

I woke up in magical manacles, having slept for the first time in three weeks. There were a few things that I had started to forget about sleeping, and one of them was the twilight feeling of consciousness where I wasn't quite sure of where I was or what was going on. The manacles led to chains, which led to a stone wall. I'd had a dream while I slept, now quickly fading, of a creature grabbing me by my arms and legs and pulling me down into the endless depths of a dark ocean, which might have been my brain's way of interpreting the signals from my body, or might simply have been a coincidence.

The room was a stark gray with a red line painted down the middle, lit by a single bulb overhead, almost everything I could see having a tint of pale turquoise that it took me a moment to recognize as being the mark of someone's soul. That meant that the whole room was probably an entad, which wasn't good. Similarly, the manacles and chains were given their own tint, a charcoal black. I was also nearly naked, with nothing but my underwear on. A quick test of my magical abilities showed that none of them were working, and that was a checklist that took some time to go through. I had no idea whether it was the room, manacles, or wards, but the pessimistic answer was all three. One wall of the room had a big mirror, which I guessed was one-way with a viewing room on the other side, but I couldn't tell.

I thrashed against the restraints, grunting and cursing, a bit wildly at first, but then with more purpose and precision, straining and trying to get as much leverage as I possibly could to pull myself free, or pull my wrists from the manacles. I struggled for a bit, and then stopped, because I knew that I was just tiring myself out. Rattling my chains at least made me feel like I was doing something though, and without that outlet, I could feel the rage starting to boil. Obviously being stripped down and chained up was making me angry, but more than that, it was the position I'd been put in with Yarrow, unable to act without being castigated as the aggressor, but punished for letting him do as he pleased. If I'd known what the pipe was going to do, I'd have fucking cut off his head and dealt with the consequences, but I was in the dark. It was frustrating, and pretty clearly all part of whatever stupid fucking plan the Dungeon Master had. Sleep was one of my few weaknesses, so here it was, brought out at the first moment it was available. What pissed me off the most was that there was no way they could have *known* that sleep was my biggest weakness.

I tried my best to stay calm and not let anger rule me.

"Oh, I get it," I said to the room. "Pipe dream. Very clever."

The red line separated me from the door, drawn neatly across, and my guess was that it marked where the wards were. I would have used vibration magic to look with warder's sight, but it was momentarily unavailable. Based on the fact that soul sight was still working, essentialism was the only thing not fully warded against, though it was possible that soul sight was passive magic, not active magic, so I wasn't going to be able to depend on that as a weapon in my time of need.

I closed my eyes for a moment and looked at my character sheet, then at my virtues and afflictions. All my skills were back at their baselines, which meant I'd been unconscious

somewhere between four and a half hours and infinite hours. I was able to bring the upper bound down by a bit just from looking at my nails and trying to gauge how much I needed to shave: it probably hadn't been more than a day. I wasn't hungry or thirsty either, but those needs could have been taken care of while I was asleep.

I'll admit that things looked a little bit grim. I'd had all my stuff taken away from me, been dealt a major blow to my personal power, and my companions were nowhere to be seen. I was chained up, warded, and likely under the effect of an entad or two in an unknown location. It wasn't all bad though: with the way my ability points were distributed, the caps for my mental skills were higher, and thankfully, Essentialism had gained a point since the last time I'd checked, meaning that I had soul sight. That was a *very* thin silver lining though.

I tried my best to escape. I *was* really strong, but either the magic of the chains and manacles was stopping me, or more likely, I wasn't yet strong enough to rip the chains from their anchors in the walls. The scale of the room led me to believe that this place might have been used for larger people than me, brosse or something similarly sized. The drain in the middle, painted over with the red stripe, probably served to funnel urine and blood. I was guessing that I was going to be tortured pretty soon, which was a good reason to leave me alive. The door was thick and metal, without a handle or any kind of window.

"So, is someone going to come talk to me?" I asked, looking at the mirror. "As nice as this is, I'm a bit bored."

There was no response. I had no idea if there was someone else on the other side of the mirror or not. In either case, I was left to wait for another hour or so before anyone came for me. I used that time to check in on Amaryllis and Grak through the soul threads, and I was relieved to find that neither of them were snipped and both were, so far as I could tell, uncompromised. I debated stepping into Bethel's mental palace, but I didn't know where she was, or where I was. I could have used that method to talk to her, and she could have used one of her abilities to speak with Figaro Finch, but it was unclear to me what all that would actually do for us. I also didn't want to speak with her, for obvious reasons, especially not to ask a favor. Whatever Valencia's plan was with Bethel, I had to believe that it probably didn't account for me dropping into her mind to ask her for things.

The door clanked, with the sound of heavy mechanisms moving before there was any movement of the door itself. The doorway was pitch black, probably a ward against light, which you could achieve using gem magic wards, so I could see nothing beyond the room. I guessed there was also a sound ward, since I didn't hear a single thing until Zinnia stepped through. She had changed out of her frilly dress and was wearing a form-fitting bodysuit, with no magic on her that I could see with soul sight. She was more slender than I had thought she would be, looking small. She stepped forward, until she was a foot away from the red line. The door stayed open behind her, the doorway pitch black and ominous.

"What would happen if a soul mage looked into your soul?" asked Zinnia, with absolutely nothing in the way of preamble.

"I'm not sure," I replied. "So far as I know, it's never happened."

"Make a guess," said Zinnia.

"Depending on where they looked, irreversible catatonia would be a likely result," I replied.

"When I was at the Athenaeum of Sound and Silence, I had a special dispensation to prevent the anolia from inspecting me for exactly that reason."

"You were inspected by an anolia in Parsmont," said Zinnia.

"I sure was," I replied. "That was before the unfortunate accident that afflicted me."

"Is the cause of the affliction a soul mage would suffer memetic in nature?" asked Zinnia.

"Yes," I replied. "It's also contagious, in the sense that a catatonic soul mage would render other soul mages catatonic if they looked at his soul in the wrong way."

"What's the wrong way?" asked Zinnia.

"Sorry," I said. "Are there some consequences to not answering your questions? I assumed there would be, given the accommodations," I rattled my chains, "But you know what happens when you assume."

"I don't," replied Zinnia.

"Oh," I said. "You make an ass out of you and me."

Zinnia stared at me.

"So if I don't answer?" I asked. "Is there some kind of threat of violence or something?"

"You can take that as a given," said Zinnia. "What's the wrong way of looking at your soul?"

I sighed. "I haven't done a lot of testing," I replied. "And given that if I *did* tell you, you would probably use a soul mage on me, I don't really care to speculate."

"If the catatonia is irreversible and contagious, why aren't you affected?" asked Zinnia.

"Just lucky, I suppose," I replied.

A slight frown crossed Zinnia's face. She held up a hand, index and middle finger up with her thumb out to the side, and after a moment, she strode forward, across the red line. She reached behind her and pulled out a knife that must have been hidden in a thin belt that blended in with the bodysuit. She looked over my body for a moment, then began making small, shallow cuts on

my chest. If there had been more give in the chains, I would have tried to grab her, but there was no way that I would be able to. I just twisted and squirmed instead.

“Ow, fuck,” I said as she continued. “Hurts.” It wasn’t the most pain I had ever been in, not by a long shot, but it did hurt, little slices that seemed to intensify in pain as she went on.

She continued on, expression set, until my chest was covered with cuts, probably thirty of them all told. They were weeping blood, and my blood covered her hand and knife. She stepped back for a moment to look at her work with a critical eye. The cuts gave me a sharp stinging sensation, and every breath I took made them hurt more. Active blood magic was warded against (or whatever was happening that mimicked a ward) meaning my attempts at getting my blood to stay in my body, or to push healing, weren’t working at all. I tried the other way too, using my blood on her skin to gain entry into her soul, but I couldn’t feel a thing. I wasn’t even sure that essentialism would work if I could find a connection. I was breathing through gritted teeth, trying to move as little as possible.

“Why aren’t you affected by the affliction?” asked Zinnia.

The thing about torture was, if you thought that you were going to crack eventually, and the information wasn’t time sensitive, it was better not to drag the process out. That wasn’t an informed opinion on the subject of torture, that was just my own personal stance from a few dozen games where torture had taken place, because I’d made that decision for a great many characters over the years.

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“Alright, Guccifer, you’re being tortured at the hands of the baddies, I’m going to grant you an exception to the no phones rule while you’re in there,” I said. “You could also make a new character.”

“Nah,” said Arthur, pulling out his phone. “If I make a new character, I’m going to get attached to him, and by the time I actually get rescued, Guccifer will be dead to me.”

“Wait, what kind of torture are they doing?” asked Reimer. “Like, cutting off fingers, or what?”

“Unspecified,” I replied. “And your character can only *assume* that he’s being tortured, given what you know of the Golden Glove.”

“Wait,” said Reimer. “I want to use Knowledge (Religion) in order to see what I know.” He started rolling the dice before I could even say anything. “Twenty-six.”

“Sorry, you just want to know ... how they’re going to torture him?” I asked. “Is there a point to that?”

"Yes," replied Reimer. "If I know what methods they're likely to use, then I know how likely Guccifer is to crack, which means I'll know how much time we have to prepare or get things done before we go save him. Out of character, I'm curious."

"Fine," I replied. "The Golden Glove has a tradition of mortification of the flesh, which they've adapted toward torture of those who they want information from. Owing to the existence of healing magic, and given the number of holy clerics within the order, you think that this torture is probably rather extreme, involving the peeling of flesh and flaying of individual nerves. You figure that Guccifer will probably give up whatever he knows within hours, rather than days, unless, yes, Arthur, you want to object." He had perked up as I'd spoken, opening his mouth slightly like he was going to talk as soon as I was done.

"I do want to object," said Arthur. "I'm not going to give up information."

"You can't just decide that torture doesn't work on you," I replied.

"Torture just doesn't work in general," said Tiff.

"Please no," said Craig. "I don't want to get into a torture debate again."

"Have we done it before?" asked Tiff, raising an eyebrow.

"Before your time," said Reimer. "There's not actually a lot of data to go on, so it was just back and forth a bit. I think the consensus was that information derived from torture isn't always actionable, because people will say anything to make the pain stop, but there are certain times that it won't matter, like if you can verify before you take action, or narrow down a list of targets, or something like that."

"And obviously the optics are terrible," said Arthur. "Torture makes you look like the baddies, even if you're the goodies."

"How good can you be if you're going around torturing people?" asked Tiff.

"Eh," said Arthur. "That's an alignment question. Lawful good would never torture, chaotic good would break the rules if they thought it was right in that particular instance."

"Veto making this about alignment," said Reimer.

"Second," I replied.

"Motion passes," said Craig.

Arthur smiled. "You know, it's really a shame that I'm the only one who actually knows anything about Robert's Rules of Order."

"Anyway," I said. "You can't just say that you're immune to torture."

"It's a character question," said Arthur, frowning at me. "Character questions go to the players, not the rules, not the DM."

"I disagree," I replied. "I mean, if you decide that you're giving over the information right away, I would let you do that, but you're talking about something that's involuntary. You can't call that a character question any more than you would call whether or not you get charmed by a vampire a character question."

"But it is," said Tiff. "It's just dictated by the dice. You make up the character after the fact. Dice inform character."

"So, sure, you can have a series of saves or checks," I replied. "But I would really rather abstract it."

"CON saves?" asked Arthur.

"It would be WIS," replied Craig. "CON is how much you can physically endure, WIS is how much you can mentally take, and torture is a mental thing, not a physical one."

"It's both," said Arthur.

"You're saying that because you have low Wisdom," I replied. "Look, it's really not important, if you want to roll some, that's fine, if you don't, don't, I just want to move on with the session."

"If Guccifer thinks that he's going to crack, then he'll just say everything upfront and skip the torture," said Arthur.

"Oh come on," said Reimer. "Come on! You run off on your own, get into a fight that you really didn't need to get into, get captured because you flubbed your rolls, and *now* you're going to just give up everything we know?"

"If I think that I'm going to give it up anyway?" asked Arthur. "Yeah, sure. What's the point in enduring the pain? Everyone cracks eventually."

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Of course, there was no guarantee that I would crack eventually, especially because I had tricks up my sleeve.

I dove down into my spirit and began looking suspect threads, comparing them against what my spirit had looked like minutes ago, and eventually isolating a thick cluster of them. I grabbed a bundle of them and restricted them all at once, and suddenly, the pain was completely gone. I hoped that I had gotten the whole bundle, but I supposed that time would tell.

"I wasn't affected by the affliction because I'm an old friend of Uther Penndraig's, and just like for him, the rules don't apply to me," I said. I looked down at the cuts on my chest. "I suppose you've thought about the issue of blood loss?"

Zinnia stepped back from me and looked me up and down, knife still held in her hand. "You have training," she said.

"A bit," I replied. "I spent two weeks at Sound and Silence, but I like to think I'm a fast learner."

Zinnia scowled at me, probably taking that as bravado. "Then we'll have to do this the hard way." She dropped the bloody knife onto the floor and stepped back over the red line, walking quickly until the black void at the door swallowed her. I stared at the knife, frowning, thinking that she'd left it there on purpose, just to highlight how powerless I was. I could feel the anger rising in me as I stared at it, because she had a point.

She returned ten minutes later, hand wiped clean of blood in a sloppy way that left some of the blood behind at the creases. In her hand, which was now covered in a thick rubber glove, she was holding a foot-long stick with the branches cut off and bark removed, varnished and polished until it was shiny. It had someone's aura on it, not Zinnia's, carmine instead of her taupe. She stopped at the red line, then made the same hand signal as before and stepped forward after waiting just a beat.

"This is the pain stick," she said, holding up the stick for my inspection. Without hesitation or warning, she poked it against my stomach.

I looked down at it. "Ouch," I said.

Zinnia pulled the stick away from me, inspected it carefully, then jabbed me again.

"Based on the name, I'm guessing that the pain stick is meant to be painful?" I asked. "I mean, it's obviously a stick."

Zinnia frowned, then reared back and whacked me across the face with the stick. I could feel it, faintly, but it didn't actually hurt, let alone with the kind of pain you'd expect from something ominously named 'the pain stick'.

"If you break my jaw it's going to be pretty hard for me to answer questions," I replied.

"Fine," said Zinnia. She was starting to lose her cool. I wondered why she'd been put in charge of the interrogation, whether she was just the person available, or because that was her *real* specialty. Back in the Prince's Room I'd thought I sensed timidity from her, but that was completely gone. "Then we'll do this the *harder* way."

Again, she left the room, carrying the pain stick with her. This time when she came back, she had her rubber glove off and was dragging someone behind her. I had a good guess from the stature and the green skin, but it wasn't until the bag was removed from her head that I could

confirm it was Solace. Her arms and legs were bound together, and she had a gag in her mouth. Zinnia unceremoniously dumped her on the ground, then left the room again for a moment, returning with her rubber glove and the pain stick.

"Tell me how you remain unaffected by the affliction," said Zinnia. Without even waiting for a response, she leaned down and jabbed Solace with the pain stick. The reaction was instant: back arched, eyes wide, a wild attempt to strain against her bonds, a scream that the gag muffled, and though the contact had been brief, it seemed to have some aftereffects as Solace twitched and moaned.

"I'm the sole practitioner of a lost magical art which allows me to counter the affliction," I said. "If someone looked at my soul and went catatonic, I would be able to go into *their* soul and fix it, but they wouldn't be able to do the same, even after I'd cured them."

Zinnia pursed her lips, then bent down and prodded Solace again, with the same reaction. I winced, but said nothing.

"There are harder ways," said Zinnia. "I could kill her to show you that I'm serious."

"I'm sorry if you don't like the answers, but that's the truth," I said. "I don't know if there's a safe way to use a soul mage against me, but if there is, I don't know what it would be."

"Describe the bounds of the problem," said Zinnia. There was just a bit of sheen on her forehead. Solace was light, but she wasn't that light.

"There's a complex image which, when seen, will begin multiplying itself within the soul," I said. "New memories will be formed of the image, it will have imprints in skills by way of memory, it will show up in the lower ranks of the values by way of internal knowledge of it, and it will appear in social relationship modeling as part of memory links. Likely a few other parts of the soul as well, those that connect back to memory in some way. Removing it would have to be done without looking at the image, which would be difficult for a soul mage, but even if it were removed, it would regrow from a single seed, which means that the entirety would have to be removed at once, again, not something that I think would be possible for a soul mage."

"How does your secret magic allow you to circumvent those requirements?" asked Zinnia.

I hesitated for a moment, and Zinnia almost immediately left the room, returning with a pistol, which she aimed squarely at Solace's head.

"There's an entire parallel field of magic to soul magic," I replied. "Because it's so difficult to remove from the soul, the simpler option is to, ah, squeeze closed the part of the meme that's soaking up all of your thoughts in this parallel structure, which is what appears to cause the catatonia."



“Where did you learn your magic?” asked Zinnia. She had the pain stick in one hand and the pistol in the other.

“Raven helped me to find a book,” I replied. “We had to go to a library on another, secret plane, which itself can only be accessed by a form of magic that Raven is one of the sole practitioners of.”

“How long would it take to learn?” asked Zinnia.

“For a normal person to be able to reverse the damage, probably years,” I replied. *For me, much less time.* “You would need the books, and also probably to be a magus-level soul mage, which —”

Zinnia shot Solace in the head, then walked out of the room.

I stared at Solace’s body, trying to grapple with what had just happened. *Solace is dead. She was shot, just like that. This stupid fucking princess just shot a woman we rescued from death, the last druid in the entire world, and there wasn’t a damned thing that I could do about it.*

My train of thought was cut short when Solace winked at me. I stared at her eyes, which seemed perfectly lifeless, willing her to do it again, to show some sign that she’d somehow lived, but she only lay there, with dark green blood oozing out to coat her cheek and matt her hair.

Solace was a druid, and you couldn’t directly ward against druidic magic, not that anyone would, given that the last locus had supposedly been killed hundreds of years ago. If you had very carefully combed through extremely accurate intelligence reports and kept a very open mind about it, you might have cottoned on to the fact that Solace was a druid, but there were other hypotheses that you would probably jump to first.

Zinnia dragged in Pallida next, taking considerably more time and effort. Where Solace had been limp, Pallida was thrashing, struggling against her bonds and wriggling around. When her hood was taken off, she looked first at Solace’s ‘corpse’ and then at me, then screamed something around the gag. The pipe had pretty obviously put us all to sleep, but I was surprised that Pallida wasn’t able to escape from her restraints, since that seemed like it should be well within her skillset. We were dealing with, if not professionals, then at least people with quite a bit of experience. I also didn’t know where Solace and Pallida had come from, whether they had similar rooms to mine, and similarly restrictive chains and wards there.

“Okay,” I said. “Look. I don’t know what information you’ve gotten, but my circumstances are special, I really am different from almost anything or anyone that came before me, with Uther being the only exception. I can’t give you any other answer, because there is no other answer.”

Zinnia stopped where she was and stared at me. “I don’t believe you.”

"I know," I replied. "I probably wouldn't believe me either."

I was offloading a lot of my freaking out to the second thread, doing my best to — not *compartmentalize*, exactly, because I was still thinking those thoughts, but to separate the two experiences as completely as I could, putting fear and anxiety on one track and calm discussion on the other. I was pretty sure that this was the closest I had come to death in, oh, at least a month. Like Fenn before me, I was resorting to flippancy to cope with danger.

"If someone looked into your soul, they would be indefinitely catatonic until you personally cured them," said Zinnia. "That's what your official stance is."

"Yes," I replied. "So far as I know, that's the truth. I've had to do it before."

The muscles of her jaw flexed beneath the skin of her cheeks, the only sign of what was going through her mind, and that was when a puzzle piece clicked into place: she wasn't trying to find a safe way into my soul, she was trying to find a way out for someone who had tried to get into my soul while I was asleep. It was only a guess, with nothing she'd said confirming it, but it felt like an epiphany.

"If there's someone afflicted, I can cure them," I said, speaking as slowly and calmly as I could. My underwear was soaked through with the blood dripping down from my chest, and I could see the little blood gauge in my HUD had gone noticeably lower. "I'm the only one that can cure them. Please. You have nothing to lose on this, and a lot to gain. You can't trust that I won't do something to their soul, I know that, but whatever I do, it won't be worse than how they are now. There's no other cure, no other way of restoring their soul."

Zinnia hesitated for a moment, then leaned down over Pallida and pressed the gun to her head. "Her life for my brother's," she said.

I nodded. I wanted to add more, about how they could lock him up bindings to make sure that I couldn't turn him into a weapon, but I held my tongue, not just because that was obvious, but because if they somehow failed to think of it, it might be my ticket out. Similarly, Zinnia hadn't mentioned that I might be lying about the affliction's duration, and if that was unnoticed rather than unmentioned, I wasn't going to helpfully point out that I could be kept chained up for another few days to confirm that he wouldn't get better. I had no idea what, if anything, they were planning to do with us in the long term. Getting through the short term was going to be hard enough.