

Chapter 51. Forging Robes

Rhys scurried back up the mountain to the upper peak. He stopped by the trash ravine and started the process of burning the high-tier trash to make ash. He needed a new potion after he'd downed the old one, and besides, after he'd used the previous potion to empower his body, he was curious just how far he could push his limits now.

As that processed, he drew out the fabric scraps from his storage ring and laid them all out, ordering them from strongest to weakest. He had the least of the strongest fabrics, and the most of the weakest ones, as expected. It wasn't a direct linear relationship. There were times where he had most of a relatively strong garment, and only a few scraps of some kind of cheap cotton. But in general, the more powerful the fabrics got, the less of the fabric he had.

He couldn't just burn the fabric. He'd end up with little more than ash, and he already had so much ash. He needed another method.

Let's break it down. What is fabric? Fabric was made up of thread, which was itself made up of fibers, woven together. Some way of extracting the fibers and recombining them... Rhys pinched his chin. For fabric, the best way to separate it would be to soak it, right? He couldn't use heat, but water, and maybe a steel brush, treat it like raw wool or raw cotton and brush the fibers back out of the fabrics... It was beyond anything he'd ever had to do to make cosplay. The most he'd ever done there was cut whole cloth and sew it back together.

Then again, Rhys thought, looking at the cloth before him. He didn't need to break it all the way down to the raw fibers. With a needle and a thread, he could patch up the larger garments with sections of the smaller ones. Rhys pulled out one of the most complete of the more powerful robes. It was burned and had a few holes and slashes, but overall, the general shape of the robe remained. He turned the robe over in his hands, inspecting it and generating a three-dimensional model of the damaged robe in his mind. Putting the robe back down, he spun the model, mentally reviewing the damage. Several panels had slashing damage, but for the most part, he could simply sew that shut and fix it almost invisibly. The burns and the holes were the real problem, but if he completely ripped out the panels with burn damage or holes through them and replaced them with fabric from another source, rather than simply patching the hole, he could create an end result that looked relatively uniform, as if he hadn't created it patchwork. The panel would be a different color and texture, of course, but a bit of dye and some creative layering would help hide the difference. And if he replaced two

opposing panels, he could even make the choice look intentional, rather than a result of necessity.

His mind ascended into the realm of character design and costume creation. This was no different than the time his female friend had sat on a patch of bubblegum and completely ruined a large segment of her sailor skirt the day before the contest finals. Compared to the exacting eyes of male nerds and costume contest judges, ordinary mages were positively easy to fool... er, or rather, please. The upside of a design he made up himself was that no one knew what it was supposed to look like, as opposed to creating a character's costume, where the judges could compare the real-life fabric to the picture, and find him lacking. It was for that exact reason that he'd always found original character 'cosplays'—that is, cosplays of characters the costume maker made up for the purpose of making a costume—weak and somewhat of a cheat, and always resented when original characters won contests, but now, in the real world, he found himself gripping on to those same exact strengths that original characters had.

I apologize for every time I silently cursed you, original character cosplayers. You, too, are trash, and ought to be looked to for enlightenment!

He drew out a pair of scissors he'd found in the trash. The blades gleamed with the light of Trash Intent.

It was time to get to work.

Each fabric had its own properties. Some resisted the scissors' slashing, requiring Rhys to put extra mana into the cut, and others simply bent when the tip of the scissors dug into them, resisting the piercing quality. As he cut, he sorted the fabric into slash-resistant and piercing-resistant piles. There was less of the slash-resistant than piercing-resistant fabric, but the slash-resistant fabric was also higher quality than the piercing-resistant fabric. He tilted his head. Was it easier or cheaper to make piercing-resistant fabric than slash-resistant? It did make sense. To some extent, fabric naturally resisted piercing, but was less naturally resistant to slashing. Loose fabric could be slashed with a knife, but it would be hard to stab loose fabric, unless there was something behind it. The fabric would just move with the poke.

Once the fabric was sorted, he drew out a needle and thread and got to work. The slash-resistant fabric went under the needle first. He worked quickly, the pattern familiar to him, using the repetition of sewing to train his fine motor control at speed. He was a mage, now. He'd enhanced his whole body several times over. Every motion, from the large to the small, he could do far faster and with more precision than he could as a mere human. Whether it was fighting in the arena or wielding a needle, he was able to output motions far faster than he could, even when he was putting together bags in the trash heap back in the orphanage.

A few minutes later, he held up his final product. A skintight turtleneck with sleeves that came to a point on the back of his hand and hooked around his middle fingers and a

pair of just-over-the-knee-length tight shorts not unlike biking shorts. Ideally, he would have crafted leggings, but he didn't have enough slash-resistant fabric. The knee-length shorts protected his femoral artery and upper knee ligaments, and that would have to be enough for now.

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Both of them were absolute patchworks of different fabrics. He'd made no effort to make them look good. They would be worn under his robes, so it didn't matter if they were handsome or not. What mattered were their anti-slashing properties.

He knelt and put his hands on the shirt. The fabric already had anti-slashing properties, but, well, it was trash. And trash wasn't the best material. No. What he needed, was to enhance that trash! Polish the trash! It wasn't shining yet, so it was time for him to push it to its limits.

Rhys activated Trash Intent. The fabrics trembled, fighting one another as they tried to take on their original shapes, whether that was another garment or directly into the state of whole cloth.

No. Rhys fought back. He pushed more mana into Trash Intent, and with it, his will. These pieces of trash weren't going to take on their original form. Instead, they were going to take on the new shape he'd given them. Take on that shape to its ultimate form. Take on that shape to its absolute limit!

The fabrics shook. The tiny scraps gave in first. They had the least of their original intent left, and the least inherent mana to oppose him with. The pulse of Rhys' will overcame the emanations of the scraps' mana, and the scraps began to sync with Rhys' mana and his will, forming the shape of *his* intent rather than their intent.

One piece at a time. Slowly overcoming the will of the fabrics he'd built it from. The biggest piece, a solid chunk he'd used to protect his abdomen and left chest, struggled against him. It strove to be a skirt, a piece of women's attire. It had been a skirt, before it was trash. It longed to be a skirt once more.

Rhys rejected its desire. It was no longer a skirt. It hadn't been a skirt for years. It was trash, it had become *his* trash, and now, he had transformed it into something greater.

No! It trembled in his hold, rejecting his will with all its might. Its mana pitched against him. It was a skirt. It had always been a skirt. It was going to be a skirt again!

Rhys went to push it down, then paused. He could overwhelm it, yes. But was that his path? Was that the way to pull the trash onto his side? For some of it, sure... but for trash with a will this powerful? If he could win this trash over, wouldn't it become far more powerful, in its final form as his new shirt?

So instead of oppressing the fabric, he reached out to it. His will connected with its will. It wasn't becoming something lesser. Its time in the trash hadn't diminished it. He appreciated that it had once been a skirt, but before that, it had been whole cloth. Was it so attached to an ephemeral form?

The skirt fabric hesitated. Its will flagged.

Rhys showed it the shirt he'd made. He imagined himself wearing it into battle, imagined it deflecting mighty blows. Was this shirt that the fabric had become lesser than the skirt it had been? It was equal. No, greater! By working in harmony with all the other fabrics, it could become something greater than it had ever been. It could become something complete, and become useful once more.

The fabric's will shook. He felt it trembling. *One last blow!* He looked at it, and called out to it and all the other fabrics in the shirt, showing them its grand vision. If they melded together, if they all worked together in harmony, what a fabulous article of clothing they could become. A powerful shirt that bordered on armor. They had been tossed away, torn, burned, stained and forgotten, but Rhys had found them. He'd remembered them. Put them back together. And now, now they could shine once more.

Show me, no, show the world! You aren't trash. You're still strong. Still usable. Together, as one, we'll show them all that trash isn't any lesser than the original clothing! Whole cloth? Who needs it! We, together, are stronger than whole cloth could ever be!

He'd only sought to be able to use Trash Intent on the fabric, but now, the shirt, and the pants, both began to glow. They absorbed Rhys' mana and the Trash Intent alike. The cloth whirled, transforming under the glow. Rhys stared, completely taken aback. He'd felt a little silly giving a motivational speech to fabric. Who would've known that speaking to the will imbued in the items would have this level of effect?

More and more mana poured out of him. He reached into his robes and sipped a mana potion to keep up, not wanting to fall short of whatever this process was. At last, when he was about to take a second sip, the glow faded.

The shirt and pants had each become a single piece, with no seams or patchwork. The diverse fabrics had melded into one. Patches of strange color and texture merged directly into the next, green silk becoming purple cotton broadcloth, purple broadcloth becoming white canvas. The end result was not unlike a poor man's tie-dye, with a big block of dark navy across the front of the shirt where the skirt's fabric had been.

They weren't pretty. But they were powerful. The shirt and pants emanated an aura of tier 1 on their own, as if they were their own mage. Not only that, but the fabric held its own power and intent. It had absorbed his mana and intent and took them as their own, holding the power he'd imbued in them even without him constantly feeding them. Rhys ran his hands over the fabric in shock. *How... What...*

Trash Enchanting 1

He almost laughed aloud at the message pop. Trash Enchanting? What was that? Now the System was just putting trash in front of words.

Then again, he was pretty sure he couldn't use this technique on anything *but* trash. He couldn't sweet-talk whole cloth into becoming one by motivating it to overcome its history of trash, after all. But what a skill to get!

Removing the makeshift toga he'd been wearing since the battle, he put on the slash-resistant clothes. The clothes conformed to his body like a second skin, moving on their own to match his limbs. Rhys stretched. Although the shirt should have pulled where there were patches of stiff fabric, and he should have had to make dozens of adjustments, it instead fit perfectly, and the same went for the pants.

He stared at his body in shock. Slowly, a grin spread over his face, and he turned toward the piercing-resistant fabric. He'd just gained a new technique. It was time to push it to its limits.

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Chapter 52. Skullduggery

The light faded away from the robes Rhys had sewn from the piercing-resistant fabric. Once more, it had melded together, but this time, it looked far more handsome. He'd bothered to pick fabrics with complimentary patterns, colors, and textures this time to craft a garment that actually looked passable, since this would be his external clothing, and he quickly put it on. He'd mostly used dark colors—navy, forest green, brown, and black—since there were plenty of dark colors in the pile, and many of them were complimentary. Some highlights of white mixed in as contrast.

The robes were loose. They naturally draped around his body to hide the seams where the fabrics melded together, where the colors got a bit blurred and strange. The central panel was black, with a small white panel just outside, then blue and green in that order, finishing with black again in the center back. The sleeves were made from brown leather, and he'd made a belt to match, with a buckle he'd fished out of a different pile of trash. The shoulders were reinforced with a darker shade of leather, as was the collar. They weren't the best-looking robes he'd ever seen, but they were passable for his first attempt at making clothes with his new technique.

Trash Enchanting was now level 2, and he was almost out of mana. He'd taken two full potions to enchant the larger robes, but he had plenty of potions, and as long as he took

them one sip at a time, Less is More kicked in and provided him with bonus mana, which multiplied the total mana that he could absorb from the potions by several times. He sipped the mana potion again and checked on the ash. It had burned down, and was about ready to brew.

Farewell, giant trash pile from the upper peak. Rhys saluted to the pile of ash, then drew out his cauldron and started piling ash inside to begin the process of concentrating the impurities. He skimmed the purified ash out and added more, over and over, until the pot was absolutely full of impurities. On and on, until at last, he called a blob of impurities out of the cauldron and tucked it away into his robes.

He patted his chest, pleased. Two goals achieved: new robes, and a new, stronger impurities potion that he could absorb slowly while he was leading the Purple Dawn folks around. He'd defeated them soundly, and their attempts to catch the school on the back foot had failed, thanks to his intervention. Everything was going swimmingly.

The hairs on the back of Rhys' neck prickled, and he grimaced. It was all going well, but that only made him more suspicious. For a group that was supposed to find every fault and not stop until he and his school were embarrassed and subservient to their academy, they sure had been playing by the rules so far.

He hurried down the mountain, through the barrier, and toward the cabin where the students had been given quarters. He'd almost reached the cabin when he heard footsteps, crunching through the undergrowth. From his training with Bast and Straw, Rhys instinctively moved silently through forests, and his Trash Step only enhanced his ability to move silently, given that the ground was carpeted in leaves the trees had thrown away. Before anyone saw him, Rhys reined in his aura and ducked behind a tree, holding his breath.

"...even looking for?" Mae asked, frustrated.

"Anything that can embarrass the school. Split up. We need to cover as much ground as we can," Walter replied.

"What about Ernesto?" Victor asked.

Hono scoffed. "Do you ever listen? He told us. He's chasing down the source of that terrifying curse energy I sensed. If this Infinite Constellation School is really brewing a curse that potent, forget conquering this school; he'll be able to bring down the force of the entire North-Eastern Alliance on their heads. We'll crack this place open like an egg and suck all the valuables out of it."

"Yuck. What are you doing to eggs?" Victor asked, disgusted.

Rhys raised his brows. *That does raise a good question. The Alliance—I'm assuming the same one that captured Straw—clearly sees curses as evil, but Walter and Hono*

openly use curse power. Was it the strength of the curse that made it impermissible? Or maybe the origin of it?

“Obviously. If they’re actually brewing a curse strong enough to take out a school, the Alliance will have to move. They won’t overlook it, like they do with our class fooling around with curses,” Walter said, ignoring Victor’s interjection.

The strength of it, then. Rhys nodded. It was like how, in his world, countries were allowed to make bombs day in and day out; it was only when they tried to make an incredibly powerful atomic bomb that other countries would take notice and try to stop them.

Though, from the way he mentioned the Alliance overlooking their class, it seemed like curse power wasn’t widely seen as a good thing.

Then again, these guys are the class Purple Dawn sent to cause trouble for another school. Is that deliberate? After all, if the class that had ‘run wild’ and ‘gone mad’ studying curse power, whether Purple Dawn’s Schoolmaster deliberately overlooked them or not, then it was easier to excuse their bullying another school as ‘the mad actions of a class outside our control.’ It was the corrupt alliance of the government, in this case, the school, and criminals, where the school benefitted from overlooking the criminals, because they could keep their hands clean if it was only the *criminals* who dared to do *evil acts that the school would definitely never support.*

Rhys sighed to himself. It was so plausible that it hurt. All these idiots practicing curse power were nothing but the sacrificial scapegoats for the larger school, but like any criminals, they didn’t care as long as they could get away with gaining power at the same time. When push came to shove, they’d find their necks on the chopping block... but then, they probably weren’t the type to look ahead.

“See you guys later, then,” Mae said, breaking Rhys out of his thoughts. The figures split off, wandering through the forest in four different directions. One set of footsteps walked directly toward Rhys. Rhys hunkered, holding completely still. He rested his hand on his sword, ready to pull it free at a moment’s notice.

Victor walked past him, hands behind his head. The boy’s eyes were locked straight forward, and he never so much as glanced Rhys’ way.

Rhys breathed out, relieved. Not that he couldn’t handle Victor if he had to, but better to avoid a fight if he could. All four of them at once would be a bit much, especially after he’d already shown all his moves.

Standing with his back to the tree, he pinched his chin and submersed himself in thought. They were going to find embarrassing things. He couldn’t stop them from finding anything; there was plenty embarrassing on Infinite Constellation School, and he’d known from the start that this was a lost game. He’d done his best, and he was

happy to toss them the one-finger salute and wish them the worst as they sought out more dirt on his school.

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Massive curse power, though... what on earth would that be? He was completely sure he'd never sensed curse power before Hono. Straw had always hidden all his power, to the point that he'd been flabbergasted to hear that the man was supposedly a cursed straw doll. On the mountain, he'd never sensed curse power, either, and he'd covered most of the peak. Sure, there were points on the far side of the mountain he never went to, and he was actively avoiding the part of the upper peak where he'd seen beast scat, but if Ernesto wanted to wander into the wilds and feed himself to a beast, that was his—

Rhys widened his eyes. He tensed. *No*. But what else could it be?

The toxic trash pit. He himself had recognized curses as related to trash. Was it possible that the trash pit was giving off curse power? When he'd been there, he hadn't sensed curse power, but he'd barely been able to breathe or interact with the trash pit at all. It could be giving off any sort of energy, and he'd never know it. Especially since he hadn't sensed curse power until Hono, or, if he had, he hadn't known what he was sensing, to recognize it as something other than mana. The toxic trash pit blasted him with so much power, smell, everything, that it was impossible to pick out all the energies that were mixed into the sludge.

The one thing he was sure of, though, was that the sludge was *definitely* powerful enough that it *could* hide a curse of significant power. Even a curse powerful enough to destroy another school wasn't beyond the realm of possible.

Rhys narrowed his eyes. He pushed off the tree and ran, hurtling toward the trash pit. After all the work he'd put in to be able to absorb it, all the pain, the blood, the sweat, the tears, after *everything* he'd gone through, he wasn't about to let some upstart teacher from another school scoop those impurities out from under him! He'd been working toward the toxic trash pit for months. That thing was his, by right. And he intended to claim his prize, by hook or by crook.

A part of him was concerned for Tarais, but there was no time. Not with his toxic trash pit on the line. He had to trust in her. Trust in her strength, her physical and magical strength, and believe that she was fine. Right now, the school and everyone within it, his personal future, and worst of all, the toxic trash pit, were in danger. He couldn't spare a second!

"I thought I smelled a rat." A hand darted out from behind a tree and grabbed at Rhys' robes.

Rhys threw himself to the side and ran on.

Mae whirled from behind the tree and gave chase. “Hey! Where do you think you’re going?”

He reached into his storage ring and tossed a hunk of wood behind him. Mae dodged it. The second she shifted her eyes to the wood, Rhys pulled the steel pole out of his storage ring and used Trash Intent on it, jutting it straight out behind him. The pole lengthened, its blunt end hurtling toward Mae’s forehead.

“Attacking a student without warning? Aren’t there rules against that in your school?” she asked accusatorily.

“Nope,” Rhys replied. He reached to the bottom of his storage ring and drew out a handful of tiny glass shards. They rained down behind him, carpeting the earth between the two of them.

Mae scoffed. She leaped over the glass, aiming a kick at Rhys’ back. “Shitty little school.”

“Yeah. But there’s beauty in a shitty little school, don’t you know?” Rhys stopped dead. He thrust his sword between his arm and armpit, bracing it with his whole body, and activated Trash Intent.

Mae widened her eyes, but it was too late. She was already in the air. Her kick landed soundly on Rhys’ blade.

Blood flew. Mae screamed, an ear-splitting sound, and crashed to the ground, her foot bleeding into the leaves. It was split almost to the knee, and from ankle to toe.

Rhys grimaced. He hadn’t known how bad it would be. Looking at it, he almost felt a little bad for her.

From nearby, Walter shouted, “Mae?”

And that’s my cue to get out of here. Rhys put his sword away and sprinted off, using all his mana on Trash Step to speed himself up to the absolute limit of his current strength. He hurtled through the woods, running so fast that the trees became nothing but blurs in the dark. At this speed, he couldn’t fully suppress the sound of his passage, but that was less important now. If he didn’t get to the trash pit in time, it was all over. Not just for him, but for the school, and everyone in it, too. Ev. Tarais. Sorden. Maybe even Az and Lira, though he had the feeling the two monsters would figure their way out of this school’s collapse just fine.

He closed in on the toxic trash pit. This far out, he could already smell the thing, and feel its corruptive influence on the very air around him. Now that he knew what curse power felt like, he could sense it all around him. It was thick on the breeze, as heavy as mana was in the center of the sect. *How could I not sense it before?* he wondered, but

he knew why. He hadn't known what to look for, and he was overwhelmed by the multisensory experience that was the trash pit. There wasn't a single sense it didn't offend in some way or another.

Ahead of him, he sensed a single source of mana, one unfortunately more powerful than him and infinitely familiar. Rhys drew close enough to see the pit before slowing to a halt, some distance from the pit itself.

Ernesto stood at the very edge of the pit, gazing down into it, his eyes wide. Sensing Rhys, he half turned, but didn't look away, as if the thing down in the depths was so desperately interesting that he couldn't bear to look away.

"How did a tiny school like yours even end up with something like this in your possession? This thing... this foul well. We've been searching for a well like this for ages. And here it is, right under our noses, hidden away in a tiny, shitty little school like yours..." He trailed off, staring into the depths.

"You know it's no weapon. Step away from the edge, Ernesto. You gain nothing from this and stand to lose much," Rhys accused him. It wasn't untrue. If Ernesto's students were studying curse power, there was no chance the man himself had abstained. And if the Alliance disliked curse power as much as Walter and Rhys' run-in with them indicated, then he'd be essentially calling the cops on himself to reveal the pit to the Alliance. He, too, would get locked up for a long time as a consequence.

"Ha. As if you would understand! Or maybe... you would..." Ernesto looked away from the pit at last, locking eyes with Rhys. "I knew I recognized you, and when you absorbed that curse power, it struck me. You're the Strawman's disciple, aren't you?"

"That's right. I'm Straw's weakest disciple," Rhys replied. There was no need to deny it. It was true, and besides, the Alliance itself had cleared him of curse power. Not only that, but Straw had never used curse power around them, nor taught them of it. He truly had no connection to the stuff, except for his ability to burn it, the same as any impurity.

"Straw... is that what you called him? How affectionate a thing to call that monstrous doll, that mass of impurity and ruin. Tell me, child. What was it like, learning curse power directly from the master?"

"I didn't," Rhys informed him.

Ernesto scoffed. "I saw what you did to Hono. There's no need to lie."

"It's true. Straw never taught us anything about curses." The strange man had taught him how to fight, how to use mana, and how to defend himself, but he hadn't ever brought up curses... or any practical spellcraft, for that matter. Rhys had left his tutelage more martial artist than mage, even for someone of his magely proclivities.

He didn't mind it. Being capable of both was a useful tool. But it remained true that he hadn't been at all, in the least, taught about curse power.

Belatedly, Rhys realized that maybe *that* was why Straw had never taught them spells: the man couldn't, not without calling on curse power.

"Impossible," Ernesto snapped.

"Whether you believe me or not, it's true. Step away from the pit," Rhys ordered him.

Ignoring him, Ernesto turned back to the pit. "Do you know what sleeps in these depths, child?"

Uh oh. I don't like that. Rhys backed away, sudden nervousness gnawing at his stomach. "I'll go get Aquari if you don't step away right now. No—I'll get Az!"

"Why don't I show you?" With a rictus of a grin, Ernesto turned back to the pit. Dark shadows stretched from his body as the pit suddenly glowed a filthy, black-brown-green light, like the color of sick and shadows.

"No—" Rhys went to charge Ernesto, but found himself pinned in place. Mana dragged at him, pulling him down and still. He glanced down. A single nail locked his shadow in place. When he tried to struggle, his shadow writhed, but his body didn't move an inch.

Rhys' skin crawled. *A curse.*

Gazing into the pit, Ernesto made a pulling gesture. Chains rattled, and something viciously cold welled up from the pit. He laughed aloud. "Come forth! I awaken thee!"

From the depths of the pit, a hideous roar answered him.

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

Chapter 53. From the Pit

The pit glowed brightly, bathing the forest in its sickly glow. The light pulsed like a bad headache, and the pit burbled and spat as if it boiled, but emitted a fierce cold instead.

Caught under the influence of the cursed nail, Rhys could do nothing but watch as Ernesto continued to pour mana into the pit. He narrowed his eyes, reaching out toward

the nail with his mana. It had to 'touch' him somehow, right? Somehow, this nail was exerting influence on him. If he could find that connection and trace it back, then if he absorbed the curse power, he could break free. The only problem was that he couldn't sense the curse. Whatever it was, it was extremely subtle, and right now, curse power, horrible scents, impurities, and a thousand other sensations overwhelmed him constantly as the pit boiled away. Identifying one small scrap of curse power in the midst of the sensory storm was like identifying one particular raindrop during a hurricane.

From out of the sky, a slash of starlight imbued with the power of night lashed down on Ernesto. He whirled and drew his sword in the same motion, cutting the slash in two. The two halves of the starlight smashed into the pit and threw up a small wave, but that was it.

"What have you done?" Aquari asked, taken aback.

Ernesto laughed. "Awakened what was sleeping."

"Awakened...?" Her brows furrowed.

"Did you not know what this well truly was? Don't tell me, did you honestly take this for nothing but a trash pit?"

Aquari held her sword before her, hovering over him on a different sword. The sword she stood on was no more than ordinary steel, but the sword she held was pitch black, with tiny pinpricks of light embedded in its blade, as though she'd cut out a piece of the night sky and bound it into a sword. She narrowed her eyes at him and said nothing.

Ernesto chuckled darkly. "Then watch, while I awaken what slumbers below, and your sect is obliterated. There's nothing you can do anymore. I've already begun the awakening process. Nothing can stop it now."

"Why?" Rhys shouted, then blinked, surprised. *I can talk? Can't move, can talk. Good to know.*

"Why? Isn't it obvious? I'm naught but a lower-tier professor in Purple Dawn Academy, without any land to my name. After this cursed beast ravages your land, and I lead the Alliance here to righteously slaughter the heretics who dared to cultivate such a dangerous curse, they'll naturally gift this land to the hero who purged the land of such vicious demonic mages. My stature within Purple Dawn will shoot up, and I'll make tenure in no time."

Hell of a way to make tenure. "You aren't doing this on the behalf of Purple Dawn?" Rhys asked, acting shocked.

"I was. But now that I've discovered such a valuable... ahem, *dangerous* curse, why not make a little progress of my own, rather than simply profit the Academy? Besides, it aligns with my own interest. You know, these foul wells dot the lands. No one knows what causes them, but they usually house a demonic beast, and always contain a great mass of impurities."

Rhys' ears perked up. *A great mass of impurities?*

"I've always wanted to see one of those demonic beasts, a being begat by curse power and born of impurities. For a long time, I've studied curses and curse power. What are curses? What is this dark energy, that seems counter to mana, and collects in the darkest, most corrupt, most stagnant places?"

This guy was bad news. Rhys glanced at Aquari. She stood over them, holding tight to her sword, but she didn't move. Her eyes flashed to him.

Wait, is she not moving because of me? Surprised, Rhys stared at Aquari. He had no idea that the Schoolmaster actually cared for him, even to the minor extent of him being able to serve as a hostage. Still, this was no good. He couldn't let himself stop Aquari from fighting Ernesto. If she didn't stop him, the worst outcome would occur to their school, and Rhys wanted to prevent that as much as anyone.

He glanced to the side, at the pit of impurities, then back at Aquari. Aquari stared back, clearly doing her own calculations. Rhys turned his eyes back to Ernesto. Whatever she was thinking, he refused to be the distraction that lost her this battle. He would resolve things with Ernesto on his own terms, in his own way.

It was a bit risky, but gain never came without risk! Rhys steeled his heart and narrowed his eyes as determination welled up within him.

Ernesto rambled on. "And here I am, before a foul well, one with a demonic beast bound within, at that. I can't let this opportunity to study curse power pass me by."

"You won't get away with this," Rhys spat.

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Ernesto chuckled. He glanced at the nail binding Rhys in place. "What are you going to do about it?"

"I'll tell everyone. The Alliance, your school, anyone. As long as I live, I won't let you forget it. Hero? Ha! They'll know you as the villain you are. The foolish, pathetic villain who had to rely on a demonic beast's strength to take down a tiny school like this."

"Are you, now." Ernesto strode toward him, a dangerous look in his eye.

"I will. There's nothing you can do about it. When I'm done, the whole world will know," Rhys pledged.

"You. Shut up!" Aquari barked, charging in.

"No, I don't think they will." Ernesto loomed over him and raised his hand. A black shield built of a hideous and mysterious bone materialized between him and Aquari, and her sword bounced off. He gripped Rhys by the shoulder and shoved.

Rhys tipped over. Further, further, further, plummeting toward the sludge. When he was horizontal, the nail snapped, and motion returned to his body, but it was too late. He was already falling, too far gone to recover.

Aquari snarled. She hammered Ernesto's shield, but the bone was durable, and refused to so easily break. Small notches appeared in the bone, and bone shards flew, but the shield held.

As he tipped over the edge, Rhys smiled. He gave Aquari a thumbs up, and plunged into the gunk.

No one was going to take his trash away from him. Not some fancy professor from another school, not a demonic beast, no one. Before they could destroy it, he'd suck it all up out from under them!

It was a risk, an incredible risk. He'd trained impurities as much as he could within the timeframe he had, save the final impurity potion he held on him now, but even so, he wasn't confident that he could actually absorb the toxic gunk without dying. If it was up to him, he would have dripped some, then drank some, then slowly built up to jumping in, but there was no time. His trash was under risk. If he didn't act now, it might disappear forever.

Without risk, he could make no gains. If he wasn't willing to burn himself down repeatedly, he never would have progressed as a mage. He was trash! He belonged in the pit! Even if the pit damaged him or crippled him, it only returned him to his natural state as trash! And if he died—well. He refused to die. Not to trash, anyways.

This was where he belonged. This was his home. He'd been reborn in a trash pit, and trash pits would forever belong to him. Even one this dangerous and toxic was nothing more than another home for a trashy guy like him.

And so, Rhys plunged into the pit.

If his senses had been assaulted before, it was nothing compared to the barrage he was subjected to now. He was submerged in the trash, dragged into its icy belly. Trash filled his mouth with a horrific taste like nothing he'd ever tasted before and surged up his nose to leave his whole face aching and tingling. His skin smarted, stung, burned,

and froze all at once. Impurities burrowed into his body without him actively absorbing them. They invaded every pore and every orifice, blockading his mana flow and turning his blood to sludge. He could feel his mana stagnating, his blood slowing, his heart struggling to beat on. Death loomed, his body growing numb by the moment. The pervasive cold from the trash pit sucked into him, freezing him to the bone.

Rhys ignited the impurities. They burned, rejuvenating his mana with fresh mana, but even as they burned, more impurities rushed in. The flames flickered, almost spluttering out from the onrush of impurities.

No. I won't allow it. Rhys grabbed the mana from the impurities and poured it into the flames that burned the fresh impurities. The fire flared up, devouring impurities faster than ever. The self-feeding loop spread slowly through his body. First, it covered the most essential regions, his heart, core, and brain, keeping him barely alive, but no more. As more impurities poured in, and Rhys fed them to the fires, the clean regions of his body grew larger and larger.

That was all he could manage. Despite the vast amount of power burning impurities this strong released, it was still all he could do to stave off the onrush of impurities into his body. They were so virulent, so ferocious, that to use any less power meant the flames spluttered out, and without the flames to constantly burn off the impurities, even Rhys, with his impurity resist, would die. All his resist skills ticked up, and he gained **Cold Resist**, but it still wasn't enough to stave off the damage. His body was burned, poisoned, corroded by acid, and riddled by impurities. He fed what little mana he had into Self-Regeneration and manually rebuilding his body, and it still did nothing. He had staved off immediate death, but he was still losing the battle of attrition. If nothing changed, he would die here, submerged in the toxic trash pile.

He drifted downward. The deeper he sunk into the trash, the stronger the impurities became, and the more the corrosion ate at his body, despite his resistances. Any flashes of light from the battle overhead winked out as the trash swallowed him deeper. Rhys sank into the depths, barely fending off the impurities.

Deeper and deeper. Even feeding all his mana into the flames wasn't enough. The impurities pushed the flames back. From being able to defend his entire body, Rhys was pushed back, back, back, until he once more defended only the essential parts of his body. The flames that protected him wavered, weakening before the onrush of the impurities. He couldn't beat them back. He'd trained, trained and trained, and this was the result. He could survive this long, but that was all he could do. The toxic trash pit was stronger than him. It was his death, his grave. He had been defeated.

The flames burned down. Down and down, the impurities pressing deeper and deeper. Rhys' eyes closed as the flames guttered, then went dark. One final tongue of flame remained. The impurities closed around it, and it, too, went out. Only an ember remained. The last ember of Rhys' life. Every other part of him was ruined by impurities, so soaked in impurities that his skin, his muscles, even his bones were pitch black.

There wasn't a single inch of him not bogged down and riddled with the impurities. Every organ slowed, on the brink of failure.

No. That's not right. I'm the . I can't be defeated by trash!

Rhys' eyes snapped open. The flames burst forth. He gestured, activating Trash Manipulation with his last scrap of mana, not to push the trash away, but to draw it in. One final, mad, suicidal maneuver, that came from the very core of his being. He was trash. Trash was his. These things were true, and he refused to allow anyone, anything, to contradict it.

Come here! Get inside me!

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

Chapter 54. Becoming Trash

Activating Trash Manipulation, Rhys pulled the trash toward himself. Rather than staving it off, trying to push the trash away and reject it like any sane person would do when beset by deadly toxic garbage, he dragged it forcibly into himself. This was his last breath of life, the last spark of mana. The trash, the goo, actively extinguished his life with every passing moment, and rather than pushing it away, he pulled it in. It was the ultimate in counterintuitive. He was staking his life on being able to conquer this trash.

But it was trash, and therefore, it was his. If he didn't stake his all on trash, what was he? It was a mage's job to discover their path, then risk everything they had to pursue that path to the end. He'd found his calling. The one thing that allowed him to overcome his trash start. He wasn't going to give it up for anything. If he turned away now and pushed the trash away, it would all be lost. He'd lose his path, and lose everything.

Trash poured into him. He pulled it deeper and deeper, directly into his core. There, he dragged it all together, pulling it into the very heart of his core. With his sluggish, curse-power-tainted mana, he compressed it down, adding pressure from all sides. Down, down, down. As the trash compressed, he added more. The ball of trash trembled, trying to break free of his hold and shoot off in a direction, any direction.

Rhys refused to let it go. He clamped down on it with Trash Manipulation and held tight.

Trash Manipulation 2

Trash Manipulation 3

Trash Manipulation 4

Message after message popped up in the corner of his eye. He had no attention to pay them. All his focus was concentrated on the ball, on holding on, on compressing it tighter still. Trash continued to flow into him, impurities, toxic goo, everything. He kept pushing it together. Compressing. Tighter. Tighter.

The ball grew hot. It began to glow. Rhys grinned, and he shoved a tiny bit of mana into the trash ball. It ignited, burning with a ferocity unlike everything he'd ever experienced.

Like a star.

The compressed star burst, propelled outward by the forces within it. The fire rushed through him like a wave. All the impurities, the trash, the toxins, everything in the pit that had soaked into him, it all burned away. In the wake of the flame, his body remained, but stronger. Far stronger than anything he'd done before.

He'd survived. He'd cleared all the impurities and trash from his body, and now, his body was strong enough to survive in the toxins. He could swim out, escape, with no downsides. He'd succeeded!

Rhys narrowed his eyes. *Again.*

He pulled the trash in again. Once more, his body darkened with impurities and was riddled with toxins. Once more, his life flickered, on the verge of burning out. Once more, he pulled trash into his core. It ignited, and his body was strengthened. Immediately, he drew in more trash.

No hesitation. This was his path, his purpose. This trash, every last scrap of it, belonged to him. He wasn't going to give it, or anything in it, up to anyone. Even if he *could* survive, what was the point if he didn't make the most of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity? Even if he *did* escape, what was the point if Ernesto stole *his* trash, *his* demonic beast that had been thrown to the bottom of the pit in an obvious effort to throw it away, out of his hands? He refused. No. He wouldn't let Ernesto. And if he was too weak right now, then he'd just get strong enough that he could overpower Ernesto, right here, right now.

This whole time, he kept drawing in trash, compressing it, and igniting it. The intervals between the bursts of flame grew faster.

On the surface, the toxic gunk grew lower, and Ernesto frowned. "What...?"

"Daring to look away?" The stars in the sky shimmered and took on the shape of a giant bear of pitch black sky and starlight. It lunged at Ernesto, trying to bowl him into the pit.

Ernesto dodged and gritted his teeth. "Give up already! You know this is hopeless."

"I will never give up on my school," Aquari snapped, and lunged at him once again.

Deep under the gunk, Rhys knew nothing of what happened on the surface. His life was nothing but the process of drawing in gunk and igniting it. Nothing else existed in his life. Just the trash, and the ignition. Even the process of empowering himself left his mind, and the power from the burned trash and impurities was left to freely strengthen him as it roiled through his body. Everything was the tiny dark star in his core, and the gunk that poured in to refuel it.

More and more of the second-stage, more powerful impurities built up in the bottom of his core through this process. Rhys watched them, even as he focused on continuing to burn down the gunk. They were the key to the next Tier. He knew it instinctively, just looking at them. But they were what remained when everything burned down. They couldn't be burned.

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Not by ordinary processes, anyways. Rhys reached out and called to them, pulling them into the next star. They had laid motionless all this time, inert and dead, but when he brought them into the star, it was as though they realized what they were meant for all this time. They came to life and burrowed into the heart of the star, and the star grew denser than ever before.

Denser, and more stable. He poured trash into the star, and it held it without breaking apart. More, more, until his Trash Manipulation trembled, until his mana struggled to hold it tight. The star was still completely dark. Not a single glimmer of light nor heat appeared in its depths. The second-tier impurities made it more stable, but that was as much a problem as it was a solution. If the star wouldn't ignite, he couldn't begin the refresh process. Rhys gritted his teeth and kept going. He couldn't stop now.

More and more trash poured into him. If this was the him of before, the him who'd jumped into the toxic pit, he would have died, but the repeated refreshes had made him more durable and stronger, not to mention that his resist skills had leveled up, too. He could take more toxins, more punishment, before he died.

His body blackened. He spat blood as his heart slowed and his blood ran backward. His limit approached, but at the same time, he saw the end of it. It was almost there. It just needed a little more!

He trembled. Pain split every cell. His vision darkened, his limbs numbed. He was at his absolute limit. Any more, and he'd die for certain.

The star still refused to ignite.

Rhys gritted his teeth. He tensed, then, with a ferocious shout, pulled with more strength than he'd ever pulled before. The gunk sank into him, rushing into his core. His body shuddered. He felt himself dying, felt his organs shut down, one after another.

And still, he refused to give up. He shouted into the gunk and pulled even stronger than before, putting his all into it, every scrap of mana, curse power, anything he had.

The gunk became a vortex and poured into him. He compressed it and pulled in more. His consciousness thinned, barely holding on. Nonetheless, even as his awareness dimmed, he continued to pull more trash into his core to feed the star. The star was his everything. It was his present, his past, his future. This was the culmination of everything it meant to be a mage for him, everything he'd put into Tier 1 and everything he'd learned since he'd arrived in this world. If it wouldn't burn, then his path was incorrect, and there was no future for him.

As his consciousness flickered, on the verge of winking out, and his heartbeat slowed; with the last iota of self-awareness, Rhys saw it. A light. A single ember, glowing in the very depths of the star.

He poured mana into it, feeding the ember. It surged, burning through the star, through the second-tier impurities, through everything. Power rushed out once more, but this power was fundamentally different from anything he'd experienced so far. Stronger. Purer. More transcendental. It had a shimmer of his path in it, for the very first time. Simply breathing in mana fundamentally changed it to match his path. It was to a tiny extent, to the point that Rhys wouldn't have sensed it if he didn't know exactly what to look for, but nonetheless—it had changed.

His body transformed under the power of this new energy. Impurities rushed into his every pore, soaking into him without requiring any conscious effort on his part. Simply being submerged in trash was enough to call it to him now, without anything further. They flowed into him, and he shaped them into another star, letting it once more refine his body. Compared to the overwhelming difference between the star with the second-tier impurities, it was a fractional improvement, but it was still something. Everything counted.

His core, too, transformed under the power of the second-tier impurities' burning. The walls grew stronger, if less flexible. Where before, the second-tier impurities had bent the walls of his core, pushing it to its limits, the walls now easily held the second tier impurities that his continued burning of the impurities in the trash pit generated.

Rhys couldn't see it, but on the surface, the toxic gunk had retreated to the extent that it couldn't be seen from the surface anymore. Almost all of the gunk had vanished. Only the dregs remained at the very bottom of the well.

“What the hell,” Ernesto said, but had no time to examine it as a snake made of stars pressured him on one side, and Aquari pressured him on the other. He clicked his tongue and fought on.

Rhys’ feet found solid ground. Startled, he stood up. The last of the impurities rushed into him, igniting one last star. He breathed in and breathed out. Everything felt different, now. It was as though he could sense more, feel more, perceive more.

Just to confirm, he pulled up his status.

Rhys Foundling | 15 | Core Formation (Tier 2)

Title: Trash-born

Skills:

Hunger Resist 15

Survivalist 30

Pain Resist 47

Scavenging 40

Less is More 42

Sewing 12

Blow Mitigation 27

Self-Regeneration 31

Mana Manipulation 18

Improvised Weapon Proficiency 11

Heat Resist 10

Acid Resist 22

Impurity Resist 25

Poison Resist 26

Cold Resist 12

Alchemy 7

Herbalism 8

Speed Reading 11

Bluff 4

Enlightenment 2

Speed Picking 3

Path:

Trash Intent 9

Trash Body 8

Trash Aura 1

Trash Step 2

Trash Manipulation 7

Trash Enchanting 2

Trash Talk 5

Rhys pumped his fist, barely biting back a shout of excitement. Tier 2! He was Tier 2 now!

A cold snort cut through his excitement. Rhys jumped and drew his sword, holding the broken thing in front of him.

Before him stood a skeletal horse. It stood twice as tall as him, its enormous skull looming high above him. It strode forward, hooves the size of dinner plates thundering against the muddy earth.

A huge horned skeleton sat on its back. Its barrel chest held a black gem where its heart should have been. It raised a massive arm and slashed down, a huge black cleaver of a blade tight in its grasp. Glowing red eyes locked onto Rhys.

Rhys laughed awkwardly. "I don't suppose we can talk this out?"

The demon roared. It kicked its horse, and the two charged Rhys.

Rhys raised his blade. His eyes went cold. Internally, though, he squirmed in excitement. These two were trash, and therefore, his. They just didn't know it yet.

That was fine. He just had to beat that knowledge into them.

Letting out a war cry of his own, he leaped toward the demon.

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

Chapter 55. Trash vs Trash

Rhys charged toward the mounted demon as the mounted demon charged him. The demon struck down at him with all its might. Rhys activated Trash Intent as he slashed up at it. Their blades clashed.

The demon's black cleaver pulsed with curse power. The dark energy emanated from it, seeking to taint Rhys.

Rhys sucked the taint in, building it into the next star in his core. His Trash Intent-empowered blade cut a notch into the ominous black sword, then jerked to a halt as the metal grew too thick. Still, Rhys grinned. Trash like him was able to meet the demon on its own terms, and hold his own. He'd come a long way.

Surprised, the demon jerked back. The horse ran on, taking the demon with it. Rhys pivoted, watching the two as they rode. They reached the end of the small, narrow arena. The horse reared, then rounded on Rhys, snapping around to charge at him again.

Rhys' whole body brimmed with strength. His mana was fully topped up. He'd never felt stronger in his life. The monster before him emanated pressure in the upper ranks of his current tier, but Rhys felt no fear. He could take it.

He had the trash.

Rhys summoned the rat projection. It circled around him and settled beside him, watching the demon. He empowered his sword with Trash Intent and Trash Aura, and as the demon closed in on him, he unleashed a slash of Trash Aura at the demon. It turned its horse to the side at the last second and caught the blade on its black sword. The horse reared and plunged toward Rhys, striking at him with its enormous hooves.

Rhys dashed back. The rat charged, biting at the horse's legs. The horse stopped dead and stomped at the rat, distracted.

The moment it took its eyes off him, Rhys reached out to the ball of impurities circulating around his core. There was plenty of curse power floating around his body, so he pushed that into the ball. The curse within came to life.

Here goes nothing. The curse ran through him. Instinctively, Rhys raised his hand and grasped at the horse.

Two enormous skeletal hands pierced through the muddy floor and clasped the horse and rider both, bearing them into the earth.

The rider swept its black blade. The bones shattered, and its mount leaped free—directly into a leg-breaking pile of slippery, round, random garbage.

The horse whinnied in fear. The rider gripped the reins tight, to no avail. The horse crashed down, and its legs went out from under it. It sprawled over the floor.

Thrown free, the demon rolled over the mud. Rhys closed in behind it, using Trash Step to race over the garbage footing. Before the demon could rise, he slammed his sword down on its neck.

Its skull came free. It rolled over the earth.

Panting, Rhys slowly came to his feet. Was that it? Had he done it?

Strands of black power reached out from the skull and from the spine alike. They connected, and the strands slowly drew the head and spine back together.

“I don’t think so.” Rhys reached in and grabbed the black strands.

Curse power writhed under his grasp. It reached into him, seeking to corrupt him. A wave poured through his mana passages, flooding his body.

Rhys pointed it all at the star in his core and rounded it up there. The star began to glow, in the brink of setting alight.

The black energy wavered. It jerked away, trying to escape him. Rhys reached after it, tightening his grip on the energy. It slipped around his fingers.

He chuckled and pulled at it, dragging it into him.

The black strands retreated, hiding away in the demon’s skull and spine. Rhys shrugged. He gripped the skull in one hand and the spine in the other. Taking a deep breath, he pulled ferociously from both at the same time.

The skull's eyes came alight. Its jaw worked wildly. In his other hand, the skeletal body thrashed. Claws scraped at his arms, and it kicked with all its might, bucking its whole body against his hold.

"Nope." Rhys pulled harder than ever. The skeleton thrashed, but there was nothing it could do. He had it in his grasp, and its curse power was his.

Something slammed into him from behind. Rhys tumbled, instinctively rolling with the blow. As he rolled, he caught sight of his assailant—the horse, which had scrambled free of the trash pile to come to the aid of its rider.

Rhys rolled upright and skidded to a stop seconds before he struck the wall. He looked up, clutching his sword behind him. Across the room, the rider leaped up onto his horse. He swung his sword at Rhys, leveling the blade at Rhys.

"One last charge," Rhys said.

The horse reared. It landed with a snort, cold smoke rising from its nostrils. On its back, the rider lowered its head, and its blazing red eyes locked onto Rhys'. The horse chomped at the bit, its dinnerplate hooves stomping the earth.

Rhys charged, and the rider rushed at him. The horse ate up the ground between them. As the rider closed in, it raised its cleaver high. Its eyes glowed. It would win. It had the reach, the speed. This battle was in its hands.

Abruptly, Rhys stopped dead. He ripped the steel pole out of his storage ring, braced it on the ground, and pointed the end at the rider. The blue glow of Trash Intent sprung forth and hammered into the rider's shoulder. The pole bucked in Rhys' hands, trying to break free, but he held on. The butt dug into the mud. *Come on!*

The rider flew backward, taken right off the horse by the pole. The horse ran by, unable to immediately turn its bulk to rescue the rider. Rhys raced in and grabbed the rider once more, pulling on the curse energy even more powerfully than the first time.

"You're mine. Stop resisting!"

The rider's body trembled. The black stone that served as its heart grew smaller and smaller, withering away as Rhys drew the curse power out of it. As the curse power flowed out of it, the dark energy around its bones and the bright fire in its eyes both faded. At last, nothing remained but the bones. The horns fell off, and the bones fell to powder.

Rhys raised his brows. This skeleton hadn't been the source of the curse. Was it the horse?

An angry whinny sounded from behind him. The staccato beat of hooves on the earth raced closer. Rhys threw himself out of the way, and hooves landed on the place where he'd been seconds before. The horse charged by, slowing as it reached the wall and turned, then lined up for another charge.

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"You saw how that ended last time. Do you want to get jousted, too?" Rhys asked, though honestly, he wasn't confident his pole would hold. The horse was massive. Its weight alone might be enough to crumple the pole, even if he reinforced it to perfect with Trash Intent.

The horse snorted. Apparently coming to the same conclusion as Rhys, it reared, then charged, barreling down on him. Rhys held his ground. He held out his sword, tightening his grip.

And then he rolled out of the way and let the horse charge by.

"Are you stupid? No shot I'm taking you on outright," Rhys berated it as it lumbered past. He wasn't going to make a brave stand or heroically charge head-first. What did the horse think he was, some hero? Pfft. Rhys knew his place. He was trash, so he was going to fight dirty like the trash he was. If he stood tall, there wasn't a chance he'd survive in this brutal world.

The horse ran by, huffing in frustration but unable to attack him. It was huge and fast, but as a result, it had a ton of inertia. It couldn't stop on a dime or turn tight angles. As long as he dodged its direct charge, he was safe.

It slowed down as it reached the wall. Tossing its head, it stomped the mud into a froth as it turned.

Grabbing ahold of his fresh curse power, Rhys put it all into the curse circulating around his core. Two skeletal hands appeared on either side of the horse and bore it down. The horse screeched and fought back, but the hands, empowered by all the curse power in its rider, were too strong. They pressed it into the earth and kept dragging, trying to pull it deeper yet.

"Whoa, whoa." Rhys let up on the amount of mana he poured into his curse to keep it from pulling his prize directly into the ground. Instead, he jogged over to its side and put his hand on its head. "You've been thrown away. Tossed in this pit for who knows how long, with piles and piles of garbage thrown on your head. But don't worry. You're mine now. I'll take good care of you."

With that, he pulled hard, sucking the curse power into himself.

The horse struggled. Neighing and kicking its powerful legs, it fought against the curse's hold. The strange part was, Rhys felt every beat of its hooves on his own hands, as if it kicked him instead of the cursed bones. He winced and gritted his teeth, but kept going. This was his curse, his garbage. He'd earned it fair and square. Now it was time for it to join the other curse flowing around his core, and truly belong to him!

The horse diminished, the same as the rider had, then vanished. This time, though, a single bone remained, one piece of the horse skeleton surviving to hurtle into his core. Like with the first curse, Rhys wrapped it in impurities and sent it circulating around his core.

Curious, he sent a bit of curse power into the bone to see what it would do. He felt the sensation of a horse, and understood—the horse would come if he called. In essence, he'd gained a mount.

He took a moment and simply took it all in. His core emanated mana, glowing faintly. Around it, the two curses floated like moons; the one with large hands, and the other, a single bone of a horse skeleton. Curse power circulated around the outside of his core like the rings around a planet, emanating a cold, ominous power. He could purify it, but since curses required curse power, he didn't want to completely burn away his store. He could transform curse power to mana, but not the other way around.

Curses... He gazed at them, a bit confused. Were these like Straw? Remnant Weapons, or whatever they'd been called, something left over by a great and powerful demon king? They used the same curse power Straw did, but Straw wasn't a skeleton, and he didn't have horns.

Then again, maybe not all Remnant Weapons were built the same. Maybe these were weak fragments, and Straw was a large, almost full, and highly dangerous Remnant. Or maybe these were something else entirely. He made a note to ask someone once things were quieter and see if he could figure it out.

Another question tickled at the back of his mind. Did these curses generate the 'foul well,' as Ernesto had called the trash pit? Or did people start throwing trash on the curses to bury them away and keep them from endangering ordinary mages? After all, dangerous things went in the trash, too. Sure, the most highly dangerous items from Rhys' world, such as nuclear waste, had their own disposal and storage methods, but some dangerous items were simply thrown into the landfill with everything else. If someone had once known that there was a dangerous item here, maybe they'd made it a trash pit deliberately, so that no one would want to go near it. Aside from Rhys, most people avoided the trash, after all.

The curses... they weren't *good*, per se. He wasn't completely sure it was a good idea to use them. But what they were, for sure, was *trash*. And trash was his. He knew in his heart, in his path, that curses belonged to him. If his path was telling him that, then he needed to listen to it. The curses were trash, which meant there was something more

hidden in them. Some truth related to them and trash that he needed to discover. If that was true, then he had no hesitation in collecting them, and not only that, learning more about them. What other way to learn more about curses than to use them?

Well, that and talk to Az. He wouldn't want to talk to an ordinary mage or librarian about it, since curses were clearly not seen as positive—though Ernesto was willing to openly investigate them, so maybe they weren't as bad as he thought. Still, he didn't think it was a good idea to run around and admit to everyone that he had curses inside him. Plus, if his earlier guesses were right, and Ernesto's class was allowed to exist so Purple Dawn had plausible deniability for any criminal actions they took, then curses weren't good at all, and Ernesto was only allowed to use them so openly so that when the time came for Purple Dawn to excise him, they had plenty of reason to turn against him and expel him. They wouldn't be struggling to come up with an excuse to exile... or even execute him.

He shook his head. Standing, he dusted off his robes and dismissed the hands. These questions were for later. For now, he needed to get out of here.

He turned to go, then stopped. Something tugged at his heart. He sensed... *something*. He didn't know what it was, but he knew two things: it was trash, and it was *important*. He turned, following the sensation.

He'd thought the chamber was relatively straightforward, a horizontal hall wide enough to joust in, and that was about it. As the sensation drew him toward the wall, however, he realized that his initial take was wrong. The wall juked left and right, appearing to be a solid entity while in truth allowing a human-sized object to pass through. Interestingly, both the horse and rider alike would have been too large to fit between the gap. Even Rhys was a tight fit. The earth scraped by his shoulders and kept narrowing until he had to turn sideways to squeeze through.

He stepped out and into a small antechamber. Dregs of trash still swilled around his ankles, but with a sweep of his hand, he sent that trash into his core. The trash flowed away, and Rhys blinked, startled.

How the hell did that get down here?

A skeletal man kneeled with his back against the wall, frozen in a meditative stance. No curse energy clung to it, nor did it sport horns. It wore full plate armor that couldn't possibly have fit through the walls Rhys had had to squeeze through. The chamber must have been built around him, or else he carried his armor in piece by piece, then put it on once he was within. His hands rested on his folded knees, and his gaze was locked dead ahead, on the object stuck in the mud before him.

A sword.

It was rusty and old, corroded by years submerged in the trash pit, but a strange light still clung to its depths. It almost reminded Rhys of the starlight embedded in Aquari's attacks, but much brighter and warmer. If Aquari was the night and the cool stars, then this thing shone with the heat of the sun.

He yanked it out of the earth. As if the skeleton had been waiting for this moment, it crumbled. Both the bones and the armor turned to dust.

He nodded to the pile that had once been the skeleton. "Thank you."

Rhys turned the sword over in his hand, taking it in. It was beautifully wrought, but absolutely ruined by the ages. Rust crawled over every inch of it. Its blade was notched and dull. The light in its depths flickered, as if on the verge of going out, and the wrapping around the hilt was so stained by filth that it had become a different color. It had once been valuable, but now, there was no doubt: it was trash.

Rhys chuckled. *Perfect.*

The sword was delicate, almost as delicate as the skeleton had been. Simply holding it, he could feel the rust coming off in his hand, feel the leather binding crumble. He needed to preserve it, somehow, before he could use it. In the delicate state it was in, even if he reinforced it with Trash Intent, it would crumble in a single blow.

Nonetheless, he felt the power thrumming within it, the heat and fury of the sun. It would be one hell of a final blow. If he found himself completely backed into a corner with no way out, it might be what tipped the scales in his favor. In its current degraded state, it was likely still enough to save his life, even if it would crumble immediately afterwards.

But let's try to fix it up, first, rather than leave it as a last resort. Rhys tucked it into his storage ring, where it would float in the interminable space within until he retrieved it. He gazed upward. Flashes of light flickered where Aquari and Ernesto battled on the surface.

It was time to finish this.

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

Chapter 56. Surface Battle

Rhys bent, extending one leg, then the other, stretching out his limbs. He bounced in place, shaking himself out. When he was good and warmed up, he knelt, then leaped off the ground. From left wall to right, bouncing across the relatively narrow well, Rhys climbed up one jump at a time back to the surface.

The sounds of battle echoed down the well, growing louder as he climbed. He kicked off the wall horizontally and spent one jump just to be sure he'd pop out on the far side from battle, then kicked off the wall and leaped up onto the surface.

Ernesto and Aquari dueled nearby. They were both holding back, but the forest had been flattened for hundreds of feet in all directions, and in some places, deep gashes tore far into the woods, cutting apart the trees and earth alike, even splitting boulders. At his new Tier 2, Rhys could tell that the battle was utterly beyond him. Now that he was a higher Tier, he was more able to sense mana, and from the emanations he sensed from Aquari and Ernesto, they were each at least two tiers above him; in other words, Tier 4 or higher.

Aquari glanced at him, then turned to Ernesto. "Give it up. Your 'foul well' is empty, and nothing remains in its depths. It no longer contains whatever you sought within."

Ernesto paused. He pointed his sword at Aquari. "Then I'll slaughter the boy and take it from him."

"In front of the entire Alliance?" Aquari asked.

"Huh?" Rhys said.

She nodded at him. "I apologize for arriving late. I was busy investigating a nearby armada. It turned out to be from the Alliance, and called on Infinite Constellation School by a certain nameless professorial individual." She cast a dead stare at Ernesto.

"Damn. You work fast," Rhys commented to Ernesto. He'd mentioned pivoting to blaming Infinite Constellation School for the crime of happening to have a foul well on its property as if he'd only done so today, but the Alliance was already on its way?

"He fired off an emergency beacon shortly before you arrived. I was there when the Alliance received the signal. I asked them to wait, so that I could handle the internal affairs of my school myself. If I hadn't..." she cast a meaningful look at Rhys.

I wouldn't have had the time to peacefully absorb all that trash, Rhys realized. He nodded gratefully to Aquari. If not for her intervention, he would have simply been

interrupted by the Alliance and likely taken in for questioning at best, or outright killed at worst.

“Still, to have an Alliance armada waiting for your signal? Purple Dawn Academy has expanded its influence more than I was aware,” Aquari commented.

Ernesto harrumphed. “We trained the Alliance’s leader. We nurtured the Sword Saint in his earliest years. We’re the largest, most powerful academy in the Alliance, who funds the majority of the Alliance and contributes the most soldiers to its army. Isn’t it obvious?”

Rhys snorted under his breath. It was just like in his old world. Whoever had the most money to fund the biggest military was the effective leader of the region. It was a pretty simple equation. Money was power, and power was money. A self-feeding loop, empowered by the loyalty of Purple Dawn Academy’s graduates. The most promising mages naturally wanted to study at the school with the most profound experts; the most powerful school had the most money to recruit the most profound experts; the promising students graduated as fresh profound experts, loyal to Purple Dawn, and so the loop continued. Those students who didn’t return to Purple Dawn Academy became soldiers in the Alliance. As the most promising students taught by the best experts, they obviously excelled and quickly climbed the ranks in the Alliance, possessing the most martial power and the most command authority in the Alliance alike. Thus, a structure that was ruled by the consensus of many different schools in name, became nothing more than a vehicle for Purple Dawn Academy to exert its authority.

From the name of it, it might *sound* like the Alliance was a group of peers working toward a common goal, but under the surface? If Rhys was right, and he suspected he was, it meant that the Alliance was nothing more than the way for the Purple Dawn Academy to keep all the other, smaller schools in line.

Honestly, the real miracle here is that they stopped on Aquari’s request, he realized. Then again, Ernesto was meddling around with curse power. When he messed with something ‘illegal’ as obviously as Ernesto was doing, word would get around. It wouldn’t surprise him if the commander of this armada knew Ernesto, and had a low opinion of him, besides. The Purple Dawn’s power meant that the Alliance was loyal to it, but that loyalty didn’t necessarily extend to every single one of Purple Dawn’s staff members, especially ones who had a bad reputation like Ernesto almost certainly did.

Even if Purple Dawn Academy was willing to look the other way and let Ernesto cause trouble in Infinite Constellation School, hell, even if Purple Dawn had deliberately sent him here to take over Infinite Constellation, that was Purple Dawn, not the Alliance. The personality and goals of the armada leader came into play, and who knew? Maybe this particular armada was run by someone not loyal to Purple Dawn, or a student who had more of a sense of personal righteousness than loyalty to Purple Dawn.

At the end of the day, it's all speculation. He was pretty confident in his take on Purple Dawn and its dominance over the Alliance, but the specifics of how the armada fit in, he couldn't be sure of until he met the armada's commander. All he knew right now was that the armada commander had taken Aquari's side, whether out of distaste for Ernesto, a personal sense of righteousness, or even a lack of loyalty to Purple Dawn, he couldn't say for sure.

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"So, are you ready to hand over what's rightfully mine? What that boy stole?" Ernesto asked.

"Rightfully yours," Rhys and Aquari both scoffed, almost at the same moment. Aquari narrowed her eyes at him, and Rhys smiled and lowered his head, deferring to her. True, it was on her mountain... but it was trash. It was his, of course it was.

Ernesto strode to the side as he talked, trying to get an angle on Rhys, but Aquari rotated with him, keeping her blade between him and Rhys. Rhys stood close behind Aquari, protected, but unafraid. He gazed directly at Ernesto. The man was stronger than him, but he refused to be cowed by him. Ernesto hadn't earned his fear. He was a pawn in someone's game, not someone to be feared in his own right.

"You'll defend the boy, even so?" Ernesto asked.

Aquari narrowed her eyes. "No matter what, he's still a member of Infinite Constellation School."

To his surprise, a spark of warmth warmed Rhys' heart. He smiled for a second, then turned serious. Facing Ernesto, he nodded, and asked something that he'd been wondering about for a long time—or rather, he'd been wondering who'd done it, but now, he had a much better guess than he ever had before. "Capturing Straw was the will of Purple Dawn?"

"Of course. The Alliance was happy to leave such a peaceable and mysterious Remnant alone, on the principle that capturing him would be more dangerous than leaving him alone, but he would be invaluable for my research. *I'm* the one who requested he be captured."

"So Straw's in Purple Dawn Academy," Rhys commented to himself. He hadn't expected to get his probe for information directly answered, but he wasn't mad about it. In fact, he was quite happy.

Ernesto looked down on him. "That's right. You're the Strawman's disciple. Do you long to free your erstwhile master?"

Rhys shrugged. "Eh. I'm a trashy guy, you know? No sense of loyalty."

He wasn't going to tell Ernesto the truth: that he was absolutely committed to freeing Straw. Straw had been his first teacher in the ways of magecraft, and he'd taught Rhys the essentials he still relied on to survive. He owed the man more than he owed any teacher he'd had since. But Ernesto was the enemy, so it was better to play it off like he didn't care.

Once, he might have gotten worked up at the idea that Straw was languishing somewhere. Maybe even fooled into taking urgent action. It still bothered him, yes, but he'd seen enough of the world to know that nothing but power meant anything. If he didn't have the power to save Straw and keep him from Purple Dawn, then he would accomplish nothing but become the enemy of the world. Instead, he had to bear the reality that Straw was imprisoned, and work steadily toward growing powerful enough to free him and keep him free.

Plus, he wasn't alone. He was willing to bet that Bast also wanted Straw free, and he couldn't imagine that his friend was any weaker than him. Together, they could free Straw. It would be a long, laborious process, but they'd make it work in the end. He was sure of it.

"In any case, you've lost, Ernesto. The Alliance is on its way, and they will find nothing. No curse, no foul well. Give up. Stop this pointless battle." Aquari pointed her sword at him as she spoke, and the sky moved with it, as if her sword were twisted up in the fabric of the night itself.

Ernesto put his hands up. "Now you point your blade at an innocent member of the faculty? What a pathetic school this is."

Aquari harrumphed but said nothing. She turned to Rhys and quickly scanned his body. Her brows furrowed. *Curse power?* she mouthed.

Rhys startled. He blinked at her, then glanced up. *Oh, right.* There was an armada on the way, of people who probably didn't like curse power. Now wasn't the time to keep some lying around. Better that he wasn't able to use the curses for a short time, than that he got detected as a user of curse power by some kind of high-powered Alliance loyal to an enemy school. He quickly burned it the old-fashioned way, and reinforced his mana with the curse power's strength.

A second later, he furrowed his brows. She'd sensed the curse power, but not the curses themselves? He sent his vision inward, inspecting his core. The curses were embedded in balls of impurity. When he wasn't within his own core, they felt like nothing more than impurity, rather than curses.

Interesting. In other words, as long as he didn't have curse power in his core, people up to Tier 4, or maybe higher, couldn't sense his curses. They weren't infecting his core,

after all, the way the curse had on Walter's body. Was that the difference? Maybe that was also why he felt no ill effects, despite carrying curses in his core... not that he knew what ill effects curses might have.

I really need to spend some time with Az.

Overhead, ships soared through the night, rapidly closing in on the school. Aquari kept her blade leveled at Ernesto as they flew closer and closer. The ships halted in the sky over the school. The largest one lowered itself down, down, down. It was a triple-decker ship, easily five times as large as the ship Ernesto had flown in on. Three layers of cannons bristled from its decks, shining black amongst the perfect white-painted wood. A full squad of mages stood on its decks, not a one of them below Tier 3. All the mages wore pure white military uniforms with details in gold and red.

In the center of the deck, a broad-shouldered man wore the most ornate uniform of them all, laden with gold braid and shiny gold buttons, a red sash wrapped around his chest. An enormous gleaming golden poleax was strapped to his back, almost comically large, the head of the axe wider than even his broad shoulders, its pole so long he had to wear it at a diagonal. *Why doesn't he just keep it in a spatial ring?* Rhys wondered, frowning a bit.

The man's eyes alighted on the group of three standing in the woods, and he hopped down from the ship. He slammed into the earth and rattled the very ground with his landing. The trees leaped, and a cloud of dust flew up, separating the three of them from the men.

"Hyah!"

A sharp clap sounded out, and a hurricane wind blew the dust away. Rhys stumbled, almost falling, and Aquari extended her hand to rest a fingertip on his arm. Power flowed from her to him, and suddenly, it was easy to stand despite the wind.

The wind dissipated, revealing the uniformed man. He hopped out of the hole his landing had dug and nodded at the assembled group. "Aquari. Ernesto."

He didn't acknowledge Rhys, which was fine by Rhys. He was nothing but a trash student... and besides, in this situation? He really didn't want to be acknowledged. Aquari hadn't sensed his curses, but she'd only done a cursory examination, and from what he sensed, this man was stronger than her. If Aquari was mid-Tier 4, then this man was at the peak of Tier 4. If *he* scanned Rhys, Rhys had no confidence his curses would remain hidden.

"Griffin," Aquari greeted him in return.

Ernesto's lip lifted. "Of all the commanders..."

Griffin smiled wide and clapped his hands. “So, what’s going on here? Does anyone want to explain?”

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

Chapter 57. Please Explain

Griffin, as it turned out, fit none of Rhys’ expectations. As a proud graduate of Purple Dawn, he wasn’t disloyal to his academy, nor did he bear a personal grudge against Ernesto. He had a strong sense of righteousness, but that wasn’t the problem.

The problem was that he was aggressively, excessively, to far too extreme an extent—straightforward and by-the-book.

“Why didn’t you come faster?” Ernesto snarled, annoyed.

Griffin put his hands on his hips and gave him a broad smile. “Pursuant to Alliance Code for Resolving Inter-School Conflicts, the two schools’ representatives should first be given a time to resolve their differences via martial or other means for a period of not less than twelve hours, and not more than seventy-two. In the case of extreme emergency or in the case that one of the academic institutions is not party to the Alliance, the armada can intervene as early as six hours—”

Rhys blanked out. He watched the stars, counted the blades of grass, anything but listen to Griffin quote legal statements. The moon fell, and the sun rose. In the distance, he heard the startled cries of students as they woke up from their nightly meditations to find an armada floating overhead. Rhys studied the ships, mentally memorizing their shapes and forms, and cataloging the emanations that reached him, even down here on the floor.

The three high-Tier mages spoke for a while, their conversations interspersed by long-winded recitals from Griffin, until at last Rhys heard his name and snapped back in.

“—according to the Peace Treaty of Nartois, both parties must send a representative to a formal contest, wherein the contestants’ rank in the contest, or their battle against one another, should the two see one another in battle, determines who is in the right—”

“Yes, thank you, Griffin. What it boils down to, is that we both send representatives to the upcoming tournament in Purple Dawn Academy, and whoever wins, wins. If we win, then Rhys, and the entire Infinite Constellation School, is free to go; if Ernesto wins, then we are party to his wishes, within reason, and up to a limit of value equal to or

greater than—sorry, the legalese infected me. Within reason,” Aquari summed up. She turned and looked at Rhys pointedly.

Rhys pointed at himself. “Me? I’m the representative?”

“I’m pretty sure Ernesto would accept no less,” she said, quirking a brow.

“Indeed,” Ernesto confirmed with a nod.

Rhys dropped his jaw, then slowly closed it. He tilted his head, then nodded. “Okay.”

He actually... didn’t mind? Ev had mentioned that tournament, and it had sounded pretty fun to him. Plus, Straw was in Purple Dawn Academy. He realized he couldn’t free the man now, or any time in the near future, but what he could do right now—or *at least, in the near future*—was scout the premises out, to figure out where Straw was, what his situation was, and how deeply he was kept under guard, so that when the time came to break him out, he was ready.

The narrative has been taken without permission. Report any sightings.

As for having the outcome of this clash determine his future and the future of the school, it was a lot of pressure, but at the same time, he didn’t want to put that on anyone else. First off, it was *his* life, *his* future. It wasn’t someone else’s responsibility, and he was too trash to be worth anyone else staking their life on him. Second off, he was especially suited to battle those who used curses. If he fought, Ernesto was either at a disadvantage, if he chose one of his own students, or he was forced to find a student outside his class, who would likely be less committed to fight to their last. If someone else fought, they’d likely simply be overcome by the curses, without a way to counter them.

That did assume that Ernesto, or rather, his representative, would use curses in a formal battle before god and everyone, as the saying went, but given how bold Ernesto was acting? It wasn’t out of the question. Besides, as Rhys himself had experienced via hiding his own curses, curses could be subtle and used subtly. A hit that appeared to be no more than a touch, but in fact inflicted a curse, would end the battle for anyone at Infinite Constellation but Rhys.

I’m sure the higher-level mages, and the talents like Ev, have a way to deal with curses... but even so, I’d rather take my fate into my own hands.

Griffin nodded in satisfaction. “Then, according to—”

Aquari hit him with a glare.

The burly man cleared his throat and cut the fat. “Ernesto, you must also provide a representative at Tier 2 or lower.”

“Tier 2?” Ernesto looked Rhys up and down, startled, then smiled slowly. He nodded. “Of course.”

It was easy to guess his thoughts. Rhys could almost see them, moving behind the man’s brows. Rhys had only just reached Tier 2. If the man pitched a talent at the absolute upper limit of Tier 2 up against Rhys, Rhys stood no chance.

Or at least, he shouldn’t stand a chance. But Rhys was confident in his trashy fighting. He’d fight dirty if he had to—hell, if he didn’t have to. And the tournament... if it was anything like social events in his homeworld, then it would generate tons of trash. Mounds and mounds of it. Just thinking about it brought a smile to Rhys’ face. *So much power... so much potential to advance!* A more powerful school, too, meant more powerful trash. Now that he was thinking about it, he was excited to get there and get started!

A tournament, too. Would such a thing, maybe, by chance, bring out someone like, for example, the Sword Saint’s disciple? It was a tournament held by the strongest school in the region. If someone with the lofty title of the Sword Saint was going to show up at any tournament, he’d surely attend the most powerful tournament, right? It didn’t necessitate that the Sword Saint *would* show up, but if he was going to go anywhere, it would be this tournament.

It was only a chance. A shot. But there was a very real possibility, that he’d see Bast at this tournament.

“If both parties have come to an agreement, then it is my responsibility, as an Alliance commander, to see the offending party off the incipient school,” Griffin stated, gesturing for Ernesto to follow him.

Ernesto nodded. He whistled. A few moments later, his students came running through the trees to his side. Mae ran on bare feet, her shoes ruined by Rhys’ earlier strike, but she ran, her foot fully healed. She shot him a dirty look, and he shrugged back. She’d been the one to attack him. She was here to sabotage his school. She really couldn’t blame him for striking back.

“Four months. Use them wisely,” Ernesto warned Rhys. He turned, following Griffin. Griffin waved, and a red carpet unrolled from the giant ship, making stairs out of thin air as it unfurled. He stood to the side and waved, indicating for Ernesto to climb on.

Rhys saluted, happy to see him go. He had a mountain ahead of him, but he’d climb it, one Trash Step at a time. To Purple Dawn Academy, to the tournament, and beyond. Who knew what hijinks he could get up to in a brand-new school?

And maybe, just maybe, he’d encounter Bast once again.

END BOOK 1

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

Book 2 Start! Chapter 58. Heading to the Tournament

Rhys sat on a bench, a book in his hands and a cat purring on his lap. The cat rolled over, exposing its belly to the sun pouring in the window. Across from him, a short-haired woman rested her head on her hand, watching the scenery pass by. She glanced at Rhys, and Rhys quickly averted his eyes, pretending not to notice.

The last four months had been hell. Every second had been full of beatings, battle, then more beatings. The second Ev had learned he'd climbed up a Tier, she hadn't let him go. He was tougher, now, more durable, and able to fight harder, and as a result, Ev had pushed him even further than before. They'd sparred until Rhys was bloody and bruised, and then battled some more, and then kept battling. They'd fought with bare fists, with magic, with swords, with polearms and with every conceivable weapon, even improvised weapons pulled from Rhys's storage ring. He'd learned a lot, but he'd also spent his entire four months bloody and bruised, beaten an inch from death.

There wasn't much trash to work with anymore. The pit was gone, and so was all the upper and lower peak trash. He'd still done his daily rounds, but at the end of it, he'd only managed to brew one low-tier impurity potion. Given that the final impurity potion from the upper peak was now nothing to him, that potion was even less to him, so he simply carried the potions with him in case he needed a hit of impurities so he could feed curse power into the curses in his core. His progress had been purely conventional, and as a result, embarrassingly slow. Thanks to Ev, his martial and magical battle prowess had advanced significantly, but his Tier remained locked at the low end of Tier 2 with no trash to feed its progress.

The entire time he'd been in the school, training with Ev, he'd experienced no side effects from the curses. She'd pushed him to the limits, and he'd still had no downsides from the curses. He'd visited the library, of course, and researched everything Az would give him on curses, but all the side effects—heavy impurities, sluggish mana, blackening of the flesh, weakening in the body, deadly pain—simply hadn't happened to him. In the end, he'd decided that it had to be his mounting the curses on impurities, rather than allowing them to infect his core as Walter had done, that meant he faced no side effects. He read a book on curses now, but it only continued to confirm what he'd already figured out; that he wasn't getting any of the side effects he should be dealing with.

Rhys finished the book with Speed Reading and tucked it back in his storage ring. Az batted his hand, so he pet the cat as he thought. Heading to a new Academy. A fresh

start. Fresh trash... but also a fresh reputation, and in a place where he didn't care much for the occupants.

It was true that he only had the most limited experience of Purple Dawn Academy, and extrapolating an entire academy from one rogue professor was a bit of a stretch. At the same time, Purple Dawn allowed Ernesto to exist, thrive, and grow, while openly researching curse power and infiltrating smaller sects, likely with the academy's implicit permission. The kind of atmosphere that nurtured someone like Ernesto, wasn't the kind of atmosphere he looked for in a workplace... or school, for that matter.

Hell, I could condemn the school for allowing Ernesto to exist, alone. He wasn't quite that trashy, as tempting as it was. He'd give the school its due. But if he found it lacking... then he wouldn't hold back. It had been a while since he'd tried any money-making, and he had a few good ideas from his world that he desperately wanted to try out in this one. Ideas related to his path, things he was sure would not only give him enlightenment, but which would also put gold in his pocket at the same time. In other words, the best kind of ideas.

Running his hand through Az's thick fur, he sighed to himself. If only he had Bast around. He was stronger now, but compared to mages, he was still pitifully weak, and despite his best efforts and Tarais's advice, his backer, the potions teacher, Sorden, was weak, or rather, she had no influence outside Infinite Constellation School. Even if he considered Aquari his backer—a stretch of the imagination, at best—she had little influence in the face of Purple Dawn, when Ernesto, doubtless a weaker teacher with little influence in his academy, if his eccentric choice to pursue curse power was any indication, could drop by and openly cause chaos at her school.

As for the cat in his lap, though Az was a mysterious beast capable of overcoming Aquari's barriers with ease, whose Tier Rhys still couldn't determine, the cat man had little interest in acting as anyone's backer. His immense power was reserved solely for himself and his library pursuits, and honestly, Rhys understood and respected it. One day, when he was strong enough to count as an expert, it would be a total drag if every young mage around him expected him to act as their backer. He'd be running out day and night to save a bunch of braindead children who weren't yet fully mentally developed if he let that happen, and that sounded like the opposite of fun to him. He'd chosen not to have kids in his first life for a reason, and it was definitely a choice, not because no women would talk to him. He had a female friend, damn it! A female friend! She even wore the costumes he made for her, and that wasn't just because he gave her thousand-dollar costumes for free, okay? They were friends. Friends!

His pathetic past aside, he didn't think it was ridiculous to want to be powerful and left alone, and therefore respected that Az wouldn't be doing much to help him. That the cat let him into the library when he needed to retreat was already more than he expected from the man.

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“How much longer until we get there?” Ev asked, restless. Her foot drummed the floor, and her fingers rapped on the edge of the window.

“I dunno,” Rhys said, glancing outside.

They rode inside a small flying skiff. It was just big enough inside for the two of them to sit and walk around, and the deck up top was really meant for driving, or maybe standing at the railing, but not much more. In the face of the majestic three-deck monster ship that had appeared in the skies above Infinite Constellation from the Alliance’s armada, it was nothing. Less than a worm, less than a tick. It barely qualified as a flea in comparison with that enormous ship. Still, it was the biggest vessel Infinite Constellation School had, so he couldn’t count it as trash. It was precious to Aquari and her school, so it was impossible to take under his path.

Outside, the world passed by. Rolling hills wound over the earth, softly covered in a thick carpet of trees. In the distance, he saw fields and a small mortal town, sitting along a trade route, but it was mostly uninhabited out here. Their skiff floated over endless deep forest, down the foothills and across a vast valley.

Rhys had no idea where they were in relation to Infinite Constellation, Purple Dawn, or anything else for that matter. His grasp on geography was limited to what little his mortal schooling had taught him and the few books he’d read in Az’s library. He struggled to translate what he’d read in texts and seen on hand-drawn maps into real world hills and valleys, and to be given a glimpse of a random piece of scenery and expected to know where he was without ever having visited the place before was simply unreasonable, in his opinion. His path wasn’t maps. If it was, he was sure things would be different, but his path was trash, so this was no more than another set of pretty hills to him.

Ev harrumphed. She leaned on her hand again and returned to gazing out the window.

In his lap, Az batted his hand, reminding him that he was remiss in his petting duties. Rhys chuckled and went back to petting the cat. “Yes, yes. Why’d you come, anyways?”

“Me?” Ev asked, looking over.

“No, I know why you’re here. I’m asking Az.”

“The cat?” she asked with a frown.

Rhys opened his mouth, then glanced at Az and shut it. Did Az want him to reveal that he was a cat that could transform into a man, or not? He didn’t know, and it wasn’t his place to declare such a thing, so he just shrugged. “Yeah? What of it?”

She snorted. “Sorry. I didn’t realize I hit your head that hard during training.”

“Yeah, yeah. Laugh it up,” Rhys muttered playfully.

Az stretched, then curled up to nap. Rhys yawned and followed his example, folding his legs to meditate. He'd never really understood the point of meditation. It wasn't like sitting still and just thinking had ever done him much good, in this life or the last one. Still, it was the closest thing he could get to taking a nap, as a mage, so he went ahead and indulged.

He and Ev were the only ones on the skiff with the exception of the driver, a man who apparently served as a kind of all-purpose fixer-upper around the school, not that Rhys had ever seen him do much, and of course Az. The two of them were the only ones who'd either qualified for the tournament, in the case of Ev, or been obligated to attend the tournament, in the case of Rhys.

During their spars, he'd brought up the inevitable—that he had no chance of winning against her, or anyone else at Tier 3. At that, Ev had laughed.

“Don't be an idiot. The tournament is split up into brackets. You're separated by your Tier. You won't fight anyone but other Tier 2s, so don't worry about it.”

He'd felt that the admonishment was unnecessary, but he appreciated the reassurance. It made sense, in any case. It was difficult to fight up a Tier. He could barely manage it in favorable cases, such as when he'd fought a disenchanting and low-spirited Tarais, but if he was fighting someone at the absolute peak of their skill, as they ought to be during a tournament? He had little to no chance.

He was still trash in the end, after all. Unless he was running hot, burning impurities, he wasn't able to fight up a Tier. And after the toxic trash pit, the impurities he could find on the peak were just... lacking. Sure, he could burn them, but he didn't get the explosive power boost he used to. His own power had increased too much with the jump to Tier 2, so that the explosive power from the impurities was just a small percentage increase in his strength. That, and he was better at absorbing and more resistant to them than ever. Impurity Resist kept him from dying to the impurities, but it also meant he got less oomph out of them as a result, because his body resisted the good and the bad alike.

In any case, he understood why he, Ev, and the driver were here on the skiff, but he had no idea why Az had chosen to join them. Az hadn't brought up any interest in the tournament during any of Rhys's visits to the library, even when Rhys himself brought it up, but this morning, when he was waiting for the skiff to arrive, he'd felt a small, soft body winding around his ankles and glanced down to find a familiar cat meowing to be picked up. He hadn't had time to ask Az why he had chosen to come before Ev arrived, and on the skiff, well, he'd tried, but Ev was right there, and even if he asked Az, the cat had stubbornly remained in animal form and mute, besides.

Then again, Az had apparently just sauntered into Aquari's library and taken over at some point. Maybe he'd decided to move on and up, to Purple Dawn's library. It was very catlike of him, to arrive at a time of his choosing and leave when he pleased, with no notice. Still, the idea that he wouldn't be there, in Infinite Constellation's library, sent

a ping of sadness through Rhys's chest. He'd miss the cat. Back in his first life, he'd always loved cats. He didn't own Az, by any stretch of the imagination, but he'd enjoyed the cat's company. The library would feel empty without him.

Az arched his back, shifting to give Rhys a better angle. Rhys chuckled under his breath and kept petting, as per Az's command. "Yeah, yeah."

Who knew, after all. Maybe Az just wanted a change of scenery for a little while.

Rhys entered a meditative trance. Az purred on his lap, and the ship soared along, carrying them over the lands below. At last, the ship slowed. Rhys blinked awake, startled out of his meditation.

The driver's voice echoed down from above. "We're arriving."

Ev stared out the window, her jaw dropped. Rhys turned, then leaned forward, his own jaw dropping.

They had arrived. And what a place they'd reached.

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

Chapter 59. Purple Dawn Academy

They flew toward the side of a mountain. A dark stone castle stood atop the peak, piercing up into the sky. The roof was made of a strange purple metal that reflected the sunlight, giving the impression of the sun constantly rising against a purple backdrop. That roof clad steeped temples, tall towers, and outbuildings alike. A crenelated stone wall ringed the outside of the castle, more a marker than a barrier, since mages flew over the wall left, right, and center. The castle was so large that it sprawled over the entire top half of the mountain, and as a result, the wall ringed the mountain just below the castle. A purple banner with a gold sun blazing in its center snapped atop the tallest tower in the center of the castle, which perched atop the very top of the peak.

A castle large enough to surmount a mountain. A castle that took up the entire upper half of a mountain. It was immense. Larger than any building Rhys had ever seen, in this world or his own. The castle was the size of a large city, and equally vertical to match. Squinting, Rhys made out markets, shops, sports fields and even farming fields mingling in with the stone buildings of the castle. It was a castle and a city; a bastion, and a mountain. Mana emanated from the castle in waves, and Rhys sensed layers of barriers and dozens of hostile intents locking onto the skiff as they approached. Sensing

two low-tier mages and their driver, the intents moved away, allowing the skiff to approach.

In Rhys's lap, Az yawned. Rhys glanced at him. Either the mages scanning them hadn't noticed Az, or they'd let him by. Based on how easily Az had evaded Aquari, Rhys couldn't be sure at all that they'd sensed him. True, Purple Dawn Academy was huge. Its physical size was several dozens of times larger than Infinite Constellation... maybe even hundreds of times. He could only see the front of the mountain, so he couldn't be sure.

Commensurate with its size, it was surely also home to more powerful mages than Aquari, or at least housed more powerful mages than a single Tier 4 mage (also known as Aquari), in terms of both having multiple Tier 4 and up mages, and also in terms of having mages above Tier 4. But the ease with which Az evaded Aquari meant he simply couldn't be sure that Az couldn't also evade them. For all he knew, Az was an evasion specialist who could hide from mages on his own tier. Hell, for all he knew, Az was some insanely high tier, and even evading Tier 5, or, dare he guess, Tier 6 mages, was as easy as batting a paw. He knew very little about the cat, except that he wanted him on his side.

Rhys turned back to the window, gazing at his enemy. No wonder Ernesto had thought he could bully Infinite Constellation School. Compared to Purple Dawn Academy, their school was tiny. It was barely as large as one of the massive buildings in the sprawling castle before him.

He chuckled to himself. Ev glanced his way. "What?"

"You know what a big city means?"

"I'm afraid to ask."

"Big trash pit."

She shook her head at him. "Is trash all you think about?"

"No. Sometimes I think about costumes," Rhys informed her.

Gesturing at the massive castle outside, she said, "You see all that stone, all those rooms, the hundreds, no, thousands of mages, and you think, 'lots of trash,' and not 'bet there's a good fight to be had?'"

Rhys shook his head at her. "I think that's on you, not me."

"It's on both of you," the driver said, stomping down the stairs. He'd introduced himself as Oscar when they'd arrived, and was a big, burly man with a broad chest and wide shoulders. Not as big as Cynog, but far more hairy, with hair poking out of his shirt and

sleeves, bristling muttonchops, and a bandana barely holding back a jutting head of hair. He looked from Ev to Rhys and thumbed over his shoulder. "We're in their grip now. They're pulling us into the dock. We're here a bit early, so I don't know if the guide will be at the docks or not, but they're supposed to show us around the school, and then after that, you'll have the rest of the day to roam. All us little schools are getting in today, while the big schools get in tomorrow. Gives us a little time to adapt before the bigguns get here."

Rhys nodded. Rather than 'adapt,' he really meant 'blend in and scurry.' Given the way that Purple Dawn had treated Infinite Constellation, it was obvious that the schools weren't adverse to crushing one another outright or through underhanded means. Other big schools would likely be just as happy to casually backhand him and Ev off the face of the planet for looking at them wrong, and destroy their whole school for an insult.

Unless, of course, the big schools didn't know they were from little schools. Unless they blended in with Purple Dawn, and appeared the same as its students, or at least close enough that the big schools thought it was a risk to target them. He was sure Purple Dawn would assure their, and everyone else from a little school's, safety, but it was better if they didn't have to test that, especially with Purple Dawn's attitude toward their school in general. Better they were just a face in the crowd. Of course, eventually, they'd end up realizing he and Ev were from a different school when they fought in the tournament, but that would also allow him and Ev to show off their skills, and with any luck, the other students would have second thoughts about harassing or fighting them after that.

He eyed Ev. *Or maybe not.* Ev was looking for a good fight already. Who knew? Maybe there were other martial madmen like her who were on the hunt for sparring partners. But still, as long as they were good-natured and just looking to test their fists, rather than maliciously attack him and Ev with the intent to kill, it wasn't that bad.

The ship cruised smoothly into the dock. The docks stretched off a cliff, reaching out long wooden fingers into the sky, just exactly as docks would reach out into water. When they bumped up against the wood, Oscar hopped out and tied it into place, while Ev and Rhys disembarked. These docks were a little run down. The boards were silvered with age, and a few were outright missing. Birds congregated on the ends of the docks, and the wood there was painted black and white with droppings. One or two other small skiffs were pulled into the docks, most of them workhorses with all the patchwork paint jobs and mismatched hulls that implied. Across the dock, a finely painted green boat with gold trimming a little larger than theirs with a proud mast and a furled sail was tied up against the wood. Rhys made a note of it, tucking its description into the back of his mind. It probably belonged to another small school, so if he saw any students in green, they might belong to that school.

Luckily, for his blend-in plan, neither he nor Ev wore anything that tied them to Infinite Constellation School. His robes were handmade from garbage materials, and her well-worn martial robes were deliberately nondescript. As long as Purple Dawn students

didn't all wear uniforms—and the ones he'd seen so far hadn't—they had a pretty good leg up on blending in.

The tale has been stolen; if detected on Amazon, report the violation.

Oscar looked around, then nodded at the two of them. "You two can take care of yourself, no?"

Rhys and Ev exchanged a look. Rhys nodded. "Sure."

"Good. Wait here until your guide shows up. Shouldn't be more than a few minutes. I'm gonna go get a drink." Patting Rhys on the shoulder, Oscar shambled off, cracking his neck as he went.

Rhys watched him go and raised his brows at Oscar's retreating back. *I think I know why I never saw him on the peak.*

The two of them stood there until Oscar wandered out of sight. The second he was gone, Ev nudged him. "Do we wait?" she muttered.

Rhys glanced at her. "I do want to know where to sleep, where to find resources, where the shops are, where the garbage pit is..."

"Shops? What are you going to do with shops?" Ev scoffed.

Rhys shrugged. He was aware that he didn't look like he had money. He liked it that way. Made him less likely to be robbed. That was why he'd always worn old sweat stained anime girl t-shirts and baggy old sweatpants back in his world. Definitely. For sure. In any case, the same principle applied in this world. He trusted Ev, but there was no reason to randomly flaunt his wealth, either. "Look at things."

"Look at things? I guess." She crossed her arms and tapped one foot, already impatient. "Where's this guide? Can't they at least be on time?"

Rhys wanted to remind her that they were the ones who had arrived early, but one look at her knitted brows, and he decided to take the better part of valor. They stood there on the dock, waiting, until at last a figure approached them. A young man, he strode forth with his chest puffed and his chin up high, looking down on them before he even reached them.

"Oh boy. This is gonna be good," Ev muttered, crossing her arms.

Rhys's lips pulled upward, but it was more grimace than smile. He put his hands behind his back and waited for the young man to arrive, but his hopes were no higher than Ev's. It seemed Purple Dawn never was going to treat them with respect, from the beginning until the end. In all honesty, it would have shocked him to discover that it was

just Ernesto who was the problem. Yes, Ernesto certainly was a problem, but what he'd learned over his first life was that there were environments that nourished those kinds of people, and environments that suppressed them. Given how blatant Ernesto was about using curse power and attacking Infinite Constellation, he'd had little hope that Purple Dawn was the kind of healthy environment where oppressors and bullies were stopped. Instead, he'd expected it to be highly toxic. Now that he was seeing a Purple Dawn student who wasn't from Ernesto's class for the first time, his theory had been confirmed.

The young man reached them and bowed stiffly, barely lowering himself half a degree. "Welcome to Purple Dawn Academy, students of..." He looked at the two of them. "Just you two?"

Mew. A tuxedo cat sat pointedly at Rhys's feet, giving the young man a judgmental stare.

"And Az," Rhys added, nodding at the cat.

"Right. If that's so, then come along. You can join in with the introduction my fellow ambassador is offering Broad Oak School." He gestured for them to follow and set off without looking back.

Rhys bit back a snort. Student ambassador? It had been too long since he'd heard that officialism. *Gods.* Even back in his world, he'd found it stuffy and overly pompous. Hearing it from the lips of such a pompous boy... it was almost too much to take. He shook his head. Some things never changed. No matter where he went, academia would always be self-interested and stuck up its own rear end, buffing its ailing reputation with pompous titles.

Well, I don't think schools' reputations are ailing here, Rhys noted silently, gazing around at the vast castle crawling over the entire mountaintop. Here, schools truly had power and influence, more than the countries around them. After all, the Alliance had made no mention of what country they were in, but merely referred to the school.

Then again, I remember being taught in the orphanage that mortals and mages stay apart from one another. The schools ignored the countries, but equally didn't interfere in their dealings; the countries ignored the schools, because they had absolutely no influence over the vastly more powerful mages. There were essentially two societies stacked on top of one another, never mixing, like oil and water.

It made sense. Mortals were so powerless that if any mage interfered in their lives, that mage could absolutely dominate the mortals around them. On the other hand, the mages had little incentive to dabble in mortal dealings when mortals bought goods in copper pennies, and mages traded hundreds of gold on a daily basis. Sure, a mage could go dominate a mortal country, but to what end? The country's entire stock of gold

would be less than they could generate by growing one garden's worth of magical herbs or brewing a single high value potion.

Well, maybe I'm exaggerating a little bit, but not by much.

On the other hand, mages came from mortals. The birth rate among mages was low, according to Az's books, and the majority of mages were born from mortal parents. Most mages respected the noninterference with mortals not just on an economic basis, but because mortals were how mages were born. Attacking a random mortal settlement not only gave them little money, but also risked angering some high-Tier mage who happened to be born there, so whether by hook or by crook, righteous or villainous, most mages simply left mortals alone. To sum it up, the juice wasn't worth the squeeze.

Lost in thought, he quietly followed Ev and the pompous student down the docks and onto solid land. The lack of railings and the broken wood didn't bother him much; it was a hundred-foot drop to hard earth below, but his body was refined enough that taking a fall of that description would barely scrape his knees. He had already hit the point that terminal velocity might break a bone, but no more.

"Um, um, hello! Er, Ethan, these are...?"

He looked up, broken out of his thoughts by the new voice. A girl in a sweater and a long skirt, long hair and thick glasses, stood at the front of a group of ten or so students in uniform forest-green robes. They looked up at Ev and Rhys's approach, and the girl spluttered to a halt in the middle of an explanation. She pushed up her glasses, entirely at a loss of what to do with this unexpected interruption.

"Two more students from some piddling school. Take them on the tour with you, will you? I'll wait for a slightly larger school."

Rhys glanced at the pompous boy, or Ethan, as the girl had named him. He quirked a brow. He actually agreed with Ethan's actions; there was no need for the boy to guide him and Ev, when there was another group just starting the tour around the corner. All the same, he didn't need to treat them with such obvious derision. Even if he understood the toxicity of Purple Dawn Academy, there would always be students who embraced it, or conversely, rejected it. Ethan had decided to completely embrace the toxicity, and wasn't worth being around, as a result.

"O-oh, okay," she said, nodding. The gesture pushed her glasses down her nose, and she quickly propped them back up. She met Rhys's eyes, but only for a second before she stared at the floor again. "I'm, er, Mauve, but everyone calls me Mouse. I—just explained Purple Dawn's protective clauses to the other students, but if you want—"

"It's fine," Rhys interrupted her. Ev nodded as well, totally uninterested.

“Okay then. Um.” She thought for a moment, totally out of her depths, then visibly rallied. “Then, if you’ll all follow me, I’ll lead you on a tour of the facilities.”

Rhys nodded with a neutral smile. He cut his eyes backward at Ethan. *So much trash here!* On one hand, toxic human refuse, who deserved none of his respect, also known as Ethan. On the other hand, Mouse, so disrespected by her students that they didn’t even use her real name, and dumped their extra work on her. One type deserved to be polished; the other type deserved to be burned.

A grin spread over Rhys’s lips. He had his work cut out for him here. *Not just the trash pit, but all kinds of new and exciting types of trash! I can’t wait.*

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

Chapter 60. Fresh Hot Trash

Mouse quickly led them around the academy, showing them all the facilities and everything they’d need to know to thrive for their next few weeks during the tournament. From the herb fields, to the merchants and auction houses, to the training grounds and the dormitories, she led them through it all. A few times, she glanced around, then whispered that she was about to deviate from the pre-described tour to show them somewhere useful, and every time, led them somewhere highly valuable afterward. By the end of the tour, Rhys was fully satisfied with his knowledge of the peak. Sure, he didn’t know the location of every possible facility, and something like the potion-making rooms had been completely left out, but he knew enough to get around.

“That’s everything. Er, if anyone wants to see anything else, I can show you there now? Or if not, you’re free to go,” Mouse finished, fidgeting nervously.

Most of the students turned and walked away, but Rhys remained. He waited for the others to clear the area, then smiled and approached her. “Mauve—”

“Oh, Mouse is fine, it’s really fine,” she assured him.

“Mouse, then. Where is the school’s trash pit? Its landfill?” he asked, still smiling.

Behind the thick glasses, her eyes got big and wide. “Th-the... but why?”

Mew. Fur brushed against his ankles.

“And the library,” Rhys added.

Her jaw worked, and then she nodded. Pushing up her glasses, she gestured. “This way.”

“Have fun at the library, trash boy. I’m hitting up the training grounds,” Ev said, walking away with a wave.

Rhys waved back and followed after Mouse. She led him through the castle, past winding, narrow stone walls, to an ivy-clad building with an impressive stone façade. “This is the library.”

“Excellent,” Rhys replied. I’ll check it out after the trash heap.

Az stepped toward the building. He looked back and mewed his thanks to Rhys, then slipped through the doors and vanished.

Mouse waited expectantly, but Rhys just smiled at her. At last, she pushed her glasses up nervously. “Uhm, the library?”

“I’ll go in later. Why don’t we go check out the trash heap?” Rhys asked.

“You—you’re really serious about that? This isn’t a joke?” Mouse requested, her voice squeaking at the end.

“Not at all. I would never treat you with such disrespect,” Rhys assured her. Mouse didn’t deserve any disrespect. That Ethan kid, on the other hand... well, he’d see about him later.

He knew how to polish ordinary trash, but he still needed more work on his human-trash-polishing techniques. Whether the System recognized them as Skills or they remained as ordinary skills, he simply needed more practice with them. He’d started out raising Bast out of the trash, but after Bast left, he’d mostly wandered around the trash pits and focused on gaining more mana to get to the next tier. Reasonable goals, to him, but it did mean that his social skills had largely atrophied. At best, they hadn’t grown.

If he was going to polish the fixable human trash and destroy the irredeemable human trash, he needed to be far more socially capable. Where better to fix that weakness of his, than at a large school like this? They surely had social events, balls and far less formal gatherings, where he could hone his skills.

Of course, before all that, he really did need to continue to grow his own personal strength, so the first place he was heading to, was his favorite trash heap. He had to get a lay of the land and a feel for the garbage before he started worrying about any peripheral techniques.

He touched his core lightly. There was still a bundle of impurities within it, a dense unlit star made of the last dregs of the toxic trash pit. He needed more to be able to ignite it properly, and given how little burning impurities did for him now without the full boost of the intensely compacted star, he really wanted to have at least enough impurities in him to light the star and fight with mana, curse power, and the impurities' boost altogether, in case he ended up in a pinch in this unfamiliar school.

Mouse nodded mutely, then turned and scurried off. "This way."

She led the way through the streets. They were currently relatively high on the peak, up in the lofty heights where only a few specialized trees could grow, not that the difference in oxygenation or pressure made much of a difference to mages or magical plants. This section was mostly academic buildings; the library, classrooms, study rooms and other academic facilities. She led him down, lower on the mountain. Below the purely academic facilities were the practical exercise rooms, like the reinforced rooms for testing magical techniques and the potion brewing facilities. Lower than that were the student living facilities, with the nicest ones for the oldest, most powerful students at the top, down to the lowest, youngest, least powerful students at the bottom. Naturally, the dorms they'd shown Rhys and Ev were at the very bottom.

Below that were the markets, and the merchants' living spaces and warehouses. Even lower lived very old low-rank mages, adults who had no chance of progressing anymore and couldn't be considered students nor teachers, but helped the academy by growing herbs or doing other management, cleaning, or cooking jobs. Basically, they were janitorial staff, paid a small wage and provided the school's protection despite their low rank.

They kept descending. A forest stretched all around them, interspersed with the occasional field or planted plot. Out here, it was mostly empty. Except for the occasional field or garden, there was absolutely nothing this low on the mountain, but still behind the wall. In the distance, a group of the staff-level mages worked hard on constructing an arena. For a second, Rhys thought Mouse was going to lead him that way, but instead, she turned sharply away from the road and led him on a narrow path through the woods. Hints of trash appeared on the path. Snagged bits of cloth lurked on jagged thorns, and bits of paper scattered in the leaf mould. Rhys reached out in front of him with his mana, sensing the trash before he got there. A powerful emanation echoed back to him. There was a lot of trash, and some of it was very strong. Stronger than anything he'd sensed so far, with the exception of the toxic trash pit. In particular, he could sense a few places where the power of the emanations spiked, where an absolutely insane cluster of powerful trash conglomerated. His eyes lit up, and his hands shook in excitement. *Come to me, my trash-treasure! Trashure, if you will!*

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The trash pile came into view through the trees. Mouse stopped. She looked back. "There it is, but you shouldn't approach it."

“Why not?” Rhys asked, with every intention to approach it.

“Dangerous beasts live on it. Disease-ridden rats, and aggressive raccoons. They’ve grown powerful by eating the scraps of mage food and magical herbs, but they’re riddled with impurities. They have no future, but their bite can steal the future of a promising mage,” Mouse warned him.

“That’s fine. I can handle some beasts.”

“There’s also…” She opened her mouth to continue, then shut it. She shook her head. “Y-you shouldn’t go. It’s dangerous.”

Oh...? Interesting. What happens on this trash heap that’s so frightening, even a mage fears it? Rhys waved his hand. “It’s fine. I can handle it.”

“Why do y-you want the trash so badly?”

Rhys considered. He probably shouldn’t announce his path in enemy territory, in case someone tried to take it away from him. Already, Ernesto had tried to steal his valuable trash once. What if he did it again? After a second, he smiled. “I have my reasons.”

She hesitated one second more, then nodded and rushed off. “Don’t blame me,” she murmured, as she raced by him.

Rhys watched her go, then shrugged to himself. Whatever danger there was, he’d take it as it came. He wasn’t afraid to fight, nor was he afraid to run. He was trashy enough to do whatever it took to preserve his life. He glanced around, checking for anything obvious, then ran ahead, charging into the trash pile.

Glorious, glorious trash! A few rats scurried away as he approached. In the distance, a raccoon sat up on top of a pile of food scraps, munching on an apple core. It eyed him warily, but didn’t make any aggressive moves, except to reach down blindly and secure its next handful of food in case he came its way.

Rhys ignored it. He didn’t need food scraps. He could buy his own if he was hungry. Giving it a wide berth to be respectful to the ones who’d already staked their claims, he skirted toward one of the powerful spots in the trash. Surprisingly, although the rats and raccoons congregated around most of the powerful spots he sensed in the garbage, there were none around this particular point. That alone made him curious. Why avoid this point? What was different about it?

It didn’t take him long to reach it. It was deep in the trash heap, nestled between a few hills of trash. Rhys pushed the surface trash aside, digging down to the powerful emanations. A final board of scrap wood separated him from the emanations. He lifted it up—then froze.

Uh oh. That's not trash.

Then: I think I found what Mouse was trying to warn me about.

Glittering artifacts laid under the trash, carefully preserved in a cotton cloth. Books, wands, staves, and all kinds of items were mixed up together. They looked as though they had been plucked from random places around the school, as if they'd grabbed artifacts from across the school and hid them here.

Embezzlement. Clear as day. Someone was siphoning artifacts from the school, hiding them here, then doubtless selling them off to some third-party purchaser. If anyone knew he'd found them, he'd be in deep shit.

And yet, a grin spread across Rhys's face. Embezzlement, huh? Whoever this was probably wouldn't want their Schoolmaster finding out about this. If he hung out here for a little while, he'd have some valuable dirt he could ply for leverage later.

He poked around at the artifacts. The book was flashy, but not particularly interesting. The wands held powerful spells, but the embezzler would notice if he used or stole them. A few other items he simply couldn't determine the purpose of, and those he left alone. But at the bottom of the pile, was a mana potion that gave off emanations like nothing he'd ever felt before.

He glanced around, then picked up the potion. All he needed was one drop, with Less is More. No one would even notice. Rhys popped open the lid and dripped a single drop on his tongue.

Instantly, mana flooded his body. He guided it into his core, refreshing his mana and coursing it through his veins. It was more condensed than any mana he'd felt before, and scoured through his body, pulling all the remnant impurities back into his core, where he fed them into the trash star. It wasn't quite enough to refill his core, but Rhys put the potion back rather than give into temptation. He could take tiny tidbits off the deliveries without anyone picking up on the fact that he was on to them, but too much, and they'd kick off a manhunt. He couldn't get greedy. Right now, he was a tiny rat, nibbling on their valuables. As long as he remained unnoticed, or at worst, a nuisance, they'd leave him alone.

He put everything back where it had been and set off across the trash pit again, as if he'd seen nothing at all. He circulated the fresh mana as he walked, getting used to the intense sensation. It reminded him of the curse-power-purified mana, but even stronger. It must have been a truly high-Tier mana potion, the kind he couldn't even dream of making or buying.

One thought caught at the back of his mind and wouldn't let go. How did Mouse know about this? She'd clearly tried to warn him. Was she in the know? Or maybe she just knew it was a 'dangerous place,' or knew that something had happened. Either way, he

was curious enough to ask her about it later. There were roundabout ways he could prod her for information.

As he walked, his foot caught a can. The can went flying, and knocked into a rat. The rat whirled and hissed, showing him its teeth. He kept walking, expecting it to rush off, but it stood its ground. Rhys's brows furrowed. Is it rabid, or something?

When he got closer, he saw the answer. The rat's tail was pinched under a ruined cauldron. The cauldron must have tipped over as the trash shifted, leaving the rat caught underneath. It was emaciated and exhausted, but still bore its teeth at him.

"Oh, hold on." Rhys edged around it, staying out of reach, and grabbed the cauldron. He went to lift it, then hesitated. Something about the rat called out to him. Extending his mana, he scanned it.

The rat was full of the super-impurities that he'd been slowly condensing in his core, the super-impurities he needed to start a trash star. The last super impurities he'd gathered were in his current trash star, and otherwise, he'd have to wait and slowly accumulate more. And here, in front of him, was a thick source of those same exact super impurities!

It must have been because the rat lived its whole life in the trash. Magic food, drink, and plants were more pure in general, but they also could contain vastly more powerful impurities than usual food, drink, and plants. That, on top of the failed potions and toxic experiments the rat was doubtlessly exposed to in here, must have created its current condition.

However it had happened, those super-impurities were valuable to Rhys. He snapped out his hand so fast it blurred and tapped the rat on the head. The rat flinched, but it was too late. He'd already drawn out its impurities.

"Thanks, friend." Rhys lifted the cauldron, freeing the rat. The rat scurried away, as he'd expected. What he didn't expect, was for it to stop a dozen body-lengths away and turn back. Dark, highly-aware eyes looked him up and down, its pink nose trembling. The rat's head bobbed up and down, and then it turned tail and ran off.

Rhys blinked. *Did it... nod at me?* He stared, but the rat had already gone. Shaking his head, he turned back to his precious trash. It was probably just an animal being weird, and him anthropomorphizing its behavior. He shouldn't take a single coincidental motion as indicating intelligence.

There was more than one powerful spot in the trash. He picked his way across the pile, working toward the next spot. His feet landed sure and silent with the help of Trash Step. He moved as if he walked on flat ground, while the trash beneath him barely stirred with his passing. He couldn't leave these powerful spots in the trash unexplored.

If they were all caches, then he'd just note their locations and leave them alone in the future, but if they weren't, there was surely trashure to be found.

A soft scurrying sound caught his ear. Rhys jumped, whirling. He reached for his stubby sword, then paused.

A rat stood behind him. It tilted its head, then glanced back, clearly wanting to flee. Another rat, this one with a quirked tail, stood by its side. It gave the first rat a reassuring shoulder nudge and nodded at Rhys.

Rhys blinked. *What?*

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