

Chapter 71. Great Tracts of Land

By the time Mouse returned, Bast was long gone, and Rhys's potato farm was well under way. It wasn't yet time to set up the stand, so he was mostly farming the potatoes in preparation. He spent the rest of the day doing that, then, when the rats scurried up with tiny bits of trashure—most of them not particularly useful—reassigned them to guard his potatoes from their unenlightened brethren. The raccoon sauntered over and volunteered to guard as well, in return for a fresh absorption of its impurities. Rhys was happy to comply, and so the raccoon became the commander of his rat troops, ordering them left, right, and center in order to properly farm and guard the potatoes.

When he saw the critters heaping fresh compost on the plants, and even digging holes to plant more potatoes, Rhys nodded and left the farm in their capable hands. If they ate all the potatoes, he'd be slightly set back, but given his ability to generate fresh potatoes as long as he had some eyes, he wasn't too worried. He gave them all the normal potatoes, indicating that they could eat the rest as long as they buried the eyes, and the rats took to his offer like fish to water.

He hadn't had the materials to properly transform Bast, which was why he'd let his victim, ahem, friend go for the day, but a quick stop by the merchants' district quickly remedied that. Seeing him come, the merchants quickly clamored for his attention, showing him fresh deliveries of potatoes, salt, and oil, but Rhys already had all of those that he wanted. Instead, he visited the perfume shops, makeup stores, and clothing stores, gathering all the gear he'd need. He could've fished things out of the trash, but this was important, and besides, he wanted to make sure he was up on the latest fashion, not accidentally crafting bumpkin robes from the tossed-out scraps of last year's robes.

They had to look good. That was essential. A pretty face always sold more, whether it was male or female, and he was determined to sell the most of all. Fashion. Makeup. Jewelry. Perfume. These were their signboards, the posts upon which they staked their business. People ate with the eyes first, after all; therefore, Rhys intended to give them some eye candy before they made their purchases. The salesman who poo-pooed fine attire, a bit of makeup, a good scent, and tasteful jewelry poo-pooed a significant portion of his profits. As someone who previously hadn't been blessed with an attractive face or a body that didn't sweat like a pig, Rhys had experienced just how much of a difference a handsome face could make to a sale. Now that he had those things, he was determined to put them to their maximum usage.

Of course, there was a limit to what a handsome face could do, but he was willing to find that limit, rather than have to fight the current with a less-than-handsome face.

“Er, d-do you have a girlfriend?” Mouse guessed, looking at his purchases.

Rhys chuckled. “Not yet.”

She blinked, at a loss, and tilted her head to the side. “Huh?”

“Don’t worry about it. When do the rest of the students arrive for the tournament?”

“S-students are arriving constantly, but the big schools should arrive late today or tomorrow. Er, the Vurix Empire’s envoy arrives tomorrow morning, if that’s what you mean.”

“Vurix Empire?” Rhys glanced over, a bit surprised. A nation-state competing amongst the mages? “Don’t mages, martial artists, and adventurers all ascend to their own world to mingle amongst one another and leave mortals alone?”

Mouse nodded. “Th-that’s right. This is an empire of mages. F-from what I understand, one powerful mage school swept through the neighboring continent, forcing all the continent’s schools under its command. Its leader, the Empress Raelgan, has settled down in the hundred years since she conquered the continent, and she’s looking to expand trade to our continent, so she’s reaching out and seeking more ties to our continent than before.”

Expanding trade? Rhys’s ears perked up at that, but only until the rest of what Mouse said hit his brain. A conqueror who’d quieted down? A conqueror, looking to expand trade? He suddenly felt like their loose conglomeration of infighting mage schools was nothing more than a tasty school of small fish, and the hungry shark was closing in. Conquerors *never* stopped lusting after power and land. It was what made them conquerors in the first place. If they *could* stop lusting after power, they would have stopped long before something like unifying a continent or ‘expanding trade to the neighboring continent.’ And in this world, where one’s path drove their growth and dictated their every action, directing their future growth by aiming it toward what drove them as human beings, how, how, *how* would a conqueror stop conquering? After all, if what he suspected was true, and her path was related to conquering, then she would miss out on potential growth if she stopped rolling over new territories.

I sure hope those in power have a plan, he thought, because, after all, what could he do? He was a Tier 2 trash mage, not some world-shattering hero. He’d do what he could, but this was a mage-school-level, no, Alliance-level problem, not something he could solve.

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"I take it your Schoolmaster is fully aware of this?" Rhys asked, meaning the obvious train of thought, rather than the simple fact of the Empire arriving.

"O-oh, yes. Um. He's rather busy with it, and told me not to bother him with the small librarian problem," Mouse replied, visibly troubled by this.

"Ah." Well, that was a good sign, at least, even if Mouse didn't like the fact that Az was getting away with his semi-hostile takeover of the library. Better for the Schoolmaster to be worried about the conqueror setting her gazes on their continent, rather than worried over the minor internal politics of a well-meaning but very powerful cat taking over his library. Hell, for all he knew, Az was a famous figure amongst high-ranking mages, and the Schoolmaster wasn't worried at all. He just didn't know. All he knew, was that he was glad the Schoolmaster was focusing his energies in the right direction. Schoolmaster- and Alliance-level existences were the kind of people who needed to pay attention to that conqueror.

Existences... like the Sword Saint. Rhys made a mental note to bring up Emperor Raelgan, the encroaching conqueror, to Bast later so Bast could bring it up to his master, assuming the Sword Saint didn't already know. If he were a betting man, Rhys would bet that the Sword Saint already knew, but it never hurt to check.

About the only thing he could think of to do, was absolutely thrash any student from the Empire that he faced in the tournament. That way, if nothing else, Emperess Raelgun would know that their continent posed a serious threat, and the students they sent were equaled, if not bettered, by their equivalents on Rhys's continent.

This entire time, since he'd discovered impurities and how easy it was to manipulate them, he'd held back. There was an obvious route of attack open to him—pushing impurities into other people, so they faced all the afflictions he'd overcome—but he'd ignored it, one, because he needed the impurities to grow, and two, because he wasn't in the business of permanently crippling children. He might look childish, but he was an adult inside, and he knew what forcing impurities on a young mage meant for their future. Therefore, he'd held back rather than inflict impurities intentionally on someone else.

But if this group of students from the Empire was really the banner force to lead the inevitable conquest that he thought it was, then there was no longer any reason to hold back. In fact, all the better reason to be absolutely as brutal as possible, so the Emperess knew an invasion on their continent would inflict serious and permanent wounds on her conquest.

I have to be absolutely sure before I do that, Rhys decided. If he allowed his biases to color his opinion of the students, he risked permanently crippling children because he alone thought an invasion was forthcoming. Only if he had irrefutable proof that not only was the Emperess hellbent on invasion, but also that the specific child he fought was party to and intentionally engaging in the invasion, would he take those actions.

Still, there's nothing holding me back from inflicting some impurities, then taking them back after the battle. He'd have to be absolutely sure he could retrieve the impurities he inflicted, which was difficult to ensure, but if he could, then he could go ahead and use impurities. Thinking on it, though, he shook his head. It would have to be a last-ditch effort. An absolute life-or-death situation against someone the judges would not stop, who was so completely morally reprehensible that he had no hesitation judging them as an adult. After all, even in his world, exceptions were made for extreme juvenile criminals... but if the combatant didn't equal or exceed that level, he wouldn't use offensive impurities.

He shook his head. Those were thoughts for another day. For today, he was going to focus on selling his potato chips and getting as rich as possible. Whether the Empress invaded or not, he'd be better off if he was rich than if he was poor. He wasn't particularly loyal to his current school or continent. He liked them, yes, liked his freedom, but that was the extent of it. He could be equally free by simply leaving the school, and he never lost sight of that. If this conqueror was merely in it for the land grab, and everything would be more or less the same after she passed through, then he really didn't matter saluting a new flag.

Of course, the problem was that conquerors were rarely about mere land grabs, and conquest was never bloodless. He didn't want to see Ev, Bast, Sorden, or even Aquari die fighting a meaningless battle against a power-hungry tyrant. The ninety-nine-percent case was that he'd oppose this conqueror to his dying breath; but he always left the room open for optimism, as stupid and empty-headed as that optimism sounded, even to him. A bloodless conquest? A change of flag? Ha. It would take a real fifteen-year-old to believe that kind of garbage... and even then, he was pretty sure he hadn't been so blindly optimistic at that age.

But hey, this was a land of mages, where might made right. Maybe this Empress really was so powerful she could pull off such a thing.

Right, and she's sending feelers to our continent for fun. Rhys rolled his eyes at himself. Treating her as an ultimate threat and preparing to oppose her with all his might was the much more likely route, over some kind of lala-land children's-show bloodless conquest and flag change.

Just to prove himself wrong, he turned to Mouse. "So, this conqueror... how bad is she?"

Mouse shook her head. "We don't know anything about her. The continent went dark after she conquered it. Nothing in or out. This will be the first time anyone has been allowed out."

Rhys's smile tightened. The lala-land scenario left his head entirely. *Yep. That doesn't sound like there's a whole lot of freedom in the lands she's conquered.* It was oppose her to his dying breath or nothing, then.

But first, it was time to sell potato chips.

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

Chapter 72. Becoming Salesmen

The potatoes were growing. They had plenty of oil and salt. Tonight, at midnight, he was going to head back down to the trash pit and get started on packaging his chips, so that they wouldn't run out of stock during peak sales time. But the most important part of their sales pitch was still lacking: namely, the face.

Luckily, Rhys had two handsome faces at hand. Unluckily, both of those faces were also the faces of their customers' opponents. He'd been to sports matches before, however unwillingly, dragged there by his bosses or colleagues before he'd gone full remote work. The opposing team's fans rarely bought merch with the home team's face on it; the home team might go rabid for that stuff, but given how small the home team was, in his and Bast's cases? It wasn't the greatest selling technique to reach for in this particular moment.

Which meant it was time to put his old skills to work, and transform them both into completely different people.

He couldn't completely shuck Mouse this time, but Bast solved that problem by quietly approaching her from behind and knocking her out with a swift blow to the back of the head. They'd set her in a nearby tree so it looked like she was watching them. Rhys said a quick, quiet prayer that the long-term side effects of concussions were easily solvable with mana in this world, drew his curtains, and got to work on the task at hand: namely, transforming Bast.

Although he would prefer to make small modifications to the base formula, as it were, put him in a wig, slap some glasses and makeup on him, and call it a day, they were going up against mages, who were far more perceptive than mortals, and not only that, but they would be put in the spotlight, their faces broadcast all over the town, and the center of interest squarely on them. Plus, Bast was the Sword Saint's apprentice. Even if he wore a mask the whole time, and that was all that anyone saw in the matches, there were still plenty of sycophants who'd memorized his face before he'd thought to hide it. According to him, whether he wore the mask or not, he risked recognition, so he wore the mask in hopes that the worst of them would eventually forget him.

All that to say that merely disguising Bast wouldn't be enough. His face was too well known. He had to craft a whole new character, give Bast a new look so drastic that no one would be in the same headspace as thinking about the Sword Saint's apprentice. Bast had to start from something so radically different, that even if they recognized his facial features, they'd be in such a different manner of thinking that they put it down to an odd coincidence, rather than start wondering if they'd seen through a disguise. It had to be a transformation, and not only that, a transformation that completely moved people's mental paradigms into a different realm.

Fortunately for Bast, Rhys had a lot of experience dressing other people up.

"Are you done yet?"

"Not yet. These things take time."

"These clothes are itchy, and my back hurts."

"You'll get used to it."

"This is stupid. I can't believe I'm letting you do this."

"You're letting me do this because you know it's a good idea."

"I'm not so sure about that—ow!"

Rhys gripped his chin. "Hold still. I'm almost done."

There was silence. No sound but the soft touch of a brush. At last, Rhys stepped back. "What do you think?"

Bast stared into the mirror in outright shock. "How are you so good at this?"

"Don't ask questions you don't want answered."

Bast turned his head left and right, getting a better look at himself. "Who is that? That's not me. No way."

"That's exactly the reaction I want!" Rhys said enthusiastically, giving him a thumbs up.

"If Master finds out about this, I'm dead," Bast grumbled.

"But he won't, so you're safe."

Bast looked up at Rhys. Or rather, a blonde-haired beauty looked up at Rhys. He'd played into Bast's larger frame to give him an amazonian style, with long blonde curls, 'natural' makeup, and a rather aggressive dress with a single high thigh slit. He didn't

have the materials to go all out with a latex body suit in this world, so he hadn't been able to risk hip slits or anything that might show off the padding he'd stuffed into the hips and rear area of Bast's leggings. A fine stuffed bra filled out the upper half of the dress, which had a high-necked closure and demi-sleeves, just enough to hide the fake tatas from being seen through from all angles. Since they'd be doing sweaty work, and he wasn't sure how waterproof the makeup was in this world, he hadn't tried doing cleavage lines or contouring the chest, instead opting for high necklines. The dress itself had dark fabric at the sides down to the hips; it was meant to create the illusion of a waistline on a slightly overweight woman, but it also worked to transform Bast's muscular torso into something more streamlined and shapely.

He hadn't always had his female friend to wear some of his more choice costumes. Back when he was still small and delicate, before the massive weight gain as he'd gotten as an adult working a 60-hour workweek, he'd been able to squeeze into a few of them personally. It wasn't because he wanted to wear women's clothing, it was because he wanted to emulate his favorite characters, and they all just happened to be women. At the end of the day, who wanted to cosplay the boring main character in his boring black trenchcoat? The female characters always had way better character designs. Not only that, but they were way hotter than the men.

He was the trashy kind of guy who always played as the woman, whenever woman was an option. Why would he want to look at some dry man's ass for fifty hours of gameplay? Way better to look at a fine female rear for fifty hours. It was the same exact thought process when it came to cosplay for him. Why dress up as some boring-ass dude in boring-ass clothes, when he could become a hot lady? Everyone liked big tatas, so why not put some on himself? He couldn't imagine anything better.

Some people didn't understand it, but that was alright. There was always someone who didn't understand, whenever anyone was passionate about something. Whether it was food, sports, games, or dressing up as women and flaunting around conventions with giant titties, there would always be someone who didn't understand. He accepted that, even if he disagreed with it. He hadn't done it for people's understanding. He'd done it for his own satisfaction.

Of course, when he was finally too big to fit into any of his silicon body suits anymore, he hadn't stopped working on makeup. He'd helped his female friend with hers. She was good at makeup—he didn't mean to imply in any way that she was inadequate. When it came to making a character look natural or human, she was unmatched. His special skills laid in making people look like anime characters or game characters, that kind of overblown over-the-top makeup that wasn't anyone's every day makeup. It was a whole different set of skills, putting makeup on someone else, and he was glad he'd had the chance to practice it before he tried on Bast. No way would Bast have put up with his trial-and-error efforts that his female friend had.

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Once more, Rhys felt immense gratitude toward his female friend, and sorrow that he couldn't clearly remember her face or name. This world had wiped a lot of the finer details of his homeworld's memories away from him, and that was one that he regretted deeply.

"What about you?" Bast asked, nodding at Rhys.

Rhys nudged him out of the way. "Give me about half an hour."

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"We're really going out like this?"

"We're going to sell potato chips like this. Of course we have to go out like this, don't be ridiculous. Remember, just act confident. You're a woman. You've always been a woman. Exude that energy, and strut."

Bast took a deep breath. He looked at Rhys. "I still can't believe that's you."

"Huh?" Rhys blinked at him.

"Just... nothing."

Rhys looked at himself. He hadn't gone all out, and honestly, he was wondering if he shouldn't have gone harder... but then, he was trying to look like a normal girl, not some anime babe, so it was probably fine.

He'd had to work far less hard to soften the contours of his face than he had Bast's. For once, his younger, less mature body had worked in his favor. The effort he'd had to do to give himself a girl's face once his jawline and jowls fully expressed themselves back in his homeworld... he'd spent way too long fixing his face to look vaguely passable. He was almost embarrassed at how easily he'd transformed into a female with a little makeup in this world. The only downside was that there wasn't much he could do about his mana-colored, faintly glowing eyes, but Bast had assured him that there were plenty of young mages who made the same mistake of shoving mana into their eyes as he had, and that the color wasn't uncommon. He wasn't sure they'd come about their eyes the same way he had his, but at the very least, he didn't have to worry about having too-distinctive eyes.

He had long hair, but he knew that wigs were the easiest way to transform your looks, so he'd gotten a cute brunette wig with double-buns and bangs, not unlike one of his favorite fighting game characters (even if his thighs didn't match up to hers). He'd gone with a slinky red silky dress to show off his artificial curves. He hadn't exaggerated them too much, to match his age, so the silky dress was just enough fabric to make sure he still showed off his new feminine figure. The dress was an A-line, and reached his knees. Once more, he'd have preferred a true thigh-slit dress, but he didn't have his

silicon body suit. *Something I'll have to rectify, eventually.* A jangly bunch of cheap bangles finished the look, to hide his too-large wrists and subsequently, draw attention to the potato chips.

"Come on. We're just going to the market," Rhys said, gesturing Bast on. He stepped out onto the street.

Bast hesitated, then followed his lead. "To the market?" he hissed.

"Yeah, the market, B...etsy. *Betsy*. Your friend Rina's going to show you around."

"Betsy?" Bast asked, raising his brows incredulously.

"Yeah, did you forget your name? Come on." Rhys grabbed his hand and led him onto the street, bouncing a little as he walked.

Bast stomped after him, a wary look in his eyes. He glanced left and right, searching the streets around them. For now, they laid dead and empty; no one walked back in this decayed part of the massive castle that was Purple Dawn Academy. He pressed his lips together. "I'm so dead."

"You are if you don't fix that walk. Legs closer together. Dainty steps. Swing your hips—not like that, gods, are you a whore? Come on. Just a little. A little sway, something *natural*. You're cute, okay? Think cute things and move like you're cute."

"Gods, why did I let you talk me into this?" Bast muttered. He tried to adjust his stance, but only half-successfully.

"Okay, so maybe you'll just stand still in the stall a lot. That's fine. There's a lot of swordswomen in this world, so even if you walk like a swordsman, it should be fine," Rhys encouraged him.

"Oh, thanks."

"Everything takes practice. Just think of this as a martial stance, and you'll get there."

"How come you've got so much practice at this, then?"

"What'd I say about questions you don't want answered?"

They left the alley and rejoined a main road. Rhys walked confidently, assured enough in his skills that he knew no one would see through it. Bast tensed, edging toward the buildings and the shadows, as if to hide.

Rhys nudged him. "Don't do that. You're drawing attention to yourself, inviting people to find something off about you. Shoulders back, head high. You belong here. You're just an ordinary girl out for a stroll. Don't worry about anything, and walk.

With some effort, Bast relaxed. He straightened up and put his chin high, and walked more normally.

"There you go. Remember, we need to be super cute, adorable girls who are going to sell lots of potato chips because of how cute we are. Cuteness is king!" Rhys did a cute pose and smiled at him.

Bast shoved him. "You're being ridiculous."

"I'm not," Rhys replied, all business. He really wasn't. Sexiness would attract men and boys. Sexy men would attract women and girls. But cute pulled at the heartstrings of men, women, boys and girls alike. Who didn't melt a little at the sight of an adorable puppy? When it came to curb appeal, cuteness was the superior aesthetic. As long as they didn't ramp it up too far and enter female-only territory, but simply kept it at business and a pair of cute salesladies, then they'd gain far more sales than if they tried to appeal to men or women alone.

A passing male mage looked them up and down. A female mage gave them a calculating look. Rhys nodded to himself. They'd passed muster. His skills hadn't deteriorated.

Disguise 3

And a new skill to boot? Rhys raised his brows. Interesting how it didn't proc until he was appraised by other people. Did that mean Bast had gotten the skill as well? He glanced over to find Bast similarly gazing at the area where a message would pop up for him. It seemed so. Handy for his intended purpose, where both of them would need to be disguised for this to work.

He nudged Bast. "We'll just do a quick walkaround today to get you used to looking cute, and then head back to the trash hea...ahem, kitchen. The nice thing about potato chips is that you can make them ahead of time. Of course, we'll be cooking them right in front of our patrons, too, but that's just for show, and so the delicious scent of potato chips can capture their hearts and draw them over to us. We'll be selling the prepackaged ones."

"Isn't that devious, to be cooking fresh ones right in front of them, but sell the old ones?" Bast asked.

Rhys waved his hand dismissively. "Sure, but not meaningfully. The old ones will still taste exactly as delicious as the new ones, as long as we seal them in airtight bags.

Besides, deviousness is the root of salesmanship. Point me to a sale that wasn't at least a little tricky, that didn't use some kind of mental trick to fool you into making it."

Bast shook his head. "This is all beyond me, so I'll take your word for it. How are we going to make airtight bags, though?"

Rhys shrugged. He knew how to build a forge, now. It was a trashy forge, but he didn't need a high quality one. As long as he could melt metal down, he was good to go. "There's plenty of metals in the trash heap to make foil packages out of."

"Foil...? Isn't that difficult to make?" Bast asked.

"Probably not, as long as I make it out of trash," Rhys replied.

"Right, I forgot. You're insane, you know that?"

"I do know that. And also, says the guy who can cut brick walls with a sword. That's not supposed to be possible, just so you know."

Bast shook his head. "I couldn't do half the things you can do. Martial might isn't everything."

"Ain't that the truth. But with the upcoming tournament, it might as well be." Rhys nudged him on the shoulder. "That's why I'll still be counting on you to be my muscle, even if you're all dolled up."

"Of course," Bast replied. He cracked his knuckles in a very unladylike fashion, a dark light shining in his eyes. "I look forward to it."

"Now come on. Time's a-wastin', and those potato chips won't cook themselves. The rats should have got enough potatoes started growing by now. It's time we head back down and get started."

"The... what? *Rats*?"

"Don't worry about it. Oh, speaking of... there's something I need to talk to you about. In the garbage pit."

"Of course."

The two of them headed out of town once more, out into the forest.

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

Chapter 73. Cooking

They shucked their disguises in the forest, storing them in their rings. The stream near the trash heap served as a good enough place to wash their faces, and the usual two gremlins returned to the site of Rhys's burgeoning potato farm.

On the way, once Bast had assured him no one was listening or following, and his own senses detected no trash or impurities in unexpected places, Rhys explained his plan to find Straw. Bast nodded along, immediately on board. "Whatever you find out, let me know. I agree, we're too weak to free him yet, but we'll need his cell well-scouted for the day we are."

He also confirmed that Bast's master was aware of the conqueror and her likely ill intentions. When he brought it up, Bast merely waved his hand. "All the powerful mages in the region are aware of it, and preparing for it. If it comes to a fight, the Alliance will likely fold. Her might is simply too great. We're hoping to scare her off with a show of force at the tournament, along with some kind of tribute or another..."

"That kind of thing rarely works," Rhys muttered.

"True, but we're weaker than her. It's all we have to rely on."

Rhys nodded, conceding that point. He pressed his lips together. It wasn't looking good for the Alliance. "If she attacks, we should run. You and me together."

A reluctant expression crossed Bast's face. "That's what Master says."

"Oh?" He hadn't expected a man known as the Sword Saint to be so reasonable.

"Yes. He fears, more than anything, our next-generation talent falling into her hands and getting either perverted to her viewpoint, or neutered before it can take off. There are already plans for the rapid evacuation of the top talents in our region to a place more easily held than Purple Dawn Academy, right on the edge of our border with the Empire."

"That's a good plan," Rhys agreed. Better that they train for a while and be able to fight back meaningfully, than lose their top talent on the front lines, lost to the first wave of the Empress's attack. It boggled the mind to think of a point as fortified as Purple Dawn Academy as somewhere hard to hold, but then, when he thought about it, it made absolute sense. If they were really on the edge of the border with the next region, then Empress or not, they'd need a well-defended place from which to hold their ground.

There was no point building a fortress deep within the heart of one's lands, where no enemy would ever reach it. Fortresses were built on the borders, where one needed to

reinforce a point to have any hope of holding it. Against a force as powerful as the Empress's, there might be little hope of holding Purple Dawn Academy long-term, but if a smaller raiding force, or a single school, attempted to enter Alliance lands, then a fortified position like Purple Dawn would give the defenders a hand up to protecting the lands.

"But... what's the point? What's the point of all this if we don't fight?" Bast asked, a bit lost. "I've tried asking Master, but he just gives me a look like it's obvious and refuses to answer."

It was obvious, but it was the kind of obvious that came from living long enough to see another generation of children come in beneath him. Rhys sighed. He nodded at Bast. "What Tier are you?"

"Tier 2."

"And is that the limit of your potential? Will you only ever reach Tier 2?"

Bast pulled himself to his full height and looked down on Rhys. "Don't be ridiculous. Do you really think I have such little potential?"

Of course he didn't—he had infinite belief in Bast's potential—but that wasn't the point. He gestured at Bast. "And if you fight here, tomorrow, against the overwhelming power of the Empress's forces and get cut down as a Tier 2, will you achieve that potential?"

Bast opened his mouth, then closed it. He shook his head, reluctantly. "But how will I grow stronger?"

"When you fall back, you don't have to give in. Fight. Fight in skirmishes and raids. Fight small battles, battles you can win, battles you might lose, but not battles that you cannot possibly survive. Your Master isn't telling you to flee, tuck tail and run like a coward. He's merely trying to keep you alive to fight a great many more battles, rather than dying to the same massive, overpowered attack that kills hundreds of men pointlessly in the Empress's first barrage."

Bast nodded slowly, still unwilling, but now a little more understanding. Abruptly, he said, "I hope it doesn't come to that."

Rhys laughed. "We all hope so. Wouldn't it be great if the conqueror really was just trying to befriend her neighbors?"

"Sounds a bit ridiculous, when you say it like that," Bast agreed, chuckling.

"But who knows? Politics are a strange and fickle beast. I'll leave them to those far better qualified. All I know, is that no matter what, money talks. The more of it we have, the better off we'll be, and that's true regardless of if we get invaded or not."

“True, true. Tell me more, teacher,” Bast said, mock-respectfully.

“First off, let’s get these potatoes grown. Once I pour enough mana into them to get them going, I’ll leave it to you to cook them—I trust you saw my technique?”

“Yes, and what a mysterious and esoteric thing it was,” Bast said, still playing along.

“Excellent. You’re my finest student. Cook the potatoes up into delicious, addictive, mana-imbued chips. I’ll work on crafting a bag to store them in.”

But first, growing the potatoes through his favorite method: pouring lots of lots of mana into them, so they grew far more rapidly than they should have.

Bast shied away from his strange little operation at first, taken aback by the industrious potato-planting rats and their stern raccoon foreman, but before long, he saw how serious the critters were about their efforts, and accepted their presence. While the two of them were fucking around—ahem, working hard at their all-important disguises so they could sell potato chips despite being competitors in the tournament—the rats were busy. They’d used their prodigious digging capabilities to dig four additional rows in the ground, and each one had a ready-to-grow set of evenly spaced potato sprouts sitting in lush, well-composted earth. The raccoon watched them with a wary eye, and smacked any rats who ate too much of the potatoes, or tried to sneak off with the potatoes without carving out the eyes. Most of the rats were obedient, and the disobedient rats were chased off by the obedient ones, who prized Rhys’s ability to clear their impurities. Some of them scurried over and asked him to take their impurities, and Rhys gladly complied. It wasn’t a lot of impurities, but the fact that they were an ever-refreshing well of the second-tier impurities was highly useful to him.

After he checked in on the rats, Rhys immediately got to work shifting some trash closer to the farm and sorting out the organic material—what little remained in this portion of the trash after his accidental super-charged compost experiment earlier—and the metals and papers, which he’d use to make foil-coated paper bags. Ideally, he’d simply used plastic, but this world hadn’t invented plastic yet. Given how much of a bane plastic was upon the average modern human, he didn’t exactly want to try his hand at inventing it; not to mention, it would simply be a raw material then, and not trash at all, which would make it contrary to his path, and consequently harder to deal with. Foil-coated paper would get the job done well enough, so that was what he’d use.

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Unfortunately, he had no way to generate nitrogen to fill the bags with non-oxygenized air, so even the foil packets would allow some spoilage. As long as they sold the chips relatively quickly, it wouldn’t be a problem, and with large numbers of students coming in tomorrow, today was a good day to start cooking, under the parameters where he could only precook a short time ahead of sales.

With the trash sorted, he was free to start absorbing it, generate trash stars, and feed the mana into the potatoes. Even though he pushed most of the mana outward, into the potatoes, he still collected the tiny droplets of mana in his core, and he felt, instinctively, that that was the most important byproduct of the entire process. He made a mental note to swing by the library later and see if there weren't books on the requirements for the next tier later, but for now, he simply gathered the new, dense mana.

Potatoes grew under the earth, thick, heavy clusters of the delicious tubers, and as they grew, Rhys realized that the rats had not only dug holes for the sprouts, but also loosened and aerated the earth around the plants so the potatoes could freely swell to their full size. He nodded at the rats, an appreciative glint in his eye. The rats nodded back, pleased with their good work being recognized.

"Bast, the first set of potatoes are ready to go," Rhys announced.

"The first set..."

Rhys pointed. "Start from that corner, up the row, then down to the bottom of the next row, and repeat."

Bast saluted. Kneeling, he got to work digging the potatoes out of the earth.

Rhys felt a faint pang of guilt at making the Sword Saint's apprentice farm potatoes, but quickly suppressed it. It would be good practice, or something. Besides, it was going to get him and Bast both rich, so it wasn't like it was for no reason.

Bast could handle the cooking. Rhys turned his attention to the next phase of his project: the bags. Facing the metal and the paper both, he pinched his chin, thinking. He needed foil. Strictly speaking, he didn't need to melt the metal down to create foil, just hammer it really thin. With gold, or softer metals, he didn't even need to heat it to hammer it down. He wasn't going to use super soft metals, given that lead was one of those metals, and he suspected that mages might sense a little too much impurities entering their systems if he used lead to line his bags, but it was an option. He also wasn't going to use gold to line the bags, but that went without saying. He wanted to make gold, not give it away.

Ideally, he'd make aluminum foil... but aluminum hadn't been discovered yet, and he didn't remember exactly how science extracted aluminum from the earth. Electrolysis? Something funky. The point was, he had no aluminum trash at hand, so it was iron, steel, bronze, copper, or nothing.

Bronze, and particularly copper, was relatively soft, at least compared to iron. He separated out the bronzes and coppers and set them aside. Tin, as well, joined the relatively safe and cheap soft metals pile. There were problems associated with using any sort of soft metal, but as long as they weren't as evident and severe as the problems associated with lead, he wasn't going to worry about it. Not far from the metal

trash, he found a mostly-intact anvil, and he had a hammer in his storage ring. Taking the metal, he laid it on top of the hammer and pounded it with the hammer.

The metal directly shattered.

Hmm. It was trash. He didn't know what he'd been expecting, but somehow, he hadn't expected this. He brushed the shards off the anvil and picked up a new piece of metal, but this time, he drew all the oxidation and other impurities off its surface first. This one beat out pretty well, but it grew fragile at the edges and shattered once more. He paused, pressing his lips together. He'd always known he'd have to heat it, but he'd really hoped he could get away without building a new furnace.

Oh, well. There were no such things as shortcuts for anything worth doing, or something. He'd never really got the point of that saying, but he did understand that he wouldn't be beating out the metal without heating it. Honestly, it was his bad for thinking he might get away with it.

He'd already built a furnace once, so he had a relatively easy time replicating his work. The wall Bast had chopped up still had plenty of pieces lying around, so it could still serve as his bricks, and it was a short trip down to the riverbank to scoop up some raw clay. Using what he'd done the first time as the framework, he quickly slopped together a second furnace. His practice earlier made it easier, especially when it came to enforcing his intent upon the furnace. It helped that he didn't have to enforce intent upon the materials, too, or heat the furnace up to such extreme heats. He wasn't smelting the metal, after all, just softening it enough that he could beat it thin without shattering it. Nor was it a particularly hard or durable metal, but instead, softer, easier to melt metals. Things that didn't need too much heat.

With the help of the furnace, the metals were much easier to beat into foil. Rhys beat the first sheet down in no time. If he'd been a mortal, it might have been hard work, but as a mage, the harder part was moderating his strength so he didn't just beat straight through the metal. He grabbed the paper trash and paused. He had paper and foil, but nothing to bond the two.

Rhys turned, staring up at the pile. Plenty of bones in there. Bones he could cook into glue. Come to think of it, he'd need glue to adhere the bags shut, too, so he'd really just stumbled upon an inevitable problem a little sooner than he'd expected to.

"Bast, are you using both cauldrons over there?" he called.

Bast stood before one of the cauldrons, his sword drawn, intense concentration on his face. He thrust his sword once, twice, a thousand times in a span of a second. The potato chips, barely pierced by the very tip of his sword, the hole so small as to be invisible to the naked eye, flew free from the force of his stabs and landed perfectly on the fluffy cloth. He stabbed one final time, then stood and looked at Rhys. "Huh?"

“Neeeeever mind. You’re busy. I’ll, uh, figure something out.” Rhys set the foil aside and headed into the trash. He had to find bones anyways, so he might as well go find a not-too-broken cauldron while he was at it. There were plenty of cauldrons in the trash; as long as he wasn’t looking for a particularly strong one, or one with any special conditions, it wouldn’t take him too long to find one.

He'd gone through the organic trash earlier to make compost, but his efforts had been focused on easily-degradable stuff; half-rotten foods and the ends and bobs of roots and herbs that potion classes didn't need. Sure, there were some greasy chicken bones mixed in, but those were cooked and broken, relatively easy to decompose. What he was looking for now, were the places mages threw dead horses and dogs, magical beasts they'd hunted and were done with, that kind of thing. He wasn't going to touch any pet cemetery, but if they'd thrown the animal's body in the trash, then it was fair game for him. If they didn't want its bones, he'd take them.

There weren't as many bones in the trash as he might have expected. The few magical beast remains he found were well picked over, and for the most part, it seemed mages buried their pets and rarely used horses. Even so, there were bones here and there—fish bones, snake bones, discarded goat carcasses and the half-mummified remains of things he couldn't even recognize. He pulled the ex-flesh off the bones and tossed the bones in a slightly misshapen cauldron that had seen better days. It had been laden with filth, the blackened remains of failed potions sitting in its depths, its sides bulging outward from a near-miss explosion or two, but once he'd absorbed the impurities, it was good enough to cook glue in. Glue didn't tend to be explosive. As long as the cauldron held up to a reasonable amount of heat, it would be fine, and for all that it was misshapen and blackened, it didn't look to be any less able to hold a few hundred degrees than before.

The whole time he searched, he kept his intent active on the furnace back at the cooking spot. It was good training; one, because it forced him to hold an intent active for a long span of time, and two, because it forced him to hold an active intent at a distance. He'd thought it would be hard to hold an intent active without touching the object, but when the time came, he'd lifted his hand off the furnace and walked half a dozen meters without realizing it before the mental strain kicked in, and he was forced to face what he'd done. *I guess that's Tier 2 for you*, he thought, looking at his hand. Or maybe that was the difference that came from pushing the skill over the level ten threshold? He'd felt the skill change and grow stronger at level ten, unlike his non-path skills, which didn't appear to pay any attention to level thresholds, except to continue to slow down the pace at which they leveled. He stared at his hand for another few seconds, then shrugged. He could figure it out later.

Now, he returned to a flickering furnace with a cauldron full of bones. He set it down near the furnace, jogged to the nearby stream to get some fresh water, and dumped the impurity-extracted water into the pile of bones. A bit of combustible trash under the cauldron, and the bones started simmering.

Rhys pursed his lips, looking at the bones. It would work—he could eventually cook glue this way—but it would take so long. There were big ships full of students coming *tomorrow*, who would certainly be eager for a new location and a new experience, and ready to try new things. Plus, they were his enemies (not that they knew it), and if the potato chips got them addicted on junk food and full of potato-chippy impurities, that was their problem, not his. He needed this glue cooked down *today*. Ideally, right now, so he could start building his bags and bagging the chips Bast was cooking.

I wonder...

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

Chapter 74. Boil it Down

Rhys knelt by the glue cauldron. He injected mana into the water and bones, even tried to push the intent to become glue onto the bones, but nothing took. His intent slid right off the bones. They had once been alive, and they were full of such complex intents and emotions that there was no room for his desires, let alone a desire that pushed them toward total deterioration. It was a truth that gave Rhys *other* ideas, but for now, he put those ideas in the back of his mind. He was already flirting with curses and curse power. He didn't need to add necromancy—ahem, trashromancy—to the pile before the all-important tournament where he had to fairly beat Ernesto's champion.

Intent didn't work. Just adding mana didn't do much except push the water to boil hotter, which was helpful, but the cost-value-time ratio simply wasn't there. He needed something else. Something that pushed these bones to transform and melt, rather than just sit here and slowly bubble. Something more intense than either intent or mana.

He skimmed through his trash-related skills. This wasn't the time for Trash Body. Trash Intent had already failed. Trash Step, likewise, not the time. Trash Manipulation, Enchanting, and Talk all had no place here. The only thing he could think of as working at all was Trash Aura.

Trash Aura was the part of Trash Intent he could project outward. Trash Intent helped him draw out the form of the trash's intent, or enforce his intent on trash, and Trash Aura was the next step. The skill that allowed him to take that intent and project it outward. It was equivalent to shooting sword light off a sword; essentially, firing a blast of mana and power from the weapon in the form of an immaterial aura that took the form of the thing he was firing it from. Therefore, it was the next step of Trash Intent.

Trash Intent let him wrap trash with energy, and even let it resume a new form, and Trash Aura then projected that outward.

Given that he couldn't use Trash Intent on the bones, Trash Aura seemed to not fit, but on the other hand, wasn't it ideal in this situation? If he didn't try to use Trash Intent to enforce his will on the trash, but simply let it assume any form, then fired off that intent into the pot...

Rhys hovered his hand over the bones. The two skills activated in quick succession, Trash Intent, then Trash Aura. The bones all took the forms they wanted to in thin energy projections, whether they longed to be whole limbs, whole bones, or even a whole skeleton, all of them crammed into the tiny pot, then shot that energy into the pot, depleting their own intent to fire the aura. The auras slammed into the bones, and the bones broke. It was like using a hundred mortars and pestles all at once to hammer the bones into pieces, but he let the bones do all the work for him. Again, and again. As the bones broke into smaller pieces, the combination grew more effective, and the bones broke down smaller and smaller, until Rhys couldn't grip them with intent anymore.

It no longer mattered, at that point. The mana-enhanced boiling water quickly softened the bone shards, and he used the mana, and Trash Manipulation, to crush the shards even smaller and churn the gruel into paste. When the granules got too small for that to work, Rhys stirred the glue with a scrap of wood, using Trash Intent to extend the stick into the sticky mixture so it couldn't cling to it.

He grabbed the paper, took a bit of the glue, and laminated the foil onto the paper. It was the pages of an old book, with bits of some kind of scripture on it, not that Rhys cared. Taking another page, he repeated the actions, then added a bit of glue to the very edges and glued the two together. Rhys looked up, glancing over at Bast. "The chips ready yet?"

"Got a few," Bast replied, thumbing over his shoulder. A veritable mountain of chips piled atop the fluffy cloth.

Now that's mage-worthy efficiency. Gods, if I could bring the Industrial Revolution here... Then again, it wouldn't do anything, would it? The Industrial Revolution was all about working together and using machines to accomplish what one man could not, but Bast had just done an industrial quantity of chip production in an hour or so, all on his own, as a martial artist and not even a mage. If he added machines, he would probably only slow Bast down, rather than speed him up. At best, he'd unlock a marginal speed-up, some real diminishing returns-level of breakthrough. If he didn't have Bast, or any helper, it might have been worth it just from a laziness perspective, but as it was, he might as well use this whole scenario as training toward the next Tier, using techniques and skills, exercising his mana, and expanding his speed and dexterity, rather than waste his time building machines that would do nothing to raise his Tier.

Rhys tried one. Tingle of mana, perfectly salted, delicious! He nodded. “Good work.” Holding his bag open, he used Trash Manipulation to put a quantity of chips inside, then sealed it shut with a bit more glue. He handed it to Bast. “Open it with a minimum of strength.”

Bast nodded. He gripped the bag and tore it from the edge. The foil and paper ripped easily enough. “It was easy. Shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Even if it is, I guess everyone carries swords,” Rhys commented, half to himself. Although he’d never been a carry-a-knife-everywhere kind of guy, he could see the utility of it now that he was a carry-a-sword-everywhere kind of guy. He glanced down at his empty hip. Even then, he preferred to keep the broken sword’s hilt in his robes, and he kept the strange sword he’d found at the bottom of the trash pit in his storage ring, unwilling to use it carelessly—though that was more about preserving it than hiding it for strategic advantage, since the thing was more rust than sword. He wasn’t a weapon-carrying person. It just wasn’t his style.

Now, that potion full of impurities he kept close to hand at all times, that was just a training tool that he didn’t use anymore and just happened to carry around with him everywhere he went. Definitely not a glass-covered grenade full of filth and impurities. Yep. Totally reasonable behavior.

He snorted at himself. Whether he wanted to admit it to himself or not, he’d become a weapon-carrying kind of guy. He couldn’t afford not to be, in this cutthroat world.

“Rhys?” Bast asked, frowning at him.

“Ah! Bags,” Rhys said. Right. He’d gotten lost in the sauce, when he needed to get lost in the bags. He saluted to Bast and rushed back to his raw materials, cranking out bag after bag.

Bast stared after him. After a few moments, he shook his head, snorting quietly to himself. He took the finished bags and filled them with chips, sealing the tops shut afterward. Like that, the two of them worked through the night, filling bags, cooking new chips, growing new potatoes, and making new bags, until the sun began to rise. The second the light filtered over the horizon, Rhys pushed Bast into the forest, and the two of them changed into their alternate personas. Carrying a huge net full of bags so large that it extended out a few feet to his left, right, and over his head, Rhys led the way toward the arrival plaza, while Bast followed with a bag full of potatoes, the knives, some oil, some salt, and the repaired cauldron. The two of them quickly constructed a four-post stand with a colorful cloth top, a kind of simple tent-slash-awning, and a table out front, both of them constructed from bits and bobs in the trash. There were a few other stalls set up in the plaza, mostly offering snacks and souvenirs from Purple Dawn. The hoary old merchants eyed up the two of them, cute young (unsuspicious) girls with their enterprising, fresh new wares. They weren’t trendy yet, Rhys knew that. But they would be.

He planted their flag out front. *POTATO CHIPS* was scrawled down it in the biggest text he could manage. He could only whip up black ink out of the trash on short notice, but he'd found a good length of red cloth, and once he'd removed the impurities from the tablecloth, folded it in half, and stitched a double-row hem for the pole to slide through, it made a passable flag.

"No one even knows what a potato chip is," Bast muttered, his final protest among many, which Rhys mostly put down to jitters from a first-time crossplayer who hadn't yet experienced the adrenaline rush of fooling hundreds of passerby and getting envious looks from girls who usually wouldn't give him the time of day—but at this latest one, he nodded emphatically.

"Precisely. And that's why we're gonna cook up a big pile to show everyone exactly what they are." Rhys hurried to the back and lit the cauldron, adding oil and potatoes. It was time to enchant everyone with the same trash tactics every fast food chain used: smell, advertising, and novelty. And if it worked, they were going to be very, very rich.

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An enormous pair of ships floated into the dock. One was a quad-tier five-mast ship, hundreds of cannons bristling from its many portholes, its sails and hull enchanted with heavy defensive enchantments and a massive foregun pointed dead ahead along its center line, the gold-sun-in-a-crimson-field flag of the Empire fluttering atop its main mast. The whole ship was whitewashed, as austere and severe as it was pristine, its black cannons a sharp counterpoint to the pure white hull, masts, and sails. A single adornment of a gold sun with scintillating rays beaming from it glimmered on its rear cabin, a nod to the flag overhead.

The other was an enormous pleasure ship nearly as large as the Empire's warship, laden with draperies, fresh flowers, and delicate carvings. Phoenixes, dragons, and peacocks mingled on its gilded sides, while shining sails in handsome triangular shape cut a bright, almost too-bright figure against the rising sun, save for the parts of the sails painted with cranes, tigers, lions, and unicorns. The two ships clashed in every possible way, glaring one another down as if to convert one another to the other's preferences. They pulled into the dock in lock step, neither one willing to let the other go first. Likewise, their students poured off at the same time, the Empire's students all in white military uniforms, the pleasure ship's students in gorgeous robes in the latest fashion, frilled at every hem and richly adorned with embroidery, with glittering jewelry shining from every wrist, ankle, and neck. They marched down the dock and into the plaza, where every merchant immediately began plying their trades.

The Empire's students marched straight ahead, following their captain, a boy with pure white hair to match his pure white uniform, tied back into a perfectly-straight white

ponytail, perfectly-straight white bangs falling to either side of his face. The pleasure ship's students, from the Uninhibited Wealth School, were led by a girl with curly brown hair that fell around her shoulders in waves, whose robes were so ostentatious and laden with jewelry that it hurt to look at her, like a rainbow-colored disco ball in a snowfield at midday. She glanced at the boy in white, and he glanced at her, and the two of them shared a mutual *hmph* as they turned away from one another.

Anabel, the leader of the Uninhibited Wealth School's students, went to walk away, all her trendy students behind her, but she hesitated. A delicious scent caught her nose, and a flash of gold caught her eye. Slowly, she turned. A somewhat backwoods girl in a dress that hadn't been trendy for decades stood in a stall at the end of the plaza—but that wasn't important. What was important was the pile of delicious, coin-like discs beside her, and how fantastic those brilliant things smelled.

Beside her, the boy in white, Laurent, leader of the Empire's trainees, blinked. His eyes were big, and his mouth watered. It had been a long time since he'd seen snack foods. The Empire prohibited such pathetic, unhelpful foods, that weren't useful for raising one's Tier or advancing one's martial and magical power for martial and mage trainees alike. But this was a special occasion. Surely it was permissible? Besides, he was outside the Empire's training facilities. He was *meant* to experience the world. And that girl... he'd never seen a girl so cute before. Girls in his world were austere, uniform-wearing, cold beings, not... warm and friendly like this girl. Her big friend was a little bit scary, but he could overlook that. He had the martial might. He could protect her. Even—

Anabel strode in front of him, taking the first steps toward the stall. Laurent startled, jumping ahead. How dare she! He'd seen that girl... ahem, those chips, first. They belonged to him, and consequently, the Empire, not some tacky goddess in gorgeous robes who was his enemy no matter how feminine and attractive she was!

Laurent had been raised by the Empire in an excessively strict environment, where intersexual relationships were stringently watched over, with adults always present to ensure that nothing untoward happened. In fact, intersexual relationships were banned and dissuaded, with students encouraged to focus all their energy on martial and magical prowess instead. Plenty of trainees found ways to still interact with the opposite sex, but Laurent was the student captain. He obeyed the rules the most stringently of all. Relationships were but a distraction, an earthly temptation to steal his energy from his pursuits of further power. He needed nothing but his strength, his sword, and his magic, and desired nothing but them.

All this to say that despite his handsome face, Laurent had interacted with women even less than Rhys had in his original life, and now that he was face to face with women who weren't held to the same strict code as he was, who were allowed to express their attractiveness and femininity, he was facing a breakdown of the boundaries he'd lived by his whole life. It had been easy to ignore the women who were little more than faces

floating over the same uniform he wore. It was hard to ignore women with... *legs*, and *arms*, and *that cute way her cheek dimples when she smiles*...

His shoulder clashed with Anabel's. The two fought, struggling to be the first to the stall. At the last second, Laurent juttied ahead, and he all but fell forward, catching himself on the table. The pile of chips shook, but the pretty girl behind the stall reached out her hand and caught them with a mysterious but adorable technique.

"Can I help you?" Rhys asked, making his voice a little breathy. A second later, he rolled his eyes at himself internally. *Laying it on a bit thick, aren't I?* He needed to act normal, not like some kind of 1960's sexy cartoon. He corrected a little, but kept the pose. Hip out, hand on his hip, brows up, touching his chin ever-so-gently. In his original body, he would have worried about emphasizing his unfortunate jawline, but this body had a nicely slender jaw for now, so he was a-okay.

Laurent stared at her like a fly staring at the sun, his jaw agape. All words left his brain. *So cute*...

Rhys blinked. A tiny bit of sweat trickled down his back. *Did he see through me? Is that why he's staring?*

A second later, Anabel pushed Laurent to the side. "One bag, please."

"Of course! That'll be five gold," Rhys said with a beaming smile. It was an insane price from a mortal perspective, but he'd long since learned that mages had no idea what mortals considered normal pricing. One gold was the cheapest anything could possibly be to a mage. Five gold was cheap, but not so cheap that it became suspicious.

Consequently, Anabel handed over her coins without batting an eye. Rhys gave her a bag of chips, and just like that, their first customer sauntered away.

Not wanting to be behind on the trend—because if Anabel did anything, it had to be the ultimate in trendy—the rest of the Uninhibited Wealth School fell in line. Unfortunately, the Empire's trainees had all filtered in behind Laurent, following their captain, and as a consequence, they were all in line ahead of the Uninhibited Wealth School, whose students hadn't been following Anabel in a tight line, but instead mobbing generally behind her. They glared at the Empire's students, hatred growing in their hearts.

The girl behind Laurent cleared her throat. "Captain?"

Laurent shook his head, jumping as he came back to reality. He looked Rhys in the eye. "Yes!"

"One bag...?" Rhys guessed.

Laurent nodded mutely. He fumbled out his coin pouch and handed it over.

Rhys blinked, a bit taken aback to get handed someone's entire coin pouch. *Is this the custom in the Empire?* He counted out five coins, then handed back the coin pouch and a bag of chips. "Thank you!"

A part of him wanted to keep the whole coin pouch and sell the weird flunky all their potato chips in one go, but that wasn't the point. The point was to get as many students as possible hooked on junk food, so that they had no choice but to continue buying potato chips, and to do that, he had to sell the potato chips to as many students as possible, as fast as possible. Now wasn't the time to let someone buy out the shop, especially not when he hadn't meant to.

Laurent staggered away, still watching Rhys with wide eyes. How could anyone be so cute? What was this? This girl, this *angel*. She was too pretty. It couldn't be legal!

Rhys gave him a forced smile and a small wave. *Please leave.*

The other trainees glanced amongst themselves. Had they just been given permission to buy snacks? Or had they been given permission to buy this specific snack? One or two of the more adventurous trainees wandered off to the other stalls, but most continued queueing up at Rhys' stall, purchasing one bag of chips just like their captain, and wandering off. A few cracked open their bags and took a bite, only for their eyes to get wide, and their hands to dip back into the bag over and over again.

Rhys grinned, watching them snap up the chips. *I've got 'em.* He glanced over his shoulder. "How're our supplies?"

"Should have more than enough for the whole line," Bast replied, using his usual voice.

Rhys shot him a look. Bast gave him one back.

"Thank youuu, perfect!" Rhys trilled after a few beats, intentionally waiting until it got awkward.

Bast rolled his eyes at him. "You're enjoying this too much."

"A guy's gotta have hobbies," Rhys muttered back.

"This is your hobby?"

"What? It's harmless."

Bast pursed his lips and bobbed his head. "Guess so."

Rhys shook his head. Cosplay was so much harder to explain in a world that barely had characters, and dressing up as a person from a play made so much less sense than dressing up as a well-defined character with a well-defined outfit. He'd tried to explain it

to Bast a few times earlier, but it was like water off a duck's back; Bast just had no frame of reference to understand what he was trying to do. Ultimately, it didn't matter, since Bast had agreed to do it anyways, but he would've been happier if his closest friend had understood a little bit.

Ah, well. I'm used to not being understood. If he wanted to be understood by society, he wouldn't have started cosplaying. He turned to the next customer, beaming. All that mattered, was that the customers saw what made them want to keep buying more chips, and what better to sell chips than a cute girl? If it worked in his homeworld, it'd work here. In fact, it was working here.

"Next customer!" Rhys called, and the line crept forward.

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

Chapter 75. Sales are Skyrocketing

In one day, potato chips went from a total unknown to the talk of the town. Everyone wanted them, or knew someone who'd tried them, or had seen them somewhere, improbably peeking out from between the foil-lined pages of an old book. Purple Dawn's students swore up and down that they'd had them for weeks, long before the new students showed up, while at the same time desperately clamoring to get their hands on a packet. The line at the stall wrapped around the whole plaza, and when Rhys finally had to admit he was out of stock, when there were no more potatoes to fry without risking his entire farm, and close up shop, the packets started changing hands at double speed, the price racking up several times over as they repeatedly changed hands.

Rhys, freed of his disguise, busily built more bags, while Bast cooked more chips. He absorbed the impurities from the trash fire lit to cook the chips at a distance, practicing absorbing impurities from further than ever before, but at the same time, he thought. The potato chips were working for now. Imbued with just enough mana to trick the mages into loving them, delicious enough that everyone had to try them. The problem was that he wasn't sure he'd nailed the addictive angle. If the mages figured out the mana thing, it would all be over. Hell, he risked it all ending in a week or two, when the trend died and everyone had had enough potato chips. Mages were fickle beasts, and the fact that they didn't need to eat made it inherently harder to trick them into getting addicted to food. He needed something more. Something to keep it fresh. Not for right now, but for when the trend began to fade.

Back in his world, companies would sometimes rest on their laurels and fail to innovate until after the trend died, then miss out on sales while they scrambled for a new thing to catch the customer's eye. Some trendy brands even died completely or got bought out during this dip in their sales. He wasn't going to wait for that moment. He was going to get ahead of it, and figure out his next innovation now, before the trend faded.

There were two obvious directions to go; three, but one was more specific. For potatoes, he could either swap up the form-factor and try tornado potatoes or potato fries, or swap up the flavor and add herbs and spices to make different flavors of chips. Between the two, he leaned innovating on the form factor over the spicing. Everyone accepted a plain chip; no one could agree on their favorite chip flavor after that. He'd have to do serious market research, figure out what flavors were acceptable and favored in this region, find out what people liked with salty foods... or he could simply innovate the next form of potato and improve sales by diversifying his form-factor into another universally beloved form of potato, rather than try to determine if people of this world would like salt and vinegar, barbecue, cheese, or ketchup flavored chips better.

Ketchup... It was unfortunate, but he hadn't seen any tomatoes in this world. He'd have to go without for now. That was fine, though. Mayonnaise and vinegar were also popular on fries in certain parts of the world. If this region didn't have tomatoes, then they wouldn't be used to tomato flavor, and they'd probably be happy with mayo or vinegar. He'd have to stick with a basic fry for now, too, without any of the specialized coatings, but once he had the fry nailed down, he could figure out the coating step relatively easily. Better to start with simple potato chips, then move to simple potato fries, then move to complex potato fries. Hell, he could toss a tornado-potato in there (or, in other words, a single potato twisted into a long thin line, then pierced on a skewer, to essentially make potato chips on a stick) as a neat trick to draw the eye in his stall's front display.

Innovating the form factor was one thing. That would buy him days, not weeks, months, or even forever. What he really had to do to buy himself the staying power of a true staple rather than the flash in the pan of a trendy food, was innovate the magical content. Mana was enough for now, to give the potatoes that addictive kick that they couldn't quite place, but before long, the more perceptive mages would see through that. He needed that next stage of magical additive to tickle the mages' pleasure centers in a way they couldn't see through as easily as mana. Plus, he already knew how to make fries or even potato tornadoes, but he didn't know how to imbue anything but mana into the foods he made. His first step, then, was to start trying to attach a new magical additive to the chips... but what?

Mana. Techniques. Enlightenment. Rhys pinched his chin. Enlightenment was unironically easier for him to figure out how to attach than the sensation of gaining a skill or technique. He'd realized it right from the start. His path was trash, potato chips were trash, he simply had to apply a trace of his path to the chips, and voila, it was done. Of course, if it were so easy to attach enlightenment to objects, he would have already

done it. Still, he'd experienced objects with a sense of enlightenment to them before. He knew it was possible. He just had to figure out how.

I wonder if Az has any books on that...? Then again, it was such a specific, strange thing to attempt, that he doubted any book would have more than a footnote on it. For most mages, imbuing the sensation of a path into an object was a happy side effect of a job well done, not something they'd go out of their way to attempt for the purpose of selling more potato chips. It was the kind of thing that no one would have written a book about, because no one would have wanted to accomplish it badly enough to write books on it. It was like when he was doing a research project on some tiny, esoteric detail of a historical event, and had to scramble to find any sources, because whatever that esoteric detail he was interested in was simply hadn't been important enough for a large number of people to document it.

He finished putting together the last of tonight's bags and rolled his sleeves up, going to check on the chips Bast had cooked. It was time to get down to business, and see if he could enlighten these chips.

Bast glanced over. "Don't eat too many. We've gotta sell those."

"I'm not eating them. I'm imbuing them with enlightenment," Rhys informed him.

Bast gave him a deadpan look.

"What? I am."

"Whatever you do, make sure you leave enough for tomorrow," Bast said, and turned back to cooking.

Rhys shook his head at Bast's back. "Oh ye of little faith." He took a chip, and promptly crunched it down. Delicious salty potato flavor and a tingle of mana surged through his system, lighting up everything that made him happy.

Bast glanced over his shoulder. He quirked an eyebrow.

Rhys blushed despite himself. It was instinct! Years of training! He picked up a chip... and he ate it! That was just how it worked! He couldn't be expected to bat a thousand when he was so used to sucking down bags' worth of chips. One or two mistakes were expected. In fact, the fact that he'd held himself back to this extent was already impressive. Yes, Bast should be applauding him for only eating a few chips, and not taking bags and handfuls for himself.

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Crunch. Crunch. "Ow!"

Bast retracted his sword, having rapped Rhys' knuckles with the hilt. "Eating the chips does not help them reach enlightenment."

"To the contrary, I posture that by letting the chips face their full potential and act in accordance with their creation to bring me the utmost of pleasure, while simultaneously bringing harm to no one, that they might, in fact, end up in Nirvana—okay, okay!" He backed away, hands behind his back, as Bast advanced, holding the hilt in a very threatening manner. He reached out for another chip, and Bast narrowed his eyes. "I'm really going to imbue this one with enlightenment. I swear."

Bast nodded, watching him silently.

Rhys held the chip between his thumb and forefinger and focused his entire being on it. Not the way he focused his entire being on it when he was eating the chip, but the way he did when he was contemplating the latest development in a trashy novel. And, indeed, why hadn't he done such a thing earlier? Not only were potato chips the height of junk food, but they also were such a source of joy for him. And yet, to think, he'd never once even considered contemplating them, not even taken them as a target that *might* be worthy of contemplation. How wrong-headed he was! This was one of the cornerstones of his enjoyment of trash. One of the original sources of his love of things others considered garbage and junk. And yet, he'd completely disregarded potato chips until now.

Even I have blind spots, he realized. There were topics he considered beneath him, subjects he considered worthless. If he truly walked the path of trash, he needed to broaden his view, encompass all of them, and shower them all with love. It wouldn't be such an easy thing. Even if he succeeded in contemplating all trash and finding room in his heart to love it in this instant, the second he forgot about that trash and let it fall out of his mind, he would lose his capacity to love it. Yes, the path of trash was a long and arduous one, but he wasn't one to give up. He would walk it to its bitter end, until he found love in his heart to embrace all trash equally.

Having realized his failings, he returned his attention to the potato chip in his grasp with redoubled importance. The humble potato chip. This one brimmed with mana, attractive to his mage half, but that wasn't the point. What was the essence of the potato chip? What could be considered its origin, its heart, the beginning and the end of the fried potato sliver? Deliciousness was important. The salt, the crisp. Every single element of the potato, coming together in one tiny slice. Yet, it wasn't merely this slice that was the answer, but every slice. Each slice had to be uniform, not perfectly like the previous, but close enough that the consumer knew that every potato chip in their bag would be almost as good as the previous one, within an acceptable order of standard deviation from the peak average deliciousness. The essence of a potato chip was uniformity. The knowledge that opening any bag of the golden crisps would deliver the same crunch, salt, and golden starchy deliciousness as the previous one had, that any next chip would be almost as good as the previous, that was the essence of the potato chip. That uniformity.

No, that wasn't merely for the potato chip, but for any processed food. To reach into a bag and know what you'd get before you tasted it; that was processed, commercial food. It didn't have to be the utmost in deliciousness, or the perfect texture, or the ideal flavor. It just had to be the same. Good enough, over and over and over again, until 'good enough' became an ideal in and of itself.

The insight shone in Rhys's eyes, and sparkled down the length of his hand, appearing in the potato chip. He opened his eyes, having accomplished his goal, yet with the realization that he hadn't accomplished it at all. Sure, *this* potato chip had a spark of enlightenment in it, but every potato chip had not. And in accordance with his realization, if every potato chip did not have that same uniform enlightenment, then it was no good at all. He might as well stick with the mana chips.

Hmm. Rhys looked at the chip, thinking about it, then tossed it in his mouth.

"Hey!" Bast protested.

"Oh, sorry. It was necessary for full comprehension of the enlightenment I had!" Rhys explained himself.

Bast narrowed his eyes, clearly unconvinced. "No more potato chips for you."

"Come on. I'm gaining enlightenment here. Isn't that the ultimate goal for any mage?"

"I'm not sure you're gaining anything but more potato chips."

Rhys snorted. He *had* sensed the enlightenment imbued in the chip on the way down, and sharply, at that. In conclusion, it was a completely incomplete product. In no way could this be considered the final item. Not only was it a realization that consistency was required that he could only imbue into one, or a few, chips, but on top of that, the evidence of enlightenment was too obvious. Anyone could eat a chip and realize that it had a hint of a path in it, and beyond that, realize that the hint of the path was not their own. Not what he wanted at all! He wanted it to be ephemeral, almost unnoticeable. A path that could be anyone's, so subtle it could barely be felt—a subtlety that would have them reaching for one more over and over again—consistently spread across all chips.

He turned, taking in the pile of golden crisps. *Now that's going to take some doing.*

Obviously, he couldn't manually imbue each chip with enlightenment. It would take too long; they simply wouldn't be able to produce chips at the scale they were required to, in order to sell them to their many, many customers consistently. Because that was another place fad foods failed: if they couldn't succeed at scaling up to match customer demand, then they were nothing but a flash in the pan. Oh, they might be hugely popular in a small region, or hugely popular for a short time, but if everyone couldn't get their hands on the chips, then they were destined to fade into history. Rhys didn't want a fad. He wanted market dominance.

He would have been satisfied with a fad initially, but that was before the Empire started looming over the picture. Now that he knew what he faced down, he knew he had to have the vast power and money that only market dominance could achieve for him. If he had any less, he'd be just another ant ground under the great shoe of the Empire. If he had market dominance, though, he'd either be rich enough to successfully flee, or powerful enough to stand his ground as a business disconnected from any petty local politics during the takeover. Not his ideal stance, no; but a stance that might let him protect his friends and those close to him for long enough for them to mount a proper counterattack or (preferably) escape. He wasn't a coward, but he was a pragmatist, and he knew what it meant when a vastly larger power decided to take on a weaker, smaller, fragmented region with infinite internal politics tearing it apart. The ultimate decision might go either way, but the people on the ground at the border were guaranteed a bad time.

He wasn't foolish enough to think he could prevent Bast from fighting, nor did he want to; but as he'd already expressed to his friend, he didn't want Bast to die meaninglessly. Let him fight and die in a battle that meant something, if he so desired. Hopefully he wouldn't die at all, but regardless, Rhys would do everything in his power to make sure he secured a route to keep Bast alive through the first strikes.

All that to say, that what he absolutely did not need, was the ability to manually imbue singular potato chips with enlightenment. He needed the ability to mark every single potato chip with a scrap of his path, just tiny enough that he could trick the eater into triggering their pleasure centers, but not clearly enough that they knew where the happiness was coming from, or why, except that his potato chips were the only way to accomplish it.

He turned again, taking in the large cauldrons in which they fried the chips and coated them in salt. Still rotating, he took in the field, where the potatoes were lovingly raised by himself and his rat army. A hand raised to his chin, as a thousand thoughts churned behind his eyes. How... when...? But the cooking process...

"What're you looking at me like that for?" Bast asked, frowning.

"Nothing, just wondering. Do you think it's better to imbue the potatoes with a path as they're growing, or when they're getting fried?"

Bast squinted at him. "What?"

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

Chapter 76. Problem Customers

The next day was a down day, relatively. Only a few small ships pulled into the docks, and not all the salesmen bothered to set up their stalls at all, let alone hawk their wares as aggressively as they had the previous day. Rhys's and Bast's stall, on the other hand, maintained a long and winding line. They were still in the fad phase, and Rhys was loving it. Just as he'd promised, gold flowed like water from their customers' pockets directly into their hands. The new ships full of students gave them inquisitive or dismissive looks, unwilling, for the most part, to brave the long line in order to try their wares, but a few joined the lines, or had big, curious eyes, and Rhys knew he'd gotten them hooked from having such a long line alone. Even the ones who gave him dismissive looks had *noticed* him, and that was the most important thing. The second he could stick in the mind of prospective customers, he'd won.

Of course, it wasn't all smooth sailing. Two problems had reared their heads, in the form of a white-haired Empire trainee and a beautiful young lady from the Uninhibited Wealth School.

"I'll take everything this stall has," Laurent declared haughtily, looking down on Rhys. His eyes bored holes into Rhys's face.

Gods, I hope my makeup is passable again today, Rhys thought, looking half-away to keep Laurent from getting too good of a dead-on look at his face. The way the guy was staring, he was no longer worried about being seen through, and more worried about Laurent recognizing him out of costume, despite all the work he'd put in.

Laurent stared, barely keeping his jaw from going slack. *Gods, she's so cute. I want to stand here and bask in her cuteness all day. I wonder if buying out her whole stock will get her attention?*

"Dear customer, our stall has a limit of three bags per person," Bast rumbled in all-but-his-usual-voice, coming up behind Rhys. He glared death at Laurent, his hand reaching to his hip, where he'd obstinately tied a sword despite Rhys's best efforts. *"It's better if no one associates you with swords!" "But how will I protect you?"* In the end, he'd begrudgingly allowed Rhys to buy him a cheap sword in the marketplace, so he would appear to be no more than a merchant showing off sloppy but trendy wares, as opposed to wearing his actual sword into the stall. He'd almost insisted on that, until Rhys pointed out how obvious it was and how easily it was tied to the Sword Saint's apprentice. Only then, when Rhys had brought up his Master, had Bast finally caved.

Laurent startled. He glanced at Bast, giving him the usual wary look. His eyes narrowed. "I was talking to Rina."

“And Rina says there’s a limit of three bags per person!” Rhys chirped, quickly stepping in front of Bast. “Thank you so much, loyal customer. If you want more bags, you can get back in line!”

Laurent’s eyes turned back to Rhys. He nodded and handed over the gold, then obediently got back in the end of the line.

Rhys breathed out. “Jeez.”

“Why not just let him buy out the stall? You’ll get your money then,” Bast said, not understanding.

Rhys shook his finger. “I understand the sentiment, and I *do* like gold, but you’re looking too shallowly. If I sell all our potato chips to him, who experiences our potato chips?”

“He does,” Bast said, already realizing.

Rhys nodded. “Right. And if he’s the only one, then we don’t spread the good news of our potato chips to everyone. In the worst case, he’s only buying them to get my... Rina’s attention, and he plans to give them away afterward. Not only does that limit the spread of my delicious wares to only Empire students, who, if everything goes well, will leave this city after the tournament, but it also means that they’ll devalue my chips, since they’ll be used to getting them for free.

“And don’t forget the knock-on effect of everyone in line right now seeing me sell out all my wares to one guy right in front of them. Essentially, they’ll see it as a betrayal, as me giving away what’s rightfully theirs to some nouveau-riche douchebag. I don’t want that! Potato chips are the food of the people, not the food of the young masters! I mean, I don’t mind young masters eating them, but they should be freely available to everyone. Rich, poor, young, old, *everyone*.”

“That’s... actually very kind-hearted of you,” Bast commented, a little surprised.

“How am I supposed to achieve market dominance if potato chips become a luxury item? I can only addict everyone to their delicious flavor if I sell to everyone.”

“No, never mind, I understand now.”

“Plus, they aren’t expensive to make. If I sell mine as a luxury good, the market value will come crashing down not long after, because someone else will realize they can still make a healthy profit margin at a much lower price point, and I’ll look like someone trying to take advantage of consumers, rather than a rigorous and healthy young capitalist just trying to get ahead in the world.”

“By taking advantage of consumers.”

“I didn’t say I wasn’t. I just said I didn’t want to *look* like I was.”

“Ah.”

Rhys beamed. “All that to say, that I’d rather take a little of everyone’s money, than all of one guy’s money. Besides, think of it this way. If he buys all the chips from my stall today, he won’t have the money to buy any chips tomorrow, and not only that, but his buddies, and himself, will have so many potato chips that they won’t *want* to buy any more. The line at my stall will get shorter, and I’ll have less of the trendy attractiveness that I need to really kickstart potato chips. It’s a lose-lose-lose proposition.”

“I understand now, I was shortsighted. Please forgive me, master,” Bast said half-mockingly, giving Rhys a sarcastic bow.

“It’s good that you understand you were wrong,” Rhys replied smugly. He nudged Bast. “Look lively. Here comes another.”

The other problem customer flaunted up next. She flipped her perfectly-wavy hair and looked down her nose at Rhys and Bast. “One bag, please.”

Lined up behind Anabel were all her sycophants and underlings, all of them equally decked out in the latest trends. Honestly, it was a bit of a headache for Rhys. He wanted to be trendy, but not *that* trendy. Anabel and her people were good customers, but they did give his potato chips an air of being ‘the thing of the moment,’ rather than a thing that was here to stay. Sure, he was happy being the item of the moment, but more than that, he needed to nail the transition into becoming a staple for mage households all over the lands, and Anabel and her people were no help at all in that transition.

At least Laurent and his white-clad trainees looked relatively normal. Not only that, but he’d definitely hooked some of the trainees on flavor alone. They’d sneakily join the line at early hours and right before closing, snitching in to grab their three daily bags, then vanish into the night like the palest shadows imaginable. He was less certain he’d grabbed the hearts of the ones who marched in after Laurent, standing tall and proud to be sure their captain saw that they were good trainees who could follow a lead, but he *knew* he’d grabbed those sneaky trainees’ hearts.

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Of course, he was a little worried he’d grabbed Laurent’s heart a little too hard, but that was a problem for later.

Rhys retrieved her bag and handed it over. “Here you go.”

Anabel caught his wrist. Rhys froze. Behind him, Bast stepped forward, his hand instantly on his blade. Rhys glanced back and shook his head a little. She hadn't done anything aggressive yet. Wait. Not yet.

She turned his hand over, making the bangles jangle, then clicked her tongue. "You're wasting your beauty."

"Huh?" Rhys asked.

"Look at these arms! These beautiful, shapely arms. And that face of yours! Your body! Wasting it all on this boring A-line dress and these out-of-fashion bangles? I'm begging you, Rina, darling. Come with me this afternoon. Let me buy you something nicer. You can't be wearing this last-season fashion. It simply won't do."

Rhys blinked. *Uh... what?*

Behind him, Bast lowered his hand from his sword. The sound of barely-stifled chuckling came from the back of the stall.

"You're the frontwoman of your stall. The face! It's essential that you look beautiful," she asserted. "Let me do this for you. I'm begging you. The potential in your figure! The angles in your face! You could be a model, Rina... let me use you as my model this afternoon."

Rhys licked his lips. He wanted to refuse, but on the other hand, the light in her eyes, the obsession in her voice—this was her path. Even without sensing anything like a path or enlightenment from her, he knew it. He hadn't had the chance to walk someone else's path, or see it expressed in their actions. If he let her take him, he'd get a valuable chance to advance his knowledge of paths—something he couldn't guarantee he'd get in his entire time at Infinite Constellation School.

"Certainly, but my friend Betsy comes with," Rhys agreed.

In the back of the stall, Bast's chuckling choked to silence.

Anabel lifted her chin, peering into the darkness where Bast usually lurked. Her eyes darted left and right, up and down, getting a good look at him. "Hmm. A challenge, but I agree. It will be a valuable chance to train."

All her flunkies behind her gasped, and Rhys could already hear the rumor mill starting. "She's going to be Anabel's model?" "Anabel asked her—she's never asked us!" "How lucky. Let me get a good look! What does Anabel see in her?"

A sinking sensation that he might have bitten off more than he could chew crawled through Rhys, but he pushed it down. The chance to see someone else walk their path was worth it. Such a rare opportunity couldn't be turned down.

Laurent, who'd been ever-so-slowly wandering toward the back of the line so that he could buy more chips, but bask in Rina's cuteness for the maximum time possible on the way there, whipped around. He marched back to the front of the stall. "I refuse!"

"Dear customer, please re-enter the line if you wish to buy more bags or talk to Rina," Bast intoned, resting his hand on his sword once more.

"Rina, come with me tonight. I'll—I'll show you around the ship. I'll take you through our camp. You can see the glory of the Empire, with me!"

Rhys's ears perked up. A chance to scout out the enemy? He couldn't turn that down! But... seeing Anabel's path... but the enemy... but advancing as a mage... but knowing more about his enemy in the tournament and the future...

Anabel scoffed. "I asked her first. She comes with me this afternoon. Perhaps in the evening, she might deign to visit you."

"What a wonderful idea! Yes, indeed. Laurent, please wait until Anabel and I are done. I'll go with you afterward, as long as my friend Betsy can come," Rhys agreed easily. What a wonderful solution! He was starting to see why Anabel was so popular.

Laurent didn't even glance Bast's way. "Of course. Any friend of Rina's is a friend of mine."

"I ain't your friend," Bast grumbled.

Rhys nudged him. Now wasn't the time! He didn't like Laurent—or dislike him, except to the extent that he was something of a problem customer—but the valuable information they could obtain outweighed any consideration of his personal feelings. This was the Empire, the biggest threat to them personally in the tournament, or existentially as mages or members of this region. They couldn't turn down Laurent's invite. "Thank you for the kind invites, Anabel, Laurent. Of course we'd be happy to come with both of you."

Laurent nodded, awestruck just from being in Rhys's presence. Rhys gestured for him to go, and he finally drifted off again, once more wandering toward the back of the line.

Anabel lingered just one moment longer, shooting a harrumph after the retreating Laurent. "I don't know what you see in him, but I certainly hope you see more in me."

Rhys blinked. He looked at her. "Huh?"

Without explanation, she turned on her heel and walked away.

He turned to Bast. "Did I just get hit on?"

“From Laurent? Yeah, are you only realizing now?”

“No, from Anabel! From the girl! Was she hitting on me?”

Bast rolled his eyes. “Maybe on Rina. I wouldn’t know. It didn’t seem like it to me.”

Rhys pinched his chin, staring thoughtfully after Anabel. *He’d* never been hit on, but Rina was so popular... were her charms simply so much that she charmed both men and women alike?

Well, I’m not complaining. Even if they were only hitting on Rina, both Anabel and Laurent had offered him unique opportunities. He wasn’t about to turn either of them down.

He glanced at Bast. “How are the fries and tornadoes coming?”

As a response, Bast clunked down a few wraps of fries—folded together out of stiff paper Rhys had cleaned out of the trash, inspired by the British tradition of serving fish and chips in newspaper—in a tray out front. The next customers surged forward, curious about these new offerings. “The twist thingies are more difficult. It’s a fascinating sword technique, one I haven’t yet mastered.”

“Sword technique...?” Rhys half-asked, then cut himself off. What did he expect, asking a martial artist to slice potatoes? Of course Bast would transform a boring, menial task with a knife into a sword technique. The only wonder was that he himself hadn’t realized such an obvious thing would occur. He nodded. “I trust you can figure it out.”

“I will,” Bast pledged.

The fries didn’t bring as much appeal to the stall as Rhys had hoped, mostly because they sold out so quickly that only the customers at the very front of the line saw them at all. On the other hand, those were some very satisfied customers, able to try both the fluffy deliciousness of a french fry and the crispy crunch of a potato chip at the same time. He’d worried that it might be a bit of potato overload, but from the blissful expressions of his customers, there was no such problem. A few of them even tried the squirt of vinegar he recommended on the fries, but from the somewhat puzzled expressions, he chalked that one up to being a Britishism rather than a good idea.

What was I thinking, looking to the British for cooking advice? British cuisine had a reputation as being bland and brown, except for the curries they’d imported from India... which didn’t count, in Rhys’s opinion, since that was delicious Indian cooking, not British cooking, but who was he to say? In any case, he should have known better than looking to the one spot on the globe known for bad food.

I’ve really got to keep an eye out for tomatoes. This world had potatoes. It had to have tomatoes somewhere. He’d get his ketchup in the end!

Still, there was more than one way to flavor a fry. Ketchup wasn't the be-all end-all. He didn't feel like making mayonnaise—least of all because it required chickens, and he wasn't much for animal-rearing and egg-gathering, plus he had no idea how to speed up or enhance the laying process, but there were non-animal techniques to make fries delicious that he hadn't examined yet. *In the meantime, I should try some seasoned salt.* There was nothing like a fry with a bit of seasoned salt on it, especially Cajun seasoning. The market had a multitude of herbs and spices available. Sure, they were meant to be for potion-making, but most medicinal herbs, especially the cheaper ones, were also used in magical and non-magical cooking. Rhys tucked that away onto his to-do list, and went back to selling potato chips.

They sold out sometime around noon, about when they'd sold out on the previous day. Rhys put up the *CLOSED* sign and took down their banners, waving a reluctant farewell to the customers who'd waited for naught. "Tomorrow! Come back earlier tomorrow. We'll have more tomorrow!"

"Are you sure? We've got two dates tonight. Do we have any time for cooking?" Bast asked, pushing his curls back for the thousandth time.

"Stop playing with your hair, you'll frizz the wig. And yes. We're mages. We don't need to sleep."

"What about growing the potatoes?"

Rhys shot finger guns at Bast. "That's why you're going to stand here and wait for those two to show up, while I run down to the trash heap real quick and get them going!"

Bast sighed dramatically and shook his head. He drew the cheap sword. "I'm going to go practice the tornado slash in the back of the yard. They can find me."

With that, the two of them parted, Rhys running to the trash, Bast walking to the training grounds.

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

Chapter 77. Double Date

Rhys returned to the stall grounds just after midday. He'd tried imbuing the potatoes with his path as they grew, but the potatoes were living things; just like with the bones, they resisted any kind of intent or path-related influence, since they had their own path

and intent. Rather than trying to overcome it, Rhys had backed off. Potatoes were not trash, after all. It was only after he transformed them into junk food that they became trash. Therefore, if he tried to imbue them with his path now, he'd have to fight against their nature. *It's as I thought. I need to imbue it into them during the cooking process.*

The rats had continued to plant new potatoes, and he'd continued to nurture them, filling them with mana for the time being. While he was absorbing trash to give the potatoes mana, he'd also worked on getting the next round of bags ready. Eventually, there'd be enough bags in circulation that he could simply pick them up with the trash, clean them, refill them, and seal them, but he wasn't at that level of saturation yet, so he still had to make new bags.

After that, it was a short stop at a broken mirror to make sure his makeup and clothes were still holding up, and then he'd run back to the plaza, collecting Bast from the training yard along the way. He'd had to absorb the impurities from himself and Bast to remove the stench of trash and sweat, respectively, then fix a few details of Bast's makeup that had gotten melty during his training, but for the most part, their costumes had held up.

Anabel awaited them in the plaza, surrounded by her flunkies, as usual. Rhys felt a twinge of intimidation as he approached her, but pushed it down. He was Rina right now, not Rhys, so even if he fucked up, it wouldn't be a black mark against *his* record, just Rina's. He smiled and waved. "Hi! Hope I didn't keep you waiting?"

One of Anabel's flunkies whirled on him, angry, but Anabel waved her hand, and the flunky instantly fell in line. "Not too long. Now then. All of you, begone."

The flunkies bowed and retreated. A glimmer of jealousy flickered in Bast's eyes.

She nodded at them. "I don't like for others to watch the process. It's far more trial and error than my reputation would have them believe. I'm the kind of person who only wants others to see once it's good enough to be worth showing."

Rhys nodded. He understood. It was a kind of perfectionism, but to him, the most tolerable kind. Holding back and restraining yourself from screaming about every tiny advancement you made, to instead surprise those around you when you were finally satisfied enough with your skills when you showed them off; that was an attitude he himself enjoyed, not least because he didn't have to pretend to like every incremental advancement while their skills were still sub-par.

"So, tell me, Rina. What is your personal fashion preference?"

Rhys blinked, taken aback. He hadn't expected to be questioned about it. Honestly, he'd expected her to drag him along and dress him up in the trendiest new gear, without asking him anything at all. What was Rina's fashion preference?

"Take your time. I understand everyone doesn't have an answer at hand," Anabel said kindly, smoothing her skirts.

"I... like slinky fabrics. Soft clothes that accentuate my frame, and block colors," Rhys said at last. He didn't want a complex design, or something that distracted from the chips. Simple, but attractive, and slinky, shiny fabrics that caught the eye were ideal. His whole body served as his advertisement, so he had to make sure it was one that drew the gaze and held it. "Oh, and I want to be cute." He couldn't lose sight of his salesman nature. Cuteness was king, and he had to stay cute if he wanted to keep winning.

"Cute, but simple. I understand." Anabel nodded. She gestured for him to follow.

"What about Betsy's preferences?" Rhys asked.

"Don't have any," Bast grunted.

Rhys nudged him.

Anabel glanced back, a small smile on her lips. "You dressed her, no? It's obvious enough if you know what to look for; there's a cohesive set of design decisions between your and her outfits. If she let you dress her, then I assumed she would continue to allow you to take the fashion lead."

Rhys raised his brows. *Huh*. He looked at Bast. Now that she'd pointed it out, he could see the cohesiveness in the choices he'd made. Colorblocking. Solid fabrics, with no prints. Simple silhouettes that played into their body shapes. It wasn't obvious at first, but there was an underlying shared philosophy to both the outfits he'd picked.

"You guessed correctly," Bast replied.

"Good. Then, shall we?"

The next few hours were a whirlwind of fabrics and clothes. Anabel had them put on, then take off, every possible combination of skirt, pants, blouse, and dress. The clothes themselves were never the point, but simply seeing how the silhouette looked on their bodies, to pick the correct shape. Rhys, unsurprisingly, leaned toward slender and narrow silhouettes, while Bast's relatively stocky frame pushed him toward broader designs and outfits that shaped his body with subtle color changes and fabric differences, rather than accentuated what existed; alternatively, Anabel picked some relatively racy cuts for him that showed off his muscular limbs. "A swordswoman shouldn't hide her body," she opined, nudging for Bast to rotate to get a better look at the way the triangular neckline showed off his shoulders. She nodded. "There's beauty in a well-honed body, whether it's male or female. You worked hard for those muscles. Put them on display."

Bast glanced at Rhys, totally lost, only for Rhys to nod along in appreciation. “I wanted to give the design hip-slits, but I thought that might be too risqué.

Anabel nodded. “You do run the risk of displaying too much skin, and appearing as a nightwalker rather than a saleslady, but I think these muscular shoulders of hers can be safely displayed without verging into outright sexual.”

“I totally agree. You’re right, the hip-slit would have been too much. I didn’t think to display the shoulders instead.” Rhys pointed. “Then, what about a loose upper torso, into a tight wrap just above the natural waist? That way, we hide her rather bulky silhouette, but still display her shoulders, assets, and relatively small waist.”

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“Not a bad thought. I was leaning toward a tight sleeveless blouse with a pair of long, flowing detached sleeves to add the softness to the design without accidentally adding bulk to the torso.”

“No, no, I agree, that’s a better way to go about it...”

Bast gazed upward, clearly wishing to be anywhere but here. Rhys, on the other hand, was in heaven. This was almost as good as discussing the optimal character design for cosplay-making, and how to best adjust the shape of the garment so the all-important character silhouette remained, while the garment itself fit the reality of the body it was going to be worn by. He’d missed having these discussions with his female friend, and Anabel filled that void.

Not only that, but in these discussions with her, he could sense her path, and how her comprehension of fabric, clothesmaking, and fashion combined into something greater. The words they exchanged weren’t mystical or esoteric, but they nonetheless expressed an ephemeral and mystical understanding into Rhys’s mind, something he knew he couldn’t comprehend, nor did he truly want to. Yet, at the same time, his understanding of his own path advanced, as he got a look at someone else’s path from outside. He wasn’t directly gaining, but indirectly gaining.

Curious, he pulled up his stats.

Rhys Foundling | 15 | Core Formation (Tier 2)

Title: Trash-born

Skills:

Hunger Resist 15

Survivalist 30

Pain Resist 47

Scavenging 35

Less is More 42

Sewing 12

Blow Mitigation 27

Self-Regeneration 31

Mana Manipulation 20

Improvised Weapon Proficiency 11

Heat Resist 18

Acid Resist 24

Impurity Resist 29

Poison Resist 27

Cold Resist 12

Alchemy 7

Herbalism 8

Speed Reading 12

Bluff 4

Enlightenment 5

Speed Picking 4

Forging 4

Crafting 7

Disguise 10

Path:

Trash Intent 12

Trash Body 8

Trash Aura 4

Trash Step 5

Trash Manipulation 9

Trash Enchanting 2

Trash Talk 5

He nodded. Two levels in Enlightenment, a skill that usually struggled to level, let alone jump two levels. This, and his chip enlightenment, had been worth it.

At last, Anabel saw them off, promising to return with clothes the next day. Rhys waved her goodbye, a big smile on his face.

He leaned toward Bast. "That was definitely a date."

"No, that was a pair of girls hanging out doing girl things. You have a girl friend. Not a girlfriend, a girl friend," Bast countered.

Rhys waved his hand. "Eh, good enough."

"It's completely different."

"Still got to talk to a girl."

Bast squinted at him. "Why are you like this? You like things girls like, you... aren't hideous, and your personality could be worse. So why do you act like talking to girls is impossible?"

"Talking to girls isn't impossible. I have lots of female friends. Talking to a *girl* is impossible. She's a *girl*, not a girl." Anabel was a pretty girl. A popular girl. A girl with power. She wasn't just a female human, she was a *girl*, and she'd weaponized that girlishness. It was the difference between chatting with his female friends and fellow nerds, and chatting with the popular girl in high school. One was whatever, no problem. The other was a harrowing trial that he might not survive with his high school reputation intact. Of course, he didn't really care about that anymore, but nonetheless, Anabel still had pretty-girl, popular-girl allure. She was different, and she knew it. No, *everyone* knew it.

Bast just shook his head. "I don't get you right now."

"But you do get me sometimes, and that's better than most people can claim. Come on. We've got a meeting to go to."

Bast chuckled at him. "That one is *definitely* a date."

"Incorrect. It's a information-gathering operation."

"...That Laurent thinks is a date."

"That's why I brought you, so he knows it isn't a date."

"Pretty sure he didn't get the message."

Rhys shrugged at him. "What do you want me to do? Back out and not learn more about the Empire?"

"No, no, I think you should go through with it, I just want to make sure you're not deluded about Laurent's expectations."

Rhys opened his mouth, then squinted at Bast. "I'm fifteen."

Bast raised his brows and shrugged.

"Do people fuck at fifteen?" Rhys earnestly asked. He sure hadn't. But he hadn't fucked at twenty, or disappointingly high numbers following twenty, either. As a king-tier nerd loser, he didn't count as normal when it came to anything social like that. He knew kids were fucking in high school far before he thought they should be, but fifteen seemed young to him.

"People are married for years by fifteen. Some people have families by fifteen," Bast pointed out.

"Yeah, but that's peasants. If they aren't fucking by fifteen, that's half their lives over. What about mages?"

"Mages are still people."

Rhys squinted at him. "...Is that a yes?"

"Gods, I really don't know if you're joking or not."

"I'm barely people, Bast. Come on. Toss me a bone."

“Yes, Rhys. Yes. Mages are fucking at fifteen. And Laurent is at least seventeen. He’s several inches taller than you, in case you didn’t notice.”

“I did notice, but I thought it was just my delicate and adorable frame, not an age difference.” To be fair, he was still mentally far older than anyone else in his ‘age range,’ and he hadn’t hit mage ages to make that meaningless yet. He planned to do zero fucking until he was much, much older, and if his first life was any indication, there was little danger of that happening regardless of what he did. The problem was that he saw Laurent or Bast’s face, and wasn’t deliberately remembering how old he looked, he thought “a child,” not “older than me.” It’d been so easy the first time around to tell who was older or younger, but this time around, they all just looked like children to him.

“You’re too far gone,” Bast muttered, rolling his eyes.

“I’m joking, joking. Anyways, thank you, but don’t worry. If he tries anything funny, I’ll beat him up. And if I can’t beat him up, that’s what you’re there for.”

Bast nodded. “Don’t drink anything. Don’t eat anything. Keep an eye on your mana and stay aware of any potential manipulation.”

“Bast, come on. Do you think he’ll try something like that?” Rhys asked, half-laughing.

Dead serious, Bast nodded. “Saw it all the time back at mom’s place.”

Rhys’s smile died on his face. He nodded, looking down. “Right. Sorry.”

He’d almost forgotten that Bast had spent his earliest years at a brothel, hiding in his mother’s rooms before he’d decided to take his chances and run away from that place. He’d seen more sexual violence than Rhys had seen sex in his lives.

Bast thumped him on the shoulder. “Just keep your eyes open, and you’ll be fine. I’ll be right there with you.”

“Got it.” Rhys took a deep breath, resetting his mindset. This wasn’t a zero-threat hangout date with a fellow costume enthusiast. This was a serious threat to his future as a potato-chip salesman. He didn’t think Laurent would follow through, if he did actually drug him and make attempts, but he was worried about getting his disguise ruined. He rather liked this one, and it was doing good work for him. It wouldn’t do if he had to suddenly kill off Rina and come up with a new saleswoman. If Laurent found out he wasn’t actually Rina, but instead Rhys, he’d be forced to do just that.

But he couldn’t give up now. The information about the Empire and the threat it posed, personally and existentially, were too valuable for him to turn back. So instead, he gritted his teeth and walked into the lion’s den.

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

Chapter 78. Into the Lion's Den

Laurent was waiting for him by the chip stand, one hand resting on the table. He looked up as the two of them approached, and his whole face lit up. Rhys thought to Bast's warnings, and almost chuckled. How could someone so harmless and puppy-like do anything like that?

But then, people were strange in love, and this was the enemy, who had mistakenly fallen for his female self. He hardened his heart and reminded himself not to let his guard down. This was the Empire. The ultimate threat before him. Underestimating this man would lead to not only the destruction of the potato chip stand, but potentially, his downfall as a human being.

Honestly, between the destruction of his potato chip stand and his downfall as a human being, he'd much rather fall as a human being. He was quite comfortable with being trash, but he wanted to keep making money selling junk food to mages for as long as he could. Better to be caught as a crossdresser and ruin his personal reputation than ruin his future as a potato chip seller. Of course, in this case, getting exposed would lead to both, so he firmed his heart, girded his loins, and stepped forward to greet Laurent.

He didn't make it more than a step before a pair of laughing boys stepped out of one of the taverns that lined the square and knocked into him and Bast. Still playing at being Rina, who was delicate and not much of a mage, Rhys stumbled over, falling into Bast, who didn't budge an inch. He caught the offending boy by his shoulder and shoved him away, letting Rhys pass by to stand on his other side. Both boys smelled thickly of alcohol, clearly enjoying their relative freedom away from their home school to indulge a bit.

"Idiots," Rhys muttered. Trashy idiots, though. He flicked his gaze of the two of them. Day-drinking fools who acted before they thought? There was a place for people like them, and it was caught up in schemes enacted by people like him. He made a note of their faces for later, and went to walk past.

Bast stood still, frozen like a board. Rhys furrowed his brows and glanced at him. Bast glanced away, turning his head from the boys. Rhys's frown deepened. He nudged Bast, trying to remind him that they were ladies, they'd succeeded at disguising themselves all day, so why would it stop working now... and then he looked at the boys again. Their robes were less grand than Bast's, touched with pale green instead of pure white, but they were a familiar design. Not unlike the masked Bast's attire. He glanced at his friend's face, raising his brows in an unspoken question.

Bast nodded, just a hair, and Rhys's eyes widened. These were people he knew. Whether they were students at whatever school the Sword Saint lingered at, or apprentices of the Sword Saint's sycophants, they knew Bast, and Bast knew them.

Well, well, well. I guess we're testing our disguises right here, right now, right in front of Laurent. Rhys glanced at Laurent, then let out a quiet sigh. Of course this was how this went down.

Laurent's eyes widened. He pushed away from the stand, not sure if he should intervene or not.

One of the drunken boys stumbled back a few steps, then caught himself and looked at the two girls. His eyes flicked up and down, and an appraising gleam appeared in them. He quickly grabbed his fellow and bowed to the two of them. "My apologies, beauties. Me and my friend here were just passing through."

Disguise 10 > 12

"It's no trouble, no trouble at all." Rhys beamed and put a hand on Bast's shoulder, pushing him forward. *Keep moving. Now isn't the time.*

"Trouble? Oh, I'd hope not. You see, me and Jacor here—myself, I'm Luc, nice to meet you, I'm sure—we were just having a night out on the town, and I said to myself, wouldn't it be nice if he had a couple of lovely ladies along to accompany us?"

"Ah, that's what we're missing. Ladies!" Jacor declared belatedly. He staggered a little where he stood, well beyond where he should have stopped with the liquor. Catching his footing for a second, he swayed in place, then squinted at Bast. "Do I... know you?"

Bast turned his head slightly away, using the wig to hide his face.

"Of course you do! We're Rina and Betsy. We run the potato chip stall... and I'm really afraid we have a prior engagement," Rhys said, smiling awkwardly and pushing past the two.

"What? Rina and Betsy... I had no idea we were in the presence of celebrities!" Luc stepped forward to block Rhys's escape. "Come, come! I'll pay for the first round. I won't take no for an answer."

"I think you will take no for an answer," Rhys countered dryly, getting tired of this guy's antics. If this was half of what Bast had to put up with from the sycophants, then he felt for the man. This much was already obnoxious enough. He really wasn't the violent type, but he felt the itch to get a little violent with these annoying guys. They were sticky as bubblegum on the sidewalk. They'd be useful if he needed to sic 'em on someone and distract them for a long time, but they sure weren't useful here, getting in the way of their meticulous plans. If these idiots knew they were preventing him and Bast from

gathering valuable information on the Empire... He chuckled under his breath. He was pretty sure their masters would have words with them.

That was no use to him now, but it was a welcome thought.

Bast drummed his fingertips on his hilt. His muscles bulged with anger, a vein twitching in his forehead. If these were people he didn't know, Rhys was sure that sword would have already left its sheath. As it was, if he drew his sword, he was just as likely to give himself away as to scare them off.

Rhys raised a brow and touched his storage ring, where the broken hilt laid, always ready to be pulled. He'd rather give himself away than give Bast away. One of them had a reputation, and it wasn't him.

Bast shook his head minutely. It wasn't worth it... though Rhys could see the twitch in his brow and the unspoken *not yet*.

Laurent pushed away from the stall decisively and walked over, striding with all the authority of a military trainee, a hand already on his blade.

"Oh, it's Betsy! Betsy, your eyes... they're so pretty," Jacor said, slurring a bit. He staggered in place, reaching out to catch himself by Bast's shoulder.

Bast casually sidestepped. Jacor's reach missed, and he crashed to the ground.

Luc startled. He jumped over and heaved Jacor to his feet, offering the other hand to the girls... or so he thought, anyways. "Come on. Don't say no."

"Excuse me. Those two have an appointment with me," Laurent declared primly. He drew to a halt, his back straight as a board, shoulders squared, chest puffed up in all his officious glory.

Oh dear gods, just when I thought it couldn't get worse. For a split second, he'd really, actually thought Laurent might save them, but... could the man puff his chest up a little more, or maybe square his jaw a little more punchably? Rhys had never wanted to sock someone in the face more, not even when he'd punched the shit out of Cynog.

Luc drew himself up in a mockery of Laurent's pose. Being drunk, he wavered a bit where he stood, but that only made it all the better as a mockery. He swaggered around to face Laurent instead of the girls. "Excuse *me*, I think you'll find they have an appointment with—"

Rhys drew Bast's sword and hammered the butt of the blade into Luc's temple. Luc, facing Laurent, never saw the blade coming. His eyes rolled up, and he went down like a sack of potatoes—Rhys would know.

Jacor staggered, surprised by the loss of his friend's quite literal physical support, then stared down at his newly-unconscious friend. "Whaaa..."

Smack!

Jacor joined Luc on the ground, revealing a white-gloved hand in the place of his head. Laurent lowered his hand and dusted off his gloves. "Quite unfortunate how they both passed out drunk here."

"Quite unfortunate indeed." Rhys tossed the sword back to Bast, who sheathed it with a practiced hand. He nodded at Laurent. "Shall we?"

Laurent gestured for him to go ahead, and Rhys obliged. Bast trailed at his heel, watching Laurent with a suspicious glare. Laurent didn't notice, too busy basking in Rina's presence. He reached out a trembling hand, daring to touch her.

Bast's hand lashed out and knocked it down. His hand moved so fast that it was only a blur of motion, swallowed up in the gray light of dawn.

Laurent blinked, confused. He looked at his hand, then looked at Rina's arm again. Once more, he reached out.

Once more, an invisible force knocked his hand away.

Seriously? Rhys mouthed, giving Bast a look.

Bast said nothing in response, but he did grin just a hair.

Rhys snorted. Whatever gave him a laugh, he supposed. He nodded at Laurent. "I don't recall seeing this uniform before."

"This is our dress uniform. It, ah. Seemed proper for the occasion," Laurent said, suddenly a bit bashful.

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"Oh," Rhys said. Bast gave him a smug look. *I was right*, he mouthed.

Rhys rolled his eyes. It didn't matter what Laurent thought this was. It was nothing but an information-gathering operation to him. If he broke the boy's heart afterward, so be it. First loves were destined to end in heartbreak, anyways.

"Sorry about your sword," he murmured, leaning in toward his friend.

Bast waved his hand, dismissing it. "Better for you to strike than me. They don't know your swordplay half as well."

So he had understood. Rhys nodded. If that was settled, then there was no need to bring it up any further. He turned to Laurent instead. "I've never seen the Empire. Tell me, what's it like?"

Laurent glanced at him, then quickly away, as if looking at him for too long burned. "It's very different from this. Everything is clean, neat, and tidy. Everything has its proper place. There's none of this..." He gestured vaguely at the fallen boys behind them. "Tomfoolery."

"What? No trash?" Rhys asked, shocked to his core. For a split second, he even forgot to use his girl voice.

Laurent furrowed his brows slightly at that, but shook his head. "No, no. It's no paradise. We have garbage heaps, but all the garbage goes there. It isn't just... flying around everywhere."

Rhys pressed a hand to his chest, relieved. "Oh, thank goodness."

Bast chuckled, shaking his head at Rhys.

"Um... but there are much more wondrous things than the sanitation department!" Laurent said, recovering. He waved his hand at the streets around them. "Our streets are broad, many times as broad as this, and always perfectly paved, the stones polished and white. There's no such thing as a filthy, narrow street...all the old streets have been torn out and redone. The same with the old buildings, they've been replaced. Everything is shiny, orderly, and new. There's none of this chaos and decay."

"Really? But isn't that sad? All that history, ripped up and thrown away," Rhys said, though at the same time, his trash senses tingled powerfully. Thrown away? Thousands of years of construction, relics, and manuals, all thrown in the trash? What valuable, powerful trash! What furiously energetic garbage! If he went through that, what wondrous things could he learn? What incredible power could he gain, were he to burn it?

"No, no, it's all worthless," Laurent assured him, but he wasn't listening. All he could see in his mind's eye were those glittering piles of trash.

A moment later, his brows furrowed. Would it count as trash, though? One woman, one Empress, true, had designated it trash. But what about all the scholars who mourned for the loss of the manuals? What about all the historians, who cried for the history ripped up and tossed aside? Whose will mattered more, the many, but powerless, or the one, but powerful?

I guess I can only find the trash and find out, Rhys thought, making a tiny mental note to visit the Empire after the tournament, if it didn't attack, and lavish himself upon its beauteous trash pits. Worst case, he came away with an entire Empire's worth of highly

valued manuals he could sell for an outrageous upcharge. Best case, he returned with all the fury and power of the trash at heel.

“Take me with you,” Bast murmured. Rhys glanced at him, and he nodded. “I know what you’re thinking. Take me with you.”

Rhys laughed. He nodded. “Sure thing.”

“Take you where?” Laurent asked.

“Oh, we were just thinking it might be fun to visit the Empire,” Rhys said.

Laurent beamed. “It sounds beautiful, doesn’t it? Oh, its highly egalitarian, too. Everything is determined by your own personal power and strength. A true meritocracy.”

Rhys frowned, confused. “You mean, the same as it is here?”

“No, no, much better. Here, your talent and potential, determined by birth, determine your future strength. We have overcome that. No matter how talented you’re born, no matter how much potential you have, everyone is equal in the Empress’ eyes. As long as you’re loyal and hardworking enough, the Empress will gift you strength to let you rise above your birth talents.”

“What?” Rhys asked, totally lost. Was this like his own efforts to reforge his core and body? But it didn’t sound like it. It sounded like Laurent was describing a way to completely negate that, not incrementally work to better it.

“In the Empire, everyone’s core is removed at birth. It’s taken away by the Empress, who nurtures it, along with everyone else’s, to higher Tiers of strength. If you display a hardworking spirit and loyalty to the Empire, she gifts you a core. Every time you commit enough meritorious acts for the Empire, and behave loyally and in accordance with the Empire’s laws, you rank up within our military, and qualify to receive a higher tier core.”

Rhys and Bast both stared at Laurent in jaw-dropped horror. After a moment, Rhys shut his mouth, and closed Bast’s with a quick tap as well. Still, his resolve to face down the Empire to his dying breath had only strengthened. What kind of perverse country was that? Controlling every piece of a person’s potential, down to the strength of their core and the quality of their magic. Only loyalists could receive cores, huh? Then that meant there was absolutely no escape for dissidents, or even those who simply wanted to live differently from the Empire’s edicts. They had to remain within the Empire, or consign themselves to be naught but powerless mortals, totally incapable of fighting back against the Empire.

At the same time, he had to admit there was a cruel, cold logic to the thought. If he were a repressive dictator, and he had the ability to remove people’s cores and only hand out

cores to loyal, law-abiding citizens, what could be better? A rebellion? Ha! That was a joke. At best, the rebels would be mortals. Outside forces, regathering their strength for an attack inside the Empire's borders? What strength? Anyone who spoke against the Empire, thought against the Empire, lifted a finger against the Empire—hell, jaywalked against the Empire, threw away their hope of ever obtaining magehood in the same instant. Horrifying, but logical all the same.

The ability to freely extract and replace cores. The Empress is a foe far beyond my power, Rhys realized, touching his own core. He could do nothing against that. Hell, even Bast had no power in front of a force like that. He glanced at his friend, and his desire to keep him well out of the Empress's striking distance redoubled.

Blithely unaware of Rhys and Bast's horror, Laurent smiled and tapped his solar plexus, behind which the core sat. "This is already the third core I've had in my life. Incredible, isn't it?"

"Y-yeah, incredible," Rhys agreed. "What happens to the people without cores?"

"Oh, nothing. Many mortals are born without them. They simply remain mortals until they prove themselves worthy of a core."

Rhys furrowed his brows. *Is that true?* He'd been in a trashy body, and it had still had a core. He made a note to check it in the library, but remained highly suspicious of Laurent's fact. Sure, maybe people could live without a core, but he didn't think anyone was born without a core. "What about your path?"

Laurent beamed. "We all walk the Empress's noble path. We seek after her own insights, and strive to gain greater understanding of her driving power."

Rhys's brows shot up. He exchanged a look with Bast, terrified. An entire country of core manipulators? The Alliance was already dead and gone. Clearing his throat, he clarified, "You mean, you can all handle cores? Every single mage in the Empire?"

"What? Of course not. No, only the Empress has that power. That's a secret art she keeps for herself. And thank goodness, too. Can you imagine what a rogue core manipulator might do? We're fortunate it's our good and benevolent Empress who is the only one who can handle cores."

"Truly," Rhys said, for the first time agreeing wholeheartedly with Laurent's sentiment. Another look shot between him and Bast; this time, of relief. When he thought about it, though, it made more sense. After all, one core manipulator gone rogue, stealing cores they didn't 'deserve' and empowering themselves, and the whole control scheme was gone. Better to consolidate that power into one person, or so a dictator would think.

After a moment, he nodded at Laurent. "Then you don't grow your own core or expand your own core at all?"

“Well, it’s not possible to be a mage without doing that,” Laurent said, agreeing with Rhys’s lived experience. “But, well, it’s not *your own* core, you understand? All cores belong to the Empress. When the core advances, we hand it back to the Empress over keeping it for ourselves. In rare cases, the mage who advanced the core will be allowed to keep the advanced core, but that’s only in rare cases. It involves all kinds of paperwork, vouchers, special allowances... it’s rare. If the Empire isn’t at active war, and the mage isn’t actively involved in vital research, it’s almost unheard of. After all, there’s always a backlog of mages at the next rank who’ve been cleared to receive the next tier of core, but haven’t gotten a core yet. More mages eligible to rank up than there are cores to go around.”

“Right, right, of course,” Rhys agreed.

“The Empress says it prevents the tyranny of luck. That this way, only the deserving become mages, instead of those who by happenstance, have some talent. Talent is blind to morality, righteousness, and loyalty, but our Empress can fairly judge them all, and ensure the worthy are given magehood.”

Rhys nodded. It was a good idea in theory, but it broke down in practice. If the Empress really did pick only good-hearted people to become mages, then it prevented people like Cynog from gaining power. But how perfectly did the Empress really pick her mages? How closely did she inspect each person she gave a core to? How important was loyalty, over righteousness and morality?

For that matter, would he or Bast qualify as righteous or moral enough to receive cores? They were nothing. In his case, trash talent. In Bast’s case, the son of a whore. Would the Empress smile upon their shitty little orphanage and hand them cores? Or would she prefer to hand them to existing mage families, and those with money and power?

In a region that lived and died by a meritocracy, sure, the tyranny of chance was eliminated; but so was the chance for those who traditionally lacked power to gain power. Instead, those in power would hand power to their own, and never again would power filter down to the little guys, to give those like Rhys and Bast the chance to become something—*anything*.

There would always be a tyranny of something. In Rhys’s opinion, better the tyranny of chance than the tyranny of one single mage.

Laurent noticed his expression and frowned. “You don’t agree?”

“Ah, well... Rhys shrugged. “I just thought that Ba...etsy and I wouldn’t get cores, in your Empire.”

“Why not?” Laurent asked, shocked. A horrified look passed over his face as a thousand immoral and unrighteous crimes ran through his head.

“Well, we’re...” Rhys glanced at Bast. “Orphans.”

“No, no! Anyone can get a core, as long as they commit to military service, and are good of heart. Birth has nothing to do with it,” Laurent assured them.

“Nothing?” Bast asked, a challenge in his voice.

Laurent grimaced. “Well, there’s always the nobility, but... it isn’t as if there isn’t nobility in the Alliance, right?”

“Right, right,” Rhys agreed easily. The Empire had nobility? Ha. The meritocracy didn’t even pass a basic glance. Sure, sure, it was a meritocratic nobility, *suuure*.

All this time, too, he’d been putting aside the ‘loyalty’ part that Laurent kept repeating. That was its own problem. Any dictator who demanded absolute loyalty had the stink, to Rhys’s nose. The stench of pure evil. Honestly, any *person* who demanded absolute loyalty had that stink, let alone a ruler. Loyalty was something offered, not something commanded.

He nodded at Laurent. As long as he was here, he might as well get his money’s worth of knowledge. “So, those cores, how do techniques work? Skills?”

Laurent babbled on and on about the way a given core worked versus a natural core, until at last, he drew to a halt at the docks. Gesturing at the giant white ship, he smiled tentatively at Rhys. “Would you like to see the ship?”

“Would I,” Rhys said, his eyes shining with earnest interest. Since the first time he’d seen one of those huge multiple-mast flying ships, he’d wanted to get inside one. Who didn’t want to explore a huge ship, let alone a huge *flying* ship? And not some boring modern container ship, but a historic ship at that. The only problem was, his little school barely owned a skiff, let alone a three-master, or this giant galleon, but now Laurent had invited him on board the biggest flying ship he’d ever seen. His childhood dreams were all coming true right now.

Bast nudged him. He nodded back. *Yeah, I know. I’ll keep my eyes open and take care.* Still, this was his chance to be on a huge flying magical ship. He couldn’t turn that down.

A knowing chuckle from his friend was his only answer. They stepped forward, past the point of no return.

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- Chapter 79. Belly of the Beast

Chapter 79. Belly of the Beast

Laurent glanced around, checking that there was no one around. He gestured the two of them on. This was totally out of character for him, breaking the rules like this, and yet, it was so exhilarating. His heart raced with excitement that he hadn't felt since he'd gotten his Tier 2 core. Sure, all of the other students were out using their newfound freedom to get absolutely hammered, some of them were off pursuing new loves, and the rest were desperate to be anywhere but on their stale old boat, but it still made his stomach lurch. He was breaking the rules. Him! Breaking the rules! He couldn't believe it. He wasn't that kind of rebel.

But it was worth it. He got to bask in Rina's light for just a little longer. Even if that annoying clod Betsy was along for the ride, it didn't detract from the fact that Rina was here, right next to him, so close he could almost touch—

Something invisible smacked his hand down again. He narrowed his eyes at Betsy. She glared back and turned away, pretending not to know what happened.

Laurent shook out his hand. Rina glanced back, and he quickly smiled, hiding his sour glare. Eventually, he'd get through Betsy. He was the top-ranked sword talent at his academy, one considered worthy of fighting the strongest swordsman of his generation. He could defeat any swordsman or woman of his age in the Empire, and he was confident in taking on the Alliance, with the exception of one person... but it wasn't like *Betsy* was the Sword Saint's apprentice. He chuckled at the very thought. The Sword Saint's apprentice might have been a mysterious masked man, but he was definitely a *man*, not a woman. Besides, why on earth would the Sword Saint's apprentice be selling potato chips? The very thought was absurd. The Alliance's greatest sword talent had better things to accomplish. In fact, he was probably studying the sword right now, honing his abilities in preparation for their oncoming clash. Laurent smiled, a little smug. In fact, he wouldn't be shocked if that Solaire fellow wasn't as afraid of him, as he was of Solaire.

The man in question sneezed, then glanced around. "I feel like someone was talking behind my back just now."

"Huh? Weird," Rhys replied. He shrugged to himself a moment later. Bast was the Sword Saint's apprentice, after all. It wouldn't be shocking if someone was talking about him.

Laurent cozied up beside them, *coincidentally* brushing shoulders with Rina as he squeezed by. Bast's eyes narrowed, and Laurent gave him a smug look back.

Rhys rolled his eyes. *Grow up*, he thought, but he didn't say it. They were still kids, after all. A little childishness was to be expected.

"Move quietly. Technically, I'm not supposed to let you on here," Laurent whispered.

Rhys nodded and gave him a thumbs up. "We can do quiet."

"As long as no one gets any funny ideas about quietude," Bast rumbled threateningly, with a glare Laurent's way.

Rhys nudged him yet again. Now wasn't the time to scare off Laurent. They still had to see the boat! Ship, whatever.

He stepped onto white-washed boards. A vast expanse of ship spread before him, so vast that he barely felt like he was on a ship. It stood steady in the air, not really a surprise; it wasn't as if it were displacing air to stay afloat, but merely hovering on some magical technique completely unrelated to air. *Then again, for all I know, it is displacing air, and it's simply the fact that the air is wildly insufficient to move this monster ship that leaves it so steady.* The masts stretched high overhead, as wide around at their bases as Rhys was tall. Cannons lined the deck on either side, but they were fastened down, well and truly bound to the deck, their mouths plugged and their wheels chocked. They wouldn't be fired any time soon. Not that Rhys would expect the Empire to strike before the tournament. Better to impress upon everyone their utter dominance in all arts before destroying them in battle, and if they failed in the tournament, they could quietly withdraw without ever admitting they were going to attack.

Not that he believed in the fairy-tale world where that was possible, but who knew? Wilder things had happened when a country was controlled by one megalomaniac. He'd stayed awake through enough European History to learn that much.

He put his thoughts to the back of his mind and stared around in wide-eyed wonder. It was so beautiful. This ship was everything he'd ever dreamed of. So big, so beautiful, so... devoid of trash. Rhys peered over the edge, curious where they were dumping their garbage, but saw nothing. Maybe they hadn't dumped any yet? Surely they weren't storing it.

Laurent glanced around, clearly excited to be here and breaking the rules. He waved them on, toward a porthole in the deck. "Come on, this way."

Rhys looked up. If there was anywhere they were hiding their garbage, it certainly wasn't on this pristine deck. There was only one answer: to go deeper. Yes, that was his only motivation: to find the garbage, and also gather information. Two only motivations. But it definitely wasn't his desire to see more about the giant magic ship that drew him downward, after Laurent.

"How many people can fit in this thing?" Rhys asked, stepping down the ladder.

“Upward of five hundred, comfortably,” Laurent said. He followed Rhys down. “It’s not at capacity right now, but if it’s packed full, I think it can hold over a thousand.”

“That’s a lotta people,” Rhys commented. He looked around. The immediate exterior of the porthole wasn’t super exciting, but there were more cannons down here. Like the cannons topside, these glimmered with mana, full of enchantments and empowerments. He didn’t want to see these cannons fire. Given the lack of black powder or cannonballs around, he really doubted that the cannons fired conventional shot. More likely, they fired some kind of terrifying spell. Fireballs, or explosions, or who knew? Giant projections of huge ships that fired cannons of their own? The sky was the limit when magic was involved.

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Still, this particular section of ship could be a little more interesting.

Laurent noticed his slightly disinterested look and quickly scrambled into motion. “This way. There’s so much more ship to see!”

They got the full tour of the ship. By the time Laurent was done, they’d seen everything from the brigs to the crow’s nest. There wasn’t a single square foot of the ship that he didn’t show to Rhys and Bast. They saw the kitchen, they saw the mess, they saw the sleeping quarters and the officer’s quarters— “no one but the teachers in those right now, so they’re mostly empty,” Laurent added.

The whole ship was incredibly orderly. Not a single chair out of place. Barely a scratch on the white paint. Rhys looked everywhere he could, but he couldn’t find a scrap of garbage. There was no such thing as a few hundred kids with no garbage, though, and he *knew* he’d given them plenty of chip bags to throw out somewhere. *I’ll have to look more closely under the ship.*

Laurent spent a lot of time peeking around corners and checking for the other students. Rhys had already scanned the ship with his mana and sensed no one, save for a few powerful presences in the officer’s quarters that were all installed in place, and didn’t seem too interested in a few kids breaking the petty rules. As much as this was a military academy, it seemed like the teachers were still willing to look aside when a few young students decided to make some harmless decisions. It ran counter to the Empress’s entire tightly-ran ship and her complete control, but there were always levels to control, and layers to obedience.

I wonder how many of the teachers deeply believe in the Empress’ philosophy? Rhys found himself wondering. As much as she claimed she ran a meritocracy, she still had a nobility. Not only that, but, well, who would be the best at magic, know the most spells, and be the most deserving of merit when the Empress took over? Some random mortal trash who’d never touched magic, or a mage who’d trained for hundreds of years, delving deep on their chosen topic and knowledge area? It would also be far easier for

the Empress to win the approval of the existing mages if she, well, didn't change much of the status quo.

Besides, Laurent seemed to be having such a great time with it that he didn't feel the need to break the boy's illusion.

At last, they returned to the top of the deck. Laurent walked ahead, slowly spinning, his arms out to take in the whole ship. "What do you think?"

"I'm thinking a lot, that's for sure," Rhys replied. Thinking about how he didn't want to be under the Empress's rule, anyways.

Laurent paused, then. He fidgeted, nervous. "Er, there's one... one last thing."

Bast's hand dropped to his sword.

Laurent walked to a cloth-covered box, then whipped the cloth off. Underneath it, a steaming hot meal awaited them... or had, several hours ago. By now, it was cold and congealed. Not only that, but there were only two servings. Not enough for Bast.

"Oh, let me—" Laurent rushed over to fix things, but before he could, there was a thump as Bast sat down at one of the two plates.

Laurent froze, his hands hovered in the midst of lighting a candle. "I didn't—"

Rhys sat opposite Bast and beamed at Laurent. "You didn't?"

"...bring the third plate over. I'll be right back."

Laurent vanished, and Bast started chuckling, then laughed out loud. He thumped the table.

"What?" Rhys asked.

"He was so deeply lost, watching you, and you were just..." He mimed peeking under the table. "Ooh, is there trash over here? How about over here?"

"Oh, come on. I wasn't that obvious."

"You were pretty obvious."

"Laurent didn't notice."

"Laurent doesn't qualify as someone who can notice."

"What does that mean?"

“You know what that means.” Bast stood. “We should go.”

Rhys stood as well. “Yeah.” He didn’t sense any dangerous impurities in the food Laurent had prepared, which was honestly a bit of a letdown. As much as Bast had talked it up, he thought he was going to get to try his hand battling some poison impurities, instead of just impurities that happened to also be highly toxic. If there were no new and fresh impurities in the food, then he wasn’t interested.

No reason to stick around and get Laurent’s hopes up too much, either. He was fine with playing with the enemy’s heart, or whatever the hell this qualified as, but there were limits to it, and he figured it was about time to dip. Any more, and it would just become rude.

He followed Bast off the ship. The two of them sprinted down the docks and off toward the forest, quickly vanishing amidst the woods. They’d learned enough, but they had quotas to meet, and those potato chips wouldn’t cook themselves.

“Hey! Sorry it took me a minute. I was out of alfredo so I had to twist open a can of red, but—” Laurent stared at an empty ship. The plate drooped in his hand, spilling pasta over the whitewashed deck. The sauce splattered like blood. “—I’m back, now...”

Two empty seats, neatly replaced to where they’d been to start. Two untouched plates. It was as if this were all a dream, and he hadn’t met the two girls at all.

Laurent’s heart trembled. Did this mean... did this mean...

He grinned. Yes, that was it! She was playing hard to get. Ha! He’d heard all about this from the girls who read romance books. Girls played hard to get when they were really interested in the handsome, powerful, mysterious man who had a lot of money and also loved them. Or something. He didn’t really get the finer points of romance, but he understood the broad strokes. He was handsome, powerful, dare he say, *mysterious*, and he had money. In other words, irresistible. Surely Rina was only playing hard to get, and not totally disinterested in him.

Still, he felt a little empty inside as he mopped up pasta sauce from the deck. Red, tomato marinara soaked into his rag.

Somewhere down near the garbage pit, Rhys stopped dead in his tracks and sneezed.

“What?” Bast asked, glancing back.

“I don’t know. I just got this... feeling. A feeling like I missed something important. Or maybe... missed out on something.”

“What, getting railed by Laurent?”

Rhys rolled his eyes. “Oh, real funny. Hey, how are those potatoes coming? Remember to let me know before you fry them. I want to try imbuing them with enlightenment.”

“So you can eat them?”

“No, so everyone can eat them. Come on.”

“You enlightening the enemy over there?”

Rhys grinned evilly. “If everything goes right? Not even a little bit.”

Bast paused. “You know, you scare me sometimes.”

“What, me? Why?”

He gestured, giving the potato slices another toss in the cold water. “You’ve got the Sword Saint’s apprentice washing potatoes, the Empire’s student captain is at your beck and call, and the young mistress of the Unlimited Wealth School is making you a dress.”

“Uninhibited Wealth. And they’re robes, thanks.”

“Isn’t that a little bit ridiculous?” Bast asked, turning to face Rhys.

Rhys spread his hands. “Don’t blame me, blame it on my pure animal magnetism. Or, you know, the potato chips. If you want to capture someone’s heart, you start from the stomach, hasn’t that always been the case?”

“If that’s the case, then potato chips are terrifying.”

“You’re just realizing that now?” Rhys gave the vat of paste a final stir and walked over to Bast’s side. The fire that set the oil boiling lit his face from below, casting it in a hideous light. He grinned and patted Bast’s shoulder. “Now, come on. Show me those chips.”

Bast shook his head. Sometimes he wondered if he was on the right side, but he never wondered if he was on the winning side. He stepped aside, handing it off to Rhys.

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Chapter 80. Enlightening Chips

He'd done it for one chip. Now, facing the vat of bubbling oil, Rhys contemplated doing it on a hundred-fold scale, if not more, all without touching them, because if he touched the oil, he risked his entire hand. He rested his hands on the rim of the pot, relying on his Heat Resist to protect them. It was warm, hot, even but he could handle this much. Through the pot, he was in contact with the oil, and through the oil, he was in contact with the chips.

There was no time to waste. He pushed his intent into the oil and grasped the chips. Already in a state of processing, they were easy to push his intent into, but that wasn't his goal today. No. He wanted to enlighten these chips, imbue them with a hint of his path. Gripping them with his intent was only the first step of his project.

He called forth his enlightenment associated with potato chips and summoned up his mana, filling his mana with the enlightenment, then pushing it out to the potato chips. The potato chips soaked it up, but at the same time, they drained his mana in almost an instant.

Rhys gasped, startled. His grip on the chips faded. *No!* If he lost his hold now, he'd run out of time to imbue the chips with enlightenment while they cooked. Before his eyes, they darkened, from soft, floppy potato slips to crunchy golden chips. He gritted his teeth. The chips were almost done. If he left them in the oil too much longer, they'd burn. "Bast, trash, now!"

"Which trash?" Bast asked, looking around at all Rhys's piles.

"The unsorted stuff. Just throw it at me!" Rhys shouted.

Shrugging, Bast threw trash at Rhys. Rhys grabbed the trash and pulled it toward him. The momentum of the throw got the trash flying at him, and he used that to yank a solid bulk of it toward him. He pulled it into his core at speed and ignited it, shoving the mana into the chips. The blast of mana supercharged his attempted enlightenment, and the potato slices instantly filled with enlightenment.

The potato chips continued to darken. There was no time left. He couldn't check to see if the enlightenment had set, or anything. Rhys gestured, yanking them out with Trash Manipulation. The chips flew free, trailing golden droplets of oil behind them.

"Right here," Bast said, holding out his hands with the fabric they'd been using for drying stretched between them. The chips landed on the fluffy towel.

Rhys wiped his brow, then instantly charged in. "How are they? Did they burn?"

“Look fine to me,” Bast commented, showing him the chips.

Rhys stared at them, his eyes narrowed, scanning them closely for any defects. They were a little darker than normal, but not too bad. He reached out.

Bast turned, moving the towel away from him. “Nope.”

“I need to taste-test them to see if I succeeded!” Rhys explained, dancing around Bast to continue to reach for chips.

Narrowing his eyes, Bast lowered his hands so Rhys could take a chip. As much as Rhys wanted to grab *all* the chips, he limited himself to just taking one. He took a bite.

Instantly, the warmth of mana suffused him, but more importantly, the tingle of enlightenment shivered at the back of his mind. Not enough for him to notice where it came from, or even know what it was he was sensing, unless he knew what he was looking for, but enough to trigger the pleasure response. Rhys grinned, then nodded and gave Bast a thumbs-up. “We did it!”

“You did it,” Bast returned humbly. He put the chips in the salt roller and started coating them.

Rhys watched him work, then frowned. “Bast, what’s your path?”

“The sword,” Bast said simply.

“But beyond that.”

“Beyond that, I don’t know. We don’t all have as easy a time at determining our path as you did, Rhys. There’s mages who have worked for centuries toward a path, without ever determining precisely what path that is.”

Rhys frowned. “Really?”

“Centuries is rare. Decades is far more common,” Bast allowed. He shrugged. “I’m still young. Still learning the basics of swordplay. It’s not until I master sword basics, intermediates, and even the master-level principles that I will know what sword school calls to me most strongly, and only then, can I begin to iterate on the school and carve my own path. I’m likely to follow my master, the Sword Saint’s, path, but it’s not necessarily a requirement.”

“Are you satisfied with that?” Rhys asked.

Bast shrugged. “It’s not a question of if I’m satisfied or not. It’s simply that my skills are insufficient to carve my own path. A martial artist’s path is different from a mage’s path, Rhys. Your path is founded on your obsession. A martial artist obsesses themselves

with a weapon, then forges a path from that. Fundamentally, our paths take different shapes. Martial artists take longer to find our paths, because we first need to work to put our all, our everything, our obsession, into a weapon first.”

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Rhys frowned. He pinched his chin. “Isn’t that what Straw wanted us *not* to do? He wanted us to develop Intent, not just Sword Intent, or even Improvised Weapon Intent.” He had to admit that he himself had thrown that out the window, mostly because Trash Intent superseded Intent for him, and more importantly, Intent wasn’t a trashy skill, and he had no way to convince himself it was, and thus, no way to learn the skill without years of effort, if he could at all. That path wasn’t for him, but Bast was far more skilled.

A glimmer appeared in Bast’s eye, something hopeful but playful. “And that’s why I’m not just studying the sword, but every weapon I can get my hands on. I haven’t given up on that dream, Rhys. And... maybe my path is something that lies on the other side of that obsession.”

Rhys nodded, finally understanding. If Rhys needed Intent to inform his path, and Intent required him to form a general-shape Intent out of a multitude of Intent skills, then naturally it would take more time for him to find his path. After all, the skill took a great deal of time and effort to learn. It was a serious prerequisite to forming a path, unlike Rhys’s path, which only required him to realize his own obsession for it to take form. If he compared the difficulties of their paths, and considered their relative complexity as their power potential, then his was definitely trash-tier.

Not that he’d expected any different.

“So it’s not that you don’t know what your path is, but that you’re still searching to discover everything your path can be, before you resolve to a path and close off your potential in non-path skills,” Rhys rephrased, nodding to himself.

“More or less,” Bast agreed.

It was a reasonable decision. If Rhys wasn’t trash through and through, it was one he would have considered. As it was, he was so trashy that if he didn’t rely on his path, he’d never progress, so there was no such thing as an option for him. Still, no reason to pressure Bast to pick or step onto his path too quickly. Better to let Bast decide when it was time to take that step, if it was going to limit his future afterward. He didn’t see how his path had limited him, personally, but there were a lot of factors at play. His obsession with trash was abnormal, he wasn’t a martial artist, he was trash to begin with and couldn’t level up too fast except through trash... there were so many variables that he had no idea what it was that set him and Bast apart and made their paths different. Research for another day.

Bast glanced at Rhys. “Why the sudden interest?”

Rhys shrugged. “I just didn’t want to be stealing your time away, if you had a path to attend to.”

At that, Bast snorted. He rolled his eyes at Rhys. “Not everyone spends every hour of every day obsessing about their path, you know. Lots of people study other fields, or practice things unrelated to their path. You’re a rare singleminded individual who wants nothing more than to advance your path, and you spend pretty much every waking hour working on it, or something related to it, but lots of us have healthy schedules and do a lot of other things at the same time. Like help our friends make a healthy spot of gold and put up with their crossdressing hobby simultaneously.”

“You’re also making that gold,” Rhys pointed out.

“And I appreciate that,” Bast replied with a nod. “I’ll put up with a lot in exchange for this much gold.”

Rhys glanced at Bast. “We’re coming up on the tournament. If you have any last-second training to do, go do it. I don’t want to keep you from your training if it means you lose in the first round.”

“First round?” Bast scoffed, amused more than insulted. He gestured at Rhys. “Aren’t you the one who should be worried about the tournament, moreso than me? Your future and your school’s future hang on the line, right?”

Rhys shrugged. “I have a lot in the bag that I haven’t shown anyone. I might need to push myself to my limits, but I’m confident in taking down any *one* person at my Tier.”

“Yeah. You’ve got some nasty tricks up your sleeve, don’t you? I wouldn’t want to fight you at your full nastiness.”

“You could say potential.”

“I could, but we both know that’s not what I mean.”

Rhys nodded. “True.” His full potential was much less scary than his full nastiness. Full potential, after all, implied his full strength and magical prowess. Full nastiness... well, that was where he brought impurity potions, impurity imbuing, and even curses to bear. It was in that state that both he and Bast had confidence in him defeating just about anyone at his same tier level. Even so, he wasn’t planning to use curses against Ernesto. He wasn’t stupid enough to do that. Ernesto knew he’d taken Walter’s curse, and they both knew that curses were not positive in the eyes of the Alliance. In fact, he wouldn’t be surprised if Ernesto tried to maneuver him into using his curse in battle.

The upside was that Ernesto had no idea what his true capabilities were. He hadn't used the full extent of his trash skills against any of Ernesto's students, or even his full martial might. If Ernesto thought he was only as strong as he'd shown against his students, Rhys would stomp all over his champion.

He didn't think Ernesto would hold back enough that the champion would be just strong enough to defeat him. If anything, Ernesto would just pick the strongest champion he could find. The fact that Ernesto's image of him vastly underrepresented his actual abilities meant that Ernesto would certainly underestimate him, though, and he greatly appreciated that. Much better to be underestimated than overestimated. Even when it came to 'picking the strongest champion,' as long as Ernesto subconsciously considered him not much of an opponent, he'd work less hard to convince a very strong student, as opposed to just a strong student, to fight Rhys.

"Get ready. Another batch coming in." Bast held a pile of raw potato chips in his hands.

"I'm ready." Rhys lifted his hands off the cauldron and shook them a few times to reset his Heat Resist, then put his hands on the cauldron again and focused. This strained his mental capacity and his ability to stretch Trash Intent and enlightenment over items, but that just meant it was great training to expand his skills.

The next batch of chips hit the bubbling oil, and Rhys's eyes narrowed as he took control.

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