

### Chapter 31. See It To The End

Rhys slipped into the back of the class. It had been a while since he'd sat in on it, but it remained the same as ever. The man ranted away about mustelids to an empty room, with no visible acknowledgement of Rhys' arrival. Rhys settled in to his seat and evened his breathing, letting his mind wander. Thoughts flowed in and out as he sat there, listening idly to the lecture. Today, the man was covering the details of the mustelid sleeping patterns, comparing that of ferrets and weasels.

Time passed. Days flowed by, marked only by the passage of sunlight across the floor. The man ranted on, and Rhys sat there, listening. Quietly, he smoothed the flow of his mana, peeling out the last scraps of impurities and storing them in his core with the rest. The same sense of potential flowed from these, telling him they were the second-level super impurities, rather than the base impurities he was currently able to process.

When he was done with that, there was nothing to do but listen. And so Rhys cleared his mind, and focused all his energy on the lecture. The man ranted on foraging and hunting habits, now, clarifying the differences between martens and stoats.

Foraging. Hunting. Rhys submerged himself in his subconscious. A vision of an enormous trash pile appeared before him. It stretched to infinity, so far that he couldn't see its end.

*No.* He turned slowly, taking it in. It wasn't an infinite trash pile. This was his hometown trash pit, it was just that he was small. Not just small, but tiny. He sniffed, and a blast of aromas met a more sensitive nose than Rhys had ever possessed in real life. It didn't smell bad, though. It smelled delicious. His dinner was right around the corner. He scurried over the trash.

*Scurried?* a tiny part of Rhys wondered, but the rest of him pushed it down. This was him. This was his life. He lived in this mountain of trash, and loved every scrap of it.

A chitter caught his ear. He perked up. A friend approached, nose wiggling, black button eyes wide, fur sleek and healthy. The two of them greeted one another with a few sniffs, and then the friend scurried off. Rhys followed. The friend led him to a fresh patch of garbage, one that smelled delicious. Fresh food, still steaming hot, thick with sweet and salty scents. Rhys touched noses to thank the friend before he set upon the pile of tossed food, gobbling it down.

The friend joined him, and another friend, and another friend joined them. Soon dozens of friends all chowed on the delicious food together. When he was full, Rhys scurried off, back to his den. He snuggled up there and slept, curled up in a cozy den of trash.

His days came and went. He darted from shadow to shadow in the sun, and ran freely in the darkness of night. Sometimes he found food, and sometimes it was the others who found food first. They shared and gloried in the scraps, reveled in the garbage. He dragged soft scraps back to his den, along with fascinating tiny objects. As the years passed, he found a mate, and they made more friends, all in the cozy confines of his den. Life was simple, but it was good.

Until that night.

A sharp, acrid scent. His heart trembled instinctively. He chittered, warning anyone else not to come close, then went silent. Ears swept back. Eyes wide, watching.

From out of the dark stepped a shadow. It loomed tall, as ominous as it was large. Spotlight eyes beamed from above a vicious maw, so full of hunger and vicious hatred that he froze where he stood. The beast stepped forward. One step. Two.

A little cry. One of his friends, a coward, burst out of the trash and ran. His heart pounded. He kneaded the earth with his claws. *No!*

The beast's eyes flashed. It pounced. His friend let out a terrible squeal, and the scent of blood filled the air.

He turned and ran, making use of his friend's sacrifice to flee. All the way back to his den, where he burrowed in the deepest depths and cowered. That thing could not be overcome. It was far too powerful.

From that day on, his happy life turned to one of terror. The beast haunted their every step, terrorized their every thought. It lurked around corners and crouched atop cliffs, pouncing from all angles, attacking every chance it got. He fled, and fled, and fled, hiding in nooks and crannies, fleeing into dark corners and narrow squeezes where the beast couldn't fit. He resigned himself to his new life. What else could he do? The beast was too powerful. Even if he fought back, his claws couldn't even cut through its thick fur, nor could his teeth find blood. Better to flee and protect his little life.

The sun was high. The shadows, sharp. He dodged from empty vase to pile of wood, dashing across the open spaces. Once-familiar spaces smelled strange, full of the beast's horrid stench. If not for the scent of food, he would have never left his den. But he was starving. His mouth watered.

A pile of scraps laid ahead, glistening in the sun. Friends surrounded it, already devouring the tasty food. He glanced around, searching the sky for any sign of the beast, then darted forward, closing in on today's meal.

A flash of orange and white. The beast hurtled down from the heavens. All the friends fled, and he turned to flee as well, only for a sharp row of teeth to clamp down on the back of his neck. He flew into the air, hurtling over the garbage heap. The beast chased after him, golden eyes glowing.

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Landing with a thump, he turned and ran. The beast gave chase, amused more than worried. Every time he dashed for a hidey-hole, those teeth caught the back of his neck and threw him once more. He was naught but a plaything for the beast, a tiny ball of fur and bones to toss as it pleased.

Once more, it threw him. He landed amongst the trash again, but this time, he had nowhere to run. His back was up against a wall. His heart thumped in his chest. Adrenaline pounded through his tiny body. As the beast crept up on him, head low, each paw placed silently, a strange resolve came over him.

He was going to die, but he'd take as much of the beast with him as he did. Maybe his mate and pups would live if he did.

The beast lunged, and so did he. Hopping with all the strength in his body, he bit the beast's nose. Startled, it jerked its head back. He landed, then jumped again, clawing, biting, and hissing like a thing possessed. The beast batted him with its paw, and he whipped around and bit the paw. It yowled. A heavy punch sent him flying. He struck the wall with a *thunk*, but the second he landed on his paws again, he leaped at the beast again.

The beast hissed back. It lunged. White fangs flashed as it snapped at him. He didn't retreat, but threw himself at it. Pain lashed over his body as the beast bit down, but he refused to stop. Latching onto its fur, he clawed at its face, scratching his way upward, stretching with every inch of his length. His claws found the beast's eye, and he pierced it open.

The beast shrieked in pain. It bit down again, once more, powerfully, and his body finally gave out. He went limp. As his vision went dark, he watched the beast back away, its eye leaking down its face. He'd done it. He'd blinded it. Even if he had to trade his life, he'd bought a chance at survival for those he'd left behind.

Rhys didn't awaken immediately. The dream had ended, but he remained lost in enlightenment. The images from the dream looped over and over, replaying in his head. His quiet life. His desperate last stand. A rat. A being that lived in garbage and was treated as trash, a pest to be killed by pet cats and anything else that cared to kill it. Worthless. And yet, he'd lived a full life. He'd had a mate, and children, and a soft little den. His life had worth. No one else might agree, but it had value to him.

The last moments of his rat life flashed before his eyes. The desperate struggle. Backed up against the wall, nowhere to go, he'd chosen to fight. Fight an overwhelmingly powerful foe, one he knew he'd lose against, but fight with his all nonetheless. That fight replayed over and over, and two things took form in his head. The desperation with which he'd fought, putting his all into it, everything he had—fighting without holding anything back, because he was dead one way or another, and it was better to take his foe down with him than die without accomplishing anything. Fighting with neither honor nor humanity, but instead, mindless savagery.

*Even A Cornered Rat Fights Back.*

The second was the image of the rat. His life as a rat, burned into his mind. Not only that, but the protectiveness he'd felt, attacking so that his friends might last a little longer.

Rhys opened his eyes. He lifted his hand. His mana surged, flowing out in that image that still lingered in his mind's eye. A rat materialized, formed from silvery mana. It leaped out from his hand and circled around his ankles, rearing up to hiss ferociously at his enemies. It circled defensively around him a few more times, then faded.

## **Enlightenment 1 > 2**

### **Gained Enlightenment: Cornered Rat**

Rhys chuckled, looking at his hand. He'd gained his first spell! A defensive spell, but a spell was a spell. How interesting, too, that he'd gained two opposing skills, both from the same enlightenment. One, the offensive aspect of a cornered rat, and the second, the defensive aspect. Fighting ruthlessly himself, or summoning a cornered rat to protect him. *This Enlightenment thing might be the key to growing as a mage.*

The sound of applause broke him out of his thoughts. Rhys looked up, startled. At the front of the classroom, the mage in tattered clothes clapped. Tears streamed down his cheeks.

Taken aback, Rhys stood. "Sorry... did I do something wrong?"

"Not at all! Not at all. I've been waiting for this day for so long. The day someone finally gained enlightenment from my speech. I knew I was right. All this time, I knew this was the right track. And now, my young friend, you've proven me right!" Crossing to Rhys' side, the old man patted him heartily on the back.

Rhys smiled, a little lost. *Huh?* "I might not have gained the right enlightenment, though."

“Ah, well, it’s fine. To the uninitiated, rattus and mustelid creatures can seem similar. Besides...” The old man looked him up and down. “Am I wrong in sensing a hint of a path in your actions?”

“No, not at all,” Rhys replied.

The old man grinned. “I knew it. Then in that case, I’m honored to have provided enlightenment to one such as yourself. To know your path at such a young age is a gift few share.”

Rhys smiled and rubbed the back of his neck. *I wonder if he’d say that if he knew what my path was...*

“You’ve granted my long-held wish. Is there anything I can do for you?” the old man asked.

Rhys cleared his throat. “Well, actually... would you mind putting me forward for access to the upper peak? There’s something related to my path up there that I can already sense would allow me to improve greatly, but I’m not allowed to access the upper peak yet.”

The old man nodded. “Absolutely, my friend. Someone as talented to yourself should be an easy pick! Why, if they don’t want someone as skilled as yourself in the upper peak, then I don’t know where the school’s gone wrong!”

Rhys smiled, but he didn’t share the man’s optimism. Compared to Sorden, this man certainly seemed to have a much more tenuous grasp on reality. Besides, how long had he locked himself away in this classroom, lecturing no one? If everything worked out, and all it took was this man’s recommendation, then he wouldn’t complain. But he’d be startled if it did work out that easily.

Nonetheless, he nodded. It was all part of his plan, after all. If one teacher’s recommendation wasn’t enough, what about two? If two wasn’t enough, what about all of them? He wouldn’t stop until he had access to the upper peak’s rich, rich trash piles. “Thank you. I would be very grateful if you did.”

“Of course! It’s a simple enough task. Ah, how wonderful, how wonderful. Hmm, I wonder what I should lecture about next?” The man walked away, mumbling under his breath to himself, Rhys forgotten.

Rhys watched him go, even less confident than before. *Will he even remember to recommend me?*

He shook his head. It didn’t matter. Two teachers probably wasn’t enough. Once he had more, he’d come back and remind this old man. Until then, it wasn’t too problematic, even if he was forgotten.

Rhys walked away, heading back out into the sunshine for the first time in weeks. A new spell and a new fighting technique... it was time to go test his new skills on Ev!

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

## Chapter 32. Carrying On

Outside, Rhys stretched, relishing the sunlight on his face. After so long in the musty classroom, the scent of fresh air was like ambrosia to him. He yawned and stretched some more, then turned to face Ev's nook. From here, he wouldn't tell if she'd returned or not, but he figured he might as well stop by.

*Meow.*

Rhys startled. His whole body tensed, and he leaped back. A long-haired white cat walked by. It looked up at him in mild confusion, then kept walking.

He sighed and rubbed his face. He'd spent too long as a rat, to react that way to cats. It had only been a week or two in real time, but in his dream, it had been years. Almost an entire rat lifetime. To the rat him, it might as well have been an eternity. *I'd better get over this before I see Az again.*

He jogged off toward Ev's usual training nook. At the entrance, he sensed her aura, but also two other figures' auras. Rhys narrowed his eyes. He slowed his speed and pulled his mana in, moving quietly toward the gap. Sliding inside, he drew to a halt at the far end of the entry crawl. He peered out, silently searching through the trees for Ev and the other two.

The familiar field spread before him. Trees scattered around, the bark hammered off their surfaces. Well-beaten earth marked the spots where he and Ev most often sparred. He saw nothing.

*No, the signal's a bit... higher?* He looked up.

At the top of the crevasse's steep wall, Ev faced two muscular men. Her back was to the cliff's edge. The two brutes loomed over her, both of them almost as muscular as Cynog. So muscular that they seemed to be bulging with it. They were both Tier 2, but low Tier 2. Lower than Ev, for certain... but low enough that should handle two at once?

Rhys wrinkled his nose. He ran toward the cliff and hopped up it, pushing off narrow nooks in the stone and pulling himself up on small juts. As he climbed, he heard the men talking.

“...took in that kid who disrespected your master?”

Ev ffed. “Who, Cynog? He’s no master.”

“You disrespect him, too? The one who took you in and taught you everything you know?”

“Ha! There’s a joke. That old sadist can kiss my ass. He never taught me anything but how to take a punch.”

“You dare?”

“Yeah. So? You’re the pussies who need to outnumber me to be brave enough to fight me. I turn that back to you, assholes. *You* dare?”

Rhys scrambled to the top of the hill. He looked at Ev. “Everything okay?”

“Huh? Oh, there you are.” Ev nodded at him. She turned back to the bigger men. “Ready to piss yourselves now, now I’ve got a fair fight?”

One of the men sneered. “Called for backup, didn’t you?”

“Nah.”

The men waited, expecting more explanation, but Ev offered none. She waggled her brows instead and punched her hand into her fist. “We fighting? Or are you guys scared to fight when you don’t have the numbers advantage?”

One of the men growled and lunged at Ev. She sidestepped, holding out her foot. The man stumbled, lurching out-ofntrol toward the edge of the cliff. He flailed, reaching toward Ev and Rhys with his wide arms.

Rhys hopped to the side. Ev twisted again. The man’s grabs went short, and he fell over the edge and bounced down into the depths.

The other man looked from Rhys to Ev and backed away. He turned to run.

“Nope.” Ev grabbed him by the back of thellar and the belt, and pulled, yanking him onto her shoulder. Turning, she tossed him into the pit with the other man.

“Damn. I guess you had it handled,” Rhys said. He rubbed the back of his neck, feeling a little stupid. Here he was, rushing over to

“Eh. Could’ve gone bad if they’d both attacked at the same time. I appreciate the distraction,” Ev replied. She dusted off her hands, then nodded at Rhys. “You feel stronger. Learn something?”



“Yeah, actually. A new technique. I—”

His world pivoted. Two strong, calloused hands gripped his collar and belt, and before he knew what was happening, he found himself flying over the edge of the cliff.

“Neat. Show me,” Ev said, watching him from the cliff above.

*Oh, gods damn it*, Rhys thought. He wasn’t really surprised, just annoyed at himself for not seeing this coming. He pivoted in midair, shifting his weight to adjust his trajectory. He didn’t have perfect control, but he had enough to slam into the back of one of the men as the man was trying to rise.

With a muted grunt, the man hit the ground again. Rhys rolled to the side and jumped to his feet. The second man lunged. A wall of muscle closed in on him. For a moment, he was back in the square, ‘fighting’ Cynog again. In the next, he snapped out of it, but it was too late. The blow was already en route.

Rhys didn’t have time to dodge. All he could do was throw his hand out and call forth his mana. A silvery rat materialized. It lunged to meet the man. The man’s blow landed on Rhys’s chest. Rhys fell backward, bones creaking. Blood welled up, and heughed up red. Even as Rhys took the hit, the rat darted out and slammed its teeth down on the man’s ankle.

“Ow!” the man exclaimed, hopping backward. The rat clung on, persistently digging its jaws in deeper. The man shook his leg, then stomped down on the man’s hand and forcibly yanked his other foot out of its grasp. The rat de-materialized, but that was all the time Rhys had needed. He climbed back to his feet, his stance a little shaky. Trash Body held him together, and Trash Intent gave him the power to fight, but he couldn’t activate his new technique. Not yet. It wasn’t just damage. There was something else. Another condition he hadn’t triggered yet.

The second man climbed to his feet. Both men closed in on Rhys. Rhys backed away, only for the second man to blur. In an instant, he closed in on Rhys, blocking off his escape.

*Cornered.*

Rhys’ eyes blazed. Mana surged through his body, more than he’d ever felt before. His hands curled into claws of their own volition. He jumped toward the first man and clawed at his face. Red lines bit deep into the man’s face, as though Rhys had claws. The man jerked back at the last second, or else Rhys would have taken his eye.

This was his new technique, **Even A Cornered Rat will Fight Back**. As long as he was injured and backed into a corner, he could unleash a powerful claw attack on his opponent. His ability to fight recklessly was further empowered, as the skill synergized with Trash Body and Trash Intent to pour power into his failing body.



“You fuck—” the first man growled. He lifted his arms to block, only for Rhys to slice them open with his clawed hands. “Stop!”

Rhys didn't relent. He hammered blows on the man, forcing him to back up. The other man landed blows on him, but with Trash Body, he was able to shrug them off and keep fighting. Caught between the two men, he was able to land claw attack after claw attack on the first man. The first man was a block of muscle, not unlike Cynog, but unlike Cynog, he didn't have the Tier and raw power to fight back, instead relying on his bulk and muscle to hammer big blows and absorb the same. Pushed on the back foot by Rhys' endless attacks, it was all he'd do to keep his arms up and hold a block.

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Rhys fought on. If not for the impurities he'd just absorbed, he'd already tell he wouldn't be able to launch these claw attacks so thoughtlessly. Each one took an immense amount of mana. If he didn't have the mana from his impurities, he probably would have only been able to launch two or three of them. But as it was, his whole body still buzzed with mana, and hisre was overfull. He drew the mana from his body and from hisre, pouring it all into his attack. A few snds in, he'd tell he was starting to run out, but he didn't let it show on his face. Instead, he hopped back, putting his back to the wall. The two men faced him, but the one he'd clawed did so warily, and the other one limped a bit, injured from where Rhys had landed on him.

Looking from one to the other, Rhys ffed. Hands curled into claws, he pushed mana into them, threatening another claw strike. “Is that all you have? Come! Fight with all you've got, or I'll take your eyes next!”

The man Rhys had landed on glanced at his slashedmpanion. “Come on. We didn'tme here to fight this loser. Let's get out of here.”

Blood dripped down the slashed man. It dribbled down his face and soaked into his robes. He glared at Rhys for a few more snds, then spat and turned. “Whatever. If Ev wants to train this fuck, that's her problem.”

They turned and stomped off, shoving their way through the gap in the rocks. Rhys watched them go, his claws bared. Only when they vanished did he lower his hands and call the mana back to hisre. Exhaustion washed across his face. In that state, where he forcibly overcame the limits of his body, it was far easier to overdraw his mana than he'd realized. He'd been running on dregs. If he'd launched that claw attack, he wasn't sure he'd have survived it, that was how low he was on mana. He leaned against the rock wall behind him and wiped his face, taking a moment to collect himself.

### **Bluff 3**

Rhys startled, a bit surprised by the system pop. Bluff? And it was already level three? He'd only just picked up the skill, and it leveled that fast. For the skill to level that fast... His brows knitted. Did that mean bluffing was trashy?

*No, wait! Ofurse it is. It's part of trash-talking!* Rhys stared at his hands, a bolt of enlightenment hitting him from the blue. Trash wasn't this limited. He'd been treating it only as the physical substance of trash, but that was foolish. Trash had many dimensions—almost infinite dimensions! Limiting himself to the physical substance of trash and its denizens was a mistake. He needed to broaden his mind, open his horizons, and accept the vast expanses of what othersnsidered 'trash' as part of his path.

A heavy *thump* right beside him had him whip around, but it was only Ev. Rhys drew out a potion and took a sip, letting the healing goodness work on his wounds. He put it away and drew out a mana potion, sipping that as well, and put it back in his robes, then nodded at her. "You didn't have to throw me down there."

"Nah, but it was funny," she said, grinning.

Rhys shook his head. "What if I didn't land on that guy? Iuld've gotten hurt!"

"And activated your ability faster? That's no punishment. Besides, I'm not crazy. I wouldn't put you at a disadvantage to start the fight, even if it makes you stronger. I threw you at that guy."

The phrase *I'm not crazy* followed by *threw you at that guy* rattled around in Rhys' brain. He gave her a deadpan stare and shook his head. "Uh huh."

"That's an interesting technique, though. Where'd you learn it?" Ev asked.

Rhys pointed back at the main square. "You know that mustelid class?"

"What, crazy ol' Bernie taught you that? How?" Ev demanded, startled.

"He didn't *teach* it to me, per se. I kind of... got enlightened by his class, and figured it out all at once."

"Oh." Disappointed, Ev shook her head.

Rhys glanced at her. "I thought I'd beming in to save the day, but you had that handled, didn't you?"

"Yeah. Well, they're kinda annoying assholes, so I didn't mind tossing them to you," she said casually.

Rhys shook his head. He met her eyes. "It isn't that, is it? The way you threw them, and me, too. You're hiding your strength."

He'd thought he was able to spar with Ev, that he was almost at her strength, but he'd only been able to barely fend them off by fighting with all his might and bluffing desperately. Ev, on the other hand, had easily tossed them, like so much garbage. If he and Ev were truly the same strength, he would have been laughing as he crushed those two men, not lying so they'd run off and leave him alone.

He'd always understood that there was a gap in strength between him and Ev, but not to *that* extent. He'd thought he'd been growing close to her power. But that was all a lie, wasn't it? Just Ev pretending.

Ev chuckled. She raised her wrists, showing him a pair of dark bands. The same black cloth wrapped around her ankles. Now that she'd drawn attention to it, Rhys sensed mana flowing through the cloth—a suppressive spell that weighed her down as she moved and restricted her mana flow. "Yep. Got it in one."

Rhys frowned. "Why?"

"Why?" Ev gazed up at the sky. Her gaze seemed to pierce past it, landing on something far, far from here. At last, she sighed and met Rhys' eyes again. "The hearts of others are not always pure."

"No...?" Rhys asked, a bit lost. Ev was smarter than she looked, but she rarely spoke like it. In fact, he'd never heard her say this kind of thing before.

"If someone with immense talent were to appear in a small school, do you think a small, desperate school would let go of them and let them grow and flourish? Or do you think that small, desperate school would cling onto them with all their might, in hopes that the school might grow in power commensurate with their talented student?"

Rhys opened his mouth in an O. He nodded, slowly. "I understand."

To put it simply, Ev knew the state the school was in. She knew it was small, and had little renown. She would struggle to grow, stuck here in this school, but the school would easily grow by clinging to Ev and dragging itself up after her rising star. She hid her strength to escape, so she should find a better school where she should grow, without the baggage of having to haul and entire school up after her. Especially a school like Infinite Constellation, which had done so little for her. Given how little it had done for Rhys, and given Cynog's tendencies and the status of the martial students on the peak, he shouldn't imagine that Ev had gotten a good education here.

"At the end of the day, this isn't a martial school. I need to find a true martial school to continue to hone my fists," Ev stated.

Rhys nodded. "Ofurse."

"I've been putting out feelers. I have a good chance at getting into a high-quality school. One that's both good at martial arts and magecraft. It's just..." She shook her head.

"What?" Rhys asked.

"There's a tournament that all the schools partake in. It doesn't happen until early next year, four months from now. For me, everything rides on it. If I perform well in the tournament, I'll be able to pick my school of choice. If I don't..." She twisted her lips.

"Stuck here, huh?" Rhys asked.

She nodded. "Yep." A snd later, she waggled her hand. "Iuld probably still squeeze my way into a medium-sized martial school, so long as I made a good showing in the lower rounds. But my dream is to make it into one of the biggest schools. The most powerful ones on thentinent. And for that, I need to win the tournament."

"Win the whole thing?" Rhys puffed out his cheeks and let out a slow breath. The image of Bast flashed through his head, studying under the Sword Saint, the most powerful martial artist in thentinent. Sure, Bast would've only had a year or two to study, but he knew how quick a learner his friend was. And that was just who he knew about. Who knew how many powerful martial students attended the big martial schools in the area? Students whould properly train against equally powerful students, instead of beating their heads against the insensate wall that was Cynog?

She laughed. "It's fine. I'll be happy starting at a medium-sized martial school. I'll work my way up to the big ones. But it would be nice if Iuld get it in one, you know?"

Rhys nodded. "Yeah."

It was just like in his world. Thellege you went to, the people you attended it with,uld set the level of your success for the rest of your life. Sure, youuld always struggle and oveme, but it would all be easier if you started from a powerful position. He understood that better than anyone, and so, he understood what Ev aspired to better than anyone. Rhys patted her back. "Whatever I can do to help, just let me know."

"You don't want to take part in the tournament?" she asked.

Rhys hesitated, then shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe? I'll see when we get closer."

For now, after all, he was happy in Infinite Constellation sect. The place was full of wonderful, wonderful trash. What else did he need? And yet, he knew that was only for now. Eventually, he would clean all the trash and absorb all the gunk in that toxic trash pit. After that, well, it was a small school. His objectives were bigger than that. He wanted to bme the most powerful mage heuld, and that meant finding a school big

enough to help him gain his dreams. But would that happen in one year? That was what he wasn't sure about.

Ev knocked his shoulder. "You should. Even if you're not aiming for another school, it would be a good experience for you."

"Yeah, yeah," Rhys said. There was another angle here: he was trash. Could he prepare enough in a year to handle a tournament? Sure, with all his buffs, he'd fight pretty well, but...compared to students who didn't start as trash, how did he fare?

*I've been doing pretty well against my fellow students here*, a little voice in the back of his head noted. But at the same time, this was a tiny school, full of the refuse that wouldn't make it into any other school. He couldn't meaningfully track his progress against these students. Even if he outshone all of them, that didn't make him not trash on an objective scale, rated against students from every sort of academy.

Ev snorted, seeing his sterner expression. "Don't make that sterner face. If it hurts that hard, don't think about it yet. You've still got a year to figure things out."

Rhys nodded. "That... is reassuring."

"Plus, don't worry about beating me. They organize students by Tier," Ev said.

"I would hope so," Rhys replied, chuckling.

She looked him over. "You healed up?"

"Yeah," Rhys replied.

Ev grinned, raising her fists. "Come on, then. I want to try out those new techniques of yours for myself."

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

## Chapter 33. A Challenge

Rhys and Ev sparred once more. This time, Rhys occasionally had to take breaks to absorb and burn impurities, but the more they fought and the more Ev pushed him, the faster he was able to absorb the impurities. He grew used to the pain, and slowly, it became less crippling to him. Eventually, he was able to burn the impurities as he fought Ev, though the pain and the distraction of handling the impurities did impair his fighting until the impurities were fully processed. Compared to fighting while burning the

lower-level impurities, he was certainly worse at fighting under these ones. The lower-level ones were a straight buff to his power, while these came with caveats.

On the other hand, these enhanced his body to a higher extent, expanded his core more, and provided him with more power, not to mention allowed him to store that power in both his body and core—if temporarily, in the case of his body. That one was only because they invaded his body so thoroughly, that he was almost always still in the process of expelling the mana or processing it when he was with it enough to fight Ev. These impurities also held more power than ordinary ones, which was in turn further boosted by Less is More, so overall, they were stronger; it was just that he couldn't quite handle them yet.

As for Less is More, he wasn't sure if it activated because he wasn't drinking the whole potion, or because he was drinking a potion. Was it a potion-specific skill, or did it only work when he left most of the expendable behind? With his previous techniques, he'd absorbed impurities from smoke, from burning it. By the very nature of burning, he had to burn the whole thing, whether it was a pile of trash or a clump of potion impurities. True, in the case of the potion impurities, the clumps could be considered portions of a whole, but on the other hand, he was still using handfuls of the stuff. If it was activated by a 'small portion,' then maybe the clumps of impurities he used weren't small enough to trigger 'less.'

Naturally, breathing smoke also wasn't a potion. So between his two techniques of obtaining impurities, one of which triggered Less is More, and one of which didn't, he couldn't say securely what quality it was that activated Less is More.

Rhys raised his hands. Sweat poured down his face and soaked into his robes. His hair dripped with it, and his back was as wet as if he'd jumped into a pool. "Break, I need a break."

"Hmph. A real opponent won't give you any breaks," Ev opined, raising her fists.

"I know, but please?" Rhys said, still backing away.

She narrowed her eyes, but sighed in the end. "Fine. Get some water and drink that nasty potion of yours, so we can keep going."

Rhys saluted. He jogged over to the stream that ran through the crevasse and threw himself into it. Water splashed, then coursed over him, cool and comfortable. He let himself sink to the bottom of the shallow water and watched the sky through the clear stream. Nowadays, he could hold his breath for a long time, though not indefinitely, as he could go without food and water. Ev had taught him a turtle-breathing technique to extend his time underwater, but he was still at the lowest levels of it. He waited until his body cooled to the point he wanted to do more than just lie in the shade, then sat up. Water splashed all around him, soaking into his long ponytail. He touched it, lost in thought for a second. Back in his world, long hair was strange on men. Here, it was the

norm, so much so that Bast stuck out in his mind for preferring a short cut. *I wonder if I should get it trimmed?* It was starting to get excessive, long enough to tickle his waist when he let it down. He hadn't seen any hairdressers here, but there was no shortage of blades.

Ev crouched on the edge of the stream and splashed water in her face. Looking up, she laughed at him. "Look at you, sitting in the water and playing with your hair. What are you, a water sprite, luring all the girls into the depths?"

Rhys raised his brows at her. "I don't know, am I?"

"Maybe in five years," she scoffed, rolling her eyes at him.

Rhys blinked, then startled. He stared at his small hands again. *That's right. I'm still a child.* It was easy to forget just how young his body was. "How old am I?" he muttered aloud, pulling up his sheet to check.

## **Rhys Foundling | 15 | 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**

**Poison Resist 3**

**Trash Intent 4**

**Alchemy 2**

**Herbalism 4**

**Speed Reading 4**

**Enlightenment 2**

**Trash Body 3**

**Bluff 3**

Fifteen. At some point, unknown to him, that fateful day had slipped by, and he'd grown older yet again. He sighed out and stood, wringing the worst of the water out of his robes.

"Forgot your age? You're a bit young for that," Ev commented.

If you discover this tale on Amazon, be aware that it has been unlawfully taken from Royal Road. Please report it.

Rhys kicked some water at her. "Yeah, yeah. I'm old at heart."

She laughed aloud. Lowering her hand into the water, she squeezed it shut and squirted a stream of water at him. At her strength and martial prowess, it actually reached Rhys, and not only that, smarted where it hit. "Look at this baby-face, thinking he's so mature."

"Give me five years, and I'll lure all the women to their watery doom," Rhys replied, sticking out his tongue at her.

"You just gonna sit around in the stream until then, or are we gonna spar?" Ev asked, standing and clapping the water off her hands.

Rhys climbed out. He shook himself all over like a dog. "I'm ready. Let's go."

Ev raised her hands, then froze. She lifted a hand to Rhys, her eyes distracted, all her attention on listening to something Rhys couldn't hear. Rhys stilled as well, trying to hear whatever it was she'd latched onto. All he heard was the drip of water off his robes.

At last, he heard it. The crunch of leaves. Heavy footsteps, softened by the lush forest floor. Rhys whipped around, finally following where Ev was staring.

Cynog stood at the edge of the cliff, where he and Ev had confronted his students a short while ago. He crossed his arms at them, and his eyes narrowed.

“You dare to bully my students?”

“Bully? They’re the ones who were bullying us!” Rhys protested, but quietly, to himself.

Ev snorted. “As if Cynog cares. All he cares about is making sure everyone knows he’s the strongest warrior in the school.”

“Isn’t that always the case with bullies,” Rhys muttered.

On the clifftop, Cynog ignored them and kept going. “I see I’ve let you run rampant for too long. Two students, grouping up together and thinking they can train one another? This is foolishness. It’s time I bring you back into the fold.”

“Like fuck you are,” Ev grumbled.

Cynog hopped down from the cliff. He approached them, one slow stomp at a time. Ev stepped forward.

Rhys held out his arm. He looked at Ev. “Please let me have this.”

She cocked a brow. “Are you sure? He’ll chew you up.”

“That’s fine. If things go bad, carry me to the library afterward, if I’m, uh, you know. Not able to walk,” Rhys replied, growing more nervous the more he said. He swallowed. *Shit. I’m really going to do this.*

But on the other hand, when would he get a chance like this again? He needed this. It was a definitive step toward his goals. Forcing his fear down, Rhys stepped forward.

Ev gave him an uncertain look, but shrugged to herself and let him go. “I’ll try to save you before he kills you.”

“Yeah. Thanks.” Rhys pulled out his impurities potion and took a sip. Impurities ravaged his body, but only for a moment before he ignited them. He stood in front of Cynog, spreading his arms to block his way forward. Black smoke began to waft off his body.

“What?” Cynog asked.

“You claim that we cannot grow stronger by training one another, and that’s why we need to be brought back into your class. After all, you’re a teacher. You want us to get

stronger, don't you?" Rhys asserted, looking Cynog in the eyes. What he said wasn't entirely true, but it was close enough.

Cynog thought for a moment. He squinted, but in the end he nodded. "I am a teacher, yes."

"Then how about this. If I prove that I've gotten stronger training with Ev by landing one good hit on you, you leave us alone. If I can't, then we both go back to your teaching, with no complaints."

Cynog laughed. "And why don't I just beat you up right now?"

Rhys spread his hands. "You can. I can't do anything to stop you from crushing me. But that proves nothing about my strength, or yours. You're a higher Tier than me. Even if I trained perfectly, I can't do anything to beat you. But that's not the point. The point is whether or not I trained at a level equivalent to or better than you could teach me."

He watched Cynog's face, waiting. It was similar logic to what Cynog himself had suggested when Rhys had tried to escape his class in the first place. The man was always up to a good trial. By his estimation, this ought to work.

"Why not," Cynog allowed. He cracked his knuckles. "I've been looking for another chance to pound you for a while now. I'll enjoy this."

*Or... he's a rampant sadist who enjoys getting down to other people's level, then beating them on equal footing.* Rhys licked his lips, then forced his heart to calm. He couldn't have it beating like that with impurities burning. There was too much gunk floating around. He might die if anything started moving a little too fast.

Rhys raised a hand, backing away as Cynog approached. "How about a little add-on, to sweeten the pot?"

"Speak quickly."

"If I draw blood, you have to request that I get access to the upper peak," Rhys said, as quickly as he could manage.

This was it. His true goal from the beginning. He wouldn't get another chance to ask Cynog to request his access. It was a slim chance he'd win, a slim chance that Cynog would honor his bet... but if he did, this was it. The only way to get Cynog to advocate for him.

The other teachers wore ordinary robes, studded here and there with gold and gems. Cynog's was plastered with them, the thick belt around his loins all but solid gold. From wealth alone, Cynog obviously was a teacher worth targeting, someone who would doubtless have influence over the Schoolmaster. If not overtly, then at the least, he was

someone who was able of obtaining money for the school, and that made his voice worth listening to.

A dry chuckle emerged from Rhys' throat at that, unbidden. *My stint in grad school is finally worth something, huh.* Hadn't done anything in his first life, but it did mean that he understood academia and power structures like it more than the average person.

Cynog threw his head back and laughed. "Bold. I like it! Then how about this? When I win, when you fail to land a single blow on me, you have to apologize in front of the whole class and forsake all training but mine."

"If you win," Rhys returned. He narrowed his eyes. The apology was nothing to him. He'd long since gotten over the childish fear of public speaking and humiliation. The real problem came in with forsaking all training but Cynog's. He had absolutely no intention of doing that, but if Cynog decided to enforce it, there was little he could do.

*Then again, it wouldn't be a bet if I didn't ante up.* Rhys steeled himself and raised his fists. He pushed mana into the impurities, accelerating their ignition. Black smoke billowed from his shoulders and back, soaring up into the sky.

"What are you doing? Don't you have to draw blood? Draw your weapon," Cynog egged him on.

Rhys smiled, just an inch. He drew his sword-stub. Its blade leaped into shape, formed by the pale blue light of Trash Intent. Lifting his hand, he pointed it at Cynog.

Cynog blurred. He leaped at Rhys. Rhys hopped back, and Cynog's fist slammed into the earth so hard that it formed a crater. Dirt and rocks sprayed up, bouncing off Rhys's legs.

Rhys raised his brows. That blow was as hard as the attacks Cynog had launched at him after the trash lecture. Cynog didn't intend to hold anything back from the beginning.

That being said, compared to his current strength, a blow at that level would hurt, but it wouldn't seriously phase him. In other words, it was the exact kind of blow he needed to take in order to reach his trash modes without dying.

Cynog furrowed his brows. "You're fast."

"Ah? Ah!" Rhys shrieked in false surprise, then turned and ran.

"Oh ho? What happened to landing a good blow on me?" Cynog asked, laughing. He slammed his foot down, then vanished. Rhys bounced off a wall of muscle. A fist hammered into his side, and he went flying.

Rolling with the force of the blow, Rhys came back up to a three-point stance, watching Cynog. He was close, but he wasn't there yet.

"Are you just going to run? Come on," Cynog mocked him, gesturing him on.

Enraged, Rhys shouted. He charged in, sword raised high. Before he got two steps in, another heavy blow smashed him to the ground again. Cynog chased after him, but Rhys rolled out of his reach and bounced up. Cynog's eyes narrowed. He lunged, but Rhys darted to the side. Another lunge. Rhys hopped backward, evading his grasp.

"If you keep dodging, you'll never land a hit," Cynog informed him, chuckling.

Rhys' nostrils flared. He rushed in, thrusting his sword in a headlong charge. Cynog blurred and reappeared beside Rhys. With a blackhanded slap, he hammered Rhys into the ground.

Rhys laid there, breathing heavily. The black smoke continued to billow, but his breathing was labored. Blood dripped down from his mouth and nose and a dozen other cuts. His whole body was a mess of bruises and broken bones.

Behind him, Ev narrowed her eyes. She crossed her arms and tilted her head, lost.

"This is foolishness. You need my training," Cynog declared. He dragged Rhys up by the collar.

Rhys growled and slashed at Cynog. Cynog let the sword hit him. The Trash-Intent enhanced blade stopped dead on his side, without drawing so much as a drop of blood.

Cynog looked down. He laughed. "Now, do you see? It was futile from the start!" Grabbing the sword in one hand, he threw Rhys into the wall of the cliff with the other. He dropped the sword stub, now without its Trash-Intent blade, and vanished again, reappearing over Rhys, his fist raised.

Rhys' eyes flashed. A vicious grin spread over his face. "Says the fool."

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

## Chapter 34. Cornered

Backed against the cliff wall, Rhys' power spiked. His hands curled into claws. Rather than attacking recklessly, he slammed all his mana, all the strength from the impurities, every ounce of power he had, into one hand and struck Cynog's neck with all his might.

*There! What I've been waiting for!*

Having beaten Rhys one-sidedly for the last few minutes, and in his entire last battle, Cynog wasn't expecting an attack. He jerked back, but all his momentum was forward, his fist still raised to hammer the final blow home. The laws of physics prevailed. His bulk meant he couldn't dart away when he'd already committed to a forward movement.

And so, Rhys' strike hit its mark.

If Cynog's guard was up, if he'd expected a counterattack, Rhys was sure things would be different. But this entire battle and the last had conditioned Cynog to see him as a helpless idiot, a fool who talked big, but could only run away. The last thing the man expected was for Rhys to actually live up to his words and be able to land a counterattack.

*It's like Ev said. Half a battle is in the mind. A dumb jock won't get far as a martial student.*

His claw bit into Cynog's neck. Blood spurted, and Cynog jerked to the side, almost lifted off his feet for a split second. In the next instant, his fist smashed into the stone cliff face. Pushed by Rhys' blow, it veered off-target and missed Rhys' face by millimeters. Rock shattered. Shards slashed past Rhys' face, reflected with enough force to cut. Rhys swallowed, staring at Cynog with wide eyes. If the man had landed that blow, he would be dead. No ifs, ands, or buts about it. Nothing Blow Mitigation could have done. His head would have been chunky salsa on the cliff.

Cynog roared in frustration. He drew back his fist.

*It might still be!* Rhys dropped straight down, raising his arms in futile hopes of protecting himself.

*Crack.*

Rhys blinked. He looked up, and his eyes widened. Cynog stared as well. Both of them gazed in shock at Cynog's wrist, now broken, and the calloused hand that gripped it tight enough to break it.

"That's enough, Cynog," Ev growled, her eyes burning with anger.

Cynog turned. His jaw gaped. "Since when did you—"

"Since I stopped being your training dummy and started working on myself, you dusty old sadist. Get the hell out of here before I get serious." She released his wrist and stepped back, giving him room to flee.

*Huh? Training dummy?* Wasn't that what she'd called him, when she'd kidnapped him? Rhys stared at Ev, suddenly understanding a little more.

His eyes darted to her wrist. For the first time since he'd seen her, the black band was missing from her right wrist. The other three limbs still bore their restrictive bands, but the one with which she'd attacked was free of suppression.

Cynog stepped back, giving Rhys room to stand and slip out of his pin. He frowned. "Why do you waste your potential training this... this *coward*?"

"I'm not a coward. It's called 'strategy,'" Rhys informed him primly, fixing his robes. So what if his fighting style was trashy behavior from the beginning to the end? He was trash! What was he supposed to do, *not* act like it? Pshaw! He didn't believe in denying his nature. If he was trash, then so be it. He'd be the trashiest trash there was, down to taunting a superior opponent after he won thanks to a psychological trap, a surprise attack, and carefully preset conditions... as long as there was a yet bigger fish like Ev there to stop that superior opponent from transforming him into so much spaghetti bolognaise.

In fact, from his perspective, he was holding back! These people had never spent time in an internet lobby, trash talking someone who'd just sniped you fifty times for being a virgin loser who was too good at the game. Sure, it wasn't like he thought he *won* those arguments, it was just fun to shout at people. That was, when there were no consequences to it, anyways. But what was this, but a rare opportunity to taunt someone in this life with no consequences?

He glanced at Ev. Speaking of, he once again felt a little stupid. Not as stupid as when he'd 'saved' her from the bullies, since he'd deliberately asked for this fight so he could win Cynog's influence, but still a little stupid. She obviously had this whole situation well in hand. Even if he'd needed the fight to win Cynog over, it didn't mean he didn't feel foolish for all the bruises and bleeding he'd done to get there.

Cynog ground his teeth, narrowing his eyes at Rhys dangerously.

Ev rolled her eyes at him. "You, shut up. Go play in the stream. The adults are talking."

Rhys saluted, pressing his hand into his fist and bowing. "Yes!" Without another word, he limped off. He took a sip of potion as he went, then settled by the stream to finish reinforcing his body with impurities and heal all the damage Cynog had done.

From the edge of the stream, he watched Ev and Cynog speak. Ev had a dark, dangerous look in her eyes, but after the show she'd made of snapping his wrist, Cynog was simply polite and respectful to her. They traded a few words, and then Cynog yanked his wrist back into place and walked off. Ev watched him go. Only when he'd hopped up the edge of the cliff and vanished well and truly from sight did she bend,



picking up the cloth she'd dropped on the floor. She wound it around her right wrist once more as she walked over to Rhys' side, tossing him a nod along the way.

"Everything good?" Rhys asked.

"What, between me and Cynog? Fat chance. He'll honor the promise he made to you, though. I made sure of that," Ev said.

Rhys looked her up and down. "You really are the strongest person in the school, aren't you? Even at Tier 2, Cynog can't beat you."

"Mmm. It's not impossible to fight up a Tier. You know that," Ev replied.

Stolen story; please report.

Rhys laughed. He turned, gesturing. "I have a friend. Had... no. Have a friend. Name's Bast. When we were still together, he was the wall I could never beat. When the Strawman got captured, he was taken in by the Sword Saint. Every time I see you, I can't help but wonder: between you and him, who would win?"

Ev laughed. "Either way, he sounds like a good fight. I'd like to test my fists against this friend of yours. The Strawman's other disciple, is he? I heard big things about him, right when you got taken in, but I haven't heard anything lately."

"You've heard of him? Of Bast?" Rhys asked, surprised. He'd heard nothing, so he'd assumed there was nothing to be heard. But he was the trash. Why would he hear anything?

"Only right at the start, and not much more than that he was an incredible talent. Someone with the potential to be the strongest swordsman in our generation, and maybe even the next Sword Saint. Haven't heard much since... ah, but that's not worth worrying about," she added, as Rhys' face fell. "The Sword Saint is notoriously private and reclusive. He wouldn't let anyone learn too much about a disciple of his, especially if your friend is as extreme a talent as they say."

Rhys nodded. Somehow, he was a little proud to hear that his friend was valued so highly. *And to think, he was going to be thrown out with the trash.* If he hadn't stepped in, Bast would still be just another kid at the orphanage, overlooked and of no interest to anyone. But now, his friend's talent was being recognized, as it had always deserved to be.

There was a bit of bitterness in the pride, though. Now everyone could see the value in the trash; now his find wasn't his anymore. After a moment, Rhys pushed it away. It was the same as reading a manga before everyone else and trying to share it for years, only for everyone to suddenly be into it when the anime finally came out. He should be

happy that the thing he valued was finally being appreciated by everyone, not sad that it didn't 'belong to him' anymore.

*Besides, Bast never belonged to me.* He chuckled at that thought. He was being a little too possessive, wasn't he? But Bast was like a sibling to him. And not only that, but the first one to see the value in *him*, when he, too, had been nothing but trash. They'd both chosen to pick one another out of the garbage, and raise one another up. Naturally, his emotions were complex, to hear that Bast was succeeding long before he could. At the end of the day, though, he was happy to see his friend succeed. That was the one thing he was absolutely sure of.

In any case, Bast wasn't trash, and he was. Bast had been miscategorized. Between the two of them, Bast was a diamond ring that had fallen down the sink and ended up in the compost, and Rhys was a scrap of potato that belonged in there. Of course Bast would be picked up and treasured, while Rhys had to put down roots and make his own fortune for himself.

"You two were close, weren't you," Ev commented.

Rhys startled. "Er... yes." He'd just sat in silence, lost in thought. How awkward for Ev! "Sorry about that."

She waved her hand. "No, no. It's fine. I'm glad that you have a good friend like that. Not everyone has that! You should always treasure that bond you share."

Rhys nodded. "Of course."

Ev stretched. "That's enough training for today. I'll escort you back to the main plaza."

"Huh? I know the way back."

"And I know Cynog. I wouldn't be shocked if he, or some of his idiot underlings, are out there waiting for you to come by."

Rhys opened his mouth, then shut it, conceding the point. He only had a few drops left in his potion. He could still use Trash Intent, Trash Body, and even Cornered Rat, but without impurities to actively burn, he couldn't be confident in his ability to survive Cynog, or fight off his underlings. If Cynog wanted to get revenge, he might just die outright. He was a little more confident when it came to Cynog's underlings, but he was also healing from the wounds Cynog had inflicted still, and didn't really want to get beat up again today.

"Thank you," he said instead.

"Ha, so you do know how to be grateful," Ev joked. She led the way, and Rhys followed close behind.

No one jumped them on the way home, though whether that was because they hadn't bothered, or because Ev was there to scare them off, Rhys couldn't say. Halfway back, they passed a small group of mages, bowing and offering incense to the sky. The incense burned an intense black, and a heavy fragrance filled the air. The mages chanted and swayed in place, moving in sync.

"What's that all about?" Rhys asked, nudging Ev. Maybe she knew. He hadn't seen it before, but he hadn't been here long, either. Ev had been here much longer than him, so she might recognize it.

Ev looked over. She nodded at one of the nearer mages. "What's all this about, then?"

Rhys opened his mouth, then shut it. *Now that I think about it, I could've just started there, honestly.*

The mage looked up. His eyes were big and worshipful, and his manner, as though she had interrupted him at church. "Quiet! We're worshipping the Exalted Filth. Don't interrupt us, or it might punish us all with its earth-shattering wrath!"

"Exalted Filth? It's the Impure Being!" a female mage interjected.

"Shush, or the Black Smoke Spirit will devour us!" another snapped.

Rhys nodded slowly. Even as he did, his brows furrowed. *Hold on. I'm starting to put things together.* He pointed back in the direction they'd come from. "Are you... worshipping the, uh, the pillar of black smoke?"

All the mages nodded.

Ev glanced at Rhys. She snorted.

Rhys licked his lips. "I don't think you need to worry about its wrath. Actually, I've heard it's pretty benevolent." *Yeah, because it's me! What wrath am I going to visit upon you? I'm not even higher Tier than you!*

"With those impacts, that tremble the mountain itself? With that pitch-black smoke? *Benevolent?*" The male mage shook his head.

"Please leave. You've already interrupted us long enough."

The mages went back to their chanting and swaying. Rhys stared at them for a second, then sighed. *What am I supposed to do about that?* He shook his head and walked on.

Ev smirked at him. As they walked away, she nudged him. "Well, well, well, your Exaltedness. I didn't know I was in the presence of a god."

Rhys rolled his eyes at her. "Somehow, it's the second time someone's made that mistake."

"Oh, really?"

"Wish I was joking. Don't think there's anything I can do about it, either."

"Doesn't seem like it. It *is* funny, though," Ev replied.

Rhys shook his head. "Gods."

The two of them made it back to the square without any further encounters, whether with worshippers or Cynog and his followers. Ev nodded and walked off, leaving Rhys alone in the square. He looked around for a moment, then headed toward the library.

He now had three teachers advocating for him: Sorden, the potions teacher, Cynog, and the mustelid man, whose name Rhys belatedly realized he still didn't know. Of the teachers he knew about, that left the astronomy teacher, the extremely low-Tier classes' teachers, who probably had little influence, and one more teacher he knew well.

Rhys pushed open the door and stepped into the library. The usual cool and calm encompassed him, so utterly familiar. He hurried to Az's desk. "Az, are you in?"

"Am I ever out?" Az replied, his voice echoing around the corner.

He rounded the corner of the shelves to find Az lounging behind the desk in much the same pose he'd been in the first time, his feet up on the desk and a book in his hand. He didn't bother to look up as Rhys drew up to the desk, but turned the page in his book instead.

Rhys cleared his throat. "I have a favor to ask."

Az arched a brow. His eyes continued to track across the page. "You want me to ask if you can gain access to the upper peak?"

"I..." Rhys blinked. "How do you know?"

"I'm lazy, but I'm not deaf or blind," Az remarked, turning another page. He nodded behind Rhys. "What do you think, then? Upper peak material?"

"Huh? I—"

A voice he hadn't heard in some time sounded from behind him. "So, you already aspire to such heights?"

Rhys turned, startled. *No way.*

But it was. Aquari Gibrion, Schoolmaster of the Infinite Constellation School, stood before him. She tapped her fingertips on the butt of her sword and glared down at him. “What do you want so badly from the upper peak, that you’d risk life and death to achieve it?”

Rhys grinned. Without hesitation, he replied, “The trash!”

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

## Chapter 35. Upper Peak

Aquari stared at him, taken aback. “The trash?”

Rhys nodded. “It’s my path. I can burn it to get stronger.”

She considered for a moment. Her lips twisted. “I have to admit, I have no particular use for the trash, and I wouldn’t mind to see it gone. Someone recommended to me by the majority of the lower-peak teachers is surely trustworthy enough to handle the trash. However, I am the Schoolmaster. I also have to consider the other students. If I give only you access, won’t everyone stronger than you also request access? It’ll be quite annoying for me.”

Rhys nodded. “I can keep it secret.”

As if she hadn’t heard him, she continued. “But if it’s part of your duties, no one would question it.”

Rhys’ eyes widened. He shut his mouth. She didn’t actually care about the other students, she just wanted him to do something for her. Well, that wasn’t a problem for him. Whatever she wanted, he’d do his best to accomplish. It wasn’t as though he had grand plans, other than continuing to study with Ev and absorb the toxins from the cauldrons. He had all the time in the world. As long as she didn’t ask him something he wasn’t capable of, or couldn’t eventually achieve, this was a step in the right direction.

“We have a... guest teacher coming soon,” Aquari murmured, lowering her eyelids and gazing somewhere interminable. She turned her eyes to Rhys once more. “You will be his assistant with everything here on the mountain. His will is your command. But remember to hold your school first and foremost. He is only a guest, and should be treated with respect, but no more.”

*I understand.* Rhys nodded. This ‘guest teacher’ had some ulterior motives, if he was picking up what she was putting down, with those long pauses and reminders about

respect. Aquari wanted him to show the guest teacher around with the utmost respect, but not allow him to see any of the school's secrets. Not that Rhys knew any of the school's secrets, but then, didn't that make him the ideal escort?

"I'll do it," Rhys agreed.

"Excellent." Aquari fished around in her robes and pulled out a small, palm-sized flat gem plate. The hexagonal plate was about a millimeter wide, but only partially translucent; the gem was cloudy, shot through with thin hairlines and a faint glow of mana.

"This is the key to the upper peak. I will not give you a second one. Hold on to it, or lose access to the upper peak." She handed it to him.

Rhys accepted it in cupped hands and slid it into his storage ring. He wasn't going to show this to anyone. Not even Ev. This was his ultimate treasure, his key to the next tier of trash, his route to unlock his destiny... but mostly his method of absorbing the toxic trash pit's gunk.

"The guest teacher will be here in a few weeks. Prepare yourself." Aquari turned to walk off. At the last second, she turned back. Her eyes locked with Az.

Az lowered his book just a hair. He cocked a brow.

"I don't recall acquiring a librarian."

"You wouldn't," Az agreed.

They held one another's gazes. A great surge of mana emanated from Aquari, given form as a shapeless pressure, as if she'd turned up gravity a dozen times, or plunged him into the deep sea. It wasn't directed at Rhys, but the weight forced him to his knees anyways. He toppled forward, and barely caught himself with his hands before he fell completely flat.

Az, on the other hand, remained completely unbothered. He lowered his gaze from Aquari's and turned back to his book.

Aquari retracted her pressure. "Who are you? Why are you here?"

"Be a shame if such a magnificent collection went to waste. I simply decided to *cat*-ch it for myself."

She narrowed her eyes.

Az lowered his book with great reluctance and spread his hands. "Cat got your tongue? Schoolmaster, pay me no mind. Write me off as one of those eccentrics and leave it be. I go where I please and I do as I like. A free spirit, if you like."

"How long have you taken root here?"

Az chuckled. "Is that not an indictment of yourself more than me, Schoolmaster? Should you not know the goings-on of your lower peak better than anyone?"

"Can I not be rid of you?"

"When I please. Or would you like to try violence? I warn you, I won't sheathe my claws."

Rhys had climbed back to his feet during their exchange. He dusted off his hands, then looked at Aquari. "Why run him off? He's been very helpful. And you aren't paying him, so he's working for free. Isn't that ideal?"

Aquari frowned, but didn't have a counterpoint. She pointed at Az. "I'll see you in the upper peak."

"No, you won't."

"I had better."

"You'd be better off forgetting about me," Az murmured. His eyes glowed.

Aquari jumped back. She raised a hand, and a pale shield of light wrapped around her.

Az chuckled. "...or you could leave me be. Besides, I have no key. How could I possibly enter the upper peak without one?"

His voice dripped with a level of derision that suggested he would have no problem entering the upper peak, if he wanted to.

Aquari narrowed her eyes at him, but backed off. "Congratulations, you're hired. Welcome to your new post, Librarian."

"Oh my, oh my. Official recognition, how exciting." He lifted his book and went back to reading.

"I'll expect you to teach a class and report to yearly meetings."

"Expectations. I couldn't imagine letting them down."



Aquari scoffed. She turned on her heel and marched out. Her eyes landed on Rhys, who had seen all this, and she froze.

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Rhys lifted his hands. "I saw nothing. The Schoolmaster's power is absolute."

"Of course it is." With a final harrumph, she walked out. Sunlight spilled in for a moment, and then the door slammed shut.

Having watched her go, Rhys turned to Az. "So... who are you?"

"I told you, didn't I? A free spirit."

Rhys pressed his lips together, then sighed. He could already tell that Az wasn't going to tell him any more.

"But to you, I'm the librarian. Now get out of my library," Az said, tossing a book at him.

"Wait, wait. I read that series you leant me." Rhys withdrew it from his storage ring and handed it over.

For the first time since Rhys had arrived, Az sat up to receive the books. "So? What did you think?"

"It was a good time! The last book was a bit eh, but it was pretty good until then. And it had to finish somewhere, I guess."

Az nodded. He pushed one of the stacks on his desk forward. Looking closer, Rhys saw it was a new stack, one he hadn't seen before. "Try that one next."

"Got it. Thank you."

"Of course."

He paused. "Er, if you aren't actually a teacher here... how did you summon Aquari?"

Az laughed. "Isn't it obvious? What's more startling than finding out you suddenly have a Librarian you didn't hire?"

Rhys opened his mouth, then closed it. Az had a good point. He'd go check it out, if someone he'd never heard of suddenly claimed to be his employee. "Why don't any of the other teachers question you?"

Az smiled, but didn't say anything.

Rhys snorted to himself. Az wasn't revealing his mysteries? That was fine. He didn't really need to know. He already understood the most important part, anyways: Az was stronger than Aquari, to the extent that Aquari couldn't do anything about him. Rhys got the distinct impression that there were probably schools which would be happy to have someone like Az colonize their library... but, well, the Infinite Constellation School was just trashy enough that Aquari was angry, instead of appreciating her good fortune.

One way or another, Az didn't seem to mind, and as for Rhys, a trashy school suited him, so he didn't bring it up.

Rhys nodded. "Thank you for all your help."

"Mhm. I've taken a shine to you, Rhys." Az stretched luxuriously, resting his book on his chest to tuck his hands behind his head. "I think you and I have a great future ahead of us."

*Is this what it feels like when a stray cat randomly comes up to you and decides it's your cat, now?* Rhys wondered. He didn't give voice to his thoughts, though. Having a high-Tier expert on his side sounded like a good deal. Though, given how catlike Az was—*since he's literally a cat, after all*—he was pretty sure he'd be a fool to rely on Az to help him, except when the man felt like it.

"I hope so as well," Rhys said, smiling.

"Now get out. It's naptime." Az waved him away, closing his eyes even as he spoke.

Rhys saluted and scurried out, as Az had indicated. He didn't want to get on the guy's bad side. Not right after he'd declared something like appreciation toward Rhys.

Exiting the library, Rhys stood under the sky for a few moments, considering his next move. No matter what he came up with, though, one pressing prerogative kept floating to the top: the trash in the upper peak. He was probably ready for it, at least the weakest parts of it. And not only that, but the mysterious 'guest teacher' with unknown ulterior motives would be on his way soon. Getting the trash now meant protecting his path from the teacher... but more importantly, it meant getting information on this guest. If Aquari had thrown out any correspondence with him, any of the paperwork, even an indication of what school he was from, that would be invaluable information that Rhys could either directly capitalize on, or read up on in the library later.

"Nothing for it," he muttered to himself, and turned his feet toward the upper peak.

He didn't walk directly there. That would be foolish, when Aquari had just indicated that access to the upper peak was a point of contention among other students. Instead, he ran off into the woods as if he was going to meet up with Ev, then rounded the mountain up toward the upper peak. The barrier that surrounded the upper peak had no visible entryway, so he was willing to bet it was equally accessible from any point on its

perimeter. He could be wrong, but better to start sneaky and get pushed back to the front entrance, than to start with the front entrance only to find out he had a sneaky route all along.

He drew up to the barrier and pulled out his pass. Nothing about the barrier changed. He looked at the pass, then at the barrier, then back at the pass. Slowly, he advanced toward the translucent blue wall of the barrier, one hand out.

His fingertips pressed against the blue surface. Ripples spread from where he touched, as though he'd dipped his hand into water. His fingers slipped past the barrier with no more resistance than the surface of water. He passed through, and stood on the other side of the barrier. He'd reached the upper peak.

"Huh," he muttered. He'd wanted this since he'd arrived. Access to the upper peak, and its precious trash. Now that he was there, he didn't know what to feel. He was happy, that was sure, but that was about it. He still had lots of work ahead of him.

Rhys tucked the pass back away, then clapped. Lots of work to do, and it was time for him to get down to it. Just like the lower peak when he'd first arrived, the upper peak was strewn with garbage. There was trash absolutely everywhere. Even out here, on the edge of the barrier, little bits of trash were strewn around, wrapped around the trees or tangled in the undergrowth. It reminded him of his home world, honestly.

But unlike back home, this trash would make him far more powerful. He picked up a scrap of paper and instantly felt the thrum of mana in it. One piece of trash, made of more powerful materials, held almost as much mana as a small trash pile.

He collected the trash as he walked, piling it up into a bag. To burn here, or burn back in his cave? It wouldn't give himself away to burn it up here, at least not now. The students thought he was a god, or cryptid, or something. No one but Ev and Tarais would link the black smoke to him.

But on the other hand, if anyone ever *did* figure it out, they'd know he was able to access the upper peak immediately. The jig would be up. The other students who cared about such things, who were probably the powerful ones to begin with, would be up his ass.

And on the *other*, other hand, if he dragged powerful trash down the mountain, he risked losing it. At this power level, even the students who didn't care about trash might take an interest in his treasure. It emanated powerful mana pressure, enough for other students to notice, and more than enough for them to come after him or investigate it.

He looked at his storage ring, then immediately dismissed it. The storage capacity was big enough for what he needed—some particularly choice pieces of trash for use with Trash Intent later, his herbs, a beat-up cauldron, and a few other do-dads he liked to keep on him—but it wasn't large enough for all that and a trash pile. He didn't want to

completely empty it out to carry the smallest of trash piles down the mountain, because, after all, he wanted to push his limits and grow. Eventually, he'd be burning huge piles of trash, which wouldn't be able to fit in the ring at all, even if he emptied it. Taking the trash down in batches had the same problem as toting high-powered trash down the peak. The aura risked luring the students to his little hideout, and the last thing he wanted to do was give away his safe spot, his home base, to a random passing student who got curious about the powerful mana signature coming from a supposedly empty patch of mountain. It wasn't a viable option.

So either he burned it up here, and when or if they figured out that he was responsible for the smoke, he was in trouble, or he burned it down there, and if any students decided they wanted the powerful stuff he was lugging around, he was in trouble.

Rhys twisted his lips, thinking for a moment, then shrugged. The trash was up here, and there was a barrier between him and the other students. He could always flee back up here or into the library if the other students caught on, though with the rumors going around? He was pretty sure anyone who tried to claim that little weak Rhys was the 'Impure King' or whatever they called the black smoke he produced was going to get ridiculed. He smirked at the thought of the strange mythos around him, and what sending smoke up from beyond the barrier of the upper peak was going to do to it.

*Only one way to find out.* He threw down the cloth, piling up the trash he'd gathered so far. There wasn't much of it, but already, its mana signature rivaled the pressure of an entire potion of filth. Even this remained but a fraction of the impurity and mana level of the toxic pit, but it was a place to start. A first step, in a long upward climb... or downward fall, into the pit.

Rhys took a deep breath. He clapped his hands together, then approached the pile. "Here we go."

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

## Chapter 36. Big Trash

Rhys sectioned off a portion of the trash that felt more-or-less equivalent to one of his impure potions, piling the rest to the side to add on later. He wanted to push his limits, but not too much. The first impure potion sip had almost gone too far, and now he was a little more wary of carelessly shoving up the upper limit of impurities he took in at one time. He didn't want to almost kill himself again. Better to be a little more cautious and approach this one step at a time until he could take on massive amounts of this upper-peak trash.

Looking at his pile of trash, Rhys grinned. *Activating stalker mode!* He dug into it. One piece at a time, he went through everything he'd gathered so far, searching for any interesting letters or tidbits of paper. The rare organic trash he set aside, for making yet richer fertilizer later. He hadn't forgotten how much Sorden had paid him for those herbs. If he grew herbs with the fertilizer from the upper peak, would they increase in quality yet again? He wasn't sure, but he was game to try.

As expected, the trash that had flown this far had been out here for some time. The paper was weathered, the ink all but washed away. What little he gleaned was only what he already knew—that the Infinite Constellation School was a poor, small school, with few connections and little power. It owed large debts to nearby schools, which it slowly paid off, but which were often leveraged to force Aquari or the other teachers into tasks that they had no desire to complete. Rather than a noble mage of great standing, their Schoolmaster, Aquari, was more like the bullied kid who could only bow her head and act as a gofer for the more powerful Schoolmasters. From what he read, she was at the absolute lower limit one could be to qualify as a Schoolmaster, and consequently, she wasn't able to act freely very often. Instead, she was bossed around and treated like trash.

*Well, I knew that.*

There was nothing, however, about the upcoming 'guest teacher,' or even an indication of what school he'd be from, or what Tier he was. To find out that kind of thing, he'd need much fresher trash than the long-lost dregs that had fluttered through the woods to the edge of the barrier. It wasn't that surprising, in all honesty, that he didn't find anything out yet. It was fine, too. He planned to pick up every piece of trash on the upper peak. He'd find out eventually.

He set the trash he wasn't going to burn to the side, nearby enough that he could reach for it and add it on later. With all his pre-treatment done, it was time to get down to business and burn some trash. Rhys clapped his hands and rubbed them together eagerly. *Here we go!*

He touched a match to the pile. Fire crackled, quickly growing. The familiar dark smoke leaped up, and Rhys breathed it in.

It was powerful. Mana flowed into him, and with it, impurities. *Fewer* of them, but with each one individually more powerful than any impurity he'd felt before. He breathed deep, excited.

The smoke poured in. It was powerful, but his limits had expanded from his early days. He had enough mana to send it into the compost, but that was it. His limits weren't stretched. He was simply able to take in this much mana.

*Hold on. That's no good!* Rhys grabbed a hunk of nearby trash and threw it on the pile. The mana flowing into him grew stronger, but the smaller amount of impurities flowing in

with the mana meant that only his mana limits were pressed. The impurities, too, were stronger, but they didn't possess the piercing qualities of the hyper-concentrated impurities from the potions, or even a corrosiveness that exceeded that of ordinary impurities. Or rather, they were more corrosive, far more corrosive, but there were so many fewer of them that Rhys still had a good handle on keeping them in check.

Rhys' brows furrowed. His impurity limits weren't pressed by this. That wasn't good. He needed to raise the quantity and quality of impurity he could absorb, not simply expand his mana capacities.

He was at his very limit, his core stretched like a balloon about to pop even with spewing off mana to make compost, so he couldn't add any more to the fire, but as he sat there, Rhys thought to himself, his brain working overtime. How could he make these impurities more dangerous, so he could use them as a stepping stone toward the toxic pit?

The first answer that came to his mind was concentration. But how? This wasn't the leftover scum in a cauldron, this was trash. Cauldron scum had been a potion, at some point—a liquid. By adding a few reagents, he could coax it to re-enter that liquid state, then concentrate it into a potion. How did he concentrate trash? Trash was... things. Anything. A piece of charcoal. A tossed-aside fork. Bent metal, a clump of paper, a rotten apple, a ruined waterlogged book crawling with mold. If he put all that in a cauldron, he didn't even know how he'd go about melting it down. How did one melt an apple, in the first place? A book? He was sure it was possible, but through complex chemical or magical manipulation that was far beyond his pitiful skills and comprehension.

*I could just burn more*, he considered, but given that he was at his mana limits now, from this small amount of trash, he'd have to slowly ramp up over a long time to push his core to be large enough for him to absorb a significant amount of impurities. Years, even. It was an option, but not one he relished taking. That impure pit would sit there, waiting, the whole time. At any point, someone else could come along and swoop it up, and then where would he be?

Not that many other people had an interest in trash, of course, but who knew? Maybe there was someone who came along and emptied the pit every century or so. He didn't know, and it made him profoundly uncomfortable to leave such a valuable source of power sitting there for so long.

Rhys took another deep breath, then widened his eyes. *Would that work?* He looked at the smoke, then reached into his storage ring. He'd put some tidbits in there that he'd found in the garbage that seemed useful. Bits of string, long straight sticks he could use for bonking, twisted bits of metal that might serve as caltrops or thrown weapons. Now, he pulled out one of the items. A huge, stained bedsheet. He'd washed it thoroughly, but the mysterious stain refused to completely come out. It was clean, though, and it would serve his purposes today.



By now, it was relatively simple for him to disconnect from the trash's mana stream, at least with a pile at this level, where he was relatively under control. Running around the edge of the burning trash, Rhys tied the sheet into the trees, high over the fire. The smoke now had to pass through the sheet to escape.

Rhys touched the sheet and called forth Trash Intent. His mana flowed through the sheet, strengthening it, and closing the gaps between the fibers. Now, it was a complete thing, a whole, powerful piece of fabric that couldn't be singed by a passing ember. More importantly, without gaps between the fibers, there was nowhere for the smoke to go. It collected in the sheet, catching all the impurities he might have let escape, even with breathing the smoke.

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One hand pressed to the sheet, Rhys returned to absorbing the trash mana, but this time, he deliberately excluded the impurities as well as he could, by forming a dense net of mana strings at the opening of his mouth and nose. It was far denser than his previous net, which had only sought to make the passing impurities smaller. This one strove to keep them all out.

His mind blurred. Between activating Trash Intent to its limits, forcing it to create an impermeable barrier from a cheap old sheet, and creating the mana net at his mouth, he was pushing his mental strength to its limits. He instinctively sensed he couldn't keep this up for long. It was a good idea, capturing all the impurities and breathing none in, so that he could concentrate the ashes into a potion later, but impractical. He wasn't powerful enough to maintain both yet. If not for the trash mana pouring in, he wouldn't have had the mana for it, and as it was, his core was emptying of mana even with the mana he gained every moment. He was losing mana on this exchange.

Rhys held on, wracking what little remained available of his brain for a solution. Abruptly, his eyes widened, and he smacked himself in the forehead at his own stupidity. If Trash Intent could keep the impurities in the smoke in, why couldn't it also keep the impurities out of his body? He reached into his storage ring and drew out another, smaller scrap of fabric. This one was finer, as well, from one of the nice pieces of clothing he'd found in the trash heap outside his hometown. He wrapped it tightly over his nose and mouth, then deactivated the mana-thread net and, for the first time, activated a second simultaneous Trash Intent.

Instantly, he felt his mind and body reach their utter limits. He no longer lost mana, but two activations of Trash Intent simultaneously were almost more than he could bear. Trash Intent meant understanding the item intimately, every fiber, every crack and hole, every twist and tear. He had to hold the whole item in his mind, or else lose it. In some cases, the item's own intent would speak to him, like when he used a table leg to resurrect a table, filling in the gaps of what had been; in other cases, like with this scrap of fabric, the item had long forgotten its own shape, and so instead, Rhys was forced to wrap his mind around the item and hold it there, in the shape he desired. The sheet had



its own intent, but he wasn't relying on that. Instead, he was forcing it to take on the shape he desired, which likewise pushed Trash Intent to its limits.

A splitting headache immediately assaulted Rhys' mind, and his focus wavered, barely holding on. Between the two options, this one he could keep up indefinitely, but it pushed his mind to its absolute capacity. He'd thought he'd been straining before, but then, he'd still had brain to spare on thinking up new solutions. Now, there was no brain to spare. His whole world boiled down to these two objects. He was aware of nothing but the scrap of cloth, the sheet, and the mana that rushed in with every breath. The headache hammered into him like a sledgehammer beating an ice pick into his skull. His head pounded with each beat of his heart. Black dots swam between his vision, and darkness encroached on its edges.

There were still impurities in the mana, but far, far fewer, so few that, were he able to think, he might have suspected that other mages who avoided impurities would have been satisfied with the outcome. The sheet, on the other hand, let no impurities through. He needed mana and air to pass through the cloth over his mouth, and some tiny impurities slipped through along with those two. The sheet was an impervious barrier. He didn't need to let anything through it, and so he didn't. The smoke collected there, thick with impurities, then condensed and fell back down into the fire. Through the horrific headache and his utterly split focus, Rhys could barely sense impurities gathering in the ashes with every passing second.

The flames burned down. The mana ran out. Rhys lowered his Trash Intent, and gasped as the pain faded from his head. It felt like a breath of fresh air, like sunlight after a thousand years in the dark. The relief from the pain was profound, utterly lifting all the weight off his body.

He hadn't made any leaps and bounds in strengthening his body. He only had a few impurities, not enough to burn. His core, on the other hand, was larger. Not hugely larger, but increased in size by enough that he was satisfied with his growth.

Rhys drew out his favorite slightly-beat-up cauldron from his storage ring and, using a broken shovel Trash-Intended back into its true form, shoveled the ashes into it. He delicately brushed off the sheet as well, pushing any of the impurities clinging to its fabric into the cauldron. The result was barely enough to fill a tenth of the cauldron, and even then, he'd shoveled in plenty of ordinary ashes along with the impurities.

He dusted off his hands and grinned. Nine more fires to fill the cauldron? No problem. It was time to get to work.

His first order of business was to cart the compost back to his old hiding spot, where he tested it on his garden. Just adding the new compost, without even adding any of his own mana, the plants instantly bloomed, surging taller, putting out new leaves and fresh stems. Buds unfurled, stubborn sprouts grew taller, and seeds that had lain dormant suddenly sprung up. Still riding high off the tide of his previous absorption of mana,

Rhys fed the plants until they were ready to be harvested, then plucked, chopped, and picked the best sprigs, with a note to stop by Sorden later to see if she'd be interested in buying another round from him. It had been long enough by now. She'd probably need more.

He didn't have enough for a second batch of the same size as the first at the higher quality with the new compost, though, so he returned to the upper peak shortly after. Burn trash, filter out the impurities, fill the cauldron, take the compost down, grow the herbs, return to the peak. Like that, his days took on a familiar loop, as he rushed up and down the mountainside. His legs grew stronger from all the climbing and descending he was doing, and he grew faster as well. The other students, used to seeing him rush around, didn't comment at all, except to complain when he neglected the lower peak's trash a bit in favor of focusing on the new, stronger, upper peak trash.

Ten days in, he'd finally cleared the outlying forest around the Schoolmaster and her friends' dwellings of scraps of trash. He left the far-flung regions of the upper peak alone. His instincts told him nothing but death awaited him, and the piles of horrific-smelling droppings and large clawed paw prints agreed. Some fearsome beast or beasts lived on the peak, and he would be foolish to wander too far from the peak in search of trash, lest he end up in that beast's belly instead.

Rhys shoveled the last batch of impurities into his cauldron. Ashes filled it to the brim. There wasn't a single space for anything but impure ashes and impurities. As he finished filling it, and gave it a final pleased tap-down, he suddenly hesitated and looked it over again. A whole cauldron, filled to the brim with impurities. Not just any impurities, but larger and more powerful ones than the ones he'd concentrated from the potion gunk. When he'd made that, the cauldron had exploded with enough force to impale him with metal. What would happen when he tried to brew this cauldron into an impure potion?

Rhys licked his lips. He nodded slowly. *I might have fucked up.*

A second later, he steeled himself. It was just like when he'd burned the trash on the peak. He wouldn't get anywhere if he played it safe and cautiously filled the cauldron with only the amount of impurities that he was sure he could handle. Mages grew by pushing their limits. He had to step outside of his boundaries, outside of his comfort, and push himself, or he'd stagnate like the trash he was at heart.

*Besides, that potion gunk was deliberately made volatile by Alum. I can't judge this ash's explosiveness from that.*

So decided, he faced down the slightly beat up cauldron and took a deep breath. It was time to concentrate the impurities, part two.

Hopefully without exploding the cauldron this time.

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

## Chapter 37. Brewing Ash

For all that mages grew by pushing their limits, Rhys also wasn't stupid. A table leg with a portion of table attached to its top sat within reaching distance to his left, table-side pointed at the cauldron, ready to become a shield via Trash Intent at the first sign of danger. Rhys set up on the side of a cliff. He could kick the cauldron off if it showed signs of fruitlessly exploding, and a stub of what had once been a long board sat on his right, ready to push it off if a kick would be too slow or too dangerous.

Now that he could maintain two Trash Intents at once, he could also activate the stub to jab it off and the table to act as a shield at the same time, and he'd deliberately angled the two so such a thing was possible. Tested them, even, though one at a time. The splitting headache that two activations of Trash Intent, and the prohibitive mana cost, kept him from trying to activate both at once. It was a good activity to do when he had excessive trash mana flowing through him and needed something to get rid of mana, but not when he was about to attempt a difficult round of alchemy that would likely require a fair share of mana.

It really wasn't something that he could simply 'maintain at once,' but rather a life-saving last-ditch technique. Once he practiced it more, he was sure he could maintain two at once without the requisite headache and paralyzingly intense focus, but for now, it was something he'd have to keep as his ace in the hole. If his opponents knew about it, they could easily counter it.

Not only was it hard to activate and maintain, but he also felt instinctively that both Trash Intents were easier to shatter than a single Trash Intent. It made sense. After all, he could truly commune with the trash when he only had one Trash Intent. He could pour all his mana into that one item, and give it every scrap of focus as he dragged it into being. When he had two, and both his mind and mana were split, it was all he could do to hang on, forget about reinforcing the Trash Intent. A good blow would break one, and the subsequent backlash from breaking one might well shatter the second, too, in one fell swoop.

All in all, his new technique was best used as a final ace, to be used as a last surprise to finish an opponent, or for flashy intimidation, but not in equal battle. Right now, though, it was more than enough to save his ass from a cauldron explosion, or so he hoped. His plan was to activate both for a split second, then deactivate the pushing-rod

and focus all his attention on the table, so that way the table could absorb the blow. Still, he couldn't be sure it would work.

*Only one way to find out.*

He'd fetched some water from a nearby stream. Now he poured it in, wetting the ash to a dark slurry. Most potions called for pure water, but he wasn't worried about that. The water was clear enough, and besides, he was trying for the maximum concentration of impurities, not attempting to make a proper potion. Once the ashes were fully wetted and ever so slightly slopping around in the cauldron, he lit the fire underneath and began the process of extracting the impurities.

The first time he'd brewed an impure potion, he'd been dealing with potion scraps. They were dense with impurities, and mostly needed to be boiled down. This time, the ash was strewn with a light distribution of very powerful impurities. At a guess, he could probably remove seventy percent of the material in the cauldron, and lose no impurities. *No, it's probably higher than that.* The problem was, he needed to remove both the water which he'd just added, as well as the ash, which was a solid, non-melting material.

The pot reached a boil, and Rhys drew out a piece of thin, threadbare fabric from his storage ring. Using a random bit of crooked wire, he fashioned a makeshift net. As the water boiled, the heavy impurities naturally settled down, while the light ashes separated up. He pressed his hands to the side and circulated his mana through the cauldron, encouraging the process to speed up. The impurities he called to the bottom, pulling them down through the ashes. As if sensing their brethren ingrained into Rhys' every pore, the impurities eagerly followed his mana... or maybe it was the fact that he was pushing out waves of mana into the cauldron, so that the ashes trembled at a high frequency and naturally separated into their impure and pure parts. The ashes constantly welled up, fountaining on the surface, while the impurities sank, sank, sank. It reminded him of those videos online of the rings being cleaned by vibrating them at supersonic speeds. He made a poor replica with his mana, but the end result was more or less the same. The filth sank down, and the ash rose up.

At last, he sensed no more impurities in the surface ash. Rhys skimmed the surface of the water like a poolboy on a summer afternoon, and came up with a shimmering scoopful of pure white ash. He started to dump it on the ground, then hesitated. Pure ash... was that something Sorden might use in her potions? Ash was highly alkaline, so it could be used as a reactant in a basic potion or a neutralizer in an acidic one. Alchemy wasn't exactly chemistry, he realized that even with his high school chemistry background, but it was close enough that the general rules about acids and bases held true. A highly alkaline base, and one this pure, at that, would likely be valuable to Sorden.

He drew out a fine-knit piece of fabric, large enough to wrap around the cauldron, and dumped the scoop of ash into it. The water instantly soaked through it, but the ash stayed within.

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One scoop at a time, he removed the ash from the cauldron, waiting until he was sure he'd extracted every impurity he could from it. The result was highly purified ash, but that was only a byproduct to Rhys. His true intent was the thick sludge of impurities at the very bottom of the cauldron, the dark slime he could already sense the potency of, even in this incomplete and less than completely dense form. The cauldron slowly emptied. At one point, it grew too low for him to easily separate the ash and the slime, so he added more water and returned to the cycle of removing the purified ash.

A heap of ash piled up beside him. Strangely, it had diminished as it had purified. Although the cauldron had been heaped to absolutely full, almost overfull, and most of the cauldron's worth of ash had been removed, the pile of purified ash that remained was only about enough to fill half the cauldron. He wasn't sure where the missing ash had gone, because it certainly wasn't in the small puddle of impurities at the bottom, but he definitely ended up with less than what he'd put into the cauldron on the other side, and Newton be damned. He gave the shimmering white ash a look, then shrugged. Might as well chalk it up to the angel's share and move on. It was only a byproduct, after all, so it wasn't like it even upset him. The world had magic, so why would it follow the physics he knew, after all?

He removed the last of the ash, and was left only with the impure sludge on the bottom and the water on top. He fed the fire beneath it more heat, and the pot began to boil. Steam poured out of its mouth. Using a stick, he stirred it gently to keep the impurities from sticking to the bottom and becoming cauldron gunk, all the while boiling it down.

Up until this point, the process had been largely non-volatile. The ash wasn't particularly reactive, and since he'd focused his efforts on the ash and not the impurities, the impurities were free to lounge at the bottom of the pot, largely undisturbed. As the pot boiled down, though, the impurities were brought to bear. At last, the energies he remembered from his last attempt began trembling within the pot, beating against its walls.

Rhys put his hands against the cauldron and pushed his mana into it. Trash Intent surrounded the cauldron. His Intent couldn't fix the dents and dings in the cauldron. If he allowed the Intent to take on the cauldron's ideal form, it would only stand there, outside of the dents, and do nothing to strengthen the actual cauldron. Instead, he held the Intent within the walls of the cauldron, using it to reinforce the trashed cauldron. The impurities' energy hammered against the walls, but with the reinforcement, the energy bounced harmlessly back.

He focused, pushing his mana through the wall. He massaged the impurities, pulling them inward. He needed them fully concentrated. As dense as they could get.

The denser they got, the more they bumped into one another, and the wilder the energy got. The impurities were separated in the ash, and hadn't interacted to one another. Now that he was concentrating them, they reacted strongly with one another. The pot bubbled and spat. The cauldron trembled. Mana twisted in the air around the cauldron as the impurities corrupted the air around them. Dark smoke settled around the ground near the cauldron. Rhys probed the smoke with his mana, a little worried that the impurities were escaping, but it seemed to only be an effect cast by the brewing or an illusion of some sort.

These were the strongest impurities he'd ever handled. Before, they'd been less dense, and they hadn't been hard to deal with. Now that they were closer together, they fought against one another. They didn't want to be close. The glob of impurities trembled in his mana grasp, struggling to break apart. They resisted existing in their current concentration, and anything further was absolutely against their nature. Each impurity on its own was a significant source of power. A handful, ten or so, was enough to equal an old trash pile. If they hadn't been so dispersed, or rather, if they'd been as dense as the lower level impurities were in the low level trash piles, they would've absolutely overwhelmed him when he'd burned the first trash pile up here. Not a single one of them wanted to anywhere near another impurity.

Not that it mattered. He was going to concentrate them, whether they wanted to be concentrated or not. The benefits from Less is More alone were enough to decide it for him, not to mention the total waste of absorbing them at their dispersed rate.

He pressed the impurities together with his mana, refusing to let them apart. As he did, he carefully lifted one hand off the pot and drew forth a few strands of herbs from his storage ring. Those he added into the pot, then slammed the lid down. The herbs had concentrative properties, but more importantly, they were purifying herbs. They pushed impurities out of things. There was no such thing as completely ridding a potion of impurities, but adding one of these could strip out at least a little of the unwanted materials.

Now, he brewed those purifying herbs into the liquid that surrounded the dense glob of impurities on the bottom. The water became the antithesis to impurities, and forced the impurities tighter together.

Tighter and tighter. Between his direct mana manipulation, the pressure gathering under the closed lid, and the purifying herbs, he condensed the impurities down to an orb, then tighter. The cauldron rocked under his hands. Its metal creaked. One of the dents abruptly popped back out, resuming its original shape. Even under the full force of Trash Intent, he couldn't completely preserve the cauldron's integrity any more. This was the critical moment. If the cauldron burst now, he'd lose everything.



Sweat dripped down his forehead. He focused intently on the ball of impurities in his hands, slowly massaging it down, down, down, to something smaller and smaller. Pressure built. The cauldron groaned, bulging out at the middle. The lid shuddered, struggling to break free. All the water boiled down to steam, which pressed on the impurities and likewise on the sides of the cauldron, seeking freedom.

*A little longer. Hold on a little longer!*

The impurities trembled. Rhys' focus narrowed, down to nothing but the impurities. This was it. The moment. They either exploded, or he succeeded. His everything was the tiny, dense glob; his world was contained within the cauldron. His hands pressed down, and the orb pushed back. It slipped in his hands, and his grip loosened.

*No!*

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

## Chapter 38. Condensed

His grip slipped, but only for a moment. Rhys caught the ball and clenched down, tighter than before. It shuddered, tried to slip, but this time, he didn't let it. The intense pressure from Rhys' mana, the steam, and the heat all came to bear on the orb, and it finally, at last, melted.

Rhys' eyes flashed. *Now!*

He kicked the cauldron. The lid shot off in a jet of steam. A black blob flew out just behind the lid, hurtling up into the air. He grabbed a potion container from his storage ring and held it out, calling the impurities to him with his other hand. The black blob fell, but it retained its shape as it fell. Rhys pulled it into the vial and slammed the lid shut.

*Crrk-crrk-crrk.* Instantly, hairline cracks shot through the vial. High pitched creaks and shatters filled the air as new cracks formed and existing cracks dug deeper. Startled, Rhys released Trash Intent on the now-empty cauldron and quickly applied it to the vial. The deterioration slowed, but it didn't stop. The potion was too corrosive, too destructive. It ate away at the mana powering his Intent and corroded it, the same as it corroded the glass.

Rhys poured more mana in, only for it to sink into the impurities. At the absolute top speed he could feed mana into the Intent skill, he could barely keep up with the rate of



corrosion inside the glass. He stared at it, shocked. It was a success and a half. On its own, this potion was a training material, to force him to keep Trash Intent up for longer and practice preventing his mana from getting corroded by impurities. If he drank it...

A sensation of terror came over Rhys, his instincts quailing at the idea. If he drank it, he died. He was absolutely sure of that. It was too corrosive. His body, his mana, neither of them were ready for it yet.

He grinned, looking at the potion. Neither of them were ready yet. With the potion he held in his hand right here, though, they'd be ready. He just needed more practice.

Rhys sat by the cauldron and focused his Intent on the bottle. He'd never used it for more than a few minutes at a time, but now, he held it active for hours. At the same time, he paid close attention to where his mana met the potion, watching the corrosive process closely. If he wanted to drink this potion, he needed to be able to handle it without his mana corroding. Whatever it did in the bottle was the same thing it would do inside him, just on an easier-to-handle scale. If he could solve it here, he'd solve it for when he drank the potion, as well.

Fifteen minutes passed. His mana was almost out, and a tiny headache grew at his temples. He had the vague sensation that Trash Intent was drawing an unusual amount of mana, but he couldn't be sure. He'd never held it this long before. His Intent held strong, though, showing no sign of wavering. He sipped his mana potion to keep his mana high.

Half an hour. The mana loss accelerated the longer he held the technique. He no longer questioned whether it was unusual or not; it was. He needed to sip the mana potion more often now. His temples throbbed, and his skull ached. His Intent wavered at the edges as his focus wobbled, split between the Intent and his studies, distracted by the pain.

Three quarters of an hour. Rhys sipped his mana potion yet again and kept going. His whole head was on fire. His Intent barely held. He would have given up, but there was something about his mana. About the way it corroded. He'd almost understood it. Just a little longer. He only had to hold on a little longer, and he'd understand!

An hour. The first mana potion was empty, and he was already a quarter through the next one. His vision blurred. His Intent wobbled, on the verge of collapse. But none of that mattered. He stared closely at his mana and the impurities, bloodshot eyes wide. The mana touched the impurities, and the impurities infected it, degraded it, then destroyed it. But where did that energy go? Surely it had to go somewhere.

*Inside. Inside the impurities. The impurities absorb it.*

His mana wasn't deteriorating. It was changing. From ordinary mana, it became part of the impurities, an energy source for them that allowed them to grow and change. He'd

thought of impurities as garbage, as nothing but solid blocks of refuse that he could burn for energy, and that was true, but it was a limited understanding. Impurities were more than just garbage. They were also a *disease*, of sort. Something one could get infected with. Something that could build up over time, accumulate, but also taint and ruin mana.

*Or, at least, that's what the average person who only sees them as trash might think*, Rhys thought to himself. They ruined mana? No. They simply turned the mana into more impurities. More energy for themselves. That was the energy he unlocked when he burned them. Static, low-level impurities passively drained the mana out of objects. Higher-level impurities could actively seek out and absorb mana—though again at a low, slow rate. These impurities were dangerous to him because of his low Tier. If he were a higher Tier, then, based on the vast disparity between his small mana pool and that of a higher Tier mage, they might seem no more than passive to him. It was only because he'd encountered them so early, when he was so weak, that he was able to have this insight.

*Since impurities carry energy the same way mana does, I wonder if I could circulate impurities, instead of mana?* Rhys allowed himself the thought, but quickly shut it away. It was impractical, for now. It took far too much effort for him to find and absorb impurities of a sufficient strength and density to be equivalent to his current mana, let alone stronger, and even if he fed all his mana in, the transaction wasn't 1:1. He'd lost all his mana and then some, trying to keep Intent active, and the impurities hadn't even increased an appreciable amount within the potion. That didn't even get into the troubles with circulating impurities—the strange and sometimes damaging shapes of them, keeping them moving without letting them cling to the walls of his mana passages, the difficulty of igniting them to get energy out, let alone the problem that he couldn't put out an impurity fire, only light one and wait for it to burn out. It was a thought for later, not now.

He snapped back to the moment. His mana corroded when it touched the impurities, because the impurities could infect it. When he touched the impurities, tiny bits of them broke off and went into his mana, which began the downward spiral of his mana deteriorating. But what if he didn't touch the impurities?

Rhys turned his focus on Trash Intent. It gripped an object and filled it with mana, reforming it or holding its shape according to how it was meant to be, or perhaps how the object itself longed to be. The intent itself touched the object, and consequently, touched everything inside the object.

But what if it didn't? He could see the impurities and his mana without touching them. Using his aura, he could even watch from inside the potion bottle without risking his mana. What if he projected an aura around the trash when he used his intent on it? That way, the mana would be protected, and not only that, but he'd be able to sense things around the trash, rather than simply reshape it and support it with mana.

Rhys took some of his aura and wrapped it around the potion, but that did nothing. The potion was already within his aura. Intentionally wrapping it just meant he paid more attention to it. It didn't change anything about the Intent itself.

He frowned. No, that was wrong. That was *his* aura. He wanted the trash to have an aura. Like how he gave the trash intent, he also wanted to give it aura.

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He reached out and felt the Intent, sensed every part of it. The Intent skill was formed from mana. His mana had an aura, so surely the Intent skill had an aura as well. He focused on it, searching it for any sign of an aura. The amount of mana actively in the Intent was so small that he could barely feel it, especially on an object this small, but it was there. It was there, and he could feel it. If he could feel it, did it not have an aura?

Using his aura, he examined the potion closely. He could feel it. Feel its mana. And there—was that it? A fuzzy sensation just over the surface of the mana. Like drifting his hand past a sweater in winter and feeling the static electricity against his palm. Right there! From the outside, he sensed the aura.

*Now, from the inside.*

He turned back to his Intent skill and focused on it. He put his all into it, until he wasn't just observing the Intent, he was the Intent. He surrounded the potion vial and kept it intact. Bits of himself broke off, but that was fine. He was being fed by the great source, the beginning point of all mana. The pieces he lost would be replaced.

His whole world was the glass within him and the great source. There was nothing else. Nothing else mattered.

*No, a little voice interrupted. It does matter!*

He tried to push it away, but it wouldn't shut up. With a sigh, he turned his attention inward. Something sludgy churned within the glass. It was this that tried to invade him, destroy him, devour him. This was what took the pieces of him.

It hadn't bothered him a moment ago, but now, facing it, he was filled with rage. Something took pieces of him? Unacceptable! The great source had limited resources, and mana potions cost money! He couldn't simply sit back and allow himself to deteriorate.

The thing he'd used to sense the sludge lit up in his mind. It was weak, but it was there, the same as it was present in all things with mana—an aura. For the first time, he forcibly extended it. He used the aura to surround himself, firming it up and intentionally emitting it at a high enough power to keep the sludge from touching him. The sludge tried to eat away at the aura, but found itself facing a far more difficult task. The aura

was nothing but energy, rather than pseudo-physical mana, and it couldn't corrupt energy.

He smiled, pleased at a job well done, and let his awareness slip away.

Rhys jolted back awake. He blinked, startled. *Did I... uh, insert my consciousness into the Trash Intent?* No, it wasn't just that. He pulled up his skill sheet, already suspecting what he'd see.

Sure enough, at the very bottom:

## **Enlightenment 2 > 3**

### **Trash Aura**

He laughed aloud, running his hair back. A level in Enlightenment and a new skill? He'd really made great gains here today. He stood and dusted himself off, then drew out a new vial, used Trash Intent and Trash Aura on it—though using two intents at once made black spots appear on his vision, and almost drained his remaining mana in one go—and poured the potion into the new, uncorrupted vial. Better to reinforce a whole, well-shaped vial than try to keep a near-shattered one intact.

He canceled his Trash Intent on the first vial. Without Trash Intent to keep it together, it instantly shattered. Shimmering grains of glass rained down. Rhys saluted the fallen soldier, then turned. For all that this was great training, he couldn't keep Trash Intent up forever, not to mention that if he got caught off guard right now, he'd immediately be in deadly danger without the ability to call on Trash Intent to defend himself. It was time for another trip to Sorden. Surely the potion master had specialized vials meant to contain highly corrosive materials.

Rhys packed up his cauldron and the ash, separating out a small portion of the ash for himself. He looked at the potion longingly. He wanted nothing more than to take a sip and see what happened, but he knew better. He hadn't managed to actually shield his mana against the corrosion, he'd only figured out how to use Trash Aura on top of Trash Intent to prevent his Trash Intent from decaying. That probably wasn't a good route for him to keep his general mana from getting corroded, so he still needed to work that one out. Plus, the danger he sensed from this potion far exceeded the danger he'd felt from any other source of impurities. He wasn't going to carelessly drink it. He needed to work up to it, which meant he needed a container to store it in until he was ready to use it.

It was a short trip down the mountain despite his roundabout route to prevent anyone from seeing him exit the upper peak. He headed straight to Sorden, not wanting to risk a negative encounter on the way there. Though at this point, he wasn't sure who would attack him. He'd countered the low-tier Triple J Crew bullies, and the higher-tier bullies of Cynog's underlings.

Cynog himself was still a serious threat, but he was pretty sure the man wouldn't come after him in public again, between the potential that Rhys might actually land a good hit in front of everyone, and the opposite potential that Rhys would simply play the victim in front of everyone, and reap everyone's sympathy while moving Cynog firmly into the position of the worst bully in the school. It was a rock and a hard place for Cynog's reputation. Either he got badly hit by a low-Tier student and humiliated in front of everyone, or he beat up a defenseless low-Tier student for the second time and became even more of an asshole in everyone's mind than he already was.

In any case, no one interrupted his journey back down the mountain. He reached Sorden's room in record time and pushed open the rear door, peeking inside. This one opened near the front of the room where Sorden lectured, so he only poked his head in for a moment before retreating again when he saw she was busy lecturing. It didn't stop Alum from glaring fiercely at him, not that he cared. Quietly, he wished the boy well at creating yet more toxic potions so that he could still gain by absorbing the scum. Alum's potions had been great training. If not for them, he probably wouldn't have survived the fumes from boiling down the more powerful impurities. In fact, if Alum could make something *really* toxic right now, that'd be a huge help. The potion he'd just brewed was a big step up in impurities. He was pretty sure he could handle it, but it wasn't going to be easy. It'd be much easier to absorb a few toxic Alum potions, then try the potion again.

He turned to walk away, only for the door to open. Sorden stepped out. "Can I help you?"

"Er, aren't you in the middle of class?" Rhys asked.

She waved her hand. "Do you have a new batch of herbs?"

"I do, and also... I don't know if you'll be interested in this at all, but..." He drew out the purified ash and handed it over.

Sorden squinted at it, examining it. She dipped a finger in the ash and sniffed it, then touched it to her tongue. Her eyes flew open, and she jumped back. "Is that Silver-White Ash?"

"It's purified ash," Rhys replied honestly.

"Silver-White Ash is any kind of ash that's reached a certain threshold of purity," she replied distractedly. She looked at Rhys. "You're selling this, then? And herbs?"

"And herbs, yes. They might be a bit dry since it's been a while since I plucked them, but they should still be usable." Rhys drew them out as well.

Sorden stored the ash and herbs away. "What do you want? Gold? Something more?"

“Gold is nice, but also... do you have any containers—bottles, vials, whatever, it doesn’t matter—that can hold something highly corrosive?”

“Glass should work,” she replied.

“It corrodes glass,” Rhys said.

Sorden’s brows rose. Intrigue crossed her face. “May I ask what it is you need to store?”

Rhys pressed his lips together. “It would be too much to explain, but just understand that it’s something highly corrosive, destructive and dangerous. I need something that can store it for longer than... say, ten seconds for unprotected glass?”

She put a finger on her chin, thinking, then nodded. “I think I have something. Let me finish class, and I’ll find it for you.”

“Of course. Thank you,” Rhys replied.

“No, thank you. I’ll still owe you a fair bit of gold after this, so don’t go anywhere,” she said, and vanished back into the classroom.

Rhys nodded to her back. With nothing to do, he lounged outside the classroom. A few minutes in, he drew out the potion. He was keeping it in his robes, within easy reaching distance in case he needed to transfer it again. The low-grade headache from keeping Trash Intent up for a prolonged period resurfaced with nothing to distract him, pounding against his temples. He sipped a mana potion to push the pain and the mana drain back—not from the potion corroding his mana, but from simply keeping Trash Intent active for this long—and lifted the potion to eye level, getting a good look again.

The impurities ate away at his Trash Aura, but the Trash Intent simply replenished its aura. It took far less mana than keeping Trash Intent active, too. He grinned. He’d caught them, and bottled them, and soon, they’d be all his.

*Just wait.* As soon as he had a permanent bottle that he didn’t need to constantly enhance, he’d try out these impurities.

Sorden must have been almost done with class, because she emerged a bare fifteen minutes later and gestured. “Follow me.”

Rhys nodded. Smiling wide, he followed after the potion instructor, unaware of Alum glaring a hole in him from far behind.

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

## Chapter 39. Bottle

Sorden led the way to her house. Rhys followed close behind, familiar with the route from the previous time he'd handed herbs over. She had him wait outside her house while she vanished inside and emerged with a white enameled bottle. A faint aura of mana emanated from the bottle.

"What do you think?" she asked, holding it out.

Rhys held up his potion. He tilted his head back and forth, unsure. "Do you mind if I try it out?"

"Certainly. Go ahead."

"It might destroy the bottle," Rhys warned her.

She waved her hand. "The bottle's enchanted. Nothing a Tier 1 student can brew could destroy its enchantment. If you do, I'll be impressed more than angry."

Rhys raised his brows, then shrugged. She'd said herself that she'd only be impressed. He didn't necessarily trust that, but it was worth a try.

By now, even with Trash Intent and Trash Aura, the potion vial was starting to look a little ragged. The material contained within couldn't directly degrade the vial's walls, or even the Trash Intent that enveloped them, but neither could his Trash Intent stop the gasses that welled up from its surface from interfering with the glass. Opening the cap on his bottle, he drew out the impurities and sent them into the new bottle. He deactivated his techniques on his vial and relaxed as relief flowed through him.

The new bottle held for a second. Two seconds. Three.

Sorden turned to him, beaming. "There you have it! I'm more than happy to—"

Rhys lunged just as the bottom fell out of the bottle and barely caught the impurities before they spilled onto the ground. Re-activating Trash Intent and Trash Aura, he sent the impurities back into his vial and half-smiled, half-grimaced at her. "It's really corrosive."

Sorden's jaw dropped. She stared at the enamel bottle, then at Rhys. Taking the remains of the bottle, she retreated back inside. "I'll bring out something stronger."



“Please do,” Rhys replied earnestly. He was starting to get tired of this headache, and the momentary relief he got every time he could release the combined techniques was so sweet, only for him to get slammed once more when he had to reinstate them.

She came back out with a black stone bottle. “Try this. It’s also enchanted, and it’s made of a sturdier material.”

Obediently, Rhys sent the impurities into the black bottle. This time, both he and Sorden watched it closely. It held for ten, fifteen, twenty seconds before the impurities started to seep out the sides. Rhys gestured, calling the impurities to him once more.

Sorden shook her head. She returned to her house, this time drawing out two bottles with her. One was glass, but shimmered with a faint barrier, while another was solid crystal. Without a word, she handed the barrier bottle over.

Rhys grimaced. He put the impurities inside, but almost instantly drew them back out again as the barrier popped. She traded him for the crystal, and he let the impurities touch its interior for just long enough that the crystal began to crack before he pulled them back. Back into her house, and out with another three. One after another, the bottles broke or corroded. In and out, in and out. A pile of broken bottles grew around the door.

At last, Sorden stared at the goo. “What the hell did you make?”

Rhys shrugged apologetically. “It’s a bit corrosive.”

“A bit!” She shook her head. Pushing the broken bottles aside, she straightened up and looked him up and down. “I only have one container left. If it doesn’t work, I’m out of bottles.”

Rhys pressed his lips together. “I hope it works.”

“I do, too.” She paused. “It’s my most powerful bottle. Meant to contain dangerous Tier 3 potions. If it can’t contain this, then not only do I not know what to do, but you could probably use it to find yourself a job at a high rank school as a poisonmaster.”

“It’s not a poison. I’m going to drink it. I need to, if I’m going to get stronger,” Rhys explained.

Sorden stared at him. He stared back.

She turned away. “I’m going to tell myself you’re joking. Don’t tell me if you aren’t.”

With that, she vanished into her house.

Rhys turned to the blackish-brown potion. “Why does no one ever believe me?”

The impurities churned inside the vial, searching for a way out.

There was a long pause this time, longer than any other time Sorden had gone for a bottle. When she emerged, it was with a blast of cold, stale air, as if she'd opened a cellar that had remained shut for a long, long time. She offered him a small vial.

At a glance, it was nothing special, no different from the vial he held, if a bit bigger, clunkier, and older in design. As if it were the prototype of the standard potion vial. He couldn't sense any mana in it, but it felt heavy. There was something about it, some kind of truth that he didn't understand. It felt like... like his path, but not.

His eyes widened. *Someone else's path. That's what I'm sensing.*

He turned it over in his hand, getting a sense for the shape of the path in the glass, then looked at Sorden. "Where did you find this?"

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"I traded for it from a ragged traveling salesman who claimed he found it in a secret realm. It's nothing special, but it is very durable. I've used it before to store particularly dangerous potions. If I'd known how dangerous that thing you brewed was, I would have brought it out right away... but who would expect a Tier 1 student to make something so dangerous I couldn't easily contain it?" Sorden replied, muttering the last part mostly to herself.

Rhys nodded. "A secret realm?"

"Ah, that's right. You're of mortal breeding. There's places where incredibly powerful experts have created pathways to new worlds, or folded the world to prevent access, or even created their own worlds within artifacts. Sometimes, beings vastly more powerful than us can even spawn secret realms within their bodies as they decay. There's a vast variety of sources. What ties them all together, is that unless you know how to access the world inside, you're unlikely to ever encounter it. Hence, 'secret realm.'" She looked at the bottle. "I've never had the fortune to visit one that wasn't already plundered myself. The larger sects and schools usually pin down the valuable ones and only allow weaker schools like ours to visit after they've already taken all the loot out. Some incredibly rich schools even possess secret realms for training, or hold events within them, but you're unlikely to see a school like that around here."

Rhys raised his brows a bit at Sorden's outright admission that their school was weak. It wasn't startling—he'd long since come to terms with it, in fact—but he wasn't expecting such an honest assessment by one of the school's own staff. *I guess I can consider myself someone Sorden trusts, if she speaks so frankly with me.*

His head panged, and he turned back to the task at hand. Lifting his hand, he called forth the potion from the bottle. The blackish gunk swirled in midair, then plunged into the new bottle. Slamming the cap home, Rhys held his breath. Sorden leaned in, watching closely.

Nothing happened. The bottle easily contained the impurities. Not a crack nor deterioration of any kind appeared.

Sorden breathed out. She stepped back. "I was starting to worry I wouldn't be able to return your kindness. There! A bottle that holds that dangerous potion of yours."

Rhys nodded. "Thank you."

He turned to walk away, but Sorden caught him by the shoulder. "You're not going to use that on someone, are you?"

"Only myself," Rhys promised her.

She chuckled. "Stop joking."

Rhys held her gaze, eyes earnest.

Sorden pressed her lips together, then waved her hand. "As long as you don't use it on anyone else. I'd better not lose my herb provider, though."

"You won't," Rhys pledged. He had no intent to kill himself. He'd have to be careful about applying this potion, but no progress was made without danger.

She looked at him for a moment, then sighed. "I suppose you could have already ended yourself, if you meant to do such a thing. Be careful."

Rhys saluted. He walked off, putting the decayed potion bottle he'd had to use his intent and aura on in his robes for later examination. If he could figure out how it had decayed despite his efforts, he might be able to prevent it in the future. And maybe, one day, he could even create a bottle that held hints of a truth in it, like the bottle that contained the potion now.

But first, it was time to train.

He returned to his usual cave to train. It might have been safer on the upper peak, behind the barrier, but only from the other low-Tier students. There was that beast he'd sensed, and of course, he knew nothing about any of the high-Tier mages on the upper peak. If one of them was a Cynog-style bully, he might get turned to sludge for daring to practice on the upper peak. Better the devil he knew than the devil he didn't.

Settling in on a piece of patched furniture, he considered the impurities within the bottle closely. The sludge emanated a deadly dangerous aura. He couldn't drink it, the way he'd drunk the other potion. In fact, it would be better if he could slowly ramp up to this potion. The only problem was, with how dispersed the impurities were in the higher-Tier trash, there was no such thing as a slow ramp up. He jumped up here, or he didn't advance at all.

Still, there were safer ways to absorb things than simply drinking it. A survival guide he'd read online came to mind. It had been describing how to test new plants, to see if they were edible, but the same idea applied here.

Rhys uncapped the bottle. *Step 1: apply a little to your skin to test for irritation.* Carefully tipping the bottle, he allowed a single drop to contact the back of his hand.

The black liquid sat on top of his skin for a single moment before it sucked into his flesh. Black veins spread from the point of contact, twisting through his skin and biting into his veins. His blood darkened, and his mana passages corroded. Black-tainted mana flowed from the point of contact toward his heart, darkening everything it passed. From the single point, a black mark raced up his arm, visibly growing longer.

*Shit.* Rhys plunged inside himself. He closed off his veins and mana passages, but the taint kept spreading—slower, but it kept moving, oozing through the walls of the passages. He searched for two impurities to ignite, desperate to find them before they spread too far.

From the smooth flow of his normal mana passages, he plunged into the darkness of the impurity-corrupted passages. There, he latched on to one, then a second impurity. He rubbed the two together. *Come on. Ignite!*

Nothing happened.

Rhys gritted his teeth and rubbed them faster and faster, but nothing continued to happen. These were not ordinary impurities, and they wouldn't be lit by ordinary means. Behind him, the impurities continued to spread, tainting his impurity-resistant body. If not for his Impurity Resistance, it probably would have already spread through his body.

*Ignite! How can I make them ignite?* He'd been rubbing the impurities together like two sticks, but these impurities wouldn't ignite. But that was a primitive way to start a fire. Humanity had come up with so many ways to light fires since then. Like matches, or electricity...

His eyes widened. That was it! He gripped one impurity and forced mana into it. The impurity quickly reached capacity, and then it started to glow. Heat emanated from the impurity. The black mark spread further. It reached his shoulder and climbed toward his chest. Rhys focused on the one impurity in his hands, refusing to let that distract him. More mana. More. The impurity refused to absorb any more, but he poured more in

anyways. The heat grew more intense. The glow grew brighter. Rhys shoved in more mana, even as his core began to run dry. This was it. All or nothing.

A flame burst out from the top of the impurity. Rhys' eyes widened, but just for a moment. Quickly, he grabbed up the impurity he'd been rubbing together earlier and held it close to this one. The fire spread, and spread, and spread. It raced up his arm, chasing after the impurity as it coursed through him. Rhys pushed impurities into it, encouraging its spread. In a few moments, it had caught up, and all the impurities burned, no longer progressing through him.

Mana poured out from the impurities. Not as much as he was used to, but it was denser and more pure than any mana he'd experienced. He had the feeling that this mana would let him use twice as many spells for half the quantity, and if that was the case, then the mana he got from one drop was about as much as an entire trash pile. It wasn't quite a sip of the previous potion, but it was one single, tiny drop. A few drops would exceed a sip of the previous potion. A sip of this would exceed his current mana capacity several times over.

He opened his eyes, breathing evenly as he circulated this new mana. Now that he knew how to burn these impurities, he was ready. He could train while he gathered the trash, and accomplish two tasks in the same time. It was time to head back to the upper peak and dig through the trash for clues about the teacher he'd been assigned to watch.

Rhys let an evil grin cross his face. *That's right. It's stalker time.*

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

## Chapter 40. Digging Through the Trash

Rhys dripped three dots of potion on his hand. That was all the more he could handle right now, without having to vent excess mana. As fun as excess mana was, it didn't do anything for him. Didn't help rebuild or strengthen his body, expand his core or mana tolerance, anything. Three dots meant he could practice handling more impurities, strengthen his body, and expand his core, all without losing anything... or at least, much of anything. He glanced up. Black smoke still billowed up behind him, but now it was tinner, and more concentrated. Even darker than before, to the point it almost looked like a trail of ink instead of smoke. It would give away his position, but then, he was allowed to be up here. Even if the upper tier staff found out he was here, he had completely legitimate permission to be here.

He gathered the trash into a pile as usual, but now he worked around the outskirts of the upper tier's central square. Any time he picked up a scrap of paper, he scanned it

for information, but obtained nothing useful. Most of what he found was receipts or lists of materials, or crumpled pill wrappers. The pill wrappers he added to his pile instinctively, and the same went for higher-tier potion vials, but for the most part, everything he found landed in the trash pile.

Dragging the melted husk of a cauldron onto the pile, he stood and dusted off his hands, gazing upward. At the top of the central square sat Aquari's house. That was where he was going to find the most information about Aquari and her decisions, to include her thoughts on this new loaned teacher. *Why not go straight to the source?* She'd agreed to let him pick up the trash, so it wasn't like she'd stop him. He'd avoided her house on instinct, because she was the most powerful and could rescind his invitation if she sensed anything awry... but she was also the one person whose notes he really wanted to read.

*Fuck it.* He'd come up here to gain access to the trash, yes, but he also needed to find out more about the teacher. If he kept flitting about the edges of the area, he'd never figure anything out. Putting his hesitations behind him, Rhys marched up to Aquari's residence—and stared. His jaw dropped.

He stood in her yard, though 'yard' was a crude word for the space he stood in. It was a massive garden, complete with hedges, ponds, fountains, and statuary. It stood outside a manor that would have put most nobles to shame. Fine brick walls, tall towers, and an ornate façade. Picture windows gazed down the mountain, and marble pillars glittered in the sun. The house itself was a work of art, and he could only see the exterior.

The only problem was the absolute mountain of trash that surrounded it and filled it. Drifts of papers pressed up against the windows. Bits of broken furniture tangled in the fountains, and ruined clothing awkwardly draped the statues.

Rhys raised his brows. *That's a task and a half.*

On the other hand, there were so many papers. So much she'd thrown out, without even thinking about it. The information he craved was almost certainly there. A smile spread across Rhys' face, and he rubbed his hands together.

It was time to get down to work.

He started in the garden. Abandoning his old trash pile for a moment, he built a new one just far enough outside her manor that it shouldn't bother her. After all, there was no need to lug her garbage across hill and dale to his old pile. There was enough here for him to build a whole new one—no, several new ones!

Almost immediately, the old trash pile started sticking in his mind. He looked at his new trash pile, but the old one loomed large in his heart, calling to him, crying out. Why had he abandoned it? Why had he piled it all up, only to give it false hope? Rhys grimaced,



then ran to his whole pile and dragged it over to the new one. It took him five loads, but it was worth it. *No trash left behind!*

Tossed on top of the small amount of Aquari's garden he'd cleared, it was already enough to count as a full pile. He set it aside and started a new one. *I don't need a new potion right now, and I don't need to attract Aquari's attention until I'm done cleaning her place.* It would take him days to work through the potion he had, especially with Less is More kicking in. There was no rush on burning the trash and filtering out the impurities. As to the second point, he'd watched enough hoarder shows to know that hoarders often weren't happy to have someone clean up their garbage. They were attached to it, for whatever reason, and they didn't want to let it go. When someone's ancient memaw started hitting the people taking her trash out, the worst that might happen was a happy ride in a car with flashy lights for memaw. When a high-Tier mage got angry about someone taking her trash out...

Rhys took a deep breath and let it out. *Yeah. I'll just be elsewhere when she finds out.*

He had two hopes about cleaning up Aquari's hoarder stash. One, she'd let him in to clean up the trash. That meant she acknowledged it was a problem, even if only incidentally or subconsciously. Consequently, when she saw her cleaned up space, there was a good chance she might be mad immediately, but then pleased with his hard work. Two, he was here to figure out what the deal was with the visiting teacher. Even if Aquari decided to be mad and became violent, it would be worth it, as long as he knew what he was in for. He had Az to vouch for him, so not only could he hide in the library, but as long as he reminded Aquari that the cat was stronger than her, she would likely hesitate to physically punish him.

If she banned him from the upper peak after he burned her trash, it would be a pity, but... He looked over his shoulder, at the two piles of trash he'd already made, then turned around to stare at the garden. He could barely tell where he'd picked up trash. There was so much trash in the garden alone, let alone the drifts of papers and garbage in her house. He'd have enough impurities to brew hundreds of potions by the time he was done with Aquari's house. By then, he'd almost certainly have enough potions to train himself up to the level that he could begin to absorb the toxic pit's impurities.

Right now, he was still struggling to absorb drops on his skin. The potions he made from this trash were incredibly potent. Sipping them was still a dream. But that was exactly what he needed if he wanted to step up to the powerful impurities in the pit. And not only that, but lots of them. One potion was never enough. Dozens, hundreds—and all this trash would give him just that.

But first, he had to gather the trash. And to gather the trash, he had to clean Aquari's house, which was also where he would find the details of that teacher who he was supposed to watch.



The author's tale has been misappropriated; report any instances of this story on Amazon.

*Let's get started.*

It was slow going. Rhys dripped potion on his hand in between dragging the trash into piles. The excess energy he poured into his body, steadily forging it stronger and stronger, using the mana to hammer his muscles and bones stronger in the same way a blacksmith would pound metal at a forge. The whole time, he kept piling up trash, setting the piles up in a neat grid. He filled up one line with piles, then added another, five piles deep for each line. When he found suitable cloths that could let the smoke out but keep the impurities in, he tied them up in the trees over the piles in preparation to burn them.

The sound of rain broke his concentration. He paused, wiping his brow, and stared up at the sky. Clear blue skies, a few fluffy white clouds to interrupt the deep blue. Rhys furrowed his brows. *Why...?*

"You there. You dare clean the Schoolmaster's property?"

Despite the caustic words, they came from a gentle, fluid female voice, and were delivered without any bite, but instead, almost a joking lilt. Rhys lowered his eyes to find a young lady standing before him. She was a few years older than him, fully grown but still young. Eighteen or nineteen, if he had to guess. Long dark hair hung in flowing curls to her waist. A soft face held full lips and drooping, peaceful eyes that were so nearly closed they appeared to be shut when paired with her thick, dark lashes. She carried a black umbrella and wore layered, loose white robes that fluttered around her limply, wanting to fly but unable to.

Unable to, because she was sopping wet.

Rain poured from the underside of her black umbrella, absolutely soaking her. Her hair dripped with water. Rivulets ran down her face. If not for her perfectly placid expression, he might have thought she was squinting against the rain. Her wet robes clung to a mature body, one which had Rhys locking his eyes on her face and her face alone.

He might love trash, he might *be* trash, but he drew the line at ogling a woman to her face. If she were a piece of art or an animated character, he would have spent hours lavishing himself on her beauty, waxing eloquent on the finer points of appreciating a wet-robes character on the appropriate forums, and futilely begging the studios to put out figures of her wet-robes form, knowing that the studio had already commissioned every possible figure they could to squeeze the maximum money out of degenerates like himself. But she was a real person. A human being. As someone who had been the subject of stares due to his unfortunate figure in his first life, he knew how bad it felt to be gazed at with disgust and ill intent. He could only imagine how much worse it would be for a woman to be constantly stared at with lascivious eyes.

Of course, she had chosen to wear white and carry a raining umbrella, but until he was explicitly invited to look at her, he intended to avert his gaze. That, and he had already felt a twinge from his fifteen-year-old body that indicated everything was in working order and ready to go, and he had absolutely no desire to embarrass himself on his first day on the upper peak, in front of the Schoolmaster's mansion and everything.

A second of staring at her face and nothing else later, Rhys belatedly realized she'd asked him a question. He cleared his throat, using it as an excuse to reset his thoughts. "I'm not. That is, I'm not cleaning. I'm collecting the trash."

"Is picking up the trash not cleaning?" she put to him.

Rhys opened his mouth, then shut it. He tilted his head, considering. *Was* picking up the trash cleaning? It did have the effect of cleaning up an area, but he didn't set out to clean. His intent was to gather the trash for himself. It had the side effect of cleaning up an area, but that wasn't what he set out to do. In fact, his trash-gathering was selfish, for the intent of strengthening himself, where cleaning was altruistic, so he couldn't claim to be cleaning at all, but equally, to claim to *not* be cleaning when the results were so clearly obvious. Whether he did it selfishly or not, he picked up the trash and left a clean area behind. His intent didn't matter. Others could enjoy the trash-free space that he had created all the same as though he'd set out to create a clean space.

Something deep within his core trembled, and Rhys touched a hand to it. The answer of this was important, deeply so. But he didn't have an answer right now.

She chuckled. "Don't give yourself a backlash trying to figure it out. If you're picking up the trash, then pick it up out of her fountain."

Rhys turned. Aquari's fountain stood in the center of the garden. It was a grand thing, multiple tiers tall, thigh-deep on the lowest level, and at least ten meters in radius. Like the rest of the garden, it was strewn with trash. A broken chair dangled from its top, and drifts of soaked papers and leaves clung to the walls. The water itself reeked of algae, stillness, and rot, a dark murky brown from all the filth accumulated in it.

"Why?" he asked.

"I want to bathe in it," she replied, as though it were the most natural thing for her to want, and the most natural thing for him to wish to jump to her every desire.

"Uh huh." Rhys turned away, back to his dry trash. The wet trash wasn't high priority. He'd have to wait for it to dry, so there was no reason to waste his time on picking it up early when he had plenty of dry trash to work with right now. Once he ran out of dry trash, he'd get to it, but for now, it was a waste of time.

"You don't want to see me bathe in it?" the wet girl asked, shocked.

"You're already wet," Rhys pointed out.

"So you're enjoying the sights without offering anything in return!" she replied, hugging her arms around herself in mock protest.

Rhys carried on ignoring her. He knelt, scooping up a big pile of trash, and carried it to his grid.

She stood there for a few moments, arms wrapped around herself and protest on her face, until she realized he really was ignoring her. At that, she immediately changed tactics. "What do you want?"

"Hmm?"

"You must be up here for a reason," she prodded. "I know much of the goings-on up here. I can tell you anything you want to know. When Aquari bathes, for example..."

Rhys gave her an unimpressed look at that. He wasn't *that* excited to see their asshole of a Schoolmaster naked. Some people might get off on that, but he wasn't really the type to get excited over seeing someone he didn't like much naked. Besides, the risk of getting murdered was way too high for him to ever consider peeking, especially when he didn't even want to see the subject in question naked.

"What *do* you want?" she asked.

He sighed. It wasn't as if he was against cleaning the fountain. In fact, he intended to eventually, so he might as well get rewarded for work he was going to do anyways. He just wasn't sure if he wanted this woman to know what he was up here for.

*Ah, what's the risk? All she wants is for me to clean the fountain.* He nodded toward Aquari's residence. "I've been assigned to watch the guest teacher who's coming soon. I want to know more about them, and their school, and their school's relation with ours. I figured Aquari's papers would be the best place to find that, but..."

He gazed at her house. Deep behind the windows, a stack of papers collapsed into the wild drifts.

The girl nodded. "I know where she puts her latest papers. That would be the best place to start. If you clean the fountain, I'll point you in the right direction, And in the meantime, to show my good intent, I can give you the background that I know between our two sects."

Rhys nodded. He turned and offered the girl his hand. "It's a deal. I'm Rhys, nice to meet you."

A cool, wet hand slid into his, soft and slippery as an eel. "Lira. It's good to meet you."

“Are you one of those water spirits that lures people to their doom?” Rhys guessed, remembering Ev’s joke.

She smiled. Sharp teeth appeared between her lips. “Would you believe that those stories are mostly myths?”

Rhys smiled back, suddenly a little worried. *Am I going to be safe? Do I need an adult?*

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