

Chapter 30 - Agony

The realisation that Oliver wouldn't intervene against Valeria's draconian "correction" was a bitter pill to swallow. It had become painfully clear that when it came to parenting, Oliver was decidedly out of his depth.

Some might even say that he was utterly incompetent in such matters, as the sheer idea of feeding neurotoxin to your own children should, decidedly, be something that even your run-of-the-mill parent would consider "a bit too far." Yet still, Oliver had held his tongue.

Resigned to our fate, Gabriel and I had no choice but to comply with Valeria's twisted generosity and consume the tainted meal. The foreknowledge of the impending pain, rather than providing comfort, only heightened the dread. It was a cruel irony, being aware of the looming torment yet being powerless to avoid it.

At that moment, I pondered the age-old dilemma: Was it better to foresee an unavoidable catastrophe or to stumble into it unawares? Somewhere in my memory, I knew this conundrum had a philosophical label, but it eluded me under the weight of the current predicament.

Gazing at the sumptuously prepared meal before me, I hesitantly speared another slice of the luxurious lab-grown meat onto my fork, my eyes locking with Gabriel's, both of us filled with trepidation.

'I wish there was another way out of this, Gabe,' I thought solemnly. Despite the dread churning within me, I managed to muster a semblance of assurance, nodding confidently at him. It was an entirely feigned bravado, a facade to bolster his spirits as we braced ourselves to face the consequences of Valeria's decidedly fucked-up "educational methods."

As I cautiously placed the meat into my mouth, a sudden realisation dawned on me: The [Serenity] Perk I had acquired from the [Meditation] Skill Tree could potentially shield me from enduring the full brunt of the neurotoxin's effects.

A mere minute of meditation, theoretically, could cleanse my system of the toxin.

Yet, this revelation brought its own set of complications.

Firstly, I pondered whether I could effectively meditate while engulfed in agonising pain. My past experiences with meditation had always been in serene environments, mainly as a tool for relaxation or an alternative to a brief nap, but never under the throes of intense distress.

Secondly, and perhaps more critically, was the issue of perception.

It would certainly raise suspicion, if not outright alarm, if I did not exhibit the severe pain expected from the toxin's ingestion. So, I was faced with a dilemma: Either convincingly feign excruciating pain in sync with Gabriel, hoping our doses were indeed comparable, or risk revealing my abnormal resistance to neurotoxins.

The latter was a secret I was keen on safeguarding, considering its potential as a lifesaving ace up my sleeve in future unforeseen circumstances.

As I grudgingly accepted my predicament, I continued consuming the food, laced with the impending threat of the neurotoxin.

'There's no simple escape from this situation,' I contemplated, feeling the texture and flavour of the exquisite meal, even as a sense of impending dread loomed over me.

The taste of the meal was undeniably superb, surpassing anything I had encountered in this world and even in my past life. However, the constant undercurrent of anxiety, knowing the inevitable pain that each bite was drawing me closer to, significantly marred my ability to savour the experience.

The most unsettling aspect, however, was the unknown delay in the toxin's activation.

Despite having ingested several mouthfuls of the algae, lab-grown meat, and eggs, the anticipated effects of the NeuroCorpse had yet to manifest. The suspense was almost as torturous as the expected pain.

'I wish it would just start already, so I could gauge the extent of the pain,' I internally debated. Valeria had described it as excruciating for an average adult male, but that description was frustratingly vague. Were we talking about the level of discomfort comparable to severe menstrual cramps, which could be utterly debilitating, as I recalled from my previous life? Or was it more akin to the agony of having an organ violently extracted?

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As the meal progressed, my body abruptly began to feel an intense heat, signalling the onset of the NeuroCorpse's effects.

'This is it,' I thought with a sense of resignation, hastily consuming the remaining portion of my meal. Valeria's instructions had been very explicit about leaving *no* leftovers, and I doubted my ability to continue eating once the full brunt of the pain hit.

I crammed the last bits into my mouth, chewing and swallowing with urgency as a peculiar, pervasive ache began to spread through me. It was unlike any pain I had experienced before, defying easy description.

Pain, in my understanding, was usually localised: The throbbing of a headache, the sharpness of a cramp, the sting of a burn. These were direct, identifiable sources of discomfort that signalled specific issues needing attention.

Even the widespread pain from a fall, like tumbling off a bike and scraping across the pavement, was ultimately localised to certain injured areas, such as "my entire right side" or similar. But the feeling now creeping through me was something else entirely—a full-body experience of pain, an unnerving, downright alien sensation.

It was as if my brain, overwhelmed by the barrage of distress signals, was scrambling to process them, leading to a fluctuating pattern of pain across various parts of my body.

In terms of the [Programming] knowledge I had recently acquired: It felt like my body's pain signals were being managed in a first-in, first-out queue, simultaneously grouped into larger packages for more efficient processing by my overloaded brain.

As soon as I gulped down the final bite and the pain began to fully manifest, Valeria's voice sliced through the quiet atmosphere of the dinner, her words as regal and detached as ever. "You are both dismissed for the evening. Do ensure you change out of your formal attire before retiring to your rooms, children."

Her tone, though outwardly gracious, carried an unmistakable subtext that was hard to miss: You can go suffer in your room now, but don't mess up the expensive clothes as you do so.

Gabriel and I immediately excused ourselves from the dinner table, staggering back to our room as the pain escalated from uncomfortable to intolerable. In a frenzy, I peeled off my evening dress, more concerned about relief than the garment's condition, and collapsed onto my bed, burying my face in the pillow.

Muffled grunts filtered through the metal sheet dividing our shared room, signalling Gabriel's struggle to silently bear the increasing agony.

'This is utterly fucking insane. What the fuck is wrong with that fucking bitch?!' My thoughts raged, channelling my growing pain and anger into a mental tirade of curses.

The pain continued to surge in waves, each one more intense and quicker than the last, overwhelming my senses, with no sign of abiding any time soon.

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For untold hours that felt like an eternity, I writhed in excruciating pain, each wave threatening to push me into the sweet release of unconsciousness, but never quite reaching that merciful threshold.

The neurotoxin, I had realised, was a masterpiece of cruelty, meticulously engineered to inflict maximum agony while ensuring my brain remained alert to every tormenting pulse of pain. The body's innate self-regulation, usually a blessing that made sure one would not fall unconscious due to overstimulation, now felt like a curse, as it kept me agonisingly conscious through the ordeal.

The full-body pain induced by the NeuroCorpse was unlike anything I had ever experienced or could have anticipated.

With most pain, there was a possibility of acclimatising, or at least preparing for its onslaught, but this... this was different. The pain signals swarmed my brain in chaotic waves, each new surge erasing any chance of adapting to the torment.

One moment, the entire left side of my body would be engulfed in pain, then it would shift to my head, and back to the left again. Another wave would strike my right side, then my stomach, and cascade down to my feet and legs.

There was no pattern, no predictability—just relentless, random agony.

The rapidity with which one wave of pain was superseded by another, while the previous ache still lingered, only to be reinvigorated by fresh signals from the same area, was maddening.

The ceaseless, disordered nature of the pain made it impossible to brace myself for what was coming next. Each new wave felt like a fresh assault, with the previous pain acting as a cruel foundation for the next.

Lying in agony, my muffled screams into the pillow became the sole outward-facing tell of the pain, long after my voice had given way. My mind, continuously fraying at the edges, however, found a twisted comfort in the knowledge that I wasn't enduring this hell alone.

Through the thin barrier that separated us, Gabriel's own stifled cries had echoed mine, a chorus of suffering that had gradually dwindled as his voice, too, had broken under the strain.

Now, all that filled the room was the sound of our desperate, ragged breathing and the occasional rustle of fabric as we each writhed in our separate hells, clinging to the last shreds of our composure.

In those harrowing hours, as we lay in our own corners of agony, the shared ordeal somehow made the insurmountable pain slightly more bearable for me, a grim solidarity in the face of our mother's cruel lesson.

During the relentless assault of pain, my grasp on reality began to slip, dragging me into a nightmarish limbo where hallucinations, and panic attacks blurred with consciousness. Each fleeting moment of this "respite", if one could even call it that, was abruptly and cruelly shattered by another surge of excruciating pain, a relentless cycle that seemed to stretch into eternity.

As time agonisingly dragged on, the pain morphed into an omnipresent entity, no longer just an experience but a defining part of my existence. The excruciating torment ceased to be an external infliction; it became an intrinsic part of who I was, an unyielding, omnipresent spectre that dominated every fragment of my consciousness.

Pain was not something I felt anymore; it was simply what I had *become*.

The visions and voices that had started appearing in my head some time ago had further emphasised this truth, for they were merely ways for my brain to attempt to cope with this deluge of information barraging it. But the pain was not one of those.

The pain was simply part of me. It would never leave me, for it was me.

A delirious state of mind was merely a temporary problem, something even modern medicine from my old world could fix. Visions and voices were similarly transient, merely temporary problems that required a good night's sleep to fix, I knew.

But the pain? The pain was eternal.

I thoroughly knew this, in my heart of hearts.

For the pain was always there, making sure that I did not drift off into sleep, not drift off into visions or voices. It was my friend, for it made sure that I did not lose myself...

Time blurred into an indistinct haze, until gradually, I began to claw my way back to a semblance of coherent thought. My body was wracked with an almost unimaginable soreness, akin to having endured an endless marathon. Every cell inside of me felt as though it had been torn asunder and haphazardly stitched back together.

My whole body felt alien, as there was no longer any excruciating pain, only a numb, sore feeling of past agony remaining.

A bizarre thought wormed its way into my exhausted mind, an irrational longing for the pain that had become so familiar.

'Valeria should give me more of that toxin,' I caught myself thinking, almost longing for the cruel embrace of agony. *'I really should ask Valeria to give me more...'* I craved my old friend with every fibre of my being.

In this altered state, another perplexing thought spiralled through my mind, a chilling echo of the torment I had endured.

'If the pain fully disappears, who will anchor me to myself?'

The thought was absurd, yet it clung to me with the tenacity of a shadow.

In the depths of my delirium, I grappled with a misplaced conviction that I *needed* the toxin, that the pain it induced was a *necessity*. All to guard against the loss of self.

There was a twisted logic to it born from the toxin's cruel embrace, that I couldn't deny—a belief that without the searing agony, I would drift into oblivion, abandoned and utterly alone once again.

I attempted to rise from my bed, a chaotic mess stained with the remnants of my ordeal—sweat, blood, drool and tears mingling to tell the tale of what I had endured. My arms and legs bore the marks of self-inflicted violence, and the taste of iron lingered in my mouth, a physical reminder to my vocal cords' violent protests.

But none of these things held my focus for even a moment.

My mind was singularly fixated on one need: More pain.

It was a twisted, irrational desire, but it consumed me. I needed to seek out Valeria, to request—no, *beg*—for another dose of that excruciating toxin.

I needed it to stay sane, after all.

Lying dishevelled on the grimy floor, an arm's length from my bed, I tried to piece together the events leading up to this moment.

'Must have toppled over at some stage,' I thought, a grim realisation as every fibre of my being screamed in protest.

The all-consuming agony that had hijacked my consciousness was now a distant echo, the neurotoxin's vicious grip seemingly loosening. Yet, amidst the haze of pain and confusion, a bizarre urge had surfaced—a disjointed, almost alien desire to seek out more of Valeria's toxic concoction. *'Why the fuck would I crave more of that nightmare?'* I berated myself, struggling to make sense of the ludicrous thought.

Attempting to shift into a less painful position was futile; every movement was a reminder of the ordeal my body had just endured. Pain, it seemed, had redefined its very meaning through this experience.

Gradually, my mind clawed back its ability to form coherent thoughts.

A resolute promise emerged from the fog of my battered psyche: *'Never again. I will do anything in my power to never have Valeria resort to such a measure, ever again.'*

The sheer extremity of what I had just experienced was beyond any realm of sanity.

It wasn't just correction; it was torture, the kind that defied every notion of human rights, ethical conduct, and basic decency I knew from my past life. *'Valeria is not just dangerous; she's a complete fucking lunatic, a threat on a level I hadn't even thought possible.'*

In the aftermath of that harrowing ordeal, a resolute shift in my priorities became evident.

My initial plans of exacting revenge on the dirty low-lives that had dared to touch my brother, had to be put on hold. The debt Mr. Stirling had called in, courtesy of my own misjudgment, rocketed to the top of my immediate concerns. I couldn't afford to gamble on whether Valeria had set a hidden deadline for this obligation or not.

Resolutely, I placed this new task at the absolute top of my list.

"Gabr..." was the only sound I could muster, my voice barely a whisper as I called out for Gabriel.

My concern for him was paramount; after all, he was just a teenager, his body and mind far from the resilience and maturity mine had been forced to adapt to. My spirit might have been shackled to a 15-year-old's body, but my experiences, both painful and profound, belonged to a mind weathered by time and the trials of my past life.

But Gabriel? His 16-year-old self hadn't crossed the threshold of mental and emotional maturity to withstand such trauma. The fear that this ordeal might have inflicted lasting damage on his young psyche was real.

Silence hung heavily from his side of the room.

I clung to the hope that he had succumbed to unconsciousness, a far better fate than being ensnared by that same perverse desire to seek more of Valeria's toxin. The absence of any sound suggested he might have passed out, but a nagging fear yet gnawed at me—what if he had left the room, driven by the toxin's insidious influence, in search of more?

The thought alone sent a shiver down my spine.

Summoning every ounce of determination, I silently urged myself to rise. '*You need to check on Gabriel,*' my thoughts echoed, pushing against the overwhelming exhaustion.

The irony wasn't lost on me—despite my Body Attribute having improved to 3 by now, I was back to grappling with the simplest of movements, eerily reminiscent of those early days after emerging from the coma with a Body at -1.

The familiar creaky, old wheelchair nearby seemed like a lifeline, a necessary crutch in my current state. '*Is this wheelchair destined to be an eternal part of my life or something?*' I pondered, feeling an odd sense of dependency on it.

Time became an abstract concept as I laboriously coordinated every strained muscle and nerve to reach the wheelchair. My eyes, having rolled back in sheer fatigue and blurred by incessant tears, offered no help. In a moment of clarity amid the chaos, I had managed to wedge one of my infinite sock balls between my teeth, unknowingly clamping down on it with all the strength I could muster in my jaw as I struggled to move.

Every movement was a battle, with pain and numbness coursing through me, but the urgency to ensure Gabriel's well-being fueled my persistence, driving me towards the wheelchair, inch by torturous inch.

After what seemed like countless hours, I finally hoisted myself into the familiar embrace of the old wheelchair. Pausing for a moment, I drew deep, laboured breaths, gathering what little energy and focus remained.

My consciousness teetered on the edge, drained from the ordeal and the effort of moving.

With each turn of the creaky wheels, I slowly navigated towards Gabriel's side of the room, repeating a silent prayer under my breath, '*Please be asleep, please be asleep.*'

The mantra echoed in my mind, a hopeful rhythm against the backdrop of my exhaustion.

As I manoeuvred past the dividing sheet, my heart pounded with apprehension.

But relief washed over me at the sight before me.

Gabriel lay there, seemingly having succumbed to sleep, his ordeal ending earlier than mine or perhaps he had just weathered the storm more resiliently. Unlike my bed, his lacked the chaotic evidence of struggle—no stains of blood or foamy drool.

Exhaustion claimed me entirely at the sight of my brother, relatively unscathed.

My body and mind could endure no more, and as relief mingled with fatigue, darkness enveloped my consciousness, pulling me back into the void of unconsciousness.

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I stirred awake some time later, finding myself in an awkward position, precariously perched and half-entangled in the wheelchair's armrest. A groan escaped my lips as I clumsily repositioned myself into a more stable seating.

'*I need a fucking break,*' I thought wearily, guiding the wheelchair back to my side of the room.

My bed was a dishevelled mess, a stark reminder of the night's agony. The sight of it made me shudder—it was not an inviting place to return to.

Too drained to even consider changing the sheets, I opted for the simplest solution instead.

I grabbed my blanket, deciding to sleep right in the wheelchair.

It wasn't ideal, and I knew my back would protest fiercely in the morning. But in this world, I had a bona-fide cheat-code up my sleeve: the Rest Function.

It would be my saving grace against the inevitable aches and pains.

For now, all I craved was the escape of sleep, however uncomfortable the position might be.

I pulled up the Rest Function, punched in a solid 8 hours and hit confirm in one smooth motion.

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My eyes fluttered open immediately, the familiar disorientation that accompanied the use of the Rest Function momentarily clouding my senses. As the confusion receded, I was greeted by the System's chime, confirming a successful and restorative sleep.

[System]: *Rest completed. Time rested: 08:00:00*

[System]: *600 rested XP added to available Bonus XP.*

A contented sigh escaped my lips. Miraculously, the lingering pains and fatigue that had plagued me just moments ago had vanished completely, as if they were never there.

'*The Rest Function is ridiculously overpowered, and I'm all here for it,*' I thought, a hint of a smirk playing on my lips. With a gentle stretch, I began to disentangle myself from the confines of the wheelchair and the blanket I had haphazardly thrown over myself.

The relief of being pain-free was downright euphoric.

'*First on the agenda, I need to check on Gabriel.*'

Quietly and stealthily, not wanting to accidentally wake him from any potential rest, I navigated to his side of the room. Peeking around the divider, I saw him, still deep in slumber. Satisfied he was okay, I retreated back to my own space.

'Good, Gabriel's still knocked out... What fucking time is it anyway...?' I wondered, feeling like an eternity had passed in that room. Accessing my cerebral interface, I summoned the time display.

To my astonishment, it had only been eleven hours since the dinner began. *'Only eleven fucking hours? It felt like I was struggling for at least a day with that NeuroCorpse toxin... That stuff is seriously insane.'*

My thoughts shifted towards the day ahead.

'I should wake Gabriel a bit earlier today, see how he's holding up. He might not have a Rest Function, but he'd surely be upset to miss work.' I pondered, considering our precarious situation. *'Plus, Valeria would be less than thrilled if he skipped work due to this. That's **definitely** something we have to avoid at all costs.'*

Finally, it was time to check up on all the System Notifications that I had ignored throughout the entire family dinner. I couldn't spare even a second of time to check them, lest my concentration on Valeria's antics wavered.

Pulling them all up in their condensed form, I started reading through them one by one.

[System]: 200xp gained for Intuition Attribute.

[System]: 700xp gained for Ego Attribute.

[System]: 300xp gained for [Cooking] Skill. ([Rare] First time taste bonus.)

[System]: [Deception] Skill unlocked.

[System]: 300xp gained for [Deception] Skill.

[System]: [Poison] Skill unlocked.

[System]: 500xp gained for [Poison] Skill. ([Rare] First time exposure bonus.)

[System]: 200xp gained for [First-Aid] Skill.

[System]: 300xp gained for Body Attribute.

[System]: 100xp gained for Intellect Attribute.

The corners of my mouth twitched upwards, despite the recent ordeal, forming a grin I couldn't suppress.

'For how much of a fucking bitch Valeria is, I really have to hand it to her: Whenever she's around, it's experience galore. Almost makes me hope for another family dinner soon...

Almost,' I thought, my mind resorting to dark humour to cope with the trauma—a coping mechanism that seemed to have seamlessly transitioned into my new life.

As I methodically stripped the bed of its soiled linens and replaced them with fresh ones, my mind was already laying out the day ahead. *'Stick to the routine first. Then, post-Mr. Shori's shift, it's straight to dealing with Mr. Stirling. That debt needs to be off my back, pronto.'*

Despite the daunting tasks ahead, a small part of me relished the thought of hitting those sweet XP milestones soon. Not today, perhaps, but every day brought me closer to

becoming a stronger, more adept version of myself. And that was a journey I was eager to continue.

Experience gains were highly addictive, after all...