

After the dilation chamber, Johnson had many ideas on how to further test Irwyn's anomalous physique. Unfortunately, a lot of them Irwyn did not have a frame of reference to understand. Longaron's second law meant nothing to him and therefore breaking it revealed even less. Sometimes he could coax confusing explanations out of Johnson, sometimes the doctor was already too consumed by the next experiment to do even that much.

Lot of the knowledge was also... impractical. While he had not known his hair grew at an abnormally slow rate, it was not something that really impacted him. Speaking of his hair, it was apparently also unusually durable and resistant to magic. He thought it unlikely that he would lose much of it though - not like any part of him burned.

Irwyn did manage to grasp several useful things though. For one, the doctor had found out that his immunity to fire extended to *all* heat including very much the negative. His hand refused to so much show signs of freezing when submerged, first in cold water, then ice when it froze around it. Irwyn had known that he was not prone to cold and even in the depth of winter usually only felt a comfortable chill. He had always ascribed that to some kind of vague idea of 'inner fire' until it became completely mundane and not something he thought about. Never had he considered the possible full extent of it. While chemical burns were still a danger, frost was not.

After an explanation, he found the reason: 'Cold' was fundamentally just reducing heat - transferring it away. And heat was the domain of Flame. Magic manipulating raw cold - or rather, draining and absence of heat - was apparently a scarcely utilized branch of Flame, immediately filling Irwyn's head with new possibilities. Such restrictions as 'difficult' or 'prohibitively expensive mana-wise' were oftentimes not even a roadblock for him after all.

That being said, he was warned that Johnson wasn't certain about how effective that and other resistances might be against prismatic - combined, 'for the less educated' - elements. Ice, for example, was one of the combinations of Flame and Realm. Would he still be completely immune to the cold of such magic? And how about cuts or direct bludgeoning of Elements that were only half-formed of his own?

Then Johnson speculated about an obscure prismatic elements like 'Seasons' which was formed from Time and Realm, drawing inspiration from the cycle of seasons - Johnson thus wondered if Irwyn would be particularly resistant to summer's scorching heat or winter's chill wielded by a powerful mage. Such mages were rare though because the element was highly difficult to form before conception and not very well known, to the point Johnson didn't think he would be able to obtain anything of the element with a power worth testing - not on short notice, anyway.

Much more importantly, the doctor reached revelations concerning Irwyn's Soul. As often, when Johnson bothered to explain, it was slowly. Gradually building up context for his conclusion. Not that Irwyn minded.

"Do you know what is the Funnel, as the term goes?" Johnson said as he broached the topic.

"The connection between the Reservoir and the Vessel," Irwyn nodded. That was one of the first bits of theory he had learned.

"True but incomplete," Johnson shook his head. "What is the Reservoir? What is the Vessel? It would not be wrong to call each a representation of the Soul and the Body. A simplified term that we use when speaking of mana as to avoid the baggage of other terms. But that is all:

Representation. There is no convenient pocket of mana isolated from everything else within your Soul. You have likely already found that when magic is within the confines of your body it is not separate from it. The funnel is much the same. It is not a literal tube, rather, it may take a multitude of forms. All that is required is that connects the two and allows mana to pass in between.”

“Makes sense,” Irwyn nodded, though he did not see the point quite yet.

“There are, of course, extreme variations. One such is when there is no such funnel while the Soul and the Body are basically interwoven due to ‘proximity’. While some Life mages may accomplish this purposefully, it is usually considered a disability. With no funnel to regulate the flow, it is rather common for mana oversaturation and death to occur at an early age before one can develop magical skills to control it. Those that survive at first practically have the Vessel and the Reservoir merged. While that grants them great reserves compared to peers, they are also prone to sudden Reservoir depletion. An average mage will have enough time and symptoms to realize their Soul is being exhausted and stop draining it, however, without the funnel, it is quite easy to reach fatal levels of depletion in minutes - or even with a single spell. I had thought you were a variant of such a case, merely with a Soul powerful enough as to never even approach depletion and a body immune to the side effects of excessive mana.”

“You no longer do,” Irwyn noted the implication.

“At first your data seems to affirm my earlier theory: Mana enters your body from everywhere at the same rate...”

“My blood conducts it faster,” Irwyn frowned. He had discovered that much in his pursuit of magic. And not just blood, magic flowed into and through parts of him at a different speed. Johnson’s statement seemed inaccurate at best.

“At the same rate when accounting for organ conductivity,” Johnson corrected. “Blood is a better conduit than most organs or flesh. But I have done the math: Everything is within the ranges of coefficients. If you divide the flow by the conductivity, you will realize that everywhere in your body draws upon the Reservoir equally – at least the difference is within the range of rounding errors. That is usually a symptom of lacking a Funnel: The name does not come from nothing. Usually, a mage has one or several points through which all the mana is ‘funneled’ into the Vessel.”

“But you *are* saying for me that is everywhere?” Irwyn reiterated.

“Exactly, which had thrown me off at first, as I have said,” Johnson nodded. “But you lack too many of the other symptoms: Your presence is too controlled, too subtle - that level would be impossible with constantly overflowing mana; your Soul is also not in... enough ‘proximity’ to the body. My instruments have found it blurred.”

“Blurred?” Irwyn frowned. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Not your Soul, just the readings,” Johnson reiterated. “In other words, something is obstructing them from working properly. Like your Soul is obscured. If my earlier hypothesis of the Body and Soul being half melded together... well such Souls are notoriously easy to access. So, I have a new hypothesis, nay, a theory!”

"Which is?"

"From everything I see, the only logical conclusion is that the exact opposite is true," Johnson smiled. "Rather than your Vessel and Reservoir being too close with no funnel in between them, they are instead separated by a powerful boundary, still technically lacking a proper Funnel. It explains why you draw magic at the same rate everywhere - as there is no path of least resistance that a Funnel usually represents. Imagine it like drawing water through a paper: It is infinitely easier if there is a hole in it, but with enough effort, you can still squeeze some *through* the material."

"That can happen?" Irwyn raised an eyebrow. "I have never heard of something like that."

"Yes, the condition is actually extremely common," Johnson nodded. "Generally, it is called 'not being a mage'."

"Ah," Irwyn nodded, understanding quickly dawning on him. "If there is no Funnel but the Soul and Body are too distant, one shouldn't really be able to draw any magic. That poses more questions about me though - how *am I* a mage then."

"The question of what allows or disallows one from being a mage is incredibly complex. Comparing them with your exact case would take an extreme breadth of experience," Johnson said, then smiled. "Thankfully, I would consider myself one of the foremost experts in the field."

"Is that so?" Irwyn raised an eyebrow. Johnson had been just hesitant in speaking about his expertise. Was that a slip or unrelated? "I wouldn't have guessed."

"It is merely that most others scarcely bother understanding more mortally inclined humans," Johnson shrugged. "I have found them quite illuminating in certain ways - and the decade spent on such pursuit is still paying dividends, it would appear. Because of it I can tell you with complete confidence that out of the tens of thousands of cases I have seen, you are completely unique in this regard as well."

"A lot of 'unique' being used today," Irwyn smiled slightly.

"Non-mages do not possess the bare minimum amount of magic to even start learning to wield it. Often because their Funnel is either completely absent or so stunted it cannot draw any significant power. Usually, this is a result of the Vessel and Reservoir being too far detached... Imagine two towns, trying to trade: The Funnel is a road. If they are close, trade will blossom and a road may even be built because of that. If they are far away, however, trade is far more difficult - if a road is already not in place, it might be outright impossible. Of course..."

"Using 'distance' is a massive oversimplification?" Irwyn guessed. "I think that when speaking of magic this has been the case more often than not, at least lately."

"As a rule of thumb, people mean actual physical distance only when speaking about Finity or actual Time magic," Johnson nodded. "Thought you have already picked up on that, it seems."

"How am I different then?" Irwyn asked.

"The chasm between your body and Soul are not merely 'distance'. It is like your Soul is surrounded by a wall with no gaps."

“Would that not make drawing magic only more difficult?” Irwyn frowned.

“That is the purpose of walls,” Johnson smiled. “They are meant to keep something out. Or in your case: *In*.”

“So you are telling me that my Soul is essentially locked inside an egg?” Irwyn squinted a bit.

“That is not an inaccurate summary,” Johnson nodded. “But it remains a rather purposeful egg, either built with intent or is a greatly fortunate natural formation. The walls become slightly more permeable when your body fills with mana. Mana from a source multitudes stronger than a Soul of an imbued mage has any right to be. So much so that it can close the gap between Vessel and Reservoir by force. I find it quite possible that rather than your Soul growing and thus increasing in power, you are merely becoming more capable of drawing more of it.”

“That certainly explains my bottomless reserves,” Irwyn nodded. Yet in his head, a thought occurred: *And what other source would be at the core of him if not a Name? What less would need to be kept ‘in’? When it came to his thoughts, he began to feel it again with renewed intensity - just at the edge of perception but always undeniable.*

“Whether it is purposeful or not, it makes you *significantly* harder to affect with Soul magic. Also much harder to examine with it - that limits what I can find. Merely that it exudes great power and is of Starfire in nature - I may note that attuned Souls are unusual before domains, though not unheard of. Alas, I am not quite willing to risk shattering the shell to have a more precise look within.”

“Then what if the egg cracks?” Irwyn asked when Johnson brought the ability up.

“That depends,” Johnson shrugged. “Is your Soul already a chick or just yolk? I expect the power will be quite... overwhelming. Certainly, more than your current body would survive. Whether whatever is within can adapt to flesh ceasing... I have no basis to speculate in either direction.”

“So, I am constantly at a brink of death? Without ever having a clue,” Irwyn stared. “With nothing I can do about it.”

“It has held steadfast so far,” Johnson shrugged. “The best thing you can do to prepare is to become more powerful. If your Vessel becomes more magically robust it certainly won’t hurt your chances if disaster strikes.”

“Am I at risk of that happening with any Soul mage?” Irwyn inquired, not even trying to hide his worry. That would be an obvious vulnerability.

“Of course not,” Johnson shook his head. “The Soul mages you can expect to meet don’t actually understand how *exactly* they are manipulating a Soul. They will merely tell a spell *what* to do. For them, your Soul will be more intangible and immutable. Even I did not spot the ‘eggshell’ right away. If a mage capable of it gets hostile, you have far bigger issues and faster ways to die. Thought it is worth making sure it is not somehow damaged by accident.”

“Reassuring,” Irwyn sighed. “What can I even do then?”

"The first step would be learning to feel your Soul," Johnson hummed. "I am not sure how much more difficult the shell would be to perceive, but it is definitely the first step towards monitoring it."

"That seems like a significant feat given I do not possess the element," Irwyn pointed out.

"It is not unlike feeling your flesh," Johnson shrugged. "You will get a hang of it quickly."

"Feeling the Soul is obviously not the same," Irwyn frowned. "I can feel my body quite well. Sometimes more than I even want. The closest I have come to feeling my Soul is trying to estimate how much mana I have left in the Vessel - quite a ways off."

"Ah, so you can feel every fiber of muscle with perfect clarity?" Johnson raised an eyebrow. "You can manually control which glands excrete which hormones? Regulate the function of your organs through will? Feeling your body and soul are fundamentally the same thing, albeit one you develop experience in from an early age. And just like you will never feel your body the same way a Life mage does, neither can you experience the Soul the same way as a mage of the element. That does not mean the two are fundamentally different for someone like you."

"I have... not thought of it like that," Irwyn said, thoughtful. Was there a flaw in the logic or was Johnson's explanation simply the truth? Intuitively, it felt wrong, but Johnson was the expert between them by eons. "Still, if it is so subtle, how did you notice it? Is the equipment enough to overcome lacking affinity?"

"Hmmm?" the doctor hummed his confusion for a moment. "Ah, no, you seem to make a common mistake Irwyn. For all I mostly advertise my skill with Flesh, I do also possess the element of the Soul - it is merely subtler. You were originally sent to my care because of damaged memories, if you recall. My equipment is quite good but it still requires a skilled guiding hand."

"I had no idea," Irwyn admitted. Then a thought struck him since Johnson wielded Life and Soul, "Do you possess a prismatic element, as you call them, then?"

"Naturally - most of us with two affinities do eventually," Johnson nodded. "Alas, the name of it is quite telling... if you even know the word, quite obscure - nonetheless Avys would be quite wroth with me, given the secrets it implies. I know of no one else who has ever formed it within the Federation but neither have I looked particularly hard. Needless to say, it concerns my primary area of research. You may eventually peruse my hundreds of papers when the inconvenient branches are pruned and masks shed if you are still interested by then."

"You work more closely with the Duchess than I had realized," Irwyn admitted. *And was doing something special in Abonisle, so much so it had to be done cut away from even communication.* The man had offhandedly implied it when they had first met. And now that Irwyn had the chance to get a better grasp on him, Johnson did not seem like the type to ever bother with a lie. When he wanted something hidden, he just blatantly refused to speak on it. The same could not be said about the Duchess though – he could not guess what.

"Well, I had come with her to the Duchy Federation - even if I mostly saw her as a volatile investment at the time," Johnson nodded with a fond smile. "Frankly, I had expected the little schemer to maybe snatch a midling Baron, letting me set up for a few years while I prepared for

other ventures. Instead, she managed to snatch Ezax von Blackburg and then helped him claim the Dukeship. As you may imagine, my plans had changed in the light of that.”

“There is a story there,” Irwyn opened.

“Indeed,” the doctor nodded. “Not relevant to this though. I have a last few small tests I would like to try before Elizabeth inevitably steals you away.”

Those turn out to be, indeed, mild. Testing taste buds, smell, balance, eyesight, and such. The doctor assured Irwyn that while sharp, his physical senses and subtler characteristics were not superhuman. Elizabeth finally returned not long after that

She was wearing an incredibly fluffy black bathrobe. Somewhat embarrassed, she admitted that the Duchess had ‘forced her’ to attend a spa appointment after their conversation so as to sell any observers on her mental disquiet after recent events. That being said, Elizabeth did not seem particularly angry about that arrangement.

With her arrival though, Johnson decided he was finally done for the moment. He promised to think of other possibilities to test when Irwyn next ‘required professional care of a proper standard’. Then the doctor promptly left, not even bothering to collect his piles of attire, entire gym, or other magical equipment. How all that would leave the mansion, Irwyn did not know.

“At least he is not suggesting coming around every so often explicitly for testing,” Irwyn shook his head in disbelief.

“Johnson is most likely quite busy. He gets... obsessive with his work,” Elizabeth smiled. “I cannot say what is devouring most of his time at the moment but this was more of an interlude for him, I presume. Like taking a stroll to clear your head, except Johnson is incapable of not being productive.”

“How did your meeting go?” Irwyn asked before they could distract themselves further.

“I know our destination,” Elizabeth nodded, turning serious. “We will be headed North. Far, far North.”