

Chapter 41. Small Favors for Wet Women

Rhys made his way over to the fountain, gently pushing the other trash out of his way. At the fountain, he surveyed the problem. The large trash was no issue. For the most part, he could fish it out with a few sticks, some shimmying, and a little Trash Intent. It was the smaller trash that was troublesome. He didn't really know what he was going to do about the leaves and the papers floating around.

The ones nearest the edge weren't too bad. He scooped them out like how he plucked out the big items. His hands got a little wet, but that wasn't a big problem. The problem was, not all of them were within arm's reach. Some of them were up against the central pillars and on the far side of the filthy water that filled the fountain, completely out of his reach. Wade in? He'd rather not. Build a net? A better idea, but it would be clumsy and hard to operate, especially with the sub-par materials he had to start out with. Trash Intent could only go so far. He could, at his most powerful operation, draw out the ideal state of the trash at its strongest possible moment, but if he was working with soft wire to start out with, there was no amount of Trash Intent that would make that wire stiff enough to hold the mounds of heavy, wet leaves that had accumulated in the fountain.

Rhys considered for a moment, then looked at Lira and her constantly-raining umbrella. "Would you mind standing in the fountain?"

"Yes. It's filthy," she said.

"How about standing by the edge of the fountain so the water pours into the fountain?" Rhys suggested.

She considered, then nodded. "I'm amenable to this."

As per his instruction, she stood at the edge of the fountain and held her umbrella on that side, putting as much of it over the edge of the fountain as she could. Rain pattered down into the fountain. Thanks to the water being added, the still water of the fountain began to flow. A gentle current slowly began to push the leaves and papers floating in the water to the far side of the fountain. At the same time, the dirt in the fountain flowed out as fresh water flowed in.

Rhys put his hand in the water, testing it for impurities. There were some, but no more than would be found in average water or earth. By now, impurities at that level were meaningless to him. Didn't spark any excitement. He called them to him anyways, and they responded, flowing through the water into his hand, where he stored them in his

core until the next set of impurities he was going to burn. He could have thrown them into the furnace of currently-burning impurities, but he'd only be able to use them to reinforce his core right now, and they were far too weak to allow them to strengthen his core. Better to use them in a weaker, more delicate part of his body, where he could still use weak impurities.

Lira frowned. She looked at his hand. "Why?"

"Huh?"

"You called the impurities to yourself. Why? You'll weaken yourself that way," she said.

"Oh... not for me. Don't worry about it!" Rhys smiled and gave her a thumbs-up.

She narrowed her eyes in suspicion, but said nothing.

The floating trash finally reached the edge of the fountain. Rhys scooped it out and added it to the pile of drying trash by the fountain. When it was all clean, he hopped up onto the fountain's rim and jumped to the second tier of the fountain. This one was shallower and smaller, and it was easier to gather the leaves and trash out of it. From there, he simply reached up to the third and tallest tier, quickly clearing it as well. He hopped down. Landing on the ground, he tossed the trash into the pile, then nodded at Lira. "Clean enough?"

She sniffed. "Good enough for now."

Lira lowered her umbrella and stepped into the fountain. She closed it, and as it squeezed shut, the rain cut off. The umbrella spun, retracting into its handle. For the first time, Rhys got a good look at the handle, and he realized it was a loop, about bracelet-width, if a bit round and wide. She slipped the retracted umbrella around her wrist and lowered herself into the water, relaxing backward with a relieved sigh. Water flowed from her body, clear water that replenished the dark water. Thanks to her producing water, water slopped out of the sides of the fountain continuously, and the water in the fountain slowly grew cleaner. "So nice."

"I cleaned your fountain, so where's my information?" Rhys asked.

"Where's your manners?" she asked, tutting.

"Please," Rhys added.

Lira rolled over. A lock of hair fell in front of her face, and she pushed it behind her ear. Sliding smoothly to the edge of the fountain, she draped her arms over the edge of the fountain. She lifted her finger and pointed up at the mansion, at the upper right window. Like many of the other windows, paper piled up against the window. "Up there. That's her office. Anything recent would still be in there."

Rhys smiled, then sighed. It was a lot of paper. He'd take forever to get through all that.

A second later, he widened his eyes and grinned. *Unless...*

"What's that look for?" Lira asked. Without waiting for a reply, she let go of the edge and rolled back over.

"Nothing, nothing." Rhys wiped the water on his robes and headed over to the piles. He drew out his cauldron. He didn't need another potion yet, but he could always use more potions. Better to have too many than not enough.

He set the piles with the cloths over them on fire. Without Trash Intent, he couldn't capture all the impurities, but he could capture enough to make it worth it anyways. The first pile he turned into a potion, only to pause, looking at the black gunk. *I have nowhere to put this.*

Rhys pulled out his potion bottle. From all the drops he'd been putting on his hand as he worked, he'd managed to absorb a quarter of the potion, but he still had a long way to go. He couldn't fit an entire second potion into the bottle, nor did he have any other bottles strong enough to put such an extremely caustic substance into. He looked at the potion bottle, then took a deep breath. *I'll never get stronger if I never push myself.* With that, he lifted the potion to his lips and took a sip.

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Instantly, impurities ravaged him. His throat tore open. His stomach began to melt. Rhys ignited them as quickly as he could and surged all the power to his regeneration skill. That skill struggled, barely able to keep up. His wounds began to heal, but too slowly compared to the rate at which his organs deteriorated. Blood poured through his body internally, bruising his stomach horrific colors. Instinctively, he clutched his throat, resisting the urge to gag. It hurt, burned like acid. Everything inside him ached fiercely.

Poison Resist 3 > 8

Impurity Resist 13 > 15

Acid Resist 8 > 10

Pain Resist 40 > 41

Self-Regeneration 19 > 22

For all that his resist skills had leveled up, it didn't do him any good if this poison melted his organs. Rhys' body rapidly failed. He dropped to his knees, his strength leaving him.

I can't go on like this. I'll die. But what...

Lira sat up in the water. She watched him from the fountain, her brow creased in mind concern.

Rhys shook his head. He couldn't give up now. Not yet. He clenched his hand. If he couldn't regenerate fast enough, he'd die. If his skills didn't let him regenerate fast enough, then he'd have to manually regenerate himself!

He delved into himself. Impurities flowed all around him, burning up even as they poisoned his body. The burning process unleashed all the energy within them and purified their impurities, leaving only clean energy behind. Clean energy that he could freely shape into anything. Compared to mana or any other source of energy he'd encountered so far in this world, the energy that emerged when impurities burned was far more responsive to his will. So he reached out and clutched that energy, dragging it to him. It was his, now, and he'd do what he wanted with it!

He first turned to his throat. Dragging the energy forth, he forcibly fused it into the remaining undamaged cells there, reinforcing them. They grew stronger, more durable, more able to absorb impurities and more able to resist the impurities' damaging taint. He pushed them, using the energy from the burning impurities to force these more durable cells to replicate. The more durable cells spread, and he rebuilt his throat, reconstructing it from the inside out. Every time he ran into a new set of cells, he repeated the process, until he reached his stomach.

His stomach was a mess, leaking acid and impurities everywhere. It was riddled with more holes than a sieve, its internal and external structure ravaged by the impurities. All the other organs below it cried out in pain as its acid damaged them.

I was wondering why Acid Resist leveled up. It wasn't just because the impurities potion was too dangerous; it was because his own organs were damaging themselves.

Rhys dove in. Once more, he reinforced his stomach with the once-impure energy, then schooled those cells to replicate and replace the weak cells that had come before. Rather than simply fix it from the top down, as he had his throat, he patched the holes first, cutting off any new acid from escaping, then pushed the new reinforced cells to replace the weak, old cells.

This whole process took an immense amount of mana. Each cell he created anew required as much mana as one of the initial trash piles could produce, thanks to how incredibly resilient he was forced to make each cell in order to prevent the impurity potions from destroying them. Before he was halfway done with his stomach, the sip of the potion he'd taken was already running dry.

Rhys lifted the potion to his lips without hesitation, his eyes blazing with resolve. Only one way to solve that problem!

“Are you sure about that?” Lira asked from the fountain, now deeply concerned. “That thing’s killing you, you know that, right?”

He didn’t even hear her. The potion flowed down his throat once more. This time, it destroyed little on the way down. Rhys grinned. The little it destroyed only showed him where he hadn’t fully strengthened his cells! He welcomed the trial by fire. If his cells weren’t strong enough to hold up to the potion, then he’d simply have to make them even stronger!

He finished refining his throat and quickly moved on to his stomach. It was leaking once more, but once more, he patched the holes. He worked more quickly here than on his throat, since every moment he didn’t have a complete stomach, all his other organs took damage. As a result, the cells he created were less resilient than his throat’s cells.

But these are only the first batch. As soon as the cells were barely able to hold the burning impurities without dying, he deepened his focus on them. He pushed them full of mana and rebuilt them, then spread the rebuilt cells through his stomach.

The impurities began to burn down. Rhys took stock of his internal state. His stomach had more-or-less finished regenerating, but the rest of his organs still suffered, injured by the impurities and his own stomach acid.

Why stop now? Rhys took another sip of the potion. He shored up the few cells of his stomach and throat that died under the next sip of potion, then drew the rest of the energy forth. He faced his organs and threw the energy at them. It was time to manually regenerate his organs. They’d all be stronger, by the time he was done with this potion!

One sip after another, Rhys drank the potion. One batch of impurities at a time, he strengthened his organs. Intestines, kidneys, liver, bladder, pancreas, every organ he could name and some he couldn’t—he strengthened them all, one at a time, pouring mana into them to reinforce their resilience and enhance their natural properties.

At last, the potion bottle came empty. Rhys gazed within himself, looking over his strengthened organs. He no longer faced any danger from drinking the potion. It should be easier to absorb it now. He still had the problem of only owning a single potion vial strong enough to hold these potions, but that was a topic for future study... if he could even copy the potion bottle in the first place. There was something about it. A hint of someone else’s path. If that path was why this simple bottle was so strong, then he wasn’t sure he could recreate it at all.

But I won’t know until I try.

Rhys called the potion out of the cauldron and into the now-empty bottle. He tied up the ash and sent it into his storage ring, then turned and faced Aquari’s mansion. He was a bit tired from absorbing that potion, a little worn out, his focus frayed. It would be dangerous to keep drinking the potion in this state of exhaustion.

But it wouldn't be dangerous to go leaf through some papers and level up his Speed Reading, while also searching for information on that teacher—his real goal coming up here.

Or my secondary goal, at least, Rhys admitted to himself. His real goal was to get strong enough that no one could take anything away from him, least of all his precious trash, so the trash was of course his primary goal. Still, he was up here at least partially because of the papers and the ability to know more about his upcoming task, so he figured he might as well.

He turned. "I should go get Az."

Mew.

A soft body brushed against his ankles. He looked down. A small tuxedo cat with long legs wound around his legs, gazing up at him with unreadable amber eyes. It—or rather, *he* sat down, still looking at Rhys, then lifted a paw and began grooming himself.

"How'd you get past the barrier if you aren't even supposed to be here?" Rhys asked.

The cat mewed again and stood on his hind legs, stretching its paws high up his leg and extending its spine as far as it could. Understanding his demand, Rhys picked him up.

"It's surprisingly easy to evade human barriers, if you know what you're doing," Lira offered.

Rhys looked at her, idly petting Az. The tuxedo cat curled up in his arms, purring in contentment. "Are you also not supposed to be here?"

She bared her sharp teeth at him in a sort of grin and rolled back over to float in the fountain once more.

Dammit, why is this mountain crawling with creatures that aren't supposed to be here? Rhys sighed to himself and shook his head. It wasn't his problem. Aquari was the one who wasn't running a tight enough ship. He made a mental note not to admit that he'd cleaned up the fountain for Lira's sake, and turned toward Aquari's mansion.

"Let's go organize some files," he declared.

The library cat in his arms let out a ferocious purr.

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

Chapter 42. Files and Cats

Rhys drew up to Aquari's mansion. It stood over him, the entryway's pillars soaring high over his head. Everything about it was designed to make him feel small. Not that he minded. He was a small lump of trash, best ignored until he wanted someone's attention. He tried the door.

Locked. A tinge of mana in the handle warned him against trying to break it open.

Rhys scowled. "No good, huh?"

Az reached out a paw from his arms and smacked the handle. A lock clicked, and the door swung open on its own.

"Well, isn't that convenient," Rhys muttered. He shrugged, looking at the potion in his robes. He could have dripped a few drops of that on the lock to melt it. If purpose-built potion bottles meant to contain the most virulent of poisons didn't work, no ordinary metal lock would hold up to it. If it did, he'd just steal the metal to make a second bottle, not that he considered such a scenario very likely. But it was better if he didn't have to destroy the lock, so he didn't protest Az's help. He'd been given permission to gather the trash, not destroy the Schoolmaster's property.

He gave a slightly guilty look at the lock as he passed. The door was locked, a clear indication she didn't want help, but she clearly needed help.

The second he stepped past the door, all his hesitation went out the window. The smell slammed him first, an absolute wall of *stench*. There was no describing it, so Rhys didn't try. His eyes watered, and his nose ran. He found himself desperately wishing for his pre-mage senses, because experiencing this stench with a mage's nose was absolute hell. *How does Aquari do it?* She had to be used to the smell to the point she couldn't smell it anymore, because as strong as her senses had to be, he couldn't imagine putting up with this reek for ten seconds, let alone living in it.

In his arms, Az turned away. His ears went flat, and he pressed his muzzle against Rhys' robes, using them as a makeshift mask. Rhys, too, lifted his robe to cover his nose. It didn't do much, but it was better than nothing.

Trash piled high in the hallways. It completely filled the floor and piled up to shoulder height. Not just papers and relatively 'clean' trash, but *everything*. Half-eaten food. Rotting plants. A small dead animal that Rhys was pretty sure had been a rat at one point, though it wasn't anything any longer. Just a puddle of brownish liquid, fur, and mold. Broken items so far gone Rhys couldn't even identify what they might have been littered the floor and stuck out of the piles at random. He wanted to take his time and go through her trash, collect everything of value that he could either restore and sell or use

Trash Intent on in battle... but now wasn't the time. First, he'd read up on the incoming teacher. Then, once he was done, he could prattle about and do all the bonus things he also wanted to do.

Slipping and sliding, Rhys struggled over the trash. Az left his arms and perched on his shoulder instead, opening Rhys to use his hands. He scrambled around on his hands and feet, barely making forward progress.

As he walked, he paid close attention to how he placed his feet on successful steps forward. Slowly, he went from having to scramble on all fours, his hands touching unsavory items of unknown providence, to moving on three limbs, to only touching the ground occasionally, until at last, he could slip and slide with enough confidence to press forward on two limbs.

Trash Step 1

That counts as a skill? Rhys shook his head. He was never sure what counted or didn't. He walked on, though it was now relatively easy to scramble over the trash.

Aquari's mansion was a mess, but at least the layout was simple. Rooms laid out to the left and right of a central grand hallway, with a staircase at the back of the grand hall that led up to the next floor. Trash piled up at the bottom of the stairs, but due to the laws of gravity, the upper half of the stairs were relatively clean. Rhys walked up them with confidence, until he stepped on what looked like a piece of paper, only for the rotten peel underneath to send the whole thing sliding out from under his foot. He activated Trash Step as powerfully as he could and pitched himself forward at the same time. His solid foot remained still, his weight swung forward, and he stomped his sliding foot back down on the same stair, having failed the upward motion but succeeded at surviving.

Claws dug pinpricks of red against his shirt. Az's tail beat against his back. The cat swayed forward and back, belatedly compensating for Rhys' motions.

"It's alright. I got it," Rhys reassured him.

Az released his claws. His tail kept batting Rhys' shoulder, though, still dissatisfied.

Rhys took the rest of the stairs with more caution. He couldn't reach the handrail, since mounds of trash colonized the edge of the stairs near the wall. If he went for the handrail, he'd have to fight against all the trash. Better to walk on the clearer parts of the stairs and take care, than battle whatever unseen gunk awaited him by the handrail.

It smelled a little better upstairs, mostly because paper mostly populated the upper floor. It piled up in snowy drifts, like a winter landscape. Az started purring, his tail smacking Rhys with a different beat. Eager, now.

“Let’s start in her office,” Rhys suggested, hurrying toward the room Lira had pointed out to him. At this rate, Az was going to jump off his shoulder and start archiving before they even got to the right room.

Az’s tail batted his shoulder impatiently. He leaned forward, pitching all his weight ahead. His back legs coiled, preparing to launch.

Rhys sped toward the correct room as fast as possible. If he didn’t get there soon, Az was absolutely going to abandon him. He knew that pose. The cat in Az was distracted and about to run off and do his own thing, unless Rhys provided additional stimulation.

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He reached the room just as Az leapt free. The cat bounded across the room, then slowed to a stalk, taking in the papers strewn over the floor with characteristic disdain. He shook his head and sneezed.

“It is dusty in here,” Rhys agreed. He glanced across the way, at the sunlight spilling in from the front of the room. He wanted to open a window, but he didn’t want to risk papers escaping.

“No worse than I’m accustomed to,” Az replied primly.

Rhys whirled. The man towered over him, back in his human form once more. He held a sheaf of papers in his hand and flicked through them with a casually bored look.

Lifting his eyes, he cocked a brow. “So? What are you looking for?”

Rhys quickly explained the situation with the guest teacher, and Az nodded. “If I come across anything like that, I’ll be sure to share it with you. Until then, though... shall we archive these papers? Separating the wheat from the chaff is important in saving historical documentation. What is unnecessary shall be burned, but what is valuable must be saved.”

“Of course,” Rhys agreed. He tipped his head as a thought occurred to him. Was it possible that the trash generated by this process might be a purer form of trash than his usual trash? He separated out the things that were valuable to him as part of his process, but he didn’t have a team of experts there to help him pick out the most valuable items from every part of trash. He was fully aware that he might be burning things that were, in fact, valuable, and it was simply due to his lack of knowledge that he failed to recognize them as valuable. That was fine for now. It wasn’t possible for him to know enough about every type of thing in the trash to pick out all the valuables, and he’d made peace with that. In the future, he intended to be able to perfectly pick treasure from trash, but for now, this was the best he could do.

If he intended to learn how to pick all treasure from trash, why not start with a clearly defined task like archiving? Especially when he had an expert in the form of Az to guide him in separating the two.

Az settled in, and Rhys sat beside him. At first, he quietly watched while Az sorted the papers, taking the papers Az handed him and adding them to the appropriate piles, as Az indicated. After a while, though, he started to get a feel for it. Letters, receipts for large items, charters and agreements—all those were important. Papers that were no more than the detritus of a life lived, such as small receipts for Aquari's meals or other small items, advertisements, those Az tossed aside. One time, Az handed him an advertisement to save, and Rhys looked at him questioningly.

"I don't have a copy yet," Az explained, and that was that.

Even if I understand the shallow truth of archiving, of separating the valuable from the worthless, I still don't have the deep knowledge to fully understand the difference between what must be archived, and what can go without being saved. Rhys nodded, understanding. Without Az's knowledge of what existed in the archives already, he couldn't know what to hold out, and what to toss aside. He had a long way to go to be able to separate all the hidden treasures from the true trash.

The longer he sorted, the better he understood the school's affairs. And the picture the papers painted drew a poor image of the school. They were in debt. Aquari had to pay mercenaries to secure the school's boundaries, because the Infinite Constellation School didn't have enough fighters or members to secure its boundaries itself. But the problem was, their school wasn't big enough to generate the revenue to pay the mercenaries, either, so she'd had to take out loans and pawn items to ensure the school's continued safety. In her letters, she discussed wanting to quit playing the mercenaries, but the problem was, a nearby school that was larger and had more influence wanted the Infinite Constellation School's land.

If she didn't keep paying the mercenaries, that school, the Purple Dawn Academy, would invade their land and steal vast chunks of it for itself. If she *did* keep paying them, Infinite Constellation School would go broke sooner rather than later, and the Purple Dawn Academy would scoop up their land as collateral for their debt. It was a damned-if-they-did, damned-if-they-didn't kind of scenario.

Rhys snorted, already getting a feel for the situation. *I bet the Purple Dawn Academy is where this 'guest teacher' is coming from, huh? And he's not a 'guest' so much as an 'overseer and exploiter,' looking for holes in our defenses so he can take us down even faster and take our land.*

He ran a hand through his hair, undoing the ponytail and putting it back up again. This was more trouble than he'd thought. The Infinite Constellation School was in a bad place, up a creek without a paddle, so to speak. The Purple Dawn Academy had them over a barrel. No matter how he looked at it, this problem was beyond his pay grade. He

sighed. Maybe it was time to start looking for a new school? He wasn't quite as weak as he was to begin with, and it wasn't as if he felt too close to the school that had begrudgingly took him in, disregarded him, and allowed Cynog to bully him despite the power gap. But at the same time, this was *his* trashy school. It didn't belong to anyone else. It wasn't for some outsider to swoop in and snatch it up like some kind of prize.

If I can prevent it, I will. This was way over his pay grade, it was true. Still, he wasn't going to just up and roll over because some outsider decided they wanted this land. Whatever he could do to prevent the hostile takeover, he would

Besides, he'd been in small businesses when a larger outside business had forcibly taken them over before. Things were always worse afterward, no matter how much the hostile business promised they'd be better. In a certain way, this school was a little start-up company, about to be gobbled up by some big shark of a company that cared more about shareholders and profit margins than it did the little guy, or even putting out a successful and worthwhile product. He couldn't help but root for the underdog, even if he knew how futile such a struggle was. His current boss—*er, Schoolmaster*—was kind of a dickbag, but she didn't get in the way of his studies. She'd even supported him and allowed him to come up to the upper peak to collect more trash. If the Purple Dawn took over, he could say goodbye to anything like that. Regimented classes, useless school-ordered studies, and an enforced hierarchy where he was at the absolute bottom were all that awaited him if that merger—*er, takeover attempt*—went through.

He knew it was hopeless, and yet, for the first time, he felt true loyalty to the Infinite Constellation School. For the neglect that had allowed a piece of trash like him to grow, for the total disregard that allowed a useless student like him to thrive, he'd do anything. Anything at all!

He didn't actually know what the Purple Dawn Academy was like. Maybe it was an angelic place, where all the students worked together in total harmony, and it was far superior to the Infinite Constellation School. From the bits he'd put together from the letters and receipts, though, it seemed that Purple Dawn Academy was exactly like the big businesses he was used to back home. In other words, so far up their own asses that they'd come out the other side blinded by shit.

"This school is fucked," Rhys muttered to himself.

"Mmm," Az replied neutrally. He passed Rhys a letter. "Here. I believe this is what you're looking for."

"I've already got most of the picture," Rhys said, but he took it anyways. Unfolding the paper, he began to read. *So, what kind of guy is this 'guest teacher' of ours?*

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

Chapter 43. Guest Teacher

Rhys unfolded the letter and began to read the 'guest teacher's' response to their Schoolmaster, Aquari.

Schoolmistress Aquari,

I write to you today to—

Immediately, Rhys' eyes blurred. The full power of Speed Reading and skimming kicked in, and he blazed ahead, skipping past hundreds of lines of formulaic letter writing and business jargon to zip directly to the important parts.

He stopped on one line. His eyes widened. He leaned in, reading it a second time, narrowing his eyes to fully lock in and read past the legalese and jargon to understand exactly what the guest teacher was actually saying.

...I look forward to enjoying your school's atmosphere and academic prowess. I know I will find it satisfactory, as your students will surely also be satisfactory, and so, too, your staff. Although I'm a remedial teacher within my own Academy, please do not take that as any sort of inditement. I have also been identified as one of the most skillful teachers, and I assure you that Purple Dawn Academy is sending its best... in my opinion, anyways. A little humor!

"Well, he's got a shit sense of humor," Rhys muttered to himself.

But that was the less important to the true danger hidden in those words. "Find them satisfactory." He knew what that really meant. Decoding the corporatism out of the words, what the teacher was really saying, was *match up to our standards, which we have specifically set to be impossible for you to meet, or face the immediate destruction of your team regardless of how well it actually works or how high quality the work you produce is*. Maybe he was bearing a bit of a grudge from his first life, but he didn't see it that way. The scales had fallen off his eyes. He no longer trusted any large organization to do the right thing, or actually care about the little guy. All big corporations—ahem, schools—cared about was making the most profit possible, or consolidating as much power as possible. If they already had power and money, then their goal was to make even more money and gain even more power, so that they could maximally abuse all the workers and weaker people beneath them.

'Rule of the jungle?' 'Harsh realities of the feudal system?' What a joke! These practices were alive and well in his world. They permeated every single piece of his work life, whether he worked for a big organization, a small organization, did contracting or even

worked on his own. The only way to opt out, was to become so big, rich, and powerful that he could personally ignore the bullshit.

And in this life, just as in his previous one, he was far, far away from achieving that. Unlike his original life, though, he had a path to achieving that ideal freedom that he'd long dreamed of. It might be through the trash, but he wasn't going to complain! Any path was better than no path at all. What better path for a trashy guy like him, who got stepped on and neglected all his life, than to empower himself through that very same trash?

In any case, it was clear what this guy was here for. He represented a school that could completely repress Infinite Constellation School, likely economically, academically, and militarily, a school where, if they were to battle, Infinite Constellation would stand absolutely no chance of winning—like if tiny, military-less Lichtenstein and the large and powerful Germany went to war back in his original world. His purpose in coming was to find faults with Infinite Constellation School so that he could shut it down... or, more likely, absorb Infinite Constellation under the umbrella of his more powerful school, in some kind of land-slash-power grab. In other words, it was desperately important for Rhys to put on the best face he could, if Infinite Constellation School was going to survive at all.

Given that the man's qualifications for 'satisfactory' were almost certainly deliberately impossible for them to reach, he faced a high task, but... Rhys took a deep breath. Even if it was hard, even if it was nearly impossible, he'd still fight for it.

After all, this school was trashy. It was small, the teachers were allowed to abuse students rampantly with little to no punishment, and he'd already hit the limits of what he could learn within it, as a weak Rank 1 with trash inherent foundations. But it was his school. It was his damn school, where he had the freedom to pursue his path as he wished. It was his school, where he'd been helped by Sorden and Az, where Tarais had helped him find the right path, where he'd grown strong alongside Ev. He wasn't going to stay here forever. He already knew it wasn't going to be where he grew to his most powerful self. Just like Ev, he had to find a route out of it eventually.

But right now, it was his home. And until he hit Rank 2 at least, it was where he could freely grow without unnecessary regimented studies and extraneous useless requirements. It was the place he could grow under his own strength and methods, where he had the freedom to ignore the classes he didn't care about and attend the ones he needed. He'd been through public schooling. He knew what it was like, to have to sit through shitty classes on topics he already fully understood just because they were part of the training regimen and there was someone who didn't understand them. To be forced to study things that were totally meaningless to him and to his future, just because someone high up thought he needed them. To be fed politicized versions of history that fit whoever was in control of the government at the time, not reality. He'd lived that life, and he didn't want to live it ever again. He outright refused.

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Viva self study! Viva freedom! Viva fucking off into the woods to do what he wanted, instead of being forced to sit in some boring ass classroom all day!

Phew. I might have gotten a little heated there. Rhys wiped his brow and shook his head, pushing all those emotions back. School hadn't been a happy place for him, for many reasons. Not least because he was trash and loved trash, and children were not kind to trash. They were quite happy to put trash in the garbage bin or toilet where it belonged, and he'd spent a lot of time upside down in both of those places. The physical abuse wasn't as bad as the emotional shit they'd pulled.

Looking back on it now, all that bullshit just made him laugh. Children's insults were... unrefined, at best. The dumb things he'd been called, that had hurt at the time, were honestly kind of pathetic. He could rattle off a dozen lines to destroy any man, woman, or child without hesitation if provoked, and he'd probably only mean one of them, at that. Hell, he could log onto any old FPS game and hear far worse nonstop for half an hour *and that's if I'm not grieving and actually playing seriously.* But at the time, it had hurt, and his memories of school were tainted by that pain. It didn't help that the teachers had usually taken the side of the less trashy students, the ones who weren't total weirdos.

But that didn't matter in the Infinite Constellation School. Who cared whose side the teachers would take, when he was free to do whatever the hell he wanted? And that was exactly why he valued it. In fact, he'd been able to become a valuable student to several teachers *because* he was allowed to do whatever he wanted. If he'd just been another blank face in the masses, he would've remained as faceless trash forever.

He scanned the rest of the letter, zipping down to the bottom. One last line leaped out at him.

I hope I don't have to clean up your school! I remember how it was the last time I visited. Hopefully you've fixed your little... trash problem by now.

Rhys' eyes blazed. Anger burned in his heart. This Purple Dawn Academy wanted to take that all away from him. Take away his freedom. Take away his hard-earned recognition. Make him a blank face in the masses. And worst of all—*take away his trash.*

Sincerely, Ernesto Almet.

"Ernesto. So that's your name," Rhys said aloud, narrowing his eyes. His first enemy. He wouldn't forget that name until he died. How dare he take Rhys' trash away. How dare! *He's going to find out that a powerful dragon cannot repress a local snake. I might be trash, but this is my home turf! I'm going to use my hometown advantage to the*

maximum extent. It doesn't matter how strong this guy is. I'm going to prove him wrong and send him packing!

There were some things he couldn't do much about, like Cynog being an asshole. But when it came to cleaning up the trash? He would happily take up that task for the sake of the school. He pinched his chin, thinking. He had to make sure this Ernesto fuck saw the best side of every teacher, too. Some were trashy on the surface, but had value hidden within, like the mustelid man, while others were already incredible, and simply needed to be presented in a positive light.

As for the students... Rhys' eye glittered. *I am a student, aren't I?* He was trash, sure, but he knew how to clean up when he needed to. Not to mention, he had several friends who could help him out there. Tarais was the prim and proper ideal of a magical student, while Ev was the perfect martial student. He nodded, his plan shaping up in his head. *His standards might be impossible. This might be a lost game from the very start. But I'm not going down without a fight!*

He was trash. He accepted that. But he refused to let someone come in out of nowhere and declare his whole world null and void because *they* one-sidedly decided it was trash. That, he fundamentally disagreed with. Trash should be appreciated, loved, nurtured, even deeply considered and then burned in acknowledgement that it truly had passed the limits of any usability as anything but fuel... but dismissed offhand, without any consideration? Never. It went against his very soul. Against the core of who he was.

"If you're done?" Az asked, holding out his hand once more.

"Huh? Oh, sure." Rhys handed the letter over to be archived. He didn't need to hold onto it, and it certainly wasn't trash. Might as well let Az organize it.

He sat up and looked around, taking in the trash in a new light. The trash was his, and he intended to put it to good use, yes. At the same time, he had to move it out of sight of this guest teacher before the man arrived, or else Ernesto would take it from him forever. He checked the letter. The date meant nothing to him, so he turned to Az.

"What's today's date?"

"Hmm?" Az peered at him, then at the letter. "Oh. The guest teacher comes in two weeks, if that's your question."

Two weeks? Rhys widened his eyes, then firmed his gaze in determination. Two weeks. He didn't need to burn and process all the trash by then, he just had to move it out of the guest teacher's sight. The more of it he could process, the better, but given his vial limitation and the lack of containers to hold the more virulent potions he made now, his first priority was to move the trash out of sight.

Rhys drew out the vial and gazed at it. It glittered, the crystal completely undamaged despite the fresh potion in it. *In two weeks... could I comprehend how to make more of these vials in two weeks?* He gritted his teeth. Vial-making wasn't his path. Even for things that laid on his path, it sometimes took him days, if not weeks, to comprehend them. The chances he'd obtain a full comprehension of vial-making to the extent that he'd be able to make a high-tier specialized vial within two weeks, with enough time left in those two weeks that he'd then be able to make several vials and brew the potions to fill the vials... Rhys grimaced. Just putting the concept into words told him how insane the idea was. He could drink the potion now—one sip at a time, true, but it was a step in the right direction, and it meant he'd be able to refill the vial more often. He'd have to be satisfied with that for now.

As long as he hid the trash sufficiently, the man shouldn't come after it, either, so it wasn't like he *had* to have it all turned into potions by the time Ernesto came. It was like his corporate experience. The man would have impossible expectations, but he also wouldn't look deeply enough to actually understand the situation. It was true of the good in the school, but it was also true of the bad. As long as he made it look clean while Ernesto was here, the man wouldn't actually dig around to find out the truth.

He had his work cut out for him, but he wasn't going to give up. This school might be trash, but he'd fix it up until it shone. Rhys grinned.

It's time to polish this turd.

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

Chapter 44. Polish a Turd

Two weeks until the guest teacher arrived. Rhys took a deep breath. He looked around him. This was the Schoolmaster's house. It was the obvious place the guest teacher would go when he arrived here. In other words, it was the first place he had to clean.

Rhys looked at Az. "Can you archive faster?"

"I was going slow for your sake," Az replied. "Do you not wish to know how to archive properly?"

"No, I do, but we're on a time crunch here. If you can speed it up, I'll bring you papers as quickly as I can."

The Schoolmaster's manor was full of papers. Rhys wanted the trash, but he had no use for the useful papers. On top of that, the last thing he wanted to do was throw away a useful paper that the Schoolmaster needed, when he misunderstood it as useless. If he just burned everything, he risked not only pissing off Aquari and closing off his access to the upper peak, but also potentially completely ruining the school's chances of surviving regardless of how well he did when the guest teacher came. The fastest way to separate the wheat from the chaff was to rely on Az's high-tier archiving skills. Az knew far better than him (and, Rhys was willing to bet, Aquari herself) which of these papers were necessary, and which were nothing but burnable garbage.

Az considered for a moment, then nodded. "You're worried about the guest teacher?"

"Yeah. I know his type. He's going to tear this school apart if we give him the slightest opening."

"And you're that loyal to this school?"

"I'm loyal to my own freedom."

Az chuckled. "I can appreciate that. I'll teach you the mysteries of archiving another time, then. Bring me all the papers you can find, as rapidly as you can find them. We'll archive this manor, whether Aquari wants it or not."

"That's right. I'm taking all her trash, no matter what she wants!" Rhys agreed.

The two of them shared a grin. They'd come to the same place via different routes. Their paths might differ, but they converged at the same point in this moment.

Az turned away. Rhys turned to go as well, but paused at the door. Az's eyes blurred. Papers passed before him so rapidly that Rhys couldn't imagine comprehending a single letter on their surface, even with his Speed Reading skill. It was like he was a vacuum for information. He breathed it in, absorbing it merely from proximity alone.

At that rate, we really can clear this house in two weeks. No—even doing it today isn't impossible. Seeing the papers in the room visibly become organized, Rhys rushed away. If he waited any longer, Az might run out of material to archive.

It wasn't hard to find papers. They were everywhere. In fact, the harder task was staying on his feet as he ran over all the papers and trash piled everywhere. Rhys started with the closest papers, the ones lying here and there in the hallway. He'd never had to grab trash at speed before, and this proved to be excellent training. He dashed around the hall, plucking the papers and leaving the general trash for later. He wouldn't leave it forever, but while the top-speed archiving machine known as Az was working, he didn't want to let the cat-man churn without data. He ran back to the room and placed the hallway's papers in the to-sort pile just as Az finished up the first room's worth of papers.

Holy shit! He's faster than I expected. The papers he'd grabbed from the hallway looked wholly insufficient now that he knew how fast Az could work. Rhys rushed into the next room and scooped up armfuls of papers, immediately ferrying them back to Az's side. A few repeats of that, and he'd bought himself enough time to actually pick the papers, books, and scrolls out from the regular garbage. The more he did it, the faster he got at picking particular trash. It wasn't necessarily more valuable trash, since Az hadn't yet archived it and determined whether it was worthwhile or not, but it was a certain *type* of garbage. He'd had some practice picking out the organic garbage to use as compost, but this was a step beyond that. The speed at which he had to grab papers, and the volume at which he needed to ferry them around, far surpassed anything he'd ever had to do to generate compost.

As he placed yet another stack of papers and books at Az's side, a notification popped up.

Speed Picking 1

Scavenging 28 > 31

He chuckled. Another skill? He wouldn't have gained it so quickly if it weren't trash-related. But... picking? What did that have to do with trash?

Picking... isn't that a term used by thrifters? He could vaguely remember from his first life that 'picking' was a term thrift shop enthusiasts used to refer to picking through shops in order to find the best items. When he thought about it, thrift shops were full of garbage that people had thrown out. Thrifters went to those shops and picked the gold out of the garbage, in a move after Rhys' own heart. Then, speed picking... was that the skill associated with picking what he wanted out of a pile of trash rapidly?

He looked at his hands, then laughed and made finger guns. In a mock spaghetti-western voice, he growled, "Fastest picker in the West."

A moment later, he sighed. Spaghetti westerns. What a pure and undiluted source of trash narratives that was near and dear to his heart. Not just the classics, which some people dismissed as trash out of hand due to their unoriginal and inauthentic storylines and settings, but all the lesser-known titles and works as well. The cheesy space westerns and goofy steam westerns. If 'western' was slapped in the name, Rhys knew he was in for a good time. Still, in this world, they had no concept of 'western.' It wasn't a narrative or a setting they had any familiarity with. He wouldn't be able to find any of his beloved westerns here.

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No westerns... But no westerns didn't mean no trash. There were dozens of other trashy genres, some of which he knew this world had, and just because they lacked a setting, didn't mean they lacked a type of trash. It just meant they'd have their own

unique trashy settings that he needed to learn about so he could seek them out and fully enjoy them.

Enheartened, Rhys sped up once more. When one door closed, another one opened! Trash authors, screenwriters, and playwrights wouldn't stop producing his beloved trash just because they didn't have access to a genre! They'd just find new genres, or make their own! What a wonderful world he lived in. How boundless and limitless. He needed to fear naught, because he could always count on the creators to keep creating everything he loved so dearly, no matter what circumstances they faced.

One pile of papers after another, Rhys ferried the excessive documentation junking up Aquari's house to Az for proper archiving. From nowhere, Az bound the loose-leaf papers into folders and filed scrolls away in a cupboard, while setting the valuable books on a shelf he'd plucked from thin air. He piled the useless papers in prim stacks, tied up with twine and whenever those threatened to overwhelm the room, Rhys took a moment to heft them through a nearby window and out into the garden below, where he could cart them over to the piles once he finished with the house.

"What's all that for?" a feminine voice shouted from the garden.

Rhys paused. He walked back to the window and peered out. Lira had rolled over again and stared up at him from the fountain.

"We're cleaning the house. Gotta get the garbage out," Rhys explained.

"Hmph. Don't throw any in my fountain." Lira rolled back onto her back to float once more.

"Yeah, yeah, your highness," Rhys muttered under his breath. He rolled his eyes. *Would it kill you to help?*

Not that he needed her help. It was just his human instincts kicking in, demanding that everyone nearby help out when he was working. She was a water spirit or something, so of course she wouldn't understand, nor should he expect her to. Even so, he couldn't help it. That was just the way humans were built.

He collected the ordinary garbage as he went, when he had the time, piling it up by the door, whether that meant carrying it there in neat piles or chucking it down the stairs from over the balcony. It wasn't the neatest pile, but it was closer to the exit and at least generally in the right area. It also meant he wouldn't have to keep sifting out the same non-paper garbage every time, which got tiresome after a while. A part of him wanted to lug the useless papers and the non-paper garbage over to his piles already, but the rest of him refused to let Az down. If he broke Az's stride, who knew if the man would ever pick it up again? He was a cat, after all. Moody to the core. He was in a productive mood right now, but all it took was one small break for him to reset into a completely different mood, if all the cats he'd owned were any indication.

Carrying a load of papers to Az, a clump of garbage stuck under one arm, Rhys paused, then laughed at himself. Despite everything, his mind went back to his days under Straw, with Bast, out in the forest. *I bet Bast isn't doing any training like this, under the Sword Saint.*

Out in the forest. Just him and his friend, and the mysterious Straw. Back then, everything had been so simple. They'd fought, and that was it. He'd been weak, and Bast was strong, and those were the laws of his universe. He'd still been struggling with Intent, and trying to figure out what it meant to be a mage. And now here he was, running around the Schoolmaster's manor to clean it up before the rival school's investigator—ahem, guest teacher—came through to tear apart his world.

His *world*. But it was true. This school had become his world. His world wasn't Bast and the orphanage, or Straw and the forest. It was all of that, and this school.

Hope you're doing well, Bast. Then again, how couldn't he be? Bast wasn't struggling in some dead-end, doomed school. He was studying under the most powerful martial mage in the continent. With his talent? Rhys could only imagine how powerful he had to be by now.

He wasn't slacking, either, but he had no illusions about the gap between him and Bast. Hard work was one thing, but honest to god, legitimate talent was another. Starting from trash tier skill and starting from S-tier skill were totally different. Sure, if Bast was lazy and did nothing with his talent, hard work could overcome his starting point, but Rhys knew better. Bast was as hard a worker as they came. For certain, he'd be incredibly more powerful the next time they met.

I'm looking forward to it.

At last, as the sun set, Az finished archiving the last of Aquari's papers. With a snap of his fingers, he dismissed the shelves and cupboards he'd summoned, banishing the archived materials along with them. "That is all. If Aquari comes looking for her things, please send her my way. I will be holding onto them until she has need of them once more."

"Thanks, Az. I'm glad I could cat-ount on your help," Rhys said, trying some wordplay of his own.

Az stared at him. After a long moment, he blinked. "Oh. 'Count.' It was weak, but I appreciate the effort. Yes, of course. If you ever run into another vast repository of unarchived materials, please call on me anytime."

"Naturally. Oh, I was wondering... why didn't you archive Aquari's papers until now?" Az was a powerful being. Surely he could overcome the barrier at any time, just as he had overcome it today. If archiving was his path the way trash was Rhys', then Rhys couldn't

imagine hesitating to run in and get it all done as fast as possible if he had the power to pass by the barrier.

Az shrugged. “Until recently, she wasn’t aware of my presence, and so I had no intention to draw her attention. However, when you went ahead and intruded on her manor regardless of her wishes, I thought to myself, she might reinforce her barrier after this, and so I figured it was best to move now, when stepping through her barrier with a cat’s paw was relatively easy for me, rather than wait to see if she actually added enhancements later.”

“O-oh. Sorry,” Rhys said, suddenly aware of his mistakes. He had intruded on the Schoolmaster’s manor without her permission. He hadn’t been thinking, but there was every possibility she’d add additional defenses afterwards.

Az tilted his head to the side. Rhys could all but see his tail batting the ground in a self-satisfied manner. “No need to apologize. It’s thanks to you that I have this opportunity. Over-caution is as much a weakness as undue bravery.”

Rhys rubbed the back of his head, grinning just a little.

Stepping close, Az rapped his shoulder with a curled hand, almost like a cat’s admonishing smack when their owner overstepped their boundaries. He passed Rhys by. “I’ll be in the library.”

“And I’ll finish gathering the trash over here.” There was still some ordinary trash left to gather. He’d been sipping his potion this whole time, at a safe rate, anyways, since he couldn’t afford to overcharge and bring Az papers at the same time. His stomach and throat were now fully reformed, not a single weak spot left. The places he’d inadvertently missed the first time were completely shored up. All that was to say that he’d almost finished the second potion. His tolerance for impurities was growing, and he needed a fresh potion, a *stronger* potion, brewed from more trash, if he was going to continue improving.

There was no response. Rhys turned, and wasn’t surprised to find Az already gone. He chuckled to himself and shook his head, turning back to the task at hand. The papers were cleared, but the trash wasn’t. It was time to finish what he’d started.

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

Chapter 45. Cleaning House

Rhys worked through the night, picking up every last scrap of trash from Aquari's manor and the grounds around it. When that was done, he lugged the trash up higher into the mountain, around the corner and out of sight in a deep ravine that was somewhat hidden from the main upper peak village. There was still plenty of trash on the mountain and around the village, but Rhys wasn't done; he was just done with the most important part of the upper peak. Done, and in need of a new potion. He lifted the bottle. Empty, completely empty. Not even a drop left.

So it's time to brew a new one.

The process wasn't that more complex for the new potion he wanted to brew. It was the same as the previous method, in fact, except for one small detail; the trash pile he used to obtain the impurities was twice as large. That meant twice the impurities... and twice the ash. Looking at the mountain of purified ash he'd made, Rhys snorted. He'd have to go visit Sorden soon, before he generated more ash than he could possibly handle.

Brewing the double-power potion wasn't particularly difficult. As he purified the ash, he scooped it out of the cauldron and added more impure ash, until he reached twice the original concentration of impurities. It was a technique that would allow him to continue concentrating the potion up until he could no longer fit it into the reinforced vial.

He called the potion into the vial and stood, wiping his brow. Aquari's manor was cleared of trash, and all the refuse was here, in this ravine. Once he cleared the rest of the upper village, he'd be most of the way done. At that point, he'd just have to keep up his daily trash duties and brew the potions he needed to keep advancing toward the toxic trash pit.

Rhys raised his brows. He'd thought he'd be struggling to complete it within the two weeks, but here he was, on the end of day one, with success already within his grasp. *Guess I overestimated things.* He shrugged to himself, not dissatisfied. Better to overestimate the task than underestimate. Though... he glanced back at Aquari's manor. If it wasn't for Az's help, there was no way he would have completed clearing out the papers so quickly. He shouldn't discount Az's assistance. It probably would have been a two-week task without the cat-man stepping in.

That means I have two weeks to get stronger. Rhys cracked his knuckles, slowly grinning. Two weeks to work toward the toxic trash pit. Two weeks to absorb as many impurities as he could, and reforge his innards and outards until he was unrecognizable as the trash he'd began as.

That was the nice thing about starting as trash. He didn't hesitate to burn it all down and rebuild, because he started with nothing to lose.

Taking a big sip of the potion, he stretched. Time was a-wasting, and there was still trash to collect.

It took him longer than he expected to finish clearing the upper peak. The trash wasn't as concentrated as it was in Aquari's house, but that was exactly the problem. While he'd spent a whole day in Aquari's house, just lugging garbage out and running back in, he'd been spending that entire time moving garbage. He had his hands on trash the whole time, and was constantly hefting it around, whether that meant bringing it to Az or taking it out to the ravine.

The rest of the upper peak wasn't half as concentrated. Not even a quarter. But that was exactly the problem. He spent hours chasing little bits of garbage up and down the mountain, and only came back with a single bagful of trash. He wasn't exactly complaining, since it was also good training for his stamina and legs, and his nascent skill Trash Step, but it did take far longer than he was expecting to collect far less trash.

As he ran around, chasing trash, he scurried over a patch of screed, loose, smooth dry rock that threatened to slip down the mountain and spawn a landslide. To his surprise, his Trash Step skill activated. His steps grew firmer, and the skill guided his feet to the best places to stand, as if he'd spent years scrabbling over gravel. Rhys was so startled that he paused in the middle of the screed, only to quickly scramble back into motion as stopping so suddenly on loose gravel almost sent him to the ground.

Huh. I guess screed is a trashy form of ground. He made it to the other side of the gravel and turned back, looking at the patch thoughtfully. It was true; screed could be considered trash. It wasn't useful as a foundation for anything, it was hard to walk on, few animals could live there, and it was dangerous in that it could start a landslide. Most people would see it as something to remove; in other words, trash.

What other land counted as trash, then? Swamp for certain. Back in his world, people were getting rid of swamps left, right, and center in order to build things on the newly-dried land. Sand, maybe? Ice? Snow? Rhys grinned slowly. This skill would help him walk on the most dangerous types of land, the types that were most likely to slow him down. *It's even better than I thought.*

Three days passed before he cleaned the upper peak to his satisfaction. When all the trash he could see from the upper peak village was gone, and most of the trash scattered around the less dangerous parts of the peak, the parts where he didn't see beast tracks or beast scat, was collected, he returned to the lower peak to do his usual trash collection rounds. There wasn't much use for this trash anymore for him, but he wasn't going to throw it away, either. He burned what he could and converted the rest into fertilizer to spread on his garden in the lower peak. The garden was doing well, all the plants growing at a normal pace without Rhys forcing their growth with his mana. He had found a few more seeds in the garbage, and planted them alongside the existing plants. He still didn't know too much about 'properly' growing herbs, and though he wanted to fully use the garbage to its greatest extent, he simply didn't have the

herbalism knowledge to identify seeds on sight or know how properly grow them if he did identify them. Nor did he have the time to research growing seeds right now, with the two-week deadline fast approaching.

He still had a little less than a week and a half, but that was time he needed to advance his resistance to impurities toward being able to take on the toxic pit. Ideally, he wanted to be able to absorb the toxic pit before the teacher arrived, but he knew that was only a dream. Even absorbing a tiny percentage of the pit was beyond him, and it'd take a long time before he was able to handle impurities well enough to take it on meaningfully.

Still, it didn't hurt to get a little more training in. He returned to the upper peak and focused all his energy on brewing more and more dangerous potions, and continuing to absorb the upper peak's impurities. By the end of the two weeks, he'd completely rebuilt his internal organs, and begun to once again enhance his muscles, bones, and ligaments. He could absorb up to a five-times concentrated version of the upper impurities by sipping the potion, and was working on absorbing a seven-times concentrated version by dripping his way up to sipping. At the end of the two weeks, he was highly empowered and much better at handling impurities than he'd ever been.

Not only that, but the trash pile he'd gathered from the upper peak had greatly diminished. He'd had to take several trips down to Sorden to sell off the purified ash, to keep himself from getting overladen with the material. A seven-times concentrated potion took a great deal of trash to generate, and generated a great deal of ash in its creation. By now, only half of the trash remained, and he was intentionally holding it in reserve to brew a final, even-more-concentrated potion. Unlike the lower peak, the upper peak didn't generate trash quickly. During his entire two-week stint, he'd only had to go out once to pick up trash, and he'd come back with less than half a pile.

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It made sense. Fewer people lived on the upper peak. Based on the state of their houses, too, Aquari was the primary generator of trash, and for the last two weeks, she was nowhere to be seen. He sighed. It was too bad, honestly, but he couldn't complain. He'd increased his strength by leaps and bounds these last two weeks. Compared to how long martial students or mages had to work to increase their power, this was an incredible increase. Waiting a few weeks, or even months or a year to power up, was nothing. Mages would study a topic for years hoping for a single increase anything like what he'd just accomplished. Martials would train for ages to achieve the same.

Of course, that's for people of trash talent like myself, Rhys appended. Anyone with real skill or talent could quickly overcome those limitations. Bast, for example, was surely improving his sword skill by leaps and bounds as well, without having to take years to study one skill. In his case, he could only overcome his limitations by relying on his path, and by the free availability of the material he needed to pursue his path. If anyone else realized the value of trash the way he could, he was sure they could progress just

as fast—no, probably faster—without a trash-level of talent slowing them down. But, for some strange reason, no one saw any value in trash.

That was their problem. And Rhys was going to exploit it to the greatest extent he could.

A small chime caught his attention as he wandered around the upper peak, looking for trash. Rhys looked around, only to find a tiny sparrow on his shoulder, a round bell tied to its neck.

“Schoolmaster requests your presence,” the bird informed him, then fluttered off.

Rhys watched it go, a little awestruck. Even though he spent his days growing his magic, deep in training his body and mana alike, he sometimes forgot exactly what it meant to be in a world of magic. It was the little moments like this that made him remember, the little things like talking sparrows fluttering over to deliver a message.

Breaking a grin, Rhys ran after the sparrow, leaving his garbage heap ravine behind for the light of day.

Aquari stood in the center of the upper peak’s village, her arms crossed and a grim expression on her face. The sparrow fluttered to her side. She slid a small handscroll open, and the sparrow flew onto the paper and returned to ink. Closing the scroll, she stored it in a parchment-colored ring on her finger, then turned to Rhys. Her scowl deepened at the sight of him. “What have you done?”

“I cleaned up the trash, as we agreed upon,” Rhys said, lowering his head modestly.

“You rifled through my manor and stole all my documents,” she growled. There was a dangerous note in her voice, to match the dangerous glint in her eyes.

“Not at all, Schoolmaster. Azarian—that is, our librarian—volunteered to archive your documents. He’s organized and labeled them neatly for your future perusal. If you wish to consult any particular document, please feel free to visit the library. Ah! Or if you’d rather, I can fetch it for you.”

Aquari’s eyes narrowed, but she let the topic drop. She still looked angry, but she didn’t have a way to properly express it. Rhys could see it in her eyes. She was mad that he’d cleaned up her house, but she knew it was irrational, when she’d not only allowed him to clean the upper peak, but he’d gone ahead and done her a favor by archiving her important papers. She had an attachment to the trash, or the disarray, or something, but knew it was ‘wrong’ to feel that way, so couldn’t openly attack him for it.

Still, he knew he would do well to lie low and keep his mouth shut now. She might know that her anger was irrational, but it didn’t stop her from being angry. She’d still find a way to take it out on him if he gave her the slightest opening.

So he did his best not to.

“When does our guest arrive?” Rhys asked demurely, lowering his head like a good student should.

“Any moment now. Change into your dress robes and return here.”

Rhys smiled at her. *Dress robes?* If he’d known he needed something like that, he could have made them over the last two weeks out of scraps from the trash, but he hadn’t known, so he hadn’t put the time into building them. He had plenty of fabric in his storage ring, some of it even classy enough to qualify as dress robe material, but having fabric and transforming it into clothing... those were two different things. He didn’t have the skill to instantly sew a robe on the spot. It took time. Effort.

He made a mental note to make robes the next chance he got. Trash robes? He wasn’t sure what bonus he’d get from wearing them, but he wouldn’t know until he tried. Plus, he had the feeling he’d be able to easily empower trash robes and enhance them to be far stronger than any robes he could afford. It was a route worth pursuing.

Aquari put a hand to her forehead. “You don’t have any, do you.”

“No, ma’am. I have plenty of gold, though. I could buy some...?”

“We have no time. Come here.” She gestured him closer.

Confused, Rhys stepped in. A hand landed on his head, and a cool power flowed over him. All the dirt and dust vanished from his body and robes alike, and the faint stench of garbage that he could never quite escape faded away.

Rhys stared, flabbergasted. What a skill! He could use a technique like that. Though... he got the distinct impression that cleaning-related skills weren’t anywhere near his path.

Then again... Lira had called his trash-removal ‘cleaning.’ Maybe ‘cleaning’ wasn’t so far from ‘trash’ after all.

In any case, these were contemplations for a future date. For now, Rhys straightened up his robes, squared his shoulders, and stood slightly behind Aquari, the picture of a good student. His hands hung loose, and he swung them, not quite knowing what to do with them. Aquari put her hands behind her back, cupped, and after a moment, Rhys copied her gesture.

They stood there in the square, waiting. The sun crept over the sky. Rhys occasionally drew out his potion and added a few more drips, figuring he’d use the time to keep growing in his skill of absorbing impurities. Aquari glanced at him, but she didn’t tell him to stop.

At last, as the sun hit its apex, a shadow fell over the sky. Rhys squinted, lifting a hand to block out the sun. Some large object floated overhead, quickly growing closer to the school. Aquari subtly tensed, and Rhys glanced at her, then looked back at the object. *Is that our guest teacher? But... what is it?*

Closer and closer. Wood gleamed in the bright sunlight. Masts stood tall. Sails caught the wind. Rhys' eyes widened. *No way. No way!*

A three-mast ship soared through the sky overhead, bearing down on the Infinite Constellation School. It drew up to the upper peak, and Aquari waved her hand to let it past the barrier. Blue shimmered as it slid through and onto the upper peak. A man stood at its railing, prim and proper, the image of a mage. He wore black academic robes with long, wide sleeves that draped heavily over his shoulders, and a small black cap on his head, tassel and all. White gloves clad his hands, and he bore a book in one arm. A small group of students stood around him, perhaps four of them, all told. At the helm, a rather more raggedy, adventurer-looking mage handled the wheel, and even from this far, Rhys could sense that she was the one who empowered the boat. It wasn't purely empowered through her strength; there was some secondary source of mana that supported her own power. Nonetheless, it was her power that directed the ship's advance.

The ship lowered down to just above the highest buildings. On the deck of the ship, the man waved his hand. Blue mana swirled from his hand and surrounded him and the students behind him. He and his students lifted off the surface of the boat and hovered down to the ground. They landed gently, without so much as a bump.

The second they touched down, the woman at the helm spun the wheel, and her mana rushed through the ship. The ship turned about, far nimbler than its huge size would imply, and it flew off, leaving the groups behind.

Flicking an imaginary piece of lint off his robes, the man stepped forward. With a fake smile, he offered Aquari his hand. "Aquari. How good to see you again. I see your school is cleaned up! I'm impressed, truly."

"Ernesto," Aquari replied. She took his hand and gripped it tight, murder in her eyes. The two of them clutched hands for a long time, neither releasing, both of them almost clawing into the other's flesh. Two fake smiles beamed forth.

Rhys swallowed. *I'm glad I did my research. If I was getting these vibes from their meeting with no preparation, I might have just hoofed it for the forest directly.*

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

Chapter 46. Corporate Investigation

“So good to see you. Thank you for coming,” Aquari said, meaning not a single word of it. She gestured. “This is Rhys, a student of mine. He will serve as your assistant while you’re here, show you around the school and help you and your students get situated.”

Rhys smiled. He stepped forward as well and bowed a little, watching closely to see if Ernesto offered his hand. *Number one rule of meeting the corporate bigwigs—let them move first.* If Ernesto wanted to shake hands, he’d offer it. Rhys knew better than to offer his hand, lest he end up in the awkward situation of getting cold-bloodedly ignored by the bigwig in front of everyone. It wouldn’t matter, but it was embarrassing for him personally, and as trashy as he was, he still preferred not to embarrass himself in front of everyone if he could avoid it.

Ernesto gave him a slow, narrow-eyed look, then turned to Aquari once more. “Wonderful. I look forward to seeing your school in *all* its glory.”

Having not offered his hand, Rhys avoided looking like a fool. Internally, he pumped his fist. One point for Rhys, zero points for Ernesto.

“Rhys, go ahead and show the students around. You can start with their accommodations. I’ve prepared a special cabin by the dorms,” Aquari said.

Rhys nodded. *And get out of my hair while Ernesto and I talk about important things*, she didn’t say, but he got the message loud and clear anyways. He stepped forward and gestured to the students. “If you’ll be so kind, right this way.”

The four students looked him over, and Rhys returned the favor. There were two boys and two girls, the four of them about his age, maybe a year or two older or younger. The oldest-looking of the squad was a tall, slender, bookish boy with straight bangs parted over the center of his forehead and gentle eyes. Next eldest was an energetic-looking girl with a big smile and a teasing attitude about her. A gloomy girl with long bangs who wore a hood to hide her eyes was next, and the first of the four to be shorter than him, then the shortest and youngest-looking of the bunch, a blond boy with his arms crossed who was trying to put on the same overbearing attitude as Ernesto, but came across as a total brat.

On sight of the bratty blond boy, Rhys immediately felt hatred well up in his heart. He pushed it down, but couldn’t help but hate the brat a little bit, deep in his heart. There was something about the boy’s face that wasn’t just punchable, but infinitely kickable. Some deep instinct urged him to drop kick the brat off the side of the mountain and salute as he soared off to the horizon.

As the two teachers walked off to hold their important adult conversation, Rhys nodded at the children. "My name is Rhys, and you are?"

The bookish boy stepped forward. "I'm Walter. This is—"

"I'm Mae!" the energetic girl interrupted.

As if nothing had happened, Walter continued, "—Mae, and beside her is Hono. The brat over there is Victor."

Rhys snorted under his breath. *Even his friends call him a brat, huh?*

"I am *not* a brat," Victor insisted, narrowing his eyes their direction. His mana flared as if in a threat.

None of the others reacted, Rhys included. Walter quirked an eyebrow at that. Victor continued to flare his mana for a second, but seeing absolutely no reaction, he quickly wavered, then retracted his aura. Walter turned to Rhys, a bit more respect in his eyes. "Shall we?"

So that was a test. Within expectations. Honestly, he would have been a bit surprised if they didn't immediately start testing him. This 'test' was a bit crude, but then... He glanced at Ernesto. At a guess, they hadn't been *instructed* to test him, just allowed to assume that it was a viable course of action. Their 'tests' would be coarse, because they were whatever they, a bunch of children, could come up with.

Not that Rhys minded. A bit of trashy behavior from their overbearing guests was within his expectations. He was an expert at trash of all descriptions, so a trifling bit of trash like this didn't bother him one bit. He bowed. "Of course."

With that, he led the way down the mountain. As he walked, he wracked his brains. He did daily trash runs on the entire lower village, so why did he have no idea what this 'cabin' Aquari had referenced was? A bad feeling welled up in his gut, and he pursed his lips. *No, I don't like this, not one bit.*

It didn't take long to reach the dormitories. At the front of the large building, Rhys nodded to the other children. "Please wait here for a moment. I'll be right back."

The other children nodded. Walter drew a book out from his robes and began to read, and the energetic girl, Mae, started throwing punches at the air. Hono, the gloomy girl, sat on a rock, and the brat, Victor, crossed his arms and harrumphed.

Rhys rushed around the side of the dormitory. He saw the cabin at last, and grimaced. *Ah. That definitely belonged to Aquari, didn't it?*

Every inch of the cabin was covered in trash. From top to bottom, completely chock full of it.

“Rhys, what’s going on?” a familiar voice asked.

He turned. Tarais stood there, concern on her face. Rhys grinned and gestured her closer. “Can you go entertain our guests for a minute while I empty their residence?”

“Huh?” Tarais looked at him, then the cabin, then leaned to get a look at the guests. “Oh. Got it.”

“Thanks, Tarais. An hour or two should be enough.”

“An hour or—”

Before she asked any more questions, Rhys ran toward the cabin. Even before he reached it, he gestured at the trash, calling out to it with his mana. *Let’s clean this place up!*

To his surprise, some of the trash actually leaped out of the windows toward him. He gestured, and the trash spun around in the air. Experimentally, Rhys pointed toward the woods, and the trash piled up there, just like it did in his imagination.

Trash Manipulation 1

“Huh,” he muttered aloud. It wasn’t much use right now, or rather, there was too much trash, and Trash Manipulation had too little reach for him to use it properly. Still, he used it to expand his carrying capacity. When both arms were full, he used Trash Manipulation to stack the pile just a little higher. When a piece wouldn’t quite sit in his grasp right, he used Trash Manipulation to help support its weight. Like that, he quickly carted the trash out of the cabin and piled it up out of sight behind the treeline.

At the same time, Speed Picking, his other new skill, allowed him to see valuable items in the trash, even when he was moving quickly and not taking his time looking through it. A few feet of metal pole vanished into his storage ring, as did half of an armchair and a few different pieces of stained or torn clothing.

An hour passed, and Rhys finally dragged the last piece of broken furniture out of the cabin. He gave it a quick once-over. Surprisingly, under the trash, the cabin itself was relatively clean. Then again, should he be that surprised? Aquari had a cleaning skill. She’d even used it on him. She struggled with garbage, not cleanliness. For all he knew, this cabin was stuffed in a storage ring of hers thoughtlessly for years, and all the trash was just other junk in the ring that had found its way into the cabin one way or another.

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Actually, the more I think about it, the more likely it is.

Rhys returned to the front of the dorm, where Tarais was answering questions from Walter and Mae, Hono was reading, and Victor was pretending not to listen in. "Right! Everything should be ready now. If you'd be so good as to follow me?"

He led them to the cabin. At the sight of it, Hono sniffed primly, but said nothing. Victor didn't have the same prescience. "What is this trash? This thing is worse than the accommodations for servants at Purple Dawn Academy!"

The whole cabin is trash? Rhys' eyes lit up, and his heart beat a little faster. Forcibly, he suppressed his excitement. Now wasn't the time. Instead, he bowed humbly. "Please forgive this small school's limited establishments. This is the best we can offer you."

"Ha. I suppose I should've expected as much, from a raggedy little school on the brink of destruction." Victor sighed and shook his head in abject disappointment. He strutted inside, proud as a chicken, his nose high in the air as he looked down on everything inside.

Walter smiled at Rhys. "Please forgive him. He's used to finer trappings."

Rhys nodded, smiling back in silence. He didn't miss that Walter didn't apologize for Victor's actions, just for Victor having high expectations. *These kids know that they don't come in peace, and they aren't pretending, either.* Quietly, he wondered how they'd react if they knew about where he lived, tucked away in a crag in the rocks halfway down the mountain. If this was worse than the servants' accommodations where they were from, then how would they see his humble abode? "I'll leave you behind to get used to the mountain. Meet me in the central square when you're ready, and I'll take you around to see the rest of the sights."

"Not much, I'm sure," Hono murmured quietly to herself. Mae giggled and gave her a playful shove.

It was true, so there was no point protesting. Rhys simply walked away. Tarais stared after them, but when he nudged her elbow, she turned and followed him. She leaned in. "Who are they?"

"Students from the Purple Dawn Academy. They're here to... well, let's not mince words. They're here to bully our school," Rhys explained.

Tarais' jaw worked. At last, she managed, "Why?"

He shook his head. "We own their school a lot of money... it's complicated, but basically, Purple Dawn Academy wants to destroy our school and gobble it up into their sphere of influence."

Her mouth made an 'O.' "That's not good."

Rhys chuckled. He shook his head. "Nope."

He returned to the central square to wait. The four students hadn't visibly been carrying much, but storage rings were pretty common in this world. For all he knew, they were each carrying a house's worth of furniture and a year's worth of clothes to unpack. He was still sitting in the central square when Ernesto and Aquari descended from the mountain's peak.

Aquari gestured. "Show him around, will you, Rhys? I have business to attend to."

"Of course." Rhys saluted her and stepped forward.

"Show me the facilities," Ernesto demanded.

Rhys gestured for the man to follow him. "Let's start here in the main square, shall we? First, the basics. The lowest level classes for children are—"

"I don't need to see those," Ernesto declared dismissively.

"As you wish. Then, this way is the potions class," Rhys said, gesturing. He led Ernesto into Sorden's class. She was mid-lecture, but smiled at the sight of Rhys. The students listened deeply to her lecture, and in the corner, Alum desperately brewed something in one pot while following along in another.

Rhys cast an affectionate glance at Alum. He had progressed beyond the level of impurities the boy could brew, but he appreciated the effort nonetheless. If not for Alum's hard work, he never would have reached the heights of impurity-absorption that he had.

Ernesto listened for a while, then nodded, satisfied. Rhys led him away. "The next class is a bit of an odd one. Let me introduce you to the Enlightenment Class."

"Enlightenment? This school has a class on enlightenment?" Ernesto asked, honestly taken aback.

Rhys nodded. He pushed open the door to what had formerly been the mustelid class. The man lectured on robins now, espousing the value the small bird brought to a region. "If you listen closely, can you hear the truth in his words? Feel the twinge of enlightenment? Although his words aren't meant for everyone, students seeking enlightenment can sit in this class and pursue it without interruption."

"I see no one's attending it today," Ernesto remarked dryly, immediately less impressed.

"Do people need to be pushing themselves to the limit of enlightenment every day? Forgive me if I'm underestimating your school, but in the Purple Dawn Academy, do students achieve enlightenment daily?"

Ernesto grunted. He twisted his lips, then reluctantly shook his head.

"But nonetheless, our instructors tirelessly labor day in and day out, offering the opportunity to achieve enlightenment anytime." Rhys shut the door and led the way to his final stop.

There were more classes on the peak, but none of them were worth bringing Ernesto to. They were either too low level, or of no interest to Rhys, which he assumed meant would be of no interest to Ernesto, either. Rather, it was best to bring him directly to the final attraction.

He hadn't been back this way in a while. Once, it would have terrified him, but now... now he was still scared, but he stood strong and squared his shoulders anyways. He didn't have Ev at his side, but he was stronger than before. His body was reinforced, and his skills had improved. He wasn't confident he could beat the man, but he could probably survive and escape back to Az. And that had to be enough.

From atop the small rise that looked down on the open space, he watched neat lines of sweaty students throw punch after punch at the air. In front of them all, a muscular hulk of a man barked orders, striding back and forth in front of the students.

He gestured. "Cynog, our martial instructor, and our martial class."

Ernesto harrumphed. "Still letting that predator run loose, I see."

Rhys silently agreed, but said nothing. Did Infinite Constellation School have flaws? Absolutely. But neither did he agree with allowing Purple Dawn Academy to absorb it and destroy it. He preferred a flawed school where he had his freedom, versus a large academy where they pretended everything was perfect and pushed any problems under the rug.

Abruptly, Ernesto clapped. "Excellent, this is excellent. Where are my students?"

"They're still—"

"Right here, sir," Walter said, stepping out from behind the trees. Mae, Hono, and Victor followed him, as though they'd been there all along.

When did they get there? Rhys stared for a second, but quickly hid his surprise. Now wasn't the time to admit he was on the back foot.

At the front of the class, Cynog looked up. He caught Rhys' gaze for a moment, then stared at Ernesto and narrowed his eyes.

Ernesto stepped forward. He clapped once, demanding everyone's attention. The students stopped punching and turned, staring at him.

"Good afternoon, students. I'm a professor at Purple Dawn Academy, and I would like to propose a duel. An inter-academy duel, as it were—or, shall we say, inter-school?" Ernesto chuckled, as if he'd made a joke, and his students smiled as well.

Rhys raised his brows. Seemed like an academy outranked a school in this world. He hadn't paid that much attention to the names of teaching establishments in his world, so he wasn't sure if it was the same, but it certainly wasn't a shock to him that different types of schools looked down on different other types of schools. The world of academia was notoriously cutthroat and petty, so why would this world be any different?

Cynog crossed his arms. "Say what you mean or get the hell out."

For once, Rhys found himself wholeheartedly agreeing with Cynog.

Ernesto raised his chin. "Why don't we have your best students, against these four students of mine? These students aren't all martial artists, but I'm sure you won't have trouble facing mages as well as martials, right?"

Cynog snorted. He looked down on Ernesto in return, not backing down an inch. "The best martial in this academy isn't my student any longer. She hasn't been for a long time."

Rhys blinked, startled. Was Cynog actually acknowledging Ev? No way. But he was sure he'd heard right. *Damn. Does he actually secretly respect her?*

"Oh?" Ernesto scoffed. "A good excuse."

"No excuse. She's too high Tier for those Tier 1 students of yours. So why don't I match your students' Tier with my own students?"

"There's no need. My students can fight at Tier 2," Ernesto said, still looking down on Cynog.

Rhys snorted. Tier 2 sounded impressive, until he recalled that Ev's power reached Tier 3, and she could fight even higher if need be. These guys wouldn't last a second in front of her.

"I have a single student who can match all those brats of yours," Cynog grunted.

"Oh? And who would that be?" Ernesto asked.

Rhys furrowed his brows, equally confused. He looked around. Were those students he'd sent to ambush him and Ev around? They were powerful, but not Tier 1, from what he recalled. Was there some other hidden talent around that he hadn't met yet?

Cynog lifted his finger. He pointed directly at Rhys. "Right there. He can take on all four of your students alone, no problem."

Rhys jolted. He looked around, searching for someone else near him or behind him, but he stood alone. It was him, Ernesto's students, and the forest. He looked back at Cynog to find the man still pointing at him, a small but vicious smile quirking at his lips.

His stomach sank. *Uh oh.*

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

- Chapter 47. Four on One

Chapter 47. Four on One

Rhys backed away. He laughed. "Me? No, no..."

"You've beaten my strongest students, no?" Cynog pointed out.

"I..." With Ev's assistance, sure.

"Is there anyone here who could defeat you?"

Rhys licked his lips. "That is..."

Cynog gestured to Ernesto. "There he is. Our school's champion."

Rhys smiled nervously. *Is this bullying?* He was just trash. There was no way he was the most powerful student around!

But... he had beat Cynog's enforcers. Not only that, but he'd reforged his body and grown his skills since then. Maybe... maybe he really was strong, after all his hard work.

Ernesto looked Rhys up and down. He snorted dismissively. "Truly? Is this a joke?"

“No joke at all. Come on, time’s a-wasting. Let’s get the exhibition martial arena set up in the main square.” Cynog nodded, and his students hut-hut-hut-ed away toward the main square.

“In the main square? Couldn’t we do it back here?” Rhys requested, his voice squeaking a little. He was trash and he knew it, but did he have to show it in front of everyone, *again*? Wasn’t one battle where Cynog trashed him in public enough?

Cynog shook his head. “Nah. We need everyone to see.”

Rhys narrowed his eyes. Was Cynog not happy with publicly beating Rhys? As far as the public was concerned, Cynog had absolutely obliterated Rhys, the last they’d fought. No one but him, Cynog, Cynog’s loyal enforcers, and Ev, had seen the battle in the rift. He’d privately defeated the man—or at least, got his one good hit in—but apparently, Cynog held a grudge even for that secret, minor defeat. He had to see Rhys completely ruined in front of everyone, or else he wasn’t happy at all, and forget what the schools thought of one another. Cynog didn’t care if Infinite Constellation School burned down, as long as he got to watch Rhys get his face beat in.

It didn’t matter. Rhys wasn’t going down that easily. Cynog could set him up to knock him down, but he wasn’t going to fall just like that. He’d grown since Cynog had seen him last. If Cynog was trying to make a fool of him, he’d be disappointed.

He looked at the Purple Dawn students. Victor puffed out his chest. Mae giggled, looking down at him from behind her lashes. Hono read her book, pretending not to care, and Walter gave him an easy smile, his eyes as gentle as ever. He wasn’t confident he could take them down, but he was confident that he wouldn’t go down without a fight.

“You can appoint four champions, if you prefer. I can even tell you what my students’ specialties are,” Ernesto offered.

“That won’t be necessary,” Cynog replied.

Rhys narrowed his eyes. What did he mean, ‘that won’t be necessary?’ It sounded pretty necessary to Rhys! He’d have a massive advantage if he knew what he was up against!

At the same time, he understood. If Cynog accepted the offer of information, then Ernesto could scoff afterwards and claim that any victory the Infinite Constellation School claimed was only because of their foreknowledge.

As for appointing one champion, he was pretty sure that was just Cynog’s naturally bullying nature, but for all that he generally disagreed with Cynog’s bullying, he appreciated it being pointed against their enemies this one time. If he won, as solo champion, that would be a heavy blow against the supposedly superior Purple Dawn

Academy, whereas if he lost, as the solo champion, Cynog could rightfully point out that Purple Dawn had one-sidedly beaten up one of Infinite Constellation's mages, and either appoint a new champion or use the story as an example of how Purple Dawn bullied smaller schools. It was actually a genius maneuver from someone he'd hitherto seen as a blockhead with nothing but muscle in his skull. Rhys looked at Cynog in shock. Was it deliberately a genius move, or some kind of idiot savant, a broken-clock-is-right-twice-a-day accident?

Cynog pulled his pinky finger out of his ear and blew some earwax into the wind.

Rhys shook his head. *I have no idea which, but I should definitely be more careful around Cynog in the future.*

He still wasn't happy about his place as the guy who was sacrificed so that the sect wouldn't lose reputation regardless of whether he lost or not, but neither was he intent on losing. He would win this, whether they realized he was capable of it or not.

As the two teachers had been speaking, a few of Cynog's musclebound flunkies had been scurrying around, drawing out tiles to set up the battlefield. Now, they dispersed, and a beautiful golden-tone stone grid awaited Rhys and the Purple Dawn students.

Victor mounted it with a harrumph. Puffing out his chest, he thrust his thumb at himself. "I'm the weakest student of the four of us. Let's see if you can even beat me, Rhys!"

Rhys stepped onto the stone. He bowed to Victor, as he'd seen the martial students bow to one another before a formal duel. "My apologies, Victor, but I wasn't aware that being the weakest was something worth bragging about."

Victor's cheeks flushed, and a few of the Infinite Constellation students—and Mae—broke out in laughter. "Th-that's just because when I beat you, it'll show how weak your whole school is!"

"Then brag about it after your victory," Rhys advised him. He cupped his hands, proceeding with the formal introduction as if he'd said nothing at all. "Rhys Foundling greets you as a mage with no standing within or without Infinite Constellation Sect. Tier 1, trash talent, no particular bloodline nor rare skills to brag of."

Victor's face flushed. His teeth ground, and he hurriedly cupped hands back. "Victor Arneste. Third Rank within Purple Dawn's Tier 1 students."

Internally, Rhys grinned. In essence, he was doing to Victor exactly what Victor had hoped to do to him: reveal his own weakness before everyone, so a win on his part would be more embarrassing for Victor. Not only that, but to do it elegantly and formally in front of both teachers, while Victor embarrassed himself and put himself on the back

foot attempting the same tactic... well, when it came to bringing the right mentality to the battlefield, it was obvious who had won between Rhys and Victor.

Of course, this gambit was meaningless if he lost, but Rhys didn't care. By embarrassing Victor so thoroughly, he'd already won.

This kid wouldn't last ten seconds in a CoD lobby, he thought to himself, barely hiding his smirk.

They rose from their bows, and the battle began.

Victor charged Rhys with a shout, face still flushed, frustration still clear in his every action. Rhys jumped away. He deliberately retreated to the very edge of the battlefield. Victor's eyes flashed, and the boy launched a dozen powerful blows. "I've got you now!"

Standing on the edge of the stone grid, Rhys barely suppressed a yawn. Victor's punches were straightforward and simple. There was none of the skill and deadly intent Bast expressed, nor the fearsome twists and sudden feints Straw could pull out of nowhere. Nor was there the raw brutality and speed Ev brought to the field, where she rained down a hundred punches so quickly that he couldn't imagine countering her, and struggled to so much as hold a guard. Not only that, but Victor's punches seemed to be moving at half speed. He had absolutely no difficulty dodging them, and it was only with his back against the wall, as he was now, that he felt any thrill at all.

He went to throw the boy out of the ring, only to catch Cynog's eye. Cynog shook his head, just a little. *Overkill*, he mouthed.

Rhys shrugged to himself. This was a competition to show their skills off in front of Purple Dawn, right? It'd be no show of skill if he simply threw Victor out of the ring. To the uninitiated eye, it might even look like he just got lucky. So instead, Rhys called forth his rat projection. A rat materialized behind his head. It scurried down his arm and perched there, baring its teeth at Victor.

Mid-punch, Victor laughed. "What the hell? What a stupid—"

The rat projection sensed the incoming punch. It leaped from Rhys' hand onto Victor's face and tore into it. Blood and gore went flying. Victor screamed, stumbling back. He beat at the projection, but uselessly. His blows bounced off the side of the glowing blue rat, the mana that composed it more solid than his fists.

"Call off the projection! You have won," Walter shouted, stepping forward.

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Rhys snapped his fingers, a little perturbed himself. That rat had been far more savage and dangerous than he remembered. In his memories, the rat barely managed to get a

single bite off on Ev before she dismissed it with a kick... *Right, but Ev can fight at Tier 3, and this guy is only a Tier 1.* He looked at his hands. *Am I... strong?*

Walter sighed in relief as the rat vanished. He gestured. "Victor, come on—"

"I haven't lost yet!" Victor roared. He threw himself at Rhys, his arms wide in an attempt to bear hug Rhys off the platform.

Rhys stepped aside and gave Victor a swift kick in the ass as he passed. The boy stumbled forward, carried by his momentum and the force of the kick off the edge of the platform.

Cynog stepped forward. "Rhys has won."

"No! I refuse to acknowledge it!" Victor growled. He hopped to his feet and marched back toward the stone platform.

There was a blur of motion. Ernesto appeared behind the boy, one hand clamped on his shoulder. "You have lost, Victor. Do us a favor and acknowledge your loss, rather than continue to embarrass your school."

Victor jerked to a halt. He stared at Rhys in disbelief. "No. I refuse. He hasn't... he couldn't..."

Rhys smiled and gave him a little nod and wave. *Haha, I did and I could, fuck you!* He didn't say it, though. It was a time when silence was far better than any taunt he could muster.

"Then, it's my turn."

Rhys turned. He didn't know when, but at some point, Hono had stepped onto the platform. She had removed her hood to reveal a bonnet and a bell skirt, all in black and dark crimson, festooned in ribbons and bows. Rhys nodded in appreciation. Goth Lolita was always a high-tier fashion statement, and here she was as the pinnacle of the art! She made a sharp departure from her fellow mages in their prim robes and heavy cloaks, simple and dark, but that only made her choice all the better. It would be boring if he faced off against four copies of the same mook. He far preferred to fight four distinct character designs. Plus, a design like this... it wasn't quite as good as Sorden's, but it made him wish his female friend had transmigrated with him. She would go insane to have the chance to wear an outfit like Hono's.

He nodded in approval and bowed. "Greetings to Hono."

"I hope you won't hold back against a small, delicate girl like me," she said.

Rhys scoffed. What kind of trash did she think he was? He'd seen enough anime to know better than to underestimate the tiny female characters. She was probably the most dangerous of all of them. No way would he hold back. "Not a chance."

Hono bowed back. As she straightened, she threw her hand out. Black chainlike bolts of energy shot from her hand and rushed toward Rhys. Almost as if alive, they dashed back and forth on the air, zipping this way and that as they closed in.

Rhys dodged, hopping backward one step at a time. The bolts chased after him, unrelenting. When he dodged, they darted. When he retreated, they advanced. Pushing at him from four directions, they sought to pin him down and attack from all angles. He tried to work around them and close in on Hono, but she moved with her bolts, keeping them, and the battlefield, between her and Rhys.

"Let my curses land on you. Let them course through your blood. All I need is one hit, and the battle is over!" Hono mocked him. Her eyes were wide with bloodlust. Compared to her quiet out-of-battle persona, she fought a completely different person.

Rhys approved heartily.

Behind them, the students mumbled to themselves, taken aback.

"Curses?"

"That dark power?"

"Purple Dawn... what are they doing?"

Rhys had no time to spare them any thought. The black curse energy chased him down relentlessly. It gave him no space to breathe, no room to stop and get his feet under him. The battlefield was too refined and neat for Trash Step to give him an advantage, and when he chucked a random piece of trash at the energy, the trash flew right through it without stopping it in the slightest. When trash couldn't affect the energy, he didn't want to risk using Trash Intent here and losing the surprise of using it later for no advantage. It was 'curse' energy after all. Who knew? Maybe it could travel directly through any number of solid objects.

Back and forth, Rhys retreating and Hono pushing her advantage. There was no way to get to her without getting through the bolts. But that was fine. Rhys had a skill for that.

Baring his teeth, he charged directly at Hono.

Hono cackled. "I knew it! You have no ranged attacks. Bathe in the ferocity of my curses! I'll permanently cripple you, pathetic slime!"

It wasn't that he had no ranged attacks. He could empower something with Trash Intent and huck it at her any day, plus there was all the trash in his storage ring, but this battle didn't give him the sense of intense danger that would provoke him to use that kind of attack. Besides, there was something about this cursed energy she was using that was incredibly familiar. Something that called to him, just as he called to it.

The beams struck him. Rhys prepared to activate Trash Body, but found himself stopping dead instead. Evil magic permeated his every pore. Filth clogged his arteries and his mana passages alike. The dark energy tore him apart, attempting to turn his strengths against him and attack his weakest parts.

Just like impurities.

Rhys' eyes flashed. He called to the impurities in his core, the ones he'd been slowly pouring into himself from dripping the seven-times concentrated potion on his hand, and forcibly ignited them. As they ignited, so too did the curse power that had infiltrated his body. Rather than strengthening his body, though, the curse power burned, and burned away his mana directly. In that moment, Rhys' eyes were opened. It wasn't just that his body was impure and poorly built. No. The very mana he breathed in, the mana he'd assumed was clean all this time—it, too, was impure, and not just physical impurities, either. There were hints of darkness to its very energy, evil, dark, impure energy that ever so slightly tinged his mana, darkness that naturally existed in the world around him. Darkness that an ordinary mage would try to filter out of their mana.

In other words, *trash*.

Spurred on by the impurities, the curse power, and his mana, ignited. The darkness burned away, leaving behind a hyper-pure mana of an intensity and concentration Rhys had never seen before. He guided the new hyper-pure mana into his core and collected it there, winding it up into a tiny ball. The new mana thrummed with energy, at least twice as energetic as his ordinary mana. It felt compressed, concentrated, as though he'd burned away the empty space along with the impurities. Instinctively, Rhys sensed that this was a route to greater power. If he could empower all his mana like this, Tier 2, no, Tier 3 wasn't a dream.

Faint wisps of black smoke rose from his shoulders, but at this point, he was too experienced at burning impurities, and burned too few of them here, so that very little smoke appeared. The curse power produced no smoke when it burned, evaporating cleanly into the atmosphere. Rhys looked up. He walked toward Hono, absorbing the curse power she sent at him and burning it down to concentrate more of his mana.

Hono widened her eyes in shock. "What are you doing? How are you still moving? My curse power should... you should be writhing on the floor in pain!"

"Can you give me more? This isn't quite enough. It'll take all day to refine my mana, at this rate," Rhys requested.

“Wh-what? Refine your mana...?” Hono muttered.

Rhys continued to approach. Hono clicked her tongue and closed her hands, cutting off the beams of curse power. Disappointed, Rhys sighed and let the impurities burn out. It was a pity about Hono, but it was good to learn about curse power. Maybe he should go seek out a powerful curse later, to further refine his mana.

In his mind’s eye, he saw a city street. Bast stood beside him, and they stared at a poster. **Beware! The Strawman possesses great curse power!**

Rhys raised his brows. *I need to find Straw.*

Hono’s body blurred, and she vanished. Snapped back to the battle, Rhys barely made out her form flashing by him as she retreated. He reached out, but she was too fast. He raised his brows, actually impressed. It seemed they weren’t all total slackers like Victor.

Something wet and cold splashed on his side. “I’m not just a curse user. Now! Writhe!”

“I prefer the cool and calm goth type, not yanderes,” Rhys informed her. He looked at his arm. Black splotches appeared where the poison had struck him, but they quickly vanished. Not only was his poison resist too high for a low-tier poison to do him any harm at this point, but the potion simply wasn’t virulent enough to get past his impurity limits. Compared to the damage he’d learned to counter from handling impurities, this potion did nothing. He was sure the poison would have been deadly to an ordinary mage or martial artist, but to him? He could have bathed in it, and it wouldn’t even have been particularly good training.

Am I actually... strong? Rhys wondered, then pushed the thought away. There was no point getting a big head on the second fight of four. If he wasn’t a perfect counter for Hono, this would have been a tough battle. As it was, it ended up being a joke, through no fault of Hono’s. After all, she had no idea that she’d face a man who poisoned himself regularly for fun.

Then again, it’s a good lesson for her to learn. I’m surely not the only person with high immunity to poisons and curses. Rhys walked toward Hono. It had been fun, but she couldn’t hurt him, so it was time to end this battle.

Her brows furrowed, and she searched him, eyes darting back and forth over his body. “Why aren’t you in pain? What’s wrong with you?”

“A lot. A lot is wrong with me,” Rhys replied honestly, still approaching her at a slow walk. Abruptly, he slammed his foot down and sprinted toward her from a dead stop. It was a trick Ev had been fond of using against him, and now, he used it against Hono. Hono’s eyes flew wide. She turned to dart away, but Rhys had accelerated from too close, and she had no time to react. Lifting his knee, he hammered her in the chest and sent her flying off the stage. She landed in a pile of fabrics and a *fwumpf* of skirts.

Rhys dusted off his hands and nodded at Ernesto. “Next.”

Ernesto’s eyes narrowed. He stared venom at Rhys and said nothing.

Walter stepped forward, but Mae threw her hand out. “It’s my turn. Don’t get in my way.”

“If he bested Hono and Victor so easily, then you—”

Mae scowled. She shoved him out of the way and stomped ahead. “Stop underestimating me. Stand back and watch.”

Rhys nodded at her. She looked like a martial artist, muscular and powerful, which meant he was actually a poor match against her, when compared to Hono and Victor. When it came to physical fighters, he’d always been on the losing side, whether his opponent had been Bast, Straw, or Ev. Of everyone here, it was Mae he feared the most. His body was weak and slender; it always had been. No matter how much he practiced and reformed his body, he started from a natural disadvantage, and he’d never been able to overcome it.

A little voice at the back of his head whispered, *Yeah, you’ve never been able to overcome it... against the ultimate super weapon multiple schools worked together to defeat, the guy who got picked up by the Sword Saint for his raw talent, and the girl who’s a Tier higher than you and can surge her power up a Tier higher... if she isn’t Tier 3 outright.*

Rhys pushed the voice down. Even if his outlook was a little skewed, he still couldn’t take this fight easy. This would be the hardest battle yet.

He bowed. “Rhys Foundling greets fellow martial artist.”

“Shove it. You know my name, you know why we’re here.” Mae stepped onto the other end of the field and raised her fists.

Rhys snorted under his breath. He could respect someone with a one-track mind. He lifted his fists as well, and the two of them leaped at each other.

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

Chapter 48. Two Remain

Rhys and Mae charged at one another. At the last second, Mae's hands blurred, and she drew a sword. Rhys, not to be outdone, drew his broken sword in the same instant.

Mae saw the stub of a blade, and she laughed. "What's that going to do?" Ignoring it, she swung at his neck.

Rhys activated Trash Intent. Her sword rebounded off his intent, and her eyes widened. In that instant, with her guard blown wide open and both hands flying back, Rhys closed in. He stabbed at her gut, going for the kill just as she had for him.

A blue gem dangling from Mae's neck flashed. Blue light wrapped around her body, and his sword struck the light, not Mae herself.

Mae staggered back. She caught herself at the edge of the field and immediately ran to the right, circling around him. Rhys watched her go, eyes narrowed. That light was some kind of barrier or shield, and he'd have to break it to do damage to her. A part of him wanted to shout that it was unfair, but then, she hadn't known about his Trash Intent, either. If he could bring hidden weapons, why couldn't she bring hidden shields?

Besides, he was treating this match as a simulation of real battle from the start. He wanted to know how his skills would hold up in real combat. Quibbling over whether one equipment was permitted or not was meaningless, when in the real world, someone could wear a dozen shields or carry a hundred invisible blades, and he would simply die, rather than be able to shout to someone that the fight was unfair. Best to find out now what kind of magical items he might face here in the ring, when there was theoretically a referee able to halt the match, rather than in the real world, where there were no guardrails whatsoever.

Still, that didn't keep him from mocking his opponent.

"One point," Rhys said quietly, spinning the sword in his hand.

"What *is* that? An invisible sword? Isn't that cheating?" Mae said, apparently sharing none of his qualms over treating this as real battle.

He lifted his sword. "Not at all. Can't you sense what it is?"

At the edge of the battlefield, Ernesto stiffened. Walter stepped forward, his face pale. "Mae, that's weapon intent. Watch out!"

"Weapon intent? Since when has weapon intent been wasted on manifesting broken weapons?" Mae mocked him.

Rhys smiled. “Jealous?”

There was no point hiding his Trash Intent any longer. He’d already used it, so he might as well use it as part of his mental warfare. Besides, this, too, was mental warfare. As long as she saw it as nothing more than ‘Weapon Intent,’ he still held a significant advantage in this battle.

“Jealous of my shield? What, are you too poor to afford one, in this tiny little school?” Mae returned without missing a beat.

Rhys laughed. It was good to fight someone who wasn’t afraid to trash talk back. He’d missed this, somehow. He hadn’t thought he would, but he had.

The second he laughed, Mae rushed in again, trying to catch him off-guard, but Rhys was ready and waiting. The two of them clashed over and over again, dashing across the battlefield. She pushed him to his limits. Her strength was greater than his, and so was her speed, her technique infinitely more refined. Rhys was on the back foot.

But he was still able to keep up with her. He matched her, blow for blow, and maneuvered deftly around the field, careful to keep himself from getting backed against the boundaries. She could overpower him, but he was used to fighting stronger opponents, and not only that, but her strength was... he had to admit it, closer to his than he was expecting. Compared to fighting Bast or Ev, it felt far more like he battled a true peer in her, someone who had a small advantage, but no more.

The battle continued, and Rhys stayed strong, while Mae began to run out of breath. Her eyes flashed in desperation. She reached to a pouch at her hip and loosed it, and twists of wire covered the field.

“Try that maneuvering now, dipshit,” she snarled.

“Thank you,” Rhys replied, a grin on his face. She’d done him a favor. Who would have thought that his opponent would throw trash on the field for him? Honestly, it was too kind. He activated Trash Step and easily avoided the caltrops to close in on Mae. She whirled, tracking him. He lashed out with his sword, and Mae swung to parry it, but at the last second, Rhys deactivated Trash Intent and stepped to the side instead. Carried by the weight of her blow, Mae stumbled forward into her own caltrops.

Now Mae was the one on the back foot, as Rhys pressed the advantage to force her to fight in her own caltrops. He hammered a flurry of blows at her, attacking with a ferocity and speed that mimicked Ev’s to force her to constantly block and allow her no chance to escape the caltrops. Mae gritted her teeth, and sweat ran down her brow. Rhys kept up the barrage. He had her. One misstep, and the match was over. Just a little more—

Mae roared. A wave of orange energy blasted from her core. Rhys was thrown backward as her cloak, likewise, flew off. Underneath, she wore a skintight orange crop

top and black spats, with orange-dyed leather skirt armor covering her hips and thighs. A orange-dyed leather panel was strapped over her heart as well.

Rhys nodded approvingly. She was definitely a sportsgirl, but what a dynamic outfit! He'd love to stitch that up for his friend any day. It'd be a quick make, too, as long as he cut some corners on the armor.

Bits of metal rolled by his feet. He glanced down to find that the caltrops, too, had been thrown away. They once more stood on the solid stone of the arena, with no difficult terrain in sight.

"That's a pity," he muttered to himself.

Mae charged, and once more, Rhys rushed to meet her. This time, though, he found himself one-sidedly being pushed back. The orange energy that flowed over Mae's body empowered her beyond what his reforged body could meet. It was like fighting a wild animal, or battling Ev when she got half-serious. He never won those fights... but then, he respected Ev too much to use some of his more underhanded tricks on her, and besides, on the rare occasion he *did* start fighting underhandedly, it only led to her getting even more serious, and the fight ending even faster.

That wasn't the case for Mae.

Rhys empowered his sword once more, this time activating Trash Aura on it. The sword strengthened, growing to its absolute ultimate form. He slashed at Mae, hacking at her body with his full force. Attacking so aggressively meant hits of hers got through, but she was never able to capitalize on them. Instead, she had to fend off Rhys' attacks, or risk taking a heavy hit herself. Her sword took hits, and steadily weakened, while Rhys' empowered sword took none, or simply grew more powerful as it became more trashy and he could pump even more energy into it.

Her sword met his, and this time, Rhys unleashed his Trash Aura. A strike of sword energy left his sword and hurtled past her unempowered weapon toward her body. Mae growled. Jumping back, she lifted one hand off her sword to bat the energy away. Her shield, and the orange energy, both surged as she made the gesture. The orange energy held; the shield, with a loud *tink!*, shattered. The stone on her neck broke, and bits of blue gem rained down.

"Weapon aura? How? He's only Tier 1," Walter murmured to himself.

"Was that expensive? Sorry," Rhys said with a mock-grimace.

Mae said nothing, but her eyes grew more dangerous. "Do that again. Try it."

Rhys smiled. He would not be trying it, not least because unleashing Trash Aura took a lot of mana. He was already running low, and there was no room mid-battle to sneak a

sip of his mana potion, nor did he want to tap into the hyper-pure mana he'd obtained from burning the curse energy. He still needed to study it, and between winning one fight and advancing as a mage, he prioritized advancing as a mage.

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Using Trash Aura again or no, his back wasn't against a wall yet. He still had more techniques to use before he had to tap into any of his desperation moves. And from the looks of Mae, she'd already tapped into hers.

She was making a good show of it, but he could see the sweat dripping down her body, and the way her chest heaved when she had a moment to breathe. This orange energy technique took a lot out of her, and she couldn't maintain it forever. On the other hand, all he needed to do was use Trash Intent, and he could stave her off—not win, but hold his defensive position for minutes, if he needed to. If he simply stood here and turtled until it dissipated, it was his win.

Not that he wanted such a hollow victory. He was a trashy guy. Sure, if that kind of victory was all he could achieve, he wouldn't flinch at taking it. But if he could do more, absolutely obliterate his opponent, stunt on their friends, and tea-bag their corpse... well, what kind of basement-dweller could resist?

Turtling was a good grieving strategy too, but Mae didn't seem like the type to get as bothered by that as she would if he took her down in an embarrassing show of power. Victor, sure, he'd turtle on that brat all day if he needed to. He could already tell the boy was the type to get worked up over being unable to injure an opponent. But Mae? No. She was a warrior. A martial artist who'd been through hours upon hours of training. She had beaten insensate dummies and failed to land a serious hit on true masters for so long that fighting someone who turtled wouldn't budge her mental state at all. He had something else in mind.

Rhys closed in on Mae. Mae's eyes flashed. Doubtless she'd been waiting for this, for him to give in to the lure of the fight and meet her brute power with brute power. Brute power that he, of course, didn't have, something they both knew. His body was empowered and reforged, but against someone at the absolute peak of Tier 1, he was still lacking in strength.

After all, Mae doubtlessly had ways to empower her body and reinforce it, the same as he did. The fact that they could trade blows indicated as much. If he'd seriously fought Victor with the kind of hits he'd been landing on Mae, the boy might not have survived the encounter. Where hers had likely been guided by a martial fighter or a technique that gave her both strength and toughness, his reforges had all been under non-battle conditions, which meant he'd prioritized survival and invulnerability. He was tough, but not as strong as he could have been. It was something to fix in the future, but right now, it was simply something to keep in mind.

Honestly, even discovering that his body could be considered tough was a bit eye opening. Cynog had trashed him, and so had Ev... but in both cases, he'd been fighting up two Tiers, in essence. Fighting up one tier had already made Tarais treat him with respect, despite him being a lower Tier than her and technically the one who ought to show her respect. If he could actually hold his own two tiers up, he would really be a once in a generation talent, and not trash at all.

If only, but alas, his talent was trash.

He put his thoughts to the back of his mind and slashed at Mae. She blocked, a static block in case he yanked the blade away from a parry. This time, Rhys dismissed the blade before he hit hers. It soared through, and on the far side, he activated Trash Intent once more. A deep red line opened up on Mae's chest.

She snarled in pain and returned the hit. The downside of this attack was that he was on the other side of her guard, yes... but as a consequence, she, too, was on the other side of his. Her blade cut deep into his ribcage, and red blood spilled out.

Rhys activated Trash Body, suppressing the pain and damage alike. He didn't retreat or retract his blade, but kept attacking. Mae shouted and leaped back, putting distance between them.

Now. Rhys drew out the steel pole he'd found earlier in the cabin's trash and pointed its end at her. He manifested Trash Intent with all his power.

Resistance. Fierce resistance, as though he were punching through flesh with his bare hands. Rhys pushed past it, fueling the manifestation with all the mana he had left. The trash in his hand trembled, then came to be, brought back at its original form and strength. A steel pole, formed from Rhys' mana, pierced through Mae's shoulder.

Mae screamed. She screamed as Rhys had never heard anyone scream before. He deactivated the intent, and bright red blood spurted from the wound, almost comedically bright, if not for how horrific the wound was. He saw bone and muscle, and behind her, the length of where the steel pole had ended away, was a chunk of flesh. His pole had manifested from his hands, toward her, at speeds even Ev couldn't mimic, piercing through her shoulder on the way out.

He'd tried the technique once, on Ev. The resistance had been far greater, and he'd failed, but Ev's face had turned stormy, and she'd immediately closed the distance and delivered a punishing blow to his chest.

When he'd woken up, she'd been there, hovering over him, staring into his eyes. "Never use that technique again. Not unless it's on someone you mean to kill."

He didn't mean to kill Mae; that was why he'd aimed for her shoulder. He'd meant to send a message. If you seriously threaten my school, then prepare to be taken seriously

in return. This was no friendly spar between two friendly schools. He knew it, they knew it, everyone knew it. When Hono had been openly shouting about crippling him permanently with her curses, he'd confirmed what he'd suspected: that these students knew, and agreed with, what their teacher and academy meant to do—that they wanted to crush Infinite Constellation School, and gods damn the aftermath. No one opened a friendly duel by threatening to permanently cripple their opponent. Likewise, when he'd taken the hit, he'd confirmed it. Her attacks would have permanently crippled anyone but him. The poison she'd used, too, would have killed someone who didn't have poison resistance, even at the Tier 1 level, maybe even all the way to Tier 2.

These students knew why they were here. They had come here with the intent to cripple any Infinite Constellation students they met in duels. If not for Rhys' deep battle familiarity, his Trash Step, and his Trash Body, he might have been crippled in his battle with Mae. She'd had a hidden shield that no one had disclosed, and used caltrops which would have seriously injured, if not permanently crippled, a lesser students' feet. Knowing how they looked down on Infinite Constellation School, he knew that, though Mae's attempts were sloppier and less direct than Hono's, she, and all her fellow students, had come here to strike fear into the heart of his school, and cripple, if not outright kill, its most powerful students.

How unfortunate, then, that the one they faced was a piece of trash, who wasn't afraid to shred his own body to get ahead.

The orange light around Mae's body faded. She stumbled back, gripping her shoulder. Walter rushed toward her, concern all over his face. Before he could step on the battlefield and taint their duel, Rhys kicked Mae over the line. She could have no complaints, that way. No take-backs or try-agains. This was their duel.

And it was over.

Walter caught Mae before she hit the ground. Baring her teeth at him, she tore free of his hold and stomped away, yanking a potion out of her robes and downing it in one gulp. Rhys stared at the potion, raising his brows. The emanations from that potion were tremendous. If he had one of those, with Less is More...

Now isn't the time. He was bleeding from a dozen cuts, and his mana guttered in his core. Rhys drew out his potion and his mana potion and sipped from both. Less is More sparked into life and closed his wounds, and the mana smoothly flowed into his core. Naturally, with all the gold he had, he'd purchased his fair share of potions and mana potions, though the potion he sipped today was one he'd made himself, with strong impurities in it. After a moment, he drew out his impure potion and dripped a few drops on his hand. He had one fight left to go, and Mae had truly pushed his limits. If he hadn't used underhanded techniques and been willing to put his own body on the line, he would have lost. To put it clearly, Mae should have won their duel, and it was only thanks to his troublemaking that he'd won.

On the sidelines, Walter pointed at him. His hand shook with rage, and his voice trembled with it. "You..."

"Me. So afraid that you're shaking? I guess that's only fair, since I've beaten all three of your underlings with ease. Should I remind you that I'm a mage of no standing within the school? Hmm, maybe it's Purple Dawn Academy which is lacking," Rhys said, lightly flicking his sleeve. A drop of blood splattered across the ground. It was his own, but Walter wouldn't know that.

Walter's hand shook harder. His lips pressed into a dangerous white line.

"Should we call it here? I've already won three of four. Or is Purple Dawn Academy going to force this duel to its bitter end?" Rhys asked. He was playing the villain, but what else was he supposed to do? Purple Dawn had come here to stunt him his school, and here he was, stunting on them. Was he supposed to act all noble in this circumstance? Graciously accept his victory? Quietly stand here and wait for the next duel?

No! He'd never held back in his life! When he had the upper hand, that was exactly the time to taunt! Piss off the other team even more! Ruin their plans by riling them up! Push their mentality to the edge!

Well, if being silent and mysterious would piss off the other team, he'd do it. But good Walter looked like the sheltered type, who hadn't done any trash talking in his life, who'd had it beat into him by some well-meaning parent to only say things he meant and say nothing at all rather than something rude.

Ha! He shat upon such noble ideas. Shit-talk, trash-talk, and ruin their mentality! Mental warfare was a kind of warfare, and Rhys loved it most of all! How could someone who loved trash not love trash talk? It was a part of his nature, a piece of his very soul. If he didn't have anything nice to say, he'd make sure he shat so hard upon his opponent that they'd be wiping excrement out of their crevasses for years to come! Oh delicate of heart, oh noble of mind, come before him! Lay your lily-white ears before his mouth, so he could spew the worst excrement he could come up with into them! Yes, yes, he was in his element!

Walter's mana flared. His aura clashed with Rhys', and for the first time since the duels had begun, Rhys felt actual fear. Walter was technically Tier 1, yes. *Technically*. But his mana was so pure, his emanations so powerful, that he was but a blink of the eye from ascending into Tier 2. In fact, fighting too hard might even push him directly into the next Tier.

Whu-oh, Rhys thought, but not a glimmer of regret went through his mind. If he was going to face the beating of his life, then at least he went down after handing out the tounge-lashing of his life. He could be at peace with that.

“I’m going to kill you,” Walter snarled, and stepped onto the field.

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Chapter 49. The Final Duel

Walter stepped onto the field. Instantly, Rhys knew he was serious. The aura rippling off of him left no doubt of that. If there had been any true friendship to this ‘friendly duel,’ it was gone now.

Rhys stepped back. He smiled. *Good*. If he could do nothing else, at least let him draw out the truth to this visit in front of all his other students. If they didn’t know it from his duel with Mae, let them see it from his duel with Walter. There was no intention on the Purple Dawn Academy’s side to be anything but destructive. Not from the beginning until now, was there ever any intent to have a friendly spar.

“Rhys Foundling,” Rhys introduced himself again, clasping his hands.

Walter barely inclined his head. “Walter Tournors.”

“You’ll have to forgive my ignorance, but are you from noble families?” Rhys asked. Now that he’d fired up Walter, what better to do than slow things down and let him stew in his frustration a bit? Walter wanted nothing more than to tear him into pieces. Letting the fight start now would give Walter exactly that release. So he was going to build up as much frustration as he could, and put Walter on the back foot mentally, because if he didn’t, he would die. He needed all the advantages he could get right now.

“Hmm?” Walter all but spat in his irritation.

“You and Victor both introduced yourselves with a great emphasis on your surnames. If you were ordinary children... or orphans, like me, you wouldn’t put any emphasis on your family name like that.” Rhys paused. “Well, Victor’s behavior already told me he was, but...”

“That’s correct. We’re from noble families. Noble mages.”

“Mmm.” Walter, too, had already told him he was a noble, or at least, from a good family, from his good behavior and his gentility. For all that rich kids were all insufferable brats, some of them had been taught how to behave before they were sent out into the world. Walter had clearly been taught manners by hook or by crook, and Rhys greatly

appreciated his parents for doing their part. “You know, I’m just an ignorant country boy, someone who was found as a child. Tournors, when compared to Victor’s family, how does it rank?”

“Low.”

Lower nobility? Ah, that explained it, then. That was why he actually had some semblance of self-control and manners. The higher nobility had no reason to teach anything to their children, but the lower nobility still had to fear the upper nobility. There weren’t many benefits to a feudal system, but the fact that the nobility, too, had a hierarchy, and everyone who was even a little bit rich didn’t have the right to generate horrid brats for the world to deal with, was certainly one of them.

Well, maybe he was a little biased, given his original upbringing in a bottom-of-the-middle-class family. But he had the right to be biased, after all the bullshit he’d put up with at the hands of brats, whether they were his incompetent bosses or the popular kids at school. He’d experienced enough brats to know how irritating they were, right from his heart.

Rhys nodded. “A pity that you can’t knock Victor in the head. Must have been cathartic when I gave that whelp a beating.”

Walter’s lip twitched. His eyes narrowed.

“Or maybe you’re angry that I beat Mae? Are you in love with her? She’s beautiful, yeah. And I can respect that savagery. But you guys should all break free of such an aggressive and predatory school while you can. Do you really thing it’s a good thing to come to smaller schools and beat up our most powerful students? Even go so far as cripple them? You had a good upbringing, Walter. I can tell it from the way you hold yourself back, and hold a conversation rather than just beating my head in. Surely you know that it isn’t the place of the strong to one-sidedly beat the weak, right?”

Walter’s lip twitched. “After you did that to Mae—”

“After I protected myself in a heated duel? After she threw caltrops on the ground? After Hono openly attempted to permanently cripple me? Don’t pretend to be righteous now, Walter Tournors. You know what you’re doing.” He lifted his finger and pointed at the center of Walter’s chest. “In your heart, you know it’s wrong.”

“I...” Walter’s brows furrowed. A troubled expression crossed his face.

Rhys’ eyes narrowed in happiness. Excellent. Not only had he frustrated Walter, but he’d also forced him to question his own righteousness. Walter had obviously long-since made peace with his role in bullying the schools, but making peace with something in his heart, and making peace with something in public, in front of everyone, were two different things. Even if Walter’s heart was completely hardened, and he felt nothing at

all, he couldn't openly admit to such a thing without losing all credibility, and outing his school as deliberately bullying the smaller Infinite Constellation School.

And if Rhys was right, and Walter really did have a strict, 'good' upbringing, then his heart *wasn't* hardened. And his words, right now, despite all the shit he'd put Walter through up until this point—for the sole reason that Rhys was correct, for the sole reason that Walter himself doubted the righteousness of his actions, he would sow a single seed of doubt in Walter's heart.

Rhys bowed again. "Shall we?"

Cementing his righteousness by not outright attacking, but offering Walter yet another notification that battle had begun. His opponent was far more powerful than him, at the absolute limit of their Tier's strength. It was suicidal to take a moment to notify him that the fight had begun. Rather, all tactical sense said that Rhys should immediately launch a sneak attack. But that wasn't the game he was playing.

He was righteous, and Walter was unrighteous. Every move, every action, was perfectly calculated to put Walter on the moral back foot.

If it was, well, anyone but Walter, or rather, anyone who didn't have a 'good' upbringing, it wouldn't matter at all. At best, it would act as a small mental detriment. But it was Walter. Walter, who had a 'good' upbringing. Walter, who as a lower-class noble, had doubtless been taught with every waking moment to do the 'right' thing, or else risk destruction by the higher-rank nobles. Especially in a world like this, where might made right, he would absolutely, without a doubt, have that kind of lesson beaten into his very soul.

I wasn't sure of it at first, but I am now. Walter had played to his every move. He could move Walter with a twitch of his pinky. Were this a battle of words or intent, he would have already won. The moral victory stood firmly in his court. Yes, he had just heavily injured Mae. But it was in a duel, where they had faced one another as equal combatants, and Mae had made every effort to cripple him. To injure her in return was fair game, and in fact, when he looked at her now, her shoulder was fully healed. For mages, that had been a minor wound.

In comparison, Walter's team had bragged, openly announced their intent to cripple Infinite Constellation students, and used rude traps in battle. Rhys had met them where they stood, with equal and opposite force. Between him and Walter's team, Rhys was the shining example of nobility.

Now, he'd not only reminded Walter of that, but rubbed Walter's nose in his own status and forced him to question his actions. Pissed him off, drawn out his frustration, claimed the moral high ground, and acted with nobility, all in the space of a few minutes. Oh, if Walter remembered his early actions, he'd recall that he was the one who actually had the high moral ground, but Rhys had given him no opening to do so. And even if he did

recall such a vital fact, it would only frustrate him more. Win, win, win. The mental battle had been won.

Now, to win the actual battle.

All his maneuvering and talking had only won him a tiny debuff on Walter's mental state. He had no illusions about the actual battle. This would be the toughest fight he'd ever fought. To the death. To the end. There was no calling it quits. It wasn't a spar with Straw, or Bast, or Ev. He couldn't scurry off to Az's library when things got dark. He beat Walter, or he died. There were no two ways about it.

Walter bowed back. He drew his sword. "I fight with the blade and with magic."

"I fight with trash."

If Walter was confused or surprised, he had no time to express it. Rhys closed the distance immediately after. Their blades clashed.

If Mae had tested the limits of Rhys' strength, Walter completely surpassed them. He forced Rhys back. One strike had Rhys' wrists and arms singing with pain. Gritting his teeth, Rhys pushed on. He barely kept pace as Walter harassed him with a series of devastating blows. Rhys' most recent sparring partner, Ev, preferred hand-to-hand combat, and as a result, Rhys' last experience of swordplay was with Bast and Straw, long ago in the forest—and that, with sticks and fake swords, at best. Mae had been a strong swordsman, but nothing beyond Bast's level. Walter was a master with the sword. Time and time again, he slipped past Rhys' guard to land heavy blows on Rhys.

These weren't the superficial wounds Mae had inflicted, that he barely needed Trash Body to work past. Every single one was meant to maim or kill. If he relied on Trash Body here, he'd be out of the fight before the fight began. Rhys barely kept up. He was locked on the back foot, desperately parrying and blocking to keep Walter from picking him apart, like a vulture dismembering a corpse. Where Walter's hits landed, he utilized Trash Body to its utmost extent, and barely kept his body in working condition by flaring almost all his mana into it. He wanted to use his Cornered Rat claw strike, but although the 'cornered' condition had triggered, and he knew he could launch out with explosive power in this moment, he couldn't find the space or the time to afford to go on the attack. If he stopped blocking for a moment, that would be it. The fight, and his life, would be forfeit.

Abruptly, Walter stopped. Rhys hopped away, adding room. Blood soaked into his robes and poured down his body. He was a sorry sight, badly injured, bleeding, and panting heavily, while a near-pristine Walter looked down on him, a single hair straying from his slicked-back hair. In this miracle moment, Rhys yanked a potion out from his robes and sipped it. He was prepared to throw it away, but Walter waited, somehow, miraculously, giving him a moment to heal.

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Does he want a good match, or something? A fair fight? His loss. Rhys put the potion back in his robes and nodded. “I appreciate it. I hate to waste anything.”

“You shouldn’t thank me.” Walter’s mana flared, then vanished. The boy staggered as though he’d been dealt a severe blow. At the same instant, a sense of intense cold and danger gripped Rhys’ stomach. He raced toward Walter, wanting to take advantage of the boy’s apparent weakness, but the sense of fear didn’t dissipate. If anything, it grew stronger.

This isn’t good.

Two skeletal hands erupted from the earth on either side of Rhys. Sharp, bony fingers rose up on every side of him, completely encapsulating him. The hands slammed shut, striving to shut Rhys inside.

Rhys put his hand on his storage ring and called forth the two largest pieces of trash he had, two sturdy halves of the same timber that had once supported a home, some time before that home had burned down. He activated his Trash Intent with all his might, slamming the two halves of the timber up against the bones of the hand. Blue light snapped into place, reforming the timber and reinforcing it, empowering it, strengthening it.

The hands struggled. They trembled, striving to close. Rhys kept his hands firmly on the timbers, refusing to let them break. If the hands closed on him, he was dead. Their emanations were that powerful. There was no question in his mind. That icy cold, dangerous power would bear him under the ground, and he would die there, cold and alone.

But he could hold them open. For as long as it took, until the spell wore out—

“Have you forgotten someone?”

Rhys stared up. Walter stood over him, bare blade pointed at Rhys’ face. There wasn’t enough room to escape between the fingers, nor to reach a hand through, but there was enough room for a blade. Walter drew back. His blade flashed in the sun, perfectly lined up with Rhys’ right eye.

Shit. Oh shit. Oh fuckballs. Rhys’ hands trembled. He wanted to lift them off the timbers, but he couldn’t. If he released that Trash Intent, the skeletal hands would crush him. If he didn’t, Walter’s blade would take his head. There was no way out. No victory.

Trash. This situation was trash.

And what did he do with trash?

He burned it down.

Rhys' right hand flashed. He moved faster than he ever had before, tearing the ligaments on his hand to force it to move faster. From his storage ring, he yanked the impure potion—and downed it.

All in one go. No worrying about Less is More. Devouring every last drop of the potion, until there was nothing left.

The Trash Intent flickered. Half of it winked out, and the hands closed around him. The other half of the timber caught them, and they jerked to a halt again, unable to bear him into the earth. Water's blade clashed against the manifested bones of his own spell and fell back.

Cold bone pressed in all around Rhys, cold as the grave. He felt it sap his strength, even without making contact. Being this close to the bones was dangerous. If they successfully dragged him under, that was it. His life was over.

But Rhys barely felt it. Impurities poured through Rhys. More than he'd ever borne before. His whole body trembled, no, convulsed with the pain and the force of it. They tore into everything. Bones, muscle, organs, all of it. Even his skin blackened. His mana stopped flowing entirely, slowed to black sludge. His blood flowed backward, and he spat a black mouthful.

Walter frowned, confused more than anything. "Committing suicide?"

"Never!" In the very center of his core, Rhys' consciousness circled around that tiny ball of hyper-pure mana, that even these impurities couldn't break into. He grabbed onto it. He wanted to save this for later, but he couldn't hold anything back in this fight. Not without dying. So he took that hyper-pure mana, and forced it into the very thing that it wanted to be the least—forcing every last drop of the ball into the impurities.

The impurities heated. They glowed red hot, rejecting the hyper-pure mana just as the hyper-pure mana rejected them. Caught in a feedback loop, they grew brighter and hotter, hotter and brighter, until Rhys couldn't bear to look at them.

They broke into flame. Fire raged through him. Not the controlled blazes he'd been conjuring lately, within the safety of the upper peak, within the limits of what counted as safety to him, but a wild flame. A wild fire, that burned his whole body down. Every part of him blackened as pitch black smoke poured into the sky.

The students outside could only see the white bones, trying to pull Rhys down. They could see that the bones couldn't move any further, but that was it. Walter stood there, equally frozen.

And then black smoke began billowing out of the gaps in the bones.

“The Beast!”

“Our Impure Lord!”

“God of the Black Smoke!”

A few Infinite Constellation School students jumped to their feet. Their god was in the room. Their god, the black smoke they’d worshipped, the one that had shook the mountain—was here! Before them!

Within the skeletal hands, Rhys burned. He burned to charcoal, but as he burned, he rebuilt. Strength. Power. Not just defensive power, not just the durability to take Ev’s hits and return in kind, but ultimate power. The strength to defeat anyone. The strength to defeat someone at the very limits of Tier 1—

No. My ambitions aren’t so weak. The power to beat anyone. To defeat anyone. To overcome everyone, and protect everything he wanted to protect.

Power welled up in Rhys’ body. Strength like he’d never felt before. The impurities reforged him, but not only that. They empowered him. Like mana, but a hundred times more powerful, forcing every single ounce of power into his limbs, his muscles, his bones. He’d channeled impurities before. Used them to reform his body, or transform them into mana. But right now, in this moment, he did the bare minimum of transforming. Instead, he directly channeled the impurities themselves, grabbing onto the raw power of burning the impurities and transforming that directly into strength.

As Rhys burned, his hand fell off the timber. The skeletal hands began to shut. But at the same time, his eyes flared with power. Burning orange fire poured from his eye sockets, overwhelming the blue tinge mana had cast onto them, turning it all to bright flame.

He reached out. His charcoal hands grasped the bones that sought to cage him. Without hesitation, Rhys clenched his hands shut. And that, that small gesture, the closing of his hands—that was enough to tear the hands apart.

Bone shattered. For a moment, blue-tinged shards of bone flew outward from where Rhys had broken them, and then the spell itself gave out. Walter stumbled back, spewing blood from his mouth as the backlash of the spell failing hit him. Nonetheless, he raised his sword, his eyes grim as he faced down the savage specter Rhys had become.

Rhys stood there. His vision flickered, barely clear enough to make out Walter before him. He wavered, his consciousness on the brink of dissipating. An almost subconscious part of him reforged his body, making it stronger, *stronger*, more durable, and *stronger*. The rest of him channeled the impurities, letting them rage within him. If he couldn’t bear them as he was, then burn it down, throw it out, and start over. If this

body was inadequate, then he would recognize it as the trash it was and reject it. He wasn't afraid to burn himself down. He didn't fear destruction. He was trash, and trash was intended for destruction, fated for it from the start. It was only through destruction that he could become more powerful. Only through burning himself to ash, that he could strengthen himself—enough to win this fight. Enough to become stronger. Enough—enough to become strongest of all.

Walter adjusted his stance. "If you won't approach, then—"

Rhys lunged. He moved so quickly that his vision went black, that the sparse blood in his body couldn't keep up with it. But he didn't need it. Didn't need to see to know where his enemy was. He sensed it, felt it in his mana, in his bones.

The only real match for him today, was Mae. Why?

Because Walter was impure.

Black gunk filled Walter's mana passages. Curse power clung to his mana. In this state, on the verge of death, his whole self burning, Rhys could see it. The black mark on Walter's core, a sleeping skeleton with demon horns pushing through its brows. The skeleton's eye sockets were shut, and it looked extremely bizarre, covered in bone spurs and vicious spines. *That* was the source of the attack he'd used on Rhys. Some form of curse. Not a curse itself, or else Rhys could have absorbed it like he did with Hono's attacks, but a *projection* of a curse. A curse that Walter had taken onto his very core.

Rhys felt a sense of loss. A strange sadness. Walter wasn't trash. He had decent talent, and undeniable skill with the sword. But by taking that curse onto himself, placing it onto his very core, he'd marked himself as trash. To see something that wasn't trash, marked and transformed into trash—sorrow flooded over Rhys. It was different when he was trash from the beginning. No one would cry a tear when trash became more trashy, or burned itself up. But to see someone with talent throw that all away and become trash... that was worth sorrow. That was worth regret.

Rhys grabbed Walter by the head and slammed him into the ground. Walter tried to counterattack, but Rhys was too fast, too strong. An overwhelming force of fire, smoke, and impurities. Rhys willed it, and burning impurities rushed from him into Walter. He didn't know how, or why. In this state, it was as easy as breathing, and he didn't question it, just as one wouldn't question breathing water if they were transformed into a fish. He could set Walter's impurities alight, and so, he did.

Walter screamed. He thrashed in Rhys' hold, struggling to break free. Overcome with pain, he couldn't launch a meaningful attack or countergrapple. He kicked and struggled like a rabid beast, but couldn't overcome the burning Rhys' strength.

It made a fearsome sight. A charcoal-black figure, flaking away, burned down to blackened bones. Red molten light leaked from the cracks in its body, and flames poured from its eyes and mouth. Walter thrashed in its hold, struggling but failing to break its grasp.

Ernesto stepped forward. "The duel is over. Release him!"

Cynog blocked his way. Ernesto looked down his nose at him. "Step aside, or I'll report your blatant abuse to the Headmaster."

"Of what, Purple Dawn Academy? He isn't my boss. Not yet," Cynog scoffed with a sneer. "Right now, my boss is Aquari Gibron, and she doesn't give a fuck. Go ahead. Take it up with her. But I'm not going to step aside."

Ernesto narrowed his eyes. He lifted his hand. Power glimmered in his palm.

Cynog flexed his muscles. He glared back. "Try me."

The two glared at one another, locked in a deadlock. Behind Cynog, the battle raged on.

Unaware of all this, Rhys continued to pour into Walter. The impurities burned. Rhys absorbed that power into himself, rather than let it empower Walter. He didn't know Walter's body well enough to know what or how to enhance it, and besides, they were enemies. This power was his, now, and he wouldn't let it go.

He reached Walter's core and didn't stop. He plunged right in, seeking after the source of all the impurities—the sleeping demonic skeleton in Walter's core.

That demon opened its eye sockets. It uncurled from its sleeping position and screeched a battle cry, rushing to meet Rhys. The two clashed. For a moment, the demon held him back, but only for a moment. Rhys was a tsunami of smoke and fire, a force of nature, not a being. Before him, the skeletal demon was but an ant. An ant that he would swallow up.

It fought back. The skeleton clawed at the wave Rhys had become, but there was no overcoming him. The wave swallowed it up, and just like everything else, the skeleton burned.

In the last moment before the skeleton died, its eyes suddenly flared to light. Cold, dark light burned in their hollow depths, and a cold, dark intelligence gazed forth. It locked eyes with Rhys. Not the burning wave of smoke and fire, but Rhys, the human form hidden in the depths of that wave. Rhys saw the darkness, and the darkness saw him.

So you've come, O' One Who Cleanses.

Rhys' eyes flashed. He grinned. "Wrong!"

The darkness paused. *No?*

“I don’t cleanse the trash. I love it! If you think I’m here to clean you, you’re wrong! All trash belongs to me. All trash is mine, whether I burn it down to remake it anew, or polish it into something that can be loved. If you’re trash, then I’m not here to destroy you, or cleanse you. I’m here to make you shine!”

What?

“Come here. Today, I was going to burn you down, but why waste such a gem? You’re a powerful weapon, aren’t you? You don’t belong to Walter. I don’t know who you are, or who this power belongs to—but I don’t care! I’m going to polish you into my own spell!”

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

Chapter 50. Plucking a Diamond

The tsunami of burning impurities rushed through Rhys and into Walter. They coursed through his core, surrounding the black mark of the skeleton. Rhys’ impurities scoured at the skeleton, lifting it off Walter’s core, ripping every black mark and trace of impurity out of the other boy’s core. The mass of impurity worked like superpowered sandpaper, and on top of that, it was superheated. When it came to lifting the curse off Walter’s core, it was like scrubbing with a scouring pad and boiling water. He narrowed his eyes, focusing on the skeleton itself. This was the most important moment. The curse, the skeleton, was no longer empowered by Walter’s core. With no power source to draw from, the curse naturally began to die.

But Rhys didn’t let it. He fed it impure power, directly from the impurities he was burning. The skeleton trembled. That black intelligence shook as well. It struggled to remain tethered to the skeleton, but the skeleton itself could hold very little power. Compared to the power of Rhys’ wave of impurities, it was utterly overwhelmed. He burned the black power that controlled it. That power was immense, and this was but a tiny strand of that power, but this tiny strand? This tiny strand was well within Rhys’ power to burn away.

How... the voice whispered, and then there was silence.

Nothing connected to the curse except for Rhys. Nothing empowered the source but Rhys’ burning impurities. Rhys surrounded the curse with his impurities and pulled it free of Walter’s core. He drew it into himself, placing it not on his core, but wrapping it in a small ball of impurities and setting it nearby. The small ball of impurities wrapping the

curse orbited his core, and within the small ball, the skeleton quietly shut its eye sockets and went back to sleep.

It was his. His spell. He knew instinctively that he could only empower it with impurities; mana would never do. It was a filthy thing, trash, and he wasn't quite skilled enough to truly obtain it for himself. He was skilled enough to obtain it, hold it, and unleash it when need be, but it remained a separate thing from himself. Something he'd stolen, something he now owned, but not something that was *his*. It was different from Cornered Rat or Trash Intent, which came from his core, his path, and were an innate part of him. Instead, it was a weapon. Something he'd picked up, something he could use to deadly intent, something he could activate and unleash destruction with, but not a part of him.

Curse Obtained: Cold Grasp of the Frozen Earth

Pull an opponent into the earth and smother them beneath. The bones are icy cold and sap vitality on contact.

As it went to sleep in orbit of his core, he noticed that the skeleton's hands were disproportionately large, perhaps as large as its entire ribcage. It folded them before it, sleeping on its side, so that its overlarge hands were fully visible within the orb of impurities.

Rhys retreated from within Walter, taking his impurities with him. In his grip, Walter foamed at the mouth and passed out. The duel was decided.

But Rhys wasn't done. Or rather, he couldn't be done. He sat back and folded his legs, focusing all his attention on the energy swirling within him. His body was a charcoaled, burning mess. This time, he really had burned it all down. Without the impurities to empower him and feed his life force, he would have died a long time ago.

So, before the impurities could burn out, Rhys sat there and carefully rebuilt himself.

Organ by organ. Muscle by muscle. Bone by bone. His body reformed. From outside, it appeared as though the charcoal fell away to reveal a refreshed, perfect body, but from within, it was a different story. Rhys carefully shaped every inch of himself, schooling everything into its proper position. If he didn't have the practice of reforging his body from his previous efforts, he would have been lost, because very little of his body remained undamaged. But because he remembered where everything belonged, every scrap of flesh and piece of bone, he could regenerate everything, as long as he had impurities to burn.

This wasn't Self-Regeneration. This was something he could never learn as a skill. It was his manual effort, one piece at a time, slowly and carefully rebuilding his body from ruin.

This time, he not only rebuilt it sturdier, able to take more impurities, but also stronger. His muscle and bone was denser, his ligaments more flexible and durable. Bit by bit, piece by piece, until the impurities burned out. The black smoke petered away, and Rhys opened his eyes.

“You don’t get to interrupt one of our students’ enlightenments, just because you’re from a big *academy*,” Cynog mocked Ernesto. He stood with his arms out, a wall of muscle close behind Rhys.

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“He crippled one of my students.”

“I didn’t see any crippling. If your student crumpled under Rhys’ power, that’s his weakness. Isn’t that what you were going to say if one of your students crippled one of ours? Or was that girl howling about crippling our students for nothing?”

“What my students say in the heat of battle should not be taken as serious threats.”

“No, huh? Especially not if they immediately act on those threats?”

Ernesto fell silent.

Rhys stared up, a little flabbergasted. Was Cynog... *defending* him? What the hell? Where was the petty bully he’d gotten to know so well, and who was this man?

At the same time, he understood. He’d had ‘friends’ like Cynog, back in his original world. People who were all too happy to bully anyone they ran into, friend or no, but who would turn their prodigious bullying power on a foe and absolutely broadside them for the sake of the larger group, if given the chance. He’d enjoyed pointing those loose cannons at the people who deserved a load of hot lead in the face, and now, he was glad to hear Cynog hammering Ernesto. *Even a piece of human trash like a bully can become a weapon in the right circumstance*, he reflected, and tucked that breakthrough into the back of his head.

Cynog glanced down. Seeing Rhys awake, he nodded. “If you’re awake, cover yourself and scam.”

Cover himself? Rhys looked down, to find nothing but miles of skin awaiting him. His clothes had burned away with the impurities.

Whoops. He drew some scrap fabric from his storage ring with a flourish and wrapped it around himself, toga-style. Bowing, he retreated a few steps from Cynog and Ernesto alike, then said, “Ernesto—”

“*Professor* Ernesto.”

“Prof. If you inspect your student over there, I think you’ll find that not only is he in perfect condition, but he is in fact in better condition than he was before battle. And if that’s the case, then I haven’t crippled anyone, have I?”

“Mae—”

“I’m fine, Professor,” Mae interjected, embarrassed to have been brought up at all. She rolled out her shoulder. “That healing potion my sister made for me fixed my shoulder right up.”

Ernesto scowled. He swept over to Walter’s side and knelt, checking his pulse.

At his teacher’s touch, Walter jolted awake. He looked around, then touched his stomach, shocked. “The curse... it’s gone?”

“What?” Ernesto asked, equally shocked.

“The curse, the one I obtained during the trial in the tomb. It’s gone!” Walter said, equally bewildered and confused. He didn’t sound joyful or excited, but rather, anxious. “What am I going to tell the Elders...?”

“There’s more than one path to power. I always thought cursing yourself was a bit hasty. You have plenty of potential, and no need to seek out curse power unless you desire that path, as Hono does,” Ernesto chided him, and for a brief moment, Rhys saw the responsibility of an adult and a teacher in the man’s expression.

Lost, Walter turned to Ernesto. “How am I supposed to avenge my family without a power equal to—”

“Enough.” Ernesto glanced at Rhys, who was very politely pretending not to listen to their conversation, while drinking in every word. “There are too many ears here. These are sensitive matters. We can continue in private.”

Numbly, Walter nodded. He pushed himself to his feet.

With that calm demeanor of his, I never would have guessed he sought to avenge his family. Rhys shrugged to himself. People were complex. It wasn’t as though those who sought vengeance brooded over it every second of every day. They’d laugh, smile, even plot together with asshole professors to bully small schools. Whatever progressed their goals, he supposed... which made them no different from any other mage.

As Walter passed him, Rhys leaned in. “Sorry I commented about your family. I didn’t know.”

“Huh? Oh, my social status.” Walter snorted. “As if something that weak would get under my skin.”

Sure seemed to work in the heat of the moment. Tucking his personal thoughts away, Rhys nodded, letting Walter have the small victory. Now that the fight was over, he had no need to crow over every tiny petty win and loss. Mental warfare was best reserved for battle, so it had maximum impact when it was performed. In this case, he didn't have the time to do anything insidious, where he wore the man's mentality down over weeks or years, so there was no point preventing Walter from letting their past battle be water under the bridge.

Ernesto brushed imaginary dust from his shoulder. "Now then. How wonderful, that we had a friendly duel."

We did? Rhys almost asked aloud. He shook his head at Ernesto. Just moments ago, the man had been trying to play the victim and claim that Rhys had crippled his students, and now it was all a friendly duel? What a joke. If Ernesto's students had won, it wouldn't have been a 'friendly duel,' but a 'clear example of the incompetence of Infinite Constellation School,' not that there was any point blabbing that outright. Everyone here knew it. It was a miracle they'd survived the 'friendly visit' largely unharmed so far. A miracle Rhys had worked hard to put into place, but a miracle nonetheless.

Ernesto nodded at everyone who'd assembled to watch the duel. "My students and I are tired. We had a long day of travel, and difficult battles afterward. I believe it's time we retired for the night."

"Of course. Should I...er, Tarais, would you escort them to their quarters?" Rhys quickly amended, remembering the state of his robes.

Tarais stepped forward, but Ernesto lifted his hand. "No need. We recall where the cabin is, thank you."

As he led them away, Victor stuck his tongue out at Rhys, Hono huffed and ignored him, and Mae gave him a deadly, but appraising, look. Walter wobbled off in a daze, somewhere between shocked, elated, and terrified.

Rhys nodded at Tarais. "Will you keep an eye on them?"

"While you fetch some robes? Certainly," she replied, eyeing his current ragged attire.

Rhys opened his mouth, then shut it. Not quite... but close enough. "I'll be right back," he promised, and ran off.

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

