all the novels and had to return to merely meditating. A part of him wanted to call out to Az and ask for more books, but Az was still snoozing, and he knew better than to interrupt a catnap. The books he'd finished with sat beside him, neatly stacked. He continued to gather mana until his wounds healed. When his foot returned to normal, or at least mostly normal, he finally stood. He didn't have a shoe anymore, so he took off the other shoe to match and put his remaining shoe in his robes. It was garbage, now, but that was exactly why he was holding on to it. He could always use more garbage.

Rhys finally approached the exit to the library. He reached the door and extended his mana outside. Closing his eyes, he focused on exploring the area outside with his mana. He sensed students, some of higher Tiers, most of lower, and a lone high-Tier mage wandering outside, but not Cynog. Rhys pushed the door open and peeked outside.

Still no sign of Cynog. He looked left and right, up and down. No burly martial artists in sight. Just to be absolutely sure, he extended his mana once again, without the door in the way. Scans returned negative.

"Go outside already. You're letting all the hot air in," Az complained from his desk.

"Right, sorry," Rhys said, and hurried outside.

There was a distinct reek in the air, a familiar one, yet one he hadn't smelled in a while. He turned, slowly. Trash had piled up everywhere. At his estimate, at least two weeks of trash laid around the central square.

Damn, I really was out for a while, he realized. Shaking his head at himself, he hopped to, scurrying around the square to collect all the trash. In the span of a few hours, the square, and the areas around it, were once more clear of trash.

With that done, he returned to the central square. Back in the trash pit, he had plenty of herbs between the scraps in the trash and what he'd held in reserve from when he'd

grown herbs. What he lacked, was a cauldron. Strangely enough, no cauldrons had turned up in the trash... or if they had, they were in such horrible states that he couldn't recognize them as cauldrons anymore. As much as he wanted to immediately get started on growing the Star Ice seed, now that he had more than enough trash, he couldn't go without a potion. Self-Regeneration was nice, but it was an out-of-battle heal for now. It didn't work fast enough to matter, when he was getting ripped up by a martial artist. *That* was when he needed his potions, and his Less is More skill to empower them. Right now, with a martial artist potentially after his ass, he couldn't be without potions.

Sure, he could buy potions, but he had the herbs, so he figured he might as well level up Herbalism and Alchemy while he was at it. Cynog wasn't going to attack him while he was in Sorden's class. Or rather, if he tried, Rhys was pretty sure Sorden wouldn't sit back and let him tear up her high quality low-Tier herb supplier.

As for mana potions, he had the recipe in the book, and by cross-referencing it with the generic potion recipe, he'd figured out what all the instructions meant. He figured he could hack one or two out and figure out the little quibbling things he didn't understand. After all, worst case, he gave himself some impurities. For Rhys, there were definitely worse fates.

Rhys slipped into the back of Sorden's class. She was in the middle of teaching some kind of speed-boosting potion, and as interesting as that sounded, he didn't need that right now. Luckily for him, this seemed to be an advanced class. Only a few students were in attendance, and they clustered toward the front, right around Sorden. Rhys settled quietly in a corner and began heating up his cauldron for a healing potion.

One of the students at the front of the class whipped around and narrowed his eyes at Rhys. Rhys gave him a friendly wave, then paused. It was the boy from his very first day! The one who'd dumped his cauldron in the trash, and given him such precious resistance training. He nodded and smiled a little, then turned back to his potion.

The boy turned back forward. Rhys thought that would be the end of it, but instead, he cleared his throat. "Professor Sorden, there's a student you didn't invite here. Didn't you say this class was invite only?"

Back to the class, Professor Sorden hummed. "Did I say that?" Still, she lowered her chalk and turned. Her eyes roamed the room, before snapping to Rhys in the corner.

Rhys waved.

"Ah. He's fine." She turned back around and continued to scribble a formula on the blackboard.

The boy's jaw dropped. He stared at Sorden, then whirled and stared at Rhys. This time, Rhys ignored him in favor of beginning the brewing process. The boy turned to Sorden again. "Why does he get special treatment?"

At this point, the whole class stared at Rhys. He did his best to ignore them, though he felt their gazes prickling on his skin. He'd just struggled to escape Cynog with his life after saying something stupid, and now, he felt as though he'd done the same, somehow, without saying anything. He raised his hands. "Should I leave...?"

Sorden made eye contact with him. "No." She turned to the students. "The cauldrons are a free resource anyone can use at any time. Do you have a problem with a fellow student using *my* cauldrons?"

Most of the students either turned thoughtful, then shook their heads, or immediately understood the implicit threat, and shook their heads as hard as they could. Only the boy frowned deeper. "He's not a part of the advanced class. Why is he allowed to stay?"

A chalk stub flashed across the room and struck him in the forehead. The boy's head snapped back, and he let out a little *oof* of pain. "He grew the herbs at a high enough purity that I was able to hold this class. Of everyone here, he's the most qualified to be in attendance, wouldn't you say?"

The boy startled. He turned, slowly, and looked at Rhys again—at first, in a new light, but then in growing disbelief. "Him? The garbage collector?"

"Him indeed. Perhaps you should consider collecting garbage?" Sorden replied lightly.

Rhys frowned at that. Perhaps he shouldn't. The garbage belonged to him. He didn't need anyone competing over it. He wanted everyone to *appreciate* garbage, but not muscle in on his business.

The boy looked at Rhys for one more moment, then scoffed and turned back to his potion. Rhys shook his head at the boy's back and turned to his. Some people couldn't leave well enough alone. He mentally marked the boy as someone to stay away from, and paid no more attention to Sorden's class.

In no time, he'd brewed the potions, and made a few mana potions with the bare minimum of bumps and explosions. Rhys nodded at Sorden and slipped out, rushing back to his trash heap.

It was time. He had everything ready. Potions in case he got injured. Enough trash to make a small mountain. And the seed itself, just waiting to bloom.

Let's get that bread! he cheered to himself, and sped off through the square.

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

Chapter 23. Star Ice Seed

Pausing in the center of the square, Rhys extended his mana. He searched the air, hunting out any sign of Tarais' signature. For a long moment, there was nothing, and then the color of her materialized, brushing the very limit of his senses. He chased after it, leaving the square behind. Not far behind the main buildings, he came up to a large, blank, boring-looking white building with evenly spaced windows placed at short intervals over its entire three-story height. Instantly, he recognized it. A hive of villainy. A pillar of filth. A den of utter depravity.

A dormitory.

Or at least, it had been that way in his college. It was probably different in a school for mages in the medieval era.

Yeah, it's probably worse, he thought, laughing to himself.

He stood outside for a moment, contemplating how to get her attention. He was used to the building itself; he could count on it for a good couple armloads of trash every few days. But he'd never been inside, and he didn't know, either, if he *should* go inside. What if it was a women's dormitory? He already had Cynog on his case. He didn't need all the women of Infinite Constellation School out to murder him, too.

A male student passed by and entered the dormitory, thus ending his moral conundrum. Rhys followed him in. The dorm was a pretty familiar layout to him, with narrow white hallways and doors on either side of each hall. Each room held a single aura... for the most part. He didn't look too closely at the ones that held two or more. They were probably just wholesome study groups, anyways. Good students, focusing eagerly on practice and study.

He traced Tarais' aura through the dorm to a boring door on the third floor. There, he paused, scanning her room briefly. When he sensed Tarais and only Tarais' aura within, he knocked.

"Hello?" Tarais pushed the door open, only to frown when she saw Rhys. "You're still alive?"

"Yep! Do you have time to help me grow some herbs?"

She considered for a second, then shrugged and nodded. "Lead the way."

They quickly crossed the peak and reached Rhys' cave in no time. The furniture he'd found ripped up in the storage ring was patched with fragments of robes from the trash. Bright segments of fine fabrics gave the furniture a boho look...at least in Rhys' opinion. From the look Tarais shot it, she had a much lower opinion of his efforts. He shook his head. She couldn't comprehend his modern aesthetic.

Around the corner, he already had the plots set up. In his few moments of downtime the previous week, he'd set the scraps of herbs from the garbage into the plowed earth. There was still enough compost hanging around that he'd been able to renew the rich soil around the herbs. Rhys checked his stocks of compost, then sighed. It wasn't low, but it wasn't high, either. If he had extra mana after growing the Star Ice herb and the other herbs, he might as well have the compost ready to go. "I'm going to separate out the compostable garbage, if you want to wait for a minute."

She looked at the trash, then looked at his somewhat ragged furniture and sighed. "Did you drag that out of the trash?"

"Huh? No, no. I found it in a storage ring," Rhys replied honestly. The storage ring was in the trash, but she didn't need to know that.

Tarais nodded. "I'll wait for a moment, then."

Rhys darted across the trash. He'd grown stronger and faster after his battles with Cynog, not to mention more agile from all the dodging he'd been doing. Now, he darted over the trash, picking out bits of herbs and organic trash, pushing over large lumps with ease and fleeing from collapsed spots before they damaged him. Before long, he had the organic trash separated into his compost pile. He gave the pile a stir with a broken-off table leg, then stood back to think. He had the compost ready to go. He had herbs ready to grow. He had the Star Ice herb ready, too. The pot of soil set slightly aside from the rest of his gear, with the seed buried just enough in the earth to take root. The jug of water Sorden had given him sat beside it, ready to go.

"I'm ready," he called out to Tarais.

Tarais walked over. "What do you need me to do?"

Rhys pointed. "I need you to stand by the seed with the water. Give it some water at the start, then keep an eye on it and give it water whenever it looks dry. Understood?"

"I understand." Tarais lifted the jug and poured a little on the seed to start, then stood at the ready.

Rhys took a deep breath. He closed his eyes and took a minute to settle his mana flows and consolidate the mana in his core, then walked over to the trash. Drawing his matches, he once more lit the trash on fire. Mana began to well up from the trash. Rhys sucked it in, pulling it into his core. The mana whirled inside him. For the first few

seconds, he could handle it, but then it began to push his limits once more. Just like the first time, though, he was able to use this mana to expand his core. He pulled it all in, filling up his core to its limits, and then some.

The books he'd read on magehood indicated that a larger core was better; well, to be honest, he'd figured that one out himself. Bigger core, more mana. More mana, bigger spells and more power for longer. It sounded like a good idea all along. The only thing the books had really told him was that a bigger core in Tier 1 would also set him up to be stronger in Tier 2, and, if some of them were right, might even influence his absolute upper limit as a mage. In other words: the bigger, the better.

Quickly, he reached his absolute limit. His core stretched until it began to tear, and his mana passages swelled, on the verge of bursting. The pain was more bearable this time, but he did have a higher Pain Resist than last time. Still, he didn't rely on Pain Resist. When his mana organs began to break down, he lifted his hand and pointed his palm at the Star Ice seed, and sent all the mana flowing through his body, into his palm, and into the seed.

The seed instantly absorbed all the mana he sent its way. It was like dropping a clay ox into the ocean. Rhys acted as a conduit and nothing else, transferring mana from the trash into the seed, only slowing it enough to strip the impurities as he went, and the seed drank all that up and showed no sign of approaching its upper limits. In fact, it didn't so much as show signs of life.

Rhys breathed narrowly. His whole body was stiff, every piece of him focused on drawing the impurities into himself and the mana into the seed. Breathing deep hurt his overburdened core. The seed continued to drink down the mana without twitching. It didn't even show an indication of awakening, but simply swallowed up his mana like a black hole.

His brows furrowed. He couldn't keep on like this. At this rate, he'd burn down all the trash and then burn down the impurities, and he still wouldn't have enough mana to awaken the seed, let alone grow it to its full size. *Is it that I'm not giving it enough at once?* He tried to up the rate of mana pouring through him, but his body proved the limit. His mana passages were only so big. His core was already overburdened. If he pushed any more mana at once, he'd break.

I'll break. He stared at his hand, then clenched it. His eyes shone with new resolve. So what? If he had to break, he'd break! He was trash. If he let himself get held back by his own limitations, he'd never be anything but trash. The only way to break free and become something more, was to push past them. The limit where his mana passages split open? Let them split! The limit where his core began to burst? Let it burst! Pushing himself only as far as was safe, wasn't pushing his limits at all!

Rhys pushed the pain to the back of his mind. He shoved all his hesitations back and sucked in mana with abandon. His mana veins tore open. His core cracked. Mana

leaked through his whole body, coursing through his muscles and bones. It bit into him like poison, eating into his body. Like acid, it seared through his blood and curled its claws into his organs. Instantly, he felt sick. Every piece of him shuddered, on the absolute limit of breaking down. There was nothing safe about this. He treated his body as a piece of garbage and trampled over it as though it had no value. Without hesitation, he pushed so much mana out of his hand that his fingers burned and a hole opened in his palm. Narrow blue veins twisted through his body, pushing at his skin as mana invaded every blood vessel. His eyes flushed mana-blue, as clear cerulean as the sky above.

Mana exploded from him and blasted into the seed. It laid there, dark and dormant. He could sense it, still sleeping. Waiting.

More? Fine! Even though he was already past his limit, and his body falling apart, Rhys pulled at the mana. All that he could draw down from the trash—only to find out that this was the absolute upper limit of what the trash could give him at once. He was already absorbing all the mana the trash put off.

If you encounter this narrative on Amazon, note that it's taken without the author's consent. Report it.

No! This wouldn't be enough. He had to do more. More... but how?

His eyes widened. He reached out through his body, scrabbling together the last of his consciousness, and focused on the impurities inside himself. They already stuck in his body; now, he guided them to his core even as more poured in. One part of his mind began filtering them into his core as the new mana flew in, while another part pulled the impurities that had already escaped into his core. Once most of them were gathered together, Rhys once again grabbed two of them and crudely rubbed them together.

Come on!

The impurities ignited. Black smoke billowed up from Rhys, and even more mana exploded into his overloaded system. The blue veins twisting through him gained a second color, a yet more pure, darker blue, and in his eyes, an inner ring of dark blue formed. He grabbed that mana and poured it, too, into the seed, while at the same time guiding more impurities into the furnace in his core.

Tarais stood opposite him, watching him with fearful eyes. He was killing himself. Right in front of her, killing himself. But if she stepped forward, or told him to stop, she'd interrupt the tenuous grasp he had on whatever technique he was using. Then he'd die for sure, and in all likelihood, his core would explode and take her out as well. So she stood there silently, grasping the water and waiting, while quietly saying a prayer for him in her heart.

Rhys gathered up that ultra-pure mana in the wreckage of his core. He guided it in a circle, building up more and more of it until the very flame of his life began to flicker. This wasn't a limit of pain, or a limit in his head. If he pushed any further, he would die. He knew that as certain as night followed day.

Now. Narrowing his eyes, Rhys fired the mana at the plant. He released it all at once, in one great blast. This was all or nothing. If this failed, he had nothing. He was truly out of ideas, and he could only tell Sorden that he, too, couldn't grow it. He watched it fly toward the pot and held his breath, urging the seed to grow with his whole heart. If not now, then when? If not this much mana, then how much?

Within the soil, Rhys watched with his mana-senses as the seed soaked up his ultra-pure mana. It sat completely still. Still sleeping. Still waiting.

Rhys clenched his teeth. Even so, he wouldn't give up. Not until the last flame of trash burned out—

The seed twitched. It trembled.

He held his breath. His eyes widened.

It burst open. A single white root pushed into the moist earth, and a tiny green bud began to unfurl. Almost immediately, it sucked up all the water, then slowed.

"More water! Now!" Rhys shouted.

Tarais jumped. She lifted the bucket and tipped some water into the earth. The seed began to grow again, and this time, the tiny shoot pushed through the earth. Two round green leaves stretched to the sun. Rhys felt her mana senses brush against his as she joined him in monitoring the seed under the earth, and added water every time the seed's growth slowed.

The seed began to wither. The two little leaves drooped, and the roots thinned. Rhys stared, confused. He was giving it so much mana. How was it withering?

"Too much!" Tarais snapped. "Cut down on your mana!"

Rhys flinched back. He pulled back the flow of his mana, rescinding the ultra-pure impurities mana and using that to reinforce his failing body instead. The sprout stopped withering and started growing again. Its slender stalk grew taller, and a third leaf appeared, while below the earth, the roots grew deep and strong.

Now that Rhys no longer had to overshoot his limits to push mana into the seed, he could focus on healing his body, as well. He drew out a potion and tossed back a big sip, then guided the healing power that unleashed to his core and mana passages. His body was burned and injured, too, but he first needed to treat the source of the damage.

Otherwise, his core and passages would keep pouring mana into his body, and he'd be trapped in a loop of damage.

Deliberate Triage 1

His core closed up. His mana passages knitted back together. As they reformed, Rhys had enough extra mental processing power to optimize them, just a little. He straightened out the kinks in his mana passages, and widened the veins. Reforged his core larger than it had been, even if just a little, and with stronger, more flexible membranes. The potion had also added more impurities, which he pushed into the bottom of his core to burn with the rest.

Once his core and mana passages were no longer a problem, he turned his attention to the real problem: the rest of his body. He was riddled with mana, absolutely addled with it. His Pain Resist pushed back the horrifying pain, but he could tell that if he left things as is, he'd be facing long term consequences. At the minimum, a long sickness until the mana naturally left his body.

But when he thought about it, wasn't part of the process of strengthening one's body to push mana into it? To imbue his muscles, bones, and even organs with mana, to empower them permanently? Sure, usually that was a long, slow process, or at least one where a safe amount of mana was pushed into the body, but he wasn't the kind to treat his body preciously. He had the skill Trash Body for a reason. And now that he'd already made his body trash, why not take advantage of it?

He monitored the seed for a moment, but it seemed happy with a steady stream of mana and the water Tarais supplied. It grew slowly but steadily. As long as he continued to supply it with pure mana, it would continue to grow. Putting that duty on the backburner, he turned his active attention to his body.

Trash Body was a passive boost. As far as he could tell, it basically allowed him to trash his body and maintain some semblance of ability over it, even past the limit he should be able to move. When shock, pain, and broken bones should have stopped him from advancing, Trash Body stepped in to push them back and allow him to push just a little further. But there was more to it than just that. He could sense it. He just hadn't figured out what it was, yet.

Now, he had a slight suspicion, as he turned his attention to his mana-addled body. He pulled the mana forth and weaved it into his body. Usually, enhancing his body with mana was a difficult process, one that he beat his head against. From the back of his mind, a memory welled up. In his mind's eye, he sat under a waterfall, shoulders freezing from the pounding water. The air was pure, and overflowed with mana. His legs crossed, cold water pooling around his waist. There were no distractions. Any that remained were washed away by the roar of the waterfall. In that perfect setting, he focused on his legs. With all his might, he pushed mana into them. They grew warmer, but that was it. His muscles refused to hold the mana, or enhance themselves from it.

He glanced beside him, peeking for just a second. Bast sat there, perfectly serene. A faint blue aura hovered over his skin, undulating slightly with the flow of the water. Even from where he sat, Rhys could sense Bast's whole body growing steadily stronger.

"How?" he muttered, in disbelief. What was he doing wrong?

A piece of reed smacked him on the chest. "Focus," Straw demanded, arms crossed and brows furrowed.

He shut his eyes again obediently and focused once more. Yet, at the end of the session, Bast had advanced by leaps and bounds, while Rhys remained the same old weak him as ever.

But no longer. Here and now, in the present, torn apart by his own foolish actions, he strengthened his body with ease. His trashed muscles drank up the mana he pushed into them and obeyed his will when he directed them to reform. For the first time, he understood how easy it was for Bast to strengthen himself. It was that easy for him! As long as he trashed his body first, anyways.

He snorted under his breath. From the beginning, he'd been unable to advance except through the trash. Why would his body be any different?

His body came back together, bit by bit. The mana cost was immense, but the supply of ultra-pure mana from the impurities was more than enough to handle the remodeling. The parts of his body he didn't manually reconstruct, he surged mana to Self-Regeneration to force them to heal. That, too, had immense mana cost, but under his current situation, that was no problem at all. Now that he couldn't feed the impurities' mana into the seed without overwhelming it, that power had to go somewhere. It might as well go into improving his body.

At the same time, he kept pouring mana into the plant. The plant grew slowly. The amount of mana he'd poured into it was already more than it had taken to grow all the herbs he'd grown last time, and the seed still had plenty of growth left in it. It had put out two slender, long leaves, and a bud swelled atop its stalk, but it was still far from blooming. Tarais stood beside it, monitoring it alongside Rhys, and fed it water whenever its soils dried. Rhys kept the mana going, but the trash was dwindling. He cut back on reconstructing his body to gather the ultra-pure mana inside him instead, preparing to feed it into the plant later. Ideally, he would have simply stifled the impurities and re-ignited them later, but he didn't know how to stop the burning once it had begun.

As the trash burned down, he started pushing the ultra-pure mana in alongside the mana. He had to carefully limit the ultra-pure mana; after the initial surge, too much made the plant wilt. But just enough, and it began to grow at a wild rate. The bud swelled up. The two leaves trembled, growing darker green. The stalk thickened, toughening in order to carry the heavy bud.

The trash burned out. Rhys could no longer absorb mana from it. All he had were the impurities, and the ultra-pure mana. He fed that carefully into the plant, urging it to push its limits and finally bloom. The bud grew and grew. Traces of color appeared behind the green leaves that engulfed it.

Come on! Rhys clenched his teeth. The ultra-pure mana ran down. The bud shuddered. One after another, the leaves peeled off, but the bud remained stubbornly furled. The black smoke petered away. The last of the impurities burned out, leaving a few lumps of the harder, darker impurity in the pit of his core. He poured the mana into the flower, willing it to bloom. Just a little more. Just a little more—!

His mana ran dry. Rhys lowered his hand. He and Tarais both stared at the bud. It sucked in the last of the mana and sat there, trembling slightly. The petals strained outward.

“Oh?” Rhys stepped forward.

Tarais stared, holding her breath.

The bud settled in. The trembling stopped, and the petals went still.

Rhys sighed. He shook his head. “Oh well, maybe that’s close enough. Let’s take it to Sorden.”

Tarais shook her head. “After all your hard work...”

“It’s fine. I’m used to failure,” Rhys said. He was used to failing, but he couldn’t help but feel a little bad about failing Sorden. She’d trusted him, and he’d let her down. His failure didn’t just impact himself, it impacted Sorden, too. He turned away, running a hand over his hair. Maybe with a mana potion...? But would the mana be pure enough?

Tarais gasped. “Rhys!”

He turned back around.

The flower unfurled, blooming beautifully in the pot. White petals traced with dark blue spread under the sun. A faint cold wind blew, and Rhys swore he saw ice crystals swirling around the heart of the bloom.

“Holy shit! We did it!” Rhys said, punching the air. He snatched up the pot and ran off. “Before it withers, let’s get it to Sorden!”

Tarais nodded. She set down the water and raced after him, both of them hurrying toward Sorden’s classroom.

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

Chapter 24. Delivering the Flower

Rhys rushed across the peak, Tarais at his heel. When the students saw him coming, they dismissed him, but they cleared out of the way at the sight of Tarais, a rare Tier 2 student. In such a way, the two of them ran easily across the peak almost entirely unobstructed. Rhys wrapped his arms around the pot, hugging it tight to his chest. He protected the delicate flower with a raised hand, shielding it from the wind that blew around him from running. Coolness brushed against his chest, emanating from the flower's heart. The mana from the bloom pulsed, nearing a fever pitch. The time to harvest it was now, but he didn't know how, and didn't want to risk damaging it.

Tarais patted his shoulder. She pointed. "She's in class."

Rhys nodded. Without hesitation, he beelined for the potions class and threw the door open.

It slammed against the wall. Once more, the whole advanced class stared at him. The same boy from before lifted a lip, sneering.

Sorden looked up. "I did invite you to come by anytime, but I hoped you would be more subtle."

Rhys lowered his protective hands, showing her the bloom. "It blossomed! The Star Ice—"

Before he finished, Sorden stood in front of him. He hadn't seen her move, so quickly had she flashed from the front of the class to in front of him. She stared, eyes wide, open-mouthed. Her hands hovered around the flower, almost afraid to touch it.

"Professor?" the boy asked.

"Class dismissed." Sorden dashed back and forth for a second, lost on where to go, then sprinted off. She returned with a set of very specific blades, each one a different width, hardness, and span. Taking the pot delicately from Rhys, she knelt on the floor right in front of him. Holding her breath, she watched the plant closely. The mana beat, pulsing faster and faster. As it reached its top speed, her hand lashed out. A dozen precise cuts filleted the plant where it stood, separating bud, petals, leaves, stalk, even the roots were sectioned up. Another flash of hands, and she quickly, but carefully, stored each individual piece in a separate vial.

Most of the students quietly filed out the other door at the front of the classroom. *Most* of them. The boy who'd questioned Rhys this whole time stood at his seat, his arms crossed. He narrowed his eyes at Rhys. "Why is he allowed to recklessly interrupt our classes? If I attempted the same, you would—"

"Bring me a perfect Star Ice Flower, and I'll let you interrupt any class you want," Sorden interrupted him, distracted. She nodded at Rhys. Lifting the vials, she said, "I need to brew these immediately. Five times your initial reward... it's not enough, for what you've given me. See me tomorrow, and we'll discuss a more worthy reward."

The boy's jaw dropped. "Professor! This blatant favoritism—"

Sorden dashed off, completely dismissing the boy. With the teacher gone, he immediately turned to Rhys instead and marched up to him, pointing directly at his chest. "Why do you get special treatment?"

Rhys smiled. He offered his hand to shake. "Hi, nice to meet you! What's your name?"

The boy froze. He narrowed his eyes and put his hands behind his back, where Rhys couldn't possibly touch them. "You can call me Alun."

"Alun. We got off on the wrong foot, I think. Listen. I know I'm trash. You don't need to push me down, or anything. I'm quite happy here at the bottom."

"Why is Sorden letting you act like no one else can, then?" Alun demanded, crossing his arms.

Rhys spread his hands. "Sorden doesn't care about me. She cares about the herbs I grew. If you grow her some herbs, she'll treat you the same way! It's that easy. See? No secret to it at all. I'm just someone who worked in the mud, that's all."

Alun scoffed. "As if I could get into her good graces by growing any old herbs. You're doing something, Inflating your output, so you look better to Sorden. What are you doing? Stealing someone else's herbs? Reselling another mountain's herbs at a loss?"

"I'm too weak for the first, and too poor for the second. I work hard. That's all."

Alun wrinkled his nose. "I'll figure it out. Whatever you're doing, whatever dirty nonsense you're up to, I'll search it out and lay it all bare before Sorden!"

With that bold declaration, he marched off.

Rhys watched him go. He sighed. "I'm not the best at making friends, huh."

“Why’d you say that? You basically told him to be suspicious of your herbs. What if he finds out you can, in fact, grow valuable herbs, and tries to steal them?” Tarais pointed out.

Rhys shrugged. “I had you at my back. You’re a Tier 2. He’s a Tier 1. He isn’t going to fight you. Besides, he knows I have Sorden’s backing. If he’s foolish enough to steal my herbs, he’ll find out that a Professor is quite proficient at identifying how herbs are grown... including the signature signs of my very specific technique. If someone else shows up with herbs that look like mine, she’ll be suspicious. All I need to do is show up and tell her the truth, and it’s curtains for him.”

“What if he outright attacks you instead?” Tarais asked.

“Would you attack someone who showed up to class unannounced with a friend a Tier higher beside them?” Rhys asked her rhetorically.

Tarais snorted. “Fair point.”

“If he does try to attack when you aren’t there, he’ll find out I learned quite well under the Strawman. That, and I’ve got a few new moves I want to try out, courtesy of Cynog.” Rhys grinned, cracking his knuckles. He still wasn’t an earth-shaking martial artist, but compared to some random potion-brewer at the same Tier, he was confident he could hold his own.

“What I don’t understand, is why he’s so broken up about this. Shouldn’t he be happy that his teacher is getting excellent herbs, even if it means class gets canceled a few times?” Silently, he added, *and plus, isn’t class getting canceled a bonus?*, but he kept that to himself. He got the feeling that student-mages in this world didn’t feel the same way about school that years of obligatory public schooling had inflicted upon him.

Support creative writers by reading their stories on Royal Road, not stolen versions.

“Alun is... well, he’s considered a prodigy in potions. He was Sorden’s favorite student until you came along. He’s probably a bit envious of the attention you’re getting from her, now that she’s paying more attention to you, than him,” Tarais explained.

Rhys nodded slowly. “Jealousy, huh?” Nothing he could do about that. He sighed. “Crazy that he’s jealous of the garbage collector.”

Tarais shook her head. “That’s probably part of it. He thinks you’re not worthy of her attention because you’re the garbage collector, who obviously ranks below him. He doesn’t see you as a fellow student who deserves to compete for Sorden’s attention, but instead, a servant who’s daring to reach above his station.”

“But I’m a fellow student who chose to collect the garbage,” Rhys pointed out.

“True, but does he conceive of you that way? The truth doesn’t matter. What matters, is how Alun feels... to Alun, anyways,” Tarais added.

Rhys sighed. “Oh, whatever. Nothing I can do about that. If he comes after me, I’ll shut him down. If he passively hates me forever, that’s his problem.” He glanced at Tarais. “Unless he has some kind of formidable backing?”

Tarais shook her head. “Not so much. To an ordinary student, I’d warn that he’s one of Sorden’s favorites, but you’re clearly held in higher favor at the moment. As for his family or anything like that, if anyone here had that kind of backing, well... they wouldn’t be here. At best, a student here might have parents who are bigshots in the mortal world. Most of us are from no-name mortal families, who leaped at the chance to give their child *any* shot at being a mage, no mind if it was from a school they’d never heard of before.”

Rhys nodded. He could relate. It was like predatory for-profit schools back where he was from. People were so desperate to have a degree that they’d do anything to get one, even pay exorbitant rates for what amounted to worthless paper. If the prize was magic, godhood and immortality, he could only imagine how much harder someone might fight to be a part of that.

After a second, he tilted his head. There was one part of that which had been bothering him from the start. Until now, he hadn’t had anyone reliable to ask, but Tarais seemed knowledgeable about this kind of thing. He nodded her way. “If this school is so lowly regarded, then why was Schoolmaster Aquari summoned to the same meeting about the Strawman that the Sword Saint was?”

Tarais laughed. “Oh, that’s easy. It was a coincidence. The city where we captured him is technically within the bounds of the Infinite Constellation School’s territory. Though the city itself hasn’t paid tribute to our school in ages, and treats us with disdain, preferring to pretend it has no relation to us at all, it’s still technically within our bounds. That alone gave Schoolmaster Aquari the right to attend that meeting, if she likely didn’t have much right to speak.”

“Ah... no, that explains a lot,” Rhys murmured. Such as why she’d picked him up. If he was technically found within her boundaries, but was so weak that not even the quasi-independent city wanted to pick him up, then by the same technicality that gave Aquari the right to be there, she was also honor-bound to take him in. *Though, given how stinky her peak was, I imagine she might have ducked that responsibility a bit harder if I hadn’t offered to be her janitor.*

He glanced at Tarais. “I’m surprised you can speak so frankly about your own school.”

Tarais spread her hands. “Schoolmaster Aquari knows all this, and more. She isn’t the kind of tyrant who refuses to face reality, and she doesn’t mind if we vent about it a bit, as long as it’s not to her face... or blaming her.”

Rhys winced instinctively, flashing back to his lecture to Cynog. He'd really been out of hand back there. He had to remember he wasn't on the internet, waxing eloquent about trash. He was in the real world. If he didn't give someone face, they very well might cave his in. "Yeah... I get that. But I meant you, personally. Don't you have any affection for your school?"

"I do, of course I do. But I think it's foolish to allow sentimentality to cloud one's vision. It's best to face reality and do your best to overcome it, than to flee from it and give up."

Rhys nodded. "Good, good. So, have you faced the reality that you aren't trash?"

Tarais opened her mouth, then laughed. "Let's just say there's advantages to lying to oneself in the interest of promoting self-growth. Wouldn't you agree, Rhys?"

Rhys blinked at her, lost. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, come on. You don't actually believe you're still trash, do you? Everyone knows you've been getting one-on-one tutoring with Cynog. You survived actually pissing him off. And just now, when I told you Alun was a potions genius, you told me you would beat his face in without a moment's hesitation. Is that how trash behaves?"

Rhys shrugged, spreading his hands. "From my perspective, that's an awful lot of trashy behavior on my part."

Besides, she just didn't get it. Trash was a starting point. It was because he was trash, that he was willing to trash his body to advance. If he wasn't trash, he might treat himself preciously and not trash his body, and instead find another way to advance that didn't involve mashing himself into garbage. But because he was trash, he lost nothing by becoming even more horrible garbage, and only stood to gain.

It was Tarais' turn to blink at him. Her jaw worked, words struggling to emerge, and then she threw her hands up. "I give up."

"Don't give up yet. I'm just getting started," Rhys replied on instinct.

Before he was forced to figure out a way to follow up those words, Sorden returned. She nodded to Rhys. "Apologies. I had to store those stably... and directly transmute a few, before I had breathing space to continue our conversation. Now then, where was I?"

"Something about five bags of gold not being enough to repay me," Rhys replied.

She nodded. "Right. No, and that's correct. Five bags of gold is nothing. This herb is... it's beyond my wildest dreams. The purity, the life force... if only I knew your secrets! No, no. I'll give you the bags of gold. But beyond that... is there anything you want?"

Rhys considered for a moment. He held up two fingers. "Two things."

"Speak. Whatever they are, I'll grant them, as long as they are within my power," Sorden promised.

"One, individual potions tutoring. I can more-or-less read a recipe and follow it, but there's some advanced techniques that I don't get yet. I'd love to dive deep on those and learn from the best."

"Of course. Naturally. I was planning to ask you to study with me, if you hadn't asked," Sorden replied, nodding easily.

"Two. Access to the upper half of the mountain."

At that, Sorden hesitated. She gritted her teeth. "That... is not my decision alone. It will be difficult, especially given your low Tier. Most students are not permitted to enter the upper peak until they are Tier 3, at least. Might I ask why you want to enter the upper peak?"

"I want to gather the garbage up there," Rhys replied.

Sorden froze. She stared at him. "What?"

"I want to gather the garbage. There's so much of it! Piles and mounds! I want to clean it all up and take it back to my garbage dump," Rhys explained.

"Why?"

He shrugged. "I'm obsessed with trash."

Sorden stared at him for a moment. Emotions flashed over her face, everything from disgust and despair to shock and confusion. Her jaw dropped, then slowly shut. At last, she laughed aloud. "Obsessed with trash! What a thing to be. Well, well, I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you. I understand if you can't. And I don't need permanent or unsupervised access! I just want to clean up the trash. Whatever caveats you need to enforce, I'll likely be able to bear them."

Sorden nodded. "We'll see if I can't get you unfettered access. You have done a great deal for me, after all. If it was my decision alone, I'd let you through right now, but you understand, these things cannot be decided by one lowly Adjunct Professor."

"Of course, of course," Rhys replied, nodding. He bowed and retreated.

At the door, Sorden's voice echoed. "Oh, and Rhys?"

He looked back.

“I’ll see you in class tomorrow, six o’clock sharp. I’ll have your gold then... and with any luck, an answer on your request.”

Rhys grinned. He saluted and walked off, Tarais following after him yet again.

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

Chapter 25. Potions and the Pit

Rhys spent the rest of the day in the mustelid class, but whatever enlightenment awaited him beyond that train of thought, he couldn’t grasp it yet, nor could he grasp it before six A.M. the next morning. He rose, a little annoyed at himself. He’d freed himself from Cynog, only to throw himself into Sorden’s class! He should’ve had the foresight to see out this enlightenment, first.

Ah, well. Sorden liked him. He was pretty sure he could ask her for a few days off to focus on the mustelid class. Not right away, of course. He was eager to start learning advanced potions techniques. But after a week or two, if he still couldn’t break through on the mustelid enlightenment in his free time, he’d ask her for a week off.

Sorden’s tutoring was a far cry from Cynog’s. There was less getting-beaten-up, and more accidentally scorching or searing himself on superheated caustic materials. His Resistances steadily leveled, but his potion making screeched along at a glacial pace.

It wasn’t that he couldn’t read the recipes, or that Sorden wasn’t a good teacher. He could, and she was. But at higher levels, the recipes became more vague and left more to the potion-maker to decide, which wasn’t ideal for a beginner like Rhys. Sorden pointed out the best ways to go there, which herbs to pick and which ones to generally avoid unless they were specifically called for, but even then, he still made mistakes. Mistakes which generally ended with him gaining a new scar, until his hands, arms, and face were covered in red burns.

Higher-level recipes also called for more and stranger techniques. He had to carefully modulate his mana to give it just enough power now, then pull back to the bare minimum the next second. Or keep his mana swaying at the right pace to keep an herb melding with the liquid.

Now, he hovered over a boiling pot. Blue smoke billowed by, stinging his eyes, but he couldn’t look away. Not now. It was too close.

With his left hand, he stimulated the blue-white grass to swirl clockwise and fed it mana to empower its properties. With his right hand, he gripped the silver bud powder, clenching down on it to keep it from gaining too much mana. Enhancing with the left, suppressing with the right. All his focus poured into the pot, not an inch to spend elsewhere. Slowly, the two materials melded, forming a new, silver-white liquid.

The silver reached the edge of the pot. The entire body of potion turned silver. Sorden stepped forward, expression tense. "Now!"

Rhys dropped his hands and slammed the lid on. He went to grab ahold of the herbs again, but it was too late. The silver bud powder eagerly drank in mana, and the blue-white grass ran rampant. Pressure welled up against the lid. His eyes widened. He pushed down on the lid with both hands, locking his feet under the cauldron to keep the whole thing together.

Sorden flashed away. The cauldron rumbled, and then pressure slammed into the lid. For a split second, Rhys suppressed it, but then he lost his grip on the lid. It flew past his head, narrowly missing his nose. He jerked his head back just in time and only got splashed, rather than getting a face-full of boiling silver liquid. It flew up, then poured back down, threatening to rain all over Rhys.

Sorden stepped forward. She spun her hand, and all the droplets froze in midair. With a calm gesture, she called the silver liquid down into a separate cauldron. She stood over it, focused. Mana flowed from her palms. The potion spun placidly, no longer over-excited. Sorden put the lid on the cauldron and stepped away, and the potion simply simmered, rather than exploding.

She sighed, then looked at Rhys. "You almost had it. If you hadn't lost focus at the last second..."

Rhys nodded, embarrassed. "I'm sorry."

"No, no." But that was all she said. He'd failed too many times for any excuses. Instead, she just stared at him, something between confusion and exhaustion in her eyes. "How are you so good with herbs, and bad with potions?"

Rhys scratched the back of his head. "Er... it's more like 'good with trash' than 'good with herbs,' actually."

"Good with trash?" Sorden frowned, eyes narrowing.

"It's my path. My obsession. I really love trash. Anything trashlike is easy for me to learn, but if it doesn't have anything to do with trash, I struggle."

"How is growing herbs..." Sorden raised her hand. "No. I'd rather not know."

Rhys nodded. To be honest, he'd rather not tell her, for a variety of reasons. Of course, he wanted to protect his technique, but also, he wasn't sure she'd have given him his five bags of gold if she knew how her precious Star Ice seed were grown.

Speaking of... "How did it go? Is there any chance I'll be able to get to the trash up at the top of the mountain?"

Sorden twisted her lips. "I'm trying, but it's slow going. I'm only one lowly teacher, after all. I'm barely allowed atop the peak. To ask for permission for a student to climb the peak... I just don't have enough influence to make that happen on my own."

Rhys thought for a second. "What if I got more teachers to request it?"

"Maybe... it might help," she said, uncertainly. "But we're... we have very little influence. I'm not sure any number of teachers from down here could guarantee you access to the peak."

But from the way she said it, there was a chance. And weren't the teachers being treated as trash by the lucky few who lived on the peak? If he thought about it, it really was that simple. He just had to gather up all the trash together, and they wouldn't be able to ignore it. It was like when your garbage bag was half full. Then, it was easy to ignore. But when it was full, then beyond full, when a dozen pizza boxes stacked atop it and trash overflowed onto the floor—then, even the brattiest of college kids would at least have to admit it was a problem, even if they might not do anything about it.

That was when Rhys would step in, and offer to take down two problems with one fell swoop! Give him access to the peak, so he could clear the peak's garbage, and get the lower, trash-tier teachers to stop pestering those powerful, busy mages atop the peak, who had no time for this kind of foolishness.

This book was originally published on Royal Road. Check it out there for the real experience.

He nodded to himself. "So if I gather all the tras...teachers together, I might be able to get in?"

"I... wouldn't guarantee it, but it's probably a better bet," Sorden admitted.

"Better is better than nothing," Rhys said.

A foul smell emitted from his pot before he could continue the discussion. He leaned over it, peering inside. Black filth coated the insides of the cauldron, caking it completely. Rhys made a face. "I think I burned this one."

Sorden stepped up beside him. She sighed. "That's fine. Use your mana like I taught you, like a blade, and scrape the edges, then give the gunk to me."

Rhys raised his hand. He focused for a moment, and a shaky scraper-like blade appeared from shimmering blue mana. He lowered his hand over the pot and dragged it over the edges. The black gunk clung to the pot stubbornly, refusing to break free.

“What do you do with this stuff?” he asked, a little curious. All he knew was that she always demanded he give it to her without touching it. It seemed precious to her, so he’d always obliged without asking, but now he couldn’t suppress his curiosity any longer.

“Oh—it’s dangerous. Highly toxic, full of impurities. I have a special pit where I throw it all, so it won’t contaminate any students,” Sorden told him.

Rhys froze. From one beat to the next, the flickering scraper-blade strengthened. He swooped his hand around the inside of the pot, and all the black gunk snapped free of the pot’s walls to hover over his hand. He lifted it, letting the clumps spin slowly. His eyes shone. “It’s trash?”

“Yes...” Sorden caught his look, and shook her head. “Dangerous trash. You’d be absolutely riddled with impurities if you touched it. Even if you’re obsessed with trash, it’s too dangerous for you. Hand it over, and I’ll take care of it.”

Rhys retracted his hand, hiding the gunk behind him. He quietly put it into his storage ring for later. “Can I see your trash pit?”

“Why? If someone like you gets too close, you’ll be inflicted with impurities, even without touching it,” Sorden warned him.

“That’s fine. I can handle it. Actually—I can even cleanse that pit of gunk. Please, won’t you let me see it?” Rhys all but begged.

Sorden gave him a look. After a second, she sighed. “Fine. I’ll show you. But you’ll stay back, and don’t touch. I don’t want to injure a student like you.”

“No, no, that’s no trouble! I’m trash. Don’t treat me preciously. It’s fine to injure trash,” Rhys insisted.

She frowned at him. “Even I failed to grow the Star Ice Seed. You can’t—”

“But that was because of trash. Because I treated myself like the trash I am! You’ve seen how skilled I am at potions... or rather, not,” he amended, gesturing at the mess around his station. The stone was melted and deformed from potions gone wrong, and the wreckage of at least one cauldron sat nearby, ready for Rhys to drag it back to his heap. There might have been more than one cauldron mashed into the twisted mess of metal; Rhys really wasn’t sure. “It really is the case that I’m only talented when it comes to trash. So please, won’t you show me the trash pit?”

Sorden hesitated for one more moment. “This won’t interfere with your ability to grow herbs?”

“No—in fact, it might enhance that,” Rhys assured her.

“Well... if you say so.” She still looked a bit uncertain, but nonetheless, led him out the rear door of the classroom and into the woods.

Rhys followed her up the hill. Despite his habit of running all over the mountain, especially when he was being chased by Cynog, there were still parts of it he didn’t know well. The mountain was a vast place. There were even secluded residences he hadn’t yet found, as evidenced by the residences’ inhabitants bringing their trash into town every week or two when they wanted him to pick it up. He hadn’t worried himself too much about that idea, telling himself that whatever secluded residences there were, they’d only contribute one house’s worth of trash. It wasn’t worth it to spend an entire day running out to a distant house to pick up one house’s garbage, when he could simply wait and have it delivered to the central square.

Yet, as Sorden drew out a ladle and gestured for him to mount it, he reflected that the trash must not have *started* piled up in the town. It must have started somewhere else. Some ancient garbage pit, full of trash. Sure, it would be stale trash, but trash nonetheless. What he was really beating himself over, was that, as Sorden’s trash pit indicated, the truly powerful, dangerous trash would be hidden somewhere far from the students, to prevent accidental access or contamination. In other words, what he’d been dismissing all this time as ‘a house or two worth of ordinary trash,’ was actually ‘the most powerful trash on the mountain, hidden out of sight in incredible quantities where it could rot in peace.’

Rhys shook his head at himself, disappointed from his heart. He needed to broaden his horizons. He couldn’t allow himself to be blinded by the trash right in front of him. People hid their trash! It was human nature! If he was satisfied by such reachable, obvious trash, he’d never find the deeply buried gems of trash piles!

It was like reading the most surface-level LNs and being satisfied that you’d seen the trashiest novels available. Not so! Ah, it was true, they might be trashy, but they were merely mainstream trash. The weak, diluted trash that everyone could appreciate. How simple, how basic. What he sought wasn’t so shallow. He yearned for the depths. The unplumbed depravity, where the true brainrot resided.

Or, in this case, the most toxic, most dangerous, most *powerful* of trash.

They soared over the forest. The trees flashed past, somehow more magnificent when seen from the sky. Rhys watched them fly by with rapt eyes, far more excited by Sorden’s low flying than he’d been with Aquari’s heights. He was sure Aquari’s flight was more impressive, but, well, he’d been on a plane a thousand times. Sorden flew

low and tight over the trees, and the effect was far more akin to riding in a helicopter or swirling through the air as a bird. He laughed aloud, taken with it.

Sorden glanced back at that and smiled. “Looking forward to flying? Once you’re Tier 2, you can start practicing with flying swords—the kind that need to be powered with spirit stones. At your Tier, you’ll struggle to keep a spirit stone activated, but at Tier 2, you should be able to do it easily. It’ll be Tier 3 before you’ll be able to forge your own flying sword... or implement of your choice.”

Rhys glanced down. “You chose a ladle?”

She smiled. “I was more attached to it than to any sword. Besides, it felt a bit pretentious to mount a blade to fly, when my skills with the sword are... less than impressive.”

Rhys nodded. “I get that.”

Sorden looked at him, then laughed. “You can hold your own with Cynog, no? In that case, your sword skills likely outstrip my own.”

“Ah, that’s...” Rhys grimaced a bit. Aside from the sword scrap he kept on him at all times, he usually fought Cynog with whatever he had to hand. Bits of trash, trees, his own hands and fists. When it came to the sword, he had no particular skill... unless it was trash.

Abruptly, Rhys looked at his hands. *Fighting with my hands and feet... Trash Intent... Trash Body.* Could he use Trash Intent on himself, now that he’d obtained the skill Trash Body, which clearly labeled his body as Trash?

His eyes sparked at the idea. He clenched his fists, eager to try it, but quickly suppressed the urge. Not now. Later. After he’d obtained this fresh, powerful trash... then, then for sure. But he’d wait until he had the trash safely within his grasp to try any exciting new experiments. Better a bird in the hand than two in the bush, after all.

“Here we are,” Sorden said. She began to descend.

Rhys quickly spun on the ladle, taking in the world all around them. He marked the distant town and a tall rock near him, fixing the landmarks in his head. They ducked below the tree canopies in a rustling rush of leaves, and Rhys was forced to close his eyes. An acrid scent assaulted his nose, and he tensed in anticipation. *Come on! Here we go, powerful trash pit!*

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

Chapter 26. Don't Play in the Ancient Toxic Trash Pit

They descended through the trees, hurtling down toward the earth below. For a hair-raising moment, Sorden slalomed through branches, dropping so fast Rhys' stomach lurched only to soar back up again, and then they were down at ground level. Rhys hopped off, glad to be back on solid ground. The flight had been fun for the most part, but those last few seconds had really whipped him around. He'd never been much for roller coasters, and roller coasters without any of the guarantees of modern engineering or extensive testing were absolutely not his thing. He glanced at Sorden and her ladle, then took a deep breath. More of that awaited him, if he rode back with her. At least on the way back, they wouldn't have to dodge branches as they went for the landing.

She gestured for him to follow and walked on without looking back. Her ladle jumped into her hand, and she stuck it through her belt. "Just up ahead."

Rhys jogged after her. He quickly caught up, then had to hold himself back from rushing ahead. Already, he could smell it. The caustic stench. The sting of impurities on the air.

Sorden stepped forward. She pushed back a thick layer of undergrowth to reveal a hole in the earth. "Careful."

Rhys drew up to the edge. He caught his breath. His eyes widened, even if that made them water a little bit.

Dark gunk coated the sides of the pit. The black, crusty, seething grime slumped in the depths, not quite liquid, not quite solid. A powerful aura emanated from it, more powerful than any of the trash piles he'd gathered so far. This trash hadn't decayed for its time in the pit. If anything, it had only grown more powerful.

He hovered his hand over the pit, testing the toxicity of the gunk within by calling a little bit of it to himself.

Almost instantly, his mana circulation slowed, then ran backwards. His hand turned black, and his blood began to ache. The toxicity climbed up his arm, toward his chest. His veins turned black where it coursed through them. It seared his veins, like acid injected directly into his bloodstream. Instinctively, he knew that if it reached his heart, he would die.

"Rhys!" Sorden shouted, shocked. She fumbled in her storage ring, searching for a potion. "This is why I said you shouldn't get close!"

Quickly, Rhys retreated, no longer calling the gunk to himself. He pushed his mana out of himself, taking the contaminants and the filthy blood with it. His hand spurted with blood, first black, then dark, then safe, healthy red. His mana streamed out of him as

well, taking most of the impurities with it. Some of them got past, but those were at an ordinary level. A level Rhys could handle.

Even so, the density of the impurities in his body after one second of trying to absorb the trash pit, after ejecting them, was nearly as high as when he absorbed an entire pile of ordinary trash. Rhys stared at his hand in awe. One second, and he'd gained that many impurities? And he hadn't even lit it on fire! How dense was this gunk? How powerful?

Doubt crept into his mind. Maybe he wasn't ready for the peak's trash yet, if he couldn't absorb this gunk.

He looked at the pit again. So many impurities. Such a density of them! Impurities were better than ordinary trash, when it came to refining his body and expanding his core. He couldn't pass by this opportunity. Now wasn't the time. It would be reckless, no, foolish, no, *deadly* to try to absorb it all now, when a single pull almost killed him. But he should practice. Expand his ability to absorb trash and impurities, until he could absorb all this gunk.

His mind went to the gunk in his storage ring. That was still toxic, but less toxic. If he could practice absorbing that, he'd be able to step up to the gunk in the pit.

Sorden pressed a potion into his hand. "Drink this. It'll expel some impurities. Quickly, now. There's little a potion can do once they settle in."

Rhys looked at her like she was insane. Expel the impurities? He needed those!

No, wait. I shouldn't reject this. He smiled and pretended to drink it, quietly palming it into his storage ring instead. He could use this later. If he tried to absorb the hyper-toxic pit goo and overestimated his tolerance, this would be a convenient bail-out. Especially with Less is More, where he could use it multiple times if he really needed to.

He turned to Sorden and smiled. "Rather than putting the burned potions in the pit, could you send them to me, instead?"

She narrowed her eyes in suspicion. "What are you going to do with them?"

Rhys gave her his most earnest puppy dog eyes, using his current youth to his advantage. "They'll help me practice and get stronger! Please?"

She stared at him for another moment, then sighed. "If you insist. Consider it part of the favor I owe you, since I couldn't get you to the peak."

Rhys nodded happily. "But don't give up on that second one. I'm going to get up there eventually. I'm going to get as many teachers as I can to back me, until they can't ignore us."

Sorden opened her mouth, her brows knitting, then laughed. "Why not? It might work."

Rhys smiled. He understood without her having to say anything. She and all the other teachers were lower in the hierarchy than those on the peak, so much lower that it didn't matter if all of them asked for Rhys to enter the higher peak, those on the upper half might still ignore him. But that was fine. He didn't expect this to be easy. As long as he caught the upper half's attention by having everyone on the lower half demand he get access, he'd already won. Getting their attention was the first step to obtaining their trash.

He bowed to Sorden. "Thank you for showing me the pit. You've given me a goal to achieve. I promise I will work tirelessly until I am able to overcome the pit."

"Overcome?" Sorden asked.

Rhys didn't explain himself. She didn't need to know. She probably wouldn't approve if she did.

She waved her hand. "Whatever you're doing with this trash, just try not to kill any fellow students? I'd hate to see you expelled."

"No, of course not! I'm not planning to kill anyone," Rhys assured her. In fact, the opposite. He was getting stronger so people couldn't kill him. Sure, in a world where there was someone capable of making the Strawman, who in turn had to be suppressed by the most powerful schools around, he had a long way to go before no one could kill him, but he was already making pretty good progress on getting strong enough that absolute trash couldn't kill him. A little was better than nothing!

With their visit to the pit done, Sorden drew out her ladle once more. They flew back to the potions class. Sorden headed inside, while Rhys turned to leave, but not before he heard Sorden clear her throat and announce:

"From today forth, bring your burned potions to me at the end of class. They'll go to a fellow student's long-term project."

Rhys flinched a little. He glanced into the open door behind her, only to find Alun, sitting alert in the front row and gazing straight at him. Their eyes met. Understanding flashed across Alun's face, and he slowly grinned.

Rhys grimaced externally, but the second he walked away, he shrugged to himself. Alun was surely going to make his burned potions as toxic as possible now that he knew they were going to Rhys, but wasn't that in Rhys' favor? He could start from absorbing the normal-level potion gunk, then absorb Alun's, and treat that as a baby step toward the seething toxicity of the ancient gunk pit. He wasn't quite sure how he was going to take the next ninety-eight steps toward the ancient gunk pit's toxicity, but at least he had the next few steps laid out for him.

Hmm. The inkling of an idea rattled around in his head, but it didn't quite take form. Resting his chin on his hand, he wandered toward the mustelid class.

"Who do we have here?" a deep voice rumbled.

Rhys looked up, half-expecting to see the J Trio from such cheesy lines. Instead, two muscular boys in their late teens loomed over him. One punched his fist into his open palm, while the other put his hands on his hips. They blocked off Rhys' path and grinned down at him.

"If it isn't the guy who insulted our teacher."

"Yeah, that's right. The guy who thinks he's better than all of us, and not only that, but Cynog, too. That guy."

Rhys' eyes widened. He nodded slowly, lifting his chin from his hand, and pointed at the boys. "Cynog's students!"

"That's right. And we're here to teach you a lesson," the bigger one said, cracking his knuckles loudly.

Rhys considered for a second, eyes darting from one to another. They were both roiling with muscle, and reeked of testosterone and a general lack of good hygiene. The one with his hands on his hips had a bit of cruelty in his eyes, hinting at higher intelligence, but the larger one, cracking his knuckles, showed no such spark. He wouldn't be talking his way out of this one.

This tale has been unlawfully lifted without the author's consent. Report any appearances on Amazon.

His mind flashed back to the forest, where he'd had the idea about Trash Intent and Trash Body. He scanned the boys. Both at Tier 1, the same level as him. The one with his hands on his hips had a more powerful aura, almost at the peak of Tier 1. Mentally, he shrugged. He could take on two Tier 1s, no problem. Seemed like a great chance to test out the skill combo.

Since he wouldn't be talking his way out, and since he'd already decided to fight, Rhys threw caution to the wind. He laughed in their faces, putting his hands on his own hips. "You? Teach *me* a lesson? I'm the one who taught your teacher a lesson. You should be on your knees calling me teacher, not trying to teach *me* something."

The bigger one lunged, fists already swinging. Rhys stepped into the blow. He grabbed his wrist, turned his body, and pushed his hip under the bigger boy's hip, lifting him up and over his body. The boy landed on the ground with a huff, staring at the sky with wide eyes.

Rhys dusted off his hands. He shook his head. "Typical."

The other one charged Rhys while the first scrambled to his feet. Unlike the first, the second boy kept his center of gravity low and his fists high. The one self-defense class Rhys had taken back in his first life hadn't covered that scenario, so instead, he stepped forward and fainted toward the boy's head.

The boy lifted his hands to block. Rhys kicked him hard in the shins. The boy huffed in pain and shuffled back on instinct. Rhys didn't back away, but kept pressing in, kicking the boy's shins over and over until the boy yanked one of his legs up, only for Rhys to kick the other leg. They continued like that, the boy hopping from foot to foot, until the other, bigger boy caught up with them.

A punch whistled toward Rhys' head. He ducked, and the blow hammered the hopping boy in the face instead. The hopping boy reeled, stumbling away. Rhys popped back up and gave the hopping boy a good push at the shoulders, hooking the boy's ankle at the same time, and the boy hit the ground with a heavy thud.

Standing, Rhys looked at his hands. Punches hurtled toward him from behind. Used to this kind of assault from Straw and Bast, he ducked left and right on instinct, relying on the sound of the wind from the boy's punches alone. This whole time, he'd been trying to activate Trash Intent and Trash Body, but nothing happened. It wasn't that the skill combo wasn't working; he couldn't even get the combo started. Trash Body wouldn't activate. Without a trash target to activate on, naturally, he couldn't use Trash Intent.

Come to think of it, I haven't used Trash Body since I fought Cynog. A second later, he furrowed his brows. No, that wasn't true. He'd used it when he was growing the Star Ice Seed, when his body was on the verge of crumbling entirely due to the energy flowing through it.

Wait, is that it? He stilled as he finally connected the two scenarios.

"Stand—still!" the boy grunted.

"That's right. I can only use it when my body's in dire straits," Rhys realized aloud. He glanced at the boy, then stepped slightly uphill and stopped moving, just like the boy had requested.

For the first time, the boy's fist connected. Rhys didn't activate Blow Mitigation, but took the full power of it. His ribs cracked. Stumbling back, Rhys grunted in pain. He waited, watching the boy.

Confused, the boy looked at his fist, then at Rhys, then shrugged and charged Rhys with a shout. Blow after blow hammered into Rhys. Aside from shifting slightly so the blows didn't hit fatal points, he took them all. The whole time, he kept trying to activate Trash Body, only for the skill to stubbornly refuse to activate.

Rhys gave the boy punching him an annoyed look. “Could you hurry it up? I’m trying to test something.”

The boy roared and hammered into Rhys. This time, he put mana in his punches, and they landed with more weight than everything before put together. Rhys laughed. “More! More!”

Although Rhys paid it no mind, a small crowd had started to gather in the distance. All eyes watched one boy beat up another, while the boy getting beaten up laughed, a horrible grin on his face. More than one watcher shivered, a distinctly uncomfortable sensation flowing over their skin.

“Is that kid...?”

“Smiling?”

“What a pervert...”

“Should someone stop them?”

“I don’t know. He seems to be enjoying it. Maybe we shouldn’t?”

“Never mind, someone stop it. / can’t handle any more of this.”

A heavy blow sent Rhys flying. He struck the ground and rolled back to his feet, only for the pain to fade away. He controlled himself from outside, almost, just detached enough from his body to make rational decisions and move it precisely, despite its beaten state and what should have been extreme pain.

His eyes shone. *It activated! Then—Trash Intent!*

Light flashed over his body as the skill took ahold of him. It gripped his body, reforming all the missing pieces and adjusting the broken bones back into place. His body strengthened back to its original strength, and then beyond it, as the skill pushed him to the ideal form of his current body. He lifted his fists and faced the boy. Another punch flew his way, but so slowly that it was almost comical. Rhys sidestepped easily. He turned to watch it go by, then faced the boy once more.

“Get fucked.”

His punch flashed in, too fast for the boy to react. It landed on his jaw with a sharp crack. The much larger boy went flying. He hit the ground like a sack of potatoes and bounced a few times. Rhys stood over him, watching to see if he’d get up.

His eyes showed only whites. Foam dribbled from his mouth. From the instant Rhys’ punch had hit, he’d already been unconscious.

“Is this him?”

Rhys looked up. The first boy, the one he’d kicked in the shins a lot, ran toward him, leading a yet older, more muscular boy. This one wasn’t properly a boy, but a young man in his early twenties. He had the lithe muscle of a practiced martial artist, and the weathered face of someone who lived rough. Correspondingly, his short robes had no sleeves and were frayed at the hems, and his trousers dirt-stained and threadbare, ripped open at the knees. His hair was a tangled mess, barely held back with a sweat-stained bandana around his forehead.

Rhys tensed. The young man’s aura was at least Tier 2, and if his instincts were right, it was higher than Tarais’. He was a real threat. He raised his fists, watching the boy approach with wary eyes.

The young man looked at Rhys and scoffed. Turning to the hopping boy, he shook his head. “That runt is what beat you and Honeg so badly? If I were you, I’d be hiding under the bed and pretending nothing had ever happened, not running to my seniors.”

He had an unusually high tenor voice, Rhys noted, but maybe he looked older than he actually was. Like how some mages looked younger than they were.

The hopping boy shook his head. “He was bullying us, Ev! You have to show him that Cynog’s students aren’t so easily put down!”

“Haaa, who was bullying who? Your memory is so short, you might as well be a goldfish,” Rhys accused the boy.

Ev snorted. He nodded at Rhys. “Is it true? Were you bullying them?”

“Hardly.”

“He did! He badmouthed Cynog!” the goldfish boy insisted.

“Did you badmouth Cynog?” Ev asked.

“Only for picking such shitty students,” Rhys replied.

Ev laughed aloud at that one. He shook his head. “I mean, you ain’t wrong. But... you know how it is. I can’t have someone out here badmouthing my juniors.”

“That’s alright. Come.” Rhys gestured for Ev to attack. With Trash Intent and Trash Body active, he really did feel like he was bullying these weak Tier 1s. Ev might be a bit above what his current state could handle, but he was curious to find out just how large the gap was between him and a martial Tier 2, fighting seriously.

Besides, he hadn’t used all his tricks yet.

“Oh? That’s bold, kid. You do know I’m a Tier over you?”

Rhys watched him. He waited.

Ev laughed. He stepped forward. “Got it. Well, you *did* ask for it.”

Ev’s body blurred. Motion flashed toward Rhys’ temple, and then he was flying through the air, cartwheeling head-over-heels, but sideways. Searing pain bit through his skull. He blinked, struggling to push back the black dots in his vision.

Before he landed, Ev appeared again. A fist slammed into his stomach. He vomited, tasting blood, and flew backward.

He couldn’t do it. Couldn’t see Ev, let alone land a blow on him. He’d overestimated himself. No, he’d forgotten—at his core, he was trash. With two techniques synergizing, he could fight people at his own level, but that was all. Fighting over his Tier was a dream, with only this many buffs stacked on him.

But that was fine. He had more buffs to stack!

Reaching into his core, he grabbed some impurities and started rubbing them together. Luckily, he’d just refilled, thanks to that ancient toxic trash pit. By now, he was used to friction-igniting impurities. Before he finished flying backwards, the impurities lit with a *whoosh*. Black smoke billowed from his body as power poured through it.

Rhys kicked, steadying himself in midair. He slammed his feet down, dragging himself to a halt. Ev instantly flashed in, arm already drawn back to punch, but now, he could see the man move. He blocked Ev’s punch with his forearm and returned one of his own. His knuckles landed smack on the man’s jaw.

Ev staggered back. He paused, then lifted his hand and touched his jaw, a little surprised. “Wow. I actually felt something.”

“More where that came from,” Rhys returned.

“Oh... I recognize you now. You’re that runt Cynog was tutoring! I can see why Cynog likes you,” Ev replied. Grinning madly, he flashed in.

Fists flew at Rhys from all directions. He desperately blocked, barely fending Ev off. Instantly, he was transported back to sparring with Bast. Ev was just as strong—no, stronger. But now, Rhys could keep his blows from connecting consistently, unlike with Bast, where he’d miss a few and pick up a few bruises for his trouble.

It wasn’t that Ev was weaker. Instead, with all his buffs active, Rhys was just strong enough, now, to fend him off.

“Damn, no wonder. You’re strong. But all that mana you’re putting out... you can’t keep that up forever, can you?” Ev asked. He hopped back. “If I wait, you lose.”

Then I won’t let you wait. Rhys chased after Ev and punched. Ev stepped back, turning his shoulder. Rhys gave chase, but Ev evenly backed away, hands in his pockets, ducking left and right. He whistled, boredom on his face.

Rhys bared his teeth. Jumping forward with all his face, he lashed out at Ev’s hips with a high kick, hoping to knock him off balance.

He saw Ev’s teeth shine white, bared in a predatory grin, a second before Ev caught his leg. He tried to yank it free, but Ev had it in a stranglehold. Ev twisted it slightly, and pain shot up his knee. Rhys froze, focusing only on balancing. Ev could break his leg right now, and there was nothing he could do about it. If the man did that, the fight was over.

Instead, Ev tugged, gently putting Rhys off-balance. “I can tell you’ve been sparring with Cynog, too. He goes too easy on you newbies.”

He grinned and shoved Rhys’ leg hard, throwing off Rhys’ balance entirely. “But I won’t.”

Rhys staggered, trying to regain his balance, but before he could, Ev was on top of him. He shoved Rhys to the ground and hammered at his face. Rhys blocked with his arms as best he could, and this time, he held nothing back. Blow Mitigation worked as hard as it could, fending off some of Ev’s blows, but there was only so much the skill could do. Before long, his vision darkened. Spots appeared in his vision.

No. I refuse. Rhys twisted, tearing his robes to break Ev’s hold. His bones creaked a bit, joints screaming, but in his Trash Body-Trash Intent state, that was easy enough to ignore. Face-down, he crawled out from under Ev at top speed, hammering a kick backward at the man’s crotch on the way out.

Ev took the hit with a bare grunt. Rhys’ foot landed on a lump of fat and bone, not delicate genitalia.

Ev looked down. Rhys stared up.

“You’re a—”

A grin split Ev’s face. “Damn straight I am.”

Her fist slammed into his face, and his vision went black.

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

Chapter 27. Help, Help, I've Been Kidnapped!

Pain was the first thing Rhys felt. He swayed slightly, a breeze shifting through his hair. Rather than open his eyes, he let himself hang there, his knees wrapped around the wood of a tree and weighed there with some kind of counterweight, reflecting on what had just happened. He'd been fighting some losers and totally dominating them, and then Ev had come around. Taller, more muscular, more powerful, but still only Tier 2, well below Cynog's strength. She hadn't tried to kill him, or seriously injure, the way Cynog had, but she had straight knocked him out with a punch. That was some serious power.

Unlike Cynog, I don't hold back. Was that it? It sure hadn't felt like Cynog was holding back. And to be fair, he had been in much worse a state afterward. If anything, he felt as if Cynog, the sadist, had deliberately left him awake to experience as much of the beating as possible, while Ev had simply landed the KO when she felt like it.

On the other hand, Cynog definitely *could* have killed him, and had deliberately held back. On the other hand, Rhys had been using his most powerful enhancement techniques, neither of which he'd used against Cynog, and he'd still lost. He'd landed a good hit, and he'd put up a fight, both of which were remarkable achievements for someone a Tier below, but he'd lost.

No, that's not quite right. Cynog and Ev... from the beginning, their blows had completely different goals. Cynog hadn't had to fight him. Rhys might as well have been punching a rock wall, for all the damage the man took from his blows. It wasn't a fight at all, but a one-sided beating. He'd been free to torture Rhys, and had chosen to do so at his leisure. Ev, on the other hand, *had* been fighting him seriously. He'd forced a Tier 2 to fight him on even footing, as though he was a Tier 2. He wasn't, and so he'd lost, but he shouldn't denigrate his accomplishments. For trash, that was quite an achievement.

"You can go ahead and open your eyes. You aren't fooling anyone," a distinctive tenor voice intoned, vaguely amused.

Rhys opened his eyes. Ev lounged in a tree opposite him, one leg dangling, her head propped on a hand. He gasped in shock. "Ahhh! I've been kidnapped!"

"Uh huh. Convincing," she deadpanned. "Come on. Get your ass up, and let's get started. Forget Cynog's bullshit and let's get to training."

Rhys swung in place, getting a feel for the counterweight on his legs. "I'm stuck."

"Sure you are. I didn't tie your arms or take your blade," she replied.

"Then... why'd you hang me up?" Rhys asked, lost.

She snorted. "Your sleeping face looked too smug. It was annoying me."

"Oh." Rhys shrugged, not really understanding. He drew his blade from within his robes and activated Trash Intent. Reaching past his hips, he strained his feet down and slashed the rope that bound him to whatever she'd used as a counterweight. His body instantly fell head-first, but only a foot or so before he hooked his ankles on the branch and caught himself. Rhys dangled there another few seconds, reaching back to free the loop of rope from where it had been tied around his ankles, then swung himself around, flipped off the branch, and landed on his feet.

He looked at Ev. "Why'd you kidnap me?"

"I need a training partner. Cynog... well, it's like hitting a big sadistic wall, if you get my drift."

Rhys grimaced. "What a way to describe it."

"Am I wrong?"

"No, not at all."

"What I need, is someone about my strength, that I can fight without holding back. You seem to be about that size. And I trust I'm about that size to you, huh?" she asked, crossing her arms.

"If I'm fully buffed, yeah," Rhys replied.

"Buffed?"

"Er... if I'm using all my techniques," he quickly recovered.

Ev nodded. "That's what techniques are for. Alright, it's settled. From here on out, you're my training dummy."

Rhys hesitated, then raised his brows. This actually wasn't a bad deal. He needed to get stronger. In the absence of Bast, he needed a training partner, too. Plus, like this, he had something to do with all the mana he'd generate from the impurities-burning technique, as he progressed in absorbing stronger and stronger impurities so he could absorb the toxic slime pit. Sure, he could just sit still and strengthen his body, but he'd have a better idea of how to strengthen his body—where he needed to reinforce, and what he needed to empower—if he optimized his body based on real battle, as opposed to while just sitting still.

"Understood. Then... can you give me a moment? One of my techniques requires a, uh, different kind of fuel than mana, and I need to recharge it," Rhys explained.

She thought for a second, then stepped back, giving him space. "You have a moment."

Not wasting his time, Rhys immediately drew the impurities he'd rescued from Sorden's class out of his storage ring. He kicked the bushes and undergrowth aside, then laid the gunk on the ground and lit it. Impurities flowed into his body; not as much as a full load of trash, but more than a third of a usual week's worth of trash. He grinned to himself. His instincts were right. If he gathered a lot of this gunk, he could quickly scale up his impurity-absorbing tolerance.

Come to think of it, he usually had one or two potions' worth of gunk in the trash when he burned it. Right from the start, the majority of the impurities had come from potion-gunk.

The gunk burned out. Rhys breathed deeply, sucking down the last of the smoke. He stood back, wiping his face. "I don't have as much as usual, but I can be your sparring companion for a short while, at least."

"Is that all you need? I thought I could sense at least three techniques active on you," Ev commented.

Rhys glanced at her. He didn't intend to deliberately shatter his body again. Honestly, he probably didn't need to. The way Ev fought, with no holds barred, he'd end up broken whether he wanted to or not. "Those... I'll activate later."

"You holding back?" she asked, eyes narrowing.

"Don't be ridiculous. I don't want to die."

"Then there's some kind of condition on activating it," she concluded.

Rhys stared at her. He did give it away a little bit, but he hadn't expected her to jump on it that quickly. She was sharper than he expected.

She laughed. "What, did you think I was a brainless meathead? Don't be stupid. Fighting's all about mind games. One mistake or misunderstanding can overturn an entire battle. Like when you tried to land a dick-shot on me. If I'd had a dick, that might have worked, but I didn't, and so I had the chance to absolutely hammer you." She paused. "I mean, I could've done it anyways, but you get the point. If we were *actually* perfectly matched, that might've given me the advantage I needed to beat you."

This book is hosted on another platform. Read the official version and support the author's work.

Rhys nodded. He looked at Ev again, reappraising her. He *had* taken her for a meathead, she was right. After dealing with Cynog, he'd kind of written off all the

school's martial artists as meatheads. But Ev... she was clearly thinking ahead. He was playing checkers, and she was playing multi-dimensional chess. "Is that why you dress like a boy?"

"Well, I'm also a lazy ass who doesn't like showers and taking care of my hair and shit, but yeah. Tactical advantage," she said firmly, nodding.

Rhys snorted. "You can do that dressed as a girl, too."

"Eh. No one bothers me if I dress like this and do it. They harass me if I dress like a girl and act messy."

"Fair enough."

She raised her fists. "Enough talking. You're all fueled up, so it's time to fight."

"I don't know how long I can stay in this state, so please don't kill me," Rhys requested. He still hadn't tested the limits of his impurity-burning technique. Testing it within the relatively safe limits of a spar was better than discovering its limits in real life-or-death battle.

"If you can't last long enough to satisfy me, that's on you," Ev returned.

Rhys raised his brows. *What the—*

She flashed in. Rhys barely had time to jump back. She pressed the charge rather than fall back, aggressively chasing after him. He ignited his impurities as he landed and barely managed to block. Her fist slammed into his forearms. His arms trembled, almost giving out. Fierce pain rattled through his bones from the weight of her blow.

Ev laughed. "Oh, caught that one, did you? Good, good. I knew I picked a good training dummy."

"Sparring partner," Rhys corrected her.

"Same difference." She threw a punch at him, and Rhys dodged backward. The fist breezed by his face, fast enough to send his loose hairs into a flurry.

Rhys' eyes widened. If Ev landed a punch, he wasn't sure he'd have time to enter Trash Body-Trash Intent form. He might just directly die, even with impurities burning. He gulped, then took a deep breath, settling his energy and focusing on the task before him. If he didn't give this fight his all, he might not survive it. He lifted his fists to match Ev and stood on his toes, watching her every move.

She grinned. "That's more like it. Hold in there, partner. You might actually survive."

With that, the melee began. It wasn't as one-sided as Cynog's beating had been. Rhys could dodge most of Ev's attacks, and the few that landed, he deflected with Blow Mitigation and his usual techniques, leaning away from the blows and turning with the force. He was on the defensive, no question about that, but every so often, Ev made a mistake. Underestimated him and overreached, misstepped, lowered her defenses a little too much. Every time she gave him an opening, Rhys punished her with his heaviest blows.

They barely seemed to smart. She laughed aloud, eyes blazing with the thrill of the fight. The two of them battled for almost ten minutes before Rhys ran out of impurities. By then, though, he was able to use Trash Body, and so he fought on with the help of Trash Intent. He could tell Ev was holding back some to prevent killing him, now.

Time ground on. Rhys desperately held her off. His mana guttered, running low. Sweat dripped down his ragged body, stinging in his wounds. She dashed in, hammering a fist at his forehead. Rhys doggedly raised his arms to take her blow.

Trash Intent flickered, then went dark as his mana petered out. Rhys' eyes widened. He jumped back, no longer able to take Ev's hit.

Her fist froze an inch before his forehead. The wind from the blow struck Rhys, but the hit itself went short. She looked at him.

"Out of mana?"

Rhys nodded. And impurities, but she didn't need to know that part.

"Hmm. That was fun, but it could have lasted longer." She sighed, running a hand through her hair, then looked at him. "How long will it be before you can recharge?"

"Uh... I need to check something, but I could be back as soon as this afternoon," Rhys told her. If he was just recharging his mana and reloading on impurities, he could burn some trash and hop back into it, it would just be a matter of gathering the trash and burning it. For the impurities in particular, it would depend on whether Sorden had dropped off the cauldron gunk or not, but since she had class in the morning, it wouldn't surprise him if she'd swung by while he was out fighting Ev.

"This afternoon? Don't go crazy pushing yourself just to fight me! I'll be here. How about you come back tomorrow?" Ev suggested.

"No, as long as I have the right conditions, I can come back this afternoon," Rhys insisted. Right now, Ev was ideal training for him. Not only did it give him a chance to really spar, but she also forced him to use his buff moves for as long as possible and gave him something to do with the energy he obtained from burning impurities. She'd also push him to burn more impurities faster and rebuild his body properly. He didn't

want to do anything but train with her, at least until he was significantly closer to being able to absorb the toxic pit.

She crossed her arms. "If you're sure."

"I'm not sure, but give me a few minutes, and I'll be sure," Rhys assured her. He quickly sipped his potion to heal the most grievous of his wounds, and turned to run off.

Rhys paused. He turned back, slowly.

Ev raised a brow. "Yeah?"

"Er... how do I get home?" He'd been kidnapped here while unconscious, and he didn't recognize this part of the mountain. He legitimately didn't know how to get back.

Ev snorted. She pointed. "Dead ahead, 'bout half an hour full speed. Can't miss it."

Rhys frowned. If that was the case, he should've seen this place during his spars with Cynog. But then, who knew? It wasn't as if he'd walked every inch of the mountain. Maybe this was a part Cynog didn't like.

He set off across the mountain, occasionally sipping the potion whenever the previous hit wore off. As he ran, stone walls closed in on either side, until he ran through a narrow crevasse. The land naturally sloped up, until it spat him out through a gap in two rocks barely wide enough to squeeze through.

Rhys glanced back as he fled. If he hadn't left through that gap, he would have never seen that gap, let alone imagined that a huge valley gaped beyond it. He mentally marked the entrance so he could come back to it, and ran on.

Back to the main square. Rhys did the usual loop to pick up all the trash. Outside of Sorden's class was a pile of particularly noxious waste, sitting in a beat-up old cauldron. Rhys poked at it with a stick, only for the stick to hiss and melt away. He raised his brows. "Damn."

For all that, it wasn't nearly as toxic as the pit. It'd be good training, though, and he would only continue to amass more the longer he had this deal with Sorden. He grinned. *Excellent.*

Taking the trash and the gunk, Rhys retreated to his usual stomping grounds. He piled the trash up to burn it, then looked at the gunk. It was pretty nasty stuff. Too potent for him to try absorbing it all just yet. He had to adapt. Work up to it.

He gripped the pot by its handles and sloshed a bit of the thick, molasses-like goo on top of the trash. Even that much felt a bit too much, but he rolled up his sleeves and

grabbed the matches. If he never pushed his limits, he'd never be able to absorb yet more toxic goo. This was but the stepping stone to the toxic pit.

Black smoke welled up from the trash pit. Before he even stepped into it, Rhys could feel the weight of impurities sinking into him through his lungs and skin. He hissed in pain and shook himself out, working himself up. *Come on. I can do this. I can do this!*

Rhys stepped into the black smoke and breathed deep.

Mana flowed into him, but so too did impurities. His body instantly grew heavy. They clumped in his mana passages and slowed the flow of his mana. His organs ached, barely continuing to function. Rhys began to burn the impurities just to keep his body from shutting down, and still they poured in, an unending stream of them. He filled up his core, patched up his body, and energized his muscles and organs, and they still came.

Luckily, he had a fresh set of compost and a few nice plots of land just waiting for mana. Rhys turned all the organic waste to compost and encouraged two plots of herbs to grow, and that managed to spill off just enough mana that he could absorb all the impurities as the last of the trash burned away. Since it was only one day's trash, it didn't burn long. If it hadn't been for the splash of goo, it wouldn't have done much for him at all. He still couldn't kill the burning impurities before they burned off, so the second the fire burned out, he sprinted off, back to Ev.

She stood just inside the valley, leaning casually against the wall. At the sight of him, she raised her brows. "I saw that black smoke coming... so it really was you."

Rhys hurtled at her and punched with all his might. She dodged to the side, and his fist hit the wall instead. His knuckles bruised, but now he was sturdy enough that nothing broke. Nothing except the wall. Bits of rock flew away, and a small dent appeared where his fist had landed.

"Oh? You're raring and ready to go. Damn. Well then! Come at me, kid." Ev swept a kick at his legs from behind even as she spoke. Rhys hit the ground hard and immediately rolled away from the wall, toward Ev. She'd closed in to leap on him, but now he slammed into her ankles and forced her to hop instead. Rhys used the bare seconds he'd bought himself to climb back to his feet and immediately charge at her back.

She spun around, grinning wide, and swung to meet him. The two of them clashed once more. Blows echoed through the valley. The trees shook, and dust flew. Neither one held back as they both gave it their all.

Rhys grinned. He wiped the blood from his face and charged at Ev again. Until he could absorb infinite impurities, until he was stronger than Ev, he would fight! Anything for his precious trash. Anything!

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

Chapter 28. Burning Impurities

A legend spread among the students of Infinite Constellation School. In a distant part of the mountain, high on the peak, some horrible monster had made its home. It spent all day hammering away at the stone, shaking the trees and rattling the earth itself. Some people claimed it was angry, furious at the school, and that it wanted to burn the whole school down, as evidenced by the black smoke that issued from its den. Others postulated that the beast must be a dragon, and that black smoke no more than the breath pouring out of its nostrils. No matter how hard they searched, no one could find hide nor hair of the beast, and yet, between the horrific din it made and the billowing black smoke, they knew it was real.

“I saw it!” a student claimed. “It was small, but fierce, and moved too quickly to be seen. It shrouded its body in black smoke and reeked like rot and decay!”

Thus the monster took on a definite shape. It was an undead, some kind of ancient, twisted zombie. The thumping was its rage at having been awakened, and the smoke was its curse, so furious as to manifest physically.

“Someone must have opened its grave and disturbed the formation that kept it asleep.”

“Then what are we supposed to do?”

“We need to make offerings. Appease it. And search for its grave! Set its tombstone back upright, reset the formation.”

The mountain came alive with activity. The students rushed around, setting up a makeshift shrine and searching for whatever grave might have been disturbed. But, for all their effort, the booming only got worse, the dark smoke grew stronger and more ominous, and now, pained grunts and terrible screaming, like a child in pain, joined the symphony of fearful noises issuing from the deep mountains.

“It’s digging in! It grows stronger by the day.”

“Forget the grave. It’s lost. We need to seal it anew. Set up an undead-sealing formation on that side of the mountain, and hope it takes!”

The students set up red ropes to bind the forest and burned purifying incense to placate the undead. And yet, the thumps only grew louder, and the smoke grew darker. Nothing they did could change a thing. No matter how hard they tried to seal it, it only grew stronger.

Some students gave up in despair. If they couldn't stop it, there was no point trying. They'd simply have to wait and pray that it cared not for their lives, and leave its fate up to the more powerful teachers, whenever they chose to take action.

Others simply tired of it. They shouted back at the monster's cries and ceaseless thumping, spread fragrant herbs to mask the acrid rot stench it put off, and went on with their lives. The teachers didn't seem concerned, so why should they be?

A handful continued to fear the monster. They searched for it, sealed it, feared it. Candles accumulated at the makeshift shrine. Offerings piled up, only to mysteriously vanish every week. They cowered in fear when the hammering booms rolled out, and sang praises when the smoke flowed strong and dark. Slowly, what had been an effort to seal the beast, turned into a kind of worship.

Unaware of all this, Rhys and Ev continued to battle. After the first few rounds, Rhys started stockpiling the trash in Ev's valley rather than make the run between his nook and Ev's valley. He could only take in a little bit of the black goop at first, but steadily, he grew able to absorb more and more of it, as his body grew more tolerant toward impurities and his Impurity Resist skill leveled up. The black goop piled up at first, as Rhys struggled to absorb any of it, but as his tolerance increased, he began to keep up with the rate of accumulation, then surpass it. Eventually, he began fishing out the most toxic parts—probably contributed by Alun, from the mana that clung to them—and saving them separately, so he could give himself the maximum hit of impurities at once. The first time he did it, when the first wave of the more powerful impurities sunk into him, his mana passages seized and almost stopped entirely.

Ev immediately stepped in and smacked a dozen points on his body, and his mana passages swelled, letting the impurities flow through. Gasping a breath, Rhys immediately ignited the impurities, clearing them out of his passages as they burned. Even so, the larger, thicker, stickier impurities stuck in his passages, resisting the flow of mana and even his efforts to burn them. His whole body shimmered with heat, mana starting and stopping as the impurities chunked through him.

She looked at him, her brows furrowed. "I appreciate the effort, but you're going to kill yourself if you keep this up."

Rhys raised his hand. He focused internally on the impurities. They were too big for his passages. What Ev had done was only temporary. When his passages narrowed again, he *would* die. The impurities kept rolling in, just as big as before. He struggled with it, pushing it into his core as fast as he could. It was only a temporary fix. Without the bigger passages, he was ruined.

I have to do something. But what? He furrowed his brows, thinking, then startled. He looked at the smoke with new eyes. If he just blindly absorbed the smoke, then he had to adapt his body to take whatever it had, no matter how dangerous or toxic it was. That was *one* strategy, but if he limited himself to one strategy, he would be limited by that one strategy. In other words, the limits of his body would hold him back. Since he had a trash body to start out with, that was a severe limitation. On the other hand, if he had multiple strategies running at once, he wouldn't be limited by any one chokepoint.

He extended his mana outside of him. Carefully, he pulled a thin thread from his mana. The first time, it broke off, but he widened it a little and kept going. One thread overlapped over itself a thousand times as he slowly wove it together, forming a fine net. He set the net over his throat, at the point where impurities entered his body, and breathed.

The impurities sucked in. The smaller ones flowed neatly into his body, while the bigger ones caught on the net. Rhys flared his mana, heating the net. The net seared into the impurities, cutting them into smaller pieces. They rushed past and into his core, where they joined the rest.

It wasn't the neatest or most mana efficient technique, but it worked. It kept the impurities small enough to handle, and easy enough to break down. Like this, even before he managed to enlarge and toughen his mana passages enough to handle the larger impurities, he could press on and absorb more dense and dangerous impurities.

Rhys straightened, strongly drawing in the impurities once more. He turned to Ev. "Let's continue."

She shook her head at him. "You're insane. This is going to be the death of you."

"It's the death of me if I don't," Rhys said. If he gave up and didn't try to progress, his trash stats would leave him at the bottom of the food chain. He'd be chewed up and spat out before he knew what was happening. No matter what, he could never stop climbing. Never stop growing stronger. Even if he had to harm himself in order to get stronger, he couldn't stop now.

Their eyes met. After a moment, Ev nodded. "That resolve in your eyes... you really believe in this, don't you? In this technique."

Rhys nodded in reply. "I do."

"This... is your path?"

"Yes."

She laughed. "Then who am I to tell you to stop? If this is your path, walk it to its end. But first..." She backed away, gesturing him on.

Reading on this site? This novel is published elsewhere. Support the author by seeking out the original.

Rhys charged at her, and they leaped toward one another once again.

Ev wasn't one for many words. Their exchanges were mostly fists. Occasionally, backed into a corner, Rhys would draw his sword, but Ev only ever fought barehanded. She didn't hesitate in the face of a blade. If anything, it made her faster and more brutal. Rhys struggled to keep up with her speed even now, but he'd learned the pattern of her technique. Just following her footwork, he could react to her attack before she launched it. The more she fought, the better he got at reading her. She realized what he was doing, and changed up her footwork, but he kept his eyes on her feet. As long as he could follow the way she shifted her weight and watched her steps, even if he didn't recognize her specific movement, he could guess what she was about to do next.

They fought on. Impurities flowed through Rhys. He grew stronger and stronger as he absorbed more impurities, enhancing his body as he went. More of the ultra-impurities gathered in his core, but even with this rate of impurities, the small ultra-impurities remained negligible in size.

His body, too, adapted to impurities in small, subtle ways as he kept going. His mana passages widened, and the speed at which he pushed mana through his body increased, keeping the impurities flowing even when they were larger. The temperature of his mana grew warmer, which kept the impurities softer. All these small adaptations allowed him to absorb impurities more smoothly and merge their power, once unleashed, into his body with ease.

At the same time, he gained practice with using Trash Body, Trash Intent, and both at the same time. He streamlined each technique to the point he could activate Trash Body before his body was in complete tatters, and instantly attach Trash Intent to it the moment it was up. He also practiced the two separately, using Trash Intent on his sword stub and Trash Body to hold on when his body should give out. Less is More also grew stronger, as did Blow Mitigation. Of all his skills, Trash Body and Trash Intent grew the slowest. They were also the strongest of his skills, so it made sense that they leveled slowly. The more powerful something was, the harder it was to level it.

After nearly a month of training, his stats looked far different.

Rhys Foundling | 14 | Foundation Building (Tier 1)

Title: Trash-born

Skills:

Hunger Resist 14

Survivalist 27

Pain Resist 39

Scavenging 28

Less is More 36

Sewing 8

Blow Mitigation 25

Self-Regeneration 19

Mana Manipulation 10

Poison Resist 12

Improvised Weapon Proficiency 7

Heat Resist 7

Acid Resist 8

Impurity Resist 13

Trash Intent 4

Alchemy 2

Herbalism 4

Speed Reading 4

Enlightenment 1

Trash Body 3

He looked over his stats and nodded, pleased. It was worth it to see hard work pay off, even if checking his stats was just seeing a number go up, and using them to feel the change in their power far more meaningful. Number go up was nice. There was something satisfying about it. Something concrete. It spoke to his heart in a way that he couldn't fully express in words. The beauty of it. The simplicity.

"Dazin' off over there?" Ev asked, walking over.

It was a rare peaceful moment. Rhys needed to heal before he could fight again, so they were resting. Rhys had been reading one of the books Az had leant him yet again, while Ev had been off practicing punches or whatever it was she did for fun. She usually walked away to handle her own business during downtime, and he didn't press the situation.

It was rare that she acknowledged his existence during that time, but now, she was talking to him? A rare mood, for Ev.

Rhys looked up, dusting off his robes. "Just checking my stats."

"Stats, ha." She spat.

"You don't like the System?"

Ev shook her head. "Doesn't mean much to a fist fighter. 'Fist Proficiency' is whatever. It can be as high as you like, but it doesn't mean you know how to counter a throw or turn a blade."

"Aren't those their own skills?"

"Mmm. Sure. Still don't like 'em. Putting too much faith in a number makes my skin crawl. Saw someone with Knife Proficiency in the fifties get oneshot by an arrow. Even had a skill to intercept arrows, and everything. But he wasn't paying attention. Didn't keep his guard up, and all those skills meant nothing. He bled out like everyone else. And everyone always says, 'oh, but he could train Bleed Resist and—'" She rolled her eyes. "Sure, he could. But unless you're a mage, you don't have the time to sit there and slowly grind bullshit defensive skills. Skills aren't everything."

Rhys nodded. "I get what you're saying. It's like how you could have a high Sword Proficiency, but if you never fight spearmen, you'll never know how to counter them, and they'll still have an advantage over you regardless of the number in Sword Proficiency."

He'd already experienced that, himself. He had points in Improvised Weapon Proficiency, but when facing the absolute wall that was Cynog, he'd been reduced to hit and runs in hopes he could do a little damage. Without real world experience, skills were... well, what they looked like. Just a number.

"Yeah. Not a lot of people get it. They just think big number equals power." Ev cracked her knuckles. An evil grin crept over her face. "And then I beat their faces in."

Rhys smiled, but internally, he was just a little bit scared.

"It's like you. You can fight me, even though your Tier says you can't. Well—to be honest, that's far rarer than some idiot with a big number in one skill who doesn't know

how to use their skill, but..." she shrugged. "Point is, don't worry too much about numbers. Even if yours is small and theirs is big, it's all about how you use it."

"Are you doing that deliberately?" Rhys asked. This wasn't the first time she'd said something that *might* have been an inuendo, or might have just been innocent misphrasing. By his count, she'd done it at least three times, if not more. At this point, though, he had to know. There was just too much coincidence.

"Doing what deliberately?" Ev asked.

Rhys opened his mouth, then shut it. He eyed Ev, who watched him with a dangerous glint in her eyes. *If it's not deliberate, I'm not going to bring it up. If she takes it the wrong way, and this ends up as a Cynog situation, I've got a lot farther to run to get back to the library.*

"Nothing," he said, wisely.

"That's what I thought," she said, grinning. She gestured him on. "You're healed up, right? Back to it."

Rhys raised his hand. He checked his stock of gunk. It was almost out...but even then, it no longer did much for him. Ordinary gunk barely bothered him anymore. Even the more toxic stuff that Alun created just wasn't cutting it. He'd tried separating out Alun's toxic goo and just absorbing that, and it had worked for a few days, but now, it did little for him. The impurities still gave him power, but they barely did anything to strengthen his body. He needed more. Something more toxic, so he could actually work toward absorbing the pit. Right now, he still wasn't getting any closer.

He had ideas, he just couldn't act on them here, far from his base camp. He needed equipment and knowledge back at his home, or in the main square. The settings were too austere for him here.

He looked up at Ev. "Actually, there's something I want to try. Could you give me a few days?"

Ev pouted playfully, then waved her hand. "Sure. I'll just sit here and practice my forms, I guess. Wait for my durable training dummy to reappear."

"I'll be back," Rhys promised, and stood. He jogged out of the crevasse and stopped.

He'd noticed a few bits and bobs being added to the woods. Some strange red ropes, tied in specific knots. Odd wicker structures, often vaguely humanoid, which turned into burned piles not long after. Even a strange shrine cobbled together out of scrap wood, stained with black smoke from the herbs they burned in it. But this was... over the top.

Paper streamers hung from the trees, black as the night. It looked like someone had TP'd a tree after a college football game gone sideways, but black, and vaguely ominous. Small black figures hung from the trees, all of them distorted and only humanoid if he squinted, paired with bundles of fragrant herbs. The trees were riddled with red ropes, knotted in strange and exquisite knots.

Rhys frowned. *What happened?* Had some evil being escaped, that needed to be appeased and sealed? Was it some kind of festival to celebrate one of this world's gods? He leaned in close to the humanoid figure, getting a better look at it, but couldn't make heads nor tails of its intent. Rhys lifted a hand to touch it, then flinched back. What if it was some kind of cursed doll? He, of all people, should know they existed. He'd been trained by one of the most powerful cursed dolls of all, after all.

Shaking his head at the strange decorations, Rhys headed back into the town. At the square, he hesitated, thinking. He wanted to brew the leftovers into a toxic potion, concentrating and hopefully increasing the toxicity of the gunk at the same time. Sorden would have the potions knowledge necessary, but just the idea of explaining himself to her gave him a headache. Plus, she'd already hinted that he shouldn't tell her too much about how he had grown so strong, so quickly. Asking her something like that might give away too much about his techniques, and turn him from a student to a target. Not that he'd let that hold him back, if it was something truly essential, but for something he had another route to achieving, he didn't know that he wanted to give that away to her so easily.

Which left his other option. And honestly? It was probably the better of the two. Nodding to himself, Rhys set off.

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

Chapter 29. Book Exchange

Having eliminated Sorden as a good starting point, Rhys headed toward the library, his second idea. It was a good place to start. It wasn't like Az would leave the library and tell anyone that he'd asked about potions, and Az had shown no inclination toward aggression toward Rhys, even if Rhys told him his techniques; Az was just too lazy to bother. Asking Az for potion books in the library wouldn't keep him from being able to visit Sorden later, and besides, he could use the books to figure out what he specifically needed to ask Sorden, and that way avoid giving away too many hints as to what he was doing, but still get the knowledge he needed.

Braziers full of smoldering fragrant herbs hung from the buildings in town. Others simply hung bundles of herbs over their hearth. Rhys raised his brows. *Wonder what that's all about?* It reminded him of the strange decorations in the woods, somehow, but much less extreme. He sniffed. There was a slightly strange smell on the air, but it wasn't *that* bad.

Then again, I do live in a garbage pit. He was used to bad smells. Maybe it was worse than he could tell, because he'd gone nose-blind to bad smells. Shrugging, he headed to the library.

The library was still the same as ever. No herbs hung over its mantle. He stepped into the cool, quiet interior. The smell of old books and slowly decaying leather reigned supreme, as usual. The entire space hung in dusty silence, save for the quiet echoing tap of his shoes.

He turned the corner to Az's desk, only to find it empty. Books still piled over the desk, and the chair stood ajar behind it, as if its occupant had only just stood up. Rhys frowned and looked around. "Az?"

Soft paws landed on his shoulder. A light weight settled onto him. In a scathing tone, Az murmured, "I see you've returned. Did you read the novels I so kindly leant you *this* time?"

"I did! I did, this time. Do you want your books back? I took good care of them."

"I do." Az hopped off Rhys' shoulder and padded a few steps away, then transformed back to human. He held out his hand.

Rhys pulled the books out of his storage ring and passed them over. "I really enjoyed the one about the coward who's determined to play dead to survive."

"Oh? There's eight books in that series. I can give you the sequels," Az replied. He stacked the books under one arm and headed out toward the shelves.

"Wait, wait. Do you have any books about potionmaking?"

Az gave him a deadpan stare. He lifted his head, taking in the thousands of books all around them, then slowly lowered his eyes back to Rhys.

Rhys cleared his throat. "Low-level potionmaking books about concentrating potions to make them stronger. I'm interested in general-purpose concentration techniques. You know, like boiling a soup down, but for potions."

He assumed it was more complicated than just boiling the potion down. In any case, with something as toxic as what he was working with, he wanted to make sure he concentrated it according to best practices. If there was an equivalent of a fume hood or

some other protective measure while cooking down something toxic, he should probably use it. After all, he didn't know *how* toxic he'd be able to cook it to be. He might be able to cook it up more toxic than he could handle, even by burning impurities. There were still upper limits of toxicity he couldn't yet absorb. If the cooking process unleashed more than he could handle, or if he concentrated it harder than he could bear, then he could always water down the potion afterward, but he'd need something to handle the toxicity while he was cooking.

Az considered for a second, then nodded. "I'll bring you a few books that touch on the subject. And the novels?"

"Oh, yes please. A few more would be good, as well," Rhys said.

Az was about to leave, but then turned back. "Do you know Alun?"

"Hmm? Oh, yes. I do."

"He's been in here looking for tomes on making the most vile potions possible, the ones that have the most disgusting waste products. Muttering something about 'that stupid garbage collector' while he's at it."

Rhys nodded. "I'm very grateful for his efforts."

Az stared at him, then chuckled, just once. "I'm glad you have it under control. I've been working on Alun for quite some time, and I would've regretted having to give up on my efforts if he happened to pick an argument with a student I far prefer."

Rhys blinked. He looked at Az. "What do you mean, 'working on Alun?' Working on him how?"

"There's a tome in here that contains the secrets to the Illuminating Fist technique. I've been trying to influence Alun to learn it for a long time."

"Why?"

"Because then it would be the Alunminating Fist," Az said simply, as if it were obvious.

Rhys' jaw dropped. He stared at Az for a moment, then laughed. "You really like wordplay, don't you?"

This story has been unlawfully obtained without the author's consent. Report any appearances on Amazon.

Az snorted. "How sad it would be, to live in a library and not enjoy playing with words." He turned away for the final time, striding off into the books. His black-and-white robes

fluttered behind him, long sleeves dangling around his elbows while the narrow under-robos clung tight to his wrists.

Rhys watched him go, then shook his head. He couldn't counter Az. Everything the cat had said made sense. He chuckled to himself and leaned against Az's desk to wait.

Az returned a short time later, carrying the books. He handed a stack of heavy leatherbound tomes to Rhys. "These are the potion books that have information on potion concentration."

Rhys accepted them and stored them in his storage ring. "Thank you."

"And these..." Az lifted a second, larger set of books. Although the stack was larger, the books were smaller, with cheap, thin pages and paper bindings. Thin pages meant more words could be packed into a smaller space, so even though the books were smaller, Rhys knew they were no less full of knowledge and wisdom... or even better, trashy plots, dangling subplots, and crazy characters who barely made sense. With a much more serious expression, he handed them to Rhys. "These are the novels."

Rhys accepted them with all due respect. "Thank you, sir."

Az nodded. "In the future, I hope I can discuss them with you."

"I would certainly hope so," Rhys replied.

He missed his days on the forums, ranting and raving about all his favorite trashy novels. Since he'd gotten here, not only was there no time, but there was also no one to discuss them with. Bast wasn't much for reading. He was definitely a man of action, not of nice, slow thinking. Tarais seemed too serious, and he didn't think Ev was interested in sitting still long enough to read. Until Az, he hadn't had anyone who shared his hobby, let alone so thoroughly, and who also wanted to discuss the books afterward. He smiled to himself, already excited. Becoming a mage, growing more powerful, and gaining powers beyond his wildest dreams were all nice, but they were a career. A job. Reading was his hobby, and it was one he hadn't been able to indulge lately. Now he could, and it felt so good.

Az plopped down in his chair and put his feet up on his desk. He yawned and gave Rhys a meaningful look.

Right. Rhys nodded and hurried out before Az got really annoyed. After a quick loop to gather trash and pick up Sorden's leavings, he headed back to his home base for the first time in a while and settled in under the stone nook on his repaired furniture to read the tomes. The novels were burning a hole in his pocket, but he knew he had to focus. Now wasn't the time to give in. Besides, he'd have plenty of time to read them while he was recovering from Ev's beatings.

He sped through the tomes, skimming the bits that weren't about concentrating potions. At last, he set the book down and took a deep breath, thinking. For the most part, concentrating potions went about how he'd expected. Using better ingredients, then boiling them for longer. The main issue was that the longer a potion boiled, the more concentrated it became, the harder it was to maintain its properties. Some potions were downright dangerous to try to concentrate; they'd directly turn into poison, or destroy themselves and become worthless goo instead. Others required specific reagents to keep them from corrupting under the additional brewing time and extra heat. There was nothing about ventilation or fume hoods, except for the occasional note that potion concentration was best done outside, with a weather eye kept for explosions and the brewer crouched, ready to hoof it if one came knocking.

Rhys closed the last tome and put it into his storage ring, then stood. He usually lugged the old, beat-up cauldron back to Sorden's place so she could refill it, but right now, the beat-up cauldron was hanging out in Ev's valley, so he had a slightly less beat up one full of gunk today. It seemed to be in good enough shape to handle a little bit of concentration, at least to his untrained eye. He didn't have any reagents, but then again, he was concentrating waste. He didn't need to be precious about it. It was trash. If things went poorly, he'd throw it out, wait for more trash to accumulate, and try again.

He bent and lit a fire under the pot. He still had to use matches like a mortal, but he had enough money now that he didn't have to worry about running out. He had enough matches piled up in a corner of his storage ring to light the entire state of California on fire.

Once the fire started, he began feeding it mana. The fire grew hotter and hotter. The bottom of the pot began to glow red, and slowly, the thick liquid began to boil. Rhys watched it closely, treating it like a pot of soup. When the liquid got too low, and the gunk began to solidify and threaten to burn, he added some water and stirred. His stirring sticks kept dissolving into the gunk, but luckily, he had plenty of trash around to use as sticks. After the first few melted down, he started using Trash Intent on the rest of them, and that helped them survive the gunk a little longer.

There was no recipe to follow. Shockingly, no one had ever tried to cook the noxious remains from potions gone wrong into a yet more noxious potion before. With no other option, Rhys played it by ear, closely watching the pot and letting the potion tell him what it needed. He'd harvested the herbs from his second round of growing them out and sold the best of them to Sorden, but he still had the trashy leftovers that hadn't made the cut hanging around in his storage ring. He was pretty used to their properties from using them to make his usual potions, and when the nasty concoction before him needed a little bit of any of those herbs to keep from congealing, he quickly added them. He wasn't too worried about the extra herbs altering the shape of the potion. It wasn't like he was trying to keep a delicate potion balanced, after all. He was just trying to keep a vile concoction from exploding in his face. The potion boiled and spat, shaking the cauldron with the force of its boiling. It didn't like being heated, and it made sure Rhys knew it.

Slowly, the cauldron-full of gunk cooked down. The metal creaked as the potion kicked around inside its belly, but it held. The liquid boiled away, and the gunk grew smaller and smaller, but more potent at the same time, and more vicious, too. The cauldron shook, rattling aloud. Rhys struggled to stand over or too close to the cauldron, or else heavy impurities would clog his mana passages. He gathered the impurities into himself, but at a slower rate than sticking his head in the smoke would do, instead absorbing it as it slowly dissipated in the space around him.

Down, down, down. The cauldron trembled. It rattled, hopping where it stood. Rhys drew out a vial. He tensed, one hand hovering over the mouth of the cauldron, preparing to call it up. *Not yet*. There was still too much. Just a little more. The cauldron shuddered and groaned. Its whole body glowed red-hot. The single handful of liquid gleamed viciously in its heart, giving off such pressure and volatile gas that the cauldron's walls bent outward. With a *ping*, a band of metal snapped off the cauldron's belly and shot across the valley. Rhys shied away, but refused to run. It was almost there. So close! Just a little more, one second more...!

BANG!

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

Chapter 30. Explosion

BANG!

The cauldron exploded. Red-hot metal shards hurtled through the air. Rhys threw himself backward, covering his head with his hands as he hit the floor. The shockwave hit him and pushed him further, and he slammed into the rock below. Hot metal seared into his back and sizzled through his sides. He gritted his teeth and hissed rather than scream in pain.

But there was no time to wait. On the floor, he activated Trash Body and whipped around to face the remnants of the cauldron. The potion still hung in the air, though it rapidly plummeted. He thrust his hand out and called the potion to him. The black sludge twitched in the air, then flew toward him.

Shit. Vial, vial... The one he'd been holding was lost to him, tossed out of his hand by the shockwave. The dangerous goo flew his direction with nothing to protect him from its imminent impact, seething with thick impurities. Rhys scrabbled in his robes and

pulled out a vial just as the sludge reached him. He called it into the vial and quickly capped it.

Exhausted, bleeding from a dozen cuts, Rhys examined his prize. The goo slurped slowly in the vial, thick and disgusting. He could sense its potency from the far side of the glass. It was truly horrifying how vile it was. A single drop of the potion was worth an entire cauldron of ordinary goop. Somehow, he'd strengthened the potion while he was concentrating it—not that he was complaining. He grinned, then grimaced as the pain finally caught up to him. Reaching over his back, he slowly pulled the chunks of metal out of his body. He put the filthy potion away and drew out an ordinary potion. A quick sip, and he began to heal. He kept pulling metal shards out as his body did its best to shove them out on its own.

Now he had his filthy potion so he could keep training impurities, and he could keep fighting with Ev to strengthen his martial prowess, as well. He waited while he healed, occasionally taking sips of the potion to speed things along. Slowly, the pain faded. Rhys climbed to his feet and dusted off his robes. A part of him wanted to rush right off to Ev, but he held back. First, he needed to make sure he could handle the potion. It would really suck if he got there, only to find out the potion overwhelmed him, and then get beaten up by Ev while he was struggling to not die to the potion at the same time.

He pulled out the sludge. Staring at the vial, he hesitated. Was it just him, or had the glass decayed a little from the inside out? The inner layer of the vial looked a little corroded, the surface cracked—only at the hairline level, but enough to be worried, nonetheless. Rhys tipped his head, then shrugged. It wasn't like it would make the potion less toxic.

"Time for some plasticsmaxing. Or glassmaxing, I guess," he muttered, and took a tiny sip of the potion.

The potion burned. His whole mouth felt like it was on fire. He tasted acid, then electricity, then nothing at all as his mouth went completely numb. There was only pain and numbness, the two fighting one another for dominance. He quickly swallowed. It burned all the way down and roiled in his stomach, eating away at him from the inside out.

My body might not be able to handle this, he thought, and then the impurities slammed into him, and there was no more time for thinking.

The filth poured through him. Usually, he breathed it in, and could filter it on the way in, misusing his lungs and throat, perhaps, but nonetheless, filtering it. This time, he'd stuck it directly in his stomach. There was no leaning out of the impurity-smoke to gain a little breath of fresh air. He was in it to win it. He absorbed these, or he died, and there was no other option.

The pain reached an apex, then tapered off. Rhys took a breath. *I can handle—*

Less is More activated, and the pain redoubled once more, more than twice as powerful as before.

Rhys' body contorted against his will. He curled around his stomach, his limbs twisting unnaturally. Gasping, he managed a grunt of pain before all the air huffed out of him. Every inch of him burned, ached, went stiff, became overcome with pins and needles. Reaching his mana into his stomach, he stirred the potion, manually searching for the large clumps of impurities, only to find out he had the opposite problem.

The impurities were tiny, but intense. He'd truly cooked them down. Now, they were slivers, splinters, tiny needles that pierced through everything they touched. His stomach, his organs, his muscles, his bones, his mana passages, the needle-like tiny impurities pierced through them all. They were as dense as they were small, heavier than they had any right to be. He couldn't control them. They slipped through his mana, too heavy and slippery to get a hold of. In a few moments, there was no part of his body that wasn't riddled with the things.

Rhys continued to stiffen. His mana flow slowed, and his vision darkened. In his chest, his heart thumped, slowing with every passing moment. Death pressed close.

Did you know this text is from a different site? Read the official version to support the creator.

Fuck it! Rhys grabbed two of the impurities. Without caring that he wasn't anywhere near his core, he rubbed them together. The slender slivers grew warm, but stubbornly refused to ignite.

Rhys narrowed his eyes. His heart beat slower. His vision had narrowed to a pinprick. He rubbed the impurities faster, putting all his strength into it. At the same time, he poured mana into the both of them, like blowing on a spark.

Everything faded. He could no longer see. His heartbeat throbbed in his ears, each *thwub* too far from the next. He felt nothing. His body no longer responded to him, nor could he sense anything through it. There was nothing but him and the two impurities.

Fzzt.

Light flashed. Once. Twice. A steady flame took. The impurities began to burn. It quickly spread across his entire body, as the other impurities came alight in a flash of chain reactions. Rhys' heart sped back up to normal. His vision returned, and so did feeling in his body. He stood upright and roared. Power flowed through him. More thoroughly than ever before, it flowed through his whole body. Just as there wasn't a piece of him that hadn't been pierced by the impurities, now, there wasn't a single piece of him that wasn't inundated with strength. His whole body thrummed, improving by leaps and bounds simply from absorbing the energy from the burned impurities.

Everywhere the impurities had invaded grew stronger. His bones. His muscles. His organs and his mana structures. The power from the burning impurities reforged all of them, completely strengthening every aspect of his body. More of the super-impurities gathered in his core, but his core grew larger and wider, so that the additional super-impurities were negligible. All of them amounted to a tiny portion of his core. In this state, scoured by the impurities and their flames, Rhys could feel something emanating from them. A power... or maybe not? *Potential*, he realized. He sensed *potential* from them. Potency. Something he couldn't yet unleash, waiting for him to get strong enough to handle it.

Let's survive this first, he decided. He straightened back up as the impurities transformed his body and took a small sip of his healing potion, letting it fix up the injuries the impurities had done to his body and organs before he'd ignited them. Rhys sat down, crossing his legs and entering a meditative state to wait out the transformation. The impurities still did harm. They ravaged him, but what they broke, they rebuilt stronger. He was still able to refill his core, but this wasn't like ordinary impurity burning. Until he got used to this higher level of condensed, Less-is-More-boosted impurities, he'd have to burn them, then fight, and treat the fight as the cooldown period between absorbing impurities.

He could sense that he had an immense amount of power from the impurities, but right now, he had to devote all that power internally, to heal the damage the impurities did either by guiding the potion he drank or by flaring Self-Regeneration. The mana he gained from them was, as usual, almost overwhelming; it was just that he needed that much mana to support his body and keep it from collapsing entirely. He battled against death, even as the impurities refined every iota of him.

At last, the impurities burned down. Rhys sat there for a little while longer, healing himself to full, then stood. It was time to get back to battling. Sure, he couldn't burn these impurities and fight now, but that was all the more reason he needed to figure out how. These impurities gave more power than the lower-level ones. If he got to the point that he didn't utterly destroy himself with these impurities, he'd unlock a fierce power in battle that would give him a serious boost when he needed it most.

Unbeknownst to Rhys, the devotees of the strange god were aghast. The pillar of smoke came from a different part of the peak? And not only that, but it was darker, thicker, and more powerful than the first? Had a challenger come to upset their god's reign?

Even those who took it as some sort of spirit or beast were taken aback. There were two of them, now? Wasn't one enough?

Only a few saw the pillar of black smoke and thought to themselves, *wait, now that I think about it, isn't that where it came from to begin with?*

Rhys rushed back to Ev's usual valley, only to find it vacated, and Ev nowhere to be found. He frowned and looked around, confused. A piece of paper stabbed to the tree with a pocketknife caught his eye, and he wandered over.

Got a problem to deal with for my brothers. Be back by end of the week.

Rhys twisted his lips, then shrugged. He couldn't count on Ev forever. She was her own person. If she had something else to do, then he'd have to find something else to do.

Like what? He considered for a moment. He could practice forms, run laps, spar against some trees or dummies—

No, hold on! Rhys shook his head. He hadn't set out to be the ultimate martial artist! From the start, he'd recognized that it wasn't a path available to him, and to this day, he still acknowledged that. He could hold his own against Ev because of all the buffs he had on him, but that was all. Without the buffs, he'd struggle to fight someone at his own strength. No, from the start, he'd set out to become a mage. The problem was that spell skills were few and far between, precious things that weren't just given out to anyone. Even Az wouldn't hand him one... though that probably had more to do with Az struggling to come up with a technique that played on his name, rather than simply being unwilling to give him one.

He wracked his brain, pinching his chin in deep thought. How to get a spell... how to get a spell... The teachers were worthless. They were so basic-level that even the advanced classes were worthless. So where—

Rhys straightened up. He snapped his fingers. *That's right!* The class on mustelids! It wasn't the class itself, but rather, something about it... if he sat there and pursued enlightenment, he felt as though he could surely acquire a spell.

It was a long shot, but it was his only shot. Besides, he was curious about the Enlightenment skill. How far could it take him? What did it give him? The only way to find out, was to keep practicing.

He'd meant to go back and pursue enlightenment in that class for a long time, now. Now that he had some free time, he might as well see it to the end.

Drawing a brush out of his robes, he replied, *Find me in town*, and with that, he set off in pursuit of enlightenment.

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

