

Chapter 81. Tournament Time

If the mana-imbued chips had sold, the enlightenment chips sold like hotcakes, absolutely flying off their shop's shelves. Although they'd targeted the tournament-visitors, by now, the word-of-mouth about their chips had spread throughout all of Purple Dawn Academy. Teachers, students, staff members, it didn't matter what their rank or Tier was, they all visited Rhys's stall to find out what all the fuss was about. Most of the higher-Tier teachers gave Rhys and Bast a knowing look, easily seeing through their physical-only disguises, but none of them called the two of them out on it. Whether they approved, thought it was amusing, or merely didn't want to bother, Rhys was nonetheless grateful for their discretion.

Gold flowed into his and Bast's pockets. With the enlightenment chips, Rhys could safely raise the price to ten gold without getting anyone to pause or slow their purchases, they were just that addictive. He quickly made back all the gold he'd spent buying oil and salt, and then some. By the end of the week, he had four times the money than he'd made selling herbs to Sorden, and then some.

Anabel's new robes were absolutely adorable on him and Bast alike. She'd delivered within days of her offer, and Rhys couldn't be happier to wear the slinky red number with hip slits that she'd built for him, even if he'd had to start wearing leggings so he could pad his figure to fit the look. Bast, on the other hand, had been less pleased.

"You're kidding me," Bast said, holding up the robes.

"What? They're adorable."

"Sure. I'd love to see them on a woman."

"Betsy is a woman."

"Betsy is me in makeup."

Rhys clicked his tongue. "You just have to think of it differently. She isn't you. She's her own person, and she would love those robes."

"She doesn't feel like her own person," Bast grumbled. He looked at the robes one more time, then sighed. "Fine. I'll wear them."

"Good. You'll look great!" Rhys said, with a thumbs up.

Bast glared at him. “This is the last time I go along with one of your stupid plans.”

“You know that’s not true.”

Bast grumbled wordlessly.

He *did* look great in the robes, whether he wanted to admit it or not. Anabel had built him a midriff-bearing frilly top with a matching pleated miniskirt and petticoat, along with thigh-high stockings and a pair of Mary-Janes. It was a startlingly risqué outfit, given that mages preferred ankle-length robes, but it wasn’t out of the pale, given that adventurers and martial artists often wore shorter and more practical clothes. There was nothing practical about a miniskirt, but Rhys wasn’t about to point that out. He was too busy selling them as the sexy potato chip ladies to worry about that.

They had left cute somewhat behind to go for sexy instead, but now that they were past the initial advertising phase, it was better to change their clothes every now and again so they looked more ‘real’ as opposed to wearing the same robes day in and day out. It wasn’t unheard of for a mage to only wear one pair of robes, but it was rarer for female mages than male mages. He didn’t want them to get outed for only owning one pair of clothes, so it was better to swap between two sets than to simply keep wearing the first set.

As for alternative forms of potatoes, Bast unlocked the secret of using a sword to get a perfect spiral potato cut, and spent his time in the back of the stand carving potatoes into spirals and selling the tornado potatoes. Since they only had mana, they sold at less volume than the chips, but the alternative was that they were attractive and interesting to prospective buyers, and as a consequence, drew people to their stall out of novelty alone. French fries had fallen by the wayside. They sold well, but not better than chips or the tornadoes, and the fact that they had to make them fresh, while they were of little interest to Bast or Rhys, meant that they were low priority as a consequence. If a customer asked for them, they were happy to oblige, but they didn’t go out of their way to make them.

“Rina, if you would?” Anabel took her chips and offered him a folded set of clothes in response. Rhys accepted them gratefully, the same as he had the previous three times. She looked over the outfit she’d handed him yesterday and nodded approvingly. “As I thought, it fits perfectly.”

Bast chuckled in the background, shaking his head at Rhys. Rhys smiled, not really sure why he was the focus of Anabel’s obsession, but happy to get new clothes for free, anyways. These clothes were worthless to him, except to give Rina an ever-changing costume. They were gifted, not thrown away, and his empowered robes were far more defensive than he could possibly make these, even though they were made out of high-value fabric—no, because of that. It was somewhat useless to have a wardrobe of women’s clothes, but who knew? Maybe Rina would have to make another appearance

in the future. It was better to be prepared, though he really wasn't sure what he was preparing for. Infiltrating a female-only school? Was there even a female-only school?

Like this, Rhys and Bast continued to make money, all while the other students finished last-minute preparations for the tournament. The two of them also finalized their own last-minute preparations. Rhys brewed another few impurity potions for the buff and filth-grenade they could provide him, using the high-quality trash and his best techniques to compress down enough impurities that he could ignite a trash star instantly on the battlefield, essentially giving him a mana refill, or, alternatively, spread impurities through his body and ignite them the old-fashioned way to give him a all-over strength boost. Although he used his best techniques, he carefully calibrated the potion to keep it from being so toxic it corroded the crystal glass of an ordinary potion bottle. It meant he'd have to take a slightly larger sip to accumulate enough impurities he could burn them down or fill a trash star with its essential impurities, but he was willing to take that downside.

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Drinking filth potions was less good now, compared to the trash stars, because the trash stars gave him more growth, a drop of the pure mana, and an instantaneous boost, but the long burn of the old-fashioned impurity burning would give him more than a single hit's worth of boost, so it wasn't worth abandoning entirely. In most situations, the instantaneous all-the-boost-in-one-hit of the trash star would be what he needed, but he wanted to make sure he still had the flexibility to do either, just in case.

He also bought some potions, mana potions, and strength, speed, and spell-boosting potions. There were no downsides to using potions for him, since the impurities only made him stronger, and on top of that, Less is More gave him more boost per potion than most people could draw out. He made a mental note to try creating different types of trash potion in the future, to see if he could draw out the different types of boosts the way people could in ordinary potions, but now wasn't the time.

Rhys also absorbed a lot of the trash, using it to ignite the trash stars and steadily improve his body and condense his mana. At this point, he'd picked out a lot of the more interesting trash and stored it in his storage ring, replacing the less-valuable and less-interesting trash he'd been storing in it. He still kept that trash, unwilling to let it go, and used it to build a kind of hut in the woods near his potato chip operation. Bast shook his head at him when he saw Rhys building his trash hut, but he said nothing, so Rhys ignored him.

Bast practiced his sword skills and did lots of body-training exercises in between selling chips, including some he did in the back of the stall whenever he wasn't doing much in the potato chip stand. Rhys continued to absorb his impurities, and the rats' impurities, which was a big boost for both Rhys, Bast, and the rats.

The rats in Purple Dawn Academy had largely been recruited to his cause at this point. When he went back to his dorm room, he could always find one or two rats waiting for him to extract their impurities. They brought him interesting tidbits, like who Ernesto contacted, and where the Purple Dawn prisons were, but never any news on Straw. Rhys had known it had been a longshot to start out with, so he wasn't too disappointed. He was fighting mages, after all. There was every chance that the prison where they kept Straw was highly warded so nothing could get in or out—no, in fact, it was more likely than not.

He told the rats to keep him updated on the places they couldn't go, but since the academy was so large, and there were relatively few rats within the academy, there were lots of places where they either couldn't enter, or which they'd never been and simply didn't know about. Some of those were almost certainly not Straw's prison—for example, the rats let him know that there were rooms in the library they could never enter, and that they'd recently felt it was outright impossible to enter the library. Given that even Infinite Constellation School had had restricted rooms in their library, and given that it was currently occupied by a cat spirit, he chalked that up to Az's presence and the normal operation of a library. Some places were more interesting, like the spot in the depths of the prison where they couldn't enter, but since he'd always expected there to be special prisoners in the prison who were so restricted the rats couldn't easily enter their vicinity, that wasn't much news, either. Definitely somewhere worth checking on, but not the smoking gun he was hoping to find.

He shared what he found with Bast, who largely agreed with his assessments. Occasionally, Bast frowned, and he shook his head and told Rhys what was actually in the room; as the Sword Saint's apprentice, he'd often been in the higher-end, warded rooms the rats couldn't enter, and so he could fill in the pieces of the map the rats couldn't. Rhys found a map of the Academy in the library and stole it, with Az's implicit blessing. He annotated it with symbols to indicate whether he knew about the room or not, and whether he considered it a possible hiding place for Straw or not, though he was careful not to use anything that could be easily decoded by others, and kept the map in his storage ring, where no one could access it unless he was dead or indisposed. Even then, he kept it right next to his toxic potions, so if he needed to destroy it, all he had to do was smash things around in his storage ring real quickly.

The day of the tournament arrived. Both Rhys and Bast had matches on day one, so they shut down the stall for the day. Even if both of them were confident, they didn't want to be distracted on the first day of the tournament, on their very first match. Rhys spent his morning in the trash heap, absorbing enough impurities that he could ignite them at a moment's notice, but not yet igniting them. He didn't see Bast all morning, presumably because the man was doing last minute sword practice.

Looking at his storage ring, Rhys's eyes lingered on the sword he'd found at the bottom of the toxic trash pit, the one gleaming with sunlight. He still hadn't tried to reforge it, not least because his skills were still inferior. Repairing the furnace and making chip bags had helped a lot, both in his personal understanding of the art and in levelling his skill,

but he still wasn't confident enough to risk the sword to his skills. The sword was trash, right now, but it could be so much more. Besides, he risked throwing away that sunlight glimmer if he failed in the forge. If he kept the sword and used it later, without repairing it, it could still launch one final powerful attack. If he tried to forge it and failed, he lost that chance forever. For now, especially with the tournament and his future on the line, it was better to keep it as an ace in the hole, versus risk trying to fix it with his weak skills and lose it.

The bell sounded. The tournament was about to begin. He drew out his sword hilt and tucked it into his robes, then straightened. He was ready.

It occurred to Rhys, as he walked to the tournament, that all this time, he hadn't seen the Sword Saint. Was he not present? Then again, with the Empire looming, he wouldn't be surprised if there were important things he had to do right now. If anything, the fact that he hadn't seen the man was reassuring.

This whole time, he'd mimicked the merchants and set his stall up at the docks, where the new students arrived. Now, though, the docks stood empty. Instead, it was the walk leading up to the arena where the merchants gathered, and mages milled about, examining the merchant's wares as they wasted time before the tournament began. Rhys glanced at the place he'd set up his stall, and the sad closed sign dangling from its front. He sighed quietly. The streets were packed full of customers, and a festival attitude filled the air. Today would be a great day to sell chips. Too bad both he and Bast were busy today.

His mind went to a certain quiet girl who'd been tailing them all this time. He pinched his chin. *I bet I could get her to sell chips, if I pressured her the right way.*

A thought for later. Today, his mind was only on the tournament, and the first battle that awaited him. The arena's grand opening gaped before him, leading into a packed stadium. Rhys took a final deep breath and stepped inside.

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Chapter 82. First Match

The crowd was larger than any crowd Rhys had ever seen before. All of Purple Dawn had turned out, along with most of the students from all the other schools. There were big blocks of white, green, and blue in the crowd, according to the schools' uniforms, while a mishmash of every color of students filled another quarter of the stadium. Not all

the schools had only sent their contestants; in fact, most of them had sent more students to watch the matches and gain insights from them. Infinite Constellation was one of the few schools too poor to send anyone but its contestants, so besides Ev and Rhys, there was no one else to cheer them on.

Aside from the schools, there were also lots of high-level mages from higher-tier schools, martial artists, and adventurers, either here to watch the spectacle or here to recruit good prospects to their programs. Rhys eyed that section of the crowd. Although he loved his trash school, he wouldn't say no to getting recruited by a higher-level school... not that he thought that was likely. Instead, his eyes went to the adventurers. He'd wanted to be an adventurer, from the moment he'd arrived in this world. There were certainly adventurers looking for party members who'd be happy to have a party member with high impurity—ahem, poison—resist, and he was happy to explore the world and discover new and fresh sources of impurities. Hell, something like a cursed tomb would do numbers for him, given how he could safely absorb curses and curse power. Plus, adventuring parties were usually temporary, from his understanding, so he'd be able to adventure for a while, then return to his school with new trash, loot, and experience under his belt.

Of course, that all depended on if he caught the eye of any adventuring teams, and if the ones who were interested in him were worth travelling with. Not to mention that if the Empire attacked, all of that went out the door. There was a lot that had to line up, but nonetheless, he was interested in adventuring, one way or another. He'd keep his eyes open, all throughout the tournament.

The stadium surrounded a series of flat stone platforms, each one surrounded by a band of metal with twisting enchantments glowing in its sides. An exhibition match was going on in the center of the arena, and as Rhys watched, one of the opponents launched a blue, glowing projection of a horse, that rushed at the swordswoman they fought. She sidestepped, dodging the horse, and it rushed off the edge of the platform and slammed into an invisible barrier. The enchantments around the edge lit up, and the horse vanished, swallowed up into the wards around the platform.

Rhys nodded. That was good to know. He could let loose without worrying about hitting the people around him. Of course, most of his direct combat skills were either melee or defensive, so it wasn't like he was at a real risk of throwing glowing horses into the audience, but in case he needed to use a splash attack, the wards would absorb the overrun damage. Likewise, he wouldn't have to worry about protecting the audience if his opponent launched a huge attack. Not that he'd been planning on it; he was completely willing to let the higher-tier mages in the crowd handle any splash damage his opponents (or he) threw. But it was good to know that he wouldn't even have to think about it.

What he did have to think about, was Ernesto's champion. Rhys lifted his head, scanning the opponents to see if he could spot Ernesto in the crowd.

It wasn't hard to find Purple Dawn Academy's students. They grouped into a rough mob, all wearing the same purple-and-black uniforms that Ernesto's students had noticeably not worn in Infinite Constellation, save the purple-lined black cloak some wore draped over their shoulders. Out of the students in the crowd, about half wore the uniform and half didn't; either that, or the Purple Dawn students had a lot of guests in their section. Maybe it was like his high school, where kids had been free to wear whatever they wanted, but if they were on the sports team, they had to wear the sports uniform. Of course, his school hadn't had a uniform except for the sports teams' uniforms, and they were only the kind of uniforms they wore during sports, but it was the same idea.

There were several teachers mixed in with the students, the teachers usually hovering by groups of students that they seemed to be responsible for; unlike Rhys's relatively free-flowing school where students were free to show up to any class they pleased, it seemed like Purple Dawn assigned students to classes, and teachers to those classes, so certain teachers were responsible for certain students.

Then again, Rhys reflected, *I did kind of dodge any opening-year bureaucracy.* Hell, he hadn't even gotten assigned to a dormitory, and he was a hundred percent sure that one was some kind of oversight, exacerbated by the fact that he, as an adult, hadn't really wanted to be assigned to anything, and had instead chosen to live in a cave. He was pretty sure he could've gotten a dorm if he'd made it known to anyone that he didn't have one, but his mage body was durable and didn't really feel the elements, so he preferred the freedom of sleeping where he liked. For all he knew, he had been assigned to a class, he just hadn't bothered to ask anyone whose or where he was supposed to show up... because he hadn't cared, and didn't want to bow to anyone else's idea of what he should learn. He'd had enough of that. Better to pursue what he wanted and nothing else, for the first time in his life.

He scanned the group until he found Ernesto at last, standing at the edge of the group of students. Ernesto leaned toward a mountain of a man, a teenager whose muscles strained the absolute limits of what his extra-large uniform could manage. He kind of reminded Rhys of a younger Cynog.

Rhys pursed his lips and nodded to himself. He'd dealt with that kind of thing before, so he wasn't too scared.

A cloaked figure stepped up behind Ernesto and tapped his shoulder. Ernesto turned. The two spoke for a while, Ernesto nodding along. The figure was slim, but their exact figure was too obscured by the cloak for Rhys to see much. Heavy shadow followed them around, darker than the shadows around the other students.

Rhys raised his brows. *Ohhh.* That made so much more sense. That figure *exuded* Ernesto's goth-wannabe aura. They were definitely at least ambiguously evil and probably cursed, to boot. If he had to guess, they were probably the kind of cool dark-haired character who would look over their knitted fingers at the main character, have a dark backstory, be really good at being a ninja and use lightning but ultimately

give in to the creepy snake guy who cursed him—ahem, all that to say, the figure had the vibes of the cool guy all the girls loved inexplicably, despite him being a total douchebag from start to finish. Unfortunately, that kind of guy tended to be super strong, way stronger than the musclebound idiots like Cynog.

Not that he knew that the figure was strong, and he knew that basing his guesses of how powerful people were in real life on trashy manga tropes was a poor idea... but the figure had an aura that made his mana twitch in discomfort even at this distance. If that wasn't a bad sign, it at least wasn't a good sign.

A board displayed everyone's names at the far end of the arena. There were different brackets for Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3. As Rhys scanned the board, searching out his name from the Tier 2 board, a hand landed on his head. Rhys startled, reaching for his sword.

"Where'd you go, sparring buddy? I was looking for you." Ev released his head and crossed her arms at him.

"I... was busy," Rhys excused himself.

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"Busy selling chips with your girlfriend?" Ev asked.

Rhys blinked at her, keeping his poker face. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Uh huh. You can hide your face, but you can't hide your aura," Ev said, laughing.

"Oh—really?" Rhys asked, suddenly concerned. Had he accidentally put Bast on display, without realizing it?

Seeing his shocked face, Ev chuckled. "I knew it was you."

Rhys froze, then glared at her. "You were bluffing?"

"Eh, only partly. As much as I've sparred with you, I was pretty sure it was your aura, but aura-reading is a tough art. If you aren't super familiar with the person's aura, it's hard to pick anyone's particular aura out, at least at our Tier. Even with you, I wasn't a hundred percent sure. Maybe seventy percent. Unless your friend spent a lot of time sparring with one of your victims, and that victim specifically studied her aura with her true identity's aura in mind using either the Aura-Reading skill or some analogue, like a technique that does the same, then *her* secret is safe with us."

"That skill isn't common?"

“Nah. Most people don’t bother. It’s more a martial artist skill than a mage skill, anyways; more useful to study the flow of your enemy’s energy to know where they’re going to attack you from next than know that a mage is going to fire a big spell at you. Shocker, mages do that a lot, and they usually do it from their hands. Martial artists, on the other hand... that skill is the difference between blocking a kick and sidestepping a punch.”

Rhys nodded. “That makes a lot of sense.” It was a useful skill for anyone fighting a martial artist in melee, but if you were fighting a mage, not only did you have more time to respond to a spell coming at you from range, but it also wouldn’t help you much to know whether they were going to fire it from their hand or knee. Either way, it would still be as powerful, and when spells could take a life of their own and fly around in midair, it wasn’t useful to know where the spell would be launched from to block the attack, either. On the other hand, just as Ev said, knowing which limb a martial artist was going to attack with next told you far more about how to move to block or dodge it.

“Not a whole lotta martial artists around here, and if your friend is who I think she is, she was mostly hanging around mages, anyways... her master doesn’t really have a choice, given his impressive title. Plus, he’s already beaten all the martial artists, and has little respect for them, so he wouldn’t make her spar any low-tier losers, who might teach her bad habits. As long as her master didn’t show up, she’s probably fine,” Ev reassured him.

“Wait, you know—”

She squinted at him. “Yes? I know who you are, and I know who you apprenticed under, dipshit. Think for a second.”

Rhys instantly recovered and nodded instead. When she put it that way, it was pretty obvious. Plenty of people knew he’d been Straw’s apprentice, and everyone knew the Sword Saint’s current apprentice had started under the Remnant Weapon. When you put two and two together, the answer was obvious. But as long as they didn’t recognize him—and given how he’d been hidden away at a tiny school, there was no chance anyone knew his aura—then they couldn’t use that as a way to identify Bast. Ev was in the unique situation of knowing him well that allowed her to guess the rest of the information.

She pointed. “Any case, your match is over there.”

Rhys followed her finger, then glanced at the board and looked back at the arena. “Right, you’re right. Thank you.”

She tapped her forehead in a quick salute and jogged off toward a different part of the arena. Rhys watched her go. The wards were thicker over there, the floors made of a more durable material. *I guess that’s for Tier 3 fights*. Turning back, he followed her direction to find himself before a nameplate bearing his name.

Rhys Foundling

He gazed at it, a little lost in the words. His name in this world. Rhys, because he couldn't remember anything else. Foundling, because he'd been a found child, abandoned as an infant; or rather, the original Rhys had been, up until he'd been killed by those children.

It already felt like a lifetime ago. In some ways, it had been. He wasn't the fatass who'd sat behind a computer screen and trashtalked other people's waifus anymore. Hell, he'd done more walking in his first day in this world than he had in months back home. He knew the original him would have resisted it, but the him that had become Rhys hadn't spoken a word of protest.

A tiny part of him wondered how much of him had changed between this world and his original. Was it really just that having magic to motivate his effort alleviated that much of the pain of making the effort? Sure, he was infinitely more motivated to work out in this world, where that meant hundreds of years of lifespan and the ability to... not shoot fireballs, but at least summon rat projections from his hands. And that was still pretty cool! It wasn't fireballs cool, but it was still cool.

I think I'm still the same person. It's just that my opportunities are so vastly different between this world and my previous one. People adapted to their circumstances. In his first world, he'd been free to be a useless piece of trash with few consequences. As long as he wrote some code, he could be as asocial and homebodied as he liked, and keep a roof over his head and food in his mouth. In this world, that kind of behavior would lead to him getting oppressed, bullied, and killed, in short order. With a fire under his ass, naturally, he'd become the kind of person he needed to in order to survive these new circumstances. He was the same as he'd ever been; it was his situation that had changed. In response to the change in circumstances, he'd changed. It would be stranger if he had not.

A figure stepped up to the other side of the stone slab he stood before. Rhys looked up, locking eyes with his opponent. He'd never seen the boy before... no, that was a lie. The green-robed boy had definitely bought chips from him, and not only that, he was pretty sure he'd seen him on the first day, as one of the kids on the green ship that'd come in at the same time as them. He snorted to himself. *I'm starting from the bottom, huh?*

At least they'd matched him against someone at his level, rather than treating this as a true bracket and putting a low seed up against a high seed. Or rather, was it that his rank and this boy's rank were both unknown, and so this battle served as a way to determine their placement in the bracket?

He glanced over his shoulder. Bast was going up against someone he didn't recognize, but he definitely wasn't going up against Laurent or Anabel. Having sensed almost every student's aura during his stint selling potato chips, he knew Laurent was

legitimately one of the strongest students, and Anabel, likewise, was powerful in her own right, maybe stronger than Laurent, maybe weaker. Since Bast was fighting neither of them, his second guess was more likely to be correct, that this was a way of measuring the unknown students' strength, rather than that the bracket wasn't putting high seeds against low seeds.

The boy in green cleared his throat. Rhys checked the board one last time to learn his name, then stepped onto the stone platform opposite the boy. He bowed.

"Rhys Foundling. Well met."

Rather than return his bow, the boy harrumphed and tossed his hair. "Archem Lostses. Let's make this quick. I belong in the top of the bracket, not down here with the trash."

"I am trash, but it sure is funny to hear someone called 'arch them lost it' talk down to me. I've at least got a name for a name, not a random nonsense phrase," Rhys pointed out. "What did you lose, by the way? I can help you find it. I know all about where to find lost trash."

Trash Talk 5 > 6

Archem's face flushed. His hand darted to his sword, gripping it so tight his knuckles went white. "You'll regret those words."

"Really? A level? That wasn't even some of my better work," Rhys muttered to himself. Kid must've been sensitive about his name. Well, fair enough; it was a doozy of a name. Still, if he was too weak to take it, he should know better than to dish it. Rhys had been perfectly civil with him until good ol' arch-'em-footballs-put-some-spin-on-it-kiddo had decided to get mouthy.

"A level? You got a level... how? What?" Archem stared at him in confusion, utterly lost.

Rhys chuckled. "If that's too much for you, then I've got bad news, buddy. You belong right down here in the trash with me."

With a shiver, the sword slid from Archem's sheath. He pointed it at Rhys, his hand shaking. "Take that back."

"Don't think I will."

In the distance, a bored-looking official glanced at a sundial, then drew back her hands. Balling them up together hammer-fist style, she slammed them into a giant bell. It rang out, and Archem leapt, swinging his blade over his head at Rhys's crown with a savage shout.

Guess that's the starting gun. Rhys grinned and stepped forward, lifting his hand toward Archem's bared blade. If arch 'em cowboys was this easy to antagonize, this was going to be a fun fight.

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

Chapter 83. Arch 'em

"Arch 'em swords, bad boy," Rhys encouraged Archem with a vicious glint in his eye. He lifted his hand to match Archem's bared sword, a chunk of dark metal barely visible in the palm of his hand.

Archem growled and swung down with all his might, putting his whole pu—ahem, self into it.

To be honest, Rhys was pretty sure fifty percent of the arch 'em bullshit he was making up was nonsense—no, a hundred percent—but it bothered Archem, and that was what mattered. He'd say any amount of nonsense, so long as it antagonized the person on the other end. His long history as the shit-talker on coms in FPS games meant he could keep up an endless stream of trash talk mid-battle, as long as the other person got frustrated by it. And Archem was the perfect victim. He didn't even have to hit the heights of his skills to piss the guy off. He could say literally anything, and Archem's face would tint a deeper shade of red. Honestly, he was kind of enjoying himself... though he was pretty sure Archem didn't share that sentiment.

Archem's sword swished through the air, gleaming with ferocity. Seconds before it carved through Rhys's hand, he activated the lump of metal in his hand. A cauldron formed of blue light manifested, and Archem's sword cleaved into it, cutting halfway through—but not all the way through.

Archem stared, confused.

Rhys grinned. He waved, and with a flicker of his fingers, cast the rat projection. He was already under attack, so the rat immediately leaped up his body, swirled around his arm, and jumped at Archem. Archem shouted in shock and jumped back, pushing away from Rhys, only to find his sword lodged in the cauldron's intent.

The rat jumped from Rhys's arm to Archem's and quickly clambered up to his shoulder. Archem batted at it with his free hand, only for the rat to crawl past him. It nipped at his ear, then darted away when he tried to smash it with his shoulder and head, dashing

around to claw at his eyes instead. Archem yelped and jumped back, discarding his sword.

“Surprised?” Rhys gloated. Honestly, so was he, though he’d never let Archem know. He’d forcibly activated that cauldron’s intent, emphasizing not its desire to be the best cauldron, but instead its defensive desires, focusing on every part of the cauldron that wanted to hold strong against potions and resist the pressure from within itself. As a result, it had held up better to Archem’s sword than Rhys could have imagined.

He threw the cauldron intent, and consequently, Archem’s sword, behind him, off the platform, then turned to his opponent, prepared to take another attack.

Archem batted at his head and shoulders, struggling against the rat. He stumbled around, desperately keeping the vermin from gouging out his eyes. The rat scurried over his hair, reaching for them from above. He brushed it off, only for it to bite his hand, claw on, and scramble up his arm again. Panicked, he beat at it, dancing around wildly. “Get it off me! Get it away!”

Rhys raised his brows. *Huh*. That was easier than he’d thought. He hadn’t had to use his impurities at all, not burn them, ignite the star, or use his filth potions for evil. So much for ‘I belong in the upper brackets, not down with the trash like you!’—or whatever Archem had said. It looked like he was just as trash as Rhys was, though then again, that might be exactly why Rhys was able to handle him so easily. The trash master versus the trash? The battle was predetermined.

Mustering his strength, he spun around and hammered Archem in the chest with his heel. Archem staggered backward, still fighting the rat, and stumbled off the platform.

The referee, a Purple Dawn teacher, stepped forward and raised her hand, pointing toward Rhys. “Match—Rhys, of Infinite Constellation!”

Rhys turned to the crowd and bowed. He received little applause, nor had he been expecting much. There were dozens of battles going on right now. Most of the attention was focused on the higher-profile fights, like Bast’s, or the higher-tier ones, like Ev’s.

“Who cares? Just—get it off me!” Archem squealed, still battling the rat.

Oh, right. Rhys snapped his fingers, and the rat vanished, fading into a waft of blue smoke. Archem stumbled one last step back, then let out a relieved sigh. He dusted off his shoulders, straightened, and shot Rhys a dirty look. “What was that filthy spell?”

“Just a trashy technique. I take it you aren’t fond of rats?” Rhys asked.

“Who is?”

Rhys shrugged. "I don't mind them so much myself. They're clean and intelligent, and they're kind of cute once you get over their rattiness."

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Archem gave him a look of absolute disgust. "No."

"More for me." Rhys lifted his head and searched for Bast's match. It took surprisingly long to find the man's Solaire costume, with its white robes, when so many other students wore white. When he finally did, it was just in time to watch Bast flash across the stage and send the other student flying off the platform with a strike so fast Rhys couldn't follow it at all. He raised his brows. As expected of Bast, honestly, but all the same—wow. His friend had really come a long way. He smiled, proud of him. Even back when they'd been picking through the trash, he'd seen that potential in Bast. Now, he was glad to see everyone recognize that same spark he'd seen.

Archem gripped his shoulder. "Where are you looking?"

Rhys pushed him off. "Anywhere but here. The match is over. Go home."

"I refuse! I refuse to acknowledge that match. The rat frightened me, and I wasn't able to fight at my full potential. I demand a rematch!"

"Neat. I don't accept," Rhys said, still walking away.

Archem jumped in front of him, baring his sword at Rhys's neck. "Fight me, or die here like the rat you are."

Supremely unworried, Rhys lifted one finger up and pushed Archem's sword away from his neck. When Archem fought back, he exerted all of his full strength while pretending not to put in any effort. Archem's grip was far from the sword's tip, as a sword demanded. Rhys's finger was right next to his neck. He was able to exert far more force on the sword's tip, even if Archem had the advantage in absolute strength, and pushed the tip away from him. It was a significant exertion, and sweat sparked on his back as he pushed, but Archem had no way of knowing that.

In any case, he wasn't worried about Archem's threat. They were surrounded by far more powerful mages. True, some of them might be happy, or at least uncaring, if Rhys died, but the referees and random visiting teachers had no knowledge of who Rhys was, at least not at a glance. Someone would step in long before Archem made good on his threat... if the man even had the balls to murder him in cold blood.

He looked Archem in the eye the whole time, then finally said: "No."

"No? You—"

“If the rat frightened you, then that was still my win. If I triggered some phobia of yours and weakened your mind to the point you couldn’t fight back, that was still my win. If you have some deep-seated rat-associated trauma, that was still my win. If people know you fear something, they’ll use it against you. Harden your mind and overcome your fear, don’t demand that those who are *trying to defeat you* consider your weaknesses and not provoke them. Don’t blame me for making you scared; blame yourself for allowing yourself to fear rats. If you can’t overcome your fear, then become strong enough to win, even when you’re terrified. In a real battle, do you think your enemy will take their foot off your throat and not stab you in the heart because ‘oh, I’m afraid of rats, I wasn’t able to fight well?’”

Archem’s face paled. He took a step back. “That’s—this is a tournament, not—”

“It’s a tournament, yes, but what is the purpose? To find the winner of this tournament? Or to find the mightiest warrior?” Rhys pointed out.

Archem’s mouth moved, but no words came out. He lowered his sword.

Snap.

A red glowing rope wrapped around Archem’s arms and legs, binding them together. He jolted, barely catching his balance before he fell. His sword fell to the ground.

“I’ll take it from here,” the referee said, stepping past Rhys. She looked at Archem. “You’ve been disqualified from the loser’s bracket and any second rounds of tournament eligibility. Come with me. We’re going to have an interesting discussion with your teacher.”

Archem’s face grew even paler. He looked as though he wanted to run, but with a flick of her fingers, the referee’s rope lifted into the air, taking Archem with it. A miserable expression on his face, Archem was carried off. Rhys beamed and waved as the boy was carried away, laughing under his breath. *Idiot.*

Bast’s match was over, and so was his. Rhys spent the rest of the morning watching matches, taking mental notes on his future opponents. The muscle-bound freak he’d seen near Ernesto fought like—well, like a muscle-bound freak, while the cloaked figure ended the battle so quickly that he learned almost nothing about their fighting style, except that they used a mysterious dark flame that seemed to make their opponent faint at a touch. It was good to learn he shouldn’t touch that flame, but aside from that, he had no idea if he should fight at range or in melee, or anything else about their skills and techniques.

The first day only involved one fight per competitor, since there were so many competitors in the tournament. When there were no more interesting matches to watch, he changed his clothes and sold potato chips as Rina. He only had the stall open for two hours before he sold out. The crowds who had showed up to watch the matches

were new to the idea of potato chips, fresh off their boats in a new land, and excited to try new things. Rhys was happy to capitalize on all of it, and closed his stall with his pockets full of fresh gold. He separated half of it out for Bast and headed back to his room to rest for a moment before his regularly scheduled potato chip frying session.

As he approached the door, a strange rushing sound caught his ear. He froze just outside the door, listening. It was a strange, familiar rush, mixed with a dripping sound, like water... *like heavy rain*.

His eyes widened. *Could it be?* She was maybe associated with Purple Dawn and the sound of rain, plus, she had vanished mysteriously without explanation after he'd run into her on the upper peak. He steadied himself, then threw the door open.

A dark-haired, pale vision of a woman with skin so moist it looked as though you could squeeze it and dew would come out lounged on his bed in white robes that were so soaked they were all but translucent. An umbrella was propped between the bedframe and the wall, pouring water from its underside to continuously soak the water nymph... or whatever she was.

"Hello, Lira," Rhys greeted her.

She smiled, showing her sharp, shark-like teeth. "Hello, trashman."

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

Chapter 84. We've Got to Stop Meeting Like This

"You know, the first time we met, you mentioned telling me about the background between our schools. Never got around to it, did you," Rhys said.

She shrugged languorously, something sensual about the motion. "You didn't press me for answers. I conveniently neglected to bring it back up."

"Where were you? Why didn't Ernesto mention you?"

"I was there to keep an eye on Ernesto... or to get me out of the way," she murmured, vicious light shimmering in her eyes. She yawned, propping her head on her hand. "I didn't like the thin excuse to push me out of the negotiations, so I decided to lounge instead of try to watch Ernesto."

“Ah. Do you know about the curses...?” Rhys asked.

She rolled her eyes. “*Everyone* knows about the curses. The administration is looking the other way for now. I’m simply there to provide testimonial when they do eventually decide to hammer him for breaking the Alliance’s curse embargo... not as if they’ll listen to me, anyways.”

Rhys squinted. “Why not?”

“Have you noticed I’m not human?” she asked dryly.

“I have, but... is that bad?”

“No, no, of *course* not. *No one* associates non-human mages like monsters and spirits with the demon lord. Who would do that? It would be insane to group all non-humans under the demon king’s banner when many of us actively fought against him.” She made eye contact the whole time, sarcasm thick in her voice.

“Ah,” Rhys said, nodding. He was familiar with that particular line of thought. “The Alliance is very human-centric, then?”

“You could say that,” she said dryly. A moment passed, and she shrugged again, no less luxurious than the first one. “Not without reason, of course. A good number of non-humans did fight on the demon king’s side. But we didn’t all choose the demon king.”

Is that why Az acts the way he does? Rhys wondered. Wandering from place to place, using his strength to take over libraries without asking... did he do that because he knew the mages would never let him in the library, except if he entered by force?

And then he shook his head. *No, I’m pretty sure he does that because he’s a cat, not for any deeper reason.*

“Is there a reason your luminous self has decided to visit me?” Rhys asked.

Lira sighed dramatically and flicked her hand. Power rushed over them, and Rhys sensed that they’d been cut off from the world. She flicked her sleeve, and a damp rat skittered out, spooked, tail high and fur as puffed as the water would let it be. It scurried over to Rhys and hid behind his ankles, peering out to hiss at Lira.

Rhys startled. He looked at the rat, then back at Lira. *How much does she know?*

“They told me to watch you, too. But I know what you’re after, and I’m not too interested in *ratting* you out. You’re trying to free your master, aren’t you? The Strawman.”

Rhys narrowed his eyes. He said nothing.

"I don't mind. I think he's been unjustly captured, simply because he's inhuman. He was created by the demon king. He didn't choose to fight under that tyrant's banner, and he escaped the demon king even during the king's reign. When they captured him, he was quietly mentoring a few students; nothing illegal. The Alliance's bias against non-humans is what drove his capture, not his actions."

Rhys watched Lira closely. Her body posture remained as relaxed as ever, but there was a subtle tension in the lines of her neck and her shoulders that hadn't been there before. Her lips pursed in distaste. As far as he could tell, she was absolutely telling the truth about her thoughts on Straw and non-humans.

She had come to him, rather than reporting him. Could he trust her? The fewer people he admitted his plans to, the better. He could trust Bast, but Lira... Lira was a total unknown.

At last, he shook his head. "I don't know what you're talking about."

She harrumphed, lips turning upward in an amused grin. "Of course. No, why would you? Let's put it like this, shall we? I'll continue to turn a blind eye to your rats. And you... remember what I've offered, when the time comes to free the Strawman."

"Huh? To what?" Rhys asked, pretending to be shocked.

They stared at one another for another few beats. Lira waved her fingers, and the power dissipated. Silence stretched in the room, save the rush and drip of water pouring onto his bed.

At last, Lira said: "Your bed's wet."

"I noticed, thanks."

She rose and walked out without another word, her wet robes and pouring umbrella trailing a puddle behind her. Rhys moved out of her way to let her pass, and she stepped in, close enough his chest grew wet.

"I hope I haven't mistaken you, Rhys Foundling."

For a single beat, Rhys stared at her, lost. In the next, he realized what she meant. It was fine that he had denied her guesses, but in doing so, he had put *her* in a vulnerable spot. If he truly wasn't interested in rescuing Straw and chose to go to the authorities right now, it would be Lira's head that rolled.

Of course, that was assuming this wasn't a setup from the beginning... but honestly, he didn't think it was. There was fire in Lira's eyes, the fire of a true conviction. And of everything he'd seen of her so far, he didn't think she was the kind to take action that

disagreed with her fundamental beliefs, even if it was giving the guy who'd cleaned out her fountain information she didn't want to give him.

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He lowered his head. "I don't think you have."

Their eyes met. Her blood-red irises burned into his, searching his face. Whatever she found there, it satisfied her. With a quiet huff, she turned and sloshed off.

Rhys watched her go. He'd thought it would be him and Bast against the world, rescuing Straw, that the cursed doll was 'evil,' and that was all there was to it. But it seemed there were nuances to this world, subtleties and associations that he hadn't even considered yet.

This world isn't trash.

The words rang in his head, some undeniable truth to them. This world wasn't trash. Something about that was important, desperately so. He tilted his head, brows furrowing as he thought, but whatever it was, it wouldn't come to him so easily.

His eyes drifted to the window as he thought, and he jerked up. The sky was getting dark. It was potato chip cooking time! If he didn't get there soon, Bast might think he'd abandoned him! Putting the thought aside for a moment, he raced out of the dormitory and back toward the trash heap.

As he ran there, he reconsidered his train of thought. All things considered, there was every possibility that Bast was going to be spending this afternoon training, or doing something useful, instead of playing around and making potato chips. Gold was everything to Rhys, trashy as he was, but Bast was a real swordsman with a real master. He might not be available to make potato chips, even if he wanted to.

Ah, well. If he was making potato chips alone, so be it. He'd keep the gig running until Bast showed up again.

He therefore wasn't completely shocked to find the trash heap quiet and empty when he arrived. It didn't bother him too much. Humming to himself, he got started on growing the potatoes and heating up the oil. He ignited the impurities he'd spread in his body earlier. Even for him, it was dangerous to leave impurities in his bloodstream for too long. He glanced at the big trash pile, a bit of longing in his heart. He'd been putting the trash on back burner to focus on junk food, but now that he had junk food down and gold flowing into his pockets on all-but-autopilot, it was time to turn his attention back to the trash, and his ultimate goal: absorbing ever more and more powerful impurities.

The rats dug up a fresh batch of potatoes, and he accepted them with grace. "Bast, can you—"

He faced an empty kitchen, with nothing on the table.

“Right... right. He’s got better things to do.” Rhys drew out his knife. Then again, it never hurt to develop his knife skills. All blade skills were valuable, even if they weren’t for a weapon he was currently using.

The potato chips came out a little less consistent, but they were still passable, as far as Rhys was concerned. Besides, he had the formula nailed enough, that he didn’t have to worry too much about a few little inconsistencies in chip width. The customers should put up with it, as long as he kept the enlightenment sensation in his snacks.

Using his skills and speed, he powered through enough batches of chips to satisfy two hours of tomorrow’s customers. The sun had set by the time he packaged the last ones, and the moon was approaching its apex. Rhys dusted the salt off his hands and strode out into the trash. Most of the stuff near this edge was fully sorted, with only the most unusable garbage left. In other words, garbage perfectly suited to being burned.

The trash star technique was as much about the mass of the trash as the toxicity of it. In essence, the trash stars meant the quantity of the garbage counted as much as the quality, whereas previously only the quality had counted for anything. This trash was both high quality and quantity; less quality than the toxic trash heap, but the quantity made it almost as good. Still, he wasn’t satisfied with merely igniting more trash stars. He could advance evenly and slowly this way, but that wouldn’t break him out of being trash. It would only mean he remained a trashy Tier 2.

Sure, he’d trounced Arches, or whatever his name was, but that was mostly due to trash talking the man until he couldn’t think straight, drawing him into pressing the attack before he took measure of Rhys’s strength, accidentally triggering a phobia of his, then immediately ring-outing him before he actually used any of his real techniques. It was the equivalent of button-bashing against a pro fighting game player and getting off a single cheese combo to kill their fighter once. It worked once, but that was it: *once*. One win didn’t win a tournament,

Now, he could have ring-outed Archie without the rat phobia, but that wasn’t the point. The point was, squeaking out a victory like that wasn’t a consistent, reliable strategy. He needed consistence, reliability, and the kind of overwhelming power Bast had, where nobody could question whether he deserved the win or earned it.

The musclehead was one thing. He’d only barely beaten Cynog, and he didn’t relish what was essentially a rematch with one of his closest matches... that he wouldn’t have won, by this tournament’s rules. The cloaked figure was a whole other problem. Based on the speed of their victory, they were at least as strong as Bast, but a mage instead of a swordsman. He’d never fought a mage before. In some ways, the musclehead would’ve been easier to deal with. He knew how muscleheads fought. He didn’t know how mages fought... except how he fought, but he wasn’t sure that was a good measure for mages.

For all I know, the musclehead will be easier to deal with. No one had told him who Ernesto's champion was yet. It could be the musclehead, for all he knew. What he knew for sure, was that he didn't want to count on facing the musclehead.

He faced the trash, rubbing his hands together. From the moment he'd first started using the trash stars, he'd identified one obvious way to make them stronger: absorb more trash into the star before he ignited it. He hadn't done it until now because it pushed two limits. One, how much trash he could hold inside him without his core rupturing or his body getting so impurified that his entire mana infrastructure corrupted apart. And two, how much mana and reconstruction his body could handle when the trash star ignited, before his whole body ignited. It was too dangerous to just casually increase the star's capacity. But here, alone in the trash heap with a fresh batch of chips all cooked up already, and nothing to do until tomorrow's battle, not to mention a big pile of trash and a great need to power up before he faced Ernesto's champion... well, he'd be a fool not to take advantage of it.

Rhys turned, looking at the rats and raccoon manning the potato farm. The potato farm stretched an acre by now, swarming with industrious rat potato farmers. They all looked up as Rhys looked over at them.

"Anyone got impurities?"

Several of the rats scuttled forward. Rhys absorbed their impurities, then stepped back toward the trash. "You might want to back away. It might get a little dangerous over here."

The rats scurried back, only for the raccoon to clap their ears and drag them even further back, all the way to the tree line. Following the raccoon's orders, the rats took cover in the trees.

Well, that was a little unnecessary... Rhys shrugged. Better to be safe than sorry, he supposed. He jumped in place, getting his blood and mana circulating. He wanted to be in the perfect shape for this attempt. Anything out of place, and he might not survive it. He scanned his whole body, checking it for leftover lumps of impurities, inefficiencies, chokepoints, anything that would stop him from circulating all the mana he absorbed from this attempt. There were a few small cracks and holes he fixed, a few weak points he quietly shored up. When his condition was perfect, he took a deep breath, steeling himself, and put his hand on the trash.

Trash hurtled into him. Rhys narrowed his eyes, focusing on the trash and only the trash. *More. More than ever before!*

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

Chapter 85. Supernova

Trash poured into him. The carefully separated trash visibly depleted. In moments, he reached the level of trash inside his core that he would usually ignite a trash star at, and he kept going. Compressing, pushing, crushing down the trash as much as he could into as small of a point as he could. When it started to fill his core, he used his core walls to clench down on it and crush it further. When he could crush it no more, he pushed at his walls instead, expanding them outwards. More trash. More!

His core stuttered. The flow of mana through his body slugged to a halt. Every piece of his core was full of condensed trash, and with nowhere for the mana in his core to go, it soaked into the trash itself, making it yet more powerful. Only the pure mana at the bottom of his core remained an exception, pushing a little dimple out of the bottom of his core. It was unsightly, but Rhys was used to that. He was trash. If he wasn't able to accept a little ugliness, he'd never get anywhere on his trash journey.

There was no more room. He couldn't absorb any more trash. Rhys raised his hand and stirred the tiny amount of mana he could still move. He eyed the trash, hesitating one moment before he pushed the mana inside to spark it to life. He called it a trash star, but he still ignited it manually with external mana. Actual stars were ignited due to the immense pressure and heat at their center, as huge quantities of mass pressed down on itself and down and down, until it couldn't help but ignite. These were not true stars. They were artificial stars, not yet strong enough to ignite on their own.

His jaw set. His eyes lit up. *That might be the case for now, but it won't be the case forever!* He would create true trash stars, even if it took him years to reach that height.

But for now... well, for now, he was trashy enough to take the easy way out. He shoved the shard of mana into the trash star, and the star came alight.

Instantly, mana overwhelmed him. Searing hot, blazing through every inch of his body, mana ravaged him. Sweat dotted his forehead and ran down his back. His body dried out as it baked from the inside out. His skin cracked open like a dry riverbed, and red hot embers glimmered in the depths of the cracks. Rhys fell to his knees and toppled forward, barely catching himself with his hands. He was so hot he didn't know if he was hot or cold, his body waffling between the two, only sure of one thing: this was too much, far too much, far, far too much!

Biting the inside of his cheek, he forcibly pushed the mana into his body, enforcing it as much as he could in the moment the trash star was lit. Splitting his attention, he also compressed the mana in his core as much as he could, forcing it to hold the absolute maximum he could. Several drops of that new kind of mana condensed in the bottom of

his core while he worked. The burned cells were reinforced and replaced with cells that could handle this heat. Those that were overloaded by the sheer momentary influx of mana were expanded, given more room to handle and condense mana within themselves. His baked body un-baked, and the cracks on his skin grew dark in their cores, then closed over.

It was there and gone in a split second. One moment, he was burning alive, on the verge of overwhelming himself from mana overdose; the next, he was fine once more. The mana he couldn't absorb or imbue into his body escaped into the air around him, filling the trash heap with dense mana like some kind of mage's paradise. The rats, raccoons, and other vermin gathered near, breathing deep as they sucked in as much mana as they could. Rhys wanted to absorb it back into himself, but his whole body brimmed over with mana. He'd enhanced his body, condensed mana tightly in his core, and still his mana passages and cells shimmered with excess mana. He felt like a fat kid after a big chicken dinner, his belly big and round, so full that he couldn't possibly fit another morsel in his mouth... except it was mana, not food.

Feeling borderline drunk, Rhys sat back, resting his hand on his stomach, and let out a big satisfied sigh. He couldn't do anything like this, not fight, not use techniques, not absorb more trash... hell, he could barely move. He stretched, then hauled himself upright and waddled back to his dorm. What he needed to do right now, was sleep all this off. It was either that, or sit here and stare at the stars until morning, and he figured he might as well get a good night's sleep in, what with more battles tomorrow.

There were too many battles today, just based on the number of competitors, to do more than one battle per person. After he'd finished his, the ref had pushed them both away to ready the field for the next contestants. But tomorrow, that would be different. Half the competitors had been eliminated, leaving enough room for two, or even three battles in the day. He could use a good night's rest, what with multiple battles before him tomorrow. Plus, they'd be tougher, now that the rankers had seen what he was capable of. He wouldn't be up against unranked trash anymore, but instead, facing off against what the coordinators of the tournament considered equivalent battlers to his skill level.

And possibly even Ernesto's champion.

So thinking, he waddled back up the hill and into his dorm, only to find the mattress still wet. He stared at it for a second, pushing his fingers into the cloth so the water oozed up, then sighed and backed away, lying down on the floor against the wall. One, he was trash, and could sleep anywhere; two, he was a mage, and barely needed to sleep. When he did sleep, his durable mage body meant that he took on no ill effects from sleeping in strange places or on the floor, though he wasn't sure how much that was magehood, and how much that was his younger body. Even in his first life, he remembered sleeping in some weird places and postures as a kid, and ending up just fine. It was only in adulthood that he ended up having to worry about how he slept.

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He woke to sunlight, filtering in through his window, and the titter of birdsong. Yawning, Rhys sat up and stretched. Despite everything, it had been a good sleep, for the rare sleep after a long stint of wakefulness. He didn't need to sleep, not anymore, but experiencing it reinforced it in his mind as a luxury for mages, an absolute decadence. He didn't know that it would give him the edge over his fellow tournament competitors, but it sure felt nice. He stretched one more time, then stood.

His broken sword was in his robes. There was plenty of garbage in his storage ring, and some of it really nasty to boot. He'd processed some of the mana in his sleep, and while he no longer felt overfull, he was pleasantly, perfectly full. All the mana he could possibly absorb sat in his core, and his cells, too, brimmed with the potent magical energy. He was in as good a shape as he could possibly be. And now, it was time to fight his first real battle in the tournament. Not as an unranked fighter, because, having lived an entire life of bullying children in unranked, he knew unranked was basically meaningless. They were all chaff down there. Either too ruined by random phobias to actually fight, or so weak that a victory meant nothing. Now that he'd handily beaten an unranked member, he could foresee exactly how things were going to go. Just like a shittily balanced match-based online fighting game, one victory would surely lead to him rocketing up to the very top of the ranks, so he could get punished and pingponged back to the rankless losers, only to win handily again and pingpong back to the top.

Well, it was single elimination, so he'd only pingpong once, but he didn't look forward to getting eliminated with extreme prejudice by some high-ranking fighter.

Rhys slapped his cheeks. *No! I can't lose!* Mostly because if he lost, he was going to die. Well, his school was going to get taken over by Ernesto, and then Ernesto was going to bully him to death. Honestly, a quick death might be preferable.

If I lose, I'm probably going to just take off into the night and vanish. It was a trashy move, but hey... he was trash. Besides, he'd already been bullied enough for both his lives. He really had no interest in spending his second life getting bullied, too.

But he wasn't going to lose, so it didn't matter. He was going to beat Ernesto's champion and stunt all over Purple Dawn as the representative of the clearly superior Infinite Constellation School. Even he knew it was true, but he sure liked the idea of getting to act like he was unstoppable and on top just to piss off everyone around him.

"Yep! I'm going to win!" he said, punching the air.

"You can't win on your ass in your bedroom," Bast remarked.

Rhys whirled around. Bast crouched in the window, resting his elbows on his knees like a regular delinquent. "I thought you went around in your mask all the time."

“Eh. I can manage a few moments of freedom every now and again.” Bast shrugged, then offered Rhys a hand. Rhys took it, only for Bast to fall backward out the window, dragging Rhys after him. He hopped the window ledge, hoisting his legs high to avoid barking the hell out of his shins. In midair, Bast released him and fell alone, and the two of them landed beside one another at the foot of the dormitory.

“That was unnecessarily dramatic,” Rhys complained, fixing his collar and dusting off his shoulders.

“Yeah, but it worked. And it was cool.”

Rhys nodded, unable to disagree on both counts.

A bell rang. Bast thumbed over his shoulder. “Better hurry, or you’re going to be late.”

“Huh? Don’t fights start at... I dunno, nine a.m.?”

“Fights start at the crack of dawn, and we’re well past that. You were about to miss your fight entirely, so I came to fetch you.”

“Yesterday—”

“Was opening day, with a different schedule.”

Rhys stiffened. That did sound reasonable. And he’d never seen a schedule, either, or looked for one, which, in hindsight, he really should have done. He glanced around, jittering back and forth. “Did you tell them I was on my way?”

“I did, yeah. Probably bought you five minutes,” Bast called after him.

“Thanks!” Rhys shouted over his shoulder as he raced to the arena.

Bast watched him go, hands on his hips. He shook his head. “What would you do without me?”

Rhys ran toward the arena at top speed, sending up a cloud of dust behind him as he charged in. As he drew close, the sounds of battle and the flash of magical attacks filled the air around him, mixed with the occasional cheering of the fans. Rhys hurtled through the dark tunnel under the stadium seating and out into the dusty path that ringed the edge of the stone squares. One of the squares stood empty, with a familiar dark-robed contestant and a bored-looking referee standing to the side. Rhys raced over and drew to a halt. “Hi, sorry I’m late!”

“Are you contestant Rhys Foundling?” the ref asked in the most disinterested voice possible.

“Yes! That’s me.”

She nodded, gesturing at the cloaked figure. It was the same one Rhys had seen around Ernesto yesterday. “This is Ernesto’s champion. The outcome of this match determines your fates. Do you accept?”

Rhys eyed the cloaked figure. He couldn’t tell if it eyed him back or not. The hood fell almost to their nose, and pulled tight at the base of their neck. Heavy, loose fabric hid every other feature of their figure. Rhys was a little taller than them, but that was all the more information he received by looking over them. He extended his aura to read theirs, but got little from the interaction except that they were at the peak of Tier 2. He didn’t have Ev’s aura-reading skill, and, it seemed, nor did he have any skill at reading auras either.

He nodded to the ref. “I accept.”

She nodded and flicked her head toward the stone square. “Contestants, please take the field.”

Rhys turned to the cloaked figure. Offering his hand with a smile, he said, “Let’s have a good match.”

The cloaked figure looked at his hand. Silently, they whirled on their heel and marched off.

“...Never mind.” Rhys lowered his hand and shook his head. He stepped toward the stone platform and stood there, waiting for the figure to reach the other side. The two of them opposed one another, on far sides of the platform.

The cloaked figure stepped forward. Rhys did as well, his heart thumping, half from his sprint here, half from the tension. *This is it.* He hadn’t expected it this soon, but here it was: the battle against Ernesto’s champion.

But hey, after I win this, the rest of the tournament is downhill! Rhys thought. Half-forcing a smile onto his face, he stepped onto the platform.

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

Chapter 86. Champion Match

Rhys stepped onto the platform. Across from him, the cloaked figure stepped forward as well. The two of them faced one another from across the stone expanse. A wind blew, blowing a gust of dust across the platform, and Rhys could almost hear the mariachi riff and the rattlesnake's rattle. He reached toward his hips, as though he was about to draw a six-shooter. "Draw, pardner."

He couldn't make out the cloaked figure's eyes from beneath their hood, but he was pretty sure they were squinting at him.

"Take your stances," the referee intoned, ignoring Rhys's ridiculousness.

The cloaked figure spread their legs and reached toward their right hip.

Rhys stood there casually, putting one hand in his robes. It looked like he was just chilling, not taking the fight seriously at all, but his hand curled around the broken sword's hilt in his robes.

"Do you not see me as a threat?" the cloaked figure asked, finally revealing its gender as a feminine voice issued from the hood.

"No, I do," Rhys assured her. He didn't change his stance, though. Acting like a total trash just felt so good. Actually, it felt so good that he had to wonder if there wasn't a trash skill somewhere down this path, something that would let him debuff his opponents just from acting like a piece of shit toward them.

She lowered her head. Once more, he couldn't see her eyes, but he knew they narrowed. "We'll see how long that attitude lasts."

Rhys squinted back. *Did she not hear me, or...?*

The referee dropped her hand. "Fight!"

Instantly, the cloaked figure closed the distance. Rhys didn't have time to draw his sword from his robes. A dagger glittered in black-gloved hands as she drove it toward his heart.

He grinned. From his off-hand, he flicked a small shard of metal toward his center mass.

The cloaked figure saw it coming and sneered. It wouldn't hit her dagger or her hand. His attack had missed.

Milimeters before the dagger pierced his chest, Rhys activated Trash Intent. A steel pole extended outward from the shard, catching both Rhys and the cloaked figure in the chests. Rhys had been expecting it, and was braced for it. The cloaked figure, on the other hand, was mid-leap. The pole jabbed into her chest and threw her back, and she tumbled across the platform.

Rhys deactivated Trash Intent and caught the shard as he charged after her. She was downed and rolling. Now was the time to force her off!

Her cloak twitched. Something sharp and white hurtled out from under it and closed in on Rhys at speed. He activated the Trash Intent again, projecting the rod into the ground this time to push himself back. The white thing smashed into the stone floor instead, shattering the platform.

Rhys deactivated Trash Intent again and danced back. The cloak churned, as though a huge spider crawled out from under it. Watching from a distance, Rhys took the opportunity to toss out a few extra pieces of garbage on the stage between him and her. Whatever was happening, he knew he wanted to give himself as much of an advantage as he could.

With a roar, the girl tore the cloak off and bounded to her feet, revealing one of the finest character designs Rhys had seen since he'd arrived. She wore a skintight black leotard that revealed long legs clad only in smoky translucent tights. Bone plates guarded her chest and stomach in a way that also happened to serve as a kind of corset. From the bone corset, long spine-like trails of bones flew out to her upper thighs, where they arced out from her body to support a lacey, spiderlike black skirtlet that hid nothing, but did a great job of accenting her legs. White bones glittered all the way down her spine and extended past it into a long tail that stretched out over the skirtlet and whisked around her ankles, tipped in a razor-sharp bone. Strands of bone-like beads draped over her jet-black hair, arranged almost like a ribcage, with a fang dangling from the apex of the drape into the center of her forehead, and short black gloves were backed with bones that themselves ended in sharp claws. The bones ran up her forearms as well, bracing her arms over translucent arm-tights that matched the ones on her legs. In fact, he wouldn't be surprised if she were wearing a body sock under that leotard.

A half-dozen sharp-tipped bones arced over her shoulders and down, like pale white spider's legs. Red eyes narrowed, glaring at him. She pointed a clawed finger at him. "You die here, today."

"Yes! Slay, queen!" Rhys encouraged her, applauding. Now *that* was someone who knew how to do a reveal! The cloak, the mystery, the squirming, and then the *swoosh* as she tossed it aside—*hell* yeah. It was everything he loved in a character. Just trashy enough to be absolutely peak aesthetic.

She blinked at him.

He cleared his throat. "Not literally. Please don't kill me. It's an expression, you know?"

Without another word, she dashed in. White bone legs arced down from her shoulders and pierced the stone, propelling her forward. She kicked with sharp bone-clawed boots, directly toward his throat.

Rhys sidestepped, activating the trash he'd left on the ground at the same time. A heavy table materialized under one of her claws, pushing it up and out of the way. She stumbled sideways, only to fall into a cauldron on its side, her claws scrambling to find purchase on the strange round shape that rolled as she stepped on it.

As she struggled, Rhys dashed in. He drew his sword at last and, cancelling the intents on the floor, sliced at her chest. The bone plates scrambled to block his sword, and the Trash Intent bounced off, only slicing a thin line into the plates. She caught herself on her real feet and kicked him back with her leg. The bone pierced his side and threw him away like a ball of rubbish, and he tumbled away like a plastic bag on the wind, already paper thin.

Rhys rolled over the stone. The edge rushed up behind him. He slammed his sword into the stone, carving himself to a halt. His back rolled over the edge, but his body stayed on.

The girl dashed over to him. Before he could get up, she launched herself at him, all six spider-bone legs bundled together into one ring of nasty. Rhys dragged himself aside by his sword, activating his revenge rat seconds before she hit. The stab missed his gut, but carved deep rents down his thigh. The rat lunged, crawling up the girl's bone legs to bite at her face. She yelped and retreated, batting at her face instinctively. Rhys took the opportunity to roll out of her reach.

Blood flowed freely. Pain surged through him, so overwhelming that he had to grit his teeth just to keep from passing out. His vision faded for a moment, but he forced it back, blinking back the dark. Red pooled everywhere. Everything he saw was red. Blood soaked his robes and puddled under his body. Rhys staggered to his feet. His injured leg gave out, and he stumbled. He activated Trash Body, and jammed his leg down, forcing it to hold his weight despite the damage. He couldn't fall now.

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The girl clawed into the rat. Her bone claws ripped into it, shattering it into mana. She tossed it aside and advanced on Rhys slowly, like a predator. Laughing, she pointed her claws at him. "Injured and bleeding. All your little tricks amounted to nothing. Tell me, worm. Do you still think you can beat me?"

Rhys gritted his teeth. She was stronger than him. Faster. Had more limbs, and more weapons. He was thoroughly outmatched.

He switched his sword into one hand and reached into his robes. "I didn't want to do this, but you've forced my hand."

"Oh? Getting serious, at last?"

"Lines everyone wants to say at least once in their life," Rhys added under his breath, at top speed.

Her brows furrowed. "What?"

Rather than answering, he rushed at her. In one hand, he clutched a scrap of stick. As he closed in, he activated Trash Intent, and it sprung up to full stick size.

"Ha! Too muddled by pain to activate your strange skill at the right time?" The girl charged in, baring her bone claws. The claws spread wide, as if they were living and attached to her hands, not mere weapons on her gloves.

"Sorry about this." Rhys lifted the vial in his other hand and popped the lid. It was the weakest of the potions he'd brewed, but he still felt bad about using it in battle. Chemical warfare was a war crime, after all.

Then again, he was pretty sure the Geneva Convention would have words about using bones as weapons and want to regulate the usage of magic in general, so what use was it in this world? The gunk was too thick to flow out, so, using mana, he scraped out a tiny bit from the vial and smeared it on the end of the stick. He formed his hand into a claw and struck, using the force of **Even a Cornered Rat** to propel his stick faster and with more force.

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The message activated as the stick was already en-route. A horrified look spread over his face, but it was too late to retrieve it. Less is More worked offensively, too? How potent was this gunk going to be?

Laughing, the girl blocked with her bone legs. "That isn't enough—"

The gunk struck the bone and ate through it with a horrific hissing sound. The bones blackened around the impact site, and the tip of the outmost bone cracked and fell free from her body entirely. The stick pierced through, the gunk hissing through the bones like they were made of sugar, not hardened enamel. He tried to pull back, but it was too late. He'd put his all into the strike. The arrow was flying, and there was nothing that could put it back in the bow now.

The girl's eyes widened. All her bone plates gathered up in the place the stick flew toward, stacking up between him and her body. One after another, the stick burned through. The acrid smell of melting bone filled the air as it punched through the armored

plates as if they were paper. The strike slowed, between the armor and Rhys himself trying to abort the strike. At last, it came to a halt, the very tip barely piercing her skin.

The girl jumped back, then screamed in pain and horror. Black veins spread from the point he'd struck through her body, climbing up her neck and down her legs and arms. She stumbled, then fell to the ground. Broken bone limbs kicked all around her, and her body convulsed. From where he stood, Rhys could sense her mana going into rebellion. She wasn't used to handling impurities. Even this tiny amount of impurities was enough to tear her into pieces.

"Victor—Rhys Foundling!"

In the stands, Ernesto jumped to his feet, already shouting and protesting Rhys's victory, but Rhys heard none of it. He ran to the girl's side. Now that he'd won, he had no interest in watching her die. Her eyes widened as he closed in, and she clawed out, struggling away on her broken bone legs. "Don't—don't—"

"It's okay. I'm here to help."

Her eyes rolled back in her head. She went limp. He could sense her life force fading. There was no time to waste. Rhys put his hand on the wound and drew the impurities out of it. They'd already circulated throughout her whole body, since she was spinning her mana at battle levels, but they were his impurities, the ones he'd forged, and he knew them intimately. They weren't like the ones in Bast's body, that had dug deep into his cells and mana passages and took on his aura. They were fresh, new, and still more a part of Rhys than they were a part of her. One call, and they all came running, flowing neatly into his body.

As the impurities flowed out of her, the black veins faded, and she blinked back to consciousness. She squinted at him, taken aback. "Why?"

"You were going to die," Rhys explained.

"But I'm an opponent."

He gave her an exasperated look. "In a multi-school tournament for fun! I'm not trying to kill people in cold blood."

She quieted, looking down as she took in what he'd told her.

Rhys turned his focus back to drawing the last of his impurities out of her. To his surprise, this *wasn't* her first run-in with impurities. Her body was laden with them. The weakest kind, it was true, with only a few of the second-tier ones—the ones the rats had, that he used in his trash stars' core—buried in her core. He didn't touch those, since they seemed almost... a *part* of her, in a way Bast's and even Rhys's impurities weren't, but also because they felt strongly like curse power.

No... not just the impurities. All the bones feel like curse power. She was laden with curse power. It ran thickly through her body and flowed through her veins like mana, to the extent that Rhys wasn't sure she had mana at all. She'd been a real threat, a rabid attacker who pushed the offensive so extremely that, unlike Ernesto's other students, Rhys had had no time mid-battle to evaluate what kind of mana she was using. But now that battle was over, he had time to inspect, and being this close to her, he couldn't help not notice how much curse power riddled her body. More than any of Ernesto's students, it was so inherent to her that he wasn't even sure she knew how to use mana.

Rhys finished drawing out his impurities and stepped back, looking down at her. His brows furrowed. "Did Ernesto do this to you?"

She startled, looking at her now-clean limbs and body, then looked at him. "You did—"

"I mean the ones that were already there. Was it Ernesto?"

Not that he needed another reason to hate the man, but he didn't want to start blaming his enemy for every ill, either.

Her face twisted into a scowl. "No. I was born like this. They're a part of me. Obviously."

"Obviously?"

"You truly don't know who... no, what I am?"

Rhys shook his head. "Nope."

She made a face as though she didn't know whether to laugh or cry, shoving herself to a sit. Her bone limbs trembled, then regenerated, new bone tips pushing out of the broken, jagged ends. "I am Sable. Daughter of the Abhorrent Beast, one of the remaining free Remnant Weapons."

Rhys's mouth formed an O. "I see, I see. Interesting." Was this what Straw would feel like, now that he'd awakened to sensing impurities? He was curious to find out.

She raised her brows. "Are you not terrified?"

"No. Well, my master as a child was the Strawman everyone's so scared about, so you could say my relationship with these Remnant Weapons is a bit different from everyone else's."

Sable looked at him, surprised. "*You* were...?"

"Yeah. You didn't know?" Then again, he didn't know about her, so fair was fair.

She looked down, a thoughtful expression crossing her face. “I never knew my mother,” she admitted at last, looking up. “Everyone says she was nothing but a mindless monster. But she had me, did she not?” She hesitated a long beat, thinking deeply. At last, she murmured, almost at a whisper, “Do you think those beings are capable of love?”

“Straw was always a bit of an odd duck, but sure. I mean, he laughed and cried with the rest of us. Could be a bit weird at times, but without love? Ha. I’ve met more psychopathic humans.” Rhys shook his head and offered her a hand up.

Sable looked at his hand. He was about to retract it, not wanting to leave it hanging there, when she suddenly clasped it. Her hand was small and cool in his, the bones hard against his finger joints. “All my life, I’ve been told I’m the daughter of a monster. But... you say I’m...”

“Just an ordinary person. Don’t let other people throw you out. Only you can determine if you’re trash or not. Me? I’m trash. But anyone with a character design as cool as yours can’t be,” Rhys said, thumping his chest proudly.

He left out that lots of characters with peak character designs were actually considered trash... although sometimes, a peak enough character design could rescue a character from a trash manga on its own. His mind went to the thousands of figures of one particular succubus from an over lording series where none of the other characters ever seemed to get figures, for some odd reason. Must have been all the mounds of plot around that succubus. Mounds and mounds of it.

Sable stared at him for a second, then burst out laughing. “You’re the strangest person I’ve ever encountered, Rhys Foundling.”

Rhys scratched the back of his head and laughed lightly. “I get that a lot.”

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

Chapter 87. Match Watching

Ernesto burst onto the platform, his robes billowing and a stormy expression on his face. He pointed at Sable. “Behind me. Now!”

Sable looked at him. A sour expression crossed her face. She went to move to his side.

Rhys caught her arm. "Wait. Why are you following him?"

"No one else will teach me. He's my only option. If he stops sponsoring me, I... might end up like the Strawman." She gave him a dark look and wrenched her arm free. "Stop meddling and leave me alone."

"I can't. If the world's treating you like trash, then I have a very vested interest. Ernesto might consider you trash, but I want to see you polished," Rhys insisted.

She ignored him, walking back to Ernesto's side. Rhys watched her go, feeling a vague sense of interest. Like Mouse, she piqued that part of him that sat up whenever someone who was 'trash' walked by, but she piqued it even more strongly than Mouse. It seemed that the more someone was looked down upon or considered unworthy, the more it activated his trash path. Bast, who was an overlooked orphan about to embark on a life of crime, and Sable, the unvalued child of one of the beings declared enemies of the world, were far more 'filthy' and 'trashy' than a mousy girl who'd been accepted into a mage school and doubtlessly made contributions that someone in the school recognized as worthwhile, who simply liked to hide in social situations.

He made a quiet note in the back of his mind to keep an eye on Sable. It didn't seem like she was happy under Ernesto, and she was truly a very competent fighter. Plus, as someone born into using curse power, she was an ideal teacher to help him unlock the secrets to processing, storing, and using curse power and curses himself. He'd already figured out the basics, but there was a difference between knowing where the gas and the steering wheel were, and knowing how to drift a car to come out ahead in a street race.

He was against regimented learning that ignored the realities of one's talents and interests in preference for teaching children social norms, but he had nothing against learning from experts who knew much more than he did. In fact, he wouldn't mind sparring against Sable. His skills in fighting a humanoid enemy with a normal number of limbs fell apart when faced with a multi-limbed enemy with blades attached to every appendage, fingers and toes included. He was sure that someone with more talent in the sword could have handled the situation just fine, but he had trash talent. Without lots of practice and trial and error, he had very little hope of winning in such a situation. In a world with monsters, beasts, and all sorts of horrors, he needed to learn how to fight non-humans just as much as humans. Sable provided that in a... relatively safe format, depending on her level of association with Ernesto.

"Do you require healing?" the ref offered quietly to Rhys.

"Huh? Oh." He looked down at his bleeding leg. It was ripped up pretty badly. He waved his hand. "I'll be fine." Reaching into his robes, he took out a potion and took a small sip.

She raised her brows. "You'll need more than that."

“Probably,” Rhys agreed. Better to do it one sip at a time so Less is More could kick in, though.

Speaking of his first skill... he looked at the potion, then took another tiny sip, thinking back to his use of the filth potion in battle. He hadn't expected Less is More to work offensively as well as defensively. The filth potion on its own, without Less is More, might have been enough to injure Sable enough to call the match, but as used to impurities as she was, he was pretty sure she could have fought on with only that many impurities in her system. With his potion and Less is More, though, he'd absolutely overwhelmed her Impurity Resist, assuming she even had the skill.

Honestly... I didn't expect the potion to be that powerful, he thought, putting the health potion away to check his filth potion. This level of filth potion was easy for him to absorb now, so easy he'd subconsciously taken it as 'weak.' That, and he hadn't used very much of it. He'd thought it would turn the tides, not end the battle. True, Less is More did kick it up, and he hadn't expected it to activate, true, but if he'd been told Less is More would activate on it, he would have said it would go from pain to paralysis, not...severe danger to almost-death.

“Asking *him* if he needs healing? You should be checking on my student!” Ernesto demanded.

The ref looked Sable up and down. Sable, for her part, had the good graces to look embarrassed. “She looks fine to me.”

“She didn't a moment ago, when he almost killed her!” Ernesto accused Rhys, jabbing a finger at him.

“Deaths are acceptable in the heat of battle. All contestants understand this,” the ref returned in a bored turn.

“Wait, really?” Rhys asked, a little shocked. He was expecting to face potential death due to his status, but he was expecting it to at least be against the rules when it came. It was totally acceptable to kill in this tournament? *Holy shit!*

The ref gave Rhys a look. “Before you get any ideas, death is only acceptable in situations where it would injure the attacker to avoid killing their opponent, and will always be deeply investigated.”

Rhys put a hand on his chest. *Phew.* That was more of what he was expecting. Death was an acceptable consequence of a bad situation, not a normal outcome of a battle.

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“He almost killed my student due to gross negligence... or worse, an assassination attempt! He should be disqualified,” Ernesto growled.

“An assassination attempt? Aren’t you two having a champion battle? It would be stranger if he didn’t fight at his full strength,” the ref argued back.

“Champion battle?” Ernesto scoffed. “He clearly cheated. That potion he used must have been given to him by someone else!”

The ref looked at Rhys.

He drew out the filth potion and showed it to her. “I made it. You can check.”

She took the potion from him and scanned it with her aura, then immediately held it out from her body, pinching it between two fingers as if a mere touch would contaminate her. Rhys thought she was being a bit dramatic, since it was his weakest impurity potion. but it was pretty potent, so maybe not.

At last, she gingerly handed it back to him. Rhys accepted the potion and slid it into his storage ring. She shrugged at Ernesto. “It’s his. He made it, fair and square. Are you going to argue that he isn’t allowed equipment in the tournament, next? I’ll point out that most of these contestants did not forge their own swords, and neither did you. Should I strip them all of their weapons?”

Ernesto closed his mouth. He glowered, simmering with rage, then finally spoke again. “I—”

“I have already called this match. If you wish to dispute the results of the match, please file the proper paperwork with the Tournament Bureau.” The ref waved him away, turning toward the next two contestants.

“Maerva! You dare?”

“By the power vested in me by Purple Dawn Academy, I dare.”

Ernesto’s teeth ground. He turned to Rhys, his eyes narrowing. “Watch your back, child.”

“I won, fair and square. What, are you afraid to admit it?” Rhys asked.

Ernesto narrowed his eyes.

“Sable, do you want to stick with a sore loser like this? You should think long and hard about what kind of future you want for yourself... and if a future under Ernesto is the future you seek.”

Sable looked at him. Her red irises glowed faintly in the bright sunlight, coloring her black lashes. Their eyes met for a long moment, and then she looked away.

It was fine to be the moody, emo kid, as long as she broke free of the abusive adult manipulating her at some point. If she didn't, she was doomed. Rhys really liked her fashion sense, and didn't want to see an incredible costume like that wasted on a character archetype fated to fade in act two, long before she hit the enduring love a truly iconic design deserved. Rhys watched as she followed Ernesto away, a bit sad to see Sable go. He was always reluctant to see fine, polishable trash leave his hands. At last, he turned away. She'd find him again. He had to trust in that.

He wasn't that worried about Ernesto fighting his win via paperwork. All he had to do was notify Aquari, and she'd handle that for him, if it got bad; if it didn't, he'd simply continue with his legitimate win. Alternatively, he could always pull the trashy teacher-teacher move, and shout out to that one legalistic guy in the Alliance, whatever his name was... Griffin, maybe? That overly-upright guy who believed in the rules and laws more than life itself would surely puzzle things out, and in taking the side of the rules, take Rhys's side. Things would have to be going truly horrible for him to reach out to Griffin, but it was always an option.

Oh well. He'd won. It wasn't a good win, or an easy win, or a clean win, but a win was a win. That, and he'd discovered just how potent his potions actually were. He retreated to the audience to watch a few rounds and wait for his second battle, not trusting himself to keep track of time unless he was there.

He watched quietly, taking note of all the contestants he could. A few of the battles were close, even excitingly so, but no one truly stood out to him. They were still early enough that most of the victories were quick and decisive. It wasn't so bad, Rhys reflected, sitting up in the stands and sipping on a health potion like it was a soda. He had his leg stretched out to the row in front of him, and the few mages who considered asking him to move it rethought it when they saw the fresh blood on his robe. His leg slowly knitted back together, and the day dragged on.

At last, one of the refs met his eyes and gestured him down. Leg healed, Rhys hopped up and bounced down the stands to the platform the man indicated. A male student stood opposite, wearing a uniform Rhys didn't recognize. The two of them faced one another and bowed, and Rhys smiled. A polite reaction, for once.

"May I request you don't use that poison on me?" the boy in the strange uniform asked. It truly was strange, the more Rhys looked at. A white fabric, but when he moved, it looked black, almost shimmering, but into its inverse. It was like that blue-or-gold dress all over again, but worse.

"You can request anything you want to," Rhys replied neutrally.

His eyes narrowed. "Then I would like the request you not use that poison."

“What if I’m a poison master? Am I meant to hang up my primary weapon?”

“You’re not a poison master. Your skin is too healthy, with none of the jaundiced pallor, and your clothes aren’t durable enough.”

“I’m not, but that’s not the point. Isn’t that an exquisitely rude question to ask someone? ‘Hello, please disarm yourself.’ If I asked you to put your sword aside, would you?” Rhys asked, crossing his arms. Quietly, he noted Florian’s rules for how poison masters looked, and made a mental note to seek a few of them out later. It sounded like they were heavily plagued by impurities, and he would love to lend them a helping hand for no reason other than to help them out, and definitely not to try out new, dangerous, and exotic impurities.

“Of course not.”

“Then why should I not use my poisons?”

“If you don’t, I won’t use my trump card, either,” the boy replied.

Rhys pretended to consider for a second, then laughed. “Nah. For all I know, you’re bluffing, and you have no trump card. Show me what it is right now, or I won’t even consider this offer of yours.”

“Why would I show you my trump card?”

“And yet, I’m meant to put mine down? You sure are a selfish git, aren’t you?”

The boy narrowed his eyes. “You dare?”

“I dare? / dare? No, *you* dare. Honestly. Coming out here and making wild demands, then asking if I dare... holy shit, kid. I hope your parents are rich, because you’re gonna have a tough time in life otherwise.”

The boy retained his firm stance, looking down on Rhys, but a hint of flush appeared in the tips of his ears. “You dare besmirch the Coyale Family? Our noble line has produced mages for many centuries!”

“Oh, so you *do* come from money. That explains so much.” Rhys paused, then looked at the boy in a new light. He leaned in. “Ten thousand gold, and I put my poisons away.”

The boy spluttered. An aghast look spread over his face. “You mean to ask for bribes, in the light of day?”

“Sure, why not? Come on, it’s just eleven thousand gold. Twelve thousand, and I put my poisons away. Surely a young master like you can spare a mere thirteen thousand?”

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

Chapter 88. Surely a Young Master

The boy spluttered again, shocked. “S-such blatant escalation! You shameless extortionist!”

“Fifteen thousand gold, and I promise, I won’t touch a single poison,” Rhys replied. That much would actually make a significant increase in the gold he’d made from the potato chips; at that level, it might actually be worth it. Not that he’d planned to use poisons against this pathetic young master, but he wasn’t going to put away his ace in the hole without receiving something in return.

“What an absurd suggestion! I would never,” the boy insisted. He leaned in. “Are you serious?”

“Do you have sixteen thousand gold?” Rhys replied.

The boy startled. “You—”

“Hurry up. The price is only going to go up. Seventeen thousand...”

Baring his teeth, the boy hesitated, then drew his sword. “You leave me no choice!”

“Aw, too bad.” Rhys shook his head in disappointment. “I really would’ve put down my poisons for the low, low price of twenty thousand gold—”

“You will mock me no longer! I am more than my father’s money!” the boy roared, closing in on Rhys.

“I’m really not mucking you, I just want a lot of money,” Rhys replied, drawing his broken sword.

The boy scoffed. He swung at Rhys with a telegraphed overhand swing, a smug expression on his face. “You think you threaten *me*, Florian, with a broken sword? I’ll have you know that—”

“Gods, you talk too much,” Rhys muttered. He swung upwards, activating Trash Intent at the last instant. The sword leaped to life as Rhys parried Florian’s strike, then

vanished again in the next moment. He raised his brows. It was a heavy blow, but not something he couldn't handle. Compared to Bast or Ev, it was downright light.

Florian reeled back. He'd put all his strength and weight into the blow, but this Rhys character had countered it easily, with one hand! And somehow with a broken sword, to boot. Florian's brows furrowed. He looked at the broken sword, then at his. It shouldn't have touched. The broken sword was too short to have hit his blade, so how had Rhys countered his strike?

Or at least, that's what I'd guess he was thinking, based on his facial expressions. Rhys lashed out, striking at Florian with the broken sword. Florian flinched back. The broken blade whiffed by his chest without striking. Rhys grinned. He hadn't activated Trash Intent, on purpose. He could easily beat Florian, but why not play with his food a little bit? The last battle had been so stressful. He could use a little stress relief. And, coincidentally, if he just happened to bully the rich kid into bribing him to stop, well... he was never one to turn down free money.

Sure, it was trashy. It was outright scum behavior, in fact. But Florian was the kind of pompous rich kid that *desperately* needed to be taught a lesson, and Rhys was the kind of guy who had lots and lots of lessons to give. He liked to think of it as doing the world a favor, by bullying the rich kid a little bit. If he didn't, no one would, and then he'd end up as the kind of douchey rich-ass scumbag that Rhys hated more than anything. Yes, this was an intervention! An intervention for Florian's sake, yes, a good-hearted effort on Rhys's part to give the child a gentle lesson, but also an intervention for the sake of the entire world. Who knew what kind of bullshit the kid would get up to with his daddy's money in the future if Rhys didn't put a stop to his rich kid behavior now?

Besides, if Rhys's guess was right, Florian should be *stronger* than Sable, if he'd made it to this part of the tournament, but he wasn't. He was much, much, much weaker than Sable. He'd been willing to buy Rhys's filth potion from him; Rhys was willing to bet Florian had bought a little more than that, to get here.

Florian sneered. "Too poor to afford a functional blade? You can't fight with that broken sword!"

"You sure about that?" Rhys darted in, jabbing his sword at Florian's chest. Florian hopped back and blocked. Their swords clashed.

Florian drew a brilliant blue gem out of his pocket and lifted it high. "Come forth, waves of the depths! Wash this peasant back to the slums where he belongs!"

A cool wind blew. Water splashed out of the gem, hurtling toward Rhys.

Rhys dashed to the side seconds before a tidal wave burst from the gem and slammed into the wall of the square. It rebounded and rushed at him from behind, spilling by his legs. Rhys stumbled.

Florian turned around and lifted another gem, this one pure white. “Freeze, crystal ice! Freeze like the hobos in winter’s grasp!”

White crystals spilled out of the gem. They brushed the water and instantly froze it solid. Rhys jumped, pulling his legs up out of the water milliseconds before it froze beneath him. He expected to immediately drop to his knees, but his hop took him high enough that he had plenty of time to extend his legs and land on his feet.

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Huh. He’s not completely incompetent. He was only using items, but if an item could kill, who was to say it was right or wrong to use it in battle? It wasn’t like someone could complain that their opponent had brought a sword when they had bare hands; that was just the nature of battle. Money was an advantage, just like skill, practice, and hard work were advantages. He might complain, but hell, being born rich was luck, just like being born talented. Besides, he came from a world where *all* battle was determined by purchased items, so the idea of invalidating Florian’s power just because it came from money made very little sense to him. If he could go out and buy a sniper rifle, and he used it against someone with a handgun, no one would complain that he had more money, they’d just mock the handgun user for being stupid enough to charge the sniper.

No, he respected Florian’s right to buy his strength. What he didn’t respect, was Florian’s rich-kid attitude. He summoned a piece of pipe to his hand and grinned. It was time to teach this rich kid just how much trash could do.

Florian flicked his hand, trading the white gem for a shard of metal. “Pierce, needles, like the—”

The needles rained down. Before Florian could finish his doubtlessly insensitive statement, Rhys braced himself in the broken ice and pointed his steel pole at Florian. Florian’s eyes narrowed, and he braced himself in response, having seen the pole used against Sable.

Rhys laughed. “You think you’re so much better, just because you have a little money. But anyone can kill you, you know that? *Anyone.*”

He activated Trash Intent, putting as much speed and power into the activation as he could. It burst forth and smashed into Florian’s shoulder. Blue light flashed, then shattered as Rhys pierced through some kind of shield he hadn’t even known existed, and a blue stone hanging around Florian’s neck shattered. He’d meant for the pipe to cut into his body like it had with his skirmishes back in Infinite Constellation School, but Florian’s shield slowed it. Instead, it pushed Florian back. He staggered with the hit, tripping toward the edge, then gripped the white stone and slid over the remaining ice sideways, rather than backwards. In his other hand, he held the needle, and pointed his hand at Rhys. A second flurry of needles crowded the air, flying toward Rhys. He

dropped, swapping his pipe for a cauldron, and hid behind it. The needles pinged off the Trash Intent, hard enough that Rhys felt every hit through his mana. He tensed, barely resisting their hits. He had no time to fight back, or worry about his next move; every piece of his focus and mana had to be put into the cauldron, or else it would disintegrate against the needles.

It was his first time using Trash Intent against a barrage attack like this with serious mana behind it. Sure, he'd used it before, but usually against martial artists, where they'd hit his item with one serious blow, maybe even crush the Trash Intent, but that was it. He had to worry about the backlash from a broken Intent more than the sustained mana drain of keeping it active under an attack. But now, he had to hold Intent while hundreds of needles slammed into it. It was a totally different mana drain and level of effort compared to the single big hit he usually had to deal with against the likes of Ev or Cynog. He wasn't used to it, and as a result, had no space to do anything but defend.

While he defended, Florian pulled a fresh shield necklace from his storage ring and slid it over his head. He clicked his tongue at Rhys. "Pathetic. Where's that attitude from earlier? Asking *me* to pay *you* to not use your techniques. But look at you now. Totally tied down!"

Rhys rolled his eyes. Florian was the one to bring up his filth potions first, and besides, if he *did* use it, he was one hundred percent sure he could win the battle right now. He wasn't using it for two reasons: one, he wanted to teach Florian a lesson, and two, he didn't want to grow too reliant on it, to the point where he couldn't win without using it. It would make him too easy to counter, and there was no point to rely on it overmuch when he had so much else in his arsenal that he'd barely used. Better to treat this battle as a training exercise to test out the limits of his techniques, rather than win it in one hit and learn nothing. After all, he'd already learned new things about how his Trash Intent skill worked when used defensively. If he'd finished Florian in one hit, he would have learned nothing.

And there's a third reason... if I rely on it too much, people will counter it, and then it won't be my ace in the hole anymore.

Of course, he was still trashy enough to use his sure-kill technique to secure the victory if he was backed into a corner. But no point doing that until he had to, and he still had plenty up his sleeve.

He narrowed his eyes at Florian's fresh shield necklace. That was annoying, for sure, Florian having an unknown quantity of shields hidden in his storage ring. Nothing wrong with buying power, and hell, he himself had used the technique of tanking so hard that it drove the enemy insane, dragged their mentality down, and forced them to do something rash that gave him the opening to kill them—he'd done it before in all kinds of games, from card games to hero shooters and everything in between. But it didn't mean it wasn't annoying when Florian used that tried and true technique against him.

It'll be easier to ring-out than 'kill' him, he thought, but based on how smug Florian was about everything? The boy had already realized that. He was rich, not stupid, even if the two were often synonymous. His smugness indicated that he was at least smart enough that the other young masters at the school weren't able to beat him down for his lack of academic skill, and if anything, the skills he'd used so far, bought though they might be, were used tactically and with great effect. If he'd been fighting someone other than Rhys, they might have worked.

He glanced down. His legs bled, pierced through with a dozen needles. During Florian's first barrage, he'd just stood there with the hopes of getting off the steel pipe sneak attack, and paid the price when Florian had a secret defensive shield. If not for Trash Body, this fight would already be Florian's.

Until my mana runs out, though, I've got a physical boost. But Florian, on the other hand, had lots of items to rely on. In the battle of attrition, Rhys was the one on the losing side, given Florian's bottomless wealth, and his very bottomable mana pool.

Rather than ringing-out Florian, which the boy would expect, what he actually needed to do was land one big hit. Activate all his buffs, go all out, and absolutely hammer Florian with one hit at the peak of his strength.

Florian's barrage of needles ended, and Rhys took a deep breath. He grinned. *It's go time*.

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

Chapter 89. Battle of Attrition

It's go time.

The needles in Rhys's legs left a numb, tingling sensation there that he almost hadn't felt at all through Trash Body. They were poisoned. No, not just poisoned—the entire needle was made of poison.

Or in other words: *impurity*.

Rhys released his cauldron's Trash Intent and drew in strongly, and the needles sucked in through the holes in his legs. Florian stared in shock, and a few members of the audience sat forward, not that Rhys noticed. He was too busy dashing—not toward Florian, as the boy had expected, and thrown up his arms to block the surely-oncoming

attack—but toward the other needles, scattered over the battlefield and mixed in with the shattered ice. His Trash Step activated, but that wasn't his purpose. He slapped his hand down on the ice and drew it into his core along with the scattered needles. They'd been discarded in the battle; therefore, they were trash. The needles, too, were impurities, which made them doubly trash.

The debris on the field vanished. A single chain remained behind: the shield necklace Florian had discarded earlier. Rhys snatched it up and tried using Trash Intent to bring back the gem and its function. The gem reappeared, no problem at all, but when he tried activating the shield, mana vanished from his core at a terrifying rate. Startled, Rhys quickly deactivated the Trash Intent. Was it that the shield was too powerful for his Trash Intent to replicate, or was it that replicating magical effects of items through Trash Intent, as opposed to just replicating the item itself, was the prohibitively expensive part?

His mind flashed to the rusted sword in his storage ring, with the sunlight embedded in its blade, but he quickly dismissed the idea. The shield necklace was *doubtlessly* less powerful than that relic, not to mention that the relic was one of a kind. He wasn't going to test whether he could reactivate that magical effect through Trash Intent until he was sure he *could* reactivate magical effects through Trash Intent.

Though, to be fair, the fact that Trash Intent had drawn on his mana at all when he'd tried to reactivate the magical effect suggested that Trash Intent had the capability to replicate magical effects. The real question was whether or not Rhys had the mana pool to support anything but the very weakest of those reactivations. Given how Florian had used the shield necklace without thought or effort, it definitely took a factor more effort to use Trash Intent to use a magical effect vice using the effect outright; on the other hand, it might be that he had to recreate the enchantment via Trash Intent, which cost more mana to start out with compared to activating the necklace, and that might be the bottleneck.

All this speculation takes some time to explain, but it all happened in the blinking of an eye. Rhys gripped the necklace tight, then absorbed it, opting to use it as trash rather than save it to try to reactivate the magical effect later. He wasn't the poor scum Florian took him as, but instead, the nouveau-riche kind of trash. The price of a shield necklace was nothing to him. He only hadn't bought one himself because the ones in the market seemed flimsy, unlike Florian's, which stood up to his powerful attack. But for his current purposes, a flimsy shield necklace was more fitting than a powerful one, since he wanted to find out the mana cost of reactivating a magical effect through Trash Intent, and he simply couldn't pay the cost at all for Florian's. It did hurt his heart a little bit to abandon such a rare and useful piece of trash, but then his eyes fixed on Florian's neck, and his heart hardened. It didn't matter. Florian would surely discard yet another shield necklace by the time this battle was over.

The needles were full of powerful impurities, ones Rhys was unused to, and he could already sense they'd be interesting to ignite, but they weren't enough for him to start

burning them. He simply didn't have enough trash, whether it was a trash star or a furnace he wanted. He tossed back his weak impurity potion, but that still wasn't enough, though it was close. As a cheap person at heart, despite his nouveau-riche status, Rhys turned to Florian again. "Oh no, my legs, they feel so numb!"

Florian squinted at him, who'd just darted across the arena with the greatest of speed.

Rhys staggered across the arena, acting like he'd just stood up off the toilet after a particularly long shit. "Nooo, my legs! I'm so vulnerable!"

Suspicion still clouded Florian's face, but he lifted the needle again. Another barrage shot Rhys's way.

Rhys's 'numb' legs suddenly regained feeling, and he jumped into the air, backflipping away from the needles. He landed and dashed in, sucking up the impurities again.

"You *are* a poison master!" Florian accused him, holding the needle back as though Rhys might go for it.

"No I'm not. You said it yourself!" Rhys responded. He went back to staggering across the field outside of Florian's melee range. "My legs, my legs..."

"I'm not foolish! I'm not going to fire any more needles at you," Florian said. He flicked his wrist, and the needle vanished.

Pity, Rhys thought, gazing at his hand where the needle had been with longing.

In its place, a brown-green stone materialized. Florian's expression turned manic, and he laughed. "I didn't think you'd make me bring this out, but I have no recourse. Take this! The ultimate beat-down for poor idiots like you!"

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"You know, the more you speak, the more I think you're a real douchenozzle," Rhys informed him, even as mana swelled around the brown-green stone. He jumped back, waiting to see what attack came out of it so he could respond.

The floor under him trembled. Rhys startled. As the stone broke apart and something shot through the ground under his feet, his Trash Step activated. He jumped away with the power of the boost and only took a glancing blow from the gnarled and spiked tree-hard vine that lunged for his undercarriage.

"Wow, low blow," Rhys said, patting his butt. The robes had held up to the strike, fortunately, or else his right buttcheek would be on display right now. As it was, his ass smarted, and a few prickles on his leg where the spines had scraped past warned him of poison in the form of delicious fresh impurities. The vine retreated, and he sensed its

mana curling around underground, seeking after him to strike again. He looked at Florian. “That thousand-years move is *crazy* outdated, man. It’s just sexual assault nowadays. Aren’t you afraid you’ll get cancelled?”

Florian only laughed. “What’s wrong with attacking my opponent’s weak points? You’re the fool for not armoring the places you’re vulnerable.”

Rhys scooted over to the broken stones where the vine had shattered through the floor and absorbed the debris—aka trash—they’d left behind. He had enough impurities, now, to burn them, but he didn’t have quite enough for a trash star. He looked at Florian and considered his shield amulet. He didn’t want to just beat the man; he wanted to teach him a lesson. Florian needed to learn what happened when he attacked a man with nothing to lose, and Rhys had a double serving of humiliation right here, ready to serve up.

No, no, no, not humiliation, humility! Yes, yes. I’m doing him a service. He nodded to himself, then drew a filth potion and sucked down another big sip. A trash star was a momentary boost, a big hit that would doubtlessly break Florian’s shield and ring-out the man at the same time, if not outright leave him with a mortal wound. Burning impurities, on the other hand, gave him a sustained boost that would be just enough to trash Florian for a while.

So, as the vine punched through the ground under his feet, Rhys activated the impurities.

The fire surged up, and the impurities hit. Time slowed. The vine moved in slow motion, hurtling toward the crux of his legs. Rhys stepped back, neatly sending the shattering rock into his core to burn with the rest of his impurities. The vine grew, but slowly. Rhys swept his sword at it, casually activating his Trash Intent as he did so. Mana resisted his cut, but he overwhelmed it with his impurity-boosted power. His sword severed the vine, and the top half of it fell away.

Florian’s mouth opened in shock. He stared, startled.

Before Florian could even finish reacting, Rhys slashed twice, three times, then scooped up the pieces of the vine and fed them into the impurity furnace as well. Black smoke billowed up behind him, and he let out a long sigh. He’d been using the trash stars so much recently that he’d forgotten how good this drawn-out boost felt.

The rock in Florian’s hand shattered. Florian’s face twisted in disgust, and he threw it away. Rhys’s body moved without him prompting it to, purely on instinct, and he dashed to Florian’s side and scooped the shattered stone out of the air, instantly sending it to the furnace. Florian startled and hopped to the side in shock, but to Rhys, in his sped-up state, it was as though Florian were moving through water, and he, through air. He hammered a kick into Florian’s hips and sent the boy rolling across the ground. Florian’s shield shattered.

Rhys dashed in. He loomed over Florian. Florian instantly equipped another necklace seconds before Rhys stomped on his head. The shield shattered. Rhys lifted his foot again, and Florian equipped another necklace. Two. Three.

At last, Florian stopped equipping necklaces. He put his hands up. "I can't bear any more of this. Sto—"

Before he could utter the word 'stop' and end the duel, Rhys kicked him in the solar plexus. All the air left him in a wheeze, and he went tumbling toward the edge. He saw the edge, and threw himself toward it, only for Rhys to appear there and kick him back the opposite direction, up into the air.

It wasn't a match anymore, but a one-sided beating. Rhys was honestly shocked the ref hadn't stepped in and called it yet, but for all he knew, these were the expected terms of engagement for the tournament. Killing was allowed, after all. An old-fashioned rule like requiring the losing opponent to audibly concede might be on the books, too.

Not like Rhys was complaining. He was happy to give this young master a beating with no sidekicks, bodyguards, or parents able to intervene.

Flying through the air, Florian shouted, "I conce—"

Rhys appeared behind him and clasped his hands together, hammer-blowing Florian into the ground. The stone cracked, and Florian spat up blood.

"Still wanna beat up poor people? Still think shitting on vagrants is a good idea?" Rhys asked, standing over Florian.

Florian spluttered. He started to push himself up. He put on another shield necklace out of desperation. "Please, I beg you..."

Rhys kicked his head like a soccer ball, and Florian went rolling. "I didn't hear an answer."

"No, no, no! I don't think it's a good idea!" Florian cried.

"But are you just saying that, or do you really mean it? If you really mean it, then kiss my foot." Rhys extended his filthy, trash-coated boot, the same boot that he'd been wearing to the dump every day.

Florian looked at that boot and hesitated.

"That's what I thought. Mean it, you filth! Don't just say it, *mean* it!" Rhys kicked him again, and he lifted into the air and landed with a meaty thump.

There was a stir in the stands. A man who looked like Florian, but laden in even more finery, ran down the stands toward the arena. The referees moved to block his path, but he shoved them aside.

My time is limited. Rhys chased after Florian and extended his foot again. “Last chance before I beat you black and blue. Kiss my boot, or get the beating your smug ass deserves.”

Florian’s eyes were barely open. He swayed as he pushed himself upright. In the background, behind Florian, where he couldn’t see, the well-dressed man opened his mouth in despair, reaching out toward Florian. Rhys made eye contact and smiled smugly as Florian hauled himself forward, and in front of the crowd and everyone, kissed Rhys’s boot.

The crowd went silent. Even the referees just stared. The only person moving was Florian’s father, who dashed onto the arena and physically ripped Florian away from Rhys’s boot. He cradled his son in his hands and fed him a potion, murmuring reassurances to his son.

Rhys nodded at him, a friendly smile on his face. “Need some child-rearing advice? I’m happy to help.”

The venomous glare the man shot him was *almost* filthy enough for Rhys to absorb it as an impurity.

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

Chapter 90. Child-Rearing Advice

The referee stepped forward in the next moment. He cleared his throat. “Winner, Rhys Foundling.”

“This match is invalid! He was beating my child indiscriminately!” the well-dressed man, Florian’s father, insisted.

“Haaa, is a match invalid if your child loses? I didn’t see you complaining when Florian was beating the other students,” Rhys bluffed. He didn’t *know* that Florian had one-sidedly beaten his opponents—honestly, Florian hadn’t stood out enough for him to actively watch the kid—but given the way he’d instantly tried to overwhelm Rhys and spent the entire battle talking down to him, it would surprise him more if

Florian *didn't* beat his opponents half to death. His sexual-assault attack alone meant the man didn't respect his opponents, and his initial attack had meant to capture Rhys in ice and immobilize him so Florian could pierce him full of poisonous needles. Rhys had been able to feel them through his Impurity and Poison Resist skills, which meant the potion was nothing to shake a stick at. Anyone but him would have been frozen upright and paralyzed after the first barrage.

What Florian did after that... well, Rhys could fill in the gaps, and it wasn't anything good. Especially since he himself had been able to indiscriminately beat—ahem, teach Florian a valuable lesson as long as Florian hadn't been able to fully speak his concession, what Florian did, was essentially take away his opponent's physical freedom, then their freedom to speak, and once he stripped all their agency, Rhys had read enough news stories about rich people to know what happened to his opponents. Honestly, looking at Florian now and finally putting the pieces of his attacks together out of combat, where he had more space to think it out, Rhys felt rage grow in his heart. He should've beaten the scumbag harder. Who knew what shit he'd gotten up to, throughout his uppity asshole life?

Of course, he could be totally wrong. Florian could be a good-hearted shitstain who just happened to have a sequence of skills he was familiar with using that completely robbed a person of their agency and left them at his mercy. Right. He innocently owned paralytic drugs, and definitely didn't ever misuse them. Sure. Because that played out so often at his college, people just innocently owning paralytic drugs...

Rhys shook his head. It was a different world. There were legitimate reasons to own paralytics, if he imagined himself as a rich kid with little personal strength, who could face challenges from far stronger students. It was his experiences back home that were coloring his impression of this kid, he openly admitted it, but nonetheless... Florian was a piece of shit who liked beating the poor and helpless by his own admission, and deserved everything Rhys had done to him and more.

From the way Florian's father's face reddened from Rhys's accusations, though, he was far more on the mark than he wanted to be. He jabbed a finger at Rhys. "You must have guts to mock Cassian Coyale. You will hear from me. Watch your back after dark, child."

"Shocking. I see the apple doesn't fall far from the tree," Rhys said, crossing his arms.

"What do you mean?" Cassian's voice had a dangerous note to it.

"But then, who am I to spit upon a time-honored family tradition? Just because I disagree with beating the helpless..."

"You *dare*? When you beat my helpless son?"

“Helpless? Far from it! We both entered this tournament, did we not? Was he not launching attacks at me? You’re the one who violated the sanctity of this match by sweeping in and saving your son, not me,” Rhys pointed out.

Florian sat up in his father’s arms. Cassian released him, and he stood on his own. “Father?”

“I couldn’t allow this filth to humiliate you,” Cassian replied.

Florian looked away a little, slightly embarrassed. “Dad. It’s embarrassing.”

“That’s right. Don’t do it in front of everyone. You want to make sure you’re hidden in a dark alley before you beat someone weaker than you for no reason but your own pleasure. I might have beaten your son, but our strength is nearly equivalent, and we fought in the light of day, in front of everyone. Can you say the same about your bullying of the weak?”

Acting righteous after the brutal beating he’d handed Florian was... well, completely trashy of him, but he wasn’t here to pretend to be righteous. He was here to teach Florian a lesson about what happened when he pushed his rich-kid luck too far, and he hoped it was one Florian took to heart.

He glanced to the stands. Some of the people in the stands watching his match were silent, others looked angry... and a few, particularly the weaker students, stared at Florian with old hatred in their hearts and the light of justice shining from their faces. He didn’t know Florian personally, but it didn’t mean he couldn’t recognize the harm the boy could do, and from the looks of those students, he wasn’t off base at all.

He was a trashy guy. He wasn’t afraid to act up to get his way, nor was he afraid to stand up to the rich, to defend his fellow trash. It was his unique position, as someone with some strength and nothing to lose, that he could take this stance.

“How *dare* you. We don’t bully anyone. If you want to accuse my son of such lowly behavior, present proof!” Cassian snapped. “This whole crowd watched you act like the filth you are, and they saw no such behavior from my son.”

Rhys just smiled. He put his hands behind his back. “Those who know, shall know.”

Acting smug and mysterious now was exactly the way to ruin Cassian’s argument. Those on Florian and Cassian’s side would never take his side, but from his self-assurance, rather than trying to fight back, they’d start to wonder if he *did* have some kind of incontrovertible truth. Those who suspected the Coyale family of poor behavior or had experienced it or heard stories of it, would hear his ‘those who know, know’ and understand instantly that they were on the in group; the details they’d heard, however scraggly, would suddenly feel reinforced and true. It was the ultimate counter-argument, and one that required absolutely no proof at all, a bulletproof bluff that no one could see

through, because he provided no evidence for them to see through. Of course, Cassian could simply attack him and undermine his credibility, but all he had to do was keep his mouth shut, smile, and waggle his eyebrows, and there was nothing Cassian could do about it.

Cassian scowled. Clearly he understood the same things Rhys had understood, because he nodded at Florian. "Go." Turning back to Rhys, he whispered, so quietly only Rhys could hear: "Watch your back, boy."

Rhys bowed formally to Cassian. As loudly as he could, he replied, "Thank you for your advice, senior! I will watch my back, as sir kindly recommends!"

Cassian narrowed his eyes, but said nothing as he followed his son away.

Yep, I had better actually watch my back tonight. He glanced across the stadium, toward where Bast fought. He grinned. Luckily, Florian wasn't the only one who could go crying for help, and he wasn't afraid to call in big brother to help if he got cornered. Florian thought he was a nobody with no backing. He couldn't wait to see the guy's shocked face when he turned out to have the backing of the Sword Saint...s Apprentice. But Florian and Cassian wouldn't know the difference. That was good enough for him right now.

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And, of course, that assumed that he even had to go crying for help. He was pretty sure no one would want to get too close to his impurity potions, no matter how high tier they were, especially if the referee's reaction from his battle with Sable was any indication. Impurities were a problem for all tiers of mages. None of them wanted to get tainted by impurities, no matter how small or weak the concentration. It was a fact that made his potions very, very powerful, if what he really wanted was to avoid a fight. It also made them powerful in fights, but he'd rather use the impurities to strengthen himself, rather than spread them around to his enemies. They were his hard-won impurities! He wasn't going to give them to just anyone.

The impurities burned out, and the black smoke faded away. Rhys put all his weapons away and drew out his healing potion to take a few sips. His legs were riddled with holes, and he had plenty of bruises and frost issues all around. He needed to heal a little before leaving the arena in case anyone came back-ward. It was going to be difficult to keep up the potato chip business while someone was watching over him... but then, that hadn't stopped him when it was Mouse, and he didn't intend to let Cassian stop him, either. He was willing to bet Cassian wouldn't follow him all the way back to the trash pit, and if he did, then Rhys welcomed a fight on his home turf. Make things easier on him, if he was surrounded by trash when he fought. Not only would it allow him to use even more free-form melee weapons, but he'd be able to power up at a moment's notice.

Sitting there, with nothing better to do, he pulled up his status screen.

Rhys Foundling | 15 | Core Formation (Tier 2)

Title: Trash-born

Skills:

Hunger Resist 15

Survivalist 33

Pain Resist 50

Scavenging 38

Less is More 46

Sewing 12

Blow Mitigation 29

Self-Regeneration 35

Mana Manipulation 23

Improvised Weapon Proficiency 15

Heat Resist 18

Acid Resist 24

Impurity Resist 32

Poison Resist 20

Cold Resist 16

Alchemy 10

Herbalism 11

Speed Reading 14

Bluff 7

Enlightenment 5

Speed Picking 7

Forging 6

Crafting 8

Disguise 19

Path:

Trash Intent 14

Trash Body 10

Trash Aura 5

Trash Step 9

Trash Manipulation 11

Trash Enchanting 4

Trash Talk 8

Enlightenments:

Trash Life

Cornered Rat

He pinched his chin and nodded, pleased with his progress. He'd grown more-or-less across the board, and made significant improvement on a lot of skills important to him and his path. His skills were all growing in powerful ways. He was getting stronger.

The path skills were growing much slower than the other skills, but now he was sure that a few levels in a path skill meant much more than a few levels in a non-path skill. He'd been training his path a lot lately, but only gained a few levels, whereas his ordinary skills had climbed significantly despite him not particularly focusing on them. Still, the amount by which his skills had gotten better indicated to him that they'd all been growing well, whether path skill or not.

The matches wound down. Rhys's leg healed, and he vanished to sell chips as Rina for a bit, during which he sensed no one in particular watching him or coming for his rear. It probably took some time to coordinate a back attack, he got it, so he probably wouldn't

have to worry about the revenge attack until tomorrow. Once more, his chips sold out, and so he stowed Rina and headed back to the arena for the last few matches.

To his surprise, the stadium was still full, despite the last few matches petering out, and not a single interesting battle amongst them. Rhys listened as he climbed slowly back to his seat, until he finally overheard the conversation he wanted to hear.

“...coming tonight?”

“I thought it was just a rumor.”

“No, it’s true. The Empress is making an appearance. She’s supposed to give a speech to kick off the final rounds of the tournament.”

Rhys raised his brows. The Empress herself? Interesting. Not shocking that Purple Dawn Academy would invite the figure pressuring their region to make a speech; in fact, it would probably be disrespectful if they didn’t. No, he was surprised that she had accepted and not only that, was willing to make a public peaceful appearance before what he assumed was the unstoppable hostile takeover, also known as invasion.

Then again, if she really was more powerful than anyone here, and not only that, but had the ability to rip anyone’s core out of their body, what did she have to fear from a public appearance in a place that likely hated and feared her? They had no counter to her power. If she wanted to take over, what could they do, but ease the transition?

They could, and should, fight back, but if the Empress was half as strong as Rhys’s impression of her so far, it would be a hopeless battle, at least for the initial strike. Maybe they could pull an American Revolution and do a bit of guerilla fighting against the redcoats, assuming her forces were stupid enough to march in formations... but given how mages fought in general, Rhys highly doubted they’d be facing regimented lines of riflemen.

Then again, maybe the Empress was less powerful than her propaganda made her out to be. Maybe she was the woman behind the curtain, so to speak. He highly doubted it, but all things were possible. Tonight, very soon, apparently, he’d have his first chance to encounter her. He sat down in the stands, resuming his earlier position, but without propping up his injured leg on the chair in front of him, and locked in with a bag of chips to wait for the Empress.

A friendly nudge on his shoulder drew his attention. “Hey.”

Rhys glanced over. Bast sat next to him, dressed in his usual casual robes. Rhys raised his brows. “You okay to appear like this?”

Bast shrugged. “I’m a face in the crowd. All the sycophants are chasing after my master right now, anyways, so I’m relatively free.”

“The Sword Saint’s showing up?” Rhys asked, then rolled his eyes at himself. Of course he was. He was one of this region’s top dignitaries, and it was known that his apprentice was in the tournament. He’d be massively disrespecting the Empress—and likely pissing off all the ruling parties in the region—if he didn’t show face.

Bast nodded. “Yeah. I’ll have to go wear my official robes and sit by his side pretty soon, but I wanted to stop by first. Your match was pretty interesting, wasn’t it?”

“What, with Sable?”

Bast chuckled. “No, with Florian, you know, the guy who you made kiss your boots? That was amazing, by the way. The Coyale family is well-known in the region. Everyone is going to remember that moment forever. There’s a lot of students in Purple Dawn who would love to make him kiss their boots, or worse.”

Rhys grinned and slung an arm around Bast’s shoulders. “I’m so glad you agree, old friend, ol’ buddy ol’ pal!”

Bast gave him a suspicious look. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I got told to watch my back,” Rhys said.

Bast nodded. “Always good advice.”

“And Florian, you know, he got his dad involved,” Rhys hinted.

“Wow, that’s rough for you.”

“So who would I be, if I didn’t get my big guns involved?” Rhys patted his shoulder and grinned.

Bast looked around, pretending not to understand, then pointed at himself. “Me?”

Rhys patted his shoulder again. “That’s right, business partner!”

A heavy sigh. Bast shook his head at Rhys. “My master would kill me if he knew I was helping you feud against the Coyale family.”

“So he doesn’t have to find out! Plus, it’s not a feud. It’s just surviving the incoming backstabbing. And you don’t even have to intervene, unless it gets out of control! If I can handle it, you can just stay hidden and it’ll be like nothing happened.”

“And if you can’t?”

Rhys grinned. “That’s when I can count on my oldest friend to step in and have my back, isn’t that right, Bast?”

Bast sighed again and shoved Rhys away. “Fine. Unless it threatens to get back to my master, and then—”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it. I would never escalate it to your master,” Rhys said, waving his hand. Unless his life was on the line, and then he’d use whatever shameless techniques he needed to, to get out alive... but they could discuss that later, in private. That wasn’t a conversation for the stadium.

Bast opened his mouth to speak again, then stiffened in shock. “Shit.” Without another word, he jumped up and sprinted off, taking the stadium stairs two at a time.

Rhys blinked. He looked around, trying to figure out what had caught Bast’s attention, and finally spotted it. It was a speck on the horizon, little more than a blot against the horizon, but his mage vision could make it out. Five tall masts. Red sails burning in the setting sun. A hull as black as scorched bone.

The Empress had arrived.

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