

Chapter 91. The Empress Arrives

It didn't take long for the Empress's ship to close the distance, no matter how far away it looked when Rhys first spotted it. He had enough time to absorb the blood out of his clothes—it was trash, now that it was outside his body, so fair game for absorption—but that was about it. The black ship approached the stadium, looming overhead.

He'd seen large mage ships. Huge ones, even. But this one dwarfed all of them. It moved toward the stadium with a ponderous inevitability, so large that several stadiums could fit within it. He realized, as it loomed, that the ship had once been white; bits of white still showed, under the black. It was scorched, scorched from the heat of battle and the furious weight of the ship's own preponderous weaponry. Scars marred its hull and gaped its sails, but it floated on anyways, displaying those wounds as the proud marks of a battle well fought.

It bore no carving at its front. Instead, a lone figure stood at the very tip of its bow, dressed in pristine white as a contrast to her ravaged ship. Long black hair flowed in the wind, and a small white beret with a small gold badge perched atop her head in lieu of a crown. A sword glittered at her hip, bright as a star plucked from the heavens, its scabbard black as night. Without anyone telling him, without needing to be told, Rhys looked at her and knew: this was the Empress. This was the woman who would conquer the world.

Men and women in crisp white uniforms lined up along the rails. They manned the guns and stood in lines across the deck of the ship. Perfect, not a single hair or crease out of place. With a shock, Rhys realized that every single one of them, male and female alike, had the same bone-white hair, like Laurent's; the men's hair all cropped short, the women's hair tied back into a strict bun; and he was sure, were he to loose those buns, that their hair would all reach the exact same length.

These weren't humans. They were soldiers, molded to the Empress' will, made in the same mold and copy-pasted to her desires. Their future, their past, their hopes and dreams, their skills and tier, they were all according to the Empress' will, all for the Empire, all for the Empress' mad dream. Objects. Items.

Replaceable.

Despite himself, Rhys felt a pang in his heart for Laurent, that he believed in this Empire earnestly, even with this empty future ahead of him. Laurent was a human being. He had hopes and dreams. He could even foolishly fall in love. These people, these

objects, they no longer had any of that. Rhys didn't know why, he didn't know how, but looking at them, at their empty eyes and blank faces, he knew: all that had been stolen from them, and replaced with the Empress and the Empress alone. Her dreams were their dreams. Her will was their will. She was the heart, and they were but the limbs.

It was efficient. Deadly so. But tragic, so, so tragic, to see so many *people*, so many human beings, reduced to nothing but toy soldiers for a conqueress to wield on the field of battle.

Once more, Rhys's heart hardened. He stared down the soldiers, saddened to see them, yet determined to oppose them. He would fight to the last to ensure the Empress never took this land, his land, to ensure she could never do this to his friends, to Bast, to Ev, hell, even to Mouse, Sable, Tarais, Anabel and—and Laurent, even if Laurent was dedicated to the cause and blind to the future that awaited him. If trashing himself meant he had a chance to stop the Empress, he would.

But as the ship lowered, and the Empress grew closer, he knew: that was nothing but a mad dream. Emanations rippled out from her body like waves on the ocean. Her aura was the most powerful aura he'd ever sensed, even including when he'd been taken in before the Sword Saint and the other leaders of the region. He could do nothing against the Empress. Hell, he wasn't sure anyone in this region could do anything against the Empress. The Empress was absolute. She was untouchable, unassailable—

A sharp sensation slashed over him, and Rhys startled. He blinked, looking around, and caught sight of the Sword Saint, standing on a platform across the stadium, a familiar masked figure at his side. The Sword Saint's aura slashed across the stadium, cutting through the Empress's wave of influence and beating it back, denying it, and breaking her hold on the minds of everyone around her. All around the stadium, mages looked around, blinking awake and sitting up as the Sword Saint's aura cut them out of their trance.

Rhys shook his head and rubbed his forehead. Her *aura* was enough to brainwash people at his level? Insane, utterly insane. Things weren't as bad as he'd thought under her influence—the Sword Saint could oppose her, for one—but he'd be a fool to take her as a foe he could best. She would step on him, and not even realize she'd crushed an ant under her heel.

The Empress lifted her chin as the Sword Saint opposed her aura. Their eyes met, and a small smile crept across her lips. "What are you doing here, Luc Sion? Isn't there a skirmish at your border with the impure beasts raging out of the frozen wastes once more? How irresponsible, to see you here."

The Sword Saint didn't blink. "I couldn't be so disrespectful as to not greet Your Eminence."

She clicked her tongue. Gently, she reprimanded him, "I'm but another mage. See to your responsibilities, first."

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Rhys's eyes narrowed. He looked from the Sword Saint to the Empress and back. He'd been wondering why she didn't attack outright; now he had his answer. The Sword Saint was her match, if not her better, and perhaps he had the advantage in outright combat. While he was here, she wouldn't make a move.

At the same time, he hadn't missed the Empress's reprimand. He'd thought, just a moment ago, that 'she wouldn't make a move,' but that was wrong. She had already made her move; a check, meant to draw their side's knight away from the king, so she could checkmate their region. Who knew how, but from the way she said it, Rhys had no doubt that *she* was somehow behind the skirmish at the border and the impure beasts. If she wasn't, then it was a convenient coincidence that she exploited, by arriving now, to force the Sword Saint to either move, secure their border, and save the citizens of their own home region, or stand his ground, and allow innocent people and lesser mages to die to the 'impure beasts' while he remained here, in the largest Academy in the region, as nothing but a figurehead to oppose the Empress.

Rhys gritted his teeth, frustrated as he realized: she won either way. Either he moved, and she attacked, taking the region; or he didn't move, and she retreated and ruined his reputation, by making him an idiot who stayed in Purple Dawn Academy to ward off an Empress who never intended to attack, so that when she attempted the same feint again, he would have no choice but to move to her feint, and cede the academy to the Empress.

How troublesome, how troublesome, how troublesome! Important things must be said three times. He saw no way out of this check without opening up their king to checkmate. No matter what move the Sword Saint made, the Empress could capitalize on it. He hated it, he hated it, he hated it, but there was nothing he could do. He was still too weak.

Rhys clenched his hand. He had to get stronger. There was no other option. Until he got strong enough to oppose the Empress himself, he had to get stronger. To be powerless like this while greater beings threatened his freedom and everyone he cared about was unacceptable. He couldn't make peace with it. He wouldn't. He wasn't that kind of higher being, able to move past the damage before him for the good of some greater being, or accept a tyrant's mandate in return for superficial peace. No, Rhys was trash. And like the trash he was, he was going to fight this Empress to the end of his life; all he hoped, was that he grew strong enough to meaningfully oppose her before the end.

He could feel the date of the Empress's invasion rapidly approaching. Her students were here, and now, so was her personal warship. When the Sword Saint inevitably left to help with the border, who would be left who could oppose her? Would anything

remain, to prevent her from sweeping the land? *Surely Purple Dawn's Schoolmaster...* Rhys scanned the platform where the Sword Saint and Bast stood. Some other nobles stood around, noted by their finery, to include Cassian Coyale, Florian's father, but no one came close to the Sword Saint's power. The massive, tall wooden chair in the center of the platform sat empty, the purple cushions plump and untouched.

Rhys flashed back to his conversations with Mouse about Az. Even for a beneficent library spirit, the Schoolmaster had seemed strangely disinterested in Az's semi-hostile takeover of his school's library. He'd repeatedly dismissed Mouse's inquiries, no matter how many times she brought them attar to him. A strange thought came to him, one he couldn't dismiss. Was the Schoolmaster still here, or had he already retreated? Had Purple Dawn already been abandoned as a sacrifice to the enemy, with the line of battle moved further inland? He scanned the stadium. There were lots of students, some of them top talents. Surely they weren't all sacrificial lambs, given up to the Empress so that she might be distracted, and fail to press further in?

Rhys smacked his cheeks and shook his head hard, knocking himself forcibly out of that line of thought. It was too terrifying. Besides, this was a world of magic! Maybe there were teleport formations set up around Purple Dawn for the students to escape if the Empress attacked. Maybe the Schoolmaster wasn't absent, but simply had a yet more important meeting that he simply couldn't miss to attend this event.

Right, and maybe the Empress is a good and benevolent leader who loves sunshine and daisies and is here to make friends, Rhys thought, rolling his eyes.

He took a deep breath. They'd been abandoned. Thrown away. But that was just what you did with trash like him. Rhys could accept that.

It wasn't what you did with Bast, or anyone else who had talent worth mentioning. He couldn't accept that. No, he refused to accept it. *Whatever it takes, I won't let those worth saving be crushed as part of some idiot Schoolmaster's sacrificial play.* Maybe the Schoolmaster was willing to sacrifice a knight or two and a few rooks, but that didn't mean Rhys had to play along.

The Empress turned to the stadium as though she'd just now noticed her audience. She smiled. Pure black irises blended into her pupils, and no empathy reflected in her eyes. "What an honor it is, to stand before you, people of this region, and speak to you as an equal. I know my country has long been closed to the world, but it is time to change that. I seek to know you better, and learn from this region, as I hope you learn from me..."

She continued on, blabbering meaningless political bullshit. Rhys heard none of it. He stared at her, at her warship, at her men, and vowed in his heart to never let any of that come to pass in his region. The most valuable thing to him was his freedom, and there would be no freedom under the Empress's regime. No freedom, and no future.

When the attack came, he would make sure Bast escaped to safety, whether Bast wanted to or not. Better that he bear that weight, and take those wounds, than his talented friend. If his trash core was ripped from his body, he would simply forge another, and if he couldn't, then this world lost little, and he would simply have to survive until his core could be recovered. If Bast lost his core, then the world lost a great asset and an irreplaceable talent.

Of course, it won't come to that, he resolved. He would get out and escape with Bast. He was more than trashy enough to ensure he got out in time. It wasn't surrender, but merely a retreat, to return another day with the Sword Saint and whatever other powers that could counter the Empress in tow.

There was a difference between bravery and suicide, and he intended to ensure he stopped at bravery.

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

Chapter 92. On The Way Home

Rhys left the stadium with dampened spirits. He'd feared this reality, and now that it had come to pass, he wasn't any happier for having correctly predicted how horrible a position his region held. If anything, the Schoolmaster's absence had only confirmed how terrible their standing was. He'd already figured out that this was more-or-less a helpless fight, but seeing their own officials flee before the attack sure confirmed it. He didn't know the status of general nobility around Purple Dawn to know how high a rank the remaining nobility, like the Coyales, were, but he was pretty sure all the people who could, or who didn't have a kid in the tournament, had cleared out. Now that he was looking, the stands were pretty empty, save for the Sword Saint and some people whose faces matched contestants'. The Empress had made it very clear she had a plan to remove the Sword Saint from the equation. Once he was gone, did she attack? Did she wait for the final day of the tournament?

Rhys sighed. He rubbed his forehead, frustrated. There was nothing he could do. He saw it coming—it was so obvious—and all he could do was watch the wave roll in. He was powerless to do anything against someone so powerful, and it sucked. *I'll escape. Train up. Come back and destroy her later.* But even that was little comfort, knowing that she would march across the region until however-many-years it took for him to get strong enough to overcome her.

After a few seconds, he shrugged to himself. Oh well. At least it was only Purple Dawn! True, she'd probably roll over Infinite Constellation, too, in short order, but his sworn enemy would get taken down! ...By another, more powerful enemy, but hey. It was important to remember that there was always a bigger fish. Maybe a yet more powerful enemy would gobble up the Empress!

Rhys paused, then shook his head. "No, I don't think I want that." More powerful than the Empress, when the Empress was already unimaginably more powerful than him? He didn't want to see that at all.

"It doesn't matter what you want. You thought you could get away with humiliating my son, and sealed your fate in that moment."

Rhys looked up. Cassian Coyale stood before him, his arms crossed, his son half-cowering, half-smug beside him.

Unhesitatingly, Rhys turned a sharp right and took a different road.

A man stepped out of the shadow, blocking off his path. He checked the other directions, only to see flunkies stepping out of the shadow in all directions.

Turning back to Cassian, Rhys casually strolled back to where he'd begun. He rolled his shoulders back, puffed his chest, and struck a pose. If they were going to do this, might as well do it right. "To what do I owe the honor?" Rhys asked, as if he didn't know.

"You thought you could humiliate the Coyale family in front of everyone. Regret your poor decision before you die."

"Incorrect. Your son humiliated your family in front of everyone. I tried to rectify his poor behavior by instilling a little bit of humility in him. Far be it from me to tell you how to raise your child, but if you keep coddling him like this, he's going to grow into a total brat," Rhys said, shaking his head at Cassian.

"What?" Cassian asked, his voice dangerously low.

Rhys had already sealed his death warrant, as far as Cassian was concerned, so right now, he was free to mouth off as much as he wanted, and boy did he want to mouth off. "Listen, Cassian, you've spoiled the kid rotten. I mean, he just runs around beating up poor kids. Is that good behavior? Is that what the Coyale family considers a well-raised child?"

Cassian snorted. "You lie. You know nothing of my son."

"I know enough to know that he enjoyed licking my boot. I know enough to know he should do it again, or I'll beat him up again." He shook his head at Cassian and let out a long sigh, full of reluctance, as if he didn't want to reveal these details to Cassian for

fear of disappointing him. “You know he offered to buy my strongest technique before battle, then mocked me for not using it? What kind of foolish behavior is that? I understand buying people’s aces from them. That makes sense. But to mock me for not using it, when I’m being graceful and avoiding an insta-kill on him? That’s just foolishness. That’s the kind of behavior that will end up with him dead.”

Cassian narrowed his eyes at Florian. “Is this true?”

“He’s lying! Of course he’s lying,” Florian snarled.

“Uh huh. Twenty-one thousand, Florian. I promise I won’t use it on your dad,” Rhys mocked him.

Florian’s face flushed. He glared at Rhys. “Shut up, peasant! Dad, beat him up. Show him the might of the Coyale family, so he stops mocking us!”

“Daaad, show him the might of the Coyale family,” Rhys mocked in a high pitched facsimile of Florian’s voice.

“Shut up!” Florian snapped.

Cassian stepped forward. He drew his sword. The blade sang, so perfectly forged that it cut the very air around it. His mana swelled, too, at least at the Tier 3 level, though it felt weak, far weaker than Ev’s signature. “Many people look down on us merchants for buying our strength. You’ll see that it’s not a trait worth mockery at all.”

Rhys drew a potion from his storage ring, and a bit of a trash-stick with his other. “Nothing wrong with buying strength. All forms of strength, even trashy ones, are still strength.”

“A surprisingly egalitarian take.”

Rhys shrugged. “I’m just an egalitarian guy.”

A surge of mana from behind him was his only warning. Rhys jumped forward, only for a cold sensation to slice down his back. The men who had blocked off the path were now attacking him, with no care for morality or righteousness.

Activating Trash Body to suppress the pain, Rhys tutted. “What bullying. A higher-Tier mage like you, ganging up on a schoolkid like me? What will the other nobles say when they find out?”

Cassian laughed darkly, approaching, while the other two men closed in on the left and the right. “Nothing, because you’ll be dead.”

“Nah.” Rhys glanced around. The man behind him stood close, about to strike again, while the other two raised their swords. He was literally cornered... but that was exactly where he liked to be.

Whipping around, Rhys attacked the man who'd slashed his back first, hand curled into a claw, the bit of stick clenched in his teeth. The man was only Tier 2, and had enough time to look shocked before Rhys's clawed hand lashed out, smashing into his temple. His fingers gouged through the man's face as the claw attack landed with enough power to break bone.

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The other two lunged at the same time, trying to pincher him. Rhys drew out a familiar pole from his storage ring and held it out horizontally, then activated it. Mana flowed out of his body, but he pushed more in, willing to pay the price. He needed an instant kill right now, no matter how much mana it took. His core guttered, all but clean of mana, but the Trash Intent activated. Steel hurtled out, piercing through the men's chests at the same time. He retracted his intent in the next instant, and they both stumbled back, gurgling as they bled. One toppled, but the other stayed on his feet. Rhys closed in, delivering another claw attack, and the man fell.

Only Cassian and Florian remained. Cassian had been advancing, but now he retreated, his eyes wide. “What are you?”

Rhys laughed. He kept his high stance, though he bled and his core ached, so empty of mana it sagged. He sipped a tiny sip of mana potion, then activated Trash Intent on the stick and dipped it into his filth potion. “Me? I'm trash, just like you. Can't like recognize like?”

He vanished. Cassian stared around, lost.

A shadow passed over the moon. Cassian looked up in time to see Rhys in midair, and then a stick touched his cheek. Rhys landed behind him, delivering a similar cheek touch to Florian.

“Now you're *outwardly* trash, too,” Rhys said happily.

Cassian screamed. He battered at his face, staring at his filth-smeared hand in shock. Black veins tore through his flesh, and he dropped to his knees, unable to stay upright. His Tier crumbled. Before Rhys's eyes, his aura diminished from Tier 3 to 2, the unsteady Tier directly decaying under the weight of Rhys's impurities.

Florian, too, trembled. Rhys had put less of the potion on him, but he still took serious damage from the impurities. The same black veins colored his suddenly-pale skin, and his mana flow slowed, though his Tier didn't diminish like Cassian's did. He blubbered,

gripping his father's arm. "Please! I have so many impurities... father, surely you can fix this?"

"Get off of me, you slime! Useless parasitic child, how dare you sic a demon like this on our family? How dare you aggravate someone so above your strength? Bow down and apologize to him, apologize for our whole family!" Cassian barked.

Florian stared at him, betrayed. "F...father?"

Cassian smacked him on the back of the head, forcing Florian to his knees. "Lick his boots! Do it again! Lick them clean this time. Whatever it takes to get him to forgive us!"

Rhys watched all this with raised brows, taken aback. He hadn't really expected this strong of a reaction. Honestly, he'd planned to poison them a little, let the impurities knock them out, then retrieve his precious impurities and leave. This whole groveling thing was beyond his calculations.

A moment later, he shrugged internally. Whatever. It wasn't like he was *against* getting groveled to. And a little more boot licking would only do Florian good. He extended his foot and planted his hands on his hips. "That's right. Lick it. And you, too, Cassian."

Florian wrinkled his nose. "Never again! Isn't that what you told me, father? ...Father?"

Cassian dropped to his knees and licked Rhys's boot without the slightest hesitation. "Please forgive me and my child, Potion Master. He didn't know he angered a hidden master like yourself. Can you find it in your great and magnanimous heart to forgive us?"

A hidden master? Rhys's brows raised a little higher. How did trash like him get mistaken for a hidden master? Then again, if this was how hidden masters got treated, he wasn't against getting mistaken for a hidden master, especially if it meant Cassian would be too afraid to try revenge a second time.

Florian stared, frozen in disbelief as he watched his father lick Rhys's boot. His eyes were wide, and he sat absolutely still, afraid to move, afraid to retreat or advance. "No... no," he whispered softly, almost to himself.

He looked at Florian and pointed at his other boot, wagging his brows expectantly.

Hesitantly, Florian lowered himself. He extended his tongue, then flinched back. "No. I can't do it. Not again—"

Cassian's hand wrapped around the back of Florian's head and pushed him into the boot. "Lick it before I kill you," he growled.

Florian startled. A betrayed look crossed his face, as though this were the first time his father had ever ordered him to do anything. Very reluctantly, he extended his tongue... and licked Rhys's boot.

Rhys watched the whole spectacle with a detached kind of horrific cringe. He wasn't actually into boot-licking or -kissing, and he'd only demanded it in the first place because it was such an obvious deference and a way to decisively humiliate Florian in front of everyone. Having two men now licking his boots... the only thing he felt was self-disgust and a great desire to be anywhere but here. *Yeah, this is enough.* He kneeled down and put a hand on the back of father and son's heads, and extracted the impurities he'd imbued into them with his shit stick. "It's good that you understand my true strength, now. Take care you do not overstep your status a second time."

"Of course, poison master, of course," Cassian assured him, as his crumbled Tier 3 status restored itself.

"Well, if that's the case, then... good night." Rhys waved and walked away.

Florian started to stand, but Cassian grabbed him and pulled him down into a bow once more. Both father and son remained in the deferential pose until long after Rhys faded from site.

Rhys rubbed the back of his neck. Even after everything, he still hadn't expected the impurities to be that powerful. He probably could've beaten Cassian without them; he'd only used them to prevent the long, drawn-out, gear based battle of attrition he'd had earlier with Florian. When it came to an item-spammer, the best way to take them out was to act decisively and quickly, strike immediately and drive them to their knees before they could start the item spam loop. That was all he'd been thinking when he'd used impurities against them... and here he was, with two shining-clean boots.

Rhys scuffed them in the dirt a little, rubbing away the clean as though he could rub away the memory. *That was a rough one.* He'd never expected to experience two men licking his boots, and now that he had, he never wanted to experience it again.

A low laugh interrupted his thoughts. "Hello there, *poison master.*"

Rhys looked up to see bright white robes in the tree over his head. He sighed. "Saw all of that, did you."

Bast hopped down, a big grin on his face. "Yep. And you didn't even need to call on your big brother Bast! I'm proud of you, I really am."

"They were bastards, right?"

Bast looked at him. "Checking after you humiliated them?"

Rhys shrugged. "I mean, better late than never. Let's not forget that they surrounded me and ambushed me, too. They deserved it, one way or another. But it'd make me happier if they were also bastards in general."

"Well spoken. In any case, you're right. They're well-known bullies around town. They're from a small, 'exclusive' sect nearby where all the wealthy types who aren't good enough to make it into Purple Dawn send their kids, and pretend it's better than Purple Dawn, so they're always flaunting around town. Especially Florian. I've been looking for an excuse to beat the brat up for a while, but he's smart enough to not do anything stupid in front of someone who can fight back," Bast explained.

"Guess he misjudged, going up against some trash like me. You know, there's a saying about trash. Don't ever fight against trash, because you can't win. They'll just drag you down to their level and pull you into the mud with them." He glanced at Bast and grinned. "Guess Florian hadn't heard that one."

"It's a good one to keep in mind, around you."

"Ain't that the truth." Rhys turned serious. "Think the Empress is going to attack tomorrow?"

"Hope not. I've got a tournament to win, and an old friend to beat," Bast said, thumping Rhys on the shoulder.

"Oh, come on. No way I'm up against you in the finals. Plus... don't we have a couple rounds left?" Rhys pointed out.

"Two to go. Semifinals and finals. Congrats on making it to the semifinals, by the way!" Bast said.

"Wait, what?" Rhys asked, flabbergasted. When did he make it to the semifinals?

Bast laughed aloud at Rhys's startled face. "You really didn't notice? Today was the quarterfinals."

"How the hell was Florian in the quarterfinals?" Rhys asked aloud, shocked.

"Bought his way there."

"That... makes a lot of sense."

They walked on in silence for a few beats.

"See you tomorrow?"

"Yeah. I'm bringing my all, so don't hold back!"

Bast chuckled. "Against you? Never."

The two parted, taking their separate paths to their dorms.

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

Chapter 93. Small Chats with a Small Cat

Rhys awoke to sunlight and the chattering of birdsong. He jumped to his feet, startled. Two days in a row of sleeping? That was... that was...

Absolutely luxurious! He laid back on the floor and stretched, feeling the warmth of the sunshine on his face. True, the mattress was still wet, so he couldn't enjoy the incredible luxury of sleeping on a bed, but for his mage body, the floor might as well be equivalent.

He hadn't only slept last night, of course, but since he'd focused on absorbing as much of the trash pit as he could and refining his body with trash stars, he hadn't had to spend the rest of it awake making potato chips. It was a waste not to sell them at the finals, but to be honest? He hadn't expected to make it to the finals. Now that he was here, he wanted to give them as good a showing as he could manage, and that meant focusing his all on his current strength and raising it as high as he could, rather than focusing on making money. Oh, sure, he wanted to make money, don't get him wrong, but he had enough money right now that it would be irresponsible to try to make more, vice shore up his strength with the hardest battle so far dead ahead of him.

He'd also brewed up replacement filth potions and taken care to fill his body almost full of impurities, so that he could ignite them in the middle of battle without having to scramble over the field. He'd done the right thing day one, but forgotten day two, and paid the price against Florian. True, he'd been able to bear that price, but now that it was semifinals? His opponents wouldn't give him the opening to mess around with gathering garbage. Especially not if he faced Bast in the finals... not that he expected to. At the end of the day, he was still trash, and it would be a sad tournament if trash made it all the way to the end.

As for the other tiers, they were progressing well. Ev had made it to the semifinals of the Tier 3 tournament, as had Anabel, his costuming sugar mama, and Rhys didn't know who to root on more. On one hand, he'd learned so much from Ev, but at the same time, she'd beaten the crap out of him repeatedly. On the other hand, Anabel was soft and

sweet and gave him things for free... but she was the enemy, from a different school. He compromised and decided he would cheer on Ev, and Rina would cheer on Anabel.

He didn't recognize anyone in the Tier 1 battles, not that he'd expected to; that is, except for Ernesto's students. Hono got pushed out early when she was unable, or unwilling, to use her curse powers in a sanctioned duel, Victor had apparently not made the qualifiers—which didn't startle Rhys—and Mia put up a good fight, but dropped out before the semifinals. Only Walter remained, and from the confused looks he shot Rhys's battles every now and again, he didn't quite understand why he wasn't facing Rhys in the semifinals.

Guess I'd be confused too, if I was on the brink of reaching Tier 2, and yet some trash-tier talent ascended to Tier 2 before me, Rhys thought with a shrug. That wasn't his problem. Walter had to cope with that, not him. He could just laugh at Walter from over here in the Tier 2 battles, and there was nothing Walter could do about it.

He'd gotten up early enough this morning, and hopped out the window of his own volition. He scanned the ground to make sure no back-watching was required, but it seemed Florian and Cassian really had given up on their petty revenge. To be fair, he had almost ruined Cassian's magehood altogether, so he got it, but he really hadn't expected the impurity potion to frighten them to that extent. It was just a little bit of impurities. He could drink that much for fun. Hell, it was barely enough to be worth burning, nowadays. Were his impurity potions really that potent, that a Tier 3 mage would call him a poison master?

He thought back to Infinite Constellation School, where Sorden had warned him not to use his buffing impurity potion against another student. She'd mentioned something about being a potion master... no, a poison master in a low-level school with the kind of impurity potion he'd brewed. True, this was a lesser potion, one that didn't threaten to eat the glass of the container that held it (too much, anyways), but it was still a lot of impurities for an ordinary mage, it seemed.

He glanced at the potions in his storage ring, then shook his head. He'd only use them if he had a good reason to, if his life or the life of someone dear to him was in danger. They were too dangerous to use randomly, not just because of their horrific effectiveness, but also because of the threat of random backers popping up to demand to know why their bloodline's talent had been ruined. Cassian was a great example of this, showing up to attack Rhys after Rhys bullied his son a little. If Cassian had had someone behind him yet more powerful, and Rhys had left Cassian and Florian crippled, then how would he fare against someone at the Tier 4 or 5 level? Putting aside whether the potions would work on them, he was pretty sure he couldn't possibly move fast enough to strike a Tier 4 or 5 with a stick, which meant he'd never be able to apply the potion in the first place.

It was a sobering thought. He should treat the potions like guns. Unless he wanted his opponent dead, and he was a hundred percent sure his opponent didn't have a buddy

with a sedan with stolen plates and the willingness to swing a driveby on Rhys, then the potions should only be used as a last resort, and swiftly removed from his opponent afterward. In the semifinals, he wouldn't use them. And in the finals, well, there was absolutely no way Bast wasn't in the finals, and he had absolutely no interest in harming his friend, so the potions were right out.

But that was fine. He wasn't a potion master, and he had plenty else in his arsenal.

After the last few days, the stadium felt familiar, almost friendly. To his surprise, he felt a soft brush at his ankles, and looked down to find Az there. The cat purred and reared, landing his paws on Rhys's knee.

Rhys picked him up. "Didn't want to miss the finals, did you?"

"No."

Rhys startled. "Wait, you can talk as a cat?"

"You can talk as a human?" Az yawned. "I've spoken to you like this before."

Rhys opened his mouth, then closed it. That was right, Az had. How had he forgotten? Right after he'd hidden in the library from Cynog, right before... shameful memories welled up, and he pushed them down. Honestly, if he'd known then that Az was strong enough to pressure both Aquari and Purple Dawn's Schoolmaster into looking the other way, he wouldn't have dared asked him to 'nyaa-pose.'

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Then again, it wasn't like he'd seen a second cat-person since he'd gotten here. A man had to shoot his shots.

Az suddenly smacked him. Rhys jumped. "Ow! What?"

"I suddenly thought that you're a man who should regret things more," Az said.

Rhys glanced at him. "You know about the Empire, don't you?"

Az was generally a happy cat, and typically spent his time in Rhys's hold purring, but at that, the purr cut off. He turned, giving Rhys a look.

"Of course you do. What am I talking about?" Rhys quickly corrected himself.

The purring resumed. Come to think of it, Az could somehow talk and purr at the same time. Rhys looked at him, then decided not to ask about it. It was a happy miracle!

"They're bad news. I've already gathered all the books I can, and I'll leave soon," Az said.

"What, they're book burners?" Rhys asked. He wasn't really surprised; it was usually part of the opening salvo of any repressive regime to wipe out evidence that anything better than the regime could possibly exist.

"Worse. They take them and lock them up where no one can get to them. When a book is burned, at least its knowledge returns to nature. A locked book rots, with no one and nothing to see it." Az rolled over, tempting Rhys to pet his belly, though Rhys knew better than that. "I've known the Empire was coming for far longer than you, boy. I've invaded all the libraries they're likely to crush and taken the most important works from them. My preparations are almost complete. What about yours?"

"Preparations? I don't even have a way to flee," Rhys said, laughing. Even if he bought some kind of flying ship or object, which would take all the money he'd made, if he could even afford any of them... the slowest, poorest of them wouldn't move fast enough to outrun the Empire's ships. He was committed to this, to whatever happened.

"There *are* preparations. But you're too lowly to be included in any of them. Your friend, though, he should be fine."

"Bast?"

Az said nothing, which Rhys took as a confirmation. He breathed out. "Thank goodness. I was most worried about him. He's too heroic for his own good."

"Heroic? To you, maybe," Az scoffed.

Rhys frowned, looking down at the cat in his arms. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Az rolled back upright. He clambered up Rhys's arm to perch on his shoulders instead, and whispered directly into his ear, "The boy has a cruelty in him. Have you ever wondered why he has no friends at Purple Dawn?"

"His status isolates him," Rhys said. That was obvious.

"And do you think he's the only young master, sole inheritor of a powerful technique, to attend the Alliance's premier school? There are other students here of equal, or even greater status than him. He could have befriended them, but instead, they all avoid him. Do you know why?"

Rhys thought back to his first experience with Bast. Lying in the trash heap, with three boys standing over him. One of them had pushed him in. Compared to the other two children, it could only be Bast. Bast hadn't held anything against the Rhys who had been before him, but he'd pushed him in anyways, callously, without thinking about

whether it would harm this child he didn't know. It hadn't been Bast's idea, no; it had been Tam's, the fat one's idea. But was that better or worse, that Bast had thoughtlessly executed cruelty on another's behalf, without a single consideration as to the outcome?

Az nodded. "You know his cruelty. You've been at the receiving end, haven't you? He isn't as good a friend as you think. He's dangerous, and if you push him too far, he might end up lashing out at you."

"No," Rhys said, without hesitation, utter conviction in his voice.

Az purred, giving him a silent look.

"It's not that I'm unaware of Bast's cruel streak. He's agreed to run con after con, careless of the fact that we're effectively scamming people out of their money. I've been using his cruel streak for myself. If it doesn't backlash against me one day, I'll be lucky... or rather, that's what I'd say, if I didn't know what I was doing."

Az flicked an ear, curious.

"Have you ever heard of serial killers, Az? People who kill victim after victim, usually with little or no connection to the people they kill. There's a common psychological profile among pair serial killers—that is, two people who work together to commit this kind of violence. One is the 'commander,' and the other is the 'follower.' One gives the orders and commands the violence, while the other is the impressionable one, who follows the other's orders because they are compelled to follow orders. The follower gets a rush every time they make a kill, while the commander builds up the follower's guilt, so that they doubly can't break free; they are the criminal, and they love being the criminal. If they ever decide to stop being the criminal, the commander merely has to remind them of their criminal history to pull them back in, and the dopamine of the kill will deliver the delight to get the positive loop rolling again. These kinds of bonds are formed by violence and mutual guilt; they're the same kind of bonds that bind criminals into gangs... well, that's a little more complicated, but I digress.

"I was his victim, once, but now I'm his commander. I come up with the plans. I deliver the value, the dopamine, the rush that he's after, just so long as he follows my every command. At the same time, we build up a log of mild crimes, growing slowly in severity, which I know of. I would never bring it up, but I don't need to. He knows that I know of his crimes, and he has status in this world that I could threaten. This gives me power over him, and at the same time, the joy drags him back. As long as I maintain this dominance over him, he will never be able to break free of me."

Az gave Rhys a long look. "I didn't expect you to be so calculating."

Rhys laughed lightly, the sound a counterpoint to his serious words. "Truth be told, I'm not. It's natural for me to come up with scams, just like it's natural for serial killers to kill. For me, he's a convenient and useful tool; for him, I'm the operation's brains, the one

who thinks up these brilliant plans that give him the rush he craves. And for this to evolve into something like friendship... I don't think that's so unusual. We have mutual interests in common, and our personalities click together. Is that not what forms a friendship anywhere? It's as normal as two people becoming friends over a mutual interest in books or cats. The fact that I recognize our relationship for what it is doesn't make it any less genuine."

Az snorted. "Well, when the two of you found this region's first demonic cult, remember to let a small and innocent tuxedo cat into your library, will you? The demonic cults produce the most interesting manuals."

"Manuals, or 'manuals?'" Rhys asked, remembering Az's personal taste in books.

"Need there be a distinction?" Az asked.

Rhys called to mind a few of the techniques in some of the trashiest books he'd read back home, and chuckled. "No, I guess not." He gazed down at the field, then shook his head. "I guess I'm just saying, I don't think you need to worry about his cruel streak. I have it well in hand."

"You're a strange child. At times, you talk like a man, or maybe someone who is watching this all from the outside. As if you don't belong."

"Ah...yeah. Maybe that's because that's how I feel," Rhys admitted openly. He was an adult, and he didn't belong. Oh, he was sure the sensation would go away with time. He already considered this world superior to his old one, and he was starting to feel as though it were home. He had friends here, a pet, maybe, a house, even if it was a crag in the rock... this was more his home than his 'homeworld' had ever been. He hugged Az tighter, hiding his face in the soft fur. "But it's getting better."

"Hmm." Az flicked his tail a few times, tolerating Rhys's hug, then hopped free. "It's nearly time for the fights to begin. You should get down to the field."

"Right." Rhys stood, following the cat down to the arena.

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Chapter 94. Semifinals

Rhys found his name easily. There were only two fields left; each of the semifinals took place with all the stadium's attention, with no other Tier fights going on at the same time. Earlier this morning, the Tier 1 semifinals had occurred; now it was the Tier 2, and after them would be Tier 3. The stone platform before him was pristine, which came as a bit of a shock, because Rhys's battles had shattered several platforms, let alone the other battlers who had even less care for collateral damage than Rhys did. Looking closer, the platform was made up of squares, and each square was a block of stone, so it wasn't that they had complete platforms, but instead, these final two were cobbled together from the surviving pieces from the previous platforms.

"Sure hope the Academy owns a quarry," Rhys muttered to himself.

"The Empire owns many," his opponent announced proudly. Laurent stepped forward, his white hair snapping on the breeze. He wore it in a ponytail, like Rhys wore his hair, but where Rhys's hair was a frazzled mess barely pinched in place by a ribbon only to immediately spring back to the width of his head, Laurent's was like a ribbon, narrow and silky, flowing as one solid piece when the wind played with it.

Bit of a waste on such a boring design, Rhys thought, eying Laurent's strict obedience to the Empire's white military uniform.

Abruptly, Laurent frowned. He looked Rhys up and down. "Something about you... your aura, perhaps... is familiar. Have we met?"

Rhys stiffened. *Haha, nope! You and me? Never! Definitely didn't go on a date with you as my crossdressing persona Rina!* He coughed and quickly changed the subject. "Your hair. I've noticed many of the Empire's soldiers wear white hair, but for the most part, the students' hair is naturally colored, the ordinary hodgepodge of brown, blond, black and red. Why is that?"

Laurent puffed out his chest, proud to discuss his home country. "So you've noticed! Yes, you're right. When we graduate from the military academy as fully-fledged soldiers of the Empire, we are granted the honor of our white hair, to match our beautiful country's purity! As the student president and my fellow students' commanding officer, who also happens to have a few commendable moments of service himself," Laurent turned a little, to emphasize the badges and ribbons on his chest. They were few and constrained, but doubtlessly hard-earned. Rhys had often found that the less shiny the medals were, the more the soldier had worked to earn them. "I was granted the honor of being granted the permission to bear white hair early."

"Is that a magical technique, then? It'd be a pain in the ass to keep bleaching everyone's hair," Rhys commented.

Laurent nodded. "Permanent and irreversible magic! Until your hair is white, you are still permitted to back out of the military, return your core, and resume your life as a mortal. White hair is a signal of our dedication to the Empire! As someone deeply committed to the Empire, I didn't hesitate to take up the guise when asked, and now I bear the glorious white hair you see before you today."

Rhys nodded slowly, once more reminded of the terror of the Empire. His only option was to become a soldier, or else return to mortal life? Die in the fleeting blink of an eye, with no ability to influence anyone or anything until his short life ran out? To say the Empress brooked no dissent was to state it lightly. Truly, how terrifying.

Maybe Az is right. Maybe I should secure an exit route. But at the same time, Rhys knew it was hopeless. He would make a dive to get onto Bast's ship, whatever that was, then attempt escape on foot. Better to be tracked down one-on-one and chance it against the Empire's dragnet, than attract attention to himself flying away on a ship.

But probably I'll be captured. He sighed. His future didn't look bright, and yet, he hadn't given up yet. Even if he ended up under the Empire's control, he wasn't afraid. His path wasn't something so fragile that it would fade when the regime changed overhead. The Empire might be efficient and ruthless, but it would still generate trash. And where there was trash, there was a route ahead for Rhys.

Death? No. He didn't fear death. Not from regime change, anyways. Death came to loyalists and brave soldiers, of which Rhys was neither. He was trash, the scum that floated on the water. When a great wave tore through a city, the scum floated right on with it. If he had to bow to the Empress and attend her military academy, so be it. Better to survive and figure out how to escape or break free later, rather than struggle and die meaninglessly, like an ant in an ant war, nothing but a black speck on the sidewalk roasting in the sun.

"Do you have a path, Laurent?"

"My path is my Empress's!" Laurent pledged, saluting as if on instinct.

Rhys snorted. That was easy enough to say. He wasn't afraid to bark such a response when asked. His filthy lips could say anything, but it wouldn't make it true. "What makes you tick? What gives you power?"

Laurent paused at that. "I study the blade."

"But what makes you happy?"

Laurent narrowed his eyes. He stepped onto the platform. "It is time to battle, Rhys Foundling."

Rhys bowed and stepped forth. He faced Laurent, taking stock of the man as a fighter for the first time. His aura was powerful; between Rhys and Laurent, anyone would choose Laurent as the winner by the power of his aura alone. He studied the blade; that made him a swordsman, but from the strength of his aura, he could use magic as well. Rhys had watched his battles thus far, but much like Bast's, they were over in a flash. Laurent was too powerful for anyone on this field, maybe excepting Bast, to put up a real fight. What little interesting information Rhys had been able to glean, was that Laurent preferred a direct attack from the front, one brutal slash that severed his opponent's defenses and forced them off the platform in one. It wasn't exactly a novel idea. A lot of the swordsmen's easier battles looked much the same. The difference was the elegance and skill with which Laurent unleashed his blow.

Bast, on the other hand, tended to march directly up to his opponent and kick them off the platform with a foot to the chest. It wasn't very fitting for the Sword Saint's apprentice, but the Sword Saint didn't seem to mind, and when the battle got serious, Bast wasn't afraid to use his sword, either... though so far, he'd only bothered in two, and one of them he'd seemed more exasperated than pushed to draw his sword, while the other had ended so quickly after Bast drew his sword that the sword was naught but a silver flash on the air, then sheathed once more. Between Bast and Laurent, Bast clearly surpassed Laurent's skill several times over, but, well, that was a foregone conclusion, as far as Rhys was concerned. Bast was the real deal, the diamond he'd found in his original trash. Sure, there were some parts of Bast that were trashy; he wouldn't be Rhys's friend if that wasn't true. But his skills were unmatched, unrivaled, unobstructed, every possible un- in the world.

To be quite honest, Rhys desperately wanted to watch Laurent and Bast's match, but at the same time, he was too trashy to throw the battle here to give his friend a good match. He was a rat, a filthy *rrrat*, and he was going to cling on to the last, until his teeth gave out and his claws slipped free.

He drew his broken sword. Laurent frowned at it, but said nothing. Either he'd been watching Rhys's battles, and knew the sword wouldn't hold him back, or simply respected any tactics executed by someone at this late stage of the tournament, but he merely drew his sword in response. For a brief moment, they faced one another, blades between them.

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Laurent's foot shifted. That was all the warning Rhys got, but it was enough. He released his sword with one hand, summoning forth a scrap of timber in the other. A massive roof-support beam materialized upright between him and Laurent, and Laurent's sword struck it—and sliced right through.

Damn. He'd been hoping Laurent's sword would get stuck in the thick wood, but that was a vain hope in the end. Laurent was nearly equal to Bast's strength, and Bast could slice up empowered brick walls. He should have known his timber stood no chance.

Still, it had absorbed Laurent's momentum. For the first time, the boy now stood exposed in the center of the stone square, his sword out, but his opponent still in play.

To his credit, Laurent didn't hesitate. He immediately backed away, putting distance between them, a move that showed he'd battled those stronger than him before, and knew to be wary of an opponent who could block his opening strike. The fact that he didn't completely understand Rhys's techniques probably pushed him backward rather than forward as well. He knew Rhys could summon objects, but that was it. He had no idea the limitations or boundaries of Rhys's skills. That was only natural; not many people pursued the Trash Path. But it gave Rhys an opening, and so, Rhys immediately jumped forward to exploit it.

Laurent's eyes flashed. His feet shifted, and his sword blasted out with explosive strength. The retreat was a feint. Rhys found a blade hurtling toward his heart, while his own feet carried him forward, locked in by the laws of momentum.

There wasn't any time to pull back, and his speed was too great to completely abate in an instant. Instead, Rhys turned to the side. The blade glanced across his chest, carving a great arc in his robes and in the flesh beneath, but at least it didn't take his heart.

To Rhys's disappointment, he'd dodged too well, and wasn't injured enough for Trash Body to activate. Still, he'd dodged Laurent's second attack, and he was now in close combat with the boy. He reached his hand out as he stepped past Laurent, a piece of metal hidden in his palm.

Laurent jerked back, but it was too late. Rhys activated Trash Intent, and a cauldron fell onto his shoulders. The manifestation, like all Rhys's manifestations, was transparent, so he could see through it, but it was bright enough to temporarily blind—or at least disorient—anyone caught within it. The durability and weight of the manifestation was real, if nothing else, and so forty pounds of iron slammed onto Laurent's shoulders. Not expecting such an unorthodox attack, Laurent fell back once more, a habit Rhys catalogued quietly; when faced with surprise, Laurent retreated to make space and get a better understanding of his opponent.

It was a gesture a talented fighter would make. The hubris laid in falling back, assuming he could make room to study his opponent, assuming his opponent would let him study them, assuming that he could comprehend his opponent in those few moments of study.

Rhys, on the other hand, was not a talented fighter. He'd gained his skills through hard work and endless effort, through attacking even when he should, by all rights, retreat, by overcoming talent through ferocity and the willingness to take a hit, throw his body

away, just to land one small *ippon* on his opponent. His style of fighting assumed that he had no skill, that if he gave his opponent the room to breathe, they would find a way to overcome him by talent, and so he had to relentlessly press the advantage in the rare moments he had it, even if it meant taking a greater loss himself in the next moment.

Of course, Rhys's other advantage was that he was *painfully* aware of his own skill level. Against opponents he could counter, or who fought with magic, he wasn't afraid to fall back and take stock of the battle. But against martial opponents? Every single battle he'd experienced, he'd experienced on the losing end. Straw, Bast, Ev, Cynog, every single encounter Rhys had had in melee scrums that seriously threatened his life, was against someone vastly more skilled, talented, and powerful than him. As a result, he'd developed this inferiority complex, as some might call it; his surety that he could not win without sacrificing his own body. If Laurent assumed that he could win, if only he took a step back and studied the field, then Rhys was equally-but-oppositely convinced that taking a step back would allow his opponent the advantage that would end the battle. It was as close-minded a mindset as Laurent's hubris, merely in the opposite direction.

And yet, the end product was a ferocious pressing of the rare advantage he could seize that became an advantage in its own right.

Laurent shoved the cauldron off his head, toward Rhys, meaning to use it to block Rhys's sword, already flying toward his head. Rhys deactivated the manifestation as it fell toward him, and slashed through the empty air where it had been. He landed a blow on Laurent's side, staining his brilliant white uniform red. Laurent instantly struck back, only for Rhys to re-manifest the cauldron and kick it upward. Laurent's sword struck the cauldron and carved through it; as if he'd been expecting it, his blade cut through the source of the manifestation, the scrap of metal, and to Rhys's surprise, the manifestation blinked out of existence.

Huh. Good to know. If the trash that formed the source of his Trash Intent was destroyed, the Trash Intent fell apart. It wasn't the most shocking thing he'd ever heard, but since he was working with trash to begin with, he was a bit surprised that trashing the trash ruined his intent. Did it have to do with the form of 'intent?' In other words, if the root of his intent no longer was locked to the original piece, did he no longer have the proper form of the intent to shape the object he desired? If he manifested a bowl from half a bowl, then that half-bowl got cut into half, his original intent would still be manifesting the half a bowl the initial half a bowl needed, not the three-quarters bowl the newly made quarter-bowl needed. Was that it?

There was no time to ponder any further. Laurent charged in, and Rhys had two options: take the hit or retreat. He clashed with Laurent's blade. The force of the blow knocked his blade hard, and rather than hold on, Rhys released it. It went flying high into the air, thrown by the force of a full-power Tier 2 sword strike from a martial artist.

Sword removed, Rhys was still far from unarmed. He brought out the steel pole, and Laurent's eyes widened with shock. Laurent instantly smashed the pole out of his hand, before Rhys could even activate it.

So he has been watching my battles. Rhys manifested a scrap of lurid pink fabric and flapped it aggressively at Laurent. As he'd expected, Laurent stepped back. His instinct to retreat and take in the scene activated before his rational brain processed that Rhys held nothing but a harmless piece of cloth.

Exactly what Rhys had wanted.

"Bye-bye," Rhys said, waving the cloth.

Laurent's brows furrowed. He looked around him, searching the ground for some kind of unexpected manifestation.

Rhys's sword, still fully manifested, fell from the heavens. The blade carved into the top of Laurent's head, knocking it forward at the same time. The blade clattered away, demanifesting as it hit the ground. Laurent wobbled, and blood stained his white hair crimson, but he didn't fall. At this tier, a falling blade wasn't enough to give the boy a concussion, let alone shatter Laurent's skull, but Rhys had known that from the start. He whirled, building force and momentum, and delivered it into Laurent's solar plexus in a single powerful kick. All the air whooshed out of Laurent, and yet again, he stepped back.

Off the platform.

Rhys picked up his steel pipe and his sword and bowed to Laurent. "A good match."

Laurent looked at him, confused, then looked down at his feet. His face blushed with anger and embarrassment. "You—"

"Trash, I know. I wouldn't win if we actually traded sword blows, so why would I bother? I'm not stupid." Rhys shook his head at Laurent and offered him a hand back up onto the platform.

Laurent hesitated, then took Rhys's hand. The second their hands met, Laurent yanked his back, as though it had been burned.

Rhys frowned. "What?"

"It's—" Laurent stared at Rhys as if he'd seen a ghost. His eyes flickered over Rhys's face, steadily widening.

Uh oh. Did he realize? Rhys glanced at his hand. From their hands touching? How? They hadn't even held hands! What kind of virgin was this guy? Remembering the

feeling of his hand from a single brush when they were trading currency for potato chips? Even Rhys didn't have that level of virgin power.

In the next second, Laurent shook his head. "N-no. My apologies. I was mistaken." He took Rhys's hand and stepped back up onto the platform. "It was a good match. You've made me aware of my failings. I won't make the same mistake again."

"Ah, well, that's good, I guess," Rhys said, not sure how he felt about helping a future member of the Empire's military get stronger. He wasn't the kind of guy who'd sit back for fifteen episodes just so his foe could power up to their maximum power so they could have a good fight. He'd rather beat the guy in his mook form in one hit, thanks.

"I'll look forward to your battle in the finals," Laurent said.

Rhys startled. *That's right!* He had to face Bast in the finals now! Holy shit, how was he supposed to do that? Bast knew all his dirty tricks and trashy skills. Forget beating him—what he had to do now was figure out a way to avoid the beating of his life!

Lost in thought, he stumbled away, while behind him, Laurent gazed at his retreating back, his eyes narrowed.

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Chapter 95. VS Bast

Rhys wracked his brain, but came up with nothing. Beating Bast wasn't even on the menu; avoiding getting the shit beaten out of him was the best he could dream of. Even then, there was little he could do to prevent or put off that beating. It was the finals of the tournament. He couldn't just say no or back out. Laurent would probably kill him if he backed out or surrendered immediately after the quite frankly humiliating way Rhys had beaten him. Hell, he would probably kill his opponent if he'd gotten head-slapped with a sword then ring-outted via spin kick, only for his opponent to go 'nah, no thanks' and hand the finals to the guy he really wanted to fight. There was no backing down. He had to face Bast, and it had to look like a legitimate fight.

The problem laid in that any legitimate fight with Bast was a sure and painful loss for him. He wasn't afraid of pain, if that pain meant gaining something. What he didn't like, was pain without gain. That was just masochism. Which was what this fight was looking to be: an exercise in masochism, at the hands of someone vastly superior at melee combat than him.

Rhys sighed. He put his head in his hands and took a deep breath. There were no two ways about it. He'd go out there, give it his best shot, and get the hell beaten out of him. As long as he put up a good fight, he shouldn't have Laurent coming after him, too, and it wasn't like he'd never been beaten by Bast before. He was used to it. It would be fine.

The platform was already in good shape, since Rhys and Laurent's fight hadn't destroyed it much. The maintenance mages quickly replaced the pieces that were out of shape, and a referee gestured Rhys over. Reluctantly, Rhys approached the platform.

A familiar masked figure, clad in white robes, stood opposite. Solaire gave no indication he knew Rhys, and Rhys returned the favor. It was like when he ran into his female friend at the con, after he'd handed off the costume. They didn't know one another. He was just some guy.

Solaire bowed, and Rhys bowed back. He stepped onto the platform, and Solaire stepped forth opposite. In a flash, Solaire drew his sword and darted toward Rhys.

Rhys's sword flew into his hands. He angled it instinctively and activated Trash Intent, already knowing the exact direction and angle Bast would strike from. Their swords clashed. Rhys stepped backward from the sheer force of the blow, his eyes widening. Bast was *way* stronger.

Duh. We were kids back then. Even so, his blow was proportionally much stronger than they had been when they were both children. Just like when they were kids, Bast followed up the initial strike with a flurry of rapid blows. Rhys barely blocked most of them, taking glancing hits on his limbs and body where Bast got past his defenses. To Rhys's surprise, though, none of Bast's blows hurt too much. It almost felt like he was...

Holding back? Rhys looked at Bast's eyes, but couldn't see them through the mask with the way the sunlight poured down from overhead. He glared. "Don't you dare."

The next hit knocked him physically back. If Bast's hits had been heavy before, they were almost unbearable now. For all that, the hit finally gave Rhys breathing room, even if only a heartbeat's worth. He tossed out a handful of trash between the two of them and activated his rat spell. Bast charged, only for Rhys to spawn a chair in front of his leg as he stepped forward. Bast absolutely splintered the chair, and the manifest burst into motes of blue light. It had been a long time since the backlash of a broken Trash Intent had hit Rhys, but it slammed into his head like a sack of bricks. Earlier, Laurent had broken the intent by breaking the piece of trash; in other words, he'd broken the trash, not the intent itself, so he hadn't gotten a backlash. Instead, the trash had become unusable. *Still, if I can't dismiss a Trash Intent before an enemy shatters it, it might be better to destroy the trash rather than take the hit.*

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Rhys flinched, squinting against the sudden headache, and in that instant, Bast reached him. A blade swept toward his stomach. Rhys activated another piece of Trash Intent to snare Bast's legs and keep him from approaching closer, and lunged forward at the same time, throwing out his hand. The rat leaped at Bast's mask, then swirled behind it and chewed at the string keeping the mask on his face. Bast immediately clapped his hand to his face, smacking the rat into tiny blue smithereens, but that was all the opening Rhys needed. He dashed in.

Rather than use his sword, Rhys threw it aside and grabbed Bast in a bear hug, slamming him to the ground. He immediately tried to pin and pound Bast. Two punches in, and Bast reversed the pin. Rhys's shoulders hit the stone, and the air went out of him in a familiar huff. He barely had time to get his arms up before Bast started pummeling his face.

Their childhood wasn't all laughter and nostalgia. Like any kids, or two people who had to spend their entire lives around one another, they had sometimes fought, and being two hot headed young men, those fights had often devolved into outright scraps, down and dirty no-holds-barred brawls where the winner took all, but no one actually won. Straw wasn't the kind of adult supervision to prevent a couple of boys from learning how hand-to-hand combat worked, so the fights had gone to their inevitable conclusion time and time again. Rhys's win rate was something like 1 to 9, with his few wins coming on days Bast trained too hard, or where he found some environmental factor to make the difference.

He could throw trash at Bast all day, but that wasn't his move. Rhys looked inward instead, to where the impurities filled his body and core. He ignited them, pushing them all together into one huge trash star. A flash of power filled his body, only a moment, but that was enough. He jabbed his hand out, breaking his own block to grab Bast by the collar of his robes. Bast hammered his head, but couldn't hit him fast enough. Not while the trash star burned. Rhys slammed Bast in the temple, and Bast reeled, his mask knocked askew.

For the first moment since battle had begun, Rhys saw a route to victory. He flipped Bast onto his back and pinned him, smashing at his mask. The eye holes weren't lined up with Bast's eyes anymore. The man was blinded, and had to breathe through the mask, too. He struggled, trying to grab his mask and put it back into place, but Rhys knocked his hands away in between beating his face. No chance. He wasn't going to give this up for anything.

"ARGH!" Bast roared in frustration, and his aura surged. Rhys kept pounding at his face, but it was already over. Bast broke free of his hold with more speed and strength than Rhys could keep up with. He grabbed Rhys by the shoulders, lifted him, got his leg under Rhys—and threw him, tossing him over his head like Rhys was an infant. Rhys watched the ground rush by, pedaling his arms and legs like a dog in water. The stone platform passed underneath him, and he crashed down into the dust.

Silence. Absolute silence in the stadium. Rhys laid there for a moment, stunned from the impact, and it almost felt like the stadium sat stunned with him. He understood, though. He understood. He, the trashy contestant who should never have made it to the semifinals, let alone the finals, had forced their precious Sword Saint's apprentice to not only fight seriously, but enticed him to brawl like a lowborn in a back alley, no technique or skill involved. It was truly a silence-demanding ending to the tournament. The cool Solaire, who stood upright and coolly dispatched all his foes with a single strike, brawling like a schoolboy and screaming in rage.

Belatedly, Rhys had a moment of self-reflection. *Do I bring out the worst in people? Or... the trashiness?*

On the platform, Bast scrabbled the mask back into place and stood, brushing off his robes as though nothing had happened. He sheathed his sword and bowed formally to Rhys.

Rhys bowed back, then jogged to the platform to pick up his abandoned trash and tossed-aside sword. Bast marched off as though there were nothing more to say, as if that fight had been completely normal and nothing strange had happened.

As Bast passed, Rhys muttered, "Sorry about that."

Bast snorted. "What do you mean? That was the most fun I've had all tournament."

Like that, they parted, like two ships in the night, but passing by and never touching, except for the time the two ships brawled in the dirt like little kids ten seconds ago.

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

Chapter 96. The Tournament is Over

The tournament was over, but not the festivities. There was a festival in the afternoon and a banquet in the near future. As one of the finalists, Rhys received an invitation to the banquet, but he was more interested in the festival. While the Tier 3 battles went on, Rhys ran down to the trash heap. The rats and raccoon overseer were all busy growing and storing potatoes, and the rest of his setup was still in working order. He quickly fried up a series of chips—his cut was getting better, after several days of practice without Bast's help—and transformed into Rina. He didn't need airtight bags, since he was immediately selling them, so he just needed to use a little trash to create big sheets of paper that he could tear into parts, roll into cones, and hand out potato chips in. It was inspired from the cheap method of selling fries, but it worked for chips too.

His last-minute efforts done, he rushed back to the market and opened his stall. Most of the contestants were busy talking to their mentors or watching the Tier 3 matches, but there were still plenty of mages around to either get another hit of their favorites, or sample his wares for the first time. He charged an absolutely exorbitant rate, but today was the last day, and potentially Rina's last appearance. Either everything went well, and he went home, or the Empire attacked, and he'd have more pressing issues than expanding his potato chip empire.

Bast, of course, had to attend all kinds of boring things alongside his mentor. The man didn't even have to explain himself; Rhys understood. He was the all-important winner of the tournament who was also the all-important disciple of the Sword Saint. There was no chance whatsoever that Bast would escape from his mentor's side until at least tomorrow, and maybe even the day after.

Maybe even not until he's moved out from under the Empress's nose.

He wouldn't hold it against Bast if he was spirited away. In fact, he'd even cheer him on. Better Bast got out of here, than to see him ruined at the Empress's hands.

"Is this it, then?"

Rhys looked up, snapped out of his thoughts. Anabel stood before him, gold outstretched. He took her money and handed her a bag, and tilted his head. "What do you mean?"

"Is this it? You go home, and no more Rina?"

Rhys blinked at her. "Wh...what do you mean?" Had she seen through him?

"It's such a waste. You're so beautiful like this." Anabel sighed. "I'll miss dressing you. You were my ideal model. That mysterious androgyny, the aloof yet approachable air... if Rina ever makes a return, find me, okay?"

"Er... haha, what do you mean? Rina is a normal person who always exists!" Rhys said awkwardly.

Anabel winked and sauntered off, cracking open her bag of chips as she went.

She knew. She totally knew. Did she know the whole time? Rhys watched her go, then chuckled to himself. Maybe they had more in common than he'd thought. Could it be that she was a fellow crossplayer...?

Thoughts for another time. Customers flowed in, and Rhys fended them off with potato chips while taking their coins in the noble exchange known as capitalism. At last, a figure in a white uniform stood before him. Blood still stained his hair and chest, but he stared at Rina, a complicated expression on his face. "You..."

“Your potato chips, sir!” Rhys said in a slightly-more-high-pitched-than-usual voice, shoving a bag into his hands, carefully not touching him. Who knew what Laurent could tell by touching hands with another human being? He didn’t trust those hands of Laurent’s any more. If he really had recognized Rhys by hand-brush, that talent was just too weird for Rhys.

Laurent stared at his face, searching for something, anything. He hesitated, then turned and reached in his pocket. “I, um. It’s a delicacy of our country, I... wanted you to have it.”

“Oh, that’s alright, don’t worry about it,” Rhys said, waving his hand. There was a long line, and he didn’t want to spend too long around Laurent, in case the guy finally put two and two together.

Laurent grabbed his hand. Rhys instantly started sweating. Laurent kept fiddling, cursing under his breath. At last, he dragged it free: a glass jar, with a chunky red substance inside it.

“We call it marinara—”

Rhys snatched it out of his hand. He twisted the lid open and took a deep whiff. There was no doubt about it. He’d recognize that acidic savory scent anywhere. He looked up. “Tomatoes?”

“Er, yes, it is made of—”

Rhys grabbed his collar and yanked him in. “Do you have seeds?”

Laurent blinked. Rina was suddenly very close to him, and despite everything, it was overwhelming. He looked aside. “Uh, I... I could get some.”

“Please. I’ll do aaaany... I’ll pay you good money,” Rhys said, before he accidentally pledged to do anything for Laurent.

Laurent nodded and stumbled away, stunned. Rhys glanced down, and abruptly realized he’d never handed the chips over. “Laurent! Your...”

Laurent vanished into the crowd.

Rhys looked at the chips Laurent had abandoned, then turned to his next customer with a smile. If Laurent didn’t want them, that was his problem. With a casual gesture, he put the marinara in his storage ring and returned to his salesman mode, selling off the remaining stock to his eager customers. Laurent didn’t return, though whether he was too embarrassed to come back to claim his forgotten chips, or he simply couldn’t find tomato seeds, Rhys couldn’t say. The marinara was better than nothing. In all likelihood, all the seeds were too cooked to grow... under normal circumstances, that was. But

seeds in marinara were generally considered undesirable. There was a chance that one of his trash skills might work on them.

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Maybe they can be my first target of trashomancy, Rhys thought, then frowned. Did he really want undead tomatoes, though? Undead minions was all fine and dandy, putting aside humanity and common decency, but undead tomatoes? Unlike undead minions, he was going to put the tomatoes in his mouth. He didn't want them to bite back.

He thought for another few moments, then shrugged. *Let's call it a proof of concept*. He wouldn't necessarily *eat* the undead tomatoes, but if he could awaken them back to life via some form of trash skill, then he would have evidence that such a thing as trashomancy would be possible in the future, but without any of the moral or legal quandaries associated with necromancy. Even if Purple Dawn and the Alliance frowned on curse power and dark skills like necromancy, would they really object against something as silly and harmless as bringing tomato seeds back to life? He wasn't going to cause a tomato zombie apocalypse, since living tomatoes couldn't move, let alone undead tomatoes. It was perfectly safe. Probably. In any case, Purple Dawn was about to have much bigger issues to deal with, when the Empress made her move. They wouldn't have time to deal with a small-time trashomancer and his undead tomatoes.

Back to the trash pit. Rhys set to absorbing more trash and igniting more trash stars, until about half of the trash pit was emptied. It took him the rest of the afternoon, night, and most of the next day to accomplish that, doing nothing but concentrating on absorbing as much trash as he could. He didn't know how much mana he'd need to accomplish his first trashomancy, but he figured he ought to have as much as he could, plus a body tuned to the utmost so it wouldn't collapse under the pressure of the skill.

At last, he fished out a little bit of the marinara, making sure the portion he dragged out had seeds. He reached out to the seeds with trash intent. Marinara wasn't supposed to have seeds. Obviously, in this pre-industrial society, they couldn't perfectly strain the sauce and remove the seeds, so some still slipped through. If they were unwanted, didn't that meant they ought to be discarded, and therefore... were trash?

Rhys extended Trash Intent, checking his hypothesis. It took him a moment. His intent slipped over the marinara sauce, unable to grip it. Rhys narrowed his eyes. Not the sauce, but the seeds. The unwanted part of the sauce. A subcomponent of a desirable item, that was itself undesirable in this particular context, though desirable outside of this context. But because it was undesirable in this context, therefore it was trash.

Trash Intent locked onto the seeds at last, and Rhys grinned. *Excellent*. He gripped the seeds with his intent and poured his mana inside them. The seeds came to life. They wanted to grow, they wanted to come to life, but they were dead. Cooked. Too heat-treated to ever come to life again. He pushed mana into the seeds, activating their

intent. They extended ghostly roots and sprouted ghostly stalks, but nothing actually grew. Rhys released his Trash Intent, and the ghostly parts growing from the seeds vanished.

He pinched his chin. Compared to the bones he'd melted down for glue, the tomato seeds had a far weaker intent to live and 'become' again, and on top of that, intent was only a projection of what had been, or at best, what could be. It wasn't real. It didn't make form, only the shape of form. He couldn't create the metal of a broken cauldron, just the image, the shape of the cauldron. It was the same with the seeds. He could create the shape of life, but he could not actually imbue them with life, any more than he could make metal appear just from projecting a cauldron. He could use the projection of a cauldron to fix a cauldron, like the super-strong cauldron currently rotting in his inventory, but he couldn't do the same with plants. No amount of smelting would give him a living tomato seed.

Was there nothing for it? Maybe if he used bones. The bones had really wanted to come back to life... but then, that wouldn't achieve what he wanted. Sure, he could use the bones to create a sort of skeleton-undead as long as he kept Trash Intent active to piece it together, but that wasn't the trashomancy he craved. He wanted the fire-and-forget kind of trashomancy, the kind where he raised the dead and walked away, and there was no cost but the initial cost.

Putting the seeds back in his pocket, he whistled. A couple of rats scrambled up to him, and he showed them a bone. "Could you bring me more like this?"

The rats scattered. One returned with a chicken bone. Another came back, dragging a ham bone with all its might, little feet digging into the trash in its effort to drag the bone to Rhys. The final rat carried a mummified mouse over, the little thing dangling from its jaws.

"Thank you." Rhys reached out toward the mummified mouse and pushed intent into it. The dried-out body soaked up his intent like a sponge, and took form of its own volition. The two-dimensional mouse stood upright. It tried to squeak, but all that happened was that its jaw moved. Only two of its legs could touch the ground at once, due to the way it had mummified, but it worked hard to stay upright on those legs.

"Go," Rhys ordered it.

The mouse mummy teetered off. He watched it go, measuring its progress in his head. The whole time, it absorbed mana from him, and a tether of mana connected it back to Rhys. The second it left the range of how far Rhys could push intent into it, the mummy fell over, no more alive than it had been to begin with.

It's not an undead, or even its own being. It's nothing but a manifestation of the mummy's intent. It was interesting that manifesting the mummy's intent could give it its mobility once more, but that was all there was to it. Even when he'd given it the order

aloud, he'd done that for his own sake. The mouse hadn't understood the order, or heard or comprehended it. He had pushed his intent to influence the mouse's intent such that it walked away, that was it. Some things were handled by the mummy's intent, like balancing and its chosen method of locomotion, but other than that, it was all Rhys's efforts, rather than anything to do with the mouse.

Rhys sighed. It seemed like undead tomatoes would have to remain a dream. Not... that he'd been dreaming of undead tomatoes. It was only a thought experiment that hadn't worked out. The sensation he'd gotten from trying, though, wasn't that it would be impossible forever. Instead, he lacked the proper concentration and comprehension to break through the bottleneck and actually create trash zombies. The bones wanted to. Even the tomatoes were willing to try. He was the part of the equation that wasn't coming together.

Dusting off his hands, he turned back to the remaining trash. Plenty of trash to go, and with the Empire's impending invasion right around the corner, it was time to power up as much as he could. In other words, it was time to ignite more trash stars.

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

Chapter 97. Powering Up

The banquet wasn't the next day, but the day after. Rhys checked, but the market was mostly quiet, with only a few stalls bothering to open at all. With no reason to bother making his chips and plenty of gold in his pocket, he was free to focus on absorbing trash.

Trash star after trash star. He had to turn to the rats to get more second-tier impurities, then seek out the campus rats through his Straw-hunting rat friend to get even more. The rat still didn't have any information on Straw's whereabouts, but that was fine. If it was easy to find Straw, he would have found him already.

The last of the trash vanished, leaving only the caches the smugglers were hiding in the pile. Rhys left those alone, figuring they'd want them back. Besides, he had little use for them. They weren't trash.

Looking over the fruits of his labor, Rhys dusted off his hands and sighed, proud of a job well done. Nothing but a big, empty ravine laid before him. And yet... there was something wrong about it. A fierce sensation of trash still welled up from the bottom of the ravine, as if it were still covered in the enormous pile.

Rhys frowned. He scratched up a handful of dirt, but the sensation didn't come from the earth—though the earth did have a fair share of impurities in it, from where the trash had decayed and leached into it over the years. No, it was coming from somewhere else. He walked the earth, seeking after the sensation. The edges? No... the center. Rhys followed the sensation out into the middle of the ravine, the dead ground rising up in puffs under his feet. He absorbed the impurities out of the earth as he walked, but even that did nothing to abate the sensation. It was strong. Almost the most powerful sensation of trash he'd ever felt, aside from the toxic trash pit.

Aside from... the toxic trash pit. Rhys stilled right over the place where the sensation grew strongest, then drew a broken shovel from his storage ring. Activating its intent, he struck the manifested blade into the earth. Could it be? Was this another Impure Well, like the one back at Infinite Constellation School? Ernesto had known about them, even gone out of his way to deliberately seek it out, and expected to find a curse at the bottom of it, which implied he knew about them. Was his knowledge firsthand? Were there Impure Wells on the grounds of Purple Dawn, too?

Only one way to find up. Earth piled up beside Rhys as he dug down. The deeper he got, the stronger the sensation grew. With nothing to do but shovel, Rhys found himself wondering if people weren't drawn to dispose of things in the Impure Wells. At Infinite Constellation School, they'd used it as a dumping ground for useless and toxic potions. At Purple Dawn, they'd built a trash heap on top of one (if there really was one underneath the ground). Either way, they'd used the Impure Wells as a place to store trash. Was there something drawing them to use the wells as dumps?

A strange creeping sensation came over Rhys. He stopped for a moment, staring down toward the trashy sensation. If that was the case, then... could it be that these were what he'd been called here to clean?

He chuckled at himself. Lifting the shovel, he went back to digging. He was being ridiculous. Since the start of time, people had used things they considered as worthless or garbage as trash heaps. Whether it was the local retention pond or a swamp, if a land wasn't immediately useful for human habitation or cultivation, then it became a dumping ground. The Impure Wells were more extreme versions of that than usual, in that they were more concentrated toxicity, and in that they were smaller, more precise points in the ground, but it was the same idea. Useless land was used as a dump. In a way, it was a credit to human ingenuity, that they could find a use for something they deemed useless; on the other hand, he'd hated nothing more than to see trash piled up on the side of the road back home, because the land along the road was 'junk' land that no one used, and therefore it was fine to trash it up. He'd even volunteered to help pick up that trash a few times before he'd ascended to an entirely-indoors existence, back in the dark ages known as his youth when he was required to go outside and get off the computer.

Toxic gunk started welling up around the shovel, and Rhys paused, letting it soak into his shoes. It was less vicious than the pit back home, without the secondary freezing,

burning, and acid effects, but in return, the curse power contained within was doubly, triply, no, ten times as concentrated. Even Rhys, uniquely suited to handling curse power, could barely take contact with this gunk. It was black as night, and soaked into his skin on contact. Black bruises spread up his legs, and dark curse power corrupted his mana as it spread inward, toward his core, diminishing and filtering up the mana as it progressed. Rhys waited patiently, watching it come all the way to the edge of his core, a shard of mana held just outside a trash star. At the last second before the curse power took his life entirely, as his heart slowed and his veins turned to gunk, he jabbed the shard into the trash star and ignited it.

The curse power burned as he'd expected it to, exploding into purer mana than the mana he'd had beforehand. It wasn't as pure as the droplets that came from igniting the trash stars, but it was close. Circulating the new pure mana through his mana passages, Rhys idly reinforced them and strengthened his core, but at the same time, he found himself wondering: what happened if he ignited a trash star built of nothing but curse power? If he compressed the curse power down to form the equivalent of the second-stage impurities, then burned it in the trash star technique, that usually squeezed out a single drop of that high-purity mana... what would happen? Curse power, when burned, gave him purer mana. Trash stars, when ignited, squeezed out a single drop of hyper-pure mana. If he combined the two...

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Did I just discover a method to farm hyper-pure mana?

Rhys wasn't one to sit around and mull over-long on theory when he had all the components right here in front of him, just waiting for him to give it a try. The curse power still welled up underfoot. He didn't want to jump in yet; staking his life on being able to absorb trash was all well and good, but this time, he wasn't pressured by a man vastly more powerful than him. He'd rather take things slow and absorb it at his own pace. Sure, he could probably jump in and survive, but why not experiment a little and figure out his strategy first?

So thinking, Rhys eagerly absorbed the curse power. When his core filled up, he compressed it from all directions, pushing and pushing until it became a little nugget of nasty, or in other words, a second-level impurity. The second he formed one of those impurities, he instantly worked on absorbing the curse power to form the next bundle, and so on, and so forth, piling up the impure clumps in the bottom of his core—careful to keep them separated from his droplets of hyper pure mana. Interestingly, the hyper pure mana seemed to avoid the clumps of impurity on its own, like water and oil. Rhys made a note of it and tucked it away in the back of his mind, but didn't know what else to make of it for now. Curse power didn't hesitate to infect mana, nor did impurities hesitate to corrupt it, so why did this hyper-pure mana behave as though it could fend off impurities?

A question for later. When he had enough of the dense impurities formed from pure curse power, Rhys started absorbing the curse power without compressing it... at first, only to realize his idea was flawed. A trash star wasn't quite a true star, but it came close; it ignited because the weight of the trash he'd absorbed pushed down on it from all directions and pressurized the super-impurities deep inside his core to the point that they were willing to ignite, when usually they resisted ignition.

Rhys considered for a moment. He could go find trash, but that felt like cheating. He looked at the super-abundant curse power all around him, leaking in from underfoot, and a thought came to him. *What if I put so many second-tier impurities in my core that they ignited under their own weight, without any extra trash?* In other words, rather than using trash to apply so much mass that the impurities would ignite, he simply added more and more impurities until their own mass ignited them. In some ways, it was closer to a true star, which was built of a limited number of gasses, which collapsed in on themselves without any external help from heavy trash or rocks or anything like that.

It occurred to him that igniting a trash star like that might kill him, but at the same time, his heart raced with excitement. Kill him, sure. That was a risk. That was always a risk when he was playing around with impurities. But what if it did the opposite? What if this was the push he needed to break through Tier 2 and step onto Tier 3? Maybe one Impure Well wouldn't be enough. Maybe he'd need two or three, or even a hundred. But this... this was exactly the kind of limit-pushing he had to engage in if he wanted to continue growing as a mage!

Laughing maniacally, Rhys dug down, causing more of the curse power to well up. It was so condensed it was a thick liquid, the color of dark maple syrup but if maple syrup smelled like death and rot instead of sugar and sap. One after another, he condensed second-tier impurities inside his core. The curse power kept welling up, and he kept condensing the impurities. Over and over. The impurities clustered at the center of his core and started building out. From a tight knot at the center of his core, to a dense cluster, to a ball. The ground sunk underneath him as the curse power flowed into him and out from under his feet. He let it sink, still not ready to plunge inside. Curse power had a different kind of corrupting effect than impurities. They were similar enough that he could resist both at this level, but he didn't want to throw himself wholesale into curse juice out of nowhere, when he hadn't really trained to absorb and handle curse power.

More and more impurities built up in his core, filling it up. The curse power welling up at his feet slowed as he sucked so much out that it started to get difficult to draw more up. At last, he could fit no more impurities in his core. It was full up of curse power, completely filled with the compressed curse energy.

Rhys circulated the final mote of mana he had, trembling with excitement and fear in equal proportions. He'd be absolutely beset by pure mana. It would be more energy than he'd ever handled before, with the trash stars, with the previous Impure Well, with his previous trash-burning efforts—energy to surpass all of those. Mana of such

proportions that his best efforts to handle it—reforging his body—wouldn't even absorb a proportion of the mana he would need to handle once he ignited all these impurities.

He manifested the scrap of mana in his hand, twisting it around his fingers. The little blue mote swirled around, shining in the darkness he'd built by digging this hole. It was mesmerizing... but also, he was stalling. He realized it, and couldn't stop himself. Why was he stalling? It was obvious, wasn't it? This was terrifying. He had so much potential mana inside of him. He'd essentially rolled a boulder up to the top of a mountain, then stood underneath it. If he pushed it, if he unleashed all that potential energy, would he survive?

Did I bite off more than I can chew? A note of doubt welled up in his mind, but he quickly crushed it. One didn't advance without risking something. To put it another way, a mage who didn't take risks, couldn't grow stronger. Yes, this was a risk. No, he didn't yet have a plan on how to use the energy. But if he stood here and wavered, waited until he was definitely strong enough to absorb it, then he would never grow stronger. Then he would really be trash, and even mediocre talent like Walter would surpass him, while he had to keep up with Bast if he wanted to have meaning in his own eyes.

"That's right. Being a mage means biting off more than you can chew!" he declared to no one. Before his resolve could waver again, he formed the scrap of mana into a needle and plunged it into his core. The curse power impurities trembled, glowed red hot—then exploded. Overwhelming power rushed out, pouring into him with no gates, no restriction, no going back.

Oh fuck—

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

Chapter 98. Tsunami and a Pebble

Rhys was a pebble, and the mana he'd unleashed was a tsunami, looming over him. He could sense the wave of power rushing toward him, see it closing in with every passing second. It hadn't hit yet, but it would, and he knew it would absolutely sweep him away.

He'd known this would unlock a vast wave of mana, but this exceeded all his expectations. Whether it was forging his core or forging his body, building up energy and structures inside his core to reach the next tier or using his most powerful techniques, the mana rushing toward him exceeded all of that. It was beyond his capacity to meaningfully vent. Even if he pushed it all out of his body, it wouldn't be enough. He couldn't push enough out fast enough to save his life. He needed something else. All of that, but also something else that would pull it out of him at the

same time. Something he could dump it into, that would also yank it out of him. But what?

Time seemed to slow. He searched around him, extending his mana—no cost was too much—desperate to find something, anything, to use it on. At the same time, he instinctively patted himself down, like he was checking for change in his pocket before heading through the x-ray machine at the airport. His hands landed on the tomato seeds in his pocket, and his gut jolted. Would that work? Could he even channel that much mana into them?

The wave hit, and his mind went blank. More mana than he'd ever experienced crashed into him. Almost instantly, his body began to melt from the inside out. His core burned hot, far too hot. His mana passages burned. Rhys let them burn and used the mana to reforge them stronger, but that wasn't enough. It couldn't be enough.

Inside his core, he condensed the mana into super-pure droplets, pushing it down until they joined the pool at the bottom of his core. The pool steadily filled, but the rate at which he could condense the droplets was too slow. It wasn't enough.

His core glowed so brightly it could be seen outside his body. Every single mana passage lit up inside him, burning through his flesh like a flashlight shone through one's hand. Smoke rose up from his body, and cracks appeared on the surface of his skin.

Rhys tightened his grip on the tomato seeds and shoved mana into them recklessly. He wasn't high enough Tier to comprehend the concept? Fine. He wouldn't comprehend the concept! Like a trash student at a math test, he'd just brute force it instead. Stuff it so full of mana that it either took form, or combusted, and nothing in between. It was his outlet, and not only that, he needed it to be his paper towel, his microfiber blanket, his absorbent dumping grounds that would suck up all his mana.

One of the seeds immediately ignited, burning out in a fiery flash. Another exploded, bursting his hand open for a moment. Two of them manifested, growing spectral roots, sprouts, vines and leaves, growing their spectral selves at an accelerated rate, sprouting flowers which withered, then swelled, until ghostly fruits dangled from the vine's immaterial boughs. But that wasn't what he wanted. He couldn't harvest the fruits, or cook them down into ketchup. This intent was worthless to him. He needed more than just intent. He needed true Trashomancy, the ability to force useless trash back to life! A trash skill specifically for things that had once been alive, an Intent that didn't just bring things back to their shape, or grant them their truest, strongest shape, but instead granted things true life once more. Even if it cost mana, no, especially if it cost mana, he needed to bring it back to life. True life, or at least a semblance of it. Enough life that he could harvest fruits, cook them down, and create ketchup. It didn't need to be true-true life. It didn't need to have hopes and dreams. A trashy imitation of life, just passable enough to taste close enough that he could turn it into the delicious, processed red sludge known as ketchup, or sometimes katsup.

His skin crisped, blackening at the edges. Rhys's forehead grew hot, and his vision blurred. He kept pushing mana into the four remaining seeds. They sucked it up, absorbing it without manifesting or burning. He could feel the hint of desire in them, the same as the bones had possessed desire. These seeds remembered that they had once been alive, and they strived to be alive once more. They didn't know how to get there, and neither did Rhys, but they were searching for it, all of them together, and Rhys had plenty of mana to shove in.

Abruptly, one of the seeds stopped absorbing mana, and a second later, it burst into flame. Three seeds left.

Rhys's body creaked. He wavered, barely maintaining consciousness as the extra mana blasted through his body rather than flowing into the seed. In his core, he worked at double speed to condense it into drops of super-pure mana, and managed to take some of the pressure off, but it was too slow, still too slow.

A second seed manifested, giving up on true life to simply express the desire for life. Once more, extra mana hit Rhys, and he fell back, slumping against the wall of the hole he'd dug. Two seeds remained.

His body burned. It wasn't as bad as the time he'd burned himself down to reforge his body, but it was just as bad in a different way. The mana clashed against his passages, flowing until it could flow no more, then flowing backward, striking against itself and hammering into his body as a result. He felt sick, intensely so. A headache pressed at his forehead, his whole body ached, and his stomach twisted, as if he had ingested poison. Worse than poison, because he could handle poison. This one was just pain.

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BAM! A seed popped, bursting like popcorn. Only one seed remained. Rhys poured his all into it. Like a useless teammate in a group project, all he could do was provide raw power. The seed had to comprehend it. The seed had to understand what it wanted. If it could, then he could give it everything, but his comprehension was lacking, so he had to rely on the seed.

You know what you want. Desire it! Call for it! With all your might, scream for it! You provide the understanding, and I'll provide the power!

The seed trembled. It wanted it, more than any of the other seeds had wanted it. It didn't think, but there was a desire in it, a shapeless, faceless thing that needed no words to want. Rhys reached out to that, resonated with it, and poured in all the mana he had. Holding nothing back, because he could hold nothing back, because he wished for it to take even more, he poured it all in.

It shuddered. Blue mana jolted back and forth under the surface of the tiny seed. And then—it sprouted.

Just one root. One tiny root. It extended from the seed like a tail, curling in Rhys's hand. Even that took an immense amount of mana, but that was exactly what Rhys had in surplus. He shoved it all in, encouraging it to grow further, faster. The roots extended. From the top of the seed, a sprout extended as well, stretching two tiny leaves upward. It sucked in mana faster and faster, drinking it down. The roots pierced Rhys's skin and sunk into his body, seeking mana out on their own. Rhys welcomed them, glad for the help to discard his excess mana. His cracking skin stopped burning, the smoke stopped pouring off of him, and his headache and sickness wound down. At the same time, the plant grew. Slowly, far more slowly than any of the manifestations, it took shape. A long, curling vine that twisted around Rhys's arms, broad leaves, delicate flowers, and roots that grew deeper and deeper into him. They chased up his mana passages and toward his core, thirstily slurping down mana all the way.

Uh oh. Rhys fended them off at his core, pushing them back at last. Drinking up the excess mana was okay, but he couldn't have them get into his core. Then they'd eat up his super-pure mana and set back his cultivation significantly. The excess was okay, just not the core! He tried to push that understanding into the roots, but they had no such understanding. They just kept drinking, growing further and further. Rhys stood guard within himself, slicing down the encroaching roots as they reached out from his passages toward his core. *What on earth have I created?*

He couldn't stop now. He was so close to tomatoes, and he still had so much excess mana. Standing in his core, he fended off the roots and kept pouring his mana in. The vines grew and grew, twisting around his whole body. Delicate flowers bloomed and withered. The ovaries at the base of the flowers swelled up, bulging into green lumps, then yellow, then red, growing bigger and fatter with every passing second. Immense amounts of mana flowed in with every second, quantities equal to how much mana Rhys's core could usually hold, pouring into the tomato with every second.

At last, the mana started to fade away. The tomato plant, no longer supported by insane amounts of mana, withered. Rhys reached out, quickly harvesting the tomatoes from the vine. They didn't wither overly-fast, or appear in any way different than normal tomatoes, but he'd have to examine them closer to make sure there was nothing wrong with them. For now, he put them into his storage ring, then grabbed the tomato vine by its base and grimaced.

This is going to hurt.

He pulled. The vines had spread throughout his whole body, so there wasn't an inch of him that didn't scream in pain when he pulled them free. Flesh ruptured all over his body. Bruises darkened his skin, and his mana passages trembled, on the verge of collapse. Grimacing, Rhys continued to pull. He couldn't stop now.

Inch after inch of bloodied roots emerged from his hand, pale white except for where they were streaked with fresh crimson. He pulled smoothly, refusing to stop, because if he stopped he'd never start again. At first, he only felt disgust, but the longer he pulled, the more a strange sense of satisfaction welled up in him. It was disgusting, no doubt about that, but also somehow refreshing, like popping a pimple and squeezing out all the gross pus inside to leave a clean wound. Like that, but it was a parasitic plant he was slowly pulling out of his body instead.

At last, it came clean. He dropped the withered plant and pulled out his healing potion, taking a big sip to close up the wounds all over his body, then a second sip and a third. Resting against the wall, he took a deep breath and rested for a moment, taking stock of his body.

His body was stronger, but that hadn't been the focus of his efforts, and anyways, the trash stars had already done so much that there was little he could accomplish anymore at this stage. His core had made the most progress. It had only had a little bit of the super-pure mana in it at the start, but now, it was almost a quarter full of the stuff. It gleamed golden, shining like a burnished ball of metal, and he sensed that if he filled his whole core with that gold, he would reach the next Tier of magehood. The damage the plant had done was healing nicely, and aside from exhaustion and the leftover malaise that came from poisoning himself with mana, he was in great shape.

He looked down at the Impure Well at his feet, if it even was the same thing as what he'd found back on Infinite Constellation School, and rubbed the back of his neck. He couldn't do any more today. Even this much was pushing it. Besides, he didn't have any more tomato seeds at the ready, and he had to check the tomatoes he'd grown to see if they were viable yet.

Tomorrow. The sun was low in the sky. Although it felt as though no time had passed due to how focused he'd been, he'd spent a great deal of time dealing with the trash and the Impure Well. He hopped out of the hole and headed back home. There was still time left to burn before the banquet. Better to rest than burn himself out now needlessly. His mind made up, he made haste, not wanting to get caught up in any nonsense today.

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

Chapter 99. Vital Tomatoes

Rhys passed out the second he returned to his room. This wasn't a sleep like the sleep he'd had the past few days, a sleep for pleasure or for ordinary exhaustion, but a deep, all-consuming sleep. He surrendered to it and didn't wake up until late into the next day,

and still felt groggy and exhausted afterward. Sitting up, he stretched, frowning a bit, but it only took him a short while to realize what it was.

He drew out his tomatoes to confirm it, scanning them with his mana. As expected, they had the same energy signature as he himself did. This confirmed his suspicion that he hadn't truly gained Trashomancy—the skill hadn't popped, in any case—but instead merely found a way to revitalize objects on a more true, deep level using some form of Aura and Intent. However, it still wasn't a true revival. He'd forcibly fed the tomato seed his own vitality, and therefore fed the fires of whatever tiny spark of life remained in it. The ones that had burst, had burst because there was no life left at all. This one had still been some tiny bit alive; not enough that it could have grown the ordinary way, if he'd put it in dirt and fed it water, but enough that when he merged it with his own mana and vitality, that tiny spark was able to burst back into life. To prove that it wasn't true trashomancy, it had died the second he stopped forcibly feeding it vitality and mana, with no ability to grow or survive without that tether. The tomatoes remained because they had matured enough, while the original plant was on life support, that they could survive on their own. It was like a far less disgusting version of keeping a woman or female animal alive for long enough for their baby to be born; he couldn't keep the original seed, already on the verge of true death, alive without the constant feed of energy, but once he got the tomatoes from the vine, they were no different from any other tomatoes, except that they were full of the thing that had fed them: namely, his vitality.

Curious, Rhys took a bite of tomato. It tasted like a tomato, like he'd expected it to, but he almost spat it out in surprise when a gush of vitality slammed into his body. He pitched forward, clasping a hand to his mouth to keep himself from vomiting. *No, no, push it down, push it down*—he swallowed, and sat back, closing his eyes and crossing his legs to focus on his internal energies. The rush of vitality struck him, all massed up in one place. Rhys drew it out of his stomach and circulated it around his body. His exhaustion alleviated, and the low-grade headache he'd been feeling since he woke up diminished. One bite at a time, circulating his energy carefully, Rhys ate the tomato. The vitality he'd been missing, the excess he'd pushed into the tomatoes, came back to him as he ate this tomato. At the time, the mana had been too much, and he'd had excess mana, which he had converted to vitality to grow the tomato without realizing it. He'd put a little too much vitality into the tomatoes when he'd grown them, and ended up at a deficit, but the excess mana that he'd turned into vitality to grow tomatoes was so extreme that eating the tomato meant he not only regained his missing vitality, but gained more than he'd had to begin with. Basically, he had transformed an excess of mana into an excess of vitality.

Vitality coursed through him. This was the same energy that healing potions contained, and now, unrestrained by a carefully measured potion, it raced through him. Hidden injuries and aches healed away under the rush of powerful vital energy. As his body healed, it also strengthened as the vitality reinforced his muscles and organs. Before, he'd rebuilt his body from the cells up, but that was just fixing his physical state. Now, with vital energy, he tied his body to the magical force known as vitality, therefore

transmuting his mortal physical body to something inherently magical. He felt his natural regeneration rate increase, and as he did so, got a surprising message:

Self-Regeneration: 35 > 55

His brows shot up. Twenty whole levels? How—but no, it wasn't because he'd practiced the skill, or anything mundane like that. It was because he'd discovered a new insight into regeneration, and reforged his body to fundamentally regenerate far faster than it had before. It reinforced the message he'd been learning this whole time, that grinding skills was far inferior to searching for fresh insights and new ways to accomplish what he wanted to accomplish. Sure, he could have ground Self-Regeneration up twenty levels through brutal, self-punishing methods, but even if he had, he wasn't sure the skill would enhance his regeneration as much as his new insight and reforging had granted him. Grinding skills was the lowest way to advance them, and gave him the least power per level. All the significant increases in skill and power came from his comprehension and hard work to increase his power through unconventional methods.

He pinched his chin. He'd beaten people a Tier above him before. Was this why? The fact that despite his low Tier and seemingly low skill levels, he had primarily advanced through strange and unconventional techniques, which gave him vast jumps in power that the System struggled to properly represent? It did make sense. He was following his path, finding the techniques and skills that worked best for him in particular, rather than following a generic path and simply doing what the masses thought was best in order to advance. Of course they would advance more weakly and less powerfully for simply doing the rote advancement, whereas he worked to eke out a path out of trash, and as a consequence, invested far more power in himself than those who followed the generic, easy path set forth by the System ever could. The System laid forth a path for everyone to advance, but what it didn't do was lay forth the optimal path for anyone in particular. Advancing beyond the limits of the System was the secret to fighting above tiers and growing rapidly. It was something to be wary of, that he wasn't the only person who must have discovered this. Just because someone was lower tier than him, didn't mean they wouldn't be able to put up a good fight. He had to live with his eyes wide open.

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Having contemplated the mysteries of the System, Rhys drew out another tomato. He was already full of vitality, but why stop at just being full? Why not go even further beyond, and try double-reinforcing his vitality? He was pretty sure he couldn't manage three, but two? Two seemed doable. It was a shame about the tomatoes in general, that he wasn't using them to make ketchup, but they were too valuable to give to others. He'd checked on the first one, but these tomatoes had no seeds. It made sense; they'd been forced into life by an unholy overload of mana and through rooting in Rhys's own body and drawing on his personal vitality. It would be more shocking if they'd developed

properly through and through. The fact that they were this complete was already a surprise. He'd half expected them to rot in a heartbeat, or be somehow immaterial.

Instead, they were a treasure. A treasure useless for dressing fries, but highly useful for advancing his magehood. Between the two, he knew he should be happier that he'd found something so useful for advancement, but a part of him, deep in his trashy heart, cried that he couldn't sow any seeds to grow the base ingredients for the magic elixir known as ketchup. Still, he'd asked Laurent for some seeds. Maybe the man would come through. He still had all of Rina's gear. If Rina needed to make one last appearance or two, he could make it happen. Anything for his beloved ketchup. *Anything*. Well, almost anything. Consent was key, and all that.

He ate the second tomato and reinforced his cells and body with vitality once more. There was no huge jump in regeneration levels this time, but he felt the vitality sink deeper into his every pore and crevasse, building up the power of vitality in his body such that it was more deeply linked in his flesh, until the two were inextricably entwined. From now on, his body was permanently linked with vitality, and would always possess more energy and regeneration than an ordinary fleshy body.

Of course, two tomatoes did not make a significant advancement, no matter how laden with vitality they were. Aside from the breakthrough of linking his body permanently to vitality, he was still at the trash tier of having a magically-enhanced body. Luckily, there were still more tomatoes in his inventory, more tomato seeds he could fish out of the marinara, and more curse energy to delve in that Impure Well. Rhys patted his full stomach. He couldn't eat any more tomatoes—not because he was full, though that was the sensation his body was giving him, but because his body couldn't handle any more vitality right now without deviating in some negative way. He could imagine what excess vitality would do to him, cells running wild, mutating and growing into strange cancers, and since this world didn't know chemotherapy and he personally had no idea how to cure cancer, he didn't want to push it too far and accidentally injure himself in some irreversible way.

Of course, if this world has cancer, I've probably already consigned myself to it, with all these impurities and all this trash... Rhys pushed the thought away. He'd just Tier up before it caught up to him. He hadn't gotten any kind of cold or sickness since he'd become a mage, nor seen any other mages get sick. It was entirely possible that mages were immune to sickness. Whether immunity to transmissible illnesses extended to cancer or not, he couldn't say, but it was a step in the right direction.

A quiet *mew* caught his ear. He turned to find a small tuxedo cat at his window. Rhys opened it and let Az in. "What brings you here?"

Az rubbed his head against Rhys's arm. "Are you going to the banquet in your honor, runner-up?"

"Yeah, but it's not in another hour or two, right?" Rhys asked.

Az purred. He looked up, meeting Rhys's eyes. "Why not go early?"

"Er, is there a reason to...?" Rhys asked, then immediately rolled his eyes at himself. If Az was bringing it up, then of *course* there was a reason to go. Az wouldn't just bring it up for no reason.

He nodded. "Shall we go?"

Az hopped up onto Rhys's shoulders. Rhys wobbled for a moment while the cat stood on his shoulders, but then Az dropped down and went into boneless mode, draped around his neck like a living stole. The cat started happily kneading Rhys's chest with his front paws and letting out a low purr, immensely pleased with himself.

Rhys went to the windows, then paused, internally staring at himself. What was he doing? There was a perfectly good door and a perfectly good hallway behind him. He was in no rush. There was no reason to use the window.

Yeah, but it's so cool, a little voice whispered in his head, the same little voice that wanted to read trashy manga all the time, and Rhys nodded. The little voice had a point. It was so cool to hop down from windows. If only there were telephone poles to perch atop, or skyscrapers to look down from the corners of... ah, for all the poses he'd never get a chance to do in this world. At least the window hop was still open to him. Decided, he hauled his leg up and hopped down from the window.

"Where's the banquet happening?" Rhys asked. He could wander the city until he found it, but he didn't know. He was sure they'd given the other contestants information on where to go at some point in the last few days, but the other contestants hadn't been hiding out in the dump ever since the tournament. Purple Dawn's messengers still hadn't found the dump, or rather, they had no reason to suspect anyone would be hanging out in there, and Mouse evidently hadn't spilled the beans to them, so he'd gotten by without any invites or other annoyances.

"There's a hall at the center of the castle," Az offered nonchalantly.

Rhys nodded and set forth for the center of the school. It was time to attend a fine banquet, but first, time to discover whatever it was Az was strongly hinting he should discover. *I hope it's a hint about Straw*, but with all the events happening in the world, a thousand different ideas came to mind. It could be about Bast, or the Empire, or Purple Dawn, or even Ernesto's petty revenge on Infinite Constellation School after Rhys had beaten his champion fair and square—a thousand different things, all of them potentially devastating. All he knew, was if Az wanted him to know, then he definitely wanted to know. The cat wasn't the type to get excited over nothing.

A little nervous, a little excited, he rushed toward the banquet hall.

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

Chapter 100. Banquet Hall

Purple Dawn Academy was as much a maze on the inside as Rhys remembered, if not more so. He ran over the cobbles as fast as he could, but it felt like slow going anyways. The Academy's ancient roads twisted and turned, doubling back on themselves and winding around to come out at a strange new location. Whenever he turned the wrong way, Az would start smacking his tail against Rhys's chest in annoyance, and once he figured that out, Rhys had a much easier time getting to the banquet hall. That, and whenever he turned toward a big, broad street full of fancy buildings, Az settled down. Between those two hints, Rhys was able to smoothly navigate toward the banquet hall.

On the way to dinner, Rhys quickly absorbed the filth on his body, forcibly cleaning himself. He didn't smell like trash or body odor anymore to his nose, and whose nose could he trust, if not his?

Probably anyone else's. He glanced down at Az, but the cat had nothing to say. Nodding to himself, he ran on. That would have to be good enough. Never mind that Az had approached him while he was still covered in filth. He'd just conveniently forget that part.

Rhys slowed to a walk as he approached, pretending he'd been moving casually all along. He wasn't the only contestant who'd thought to arrive early, he realized, as he reached the exterior of a truly grand and sprawling hall. Ev stood by the edge of the vast courtyard that surrounded it, showing a fellow martial artist how to punch. The fellow martial artist nodded, swaying her body closer to Ev and leaning in real close to get the details of the technique, and Rhys raised his brows. *Oh hoh? Interesting.* From the girl's body language, she was less interested in Ev's technique than Ev herself. For a moment, Rhys wondered whether she'd realized Ev was a girl or not, then caught Ev looking at him. Their eyes met, and Ev winked and shot him a sly grin.

He snorted under his breath and nodded back. *Right, got it.* Who'd just been running around crossdressing to sell potato chips? He wasn't going to be a hypocrite and ruin Ev's grand plans by walking over there and ending the illusion... assuming there was even an illusion in the first place. For all he knew, this was just a shared bit of innocent puppy love and he had no place in it whatsoever, and he was just over here making weird assumptions.

Bast, as Solaire, stood off in one corner beside the Sword Saint, who was speaking with some other high-ranking mage. Rhys wandered by, curious about their conversation, regardless of whether it was what Az had wanted him to hear.

The sword saint nodded. "...heading out soon."

"Oh?"

"It's the northern border. I know I'm playing her game, but there's nothing I can do about it. They need reinforcement, and I'm the only one who can make a difference."

The other mage folded her arms. "It's shameful that no one else at your Tier dares to stand up against the Empress."

"Not all mages are skilled at combat. Just because a mage has a high Tier, doesn't mean they can stand up to someone of equivalent Tier. Aside from myself, speaking honestly, who else in this region stands a chance against the Empress?" the Sword Saint asked.

Bast noticed Rhys, and they made eye contact and shared a nod. Rhys walked on, unable to listen in any longer without being obvious. *Soon. That means the Empress will attack soon... but also means Bast should be safe.* He didn't like that the Empress was coming in unopposed, but what else could they do? They had one Sword Saint. The Empress had an entire empire full of soldiers. Even if the Sword Saint stayed here, Rhys was deluding himself to think the battle would be any different. The Sword Saint might lock down the Empress, sure, but the rest of her army would flood the Academy all the same. In the end, the Sword Saint would have to retreat until the Alliance could mass their forces, and he risked injury or even death, if the Empress proved stronger than him, or had some trick, equipment, or spell that could turn the tide of their personal battle.

He didn't quite get why the Alliance *hadn't* massed its forces, but all signs pointed to the Alliance retreating from Purple Dawn, then fighting somewhere else later. Maybe there was a better battlefield elsewhere. Maybe they thought the Empress would stop after taking the Academy. Rhys didn't know, and honestly, he didn't care. Whatever cowardly excuse the Alliance had, all that mattered to him was that they wouldn't be defending this Academy. It meant Rhys was on his own for the foreseeable future. Just him, all alone against the Empress. Just him, all alone, wallowing in the Empire's trash...

Az batted his chest, breaking him out of his fantasy. Rhys looked up, searching for what the cat was trying to signal him for. Across the way, two mages chatted inside a building. They probably expected the building to absorb the sound of their voices, but there was a tiny chink in the window next to them. If Rhys didn't know better, he'd almost suspect a small cat had clawed it open, scratching a tiny gap in the glass, but cats' claws were far softer than glass. It simply wasn't possible to break open glass with a claw... unless the cat in question happened to be a high Tier mage. Rhys glanced at the tuxedo cat lounging on his shoulders, but Az just yawned carelessly, seemingly totally unaware of Rhys's gaze.

Rhys casually sauntered by the wall, cruising slow enough to listen in on the mages' conversation.

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"...let him loose?"

"No, no, and no. I've told you a thousand times already. We already have one problem. If we loose him, we'll have two."

"Is he really that bad? All he did was teach two kids, and pretty well at that, if the Sword Saint's Apprentice is any indication."

Oh? They were talking about Straw! Rhys raised his brows. If they were talking about Straw, then Straw was here, wasn't he? It was his first concrete proof that Straw was somewhere around Purple Dawn Academy. Until now, he'd had to guess at it, as Purple Dawn Academy was one of the largest, if not the largest, school in the region, had massive resources, and had the curse-focused Ernesto. It was a pretty decent guess, if he was being honest, but it had been just that—a guess. The fact that the rats hadn't turned anything up had been disheartening; the fact that Lira had showed up and pledged to help had given him hope. But this conversation was the first time anyone admitted that Straw was here, or at least nearby.

"Fine. Let's assume he's harmless. He's a tool. A *weapon*. He doesn't truly have will, just autonomy borne of excess amounts of curse energy. What if the Empress uses him against us, like the Demon King did? Then we've given our enemy a powerful tool, and he still becomes problem number two."

"So what keeps her from unlocking him and using him anyways? We might as well send him out there and get a hit or two in before she finds him anyways."

The second voice laughed. "Finds him? Ha! Good luck. He's locked so deep, so dark, that if Purple Dawn falls and everyone forgets about him, it'll be millennia before anyone finds him. He's safe where he is. Better than letting him out and handing him to the Empress, a thousand times over."

Rhys twisted his lips. That part was less good. But at least he knew Straw was here. Here, somewhere the Empress wouldn't find him even if she looked for millennia, but at least he was here. Hell, maybe the millennia thing assumed the Empress didn't know he was here and didn't go looking. Either way, he at least had a region to search, now. It was better than he'd had before.

All the more reason to stick it out. If he left, he gave up on freeing Straw, too. Better to stick around and hide out under the Empire, so he could have a chance at finding his mentor. Even those two mages on the other side of the wall thought Straw stood a chance against the Empress. Maybe not a chance at winning, but at least a chance at

getting a good hit on her. It was something to remember, when the day came to battle her. At the very least, it was something Rhys wouldn't forget, though he intended to free Straw anyways; it was just more motivation to free Straw.

Under a certain way of thinking, having the Empire take over was actually advantageous to Rhys's quest to free Straw. Purple Dawn Academy and the Alliance knew about Straw, and were actively trying to keep him restrained. The Empress didn't know he existed... or, if she did know about the Remnant Weapons and Straw, then at least she didn't know where he was kept, or how, or anything like that. Rhys would have a free shot at Straw, at least in terms of guards. He'd still have to worry about whatever defenses they'd set up around Straw, but the Empress taking over lowered the difficulty of that task to the level of dungeon diving, as opposed to a stealth mission, fighting off any guards, and *then* delving a dungeon.

One of the mages glanced up and saw Rhys sauntering by. He nudged the other one. "Shut up. We've got listeners."

"He's outside, he can't hear us," the second one said, rolling his eyes. "How flimsy do you think the wards on this building are? We're completely silent to anyone outside."

Sorry, but they're flimsier than a small tuxedo cat's claws, Rhys thought, glancing down at his living stole. Az was too busy cleaning his claws to acknowledge Rhys.

"Still." The first mage shook his head and walked away. Rolling his eyes yet more extravagantly, the second mage followed him.

Rhys sauntered on, pretending not to notice the two of them walk away. He gave Az a scratch behind the ears as thanks, and Az stretched and purred, pleased with himself. That was a conversation worth rushing him over here to hear.

More and more contestants filled the courtyard, until the entire space was packed with people—not just contestants, but their teachers, mentors, and even the heads of their schools, in some cases. Rhys eyed those elders, taking note of who was either too stupid to read the writing on the wall, or brave enough to remain and support their students. If they were the first, they were worth remembering to scam later; if the second, then they were the people, and the schools, he could call on if he ever needed to mount a counteroffensive against the Empress. Either way, it was useful for him to know their faces.

Aquari didn't make an appearance, not that he'd expected her to. For one, she was no fool; for two, she was no hero; for three, she knew better than to leave her school unmanned when Ernesto was looking to take it over. Even if her pragmatism wasn't the most charming aspect of her personality, he at least respected her for knowing that the Empress was well over her strength. Az could act domineering and overpower her, let alone the Empress, though he was starting to wonder if there was an upper limit to Az's

strength. He'd acted with impunity here, as well. Was he a being beyond this entire region?

He's afraid of the Empress, at least. Maybe it really was just that the Purple Dawn Schoolmaster was distracted with fleeing the Empress, and didn't want to bother with Az. He didn't know. At the very least, Az wasn't able to overpower their immediate enemy, or didn't want to. Sometimes, he wasn't sure how much of Az's behavior was limited by his constraints, like his Tier level and personal strength, and how much was just him being a cat and not wanting to bother with random bullshit.

A bell rang. Rhys turned to find a haughty-looking butler-esque mage holding a small bell high, pinched between two fingers, his pinky out. He gazed across the courtyard with his haughty eyes and harrumphed. "It is time to take your seats, everyone! Please follow me."

Rhys licked his lips and dusted off his hands, heading toward the butler. The speeches part of the banquet was going to suck, but he was looking forward to experiencing some real mage cooking. These were people who only ate for the purpose of pleasure. Their food had to be unreal.

Or it's complete shit, given how hard they went after potato chips, a little voice whispered, but he pushed it down. That was because his chips were cheap and delicious. This was different. It was a top-of-the-line mage banquet prepared for the winners of the regional tournament by one of the largest schools in the region. It had to be better than cheap street food.

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