

Chapter 61. Rat King

Rhys squinted. The rat with the quirked tail looked like the one he'd rescued. No—it was the one he'd rescued! He scanned it with his mana to be sure, and when he found no impurities, he was convinced. That rat was the one that had been trapped under the cauldron, which had nodded at him when he'd freed it. The other one was still full of impurities, but it gave him a look with strangely intelligent eyes.

He looked at the first rat, then back to the new one. "You... want me to take your impurities?"

The rat edged forward, nervous but eager.

Rhys scanned the rat with his mana. Both the one he'd saved, and this rat, both had some amount of mana in them. Not enough to qualify as Tier 1, but maybe enough to qualify as the bottom of Tier 0. Since mana improved everything about a human being, why wouldn't it improve everything about an animal, to include its intelligence? Rhys stretched out his hand, offering it palm-up to the rat. The rat scurried over. It hesitated just out of reach, its heart beating visibly in its tiny body, then bridged the final gap between them in a lunge and put a paw on his finger.

Rhys drew its impurities into his body. The rat tensed, and then its eyes widened. It chattered at him in amazement.

"You're welcome...?" Rhys guessed. He didn't speak rat... if these rats were even intelligent enough to develop a spoken language. Eh, rats are pretty smart. If the mana really props their brains up, then why not?

The rat chattered some more at him, then ran back to the first rat. The two chatted for a moment, then ran off over the trash.

Rhys watched them go, then shrugged to himself and turned back away, going through the trash again. He didn't mind. More impurities for him was always a good thing. And if the rats brought more friends with more impurities—

Chitter!

He turned. A wave of rats crested over the trash, rushing toward him. Rhys startled. He reached for his sword.

The rats slowed. They came to a halt, forming a half-moon around him. Almost worshipfully, one approached. Its head was low, its body profile lowered into almost a bow. It raised a paw to him.

Rhys looked at all the rats. He scanned them, searching over them for impurities. They all gave strong responses, all with second-tier or even third-tier impurities, more powerful than anything he'd seen so far. "Oh... all of you?"

The rat that had approached chittered agreeably.

"Well... okay." Rhys looked at the rats, then gestured for them all to get close together. "All of you, get in close. I want everyone touching everyone else, okay?"

The rats immediately reformed into a messy swarm, clambering all over one another. Rhys stared in half-amazement, half-disgust. He shook his head, then knelt and touched one of the top rats. Using them as a conduit, he reached out to every rat in the swarm, and pulled all the impurities toward himself.

The rats squeaked in pain, then shock, then amazement. Rhys, for his part, stood, touching his core. It was now laden with impurities, more high-quality impurities than he'd ever had before. He had the high-level materials to ignite dozens of trash stars this way. In fact... he looked at the trash all around him. Subconsciously, he'd been thinking of brewing it all into potions, but that wasn't necessary, was it? The trash stars did better the more mass he fed into them. If it took a lot of trash to generate enough impurities, that just meant the trash star would be bigger and better when it ignited.

A little pat on his foot caught his attention. The quirked-tail rat stood on its hind legs, looking up at him, one paw on his foot. It nodded, then scurried off.

"Yeah, you're welcome," Rhys said. They'd done him a service as much as he'd done them a service, so he wasn't too worried about them 'owing him' or whatever. Of course, he wasn't so noble as to refuse something if they wanted to give it to him (at the end of the day, he was still trash), but he wasn't overly concerned about getting repaid for his services. It had cost him nothing, and gained him a fair deal of material in return. He'd already received everything he needed from the rats.

The quirked-tail rat ran back to the other rats. They chittered at each other, their high-pitched voices sounding back and forth as they argued. Abruptly, they scattered to the four winds, vanishing across the trash pit. Rhys waved goodbye to their furry rears, and went back to picking through the trash.

Without rats to distract him, it didn't take long to discover that this powerful spot on the edge of the trash pit was also a cache of ill-gotten goods. He extended his senses to feel the locations of the other powerful points. Most of them were also on the edge of the pile, but one was in the center of the landfill. He turned toward that one. The edge were likely all stashes put there by the smugglers, or embezzlers, or whatever particular

brand of criminal was doing this. After all, why would a criminal want to descend into the center of the stinky, gross trash pit, when they could just leave their goods on the relatively-clean edges? If any of these powerful points in the trash were actually trashure, it would be the one in the center of the trash.

Well, it is possible that it's all smuggler caches, and I'll have to work harder to find trashure than simply looking for powerful mana, but it's worth a quick look. Going to the powerful points wasn't the end of his trashure hunting, but merely the beginning.

This powerful point was deep in the heart of the trash pit. He stood over it, gazing down. He could sense it, deep in the trash, but there was a mound of trash between him and the powerful mana signal.

He glanced at his core. The trash star there still needed more material to ignite. Why not try absorbing the trash and see what happened? If he was right, then he wouldn't have to waste his time brewing potions. If he was wrong, then all he risked was a slightly weaker trash star.

Putting his hand on the trash, Rhys called it into himself.

Instantly, the pile collapsed in on itself. Trash rushed into Rhys' core, transforming as he called it in. He pushed it into the trash star, compressing it just as he had in the toxic trash pit. The trash star grew denser and denser, until he could feel it about to collapse and tear apart his core. He pushed a shred of mana into it, and the star ignited again for one brief second before it instantly burned out. In that second, he made serious gains, but it only lasted for a split second.

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He put a hand on his chin and nodded. It was obvious what he had to do now: absorb trash, compact it into a trash star, and push further, compress it for longer, compact more material into it, until the star could burn for more than a split second. Ideally, he could keep it burning forever, but that would take more trash than there was in this entire pile. Maybe even more than there was in the entire region.

From the star's momentary pulse of heat and fire, a few trickles of gold-toned mana leaked out. Those drops gathered at the bottom of his core along with the impurities. Rhys eyed them for a moment, then raised his brows. *Wait. Is that what that book was talking about?* He reached into his storage ring and pulled out a cultivation book he'd borrowed from the library. It described a path he wasn't interested in—that of a specific sword style—but it also contained a lot of good general cultivation knowledge, so he'd been reading around the path parts to figure out what might come next in cultivating mana and growing as a mage.

...after Foundation Building comes Core Formation, in which the mage firms and fills their core. Once the core has grown to its maximum size, the mage fills it with condensed golden mana, which provides the foundation for the next stage of growth. The amount of gold mana the mage can fit into their core determines their potential for future growth, just as the size of their core does, just as their bloodline, body, and natural aptitude for absorbing mana...

Putting the book away, he examined his core again. It was gold, and it was definitely condensed. Was this the special mana the book was talking about? He raised his brows. That much trash, for a few tiny drops of mana? He'd need a lot of trash if he was going to get through this. *I can't imagine how long it would take if I didn't have a path to rely on... but then, I am starting from trash.* His natural aptitudes were the lowest of the low. With all his reforging, he'd gotten them up to passable, but he still had to rely on his path to make any progress. If he sat around and breathed in mana, the way ordinary mages absorbed mana, he might run out of lifetime before he hit Tier 3.

Either way, there was still trash between him and that powerful signal. Rhys put his hand down on the trash and absorbed it yet again. As he absorbed it, he inadvertently dug a tunnel deeper into the pit. The landfill was larger than he'd taken it to be at first. It had mounded over the earth, as large as an ordinary castle, but it also went underground, into some kind of crag in the earth. At a guess, the mages had started throwing their garbage into a valley of some sort, and as the years passed by, the valley had filled, then overfilled, then flowed into the forest around it. There were probably mages who didn't know that the pit had been built on a valley at all, that was how buried the original valley was.

With the impurities he'd gained from the rats and the trash, he ignited another two stars and accumulated a few more drops of gold mana before he finally drew level with the powerful signal. By now, he was pretty sure this wasn't a smugglers' cache, but legitimate trashure. If smugglers were delving this deep into the trash to hide their goods, they deserved it, honestly. That was dedication to the trash.

He cast around him, poking around at the floor to find the trash. He had his original trash sword, and the sunlight sword from the bottom of the toxic trash pit, so he didn't really need a weapon, not that he'd turn another one down. He could always polish it up and sell it. Though he had plenty of gold from the ash and the herbs he'd sold to Sorden, he was always happy to earn more gold. There was no such thing as too much!

Speaking of, I should buy some seeds. This school definitely has herb seeds that are worth good money when grown. As long as their growth requirements are simple, I can generate mana-infused compost and grow them rapidly for even more gold. It was a simple investment, and one worth making. He wouldn't set up gardens here like he had back on his home turf, not when Purple Dawn was at best uncaring of what happened to little schools like his, and at worst, actively aggressive toward them. Still, he didn't need to set up a garden to grow herbs. Due to his mana-infusion and mana-rich compost technique, he could fire up a load of plants whenever he needed them.

Of course, there could be anything in the trash, anything at all. A weapon, a shield, even another miraculous poison—ahem, potion-holding vial. He'd take any kind of magical equipment, any kind at all.

Pushing the last of the trash aside, he revealed a solid blackened wall. His brows furrowed. He pushed more trash away, and the wall curved. A foot poked out from the bottom, jutting up into the trash.

Rhys knelt and hooked a hand under the thing's lip, standing it upright. A cauldron. Its lid sat nearby, and he drew it over, matching it with the top. Thick walls curved evenly downward, culminating in four lion's-foot feet. An ornately carved dragon twisted around the outside of the cauldron, and fine gilding swirled around its lip and lid, brimming with mana in some kind of enchantment. The whole cauldron was in remarkably good shape, with one exception. He spun it around, turning the blemish to face him. One side of the cauldron was completely blown out, as if someone had shot a cannonball out from within the cauldron. The steel walls peeled back like a flower's petals around a roughly circular hole that had been blasted in the thick wall.

He twisted his lips. His old cauldron was, well, just an ordinary cauldron, and even with Trash Intent, it had been struggling to retain its shape for some time now. He'd been using the liquid technique to hold impurities away from the wall, leaving some water between the metal inner wall and the corrosive impurities so the water mitigated the damage, but even so, the bottom was getting thin. This cauldron would do nicely to replace it, and not only that, but if it was as strong as it felt, it would last him for quite some time.

If not for that glaring hole in its side.

Rhys pursed his lips, thinking. He pulled at his own clothes, then looked at the new cauldron. He'd used trash-based comprehension to merge trash clothes into his robes. True, he'd also had a high understanding of clothesmaking, but the base concept remained the same. If he could up his understanding of forging, then, by merging forging and trash knowledge, he could probably repair this cauldron. It was worth a shot, anyways.

Gesturing, he sent the cauldron into his storage ring. A project for a later date...or rather, a task for him during his downtime at the tournament. Infinite Constellation didn't have forging classes, but Purple Dawn did. The spiel Mouse had given them included an invitation to sit in on any classes. With Ernesto on the mind, he'd been a little suspicious of the offer being an attempt to sabotage their futures with false 'classes' that taught false 'truths,' but on deeper thought, rather than an attempt to sabotage their future as mages, it was far more likely that they were invited to sit in on the classes so they could see how high-quality the education at Purple Dawn was, so the more powerful school could poach the most powerful students from the lesser schools.

After all, they were the cream of the crop, the ones the little schools had sent to the tournament to show off the peak of their strength. Purple Dawn stood to gain much more by currying favor with the most powerful student mages with the most potential, rather than giving them false instruction. Sure, it might fool a few of the stupider martial students, but anyone who realized what was happening would hold a grudge against Purple Dawn, and if they, the students with the highest potential, became powerful enough later in their magehood and held a grudge, they could inflict a good deal of damage on Purple Dawn. Far better that they looked back on their tournament experience with fond eyes.

The light from overhead cut off. Rhys startled and whipped around. *Oh shit! The trash is falling—*

A figure stood on the lip of the hole, eclipsing the sun. They wore flowing white robes, as immaculate as Rhys was filthy. In one hand, they held a sword, bare blade glinting in the sunlight. Rhys squinted, trying to make out their face, only to realize it wasn't possible. The man wore a mask, one with no more than eyeholes on a featureless white face.

Rhys' heart sunk. *I take it back. I would rather have the trash fall on me.* He was cornered, like a rat in a hole, with no way out but through.

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

Chapter 62. Emissary to the Rats

"Can I help you?" Rhys asked warily, reaching for his sword. *One of the smugglers...? But no, why would he be worried with me? I'm down in this hole, far away from the stashes...*

The figure stood there. The wind blew, catching their robes. Two ribbons danced behind their head, as pure white as the rest of them. They stood stock still, watching Rhys silently.

Rhys grasped the hilt of his sword. He watched the man, waiting for him to move. He still had the element of surprise. The man didn't know he could fit an entire, full-length sword in his robes. The second the man moved, he'd—

Abruptly, the man looked away, distracted, as if someone had called him.

The second his gaze moved off Rhys, Rhys lunged. He slammed his hand onto the trash under the man and absorbed it greedily. The ground under the man dropped, and he jumped back rather than fall toward Rhys. Rhys kept absorbing, collapsing the ground as he pressed on. The trash rained down on him, but he didn't mind. Better to be buried than face execution at the hands of that domineering figure.

"Solaire!"

The figure leaped off, responding to the name. Buried in the trash, Rhys watched him go. When he could no longer sense the man's mana, he pointed his hand upward instead, and started digging himself a ramp out of the trash. He absorbed all the trash around him as he went, too, igniting a few more trash stars on his way up. At the top, Rhys shook the dirt out of his hair and looked around. The man was gone. There was no sign of him at all.

"Phew," Rhys muttered. He had no idea what the man had wanted from him, or if he'd wanted anything at all, but he was glad he'd gotten out of that situation without having to fight or risking injury. There was nothing wrong with fighting, but the emanations he sensed from that man reminded him of Ev. Not in strength—the man was Tier 2, like him—but in sharpness. Killing intent. He'd never seen Ev's Intent skill, but he knew she had one, and looking at that man, he'd been instantly sure of the same—that the man possessed at least one Intent, if not multiple. He could fight above his Tier, but that man doubtlessly could as well. If the two of them fought, Rhys wasn't at all confident that he'd win.

Well, I am here for a tournament. It only made sense that he'd encounter opponents at his strength, no, *above* his strength. Not everyone was held back by a trashy start they were only able to overcome through their path, after all. Some people even had natural advantages, as impossible as that was for Rhys to imagine.

He looked at his now-filthy robes and groaned. He'd been pretty clean for most of his trash adventure, but burrowing through the trash to evade the man had thrown all that out the window. "I need a bath."

A hand tugged at his robes. He looked down, expecting a rat, but the raccoon he'd seen earlier stood there instead. It offered him its hand.

"Oh, impurities? Here." Rhys touched its paw and extracted its impurities.

The raccoon shivered, then shook itself, like a dog coming out of a bath. It ran off on all fours, then looked back expectantly.

"You want me to follow you?"

The raccoon waited. Rhys stepped toward it, and it ran off a few steps again, then paused to look back once more.

“Alright, alright. Message received.” Rhys followed after the raccoon at a jog, letting it lead the way. The trash panda ran on all fours, striped tail hanging behind it. It left the trash pile behind and wound through the woods, checking that Rhys was behind it over and over.

Rhys followed, but warily, scanning the forest for hostile mana signatures. He sensed none, but he still kept his eyes and ears open. He’d helped the animal, but it was still an animal. He didn’t know if it had a sense of fairness or anything like that.

At last, it came to a halt at the side of a rushing river. It scurried to the edge and produced a scrap of food, bending over to wash it in the water. Turning back, it looked at him one last time.

“Oh, were you showing me a bath? Thank you,” Rhys said, laughing to himself. Of course a raccoon would know where a source of water was. He hopped in. The river was deep, deep enough to close over his head, and the water was clear and clean. He broke the surface with a gasp and shook his hair out, then took the ponytail out to make sure his hair got fully clean before retying it and emerging.

Best not to start with a reputation as the stinky kid, after all. His reputation at Infinite Constellation was already shot, but here at Purple Dawn, he had no reputation yet. He knew how bad it could be to be the stinky kid—*not that I ever was*. At least as a kid, growth had kept him skinny enough, and he’d stayed inside enough to avoid stinking. But the ones who had... yeesh. The bullying seemed harsh to him even today, in retrospect.

The raccoon watched from the bank, an approving glint in its eyes. It stuffed its prize in its mouth and dashed off, task completed.

Rhys kicked his way to the edge of the water and climbed out. A rustle in the leaves caught his ear, and he turned. A rat rushed up to him, holding something shiny in its mouth. It put down a potion vial and stepped back.

“Is this for me?” Rhys asked.

The rat chittered, then bobbed its head, almost like a nod.

“Oh, thanks!” he said, scanning the potion bottle with his mana. It wasn’t as strong as the potion bottle Sorden had given him, but it was still a powerful bottle. It would hold almost any potion he could brew at this level, or he could outright sell it for a decent amount of gold. Nodding, Rhys put it in his storage ring.

He looked up, only to find the rat still there. He blinked, then frowned. “Er... something else I can help you with?”

It chittered again, glancing at the vial, then back at the pile.

“There’s more vials?” Rhys guessed.

The rat bobbed, then shook itself back and forth. It looked at the pile again.

“There’s more... trash that’s valuable?”

A nod.

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Rhys’s eyes widened as realization struck. “And you know where it is, because you’ve lived in the trash heap for a long time, so you can find it faster than I could.”

The rat hopped in place, nodding aggressively.

“That would be a huge help.” Then he wouldn’t have to spend all his time in the trash heap, searching for valuables. He did enjoy his time in the trash, but he had other things he wanted to do here, like try reforging the cauldron he’d found, or brewing new potions, or even last-minute practice for the tournament.

Chittering happily, the rat ran in a few circles, then rushed off. Rhys watched it go. He hadn’t told it where to find him, but then, he’d come back to the trash time and time again. As long as they recognized him and brought him valuables, he’d be happy.

Watching it go, Rhys froze. His eyes widened. *That’s the key!*

He hadn’t forgotten Straw. He wanted to save the man, the same as he always had. The problem was, he had no doubt that Ernesto had set someone to tail him. Not the masked guy—he was his own problem, but Ernesto wouldn’t have sent someone so obvious, who appeared before him and stared at him, without a trace of curse power in his emanations to boot. He had faith that Ernesto was at least a little more subtle. No, there was almost certainly someone watching him, someone he couldn’t sense, who was ready to report him and ruin his future the second he did anything vaguely like search for Straw. If nothing else, openly searching for a being who’d been declared an enemy of the Alliance in the heart of Alliance soil was stupidity upon stupidity. He’d already known such an option wasn’t available to him, but he hadn’t had a backup plan yet, except for to become strong enough to overpower whatever sensory restrictions the Alliance had set up around Straw and directly sense Straw’s emanations—a pipe dream, at best.

But now, he had a *plan*.

The rats knew the garbage best. They already knew exactly where all the treasure was. Why start from scratch, when he could simply go to the experts?

Of course, these rats were garbage rats. They didn't know the school. He had to find the *right* rats, and to do that, he had a few merchants to visit.

Rhys walked back up the hill to the merchants' districts. He emanated mana the whole way to keep his wet clothes moving and separated from each other, and between that and the warm spring sun, his robes were mostly dry by the time he reached it. The sun was starting to set, but the shops were still open, and so he made a few quick purchases. Some cheese, some summer sausage, a paper roll of crackers. With that, he retreated to his dormitory.

If he'd just bought some cheese, it would be too obvious. Instead, he was a student from a small school, exercising a few of his gold to buy himself the small luxury of a college charcuterie board—in other words, all the delicious parts, and none of the weird dried fruits or olives, or anything else. He personally wouldn't mind a fig or two, or maybe some pickles, but at the end of the day, this wasn't for him.

It was tribute.

The dormitories Purple Dawn Academy had set forth for the small schools were... *rough*. They were run down, with cracked, damp stone walls and windows and doors that leaned away from one another, like they'd been slapped up in wet clay, then allowed to sag for a while before they were fired. Mold blackened the steps and vines bound the exterior walls, twisting into the windows wherever they could find a gap. In summary, they were garbage.

Perfect.

Rhys's room was in the corner, and it was a strange, triangular shape with listing walls and a floor that was warped in all three dimensions in not just straight lines, but soft, sea-like peaks and valleys, so that it was impossible to draw a straight line between any two points. His bed canted against one wall, and a wood chair and desk as spartan as his freshman dorm's furniture leaned against another, the chair pitched against the desk. He pulled it away, and it slid right back into place. Rhys nodded, getting the message. It would live there, against the desk. That was its home.

He built himself his charcuterie plate and took a few nibbles, then left the plate on the desk, drew the curtains, extinguished the candle, and sat on the bed to meditate and wait for his guest. For all the world, it looked as though he'd simply been dissatisfied and abandoned his meal, but the truth couldn't be more different.

He waited, but he didn't only wait. Not satisfied to waste his time on mere meditation when he knew how little mana that would give him, he extended his Trash Intent around him, and into the room. Through the room, to the next, to the hallway—he tried to encompass the entire dormitory in Trash Intent. The Intent took, but he couldn't push it far enough to fill the whole dormitory. Reaching out as far as he could before his focus snapped, he could encompass his room and the next, but no more. For the thousandth

time, Rhys hissed as Trash Intent broke and the backlash struck him. His body ached, his head furiously pounding, but he pressed on anyways. *Again!*

If it injured him, so what. If it broke his mana passages and damaged his core, whatever. If his head ached and his body bled, it was no problem. He'd simply return to the trash pit tomorrow, ignite another trash star, and rebuild his body. If it took two, three, even four, that wasn't a problem. He'd do it over and over until all the damage healed. He was trash to begin with, so there was no problem with injuring himself or breaking himself down. He'd just build it yet again, like he always had.

Squeak. Squeak.

Rhys opened his eyes. Activating Trash Intent, he sealed the room he sat in off, using his intent to wrap the walls and prevent anyone from seeing inside. After all his practice, that much was more than possible, even if he fell far short of being able to use Trash Intent on the whole dormitory. The whole time, he sat completely still, moving nothing save his eyes, and watched the charcuterie plate. The squeaking grew louder, and a pale gray shape appeared on the edge of the table. The rat looked left and right, then scurried over to the food. It lifted its pink paws and dug in, stealing a morsel of cheese, then retreating to the corner of the table to gnaw it down.

Silently, Rhys extended his mana, scanning the rat. Impurities, and the tiniest stir of mana. Just enough to be able to understand his overtures, if the other rats were any indication.

Perfect.

The rat finished its lump of cheese, then dashed in for another handful. The second it moved, Rhys moved as well. In this run-down building, he could freely activate Trash Step whenever he needed it. He crossed the room in record time and snatched up the rat.

The rat squealed in alarm and struggled in his grasp, fighting to break free.

"No, no, listen—"

Squealing, the rat twisted and struggled, pulling itself through his hands.

Rhys sighed. He absorbed the rat's impurities. "I'm trying to help you."

The rat stilled. It looked at him, its eyes wide in shock.

"I'll absorb your impurities, and the impurities of any other rats out there. In return, all you have to do is use your expertise. I bet you know all about this academy, don't you?"

The rat nodded.

Rhys knelt. He released it onto the side of the desk. The rat curled around. It almost turned and ran off, then eyed the food and hesitated.

Gesturing, Rhys smiled. “Go ahead, eat up. I bought it for you.”

The rat leaped on the food and tore in. Without any worries about him, it ripped directly into the meat and chowed down, ecstasy on its little ratty face.

“Listen. I’m looking for someone. He’ll be hidden in the deepest parts of this mountain, somewhere ordinary people, no, even most students and teachers, can’t go. But you can get into those places, can’t you?” he asked.

The rat licked its lips and nodded before tearing into a cracker.

“He has straw-blond hair, and he smells like hay. Blue eyes like the sky, and ragged... well, I have no idea what he’d be wearing after all this time. He might also look like a scarecrow, you know, a doll made of straw and cloth.”

The rat nodded again.

“You look for him, and tell me whatever you see, one way or another. I’ll handle your impurities. Deal?”

It thought for a moment, then patted the tray.

Rhys snorted. “Sure, I’ll make another tray every now and again.”

The rat hopped in happy agreement. It picked up a big handful of food and scurried off, only to return a second later, carting the food off to somewhere inside the walls. Rhys returned to his meditations as if nothing had happened. He smiled. Everything was going to plan.

Outside his window, in the darkness of the night, a man in a white mask stood in a tree. An unconscious Purple Dawn student dangled from his hand. That student was too weak to sense what had occurred behind the walls, past the Intent skill... but not the white-masked man.

Behind the mask, a smile curled his lips. He tossed the unconscious figure back onto the branch and jumped off into the night.

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

Chapter 63. Rare Encounter

The morning came too soon. Rhys stretched and sat up. He hadn't made much progress in his intent skill, but he had progressed a little, enough that he needed a visit to the trash heap to repair his body. He made a quick detour there and repaired his body, washing off in the stream afterwards. As he climbed out of the water, the raccoon who'd shown him the stream edged up to him. It grabbed his robe and tugged it once, twice, then nodded into the forest.

Rhys smiled. He nodded back. "I know," he whispered, though he was impressed at the raccoon's senses. It was barely at Tier 0, but it could sense what he had to struggle to sense at Tier 2.

Then again, it's a wild beast. Of course it would have stronger senses... that, and it probably didn't start as trash. As though he hadn't noticed a thing, he adjusted his robes and walked on, heading into town again.

Today, he had one goal. No, two goals. The first one was to attend a forging class and figure out how to repair that valuable cauldron he'd found in the trash. The second one... well.

"Are you done? I know you're there," Rhys said, looking over his shoulder. He caught a glimpse of dark robes before the figure darted away, and sighed aloud. "Come on. Why don't you get down here? I know you're there, so there's no point for us to keep playing this game."

A blur flashed through the air, and a Purple Dawn student materialized in front of him. To his surprise, he recognized them, and his jaw dropped. "Mouse?"

"Er...I'm sorry! I didn't want to do it! They made me, they said, they said, I was so quiet like a mouse, so I might as well be the one who—I'm so sorry. I didn't want to follow you, I had to!" She bowed repeatedly to him, hiding her face behind her hands and her heavy bangs.

"No, no, it's... not okay, but I can overlook it." No matter what, Purple Dawn was going to send someone to follow him. He'd already accepted it. Honestly, he had to thank them for the giant throw of putting Mouse up to the task. He supposed it made sense. Her peers looked down on her and devalued her, as if she were trash. Of course she'd get the shitty task of watching the trash disciple of Straw. That did bring up a question, though. He cleared his throat. "Did they tell you why you were following me?"

Mouse shook her head hard. "N-n-no! Ethan knows, but he said a little mouse like me doesn't need to know. I-in fact, he said it's better if I don't know."

Rhys nodded. That made things easier on him. If she didn't know why she was following him, it would be easier to escape her watchful eyes. Of course, it was very possible that she was lying to him, and she knew exactly why she was following him, but he was willing to take that chance. He'd seen the way Ethan treated her, so he wouldn't be surprised if she really didn't know. If she did, then... it changed nothing. He'd planned to treat her the same regardless of her response, so he'd really only asked for his own information, but it really did sound like she didn't know.

He glanced into the forest once more, but said nothing. That was for later.

Turning back to Mouse, he nodded. "Shall we?"

"Er—together?" she squeaked.

"Well, you've got to follow me, right?"

"I...but you discovered me."

"Ah, that's fine. I don't mind. I expected it. No, no, I like you, Mouse. Stay with me. You're trash like me," Rhys told her.

"W...what?"

"No, no. It's a good thing! You can help me out like this, too. Your school has a forging class, right?"

Still a little lost, thrashed back and forth by being discovered, then Rhys not minding, then being called trash, but told it was a good thing, Mouse blinked for a solid ten seconds, only to snap back into place as she landed on his last request. "Forge! Yes. This way."

They didn't have far to go. The forge class was on the fringe of town, near the other tradesmen; the actual blacksmiths, silversmiths, tanners and woodworkers. A group of burly students hammered away at metal, shaping the metal into a sword, while the lecturer gave pointers. Rhys stood in the back of the class, listening to the man's suggestions. He didn't take up the hammer or take a slug of metal for himself. That wasn't his objective. Instead, he wanted to learn the fundamentals of forging, so he could adapt it to trash for his own purposes.

For all that, the man's class wasn't particularly useful today. He was teaching how to hammer and work warmed metal, not melt down cold metal and smelt it into something stronger. Still, he listened earnestly. There was always something to learn, even if the class wasn't directly applicable. He did understand the absolute basics of forging—melt the metal, add something in or pull something out, cool it. For iron, add carbon to form steel. For gold, burn off the impurities to create higher-quality gold. Specifics like temperatures or proportions, though, he lacked.

He wasn't learning them here, but he at least learned a lot about tempering metal. Like that he shouldn't quench it in water immediately after heating it, for one. Thinking back on it, it did seem kind of a stupid thing to do. Heat water in glass, then fill it with ice water, and it would crack. Metal was more elastic than glass, but not by much, and when he thought all the way up to rubber, well, rapid temperature variations had once brought low the rubber O-rings on a space-bound vehicle hadn't they? No matter what it was, heating something, then cooling it rapidly, almost always induced fragility as the temperature stressed the material. It was very cinematic, he supposed, which was why movies always had their blacksmiths do it, but not particularly practical.

A rather trash technique, Rhys thought, then pinched his chin. Was it possible that, in the future, when he enhanced his comprehension of trash, he could use deliberately bad techniques to actually strengthen materials, even though they were meant to weaken them?

A thought for later. He was still far too lacking in his comprehension of trash to accomplish such a thing. For now, it was best to stick to the basics. After all, one had to learn the rules to break the rules.

The whole class, the instructor completely ignored Rhys, treating him as though he didn't exist. Someone else might have been insulted, but for Rhys, who had accepted his role as trash, it was water off a duck's back, or a single extra empty can on the top of an overflowing garbage can. He hadn't expected, nor desired, any special attention. In fact, if the instructor had acknowledged him or given him special attention, he probably would have felt far more uncomfortable.

He glanced at Mouse, then startled. Mouse! He'd totally forgotten about her. Or perhaps the better thing to say was that she'd slipped his mind? He hadn't forgot she was there, but simply disregarded her as unimportant despite knowing she was his all-important tail. Putting the class to the back of his mind for a moment, he watched her instead from the corner of his eye, quietly observing his quiet observer.

Mouse stood against the wall, staring into the middle distance. She barely moved, her limbs all close to her body as if to occupy as little space as possible, despite the fact that she was far out of anyone's way. Her chest barely rose and fell, even her breathing quiet. With every breath, she drew in the ambient mana more strongly than Rhys had known anyone to, save when he himself was burning trash.

Rhys's eyes widened. He lit up, excited. This was it. This was her path. Hidden in plain sight. To be within a space, yet not occupy it. To be surrounded, yet alone. He couldn't put word to it, but he didn't need to. It wasn't his path. It was Mouse's.

He scooted over. She startled at his approach, as surprised for him to approach her as he had been to find her suddenly out of his perception. He nudged her. "Do you realize what you're doing?"

"I-I'm sorry, I shouldn't—"

"No, no, you should! This is your path. I don't know what it is, but I know that it's yours and yours uniquely. You've struggled to progress the ordinary way, right?"

Mouse hesitated, then ducked her head, almost afraid to admit it.

"Try to lean in to what *works*, rather than listening to other people's idea of what's supposed to work. You're only trash so long as you let other people call you trash, Mouse. To have the calling of a path this early is a rare thing, and if you chase it, you should be able to surpass those who can only progress by following someone else's instructions. Think about it. If you know how to strengthen yourself, doesn't it make sense that you'll progress faster and stronger than waiting for someone to tell you how you ought to progress?"

Mouse tensed, thinking deeply. Her head lowered, leaving her glasses as nothing but an unreadable blaze of light. "M-my own path?"

"Your own path," Rhys replied.

She looked at him. "Why would you tell me this? I... if you're someone who must be followed, then, doesn't that, aren't you—an enemy?"

"What? Don't be ridiculous. I'm not an enemy of your school," Rhys said, shaking his head. He was Ernesto's enemy, and he was the enemy of anyone who stopped him from retrieving Straw, but until Purple Dawn actively stood in his way, he wasn't going to consider the whole school his enemy. Well, he probably would have to fight the entire school once he broke Straw out, but Rhys wasn't hasty. Nor was he foolish enough to think that every single student, to include the powerless ones like Mouse, was actively involved in Straw's capture and subsequent imprisonment. Ernesto and his class were probably unforgivable, but Rhys wasn't an upright and moral person who would turn down favors from an enemy, whether they took the form of a lesson or whatever else.

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He was trashy enough to turn the other cheek for now, as long as he could receive benefits, only to turn about and kill them to the last man later. It was rat bastard behavior, and he knew that well enough, but he'd come this far in life by being a rat bastard, and he wasn't about to stop now. Many times, he'd put up with bullying if it meant he could get an extra snack at lunch, only to out the bullies to the teacher once he had enough evidence to take them down once and for all. This was no different. People outside of his situation might call him an asshole for acting this way, but when he stood in a position of weakness, he had to use what little he could against them. Even if that meant bowing his head for a bit and becoming their lackey, or humbling himself to learn from those he hated and would later treat as enemies, then so be it.

Of course, if Purple Dawn did not become his enemy, he'd be quite happy with that, too, but considering Straw's origins as a left-behind ultimate weapon of a fallen Demon King, he didn't think they'd just smile and let him go. *No worries, take the terrifying weapon, we don't mind! Haha, what's a continent-rending cursed weapon or two between friends?*

He didn't see Straw that way, but he wasn't the one he had to worry about. It was the Alliance and Purple Dawn he had to worry about.

Rhys let out a slow breath, running back his hair as the enormity of the task before him made itself clear. Not only Purple Dawn, but the whole Alliance would oppose him freeing Straw. When he rescued the man, he marked himself as the ultimate enemy of the entire region's most powerful armed force.

He chuckled under his breath. *Never was one to set my goals low.*

"Er... Rhys?" Mouse asked, tilting her head, and Rhys suddenly became aware that he'd stared off into space, then chuckled to himself darkly after a long period of silence. He chuckled again, lighter this time, and rubbed the back of his head. *Not my best non-villainous act.*

He waved, dismissing his own behavior. "Sorry. I was lost in my thoughts. I think I've learned everything I need from this class. Shall we head to the library?"

"The library? I thought you wanted to learn forging," Mouse said, confused.

"Exactly."

"What are you going to find in a dusty pile of books like that?"

Rhys squinted at her. "You know, I would've taken you as a library-loving girl, but I guess I shouldn't judge books by their covers."

Mouse shook her head. "I-I do like the library! It's just that, that, libraries don't have much to do with forging, do they? Isn't forging metal all about fire and hard work?"

"I'm about to make a mockery of earnest forgery, so why not go about learning it backwards by sitting in a dusty library?" Rhys pointed out. He was dealing with trash to begin with. If he burned it down, if he melted it and ruined it, then it would only continue to be trash, rather than degrade in quality. True, the cauldron was a great find, but if he saved up coin from growing herbs and creating purified ash, he could doubtlessly buy an equivalent, or better, cauldron.

The point wasn't the quality of the cauldron. The point was that it was trash, trash that he could take and freely make it his own without any inhibition toward potentially destroying something valuable. He was going to fix it through trash, and forge

something better... or at least, as good as it had been to begin. He'd take that as a starting point.

Mouse's jaw worked, but she couldn't come up with an answer. She gestured. "This way to the—"

"I remember." Rhys took the lead, beelining to the library.

Mouse followed. "You remember already?"

"Why wouldn't I?" Even if he was mortal, he would have been able to do that much.

"W-well, I just showed it to you for a second yesterday. I wouldn't have remembered."

Oh. That was reasonable enough. He supposed he might not have remembered, if it really had been no more than that, but he'd dropped Az off there, and leaving his friend somewhere was notable enough to him to remember it. It wasn't that unreasonable to remember it, either. *I wonder if Mouse struggles with directions? She seemed fine enough yesterday...but presumably she's lived here for years, if not decades.* He waved his hand. "I have a good memory for places."

She nodded, an uncertain look in her eyes, but followed along anyways.

In any case, he didn't want to mention his association with Az. Even if Mouse was kind of adorably incompetent about following him, she was still following him. Anything she saw, she might report back to Ethan and his masters, whoever they were. Ernesto, presumably, but who knew? Like he'd just realized, he could be considered an existential threat to Purple Dawn and the Alliance if he was working to rescue Straw, the same way someone who tried to steal nukes in his world would be considered an existential threat. If he was Purple Dawn, he'd watch him, too.

The real miracle is that I haven't been killed yet. Presumably, they take that step the second they have evidence that I'm attempting to break Straw out.

So of course, I won't let them find that evidence.

And that included having a strange rapport with the tuxedo cat that hung out in the library and enjoying the company of a small mammal, rather than meeting Az as a friend. Between Az and the rats, his association with Az was way easier to discover. In truth, he didn't plan to involve Az in Straw's rescue at all. Az didn't deserve that, and besides, the man was quite powerful enough to prevent himself from being involved if he didn't want to be. Rhys had the sneaking suspicion that any attempt to involve Az against his will would result in his sudden and untimely death at the small claws of an unidentifiable yet savage beast. No, instead, he was using Az as a demonstration of his deep and abiding interest and strange, undefinable bond with small (woodland) creatures.

Basically, he was going to use Az as his classic princess sidekick.

It was pretty simple in his mind. Everyone accepted that Disn—classic princesses communed with animals, sang and danced with them, but why? Looking at the root of the connection, it was obvious. From the classic Grimm fairytales to the modern multicultural princesses, their connection with animals always began with an animal sidekick. Once they established that they had rapport with their small, furry sidekick, they were then given an open license to commune with any number of small woodland creatures with no further explanation. Sure, Az was a tuxedo cat and not, for example, a mouse, a rat, or a raccoon, but he didn't want to *start* from the rats, when the rats were such an important part of his plan, and he didn't know the raccoon well enough to be sure it would cooperate. Ideally, Purple Dawn would never find out about the rats at all; but in case they ever did, this moment, right here, would defend his strange connection to animals forever.

He opened the library door, looking down. "Good mor—"

"Can I help you?"

Black shoes. Skintight black leggings. He looked up, up, up, to the top of long legs and a tall, slender torso, to find the very human version of Az standing primly before him, a pile of books in one hand, the other hand carefully positioned to hide their titles. Rhys glanced at the spines, and his suspicions were confirmed. Internally, he sighed. *Never change, Az.*

Then again, male cats were always horny as hell, so he didn't know what he expected. Az was born a cat. Who knew if he'd ever been taught human social norms? He at least knew to hide the titles and be ashamed of reading them, so at some point he'd figured some of it out, but...

Well, there's mysteries to this world that I'll never discover. Mysteries lost to the sands of time.

He nodded at Az. "I could use some books on forging."

"Do you know they lack almost all novels in this pathetic excuse for a library? I had to raid the banned books they'd stolen from the students to find this measly handful," Az informed him, lifting the books to show him the lower titles on the pile he held, which were significantly less racy than the upper half of the stack.

Mouse glanced around. Nervously, she cleared her throat. "Er, sir, um, excuse me—"

Az turned his head. Unblinking eyes with big round pupils stared at Mouse.

She trembled visibly, but persevered. "Um, wh-where are the ordinary librarians?"

"They took an unexpected leave of absence when the pitiful state of their collections was brought to light out of shame for their pathetic mismanagement and their all-encompassing and totally illegitimate efforts to stamp out student enjoyment in any form of literature."

"Y-you... they... um..."

"They will survive the ordeal, but hopefully with a renewed vigor for preserving and promoting books of all descriptions, not merely musty, flavorless tomes." Az finally blinked, one short and deliberate motion. He turned to Rhys and blinked again, but this time, it was slow. "What were you asking for, again?"

"Books on forging. Well, some fresh novels would be nice too, but it sounds like you don't have those," Rhys added.

"Unfortunately, no. However, I can provide you with stacks of tomes on the topic of forging." Az turned. He waved his hand, and a half-dozen books lifted off the shelves and floated down to hover in front of Rhys. Rhys held his arms out, and the books thumped into them.

"Wh-what did you do to the librarians?" Mouse demanded. She shook, but stood her ground.

Rhys sighed silently. No, he understood. He wouldn't just stand there if some mysterious figure had showed up in his school and took control of an institution with no explanation.

"Nothing. I reminded them of the truth of finding pride in their work."

"Who are you?"

"A librarian. My name is Azarian."

"I'm g-going to t-t-tell the Sc-sc-schoolmaster!" Mouse threatened, shaking like a leaf.

"Excellent. I look forward to a commendation." Az turned and wandered off into the library, totally disinterested in her threat. He paused. "What's your name?"

Pale, but nonetheless standing her ground, Mouse replied, "M-mauve, but everyone calls me Mouse."

"Hmm. I suppose Mouse is slightly less challenging. Tell me, Mouse. Do you have any interest in houses?"

"I... what?"

Rhys tilted his head, playing dumb. “Er, is he... not the ordinary librarian?”

“He did something to the librarians!”

“They are unharmed.”

Rhys gestured. “That, uh, sounds fine to me?”

Az shrugged as he resumed walking away. “For the most part.”

Mouse’s eyes got bigger than ever.

Rhys put his face in his hands. He took a deep breath and looked up. “Look, I don’t know what’s happening, but he gave me the books I want, so I’m going to go chill down in the garbage pit. You go tell your Schoolmaster whatever you need to, you two figure this out, and I’ll see you later, okay?”

Mouse nodded. She backed away to the door, then whirled and fled.

Rhys looked at Az. He shook his head. “You were supposed to be my princess sidekick!”

“Don’t worry. A small sect will be grateful to have an expert of my caliber around,” Az replied, completely unworried. He reached the library desk, in the rear of the building from the front doors, and plopped down into a plush chair, already digging back into one of his risqué novels. He glanced up. “And what the hell is a princess sidekick?”

“...Don’t worry about it.” Rhys headed off, waving his farewell.

He hadn’t achieved his objective—an alibi for him speaking with animals—but he had obtained something almost as valuable: moments of freedom, outside of the vision of Mouse’s watchful eyes. And that meant that his plans had to change order, just a smidge.

It didn’t take long to reach the forest again. He wandered in deep, until he could sense no other humans around. Only then did he finally turn.

“Heyo. You ready to come out now, or do you want to wait until my tail gets back?”

A voice sounded from behind him—what would have been in front of him, before he turned. “I’ve been ready for a while, but you’re a busy man. Hard to catch alone.”

Rhys whirled. A white-robed figure stood there, wearing a pure white mask, save two dark eyeholes. “Who are you? What do you want from me, *Solaire*?”

The figure paused, then chuckled. "Using my formal name? How cold. I thought we were closer than that." He lifted his hand to his face and grasped the mask.

Rhys held his breath. *No way.* Could it be?

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

Chapter 64. Under the Mask

The white-robed figure lowered the mask to reveal a face Rhys knew well. One that had matured since the year or so when they'd last seen one another, but a familiar face nonetheless. He caught his breath.

"Bast?"

Bast cracked a smile. "That's me. So you do remember me!"

Rhys shook his head. He put his hands on his hips and sighed. "'You do remember me,' says the guy who showed up in full-body-covering robes and a full-facial mask. How the hell was I supposed to recognize you under all that?" He gestured at Bast.

"Speaking of, that's quite a getup yourself," Bast commented, tilting his head back at Rhys.

"Like it? I made it myself."

"Really?"

"Really."

Bast twisted his lips, then shook his head. "Stick to handbags."

"Oh, come the fuck on," Rhys complained.

Bast cracked a grin. He stepped in, offering Rhys his hand. Rhys took it, and the two clasped palms. "Rhys!"

"Bast! It's good to see you again, buddy."

"The same for you. How's life been treating you?"

“Lots of trash. I’m thriving. You?”

Bast gestured, holding out his hands to show Rhys the robes, the fine gold filigree and the delicate embroidery. “You can’t tell from these fine robes? I’m on top. I’m the only disciple of the Sword Saint.”

Rhys nodded. “You do look fine.”

Bast held the pose for another few seconds, then shook his head. He crumbled. “Gods, I’m so sick of this bullcrap.”

“Bullcrap?” Rhys asked, alarmed. Was something wrong?

Bast caught his look of earnest concern and waved his hand. “No, no, not like that. He’s great, a great teacher. I couldn’t ask for more. Honestly, he pushes me harder than Straw, most days, and I’ve made such strides in my intents and sword skills that some days, I hardly recognize myself. It’s the rest of it.”

“The rest of it?” Rhys asked, still very concerned. What was the Sword Saint doing? Taking advantage of Bast somehow?

Bast gestured. “The fame. The attention. I can’t go anywhere without a dozen people bowing and scraping and offering food, favors, money... not for me, but because I represent access to the Sword Saint. I resorted to wearing a mask to get by all that, but that backfired. Now everyone knows my mask, and I still can’t go anywhere.”

Rhys shrugged. “Better than them knowing your face.”

“I agree, but...” Bast sighed. He shook his head. “Shouldn’t be laying all this on you. Come on. This is a happy reunion. Let’s...” He looked around him, at a loss, then shrugged. “Go walking?”

“Sure.” Rhys headed off, leading the way toward the garbage pit.

Bast walked alongside him. He patted his chest, and the robes flew off and vanished into a gold bangle around his wrist, along with the mask. Underneath, he wore plain brown robes, almost designed to blend in as much as possible. He glanced at Rhys. “Sorry, but can I ask you to call me Solaire when I’m masked?”

“No problem. You know, it’s my first time being friends with a celebrity,” Rhys commented.

“A celebrity. Hardly. More like...the pathetic goldfish shit dangling from a celebrity’s ass, you know, the long, stringy kind that just kind of dangles there, that everyone thinks they can use as a rope to—”

"I get the picture," Rhys interrupted, before Bast completed that metaphor any more graphically than he already had.

"Sorry. I shouldn't take it out on you. It's just so constant. No matter what I do, these sycophants constantly—they don't do it to Master, you know."

"The Sword Saint? Why not?" Rhys asked.

Bast twisted his lips. "Too powerful. Politically and physically. He's threatened to kill a few more annoying hangers-on in the past—not out of aggression," he added quickly, when Rhys's brows furrowed in concern. "Out of a... desire to be left alone. Master is very black and white. Yes and no. He doesn't see it as an attack, or even a threat, but simply him very clearly laying out the consequences of their continued actions."

Rhys nodded slowly. He'd met people like that before back in his world. "Sounds like a fun guy."

Bast snorted. "You have no idea. I don't mind his attitude—makes things simple—but I don't have the strength to scare the flies off like he does. Which means they circle around me endlessly, like I'm a big stinky pile of—"

Rhys put his hand up. "Whoa, whoa. Can you stop calling my friend shit, please? I appreciate the creativity but I don't appreciate the sentiment."

Bast blinked, then cracked a grin. "Man, I've missed you. I—" He froze. A frown crawled over his face, and his nose wrinkled. "What *is* that smell? I've been smelling it for a while now, but it just keeps getting worse."

"What, you don't recognize it from yesterday?" Rhys asked. He pushed aside a bush and gestured for Bast to go ahead into the garbage pile.

"Gods—" Bast rubbed his face. "You know, a part of me had hoped it was merely a fluke that we always meet in garbage pits."

"No, no. I love the garbage. I thrive in it. I spend as much time here as I can." Rhys beamed at Bast.

"And I was calling myself shit," Bast muttered, wrinkling his nose against the stench this time.

"See? You aren't shit. If you're going to call yourself anything, call yourself garbage. Speaking of, I was about to start a fascinating experiment. Care to lend a hand?"

Bast shook his head. "Does it involve garbage?"

Rhys's smile broadened.

Bast sighed deeply. “Fine. Just tell me there’s a source of fresh water nearby?”

“Oh, yeah. The stream is just down that way.” Rhys pointed. “Now come on, daylight’s a-burning.”

The first thing he needed was a forge. He skimmed through the books in a few minutes with the help of Speed Reading, and had the basics down. Forges were actually very simple to construct. Some bricks, some mortar, something to hold the metal in, and somewhere to build the fire. Airflow was important, too, but he was building a trashy forge, and besides, he had the Sword Saint’s apprentice on his side. He was pretty sure he could enlist Bast to do some insane magical-slash-sword bullshit to feed the fire oxygen, and if not, there were accordions in the trash pit that wheezed when he stepped on the wrong parts. Redirect that the right way, and he had himself a kind of shitty bellows.

Plus, there’s probably bellows in here, somewhere. They just don’t cry out like dying asthmatics when I step on them. Having once been a dying asthmatic who would have been quite fine with being stepped on by the correct woman—not that he ever was—he felt like he had the right to say that.

He set the books down, thought better of it, put them in his storage ring, and nodded at Bast. “We need some bricks. Or stones. And something to bind them. I’m thinking clay? There’s clay by the riverside. I can extract the impurities, and it should be clean enough afterwards that we can bake it into place with the furnace’s own heat.”

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“Sounds good to me,” Bast said.

“It’ll make the furnace kind of fragile, and I don’t know if it’s something that’ll last in the long term, but I don’t need it to last for long. I’m just trying to fix this.” Rhys pulled the cauldron out of his storage ring and plopped it down, giving it a little pat.

Bast looked over it. “That’s a hell of a cauldron. Or it would be, if it wasn’t...” He gestured at the hole.

“Yeah, that’s the part we’re fixing.”

Bast nodded. “And once we build the forge, and fuel it, and find the metal, and melt it down, how are you going to attach it to the pot?”

Rhys put his fingertips together and leaned over it, looking Bast in the eye. “One problem at a time.”

“Mhm. So you don’t have a plan.”

"I don't have a plan, *yet*. That's different."

"Is it?"

"Temporally speaking, yes. I live in the fourth dimension, Bast," Rhys said mysteriously, spreading his bridged hands.

Bast just squinted at him.

Rhys waved. "Let's go get some bricks, stones, and clay. Then we'll figure out the next step."

Shockingly, Bast nobly sacrificed himself to the task of retrieving the clay, leaving Rhys to go find suitable bricks. The trash pit had no shortage of them. There were entire segments of wall carved in here, even chunks of carved stone rent by a blade at some point. It looked as if some of the buildings had once been cut into pieces during some kind of insane mage battle. Rhys found a chunk with a window still in it, the glass intact but cut with all the precision of a diamond glass cutter, but from the shape of it, it was a single sword slash that had severed the wall and the window alike. He raised his brows.

Mage battles are nuts.

He drew his own sword. It wasn't simple to cut apart the wall into smaller sections of bricks. Whoever had done it the first time had cut through the wall with the greatest of ease, but Rhys had to hack and slash over and over just to get one segment out. If he'd been wielding a real sword, its blade would have dulled, but it was a Trash Intent-formed blade, so it never dulled. It was his strength that failed.

Really? After all that, I still can't cut an ordinary wall apart? Rhys lifted his blade again, then paused and rested a hand on the bricks. The bricks emanated a powerful pulse of mana, at least at the Tier 2 level.

Oh. Well, all the better, in all honesty. Even with trash, stronger materials made stronger products. He went back to his hacking, grabbing the latest brick segment and wiggling it free. He tossed it onto his pile of bricks. Already, it was almost half as tall as him. Another block for his garbage forge.

Bast returned, a big sack of dripping wet mud wrapped in a cloth over his shoulder. "Congrats, here's some mud."

"Awesome. Hold on, I'm almost done." Rhys lifted his sword again.

Bast stepped by him. He gripped Rhys by the shoulder and pushed him back. His blade lashed out, slicing the wall into perfectly even bricks. "There. Is that better?"

"It's..." Rhys raised his brows. *I always expected Bast to be stronger than me, but seeing it right in front of my eyes is a different experience.* He stared for a moment, then shook his head. "That cuts down time. Let's see that mud."

Bast plopped it down. The sheet came open on its own, revealing a clump of sticky red rivermud. "Best I could find. Don't think it'll hold long under intense heat, though."

"That's fine." Rhys dusted off his robes and squatted over to the muddy pile. He patted it, calling all the impurities into himself. They rushed to him, far weaker than the impurities he was used to. They weren't worth much for training, but when he removed them, the mud left behind was far more pure, far closer to clay. "There we go. Much better."

Bast stared. "How the hell...?"

Rhys thumped him on the shoulder and grinned. "You aren't the only one who's been training."

Shaking his head, Bast backed away. "You mages are crazy."

"You just cut a wall with a normal sword," Rhys pointed out.

"That's normal. What you just did... I've never seen anyone do it before."

"That's normal?" Rhys asked, shocked. "Holy shit, I'm fucked."

"Huh?" Bast asked, lost.

Rhys gestured. "The tournament! There's a tournament coming up! You're telling me all martial artists can just casually slice up a Tier 2 brick wall? That's terrifying! I'm going to die!"

"Don't be melodramatic. They don't let people die in the tournament... usually."

"Yeah? How about the Strawman's shitty disciple?" Rhys asked.

Bast opened his mouth, then shut it. He looked at Rhys. "Oh."

"I don't mean anything by it, Bast. But you are the apprentice of the Sword Saint. People are begging you for your signature. I'm a no one. If I vanish, die by accident, then the Alliance is all the safer for it, and good riddance."

"I—"

"I don't mean anything by it," Rhys repeated. "I really don't. But for all that fame is shit, so's anonymity. We've been living in different realities. You're the premier disciple of the

strongest swordsman. I've been living as the janitor of a school so small that one single Purple Dawn teacher decided he was going to take out my whole school."

"The janitor? Rhys, you aren't even a student?" Now it was Bast's turn to be concerned.

"No, no, I signed up for it, I'm happy. Don't worry about me. Well, maybe worry a little bit," Rhys allowed. If Ernesto really tried to destroy his school for a second time, he wouldn't mind to have the Sword Saint's apprentice as backup. "But really, I'm fine, I picked this. Garbage is everything to me."

"I... guess so," Bast allowed, looking around them.

"So—"

"But even so, there has to be something I can do. I don't want people to see you as a faceless victim or someone better off dead," Bast said, frowning.

Rhys shrugged. "Help me get stronger?"

"Sure. Let's get started." Bast reached for his sword.

Rhys stopped his hand. "Whoa, whoa. What're you getting that out for?"

"What? You want to get stronger."

Rhys gestured at the cauldron. "I've got a plan, right there. Come on. Let's build a forge."

Bast squinted at the cauldron, then at Rhys, still lost. "How does that make you stronger?"

Rhys grinned. "Remember what I said about making a plan? I've made one, and it's a banger."

"Is it?"

Rhys grabbed the clay cloth and threw it over his shoulder. "Let's go over there. It's clear, the ground's flat, and there isn't too much overgrowth overhead."

"You know, hundreds of people would pay me any amount of money or favors for a sword lesson from me, the Sword Saint's apprentice," Bast pointed out.

"We'll get to that! We will, we really will. I highly value your strength, Bast. And I especially value it when you grab those bricks over there." Rhys pointed over his shoulder, already toting the clay to the spot he'd indicated earlier.

Bast sighed, but his eyes lit up nonetheless. A begrudging grin stretched across his lips. "What madness do you have in mind this time?"

"Something that'll make us so rich, we'll be pissing gold. But first, I need a cauldron."

"And not just any cauldron, but this cauldron in particular," Bast muttered under his breath.

"Not really. That part's just so I can find out if I *can* apply my path to this kind of complex multi-step crafting."

Bast sighed. "You never change, do you?"

"You take that back. I've grown a few inches since you last saw me."

"Uh huh." Bast eyed him up and down. "Don't look like it."

"You only say that 'cuz you grew more."

Bantering and bickering, the two of them lugged the raw materials over to where Rhys had indicated. Constructing the forge itself was relatively simple. A box where the fuel and metal would go, then a chimney. Rhys left the entire brick box open in the center, figuring he'd set up the place to put the metal later. Worst case, he'd just find a tough material shaped in a kind of bowl-ish manner, and pile the metal up in there. With Trash Intent, he could probably hold it in place well enough. He would just use a cauldron, but, well, if the metal was soft enough to melt in a cauldron, then it was too soft to patch his cauldron. It'd simply melt every time he tried to push the cauldron to its limits, and he didn't really want to try holding molten metal into a three-dimensional shape with Trash Intent while also clutching onto the rest of the cauldron, while a highly pressurized, highly toxic material did its best to find a weak spot and escape. Not his idea of a good time. He had to find something harder, with a higher melting point.

We might be left using stone. The stone would crack, but he could at least use Trash Intent to hold it together. He was more worried about the insulating properties of the stone. It would take longer to heat the metal, and longer for it to cool in the bowl. Cooling wasn't the problem, but heating was. Longer to heat meant it would take more fuel. He could use trees, but he'd rather use trash, and make this a trashy process from start to finish, not to mention absorb a few impurities on the way. It was fine to use some trash, but what if it took so long that he had to start using valuable trash in the fire?

Rhys turned and looked at the giant trash pile.

Okay, maybe that's not actually a problem.

"What's the holdup?" Bast asked.

"I need something to melt the metal in, and a firm metal strong enough to hold up against a cauldron's heat," Rhys muttered thoughtfully.

"What if you find another cauldron? A better one?"

"A better one? Where am I gonna find a better one? This one's got the strongest mana signature in the whole—" Rhys paused. He thumped Bast on the shoulder. "You're a genius, Bast!"

"Thanks for acknowledging it," Bast said, grinning.

There weren't stronger large mana signatures in the trash. That much was true. There wasn't such a thing as a 'better cauldron.' But what there were, were small splotches of very powerful mana signatures. Jagged bits of metal where a cauldron had completely torn itself apart, leaving very little behind. Some of those mana signatures were powerful, more powerful, even, than the cauldron he'd found, it was just that the pieces of metal were so small that he hadn't seen them as cauldrons at all. But he didn't need a second cauldron, he needed a few bits of metal that he could stuff into a hole in the cauldron he had.

I can't believe I overlooked something so obvious. Rhys set off across the garbage pit with vigor, seeking out those twisted and tangled bits of metal. Some were as large as his palm; others were as small as his fingernails. He collected them all, piling them up in his sleeves as he went.

Bast watched him go. He shook his head. "Can't say I get it, but I guess I don't have to."

Rhys returned after long with a pile of metal. "You find something to smelt the metal in while I was gone?"

"Didn't know I had an assignment," Bast returned.

"You know it now. Better late than never." Rhys looked at him expectantly and clapped his hands. "So? What do you have for me?"

Bast shrugged at him. "Nothing?"

"Aw, come on. No more genius ideas?"

"Not really."

Rhys clicked his tongue and shook his head. "I was counting on you, Bast."

Bast threw his hands up. Rhys grinned, and Bast rolled his eyes back at him.

“Guess we’re going with the stone-trash solution,” Rhys said, and clapped, heading out into the trash.

“There he goes again,” Bast muttered, watching him scamper over the trash.

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

Chapter 65. Smelting and Forging

Rhys returned before long with a scorched earthenware bowl. He held it up. “Here we are. Now we’ve got all the pieces assembled.”

“Except the fuel,” Bast pointed out.

Rhys turned and gestured toward the trash pit.

Bast sighed. “I was afraid you’d say that.”

“Wanna help me sort it?” Rhys asked, rolling up his sleeves.

Sighing again, Bast shook his head. He gestured. “Get a pile over here, and let’s get started.”

Rhys pointed his hand at the trash. He called it to him as though he were going to absorb it, but stopped just before it actually absorbed into his body. The trash gathered behind him and piled up there, waiting to be sorted.

Trash Manipulation 7 > 8

He raised his eyebrows. He hadn’t used the skill that much, but it had leveled anyways. Was that because he hadn’t used Trash Manipulation to move the trash, but instead relied on his trash absorption to find a new way to move it? His mind instantly went to Enlightenment. It leveled up every time he comprehended something new, regardless of if it was related to Enlightenment itself, or maybe even his path. Maybe this was a form of enlightenment, to utilize a different method to achieve the same end.

Interesting. It implied that levels didn’t simply come from using a skill often enough that it leveled up, but also from understanding the skill better, or discovering a new way to use that skill. It made sense, since this System seemed to lag him. He developed a skill, then the System rewarded him by naming it, rather than the System giving him a skill, and then him struggling to understand it. Once he had it, the System would level it with

use and empower it, but it made sense, too, that understanding the skill better or discovering a new way to achieve the same effect would also give him levels.

I wonder if the strength boost associated with levels is just... well, the natural boost from learning something better and better. Like how shooting one basketball at the hoop might provide the understanding of how to score a three-pointer, but shooting one hundred balls at the hoop would definitely give the shooter an idea of what it took to score a three-pointer, even if the player never succeeded. After all, a hundred balls in, the player would have a pretty good idea of what they were lacking that they couldn't throw one, whether it was arm strength, wrist strength, or simply the aim and finesse to send a ball flying through the hoop at that distance. Or, at least, that had been his experience back when he'd been forced to attempt sports as a child. He'd known very well that he wasn't strong enough to land a three-pointer, even if he couldn't shoot one.

There wasn't any point in thinking about it too hard. The System would do what the System did. He appreciated it showing him for certain that he'd gained strength, and as long as it continued to do that, he was satisfied. Whether it was a source of strength, or merely a tracker of his personal strength, was a difference that didn't matter in the end.

Then again, there are skills like Less is More, he realized, as he pondered it. Some skills definitely gave a boost unto themselves. Maybe it was somewhere between the two, and some of the skills the System tracked were just measures of how well he comprehended and could use them, some were purely System-granted boosts, and most were somewhere in between the two.

Though now that he was thinking about it, most of the measure-of-comprehension skills the System tracked for him were linked to his path. Maybe they didn't give a boost because the System had never faced someone with a trash path before, and it didn't know what to do.

You know, that makes a lot of sense. If that was the case, then did everyone who forged their own path essentially break ground on the System, and set the skills for everyone else who followed? It was an interesting idea, and one that Rhys didn't fully understand the consequences of yet. He tucked it away in the back of his head to think on later, or do a bit of research on in the library. The only consequence he could think of right now, was that it gave the path-maker an advantage in making their skills more flexible—literally whatever they worked toward at the time—as opposed to path followers, who would get whatever their founder had groundbroken on.

Then again, I don't know that a path-follower couldn't make their own skills. I don't know anything about this. At this point, I need to admit that I'm just making things up, running thoughts to their natural conclusion and ending up in the land of pure speculation.

"Thinking about something?" Bast asked, quirking a brow.

"Trash," Rhys explained.

Bast nodded, understanding without having to be told anything further.

When a good amount of trash was piled up, he began to separate it into burnable and non-burnable. Any items that seemed outright useful, like large sections of cloth, broken weapons, or sturdy wood, he set aside in its own pile, and by force of habit, he also made a pile of organic matter for composing. The 'useful' trash was further separated into metal and non-metal, in case he needed to reach for some extra ingots. As he went, he searched the larger objects for something, something that he desperately needed, examining the insides of vases and tipping cups upside down just in case, but he found none of it. Maybe a tiny trickle, but nowhere near enough.

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"What're you looking for?" Bast asked.

"Sand. I need sand, or something like it, and a few bags of it, at that." Rhys tipped the chest of drawers over and shook it, but nothing but a thin patina of dust came off.

"I could get you sand," Bast replied.

"That would be hugely helpful. Thank you."

"No problem. Anything for the plan that makes us rich enough to piss gold."

Rhys looked at Bast. Bast grinned back at him.

"I did say that, didn't I."

"You sure did."

"I'll use a better metaphor next time."

"No, no. This one's funny."

Bast put his mask back on and dashed away, leaving Rhys to work alone once more. Rhys stuffed fuel into the bottom of his ramshackle trash furnace and paused, yet again at an impasse. After all this time, he still didn't have a way to cast a single fire spell.

Is fire incompatible with my path, or something? he wondered, staring at the furnace. But that didn't feel right. He could ignite the trash in his core just fine, he just had to do it in a roundabout way, and he'd never had a problem with burning the trash to ash first before he processed it into potions. He knelt and began the manual process of igniting the trash, still a bit confused. The other strange thing was, that even though he'd developed several manual, somewhat shitty ways of lighting things, the System hadn't given him a skill related to ignition. It was as if it refused to acknowledge his efforts.

The trash lit, and he fed it kindling until the flames were strong enough to devour the larger pieces of trash. Standing back, Rhys gazed into the fire, still pondering this mystery. Even if the System hadn't given him a skill straightaway, it definitely should have by now. Why did he still fail to obtain a fire-related skill?

It came to him suddenly, like a bolt from the blue. Rhys staggered as the enormity of the realization slammed into him. *It's because I see fire as super valuable and worthwhile. I can't possibly see fire skills as trash, so it's the hardest kind of skill for me to learn.*

He stared into the burgeoning fire, his eyes wide. Was it true? Was that why he struggled so hard to learn fire skills? It couldn't be. And yet, a creeping sensation rose up within him that yes, this was the truth; this was exactly why he struggled so hard with this one particular type of skill. He valued it highly, not only because it was supremely useful, but also because it was cool, and awesome, and all the main characters of his favorite shows all used fire. Fire skills were the furthest thing from trash, so he couldn't possibly develop a skill for it... or at least, it wouldn't be easy. His trash-level talent was in full display when it came to fire skills, and in fact, he wouldn't be surprised if all his trash buffs meant he had an equal-and-opposite debuff for skills he valued highly. At the very least, he had no buff to learning fire skills, and he was sure about that.

"Well, gods damn it," Rhys muttered, shaking his head, hands on his hips. Fire might just be out of his reach in this life, or at least, fire mastery. He was sure he'd eventually be able to learn some kind of fire spell, probably, but not quickly, and not without massive effort. It was to the extent that the juice probably wasn't worth the squeeze, if he hadn't learned one already. Better to focus on his strengths than try to shore up his weaknesses.

Nothing he could do about that. The fire had already started to harden the clay they'd used for the forge, and the clay already showed signs of cracking. Rhys stepped closer, carefully laying his hand on the coldest part of the furnace and coursing Trash Intent through the whole thing.

Instantly, he was besieged. The trash had no intent of its own; or rather, it had a thousand intents, all of them very different. Some of the bricks longed to be a house once more. Others wanted to be a path. Some had no previous life at all, and barely responded to his intent. It was like melding the cloth together to make his robes, but a thousand times worse, because everything they wanted to be was so large and grand that it risked forcing him to overreach his mana if he accidentally activated even a little of it. That, and the fact that he was trying to school them into being something unlike what they'd been before. With the clothes, he'd asked fabric and clothes to become a different kind of clothes. Either it hadn't had any intent, or it had previously been clothes, and he could reason it back into being clothes. These bricks, on the other hand, the ones that had been used for something, had been grand mansions or wide roads. They had no concept of a furnace; it was a thing totally alien to them. Not only that, but being in proximity to fire was purely negative to the bricks. They longed to be complete, part of

a greater whole, not mixed with a few of their fellows and forced to be some small, dingy construction.

The clay, meanwhile, longed to return to the riverbank from which they'd taken it. It wanted to flow, to be soft and liquid, not baked into a static form. Every piece of its intent fought against what the fire did to it, what Rhys meant to do to it.

Rhys furrowed his brows. Trash Intent could pull out an object's fullest, greatest potential from its most powerful state, yes, but it was also *his* intent. It was an intent that belonged to him. *His* intent, not just the trash's intent. Often, he wanted to let the trash take control and give bring its own intent to the forefront, but not right now. Right now, he didn't care what the trash wanted. It was his intent that mattered. His goal. His purpose. In his mind's eye, he held an image of the furnace he'd built, running at full power, and with all the force he could muster, he impressed that image upon the shittily built, trash furnace sitting before him.

The bricks complained. The clay screamed. Every single piece of it longed to be anything but what it was, to be something greater, not this tiny brick construction built by some amateur. The walls had been laid by master brickmasons, the houses constructed according to master architects' plans. The clay had laid on the side of that river for years, ever since it had been deposited by the last great flood. This was below them. Every single piece of trash exuded that aura: that this thing, this pathetic first attempt by someone who had never worked with bricks nor clay before (save that one time in first grade where they made tiny clay birds), was far below them, that this was not a greater construct, but a lesser state of being, where they were demeaned and brought low for a lesser purpose.

Rhys narrowed his eyes. "Oh, it's below you, huh? This furnace I'm trying to build... even you see it as trash, don't you?" A grin spread over his lips, and his eyes flashed. "That's right. It's trash. And you're trash. Become my trashy furnace, and live in trashy harmony!"

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

Chapter 66. Everyone Shall Become Trash

Rhys gripped the intents—all of them. The bricks, the clay, even the shape of the new furnace itself, he held all of them in his mind. His mind trembled, struggling to hold that much information and keep focus, but he forced himself to hold on anyways. If it wasn't trash from start to finish—trash as the raw material, trash that he was trying to create, trash that held it all together—then it would have been impossible. His mind would have failed, and he would have blacked out, or worse. But it was all trash. Every part of the

process was trash, and therefore, related to his path. It came naturally to him, and that made everything just a little bit easier, just enough that he could hold on. His head ached. His temples pounded, and his eyes felt as though someone were piercing them with needles, but he gripped the intents in his mind and refused to let go. They struggled, but his will was greater. No—when it came to trash, his will was the greatest. There was no overcoming his will for trash. His all-encompassing love for trash meant he simply couldn't be overpowered. If he was going to make trash, with trash, then nothing was going to stop him—least of all the trash itself.

The clay was the first to go. As a raw material, its intent had never been the strongest to begin with, and now that he was forming it into something greater, it quickly fell in line and adapted to his intent. It would become the binding material to hold his furnace together. It would become something greater.

The bricks were harder. They remembered the glory days, the old times and their better lives as a larger, more complete building. They recalled being crudely hacked apart just now, torn asunder for his pitiful, childish construction. They were trash, yes, but they still had pride. They had their past, and they wanted to cling to it, even if he gave them a vision of a new construction.

Rhys pushed back. This wasn't just a new, trashy construction. This was a new thing to aspire to. Something to become. They'd been trash. Even if they had once been the wall of a grand villa, they'd been reduced to nothing but a pile of bricks lying in the garbage, of no use. True, he admired their tenacity, and he appreciated their pride in what they had once been, but that was in the past. They would never be a wall again. No one else was going to come and pick them up out of the garbage. They either rotted away here, or became part of his new construction. There was no going back to the glory days. No hero who was going to rescue them and make them something grand and beautiful once more. This furnace he was trying to build wasn't grand. It wasn't beautiful. But it was *something*. It was a construction. It was better than lying purposelessly in the trash, forgotten and unused, with nothing relying on them at all.

The bricks hesitated. Their will trembled, and begrudgingly, they gave in. Better to be used and remembered than rot away in iniquity. They had once been something far grander, but they were at least being used now, and this was better than sitting in the hole until they became dirt. Their intent changed, morphing to meet his requirements. No longer did they strive to once more take the form of the manor wall they'd once been. Instead, they worked in harmony with the clay, accepting the form of the furnace Rhys had built. It was a reluctant harmony, one that they joined by force of Rhys's will alone, but it was harmony nonetheless.

Rhys watched it from outside, noting the pushback against his will even as it gave in. He'd convinced the bricks to take his side, but that was it. They weren't excited about it. He hadn't imbued them with new purpose, or inspired them to become something greater. He could still improve this new technique of using Trash Intent to impose his will upon something.

It had been easier with the clothes, even if that one skirt had desperately fought his will. He was more familiar with fabric and clothes, having spent long enough creating costumes back in the day to know the ins and outs of the material and the tricks and techniques to working with it. Intuitively, he'd known how to merge the fabrics together and shape something new. The bricks were different. He was truly an amateur brick-and-mortar worker, and everything in this combination knew it. Unlike with his robes, the end result was shoddy, a first attempt at making something with all the inevitable mistakes and downsides that came along with it. If he had more comprehension of bricks and masonry, he certainly could have created something better that would have pleased the bricks more, and not only that, but he could have more easily convinced them to take new form.

He tucked that tidbit in the back of his mind. He wasn't aiming to become a master mason, so he'd only bothered to read the bare minimum on masonry. His comprehension was shallow, barely more than a child's understanding of sticky-thing-plus-rock-equals-house. This, though, proved that there was value in gaining a deeper comprehension even of topics that he had no intention of mastering, if he meant to impose his intent upon the trash, anyways, rather than accepting and enhancing the trash's own intent. There was little he could do about it, now. Once he began the process, he had to see it to the end or else start over, and he really did only need a shoddy furnace he could manually force together for his purposes. But for future constructions, he should definitely read the books and maybe even seek the advice of experts, if he could find them and convince them to take interest in his trashy constructions. Deeper comprehension would make it easier for him to enforce his intent and help him create greater objects, both.

The fire burned on. Rhys kept one hand on the furnace to keep enforcing his intent over it, so it didn't lose shape or crack during the cooking process. He knew that what he was doing was kind of stupid and risky, and that unevenly heated clay tended to cook poorly and crack, but this was the easiest, quickest, dirtiest route to the end, and if that didn't sound like absolute garbage, then he didn't know what did. The closer he kept to his path, the easier the repair on the trash-cauldron would be, and given how exquisitely difficult that task was going to be, he needed to make it maximally easy on himself.

He'd piled some burnable trash within arm's reach, and fed that into the fire as the furnace cured. When that ran out, he pulled more trash toward him with Trash Manipulation, and continued feeding the fire. In between feeding the fire, he pulled out the books he'd picked up on forging and continued reading them. He'd intended to just get a quick-and-dirty understanding of forging, but it seemed that comprehension was the one place he couldn't afford to be trash. Maybe at higher levels, having trash comprehension would allow him to pull off crazy stunts, but he was still too weak to affect reality at that range, which meant it was time to read. He leaned away from the furnace as he read, wary of Az's wrath. If any soot or dirt got on the books, there would be hell to pay.

He considered going back to the blacksmithing teacher and asking for his expertise, but decided against it. Purple Dawn was still against him and his school. Attending a class was one thing, but asking someone to offer their specific expertise to his specific ends? In the first place, he didn't want to tip his hand to Purple Dawn to that extent, and let them know exactly what he was up to. The inevitable sabotage attempts that would follow were not what he needed right now; for now, he needed to quietly build up to his ultimate goal, so that he could launch the plan to get super rich so quickly that no one could intervene until he already had a good lining of gold in his pockets. Secondly, the chances that the teacher would decide to give him fake advice and sabotage him were higher in a one-on-one situation. True, he still saw value in that, and he was pretty sure, even though he'd failed last time, that he could use trash advice to the contrary to pull true advice out; but he wouldn't know if the teacher was giving him good advice or bad, and that would make the job so much harder.

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Mostly, he just wanted to execute his plan in silence. The idea of the teacher trying to sabotage him was secondary. And of course, that assumed the teacher gave him the time of day at all; there was always the chance he asked, just to get immediately turned down, and then he'd simply wasted his time. But no, his primary motivation was secrecy, or at least, avoiding drawing attention to himself. It was true that involving Bast ran contrary to that, but first off, he trusted Bast to hide his comings and goings, and second off, he ultimately needed Bast, if this plan was going to work out. He knew he could trust Bast if he involved the man from the get go, but he was worried that Bast might be a bit skeptical if he came up to him with a get-rich plan at the end of the day, when Bast had seen nothing of what built up to it.

He eyed the pile of organic compost and smiled a secret smile to himself. He'd pulled it out by instinct, but what a correct instinct it had been. He'd need that if this was all going to come together.

But first, repairing the cauldron.

The clay under his hand finally grew hot. Rhys had to swap to another part of the furnace to keep Trash Intent going, then rapidly swap fingers to prevent them from getting burned off. Trash Body would let him ignore the injury, but he could do nothing but sit and wait for Self-Regeneration and healing potions to fix him up afterward, and he needed his plan to kick off by the time of the tournament, not weeks afterward. He couldn't afford to be down a few fingers during this critical time where he could make lots and lots of money—*oh, and I guess there's also the thing with Ernesto*, he allowed, much less worried about that. Unless Ernesto tried to kill him outright, there wasn't much the man could do that would truly punish him, since something like locking him up in Purple Dawn would only inform him as to Straw's location and position, and there was still plenty of trash in dungeons. As for torturing him or something like that, he'd rather not, but... well, it was a risk he ran. In any case, he didn't plan to lose to Ernesto's

champion, but he also intended to get filthy rich, and between the two, he'd always focused on gaining more than he'd focused on minimizing losses.

It was like when he'd had Cynog coming after him with the intent to kill. When he'd gone to Sorden, he'd asked for access to the upper peak, not for her to protect him to Cynog. Taking a loss or a beating was acceptable. Even being terrorized by a bully was acceptable. What wasn't acceptable, was not progressing in the world. If he missed out on gains, he'd be far more saddened than if he took a small loss. At the end of the day, after all, he was trash. If he got hurt, injured, or tortured, that was simply his lot in life. But if he failed to make progress? That was a true loss. Failure to progress meant he'd stay as weak trash forever, and that was unacceptable. He wanted to become ultimate trash, not remain as some weak-sap sad sack trash.

Asking Sorden for access had worked out then, and focusing on his current plan over worrying about Ernesto's champion would likely work out now. Besides, it wasn't as though he would get dramatically stronger in the next few days, unless he found another toxic trash pit like the one he'd absorbed back in his home school. Even if he spent all his time igniting trash stars until the tournament started, he didn't know that it would matter, given how little progress each trash star gave him. It wasn't that they didn't give him immense growth; they did, moreso than any of his previous efforts had. The problem was that progress from Tier 2 to Tier 3 required immensely more mana than from 1 to 2; not only that, but he suspected that the new pure qi that came from the hyper-dense impurities was the key to unlocking his next Tier or advancements in this Tier, and the trash stars gave such minute amounts of it that he didn't really foresee great advancements in the near future. He could absorb the entire trash pit and only advance a small step. Something like the toxic trash pit would be different; that would be enough to make a significant improvement. But for all that the trash here was vast and powerful, it had less impurities per space than the toxic trash pit. The trash pit's impurities were far more concentrated, and stronger, as well. Not that this trash didn't have strong impurities, or that he couldn't concentrate it, but even if he did, it would have fewer, less powerful impurities than the toxic trash pit.

That toxic trash pit was really something, he reflected, thinking back on it. It was insanely powerful trash, almost *too* full of impurities.

His mind flashed even further back. All the way back to an internet forum, and a few simple words: *I have a problem with trash. It's best if I just show you.* Was this what that guy meant? That absolutexistence fellow who'd messaged him out of the blue. Had he been talking about the toxic trash pit? Was there more than one of them? Was that the problem?

Rhys considered for a second, then shrugged. If it was, then he'd already figured out how to solve absolutexistence's problem. The idea of more toxic trash pits existing made his heart race a little, though he knew he shouldn't get his hopes up; his only hint was a message from a mysterious figure on an online forum in another world, and who knew if the guy was even related to him coming here. It seemed likely, but he wasn't

going to count anything out. It could be that he'd gotten a weird spam message, then had a heart attack and gotten isekai'd the usual way. True, it was far more convoluted than absolutexistence being behind his transmigration, but then, he had no proof in any direction.

In any case, if the toxic pits were absolutexistence's 'trash problem,' then they were solved, he just hadn't gotten around to applying the fix yet—mostly due to the fact that he hadn't found a second one. If they weren't, then no loss, he'd figure it out eventually. He had lots of time, what with ever-increasing lifespans on the table. If he was summoned here by absolutexistence, then the existence was clearly in no rush to point him in the right direction, and if he wasn't, then he really was free to explore and play to his heart's desire; either way, he'd clean up the trash problem by the simple fact of it being his path, if there was such a problem, and if there wasn't, then he'd simply be doing the world a service.

He had things well in hand, and he was doing fine, as far as he knew. Which meant he was free to apply himself to the present issues... like the furnace under his hand.

Despite his shoddy construction, it had held. The clay had baked in place, and his incredibly primitive furnace was ready to fire its first pot...er, smelt its first metal. He'd definitely be pushing it to its limits or further, but that was what Trash Intent was for.

Thump. "You done over there?"

"Just getting started," Rhys said, turning to find a masked Bast with a heavy sack of sand. He grabbed up his pot and scraped the metal bits he'd found into it, pulled out the surface-level impurities with his trash skills—the dirt, bacteria, and filth accumulated during a long time in the trash—then set it into the furnace to heat. He nodded at Bast. "Dig a pit about six inches deep and about..." he gestured at the cauldron "...tall, and pour the sand in."

"Bossing me around? Do you know who I am?" Bast asked, pulling himself to his full height. He'd always been taller than Rhys, and somehow, he'd grown during the time they'd been apart. Rhys, too, had grown for once, but Bast maintained his lead.

"Yeah, I do. You're the dude who's gonna be filthy rich when this pays off, so dig us that pit," Rhys replied, not even looking up from feeding the furnace more fuel to melt the metal.

"I like the way you think, Boss," Bast said, tossing a salute at Rhys's back. Taking off his mask, he stuck it in his robes, then swapped robes from his white ones to more plain ones and got to digging.

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

Chapter 67. Make a Fix

Without a good place to put the bowl inside the furnace, he simply placed it into the ashes directly. The metal slowly melted down. With the help of Trash Intent, Rhys kept the furnace from cracking, or the pot within it from breaking down under the immense heat. It stretched the limits of his skill, but he welcomed the training. The more skilled he became with Trash Intent, the more he could use it for, and consequently, the more powerful it became. He squinted his eyes against the headache and pressed on. A little more. *A little more...*

"Dug the pit, Boss, what next?"

"Fill it with sand, then press the cauldron into it," Rhys said, distractedly. "The non-broken side first, then lift it up and press the broken side into the impression, perfectly lining it up."

"Kay," Bast said.

The metal glowed red-hot, but it wasn't melting. The flames weren't hot enough. Rhys rubbed his forehead, struggling to think against the pain of maintaining two Trash Intent at the same time. *What... what was it? I thought of this problem earlier, I know I did, but—*

His eyes flashed. Rhys raised his hand and called a specific piece of trash to him. The additional activation of another skill, this time Trash Manipulation, spiked his headache, but he managed to hold all three skills, thanks to having reached Tier 2 and having the correspondingly upgraded mental and magical capacities. The trash tore out of the pile and landed in his hand.

Bast looked up, still in the middle of setting the cauldron into the sand, and squinted. "You about to play us some music?"

"Gods, I hope not," Rhys muttered. He looked at the accordion in his hand, turning it over to get a better feel for how badly damaged it was. It was mostly intact, save a gaping hole on one side of the bellows, and gunk had accumulated over the keys and the internal mechanisms. It meant that air gushed out, and some of the keys would produce no sound at all, but that worked for him. In fact, better if none of the keys produced sound.

Bracing one side of the accordion against his hip, he pointed the gaping hole at the furnace and gave the instrument a good squeeze. Air gushed out, and the flames burned brighter, even if the metal momentarily darkened. Since Rhys wasn't using

Trash Manipulation any more, he used that small amount of mental and magical space to call out to the impurities in the trash and pull them into himself, cleaning the resulting materials so they burned hotter and more efficiently. He worked the bellows again, and to his surprise, the flames dimmed slightly. Rhys blinked. *Huh?* It was just as dark as it had been before he cleansed the impurities, almost as if new impurities had appeared. Once more, he called out to the impurities in the trash, and to his surprise, there were new impurities to be found. Not *in* the trash, but *on* it.

His eyes widened. The air! Of course the air was impure. Bast was just commenting about the scent. What was scent, but thousands of microscopic impure particles floating on the air? He'd been blind until now, blind to the impurities floating all around him all the time! But now that his eyes had been opened, how could he be so remiss as to go without absorbing them? Rhys took a deep breath, operating his mana and pulling in toward his core as furiously as he could. It was the standard method to absorb mana, but today, his focus wasn't on mana, but on the air itself. The breathing was usually secondary to the mana absorption, merely a method to focus the mind and direct mana in the right direction, but in this moment, it was primary. He put all his effort into breathing, into sucking in as much air as possible. His lungs inflated. He drew the air deep, into his stomach, filling with air from the lowest part of his abdomen upward. As he sucked the air in, he called impurities as well, pulling the stench in with as much power as he could. The air tasted horrible, absolutely putrid, but that was a good sign. That meant he was successful.

Within his body, he aimed impurities into his core, marshalling them into the next trash star. While the impurities rushed toward him, he worked his makeshift bellows and pushed the newly-cleaned air into the fire. He breathed out, letting out clean air in the bellows' direction at the same time.

He hadn't cleaned all the air. Not even close. There was a small bubble of clean air around him, and that air, he sent into the fire when the flames needed more oxygen, but it quickly ran out. Nature abhorred a vacuum, and it was true for this as for anything else. The lack of impurities in the air around Rhys simply meant that the impure, denser air spread out, encroaching into the clean air and shoving it away.

Not a problem. Rhys breathed deep again. One breath at a time, over and over, drawing the trash air into himself, cleansing the impurities, then expelling clean air for the fire. The fire burned hot. The furnace and the bowl both shuddered, trying to break free of his intent and crack open. Rhys clenched down on them, refusing. They couldn't break now. He was so close. The metal was melting, slowly softening into itself like butter in the microwave.

"Do you want me to do anything with the cauldron?" Bast asked, thumbing over his shoulder at it.

"Is the hole face-down in the impression?" Rhys returned.

“Yep.”

“Then we’re good.” Rhys took another deep breath, drawing the impurities into him.

Bast watched him, quirking a brow in mild concern. “You know, I appreciate the stink going down, but you don’t have to do that. I might complain, but I’m used to the stench of garbage. You know how I grew up.”

Rhys shook his head, still breathing in. He purified all the air, then breathed it out again. “No, no, this isn’t for you. It’s for the metal. I’m cleaning it so the metal doesn’t get impurities in it.”

“Got it. I’m not that important, huh,” Bast said, sitting back and nodding.

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“You want me to clean the air for you or not?” Rhys shot back.

He chuckled and waved his hand. “Nah. It’s refreshing, having someone not give a shit about me for once.”

“I can not give a lot of shits. In fact, there’s an infinite number of things I can give no shits about.”

“That’s what I love about you, Rhys. All the shits you don’t give.”

Rhys frowned. He looked at Bast. “When you say it like that, it sounds like I have constipation.”

“Oh, you finally figured it out,” Bast replied, chuckling under his breath.

Rhys shook his head. A pang of pain jolted into his skull, and he turned back to the task at hand rather than trade banter with Bast. As much as he enjoyed the chat, he was going to lose the furnace and the pot all at once if he kept distracting himself.

The metal melted at last. He abandoned the accordion and picked up a pair of tongs he’d found somewhere in the trash, snatching up the bowl out of the heat. He released his intent from the furnace, and the structure instantly collapsed, falling into the ashes. Carrying the bowl, he shooed Bast out of the way and rushed to the cauldron—only to stop himself at the last second. The cauldron’s broken edges, the sand, everything had impurities. If he poured it in now, it would always have impurities in the bond, rather than a perfect connection.

There was no time. Still holding the metal, he slapped a hand on the cauldron and pulled all its surface impurities into him. The impurities resisted him, but he simply didn’t

let them get away with it. They were impure, trash, and therefore they belonged to him. The black patina lifted off the surface. The gunk in the nooks and crannies of the crack rushed into his skin. His hand blackened, and he simply let it stay black rather than order them into his core; for this split second, it was better to leave them, finish the task at hand, then handle to impurities.

The impurities were gone. The damaged cauldron was cleaner than it had been in years. The time was now. He poured the molten metal into the hole in the cauldron, into the impression of the cauldron's other side in the sand. The metal cooled rapidly, settling into the gap in quick order. Rhys released his intent on the bowl, and it, too, shattered, raining down tiny bits of molten metal and shards of pottery onto the ground. He instead gripped the still-soft metal and enforced his will onto it. This metal was no longer several different cauldrons; it was now the wall of this cauldron, and it would merge into it.

To his surprise, the metal didn't resist him at all. The heat had washed away much of its intent, and what little remained was ambivalent to its final form. When it had been metal, it had been reminded of the other times it had been forged. Some pieces remembered being other things before they were a cauldron, while others had only ever been a cauldron, but remembered their time in the deep dark places of the earth, before they had been given form. Their intent had softened with their physical form, and the molten metal was ready to take on new form, new intent.

Interesting. Was this something true of all materials? If he personally worked them the traditional way as well as enforcing his intent onto them, did they become easier to enforce his intent upon? It was something to ponder for later. For now, Rhys simply impressed his vision onto the metal: a sturdy, solid wall, merged so smoothly into the existing cauldron that it was impossible to pick out, a single piece of metal with no gaps or weak points. No, even better: A patch stronger than the original, a fierce shield that repaired the cauldron so ferociously that the cauldron became the weak spot in comparison to the perfectly merged, perfectly forged patch.

The metals shifted according to his will. He wasn't a master blacksmith, but he didn't have to be. The metal itself knew what it needed to be. The different metals mingled together, sharing their strength freely amongst themselves. They merged into the cauldron's broken walls, warming the edges of the cauldron so they could melt it slightly and bond with it. Rhys reached out to the cauldron as well, calling upon its intent. The cauldron wanted to be whole, and he enhanced that intent, reaching out to the metal and connecting it to the cauldron's intent. The cauldron knew it had been weak there, and it was glad for the reinforcement, for something to finally plug the gaping hole where its weakness had been exploited by some long-forgotten potionmaking. The cauldron's intent wrapped the metal and told it what to become, how to merge with the cauldron, how to bend and shape to become a piece of the whole rather than a piece in of itself. The molten metal, all-but-intentless and given a vague intent from Rhys, willingly took on the cauldron's intent and adopted it as its own.

Trash Intent 9 > 10

Moreso than with the skills outside of his path, where levels merely ticked up, Rhys felt as though he'd overcome a barrier in breaking through from level 9 to level 10 of Trash Intent, as if this single level were a more significant advancement than levels 1 to 9 combined. He let out a slow breath, surprised. Was his new comprehension of Trash Intent that significant? But then, this had doubtlessly been a totally new technique of using intent, a complete departure from any previous use of his intent that had opened up new avenues to him. *Interesting. Something to keep in mind.*

The metal cooled. The inside of the cauldron was as smooth as the day it had been forged, not even a hint of a lip where the hole had been. Rhys stood the cauldron upright. It didn't look so neat on the other side. His sloppy sand-forging technique meant that the metal on the outside of the cauldron bulged a bit, and had a few scraggly trailings, but it was all visual deficits. He scanned the cauldron with his mana, and found it solid, as solid as any cauldron he'd ever encountered.

Rhys nodded to Bast. "Try it. What do you think?"

Bast laid his hand on the cauldron. His mana spread over it, and his brows shot up. "Wow. I didn't know you were so good at smithing."

"I'm not. This was my first attempt."

Bast stared at him in open shock.

Rhys waved his hand. "Don't be like that. It's a shit job I slapped together out of trash. Come on, this is only the start of the grand plan." He went to put the cauldron in his storage ring, only to get a refusal from the ring. It was too full.

He grimaced. *Oh, come on.* The storage ring was too small. If he had enough money, he should buy a bigger one. This one was precious, and he wasn't going to give it up; after all, it was trash. But trash being his path didn't mean he couldn't go buy himself a second, better storage ring for convenience.

"Where are we going next, then?"

Rhys pulled the remnants of the beam he'd used in the battle against Ernesto's students and set it gently to the side. A pile of thin sticks joined it, and then the left half of a woven chair, neatly sliced in two from top to bottom. He tried again, and this time, the cauldron vanished.

Bast stared at him, wide-eyed. He eyed the pile of mysterious objects, then slowly raised his brows at Rhys.

All business, Rhys totally ignored Bast's reaction. "We're headed to the merchants. We've got ingredients to buy."

"Back to potion-making? Alchemy is a valuable art, and there's lots of people who'd pay a killing for a healing potion at the right moment," Bast guessed.

"You're right, but no. My plans aren't so simple. We can fall back to that, but no... my real plans are greater."

"So what are we going to buy, then? Complicated alchemical ingredients are out, in that case."

"No. We need complicated alchemical ingredients, too. But most of all, we need something simpler. Baser. Something overlooked until this moment." Rhys's eyes glimmered. He smiled. "We're going to buy potatoes."

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

Chapter 68. Poh Tay Toes

Rhys traveled from one end of the merchants' district to the other, making a series of large purchases. He knew what would happen if he made these purchases; the prices would go up on everything he needed. The wise thing would be to purchase the materials slowly over a long time period, investing the bare minimum until he was making enough money to start making serious long term investments in mercantile companies, maybe even negotiate a long-term contract with one of the stabler merchants, which he would be able to recognize by then, thanks to his long contact with them.

However, he understood what he was doing. He was going to generate a fad, a flash in the pan. He needed all the potatoes and all the oil RIGHT NOW, and after this, probably not for a long time—or, at least, the fad would die down to the extent that he could handle it through smaller purchases, if he even wanted to bother with the stable sustain period after the initial get-rich-quick maneuver. Plus, with the tournament—the event at hand, where he could expose thousands of mages to his new product all at once in one mass market and sell everything he had in one fell swoop—just around the corner, he had no time to take it slow and do the wise thing.

So instead, he flashed the money he'd gotten selling herbs to Sorden like a trashy young master and bought up everything he needed in large quantities all at once, in the

hopes that, at the very least, the merchants wouldn't have time to raise their prices in the time it took him to move from one end of the plaza to the other side. Bast tailed him, hopping from tree to tree. At some point, perhaps called back to her post by his erratic behavior, Mouse reappeared, a development that Rhys silently mourned, but she did nothing to get in his way or prevent him from going through with his plan. She simply watched, her brows furrowed in silent confusion.

His storage ring was full, so the first thing he bought was another storage ring, this one specialized at holding a few types of bulk goods. It essentially had a few large bins inside of it, each of which he could fill up with a large amount of a single kind of good. As he wandered the plaza, he then filled those bins with his few simple ingredients: potatoes, cooking oil, and salt, plus a few herbs that he either wanted for potions, or wanted for refining his recipes. He also purchased a set of cooking knives and a whetstone for sharpening them, a cutting block, a sturdy table, and a very simple, large cauldron with no finery on it, nor feet, nor decorations around the rim. The rest he could make up with trash.

When he was done, he returned to the trash heap. The heap didn't smell nearly as bad as it had before, largely due to his efforts at cleaning the air. Mouse looked downright startled at the development. She turned slowly, sniffing the air, her eyes widening as she discovered mostly clean air. It made her look even more mouselike than she usually did, not that Rhys was going to point it out.

"Hey, Mouse. How'd things go with the library?" Rhys asked, as he started setting up his cauldrons.

"Er—er, the, the Schoolmaster uhm, told me not to waste his time, and that he knew what was going on, and had no complaints," she replied, clearly still baffled by the outcome.

"Oh, okay," Rhys said, unworried. He'd never been particularly worried about Az, since Az was far stronger than him and usually seemed to know what he was doing, but he was particularly unworried about the man now. He nodded at her. "Are you okay with that?"

Mouse trembled at the question, and Rhys knew he'd hit the nail on the head. She was clearly bothered by it, deeply perturbed. He would be too, if someone had just shown up at his library, vanished Az, and then Aquari had waved her hand and said it was all fine. If he didn't know Az, he probably would have been bothered in Mouse's behalf, even knowing nothing about her library. As it was, he wasn't that worried, since Az was too lazy to seriously harm anyone who hadn't specifically pissed him off, but given that Mouse didn't know Az, he understood her being worried.

Setting down the cauldron he'd been manipulating, he sighed and stood, dusting his hands off. "Listen, Mouse. You don't have to stand around and watch me set this up. It's fine. I'm going to be here this whole time, doing nothing but working on my cauldrons.

You can sit around and watch a fellow student make some boring potions, or you can go investigate the library and figure out what happened with your librarians.”

She stepped toward the exit, then hesitated. “You won’t leave?”

“No, no. I’m busy. Look at this.” He gestured at the cauldrons, the piles of potatoes, the cooking oil, and the trash. “I’ve got my hands full getting all this in working order before the trash taints it. You go do what you have to do, and I’ll be right here, busy on my setup.”

Mouse hesitated one more second, then ducked her head. “Thank you.” With that, she turned tail and ran off, hurrying back to the library.

The second she was out of sight, leaves rustled, and Bast descended from a nearby tree. “My, my. Who’d know Rhys developed a way with women while I was gone?”

“I did not. Come on down and help out, you lazy lout. I’ve got to get these cauldrons going.”

“Sure, but what are—” Bast cut off mid-sentence. His hand flashed out, faster than Rhys could track, and caught Rhys by the wrist. He turned Rhys’s hand over, exposing his blackened fingers and palm. Shocked, he stared, first at the black marks, then at Rhys.

“Oh, I forgot.” No wonder his hand had felt sluggish and a little clumsy. Rhys called the impurities into his core, sticking them to his trash star. The discoloration faded, and his hand returned to normal.

Bast wouldn’t let go of his wrist. He stared at Rhys. “It’s harming you. You shouldn’t spend so long in the trash. You’ll cut off your future.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m fine,” Rhys said. He yanked at Bast’s grip, trying to pull his hand free.

Bast tightened his grip. Between the two of them, he won when it came to grip strength. “You won’t. Impurities impede progress. If you have enough of them inside you to blacken your skin, you’re already—”

Rhys forcibly twisted his hand free and walked over to the trash. Looking Bast in the eye, he slapped his hand down on the pile and pulled trash into his core. Bast lunged, but too slow. Rhys had already reached critical mass. He ignited the trash star, and a wave of growth and mana rushed through him. Another tiny droplet of powerful mana collected in his core.

“What?” Bast muttered, startled. He put a hand on Rhys’s shoulder and scanned him, and his brows furrowed. “The impurities. They’re... gone?”

"It's my path. It makes sense to me, but I don't know that anyone else would understand," Rhys explained.

Bast stared at him. "Can you absorb impurities from people?"

"Huh? I can from rats... I guess I haven't tried people," Rhys allowed.

Bast offered his hand. Rhys took it and called out to the impurities inside of Bast. His mana couldn't enter Bast directly—there was something preventing that, some kind of barrier—but he could extend his influence over impurities inward, as long as he had direct contact with Bast's skin. Rhys reached out, scanning Bast for impurities.

He raised his brows, shocked. *Whoa.*

"Bad news?" Bast asked, watching his face.

"No... I've never seen a mage's impurities before. I was just startled," Rhys replied honestly. He didn't know if what he saw within Bast was good or bad, since he had no gauge. He himself wasn't much of a benchmark, since he was constantly loading up on impurities, igniting them, and refreshing himself, and it wasn't like he made a habit of going around scanning mages, but there were a startling quantity of impurities within Bast. Mostly small deposits, maybe as big as a grain of rice at the largest, and all of them made up of tiny impurities clustered together, but there were hundreds of those deposits, scattered all around Bast's body. Some of the impurities within the deposits he faintly recognized as coming from their hometown and the garbage pit there, some of them were herbally scented, and some of them simply seemed to exist without a source. All of them stirred, but resisted his call. Bast's mana instinctively protected them, recognizing them as a part of Bast, rather than foreign objects.

He couldn't see into Bast's core. Whatever wall prevented him from entering Bast's mana in the first place provided a powerful, nigh impenetrable barrier in the deepest part of Bast's mana, or in other words, his core. It made sense to Rhys; otherwise, any old mage could touch another mage and influence their core, but at the same time, he sensed that Bast didn't want him to see within; that Bast was deliberately preventing him from entering his core. He twisted his lips.

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"You're resisting me. Stop fighting and give in."

"I'm not resisting you."

Rhys opened his eyes and gave him a look. "Your mana is. Try to relax. Breathe deeply. Push them out."

Bast considered for a moment, then closed his eyes and focused, circulating his breath and mana. The impurities shifted, but still didn't come to Rhys. "Mmm... it's harder than I thought."

As he spoke, he slowed his heart rate and breathing, entering a deeper state of meditation. In this state, his mana slipped away from the impurities as Bast finally recognized them as foreign objects and expelled them. Rhys acted in concert, calling the impurities toward himself as Bast released his grip on them. One surface-level herb-scented impurity lifted up, wiggling free of Bast's mana. Rhys pulled on it, accelerating its exit, and it flew toward him. Another set of the surface-level impurities began to come free, and Rhys called more powerfully, willing them his way. One at a time, pulling the rice-grain deposits free of Bast's body.

"Deep breath. I can feel them... they're coming my way."

"I'm getting the hang of it. Hold on."

One after another, the surface-level impurity deposits flew free of Bast and crossed into Rhys's body. When he had all the surface-level ones, he dove deeper, cutting surgical paths through Bast's mana to reach the deeper ones and leave minimum damage behind. Bast tightened his grip on Rhys's hand, his face scrunching in pain, but said nothing, putting up with the pain. Better to be free of impurities and take a little pain now, rather than bear the impurities forever for being unable to take a little pain.

At last, the final set of impurities that Rhys could reach flowed into his body. He turned, gazing at Bast's core. He could feel impurities within it, but that was all. It didn't feel dangerous, to him or Bast, at least not immediately, but for a mage that wasn't himself, impurities were always bad. He gently touched Bast's core. "There's impurities in here, but you aren't letting me in."

"No."

"No? You don't want me to clean them?" Rhys asked.

Bast pulled away. Rhys had just enough time to retreat back into himself before the connection broke. "I don't want you to see that."

"See what? Your core?" Rhys asked, clueless. Was there something about the core that he didn't understand? He looked at his all the time and never saw anything.

"Cores are too delicate. You're an amateur at doing this. Do you know how much it hurt?" Bast asked, the usual laughter in his voice.

"Uh... not too much?" Rhys guessed hopefully.

"A lot. It hurt a lot. You were damaging my mana passages, too. Not too much for me to heal, but enough that if it wasn't a huge advancement for me, I would have stopped you. I trust you, Rhys, but I'm not going to let you poke around in my core and risk you mangling it as your first-try guinea pig. You know a core is the center of a mage's power, right? If it's broken, or ruined, or pierced, it can either limit your potential... or completely end your future as a mage."

"I know," Rhys said. He wasn't stupid. He'd read enough manuals to figure that out. "Alright, alright, I get it. I won't play around with your core until I figure out how to safely extract impurities from cores. Agreed?" He offered his hand.

Bast grinned and took it. "Deal."

Rhys shook his hand and stepped back, but the sensation that Bast had deliberately concealed something from him didn't fade. There was something about Bast's core that he didn't want Rhys to see. It might have been as innocuous as a secret sword technique that left a permanent mark upon one's core, or a spell technique the Sword Saint had taught him that left his core changed, that he didn't want Rhys revealing to the world, but somehow, Rhys felt like it wasn't something so positive. There was something he was concealing from Rhys deliberately, something he was afraid of Rhys seeing.

A curse, maybe? He peered at his own core. Aside from the next trash star already accumulating within it, he had two curses circling his core; one, the frozen hands that dragged the opponent into the earth, and the other, a single bone from the horse and rider he'd fought in the depths of the pit. He'd tried to activate that back on his home peak, but it had refused to answer his call. Whether he didn't have enough bones, or hadn't collected enough curse power, he couldn't say, but now that he was here in the enemy's territory, he couldn't even consider collecting curse power to activate either of the curses.

Still, curses had a distinctive chilling, creeping sensation, like fingertips on the back of one's neck in a dark alley at night. He hadn't sensed anything like that from Bast. No, instinctively, he felt that it wasn't a curse that afflicted Bast, but something else. Something he was ashamed of, perhaps...?

Ah, well. If it was a curse, he'd already peeled one off of Walter's core. When Bast was willing to give him a look, he'd be able to deal with it easily enough. If it was something else, then he'd do his best to help his friend, whenever his friend was ready to show him. He shouldn't worry about it too much. Everyone had secrets, whether they were shameful or merely embarrassing, and who knew? Maybe Bast was simply too embarrassed, or too wary, to show him his core. It was the innermost part of a mage's power. Bast was right; if he interfered with the core in any way, he risked permanently harming or even destroying Bast's magehood. He would never do such a thing—not even risk it—but hell, would he allow a first-time amateur to poke around at his core and try to figure out how to extract the impurities from it? Hell no! Not that he'd want such a

thing in the first place, but even assuming he did, it was like letting your neighbor play brain surgeon. There was a reason neurosurgeons practiced for decades before they were set loose upon the populace, and in this world, messing with someone else's core was just as risky—if not more risky—than brain surgery.

No, Bast's complaint was completely valid. Honestly, if not for the sticky feeling at the back of his mind that something wasn't quite right, he wouldn't have doubted Bast's excuse at all.

As Rhys considered all this, Bast lowered himself into a stretch, extending his left leg, then his right leg. He jumped in place a few times, then set off at a run, powering back nearly as soon as he'd left. He drew his sword and slashed at the air a few times, marveling at his own speed and precision, then laughed aloud. "Rhys, this is insane."

"Huh? Is it?" Rhys asked, startled out of his contemplation.

"You have no idea. All these impurities have been subtly holding me back for years. I've been working on expelling them, but it's a long, slow process. You just accelerated decades' worth of effort into a handful of seconds. I could have spent years and years on trying to expel these! And look!" He struck with his sword, a blaze of robes and shining steel. "I've been struggling with that twist for months because my wrist had a subtle weakness in the bones, where impurities made my wrist click and weaken at that particular angle. Now, it's no problem!"

"Happy to help." Rhys smiled to see his friend so eager and excited. He hadn't been able to see the finer points of the sword strike at all, let alone appreciate the mysteries and subtleties to the specific ways the sword twisted, but if Bast thought it was a huge improvement, then he was happy to hear it.

"Forget your plan. You should do this for everyone at the tournament! They'd pay hand-over-fist for this treatment!" Bast enthused, excited.

"Yeah, and then what? I'm fighting in the tournament, in case you forgot," Rhys pointed out. He didn't mind collecting everyone's impurities, but the gains he could make from that were inferior to the gains Bast had made from his actions. True, maybe if he absorbed everyone's impurities, he could overcome the boost he gave his opponents, but... boosting his opponents before battle sounded like a foolish move to him. He wasn't in the business of throwing, thank you very much. He needed all the advantages he could get, not to give his opponents additional advantages. 'I'll wait here while you recover your strength so I can battle you at your full power!'—sure, he enjoyed those lines, and the overbearing attitudes of the characters that could utter them, but he wasn't at that level yet. He was still in the scratching-and-clawing for every bit of strength he could muster level, where giving his opponents a moment of rest or recovering their impurities and giving them an advantage might mean he lost not just the battle, but his life.

“Oh,” Bast said, his excitement suddenly subdued. He looked at his sword, then, at Rhys, an apology on his face. “I shouldn’t have asked you to remove my impurities. I—”

“No, no. Don’t worry about it. We’re friends, first off, and secondly, any battle between us is your win, whether you have impurities or not.” Rhys wasn’t willing to fight dirty against Bast the way he was against other opponents; he respected Bast too much. As a result, he didn’t even have to think about who might win the fight between them. When it came to a clean fight, sword against Rhys’s trash skills, Bast won every time. Removing Bast’s impurities had moved the needle from 100% chance of victory to 110% chance of victory—in other words, it had changed nothing.

“Well... that’s true,” Bast said, breaking out into a grin.

Rhys shook his head at him. “Besides, think about it. *You* won’t let me touch your core. What competitor is going to let me enter their body and play with their mana passages right before the battle? Sure, if you advertise for me as the Sword Saint’s apprentice and vouch for my skills, I’ll probably get a few patrons, but not enough for their gains and my gains to be even.”

Inherently, taking impurities out of other mages gave Rhys little, and the other mages much. True, he got the super-dense impurities he needed to ignite the heart of a trash star, but he could get those from the rats if he needed to. And the amount of impurities he got from Bast was enough to ignite one, maybe two trash stars. That would improve him, he had no doubt about that, but it was a flash-in-the-pan improvement compared to Bast’s vast upgrade. For this to be worth it for him, he’d have to be able to collect the impurities from almost every mage in the tournament. Then he’d almost certainly be able to improve enough to be equal or greater to the improvement each mage got from his clearing their impurities. Any less than that, though, and it was a losing proposition.

“That’s fair,” Bast allowed. He nodded at Rhys. “Still, don’t dismiss this skill. When the tournament is over, it’s still a great way for you to make money. And as long as you choose the right clients, you should have a built-in protective net.”

“It’s true. I won’t forget it, but it isn’t what I need to do now,” Rhys agreed. Bast was right. It was a great moneymaking technique... as long as he chose the right people to target, so that once he cleared their impurities, they saw it as owing him a debt of gratitude rather than something that made him a target of kidnapping.

He clapped his hands and stepped toward his equipment. “Enough with all that nonsense!”

“Nonsense? You just revolutionized expelling impurities,” Bast pointed out.

“It’s time for the real deal. The true money-making goldmine of our era. It’s time... to make potato chips!”

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

Chapter 69. Potato Chips

“Make... what?” Bast asked, lost.

Rhys handed him a knife. “Do as I do. You’ll figure it out.”

“*Potatoes* are going to make us rich?”

“I know, right? I was startled, too,” Rhys said. Startled that they had potatoes, anyways. In his world, those were New World foods, relegated to the far-flung American continent. But why not? Although he’d recognized lots of the foods, there were still lots of roots, herbs, and flowers he didn’t recognize, a great variety more than even what he’d been aware of in his world. It was as if the mountains they lived in were cold-weather rainforests, so diverse were the plants that grew upon them. With such a diversity of plants at their fingertips, why not a potato? Or at least, a starchy root tuber that was roughly equivalent in starch content and flavor to a potato.

Getting rich with potato chips was a bit far-flung, even Rhys knew that. But that was why his ambition didn’t stop at mere potato chips. After all, potato chips were junk food. And what was junk, but another word for trash?

Mages sought many things, but primarily mana, techniques, and a path. With ordinary humans, potato chips in their most processed, most junky form, provided flavor, but, thanks to complicated processing techniques, almost no fullness. What Rhys wanted to replicate wasn’t merely the technique of frying a thin slice of potato in oil. No, anyone could do that. His ambition wasn’t so shallow. What he wanted, was to replicate that addictive quality in ordinary humans—the delicious flavor plus no fullness—but for mages.

For mages, what would be the equivalent to flavor plus no fullness? Well, flavor was the same. He had seen mages eat, and there were enough merchants selling foodstuffs and stall food that he knew they were motivated by good food, just the same as humans. But the fullness was the missing factor. Mages didn’t need to eat, so food didn’t connect to their satisfaction sensors the same as it did for humans. They would either eat unendingly, or eat a small amount for flavor and no more, since they didn’t need to eat for survival. Targeting not feeling full was pointless, because that wasn’t part of the condition for mages.

No. Instead, he had to look at what mages sought. Mana. Techniques. A path. Junk food was trash; he could imbue it with the hints of a path (namely, his path), such that

the chips would seem to have depth and mysteries to them, but would not be comprehensible to anyone except for himself, or anyone else who could understand the Path of Trash, which... he doubted existed. Junk food was trash, so it was easy for him to impress mana into them. Just tiny slivers, tiny flickers so small that the mages wouldn't even be sure where the mana was coming from. He didn't want them to actually realize that the chips were giving them mana, after all. No, he wanted them to feel good when they ate the chips, but not realize why, and simply associate the chips with feeling good rather than with getting mana. If they knew the chips were giving them mana, they'd be disappointed in the amount of mana, or simply realize that they were wasting their time. Better for it to be a mysterious happy feeling they only got when they ate Rhys's chips, that was associated with the chips and nothing else.

As for imbuing the chips with techniques... he hadn't figured that part out yet. But hey, potato chips only fulfilled humans' desire to eat tasty food, they didn't fulfill their desire to create or grow as people or enrich their lives. He'd definitely experienced that for himself. If potato chips could have fulfilled his entire life, he would have been the happiest man on his old planet. He didn't need to fulfill everything that mages wanted in order to craft an addictive treat, he just needed to trigger enough pleasure centers in the mages' brains to get them to keep buying potato chips.

After all, that was the essence of junk food. Not being delicious, or providing nutrition—*ha!*—but simply tricking human psychology into bending over backwards to pick up more of it, despite offering no benefits whatsoever. *That* was what Rhys sought to emulate. *That* was what was going to make him rich. If he could crack that code for mages, he'd be swimming in gold.

Ultimately, the potato chip itself was immaterial, compared to figuring out how to make junk food for mages. Once he figured out the addictive formula, he could apply it to anything. Pure-sugar candies. Delicious chicken nuggets. Chocolate, pretzels, french fries and hamburgers. Anything he could use to trigger the same fulfillment in mages that junk food did in mortals was valid as a target to him; it was just that potatoes were available, and potato chips relatively easy to make without industrial processing materials. If he nailed this, the cost-to-value ratio would be absolutely insane, and then he could look at upgrading to even better junk food, like candies and chocolates.

Of course, a nice coincidental side effect of this was that he would have potato chips and maybe, eventually, chocolate in this world, but his real objective was gold. Those were merely happy coincidences. Or, in mage terms, as he'd often seen in the manuals he sped-read, the harmonious byproduct of working toward a virtuous goal.

Bast lifted his hand. "Wait, wait, wait. What do you mean, you were shocked? And how are they going to make us rich?"

Rhys opened his mouth to begin, and felt the exact emotion absolute existence must have felt when it had said, 'It's best if I just show you.' How could he explain potato chips to someone who'd never had any junk food, let alone a potato chip? How could he explain

the pure joy that was a potato, sliced thin and quickfried in oil, then sprinkled with salt? The addictive quality of cracking open a fresh bag to find those golden discs staring back at you, sucking down chip after chip, until your fingers were salty and oily and the bag crinkled with empty sadness, only to dip a finger into the bag and lick the last of the chip crumbles and salt off your fingertip?

Rhys turned and found all the raw ingredients lying there, waiting for him. The potatoes. The knives. The oil. The salt. Even the newly-repaired cauldron, ready to be heated and for potatoes to be fried within. So he turned to Bast and said, "It's best if I just show you."

"Sure," Bast said, gesturing.

Rhys searched through the trash until he found a large bowl, only a little dented. Using his Tier 2 strength, he pushed the dent back out, then drew the impurities off the bowl and into his core. Down to the riverside, where he washed the bowl under the approving eye of the local raccoon, then filled it with fresh water, once more drawing the impurities out to ensure it was clean. He retreated to Bast's side and set the bowl in the shade. "Do you have any ice techniques? It's cold enough that it should work, but a little ice wouldn't—"

Bast drew his sword. He took a breath, then slashed out. A thin film of ice formed on the surface of the water, and cold air sent Rhys's hair into a flurry.

"—go amiss, thank you, Bast." Rhys punched the ice into the water, then turned to the potatoes. They, too, were covered in impurities and dirt, but that was all trash, as far as Rhys was concerned. He sucked them into his core and pulled a good, strong, flat board from his core. He'd already cleaned it, having planned to use it as a shield, or maybe a weapon, since it had once been a piece of a much larger (but not too large to manifest) wooden wall, but it would do for this. He set the potatoes on the board and drew one of the knives.

Bast delicately plucked the knife from his hand. "How thin do you want it?"

Right. He's a sword-based martial artist. Why was I bothering? "A little thicker than paper... think parchment."

Bast nodded. The knife flashed, and perfect potato chips fell to the board.

Rhys picked them up and set them in the cold water. He swirled them a bit, letting the cold water do its thing and lift the surface starch off the potatoes. As soon as the starch lifted away, Rhys called it into his core. It was trash, after all. He was only going to throw it away. And if he drew the starch out of the water, the cold water, not yet saturated with starch, was better at drawing further starch out of the potatoes.

With this accelerated process, the potatoes were soon ready to fry. He laid out a particularly fluffy piece of cloth and set the newly de-starched chips atop it to dry. Turning to the cauldron, he poured the cooking oil in, letting just enough pool at the bottom, and set some trash underneath it. With his usual method, he lit the trash, then stood nearby, constantly pulling the impure smoke into himself rather than let it taint the oil. He lacked a thermometer, but his senses as a mage were far more finely tuned than they had been as a mere mortal, and when the oil began to bubble, he knew it was time. He grabbed the dried chips and tossed them in, then realized: *I have nothing to take them out with.*

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“Uh oh,” Rhys muttered.

“What?” Bast asked.

“I forgot to find something to remove the chips. Any kind of wire basket or strainer or spatula will do, I just—I forgot to find it,” Rhys said, on the verge of panic. The chips didn’t need to fry for long. They were probably already good to go, but he had nothing to remove them with.

Bast gave him a look. “Can’t you remove them with magic?”

“With what spell?”

“Don’t all you mages know a simple manipulation spell for small objects like that?”

“Sure, for trash! But these are—” Rhys stopped himself mid-sentence. Yes, potato chips were delicious enough to qualify as a nationally celebrated food, but were they trash? Everyone agreed—potato chips were junk food. He highly valued them, worshipped them, even, but he *loved* trash, so of course he did! No, no, that was right. Potato chips—were trash!

“Bast, you’re so right,” he finished. He turned back to the pot and gestured, using Trash Manipulation, and the potato chips rose out of the bubbling oil, gleaming perfect golden brown in the sunlight. Back they went onto the fluffy fabric to dry from the oil. When they dried, Rhys drew up the cauldron he’d bought—the larger one—and put the chips and some salt in the very bottom, where he gently swirled them around until the salt evenly coated the chips. Only then did he finally taste one.

Sublime. Perfection. His eyes closed as ecstasy rushed over him. Oh, they were a bit rustic, and there was still something missing, something that wasn’t quite as he remembered, not to mention that he hadn’t yet managed to fill them with mana or otherwise trigger mage-specific, instead of mortal-specific, pleasure centers—but they were potato chips, and they were *delicious*.

“Let me have one.” Bast pushed his way in and took a chip. He crunched it down, then raised his brows. “Huh.”

“Right?” Rhys said.

“It’s not pissing-gold good, but it is good. Sell that at the tournament for a markup, and you’re in business,” Bast said, already guessing Rhys’s next steps.

Rhys wagged his finger. “Not yet. This is but the basest, meanest form of the potato chip. I intend to make true junk food—to transform this trashy food into something so delicious, so addictive, that my victims—ahem, customers—can’t help but come back time and time again for more. Are you in?”

Bast shook his head. “If anyone can do it, it’s you. Show me how. What’s our next step?”

“Figuring out how to imbue these potatoes with mana. And I have a pretty good idea of how.” Rhys turned toward the pile of organic trash, sitting there waiting to be turned into mana-rich compost. He grinned.

“How?” Bast asked.

Stepping forward, Rhys knelt and pressed his hand into the trash, absorbing a large chunk of it. Bast watched with a distant kind of concerned alarm. When the trash star was ready to ignite, Rhys walked over to the compost. He took a deep breath. All this time, he’d channeled the trash star’s power inward, to strengthening and refreshing his own body—and why wouldn’t he? He needed a *lot* of mana to grow to Tier 3, and even the trash stars were but a drop in the bucket. If he didn’t use the trash stars maximally to empower himself, he could only dream of Tier 3.

But this was important. Important enough to divert some of the mana from his precious trash for. So, for the first time, he focused inward as he activated the trash star. Clutching the resulting mana, he pushed it outward and into the compost—the bacteria, worms, and other micro- and macro-organisms that lived in the food and slowly broke it down into rich compost. Just as it had before, his mana sped up the process, but his mana was now far more dense and far stronger than it had been the first time. Before their eyes, the pile of organic trash collapsed in on itself. A bubble of gas belched out of the rapidly decomposing materials, the pile rising, then falling with the enormity of the gas.

Whu-oh. It was decaying too fast, too far. If he did nothing, he’d end up with trash so fully digested that it became nothing but dust on the wind, as the super-charged organisms devoured, and devoured, and devoured. This wasn’t going to end up as rich compost, but sad and empty depleted dirt! Rhys ran into the trash, grabbing all the food and other organic materials he could find. He tossed them directly into the pile, providing fresh fuel for the organisms to break down. The second the trashed food and

scraps touched the pile, they instantly decayed, going through weeks' worth of breakdown in the space of seconds. It was like watching a timelapse video, but in real time. The food landed, fell to pieces, blackened, and became dirt in instants.

"Over there, there's a big dump from the cafeteria," Bast called, directing Rhys from below.

"There's a cafeteria?" Rhys muttered. He scrambled over where Bast directed and dug his hands into wet, cold noodles, tossing them by the handful into the rapidly decomposing pile. That wasn't fast enough, so he grabbed a whole armload and tossed it into the decaying lump. Armload by armload, he tossed the cold, slowly-rotting food into his rapidly-rotting pile. Bits of sticky and dried food stuck to his robes, but he kept going anyways. If he was going to become the ultimate trash, he had to absorb the trash, dwell in the trash, become the trash, be covered by filth and soaked in trash. He couldn't hold back because he might get a little bit dirty. If he was going to become ultimate trash, and he held back because he might get trash on him, he wouldn't get very far.

The cold and squishy texture was horrifying, and the noodles sunk in between his fingers. Mysterious, half-rotten food gave way when he gripped it, his hands breaking through a hard shell to reach a soft, cold but gooey inside, and Rhys barely suppressed a shudder. *Don't think about it don't think about it—*

"Gross," Bast commented from the ground.

"Oh, shut up." He tossed the armload onto the pile and kept going.

Even with tossing fresh fuel on the decomposition, he still couldn't keep pace with the enhanced process. Rhys wrinkled his nose. He extended his hand, activating Trash Manipulation to call trash to him, but only organic trash. Instantly, the skill strained. It shuddered, then broke—or rather, opened up. All the trash appeared before Rhys, all of it ready to be called. He couldn't see everything about the trash, but he could sense certain things about the trash. Hardness, strength, the mana held within. He closed his eyes, attuning himself to the trash. His awareness expanded, and the difference in the types of trash opened up before him.

"Rhys? It's gonna eat itself," Bast warned him.

He reached out to the trash pile and scanned it. The fresh set of rotten food melted away, but he got a sense for it before it went. Volatile, full of organic particles and gas, ready to decay, in fact, already decaying. That was what he had to look for.

Then... everything like that, let's pull it to me! Rhys reached out and grabbed, yanking the trash with that signature toward him.

A great lump of trash welled up out of the garbage near where he'd been digging out cafeteria food, the food decayed beyond recognizability, but not beyond the stage of compost. Rhys threw that into the decay and reached out further, further. Another pile opened up higher on the trash, deep and old, full of mana and trash potential. Eyes still shut in intense concentration, Rhys gripped it and pulled it, too, toward him. It stuck, moving slowly, so he put more power into it, yanking with all his might.

From below, Bast watched the pile shake. It shuddered. Bits of trash shook off the pile, tumbling down past Rhys. High above Rhys, a broken dresser fell out of the shifting pile, rolling head-over-end toward him. Lost in his technique, Rhys stood in its path, unmoving.

Bast narrowed his eyes. His sword flickered, flashing silver for but a moment before it vanished back into its sheath. The dresser tumbled one more rotation, then split into two, the two halves falling harmlessly on either side of Rhys.

"Did something happen?" Rhys asked, momentarily distracted.

"No. Keep going."

Rhys turned his attention back to the great lump of organic garbage under the pile. He strained, pulling with all his strength and all his mana. His veins stood out on his face and limbs, and his eyes glowed faintly under his closed lids. From out of the depths of the garbage rose a great lump of half-rotten food, stinking, reeking, and dripping, trailing a length of tangled roots, noodles, and other garbage behind it. His hands trembled. The weight of the garbage pressed against his body as though he himself lifted the trash. He gritted his teeth and pushed, putting all his mana into it—but it wasn't enough. His mana passages ruptured, unable to bear the load. His control trembled, on the verge of breaking.

No. I refuse! Rhys pushed his foot down and absorbed the garbage around him into his core. Thanks to him absorbing the condensed impurities from Bast, the rats, and everything else, he still had plenty of fuel for the heart of the trash stars. One after another, he ignited them, putting all that power into strengthening his own body and mana passages so that he could keep lifting the organic garbage. It held. Barely, but it held. He rotated, taking the garbage with it, then dropped it into the rotting pile. At last, panting, drenched in his own sweat, Rhys opened his eyes.

The hypercharged compost pile eagerly devoured fresh fuel. The already half-rotten organic waste quickly blackened, transforming into rich compost, and the hypercharged organisms sped upward, devouring the whole lump. When they reached the top, they finally slowed, back down to the speed Rhys was used to, then even slower, until it finally slowed to a halt.

Rhys wiped his brow. "Phew."

Bast stared at the pile of compost, then chuckled under his breath and glanced at Rhys. “Think we have enough?”

Rhys looked it up and down as well. The compost towered over him, easily ten, no, fifteen feet tall, and about as wide. He laughed. “I think we might.”

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

Chapter 70. Growing Potatoes

With compost and potato scraps (from his making of the potato chips) both secured, Rhys could now turn to the next step of his formula: super-charging the chips to make them not just delicious, but also dangerously addictive. Delicious was good. Delicious was a start. It would make him a popular mom and pop type shop. But delicious wasn’t the extent of his ambitions. He wanted that addictive, trashy content that could capture the hearts of the entire world. That truly mid, inoffensive yet tasty, neutral yet deep flavor that could get millions to all agree that yes, this was delicious, that yes, this was worth buying over and over again. He wasn’t trying to make the most delicious, standout, perfect potato chip, because that relied on his taste, and the tastes of other mages. What he wanted to make, was that processed, engineered, studied, perfect flavor, that was no one’s favorite, but which everyone wouldn’t mind finding on their plate. *That* potato chip.

He couldn’t merely match the flavor and texture. Mages weren’t food-motivated, since they didn’t need to eat. If he made the perfect potato chip exactly according to his world’s recipe, he wouldn’t generate the world-wrapping phenomenon that potato chips were back in his world. He needed something more. Something that would bring mages back again and again, something they craved.

Mana. Techniques. Enlightenment.

He hadn’t yet figured out how to imbue the second two into potatoes, but he knew how to get the first one done, so, with aplomb, Rhys got to work setting up a field to grow the potatoes in. The earth around the trash heap was soaked in impurities, but it was a simple effort to remove them, and once he did, he found himself facing unworked, soft earth, lush and ready to take crops. He took the potato cuttings, all the eyes and other bits not fit for human consumption, and pushed mana into them. As soon as they started to sprout, he placed them into the earth and heaped compost on top. Mana to push them to grow faster and compost to feed the potatoes as they grew, sprouting and sending forth leaves, stretching roots into the earth, so that they had plenty of nutrients to grow big and strong—and more importantly, create mana-dense potatoes.

The cuttings from the few potatoes he'd used to make chips for Bast weren't nearly enough to start the industrial-scale farm he desired, but luckily, some of the potatoes he'd bought at the market had sprouted or were on the verge thereof, so he cut them up, taking care to separate each sprouting eye, and added them to the garden. He ran laps to the trash pile at first to absorb trash, form a trash star, then run back over to the potato garden to feed them the trash star's mana, but then realized that he was wasting powerful potential training opportunities. Instead of running laps, he stood still and used Trash Manipulation to call trash to him, absorbed it into himself, and ignited trash stars, funneling most of the mana into growing his potatoes. Not all of it, of course. Some he still fed into himself, steadily strengthening his body, enlarging his passages, and making everything yet more durable and straight-lined, so that he could maximize absorbing mana, then transferring it into the potatoes.

His core filled with a few more drops of that next-tier pure mana. Experimentally, he poked at it, but whatever it was, he struggled to use it yet. Maybe he was too low tier, or maybe his body was simply too trash to utilize the mana properly, but whatever the case, it simply didn't respond to his manipulations the way normal mana did.

Under his ministrations, the potato plants grew from sprouts to leafy green shrubs in the space of a few hours. Rhys knelt and sent a pulse of mana into the earth, trying to sense the potatoes within. Potato-shaped lumps of mana answered his call, exactly as he'd hoped.

Rhys grinned. Right now, they were dense lumps of mana, but once he cut them into tiny thin sheets and fried them, they would give that exact sensation he wanted—that ephemeral hint of mana that came and passed without ever truly adding anything, but simply giving that taste of satisfaction without ever actually fulfilling it—yes, that was the ideal sensation for a potato chip!

"We're ready for the second test," Rhys declared, sticking his hand into the earth to draw forth a freshly-grown mana-imbued potato.

"Test?" Bast lowered his sword. The trees near him were scarred with fresh sword marks, and his robes hung around his waist, his body sweaty from exertion.

Rhys tossed him the potato. "Chop 'er up, and I'll get to frying. I need to get it exactly perfect."

"I thought it was already pretty good," Bast commented, catching the potato out of the air.

"Nah. World domination doesn't start from 'pretty good.' We need *perfect*," Rhys stressed.

"You're gonna dominate the world through fried potatoes?"

“Seems like a good enough place to start. Hell, it’s been done before.”

“By who? Which ancient hero dominated the world through potatoes? They never taught me about them,” Bast said, as he crossed to the carving board.

“The ancient sage Ronald Mac Donald,” Rhys said wisely, nodding.

“Never heard of him.”

Rhys drew himself to his full height and puffed out his chest. “You wouldn’t have. It’s only because I decoded the hidden ancient texts that I know of this secret sage’s existence. They tried to wipe him from the annals of history, but this scholar wouldn’t give up. I found the tails of his brightly-colored coat hidden in tomes, the mark of his clown shoes hidden in ancient paintings, the specter of his painted face lingering in scrolls. And from that, I decoded the truth.”

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“Uh huh.” Recognizing Rhys’s spouting-bullshit tone, Bast ignored him and got to chopping.

“The truth... about fried potatoes. Actually, there’s another form-factor of fried potato I want to try, but let’s focus on potato chips first. Fries are a yet more mysterious art form, one that requires more than potato and salt to master.” After all, the junkiest of junk food fries came with strange coatings full of weird ingredients and chemicals even Rhys wasn’t sure he could recall, whereas the ultimate potato chip, the one he sought to emulate, had three ingredients: potato, salt, vegetable oil. He wasn’t so naive to think that the process was simpler, or that the potato chip’s true nature was any less esoteric; no, he understood that potato chips were highly processed and treated to ensure they gave that exact addictive crunch every time. However, the simplicity of the materials made it easier for him to purchase them in quantities.

The fact that something so highly processed could have such a misleadingly short list of ingredients, too, was alluring to Rhys. Something about that spoke to his soul. The simplicity, yet complexity. The ultimate ease of frying a thin strip of potato; the utter complexity of turning that potato strip into a preprocessed nightmare snack. To achieve such a high goal with such simple ingredients was indeed worth lauding, and it was that which he sought to emulate. Highly processed ingredients would be hard to come by in this world, without him personally processing them. If he could achieve junk food from relatively simple ingredients, through imbuing the food with mana instead of adding strange chemical additives, then he won in many ways.

Once he mastered the process of turning food into junk food via mana, then he could extend his purview beyond mere potato chips to adapting more complex materials like potato fries, by merely manipulating them with mana rather than searching out

impossible-to-find or hard-to-make ingredients. After all, if he had to pay out the nose or search high and low for ingredients, this was no longer junk food, but alchemy, and he'd have to raise his own prices accordingly. He didn't aspire to be a great alchemist, though. He aspired to the heights of the junk food masters, of the Kings of Burgers, the Queens of Dairy, the Donalds of Mac Ronald... in other words, fast food. A cheap price, a mediocre product, and an addictive quality that the consumer could never get enough of, no matter how mediocre it was—that was the path he sought with his food.

But first, the perfect potato chip. He could save his grand ambitions for after his initial success.

Working in tandem, Rhys and Bast made their second batch of potato chips. Rhys tossed them in salt, then offered Bast a handful. Bast dutifully plucked one out of Rhys's hand, then paused and reached for a second one. He frowned. "They're good, but..." Almost without thinking, he reached for a third. "Why can't I stop eating them?"

Rhys pumped his fist. "That's it! We've done it, Bast. This is how we make our millions. We sell these potato chips to people attending the tournament, and—"

Bast lifted his hand. "Not to rain on your parade, but we'll be participating in the tournament, no?"

"Not at the same time. And if we are, we can always close the shop for a little while. It's not like all the customers will turn tail if we're closed for a few minutes, and hell, most people will be watching the matches during the matches, not out buying potato chips. We'll have to do a bit of double-duty, but—"

"That's not what I mean. Isn't it the same problem you brought up earlier? No one's going to buy mysterious food or potions—anything they put in their bodies—from a pair of contestants. It'll look like an obvious sabotage attempt. Even if we aren't sabotaging—"

"And we aren't," Rhys interjected.

Bast nodded, accepting his point. "—and we're not, it'll still look suspicious. We might get a few sales from those seeking favor with the Sword Saint, or those who don't care, but we'll be suppressing our potential revenue by our very presence."

"I hear you, and I've got a plan."

"We're hiring people to run the shop?" Bast guessed.

Rhys gave him a look. "And handing our recipe out to just anyone? There's going to immediately be imitators. We need to stay ahead of the game, Bast. This kind of foolish thinking would get us no money, but simply immediately bought out and taken advantage of."

Bast shook his head and backed away a step. “Fine, fine. This is why you’re the boss. You think of these things. So... what *is* our plan?”

Rhys gave him a devilish grin. “You’re not going to like it.”

“I don’t like it already,” Bast said, eyeing up Rhys’s expression.

Rhys stood on his tiptoes and whispered in Bast’s ear.

Bast narrowed his eyes at Rhys. “For me, too? I can see it for you, but me...”

“You’re even more ideally suited to it than I am! We need something to catch people’s eye. I’m small, but you? You’re huge. You’ll be like a gigantic billboard, displaying our wares to the world around!”

“Looking like a pig in a clown suit,” Bast grumbled.

“And who wouldn’t pay to see a pig in a clown suit? Come on, Bast. You know it’s a good idea. Trust me. When I’m done with you, you’ll look like a completely different person.”

“Gods, I hope so. Master would have my head if he found out,” Bast muttered.

Rhys sighed. He knew it would be a hard sell, but it really was a great idea. He knew what sold, and this would definitely get their potato chips to fly off the shelves. He patted Bast’s shoulder reassuringly. “Look—how about we do a test run? I’ll get all the materials and show you how you look once I work my magic. If you still feel like a pig in a clown suit, then I’ll graciously let you bow out. But give it a try, first. See how different you look before you naysay it outright. How’s that sound?”

“I don’t know that I can possibly look different enough,” Bast muttered under his breath.

“Trust me. When I’m done with you, you’ll look so fabulous, your own mother wouldn’t recognize you!” *Or maybe that was just because she was so ashamed of me she didn’t want to acknowledge me as her son anymore.* Hiding his dark past behind a gleaming smile, Rhys turned the spotlight on Bast. “Please?”

Begrudgingly, Bast nodded. “If I look horrible, or like myself, I’m not doing it.”

“Of course, of course.” Rhys couldn’t help but smile, even if he knew he should really hide his elation. He patted Bast’s shoulder again. “When I’m done with you, you’re going to look *amazing*.”

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

