

Doctor John Johnson was a strange man, Irwyn concluded. There was more to it than just the surface eccentricity that he had displayed in their scarce prior conversations. That became apparent very quickly. At first, the examination involved the older mage simply putting a hand on their shoulder while muttering under his breath. His expression seemed *uncomfortably* too ecstatic about the situation though.

“Very good, very good. You are not in any immediate danger,” Johnson concluded with several nod exaggerated nods. “In that case, we are going to do this properly. First off, wear this.”

Then the man proceeded to bring out two sets of a 15-piece - Irwyn counted - setup involving a headband, five separate bracelets, shoes, suspiciously perfectly fitting clothes - including socks and underwear – an hollowed out earpiece, and two tooth attachments of some kind.

“This thorough?” Elizabeth raised an eyebrow but took the entire hoard as if it was not ridiculous.

“Well I do not have proper data set for Irwyn,” Johnson explained. “And you may have suffered unexpected deviations somewhere since the last time.”

“What is all this?” Irwyn questioned.

“Equipment.”

“For what?”

“You need a medical examination, do you not?” Johnson shrugged. “There is no reason to not be thorough and compliment that with a full physical and magical procedure.”

“I thought the issue was memory loos. Purely Soul adjacent.”

“From what I have been told you, young man, just went through quite the tribulation. Who can tell what sequelae that may have left?”

“It’s fine, Irwyn,” Elizabeth said, already holding her entire stack. “This is not *that* unusual.”

“To you, maybe,” Irwyn sighed. “Fine, it just feels strange I suppose.”

“No shame in that,” Johnson shook his head. “People of lower-class backgrounds are often unused to a proper standard of care.”

“I will go change,” Elizabeth stepped into the room’s corner, raising a veil of Void magic around herself.

“I suppose... so will I,” Irwyn sighed. Elizabeth seemed to think nothing was wrong with any of it, so perhaps he was just freaking out over nothing. He also stepped into a corner, raising his own Veil of obscuring flames and quickly wearing the getup. There were extremely tight-fitting pants and a long-sleeved shirt as part of it as well as a robe that covered most of his form and the armbands. The earpiece and two tooth attachments – which came with simple, drawn instructions – felt like they weren’t even there at least.

“This feels strange,” Irwyn admitted, returning to Johnson’s side moments before Elizabeth. She wore a seemingly identical attire.

“You will get over it,” Johnson shrugged. “This is already quite fascinating.”

“What is?” Elizabeth asked.

"I have to reevaluate the quality of your past physicians," Johnson shook his head. "Or perhaps this is recent? It would be rather strange if *this* was not mentioned."

"You are stalling," Elizabeth smiled.

"Just stating facts. Pah," Johnson shrugged. "Irwyn, are you aware of your supernatural regeneration?"

"My *what?*" he paused.

"Then I will take that as a no?"

"I suppose I always healed quickly and was never sick?" he answered hesitantly. "But not to a degree I would consider abnormal."

"How quickly, give me an example." Johnson insisted.

"A few times I got knifed..."

"Irrelevant, I cannot account for standardized knife parameters or septic variables. Something else."

"Ehm..." Irwyn paused, unsure what to say to that. "A few small cuts from cooking would heal within a week when I was younger, sometimes as quickly as 4 days."

"That would not account for it to the degree I am seeing now. Unless..." Johnson paused. "How many calories did you use to consume?"

"A what?" Irwyn asked, unfamiliar with the term.

"Compared to others your age and body type, how much did you use to eat?" the doctor rephrased. "How plentiful was food?"

"About the same as everyone," Irwyn replied. "We never went hungry but not really *too* full, I suppose."

"Ah, then you may have been severely malnourished for many years," Johnson nodded. "This malady has persisted..."

"That doesn't sound right," Irwyn interrupted. "As I said, I was never hungry."

"Yes, yes, the human part of your biology did not perceive a need for more nutrition and therefore did not request it," Johnson rolled his eyes. "Except your body is clearly not entirely human. As I was saying, my current best explanation is that you have been severely malnourished without anyone having any idea. This has been the case during your treatment after Abonisle – which still did not mention such fast natural regeneration - and has only been remedied once Elizabeth arranged for a thorough treatment for detoxification, restoration, and sculpting."

"I have not been eating anything more than usual in Ebon Respite," Irwyn pointed out.

"Likely starving yourself again," Johnson nodded. "Or perhaps the need for energy is offset nowadays by your Vessel being permanently engulfed in mana. There will be ways to test my hypothesis, though they will take a few weeks to enact in all likelihood. This has already been enlightening, though."

"Can we go back to the part where you called me 'not entirely human'?" Irwyn backtracked

“Are you not already aware.”

“I... suppose there have been hints,” Irwyn admitted after a moment. The Dreams were the main culprit but there have been other signs. “It is just the first time having it said out loud like this. And I am not remotely as confident in that guess as you seem to be.”

“It is no guess, Irwyn. It is simply impossible for your body to be wholly mortal,” Johnson shook his head. “Other signs are of course present but the biggest giveaway is that you are too talented.”

“How does that make sense?” Irwyn frowned. “Talent is not something with a hard limit.”

“Do you think it is possible for wholly mortal flesh to be so attuned with Flame it refuses to burn?” Johnson inclined his head. “Or eyes that passively bend the laws of reality as to never be blinded by Light? If there is any doubt let me put it plainly: You are not just a statistical wonder. You are an impossibility within a human frame of reference. If we were to draw a graph of every example of magical affinity to ever exists, you would likely be further from the most talented pure human than they would be from the least.”

“What about Elizabeth then?” Irwyn glanced at the heiress who had just been listening on with interest. “She matches me.”

“She is obviously the same, though that is not important right now. I already know what sets her apart quite well. You on the other...”

“You DO?!” Elizabeth burst out in surprise before Irwyn could.

“Do you think I would suffer NOT knowing for 17 years?”

“I assumed that if there was something groundbreaking *known* about me I would have been told!”

“There is a dissertation on you already written, ready to revolutionize several fields of study...” Johnson nodded. “As soon as your parents stop fussing about ‘national security’ and ‘ancient secrets’, and similar such poppycock. They still refuse to let me proceed with the unredaction.”

“And I have known nothing about this?!”

“I am specifically forbidden from telling you almost anything,” Johnson shrugged. “Not that I would be inclined to anyway. Your knowledge would likely both hinder your growth and reduce the usability of any data. It is only a matter of time anyway.”

“I... I don’t know what to say,” she stared, wide-eyed. The revelation had visibly shaken her. “No, maybe one thing. So, you know *why* exactly I am so talented.”

“I would not use the word ‘exactly’, but close enough to it, yes,” Johnson nodded.

“Then, when I was ill in my youth...” she started. A sour topic, Irwyn knew. He also remembered that it was Johnson himself. “Was the origin of it the same?”

“The source of your sickness has been an unprecedented case of magical sensitivity affecting you at an age many years before a single recorded instance in known in our recorded history,” Johnson said. “But if you are asking whether the thing that makes you special made you special, then yes, it obviously did.”

“And yet it took you years to figure out.”

"In full disclosure, I spent that time going down a list of things I thought had been much more likely to be the affliction killing you. I was throwing anything that crossed my mind against the wall at that point," Johnson shrugged. "Anything more is a bit too specific for my vows, I am afraid."

"I... think I need to step out," she averted her gaze.

"That is perhaps for the best," Johnson nodded. "Your heart rate has passed 6 beats a second. The contingencies of my equipment are under-calibrated for you and might try to pacify you soon otherwise."

"Do you..." Irwyn spoke up to offer comfort.

"No, alone is fine," she shook her head, sighed, then stepped out of the room the same way they had arrived.

"So, Irwyn, how much can you bench?" the doctor did not even pause for a second before changing the topic.

"What?" Irwyn paused at the radical shift.

"Bench."

"I can... sit for a long while?"

"Ah, is the concept of a bench press unknown to your City?"

"This feels like I am missing context."

"Then context you shall have," Johnson shook his head vehemently, then stepped to the other side of the room. There was another door there that - as far as Irwyn recalled - should lead to a smaller side chamber. Opening the door, the doctor revealing it had been transformed into a gym.

"Bench press, let me demonstrate..."

The concept of a gym had been foreign to Irwyn. None existed in Ebon Respite as far as he knew nor had he heard of anything of the sort in any other city he had been. Nor any book even. When questioning Johnson about it, the answer became apparent.

"It is not much practiced in these parts of the Federation," the doctor sighed. "Besides the Duchy of Green, refinement of flesh is often underestimated. Physical training is also much more widespread in some Northern nations where magic is not so overwhelming an advantage."

"Then why did you act baffled I was not aware of it?"

And Johnson in contrast clearly knew a lot about this kind of training. For all the man did not appear overly muscular beneath his clothing his frame hid monstrous strength. When showing him possible positions and exercises the doctor lifted the weights as if they were feathers.

"I have only the highest expectations of you, of course," Johnson nodded as if it were obvious. "You manage to achieve the impossible in enough ways already. Why not then the merely improbably in others?"

Nonetheless, for all his former ignorance, Irwyn had been made to experience its contents quite thoroughly. The doctor first made Irwyn disable the magic reinforcing his body at all times, then

pushed him to the limits of physical excursion over and over again over eternal two hours. Elizabeth eventually returned, though she moved on to also exercise on her own with no need to input from Johnson himself.

"Impressive, impressive," Johnson nodded. "Also raises many questions."

"The only one that comes to mind is: When will this end?" Irwyn found out he *really* did not care for it. The only silver lining he could find was that Johnson's complicated attire seemed to stop him from sweating.

"Please, we are making incredible discoveries here."

"Such as?"

"Such as your strength being not fully physical in nature," Johnson elaborated. "I have expected as much already, but the difference is much smaller than my guess."

"You will have to explain more."

"Let's take your bench press for example," the doctor nodded. "You have the muscle thanks to the treatment but lack the proper technique. So, from someone like you, I would expect a limit of somewhere around 140 kilograms. Do you know how much you *actually* lifted?"

"You did not tell me, just kept increasing the weight."

"440 turned out to be your actual limit Irwyn. 3.143 times as much as I would expect based on purely physical attributes. The other data also suggest a 3.1 strength coefficient compared to muscle mass."

"That sound like a lot?" Irwyn guessed.

"That basically breaks the limits of a human body for someone your build, Irwyn," Johnson nodded. "And yet you have had no problems in your daily life, such as accidentally crushing fragile things, disproportionate use of force when moving objects, or anything of the sort, right?"

"As I said, nothing of the sort," Irwyn nodded.

"Therefore, it stands to reason that your strength is based on the *intention* to use it. And that is quite fascinating," Johnson nodded.

"And unfair," Elizabeth interjected. She must have gotten intrigued by the conversation enough to interrupt her own use of the doctor's gym. Irwyn was still not sure from where it had been brought, but then, City Black had a Beacon. "Completely unjust."

"I am sorry about my perfection," Irwyn replied with a mocking bow. "But I am still unsure what crimes I have committed."

"It took me so long to get used to not breaking *everything*," she shook her head. "And you just do that accidentally? I did not even think you *had* abnormal strength with how easily you adjusted."

"So *not* adjusting easily was a possibility?" Irwyn raised an eyebrow.

"As I said, I did not think you had extraordinary strength given how you have never mentioned or shown any sign of it..." she squirmed a bit in embarrassment. "Thought yes, in hindsight that is something I should have at least considered and brought up. Sorry."

"No need to worry over nothing," Irwyn waved it away. "Now you have me curious though. You are also significantly stronger than, I presume. Is that why you have put so much effort into enhancing your body with magic?"

"In a way," she nodded. "Void mages are not known to reinforce their bodies as it is very dangerous - for most people at least. I am not quite immune as you are but the risks are still a fraction of what the average mage has to deal with. Though it is all more in preparation. Body enhancements are relatively weaker before conception when compared to regular magic."

"It is a regrettable fact," Johnson nodded along. "Only Life mages practice it on scale as their superior healing makes them far more likely to achieve greatness before dying."

"Why is that?" Irwyn asked. "Everything I have read about enhancement was practical for imbue ment magics."

"It is the ratio between speed and Finit y," the doctor explained. "An imbue ment or lesser mage uses spells with range and speed that simply outclass an equivalent opponent trying to reach them with just their body, no matter what kind of magic they try to reinforce it with. However, in conception, the former's effective range does not increase much because of Finit y. More reinforcement-focused mages however can experience an exponential increase in their speed as physical mobility over great distances is not affected by that restriction."

"With my talent, I do not need to discard other paths for it," Elizabeth nodded. "But I do intend to develop further in that direction. It was actually Johnson's suggestion at first, that with my extreme degree of supernatural strength I have a unique opportunity. Enchantment does, fundamentally, multiply your baseline after all."

"How high?" Irwyn asked with curiosity.

"Elizabeth currently possesses strength approximately 12.4 times of what her muscle mass should provide," Johnson smiled at the frankly ridiculous sounding multiplier. "This number has risen from 5.7 from the time when she first started to wield magic at the age of 12."

"I have also only gained the strength at the time, which took months to get properly used to. Not just breaking things but it also made me a lot less dexterous as a side effect," she grimaced. "I had to be fed by servants at first because I couldn't hold on to the cutlery."

"Though returning to you, Irwyn, there is more," Johnson nodded. "Do you remember the last time you were physically exhausted?"

Irwyn thought back, frowning. He couldn't, could he? The closest thing was perhaps in Abonisle but then that was closer to just mental exhaustion. "Probably not since I first left Ebon Respite after the nasty happenings with Alira."

"Yes, that may have been the triggering point of all these changes and more as well, a competing theory to my proposed malnourishment. That was when your first vision has occurred if these dossiers are correct. "

"You are aware of those?" Irwyn asked, glancing at Elizabeth.

"I suppose my mother had shared as such," any hint of a smile slipped from her lips.

"It would have been dangerous - and incredibly wasteful - for me to not consider them," Johnson retorted. "It fascinates me all the more for another lack of precedent."

"Surely visions are not such a rare thing," Irwyn doubted.

“There are many of those. There have even been plentiful records of mages gaining in power after such dreams - except each and every one of them wielded the Soul as their element. For anything else though? it is quite literally unheard of. Although I have noted that only vague details have reached me.”

“Does the exactness of everything matter?” there were many such peculiar details he had never shared. Hints of a greater picture stretching to more than the visions themselves. Some led to conclusions he thought *himself* mad for reaching. Yet he could not deny distantly feeling that Name whenever he failed to ignore it.

“I am no dream interpreter, yet your heartrate does tell me you hide something significant,” Johnson shrugged. “Perhaps I would be of help in deciphering and using any such enigmatic knowledge, no?”

“It is... a conversation for another time,” he glanced at Elizabeth. “And with someone else.”

“A shame,” Johnson followed his gaze but did not argue. “Moving on. Do you have even the slightest clue of your parentage?”

“No,” Irwyn shook his head. It was not a topic ever burdening him. “Not that I ever cared to look. As you may know, I have basically no memory of my youth.”

“Yes, just double-checking second-hand information,” the doctor nodded. “I have another hypothesis as to the identity of at least one of them.”

“Go on,” Elizabeth’s gaze sharpened. So did Irwyn’s. He *had* never cared, yet Johnson was suddenly making the topic seem worth paying attention to.

“Well, the signs are really all pointing in one direction and Dervish seemed to have arrived at the same conclusion,” Johnson precluded. “In all likelihood, you are a bastard son of our very Sun.”

“That’s a possibility?” Irwyn gaped. It suddenly made sense why his potential heritage warranted the term ‘hypothesis’ rather than ‘good guess’.

“There are several verified records of our Star’s trysts resulting in progeny,” Johnson nodded. “Though none of even them are quite as extreme as you in any way.”

“I suppose it *is* possible,” Irwyn admitted, thoughts racing. He had to have come from *something*. His body must have been created in some way. Why not then such a vessel? Could anything less even contain what he might be? “What does that mean though? How would you even prove or disprove it?”

“It means that since your body still behaves mostly mortal, you have much yet to tap into,” Johnson concluded. “I have no idea how much, mind you. And that assumes I am even correct. Empyrean bloodlines are not a thing of thorough study due to their vanishing rarity - in the Duchy of Black especially so. Asking others might be a tad too suspicious though. Nevertheless, all that only raises only so many more questions: What secrets does your body still obscure even from you? And why the Duchy of Black? Yellow or Red would have been far more suitable. And...”

“Perhaps those may be answered another day,” Elizabeth interrupted.

“Yes, yes, I keep getting distracted, don’t I?” Johnson shook his head. “We have a baseline for your physical prowess now Irwyn. We still need to measure the magical.”

“Measure,” he repeated the word. “How?”

“Do you think the Federation does not have standardized methods?” Johnson spoke. “You must have stumbled upon the term ‘MU’, or magical unit, during your studies.”

“It has been referenced and Elizabeth had mentioned it firsthand,” Irwyn nodded. “But it is always in relation to how expensive a spell might be. I am quite literally unable to run my Vessel dry, hence it seemed unimportant.”

“Almost sacrilegious, Irwyn,” Johnson scoffed. “It is not about need; it is about knowledge and the spread of it.”

“I am not disinclined from learning. I have just been catching up and prioritizing,” Irwyn defended. “Actual practice has seemed more important. If you believe it so important, then enlighten me.”

“These are fundamentals! Armonius’ second law proves, that all matter is ultimately created of magic. It is the Law of Creation.”

“Doesn’t that directly conflict with Finity?” Irwyn frowned.

“No, no, no. You see, conjured matter can be made to undergo what is known as creational shift, wherein it becomes physical. And Finity does not affect physical phenomena. Every Realm and speck of dust in the Universe has been created from raw magic - by the Aspects for the most part, but mortals can come close enough. The magical unit, MU, represents the *exact* amount of magic that is required to create a single proton.”

“I don’t think I have ever heard that term,” Irwyn frowned.

“It is the most basic building block of physical matter. If you ignore some exacting details, anything physical in all of reality can be built from them.”

“How much is one then?” he wondered.

“A single drop of water contains approximately 1.8 times 10 to the power of 20 of such protons. As I said before, this ignores *many* other details, but it is a good show for scale.

“That is comically high,” Irwyn gaped. “In all those manuals I have read the spells they proposed

“Beginner spells made for one intention to be cast by mediocre mages not even offered tutors,” Johnson scoffed. “The nature of magic is exponential. A weak mage who has just attained imbue ment may be able to draw between 1.5 to 2 MU from their Vessel as such things are measured. Yet if you have done your math, you will realize that a nine-intention spell of equivalent relative difficulty will require 362 880 MU.”

“That is still missing 15 zeroes,” Irwyn pointed out.

“Before you get completely sidetracked, you were supposed to do a measurement,” Elizabeth interrupted.

“Malevolent,” Johnson shot her an angry stare but then proceeded to bring out a small bronze box, another surge of excitement brightening his face. He opened the container revealing a bright orange gem. “It is a small miracle one was available at House Blackburg’s vaults. Hold it and don’t resist the pull.”

“What is it?” Irwyn asked but followed the instructions. The moment it touched his palm it became immediately apparent that the gem drained his Vessel, though only very slowly.

“A proper measurement device, even attuned to Starfire,” Johnson nodded. “Hopefully it will not break considering it is supposed to be able to take the high end of conception.”

“I just... hold it?” Irwyn questioned.

“It will give you a *very* precise number of how much MU your Vessel can hold at a time,” Elizabeth nodded.

“What is yours then?” he asked with curiosity.

“73 244,” she said with a grin.

“To give a frame of reference, a seven-intention spell like you two wield now usually requires between 5 000 to 10 000 MU to cast,” Johnson interjected. “An average imbued mage of your current skill can be expected to have 15 to 20 thousand.”

“Basically five times as much,” Irwyn nodded. And at the same time he knew it would likely be only a fraction of what he had.

“It is not a perfect measure,” Johnson said. “The Reservoir and Funnel can also play a major role in the actual quantity of magic a mage can bring to bear. But an overly detailed analysis of the mathematics involved would be redundant now, I suppose... It should be done soon.”

“Maybe it will take a while,” Irwyn suggested, looking at the gem. It had been slowly... stirring his magic for the lack of a better word. The sensation was a bit strange but neither hostile nor unpleasant.

“Usually, the test would conclude in seconds for someone wielding seven intentions, though I obviously expected something special from you. Aaand, that’s it.”

The gem lifted above his hand abruptly. Irwyn noted that it used some of that magic it had been stirring to achieve that effect, though his thoughts were focused on the number.

“1 570 530,” Irwyn read it. “That sounds ridiculous.”

“No damn wonder you can outlast me to such a degree,” Elizabeth shook her head. “I thought I was *really* pushing it guessing *exactly* 1 million.”

“You are not currently experiencing existential dread, violent sickness, narcolepsy, or death, correct, Irwyn?” retrieving the gem and putting it back into the box.

“No,” Irwyn gave the man a look, still half-focused on the number. Was he calculating over 100 times the expected value correctly? No wonder he was literally unable to spend his magic nowadays. He had enough power for roughly... 310 seven-intention spells, not accounting for his mana *recovering* in the meantime.

“Usual symptoms of Morrolor’s disease, also known as Reservoir spillage syndrome. It can cause the Vessel to hold significantly more magic than it actually can without damage,” Johnson nodded. “Just double checking. That is presumably a new record at your age by about an order of magnitude including those who were being actively harmed by such a high concentration. How are you keeping your presence so restrained?”

“I have noticed it has been becoming harder lately,” Irwyn admitted. “I used to be able to erase even the slightest trace of my magic back before my first vision. Nowadays, I feel like I could scarcely not trip an alarm. It was especially apparent back in Ebon Respite.”

“A natural consequence of growing in power,” Calm nodded. “Most people never learn to completely hide their presence after stepping into conception. Bigger buildings are visible from further, unless you learn to build underground. That you can do as much as you already manage at all speaks of your talent again.”

“Nonetheless, I am missing 14 zeroes instead to match a single drop of water, aren't I?” Irwyn returned to the prior topic. “If there is so much power in raw matter, why bother using anything else?”

“Reversing a creational shift is an egregiously difficult process,” Johnson shrugged. “Armonius himself, the mage who had *discovered* the process - at least in this Realm - was among the single-digit number of mages who have ever mastered the ability enough to use either at scale or in battle. It is truly a shame the man failed to claim a Name, lest he would have advanced our knowledge of the field by whole millennia.”

“Millenia seems like a stretch,” Elizabeth chimed in skeptically.

“It is nothing of the sort,” Johnson shook his head. “True brilliance of a researcher can bypass a hundred generations of effort.”

“The Federation itself is not much older than ‘Millenia’.” Irwyn pointed out.

“Surely you do not actually believe the Conflagration's propaganda?” Johnson raised an eyebrow.

“How is the Archduke of Red being brought into this?” Elizabeth asked. A familiar Name, even. If Irwyn recalled, the first Archduke of Red who had faced the Tyrant had also claimed it.

“Truly? Are even brilliant seeds like you kept in ignorance on this?” the doctor shook his head in disbelief. “How old do you think I am children?”

“At least... a few centuries?” Irwyn guessed. Johnson seemed rather aged but not to the point of being near death. As a life mage he could also likely live longer than most already long-lived mages.

“658,” Elizabeth blatantly guessed.

“The day of my birth was the 27th bloom of the Everchange Willow's sprout. An auspicious event that occurs about every 1000 years.”

“I have never heard of it,” Elizabeth frowned, then paused, realizing the other point. “27th?!”

“That is not strange,” Johnson ignored her surprise, instead focusing on the admitted ignorance. “The next is still far away. I think the 30th should be in some 300 years, though I admit I might not have kept the time perfectly in my stay up north.”

“Am I mistaking my math?” Irwyn likewise gaped. “2700 years?”

“Thereabouts,” Johnson shrugged. “The exact numbers tend to blur at times.”

“That is not possible,” Elizabeth said. “Without a Name even 500 would be pushing the limits.”

“Namehood is not the only way to nigh immortality,” Johnson shook his head. “To live is to deceive after all. Why not do so to aging and death? I promise you there are dozens of fossils like me scattered around the Duchy of Green. And in other places. Though methods not involving Life are much more complicated and thus rarer.”

“Even if we take that at face value... 30th? Every millennium?” Elizabeth repeated her earlier question. “How old would that actually make the Federation? That tree was not even planted until long after the founding.”

“Ask your parents, I might already get my budget cut for saying too much,” Johnson seemed to suddenly reconsider. “More importantly, there are still things to be tested out. And for every answer you have given me, I only have - on average - 4.7 more questions.”