

## Chapter 2 – Winning as a Man Brooks no Half Measures

“- October 28, 1980 .-“

The air broke into glass-like shards as I stepped out of the Mirror Dimension into the midnight darkness of the Office of the Registrar at the Rice University in Houston, Texas.

*Sorcery is a hack*, I thought as I began pushing buttons and pulling drawers. *Surprisingly structured in operation though, even if that surrendering stuff that baldy told Strange in the film was nonsense.*

Occult power, in reality, was all about territory, claim and command. To the point where I seriously wondered if Strange only paid lip service after he finally opened the portal back from Everest.

*Yes* everything needs to make sense. Claiming otherwise isn't teaching, it's indoctrination. There *is* such a thing as ego death, but it means something completely different, it means discarding everything reactionary, inculcated, and projected on you that you've been taught to believe is you. The end result would seem even *more* self-centred from the outside, to someone like, say, Black Widow. Earnest Demand, Confident Expectation, Positive Will, that was the *opposite* of the mindset baldy preached.

Telling someone to 'surrender to the power' was only useful if you wanted them to get possessed by something. Which, fair enough, was half the point of shamanism. But it didn't teach you how to kick possessing entities out, it didn't teach you how to deal with demons, and it was absolutely useless for *externalization* of power.

*Right, mind on the here and now. Forgery first, exploring arcane mechanics later.*

I'd set time aside over the past couple of weeks to spy on the paper-pushers at Rice University in Astral Form, to learn all the right documents and procedures. The stuff happening at the start of the academic year was eminently different from end-year. Further, the certification process I went through in the simulation wasn't help at all because it happened in Greece, not the US. Still, there were enough summer session diplomas being processed that I'd learned all of what I needed to confect some alumnus records for myself.

Master's degrees were still worth something right now. 1980 was *mostly* before the ugly times of college degree oversaturation that turned the young into nothing but indentured cash cows for student loan companies. The right degree would get me a foot in the door practically anywhere a certain child inventor was likely to study, including both of the alma maters I knew Tony Stark was and would be attending.

*A Master's in Mechanical Engineering, that should do for most things*, I thought as I collected the right forms, thankful I now had my datapad from the ship and had been able to fabricate a few younger pictures of myself. *And a minor in physics, it's practically already included in the other one, but it's always good to have an extra title to wave in people's faces.*

Back when the council cajoled my father into reviving the old-fashioned Accession Training Peregrination because I was too 'idealistic', I learned and worked as practically every profession in Spartan space. The ones I gained most from were servant, miner, poet, soldier and pilot. I took to the last two best. But mechanics, sciences and engineering were also in there.

It should be enough to pass muster in any teaching profession here on Terra. Maybe not at MIT, the top in the field were already there, and a bunch more were likely to apply there too, once they hear Tony Stark will be attending. But an MD was more than enough for Philips Academy, and I had ample time to get some manner of doctorate after that. I was already good enough that I would have fixed my ship even if it had a broken interstellar drive, if the damn thing hadn't decided to crash-land in the Alta Lake in this timeline.

Instead of dragging me out of a burning ship, Meredith had to drag me out of the water this turnaround.

*At least I still got mouth-to-mouth.*

A shame about Manifold though. I'd only been able to retrieve the felinoid's remains from the shipwreck last week, for burial. Father had made the bodyguard a condition of letting me leave to begin with, but he'd been a good companion for all that.

*Then again, I might have dodged a bullet there.*

My knowledge of the comics adaptations of the pre-Snaps was nowhere near as thorough as the cinematic version, there was no point when every storyline was a hodgepodge of stuff that

happened in several different timelines. Not as bad as the TV series which were more than half-way made up, but still pretty bad.

But I'd looked into felinoids for sentimental reasons. Imagine my surprise when I found out Manifold Tyger secretly worked for the Providian Order in at least one universe. Seeing as I didn't know if that secret society even existed here, I wasn't going to condemn him based on a story that might have been entirely fictional. Not when less than half the adaptations about *me* were barely accurate. Still, it was something to keep in mind. With all the somehows going around, he might have ended up joining the Black Order this time.

*Talk about malicious compliance though.*

The Accession Peregrination doubled as a publicity stunt. At the end of each 'learning experience', the heir to the empire would be 'discovered' with great fanfare on the worlds I trained on. It tickled the people's fancy to know their planet was worthy enough for the prince to come down to live among them. Officially anyway, the cheers were more out of duty than choice at the start. Still, Father agreed to put me through it because he believed – correctly – that the experience, skills and perspective would make me an effective heir.

Unfortunately, the council only wanted to seize power as much as Eson's reluctance to turn the tyranny dial allowed them. They thought – also correctly – that removing me from Sparta for thirty-three years would allow them to gatekeep my influence over court, when I finally came back. They had managed to be so insufferable that I washed my hands of the place and left to explore the stars less than a year after my Peregrination concluded. Now, because of that, they might just be facing the end of our entire civilization at the hands of space lizards, and possibly Thanos' Black Order. Because I wasn't around to lead us like every other timeline before.

Assholes.

*I don't like what all that implies about my sovereignty.*

The Ancestral Heirloom of the Spartan Royal Family was Medea's Tiara, and Medea's Tiara contained the Mind Stone. The same Mind Stone that Thanos was going to get his hands on at some point in the next three decades. And, if Stark's short-lived 'Vacation' was anything to go by, I could have as little as eight or nine years before the theft occurred.

*Assuming it's not going to be something worse, like a full-scale invasion.*

I could easily see Thanos choosing Sparta to blood his troops – and his ‘children’ – since he was never less than totally serious about wanting to kill half of everyone. Who better to test himself against than us? Though he’d need to muster something better than a single regiment of xenomorphs if he actually wanted to get anywhere. Maybe the reason he had such a small force by then was precisely because he picked a fight with us?

*I really need to check in on things there.*

But I had a few more things to do here on Earth before I was willing to set everything aside to sleep for a week straight.

*Damn, I’m really not good at this at all, am I? I can run as many thoughts at once as I can mesh my mind threads into, but I’m shit at using them in parallel. Maybe I should reconsider a career in psychology after all.*

I’d considered reproducing my psychiatry and counselling credentials from the simulation, but two things stopped me. For one, Howard Stark almost certainly didn’t believe in therapy, so the odds of him or his son ever seeing one were infinitesimal, even if I somehow got myself hired as the Phillips Academy school counsellor. For another, *I* didn’t believe in what currently passed for therapy. Any job interview for such a position was likely to devolve into me going on a tirade about all the Freudian nonsense still considered the height of the field.

A shame, because I might actually have been able to get myself hired on. I’d spent a couple of scattered days snooping around Phillips Academy. Tony Stark was a brat, but what did you expect of a 10-year-old kid that had been shipped off to a boarding school at age 7? He was lonely and nobody wanted to play with a kid, so he was failing (badly) at trying to skip seven years of mental and emotional development. I gave it two more months before the school counsellor cracked – again – and Howard Stark had to pull yet more strings to get one hired just for Tony – again. On top of all the *other* special treatment alienating him from everyone else.

*Maybe I should apply anyway just to see what happens.*

The ‘why do you believe you are best suited for this job’ section would give me all the space I needed to make the right impression. Or the wrong one, depending on your view. Contrary to my hopes, Phillips Academy was still, in fact, just a high school. I don’t know what Howard Stark paid and what strings he pulled to get Tony a custom-designed curriculum currently

speeding him through primary and secondary school. But if you're just going to hire tutors anyway, why not just homeschool him?

Either there was a long-standing threat to Tony's safety that *somehow* wasn't even greater in a different state where he stuck out like a sore thumb as the only child among hundreds of strangers, or there wasn't. My conclusion was the same either way.

*If anyone needs therapy right now, it's definitely Howard Stark.*

~Alert~

The thought strand I'd left with Peter tugged at my mind.

I dropped what I was doing, opened a portal to my entry hallway and sauntered upstairs to the nursery, just in time to see my boy groggily opening his eyes in preparation for a midnight tantrum.

"Hey, little man," I murmured as I catalogued what he was broadcasting. Not the slightest hunger, a bit of discomfort from a building belch, and the *expectation* of discomfort from the clean diaper he was about to soil. "Look at you, already learning to anticipate trouble." I considered and then decided against conjuring pretty butterflies. While the excitement would probably expedite things, it wasn't the sort of pavlovian reflex you wanted to instil in a baby.

I picked him up and laid him over my shoulder to pat him on the back instead. When that didn't work, I cast a sound-containing spell and began swinging him around, delighting in his happy shrieks until I felt the puke burp coming. *Before* it happened, so I didn't get splattered. I never did. Fatherhood for a wizard was the game of life on easy mode and I had all the cheats. Meri was beyond jealous.

She also completely disagreed that 'I had to learn good while raising you or else' was a good enough explanation. Which was fair enough, empathy was the ultimate hack when raising babies. But it actually *was* a very basic skill once you achieved astral projection. You could just zero in on what your astral form got from the other ones poking it.

Sapience worked by the same principles power did – where attention goes, energy flows. Emotions, wants, intent, people broadcasted these things naturally, it was half of why empathy and intuition existed at all. Gut instinct. It wasn't just about being receptive, it was about the other guy sending something out to begin with. That was how people knew they were being watched too.

Peter burped and pooped at the same time, because of course he did. I set him down on the nearby dresser to change him. Since bowel control was a very important skill deserving of every encouragement, I deliberately didn't contain the displeasure at the dirty and smelly task. Well, no more than my general ecstatic delight at his existence.

Besides, totally shielded people, psychic or not, made people feel uncomfortable. Not intuiting anything from the guy within your astral range was subconsciously suspicious. That's why sociopaths made people uneasy, even if you didn't interact with them. Fear, mistrust, being rubbed the wrong way, even general feelings of unease were a subconscious reaction to broadcasted intent, or the lack of it. Conversely, immediate trust and fondness for someone was a subconscious *positive* reaction to earnest goodwill.

The real danger were psychopaths. Those monsters automatically sent out the right vibes even while they were planning to rape and murder you.

"I don't understand you, daddy," Meri said from the door as I finished wrapping up the new diaper. I'd known she was there, Peter wasn't the only one I'd stuck a figment to. "How can you dote on Peter so much when you hate his father so?"

"There's no one I hate more than I love any of my children."

"He's not yours."

I couldn't help but feel amused. "You don't need to provoke me if you want information, my girl." *Guess it's finally time to rip the bandaid off, it's been over a month and she's getting suspicious of her mother's 'facelift' anyway.* "That you asked is more than enough."

I knocked on the air with the ring.

The mirror dimension cracked, shards whistling into view with sharp, grinding sounds. I ignored Meri's gasp and tapped on the shards with my fingertip one after another, leaving figments on each. Scenes began to play out on them like screens, projected from my memory of the past, present and aborted future.

I put the scene of Ego showing Meredith his pod flower thing on the second biggest shard of them all. Right up there next to the one of her dying, and the third where Ego was admitting to putting cancer in her head while Peter was suspended and helpless. Another little spell made sure sound only ever came from the shard being given the most attention.

My boy babbled curiously at the new noises and shades on the ceiling. I picked him up and went to sit on the nearby rocking chair. I was careful to keep him with his back to the looping scenes. I didn't block the sounds though. If he associated Ego's voice with my silent contempt for the aborted celestial, all the better. Children needed a balanced upbringing and he got far too much of the opposite feelings from his mother.

Peter was frowning at me.

*Alright, maybe a little less contempt.*

I knocked our noses together and he laughed. I laughed too, hugging him close to rub our cheeks together. So cute!

Since Meri still stood and felt absolutely petrified by what she was watching, I decided to settle in for the long haul and finally conjured those glowing butterflies to distract my boy. They distracted him alright, in the worst way. The tantrum built up so fast that I almost didn't catch it in time. I dispelled them and conjured a fox instead, though I expected him to start hollering anyway. This one worked much better though, much to my delight.

*Maybe I should get a real one.*

I could go on a hike in January, to find whatever baby foxes got orphaned in the local woods. Foxes might not be the most conventional pets here, but Spartans loved them for the simple reason that they're absolutely hilarious. There was a saying back home – if it looks like a dog, acts like a cat and sounds like a dolphin, then it's quite possibly a fox. So, basically the same as Peter's baby babble but cuter. And fluffy.

*Foxes in the wild are territorial, but the property should be big enough for two or three.*

Toddler Peter was going to love them, and seeing him and them interact will be surreal. I couldn't wait. Why, I could even feel a song coming on!

“Turn your head and see the fields of flames~”

A side effect of my inclusion in the sim was that some of my culture seeped through the zeitgeist into song and story. The Founding Epic of the Spartan Empire, or at least episode one, emerged almost unaltered as a power metal song. Funny how these things go, though – the singer proved, for all his boldness, to not have any courage at all. The opposite of a Spartan, he may as well have been a lily-livered Athenian. Fortunately, I could hold that against him

without holding it against the ones who played the instruments. My vocal range was better suited for the song anyway.

I sang lowly while the spectral fox pounced all over Peter's hands and face. Gave him a few minutes to get bored of grasping after the little animal while I gently rocked him. I spent the next few poking his cheeks while letting him tug on my beard to build up his baby grip. I normally went clean-shaven, but a beard was an added layer of disguise while you were infiltrating government institutions and places of higher learning.

I always made sure to scout the area in astral form, and most of the time had figments swarming my surroundings too, so I wasn't worried about discovery. Well, not *unintended* discovery. But it never hurt to be thorough.

*Maybe I should keep it*, I thought as my daughter's stress levels finally mounted to the point where she could no longer go without voicing them. *A beard might give me an added layer of authority when dealing with young brats.*

And Starks.

"Daddy... what... what *is* all this?"

I raised a finger in forbearance and gave Peter another minute to finally doze off. As I expected the reminder of her priorities – and that I shared those priorities – helped Meri collect herself some. When I held him up for her, she rubbed her arms, took a breath and accepted him, carrying him carefully back to his crib.

I walked and stood next to her while she set the baby down and we both waited quietly until deep sleep finally claimed him.

"What are you?" Meri whispered, arms wrapped around herself. "What is this? What was... all that?"

"I'm your father." I waved a finger down and the dimensional wall fused back together behind us, disappearing from view. "The magic is a recent development. And *that* was me explaining to my precious daughter that my *utter loathing* of that alien who dishonored you is a fully informed decision."

Meri hunched on herself, afraid to meet my eyes. Afraid of me, and more besides. I could feel it. Not for the first time, I felt zero regret that I hadn't gotten around to learning more invasive

forms of telepathy. Even went one better and blocked out what she was practically shouting at me in the other plane.

“I don’t believe it,” Meri finally found her voice again. “I can’t. I *can’t* believe it. He couldn’t – he wouldn’t, he’d never do something like that, I know it. I know *him*.”

I gently put a hand on her shoulder, turned her to face me, and then struck her at the same time in the forehead and right below her navel.

Meredith Quill the Younger flew out of her body with a sharp scream.

I left mine too. Walked over and waited for her to stop shrieking and flailing mid-air while I hooked a mind braid on her to synchronise our perceptions of time, instead of it randomly speeding up and down like it did for all the untrained. And most of the trained too, for that matter. That was a big reason why dreams were so chaotic.

“Meri,” I said as time slowed to a crawl around us, causing her to whirl her shocked, angry and terrified eyes to mine. I held out a hand and smiled winningly. “It’s alright, daughter mine., I’m a professional.”

My daughter curled around herself with that look of disgust universal to children cringing at their parents for trying and failing to act cool.

Finally, though, she took my hand. Of course she did, she didn’t know how else to land. It hadn’t dawned on her that she didn’t need to think about it in what was basically a lucid dream. Flying was like breathing. If you thought about it, you suddenly started needing to consciously control it and it never seemed to go as well as it should. Not unless you learned the right rhythm. Meditation was foundational to Alchemy of the Self for good reason.

I tugged her down – she didn’t think about going through the floor, so she didn’t – and walked her over to her body. She was reluctantly fascinated at seeing herself from the outside, and I pretended not to notice her scowl at the sight we made, with her reeling from me mid-jab. I instead pulled her closer and pointed at a very specific spot inside her head which, put simply, was *all wrong*.

Meri stilled and brought her hands to her mouth, wide-eyed.

I let go and stepped back to wait.

Meri looked closer, horrified fascination on her face, in her eyes and every psychic wave. Closer and closer until she couldn't deny what was in front of her. Until her curiosity and denial drove her to reach out and disperse what she hoped but *knew* was no illusion. She reached into her own skull only to be sucked back into her proper place in her flesh and blood.

*Oho, a natural talent! No getting trapped outside her body for her, unlike a certain Hulk.*

I returned to my body and caught her before she toppled backwards.

“Easy there, my girl, let's put your feet up.” I walked her over to the rocking chair and let her collapse in it. Then I picked up the whole thing and moved it right next to the crib. I stroked her hair. “Daughter mine, you don't know shit about how the universe works, but it's alright. Nobody would expect the guy being all sweet on you to be space Satan.”

“This must be a dream,” Meri put her face in her hands. “A bad dream. A nightmare. I'm still in bed and this is just a fevered delusion.”

*I have no skill at dreamwalking yet,* is what I could have said. Yao had to put us into an artificial dream to learn all this to begin with, last reality. Dreams within a dream were less reliable teachers than Eris drunk on underworld pomegranate sherry. But one revelation was enough for one day. “I'll make a repeat performance at noon tomorrow, so you don't need to wonder about it.”

“Please don't.”

“I have to, space Satan put cancer in your head.” I withdrew. “I'm going to fix it, in case that wasn't clear.”

Meri's eyes snapped up to mine.

“I'm not skilled enough right now, but I will be in time.” Soul powers, spiritual abilities, they were countless, varied and virtually lacking in scalability if you kept working on them. But I could perceive my *current* limits, and they weren't that wide or high in the grand scheme of things. At least by the standards of idiot gods. I might, say, be able to hold an infinity stone in my bare hands without dying, but probably not use it. Currently. “Give me a year, tops, and I'll take care of that tumour, and anything else that's not going good. So you don't need to worry about it, alright?”

Meri opened her mouth, closed it and just stared at me helplessly. Lost.

*Wait till you find out everything else.*

“Now, I’m sorry but I still have work to do tonight. I’ll send your mother up, alright?”

No reaction at all this time, which was fair enough. This was never *not* going to be a traumatic revelation. Hopefully the wonder I added through my chosen approach will offset the damage some.

*Mom and Dad’s love and kindness will just have to do for the rest.*

I wandered downstairs to find the mom in question, whose restored youth had rendered her a tad too willing to stay up late just to wait for me. All on top of the astral traveling she’d been doing herself, on and off these past weeks. She hadn’t found it a good fit, externalization of power was more of a masculine thing in arcane terms. Even then, not just anyone could do it.

Fewer still could affect the physical world as a ghost, never mind do it *and* manipulate their own perception of space and time with such impunity as me. She had more of a propensity for symbology, potions and crystal harmonics. Possibly seidr too, though we were reluctant to experiment with anything resembling channelling for obvious reasons.

But she was as concerned about our other child as I was, so I wasn’t going to gainsay her contributing even the least fabulous of her witchy powers. Odysseus and Medea were the greatest power couple Terra was never going to know about for good reason. Also, we learned together from the same teacher, in the one year-long life from before, even if Yao was only willing to get *me* a sling ring now. However he’d sourced it when he was avoiding all contact with Kamar-Taj for the foreseeable future. For whatever reason. Probably Dormammu.

*Oh well, all the astral projecting she does during the day does count as sleep.*

I walked to the tea table to look over the article cut-outs she’d prepared for me. Meredith had subscribed to a whole bunch of newspapers, tabloids and magazines, and she actually enjoyed reading them and picking out important information from the rest of the dross. As I’d assumed, keeping Tony’s exploits at Philips Academy private was never going to work, no more than keeping his attendance from the public had. It didn’t even take paparazzi, the local mean girls had leaked the news almost immediately. Still no new job postings, but it was only a matter of time.

“You’ll make the perfect empress.”

“Promises, promises.”

“The law of averages is on my side, woman.”

“Throwing fuzzy math at me won’t make me empress any faster, dear.”

“Oh, what’s that? You can’t wait to deal with the gossip and simpering of an entire galactic arm?”

“Revisionist geography, how dare you? You told me it was barely half of an arm at best!”

“I said *over*. Over half. And we’re always expanding.”

“You and I remember that conversation very differently.”

*We sound like Barton and Romanova.*

Yikes, a sudden change in the conversation was urgently required. “I told Meri about the cancer.” That worked and then some. “Didn’t mention being an alien, past lives or Peter being ours, but I showed her the tumour and how it got there.”

“Oh dear. I should be going up there, shouldn’t I?”

“Probably for the best. She’s with him in the nursery. But first, how’s Glenn?”

“Getting busy with his strumpet,” Meredith huffed as she got up from the chair. She didn’t appreciate Elia Serkis’ existence any more than I did, never mind her hogging our son all to herself. Personally, I despaired more at Glenn’s lack of self-control. When did chastity unto your wedding night become a point of shame on this planet?

That was a rhetorical question.

Meredith didn’t come over for a kiss so I didn’t bother putting the work in either. I just tossed a psychic ball with the memory of my talk with Meri at her.

My wife rolled her eyes but sent back what she believed was pertinent. Communication at the speed of thought was ever so convenient. Psychic powers *could* get really invasive, depending on the vector used. Some *started* with invading the human brain to read the wave interference patters at the source, and only got more sinister from there.

Fortunately, in-built awareness and defences against such things steadily developed as a side benefit of *Alchemy of the Self*. If your mind integrated with your psychic body, for example, no telepath could have his way with you without a literal battle in the astral plane. Conversely, if you hadn’t done the same with your brain, and didn’t have the ability to possess things like

*I'd* based my entire mystical development around – just so I could have all the powers of a horror movie ghost demon in my own body – there were things that could still get you. Nerve override, brain-affecting drugs, probes, implants, cybernetics. Not that I could confidently speak to the existence or efficacy of such technologies. On Terra anyway.

More importantly for us, mind-to-mind communication didn't need anything invasive at all. You just bundled up what you wanted to send in a tiny ball of psychic matter and spat it over. Yes, this was where the idea that spit carried a part of your soul came from.

If you wanted extra senses, you could also build a few new eyes, ears, feelers or what have you in your psychic body to keep track of things, including what other people's spirits and minds might be conveying. Needless to say, I had many of each, with ideas for a lot more applications besides, as soon as I freed up enough time to experiment properly.

Technically you didn't even need any of that, it was possible to practice deciphering your own intuition until you just *knew* these things as well as you did anything else. But it was time-consuming and involved, and unnecessary when the quicker options didn't have any pitfalls. Also, no parallel processing.

*Glenn's almost back home*, I concluded from Meredith's update. Well, back to his rental flat in Los Angeles anyway. *Should finally reach the end of his road trip by the end of the week.*

It was pretty late in the year for one, but I couldn't deny that Route 66 always had something for everyone no matter the time of year. I even approved of most of the stops on his itinerary – the Muffler Man statue in Atlanta, the meteor crater in Arizona, he stayed the night at a Wigwam Motel every time he could, the Grand Canyon, climbing the Statue of Liberty, many more besides those, it was like he'd planned out his five week trip to cross out every item on America's bucket list.

Hell, he even stopped by a Cadillac Ranch in Texas to get his car spray painted. He hadn't earned the Spartan army insignia, but who even did on Earth anymore? I was more than willing to appreciate the homage to his dear old dad. Even if it was completely unwitting because I never revealed my true background to anyone.

*Nature does breed true.*

I couldn't feel smug about it though, for the same reason why Meredith and I were stalking him like a pair of crazy in-laws to begin with.

*Am I one though? Is it even stalking if it's your own kid? For the sort of thing that might drive a normal person to hire a private investigator?*

The simple fact was that he was on his road trip in late October, when he should instead be attending his second-year classes at UCLA. After he'd gone there *against* our wishes, when it wasn't even the only place where he'd have gotten a scholarship. I didn't raise no simpleton.

But now he was, what? Taking a year off? Dropping out? *Without* telling any of us, hell, he lied to us straight up when we were on the phone. We knew about the girlfriend, he had that one over his sister at least, but had never met. The two of them completely avoided the entire state of Missouri on this trip too, who did that? We had the Fantastic Caverns, the world's second-largest rocking chair, we even had a giant cave stashed with one and a half billion pounds of cheese! Who in their right mind went on a Route 66 road trip and missed all that?

*Fuck, I **have** gone native. Reverse, reorient, get a grip, curse you Terran Collective Unconscious!*

Ahem.

I *was* glad he was away from Los Angeles for once. That place was devil central, of course I didn't want him near there, never mind the den of child-raping vipers on the hill next door. The number of lowlifes there trying their best impression of Clement Freud was probably the highest per capita of anywhere in America.

But he'd gone there anyway because he was going to attend UCLA to study molecular physics, and nothing and no one was going to get in the way of his dream to experience the big city. He was a man with a want and the will to make his own means. Just like I raised him.

He even refused our help with money – of course I wasn't going to cut him off, breaking out from under your father's authority is a natural part of becoming a man! It wasn't just rent either, he refused *all* our money, once he left home he wanted to make his own way. It was precious, perfect, a dream come true, all my fatherly efforts rewarded and validated in one single swoop, I should've been crying manly tears the whole time.

Instead I was just pissed that I would forever *be* pissed at him for choosing that cesspit of all places. A father wants to be proud of his boy without string attached, dammit!

*Oh well, I thought fatalistically. At least the place isn't a shit-covered tent city full of fentanyl zombies run by retards.*

Right.

Back to work.

For the benefit of the *other* mini-man that will drive me bald before I'm even a measly centenarian, I can already tell. "Okay, I got all of it. Thanks ever so much, dear wife." I reached out to spin a new portal.

"You're really going all in on this, aren't you?" Meredith was watching me carefully, oblivious to my inner ramblings because she valued privacy and liberty too much to even entertain the thought of learning invasive mind magics. Which was ironic because accepting other people's minds into yours – and any manner of incorporeal entity – to learn everything going on was a natural talent of women practitioners. "Will you ever explain why?"

"You don't like him much, do you?"

"I don't *dislike* him just fine, I just don't understand it. You and yours have a bad history with gods. I'd have thought you rebuffed him because you want as little to do with him as possible. Is Tony Stark really worth all your loyalty?"

"Not fidelity, honor. Perseverance to reciprocate." I aborted the portal spell to give her my full attention. "Meredith, Stark went full 'let me let you do whatever you want even if it means punching me in the face with my own gauntlet.' There was at least one moment when he thought I was planning to challenge his control of the stones, and he was fully intending to let me even if it meant bashing his face in. He only ever did that once, with a single person."

Her face cleared. "James Rhodes." But it closed off again the next moment. "Your opinion of the man is hardly glowing, Jason."

"You think so?"

"I know how you think, husband. That man attacked his best friend in his own home, beat him up in public at his birthday party, tried to justify it on grounds that Iron Man's party tricks were ever so dangerous, then immediately lost that moral high ground by being the one who started the violence. And when Stark brushed off his grappling attempt and tried to deescalate – repeatedly, no matter how condescendingly – Rhodes wouldn't stop attacking until he won the pissing contest *he* started. All in a bid to justify his robbery, assault and utter betrayal of his supposed best friend via a good bout of victim-blaming."

“And if I play devil’s advocate and say Stark was very deliberately holding back and manipulating him the whole time, to make him ‘steal’ the armor as his chosen successor once he died to palladium?”

“That doesn’t matter. Not when he would have followed through on his peace offers if Rhodes had stopped. Not when Rhodes could have stolen the armor without any confrontation at all. Not when he could and *should* have done none of this. I don’t believe for a second he hadn’t already resolved to steal it going in.”

Yes, that was my reading of the situation as well. Rhodes couldn’t be man enough to face the thief in the mirror, so he refused to leave until he beat Stark up just so he could convince himself Tony gave him no other choice. The mental gymnastics required to convince yourself ‘he deserved it’ were never pretty. In light of his own actions, Rhodes having the gall to tell Tony that he didn’t deserve his own creation was self-deluded hypocrisy that only Widow and Romanoff ever surpassed.

To Rhodes’ credit, he never did it again and seemed determined to atone and become once more worthy of Tony’s friendship and loyalty afterwards. He even succeeded, which was a feat no human save Virginia Potts ever surpassed, on account of her never betraying Stark to begin with. But it was at best debatable whether that would have still been the case if karma hadn’t so swiftly caught up with Rhodes at the Stark Expo.

That *said*... “All true, dear wife, but ultimately irrelevant.” I returned to my casting.

“How? Explain it to me.”

“Because it doesn't matter what I think about him, what matters is what Tony did in this case.” The portal stabilized. “He conflated me with SHIELD early on, then with Doctor Strange, but by the end he was treating me like Rhodes, and then better. He trusted me and gave me more consideration than he ever did *anyone*, to the point where I didn’t have to work in spite of him at all by the end. *No* one got that honour, ever. Not James Rhodes, not Virginia Potts, hell, not even JARVIS. I can’t *not* repay that and still get to call myself a man.”

“Oh Jason,” Meredith sighed, looking like she wanted to drag me to the bedroom right then and there. “Go then. Be a man. A thousand miles away from me, because why should I get the dues I’m owed?”

I snorted. “As if I’d ever work by anyone schedule but my own.” I didn’t need anyone’s approval or permission for anything. “Don’t become a crazy cat lady while I’m gone, we’ll be getting foxes instead.”

“What?”

But I’d already crossed the portal and closed it behind me.

*It’s not like I don’t plan to arrange meetings with better prospective friends for Tony anyway. I even have the start of a shortlist, thanks to the Vacation.*

But that was for much later.

I spent the next few hours finishing my paperwork and filing everything where it was meant to be. Some creative use of transmutation magic was needed to alter the yearbook. Not my specialty by far, but manageable when I had a ready picture to copy over. By around 4 AM I was finished, so I put everything back how I found it and returned to the house to drop off the diploma in my study.

Then I took a nap.

At noon, I followed through on my promise of a repeat performance and left my baby girl with no choice but to accept she’d done goofed. I let her be after that so she could spend however much time she wanted with her head in her mother’s bosom without the burden of my presence. My girl was unjustly spurning of her father’s company when she felt small and stupid. Which she wasn’t, but when did she even listen to what I actually said anymore?

*Space Satan is going to pay for this!*

**“- October 31, 1980 .-“**

The rest of that week I spent typing up various job applications, with a couple of night-time trips to the Office of Vital Records in Austin, Texas, to double check that the rest of my paperwork was also still solid. You never knew with karma, I might have to use Hurricane Allen as cover to falsify my records all over again.

The way I’d established myself as an American citizen hadn’t been entirely considerate of other people, back in 1961. I didn’t choose Texas instead of Missouri as my ‘place of origin’ just so

I could be 'private' about my past to my neighbours, though leaving myself ample opening to adjust my backstory as necessary was completely intentional. Like now.

The real reason was Hurricane Carla. When it swept over Texas, I did the opposite of evacuating in the face of the strongest hurricane to ever hit the state at the time. I instead used all the peak human ability I still had back then to defy the storm, break into the Office of Vital Statistics, and falsify a birth certificate while there was still backup power.

Then I proceeded to inflict battery upon the archive room and a couple of offices so that the interior was thoroughly ruined by the wind and rain. Since I'd chosen Talbot as the name of my fictitious parents, I was particularly careful in making sure the filing cabinets with the Ts were completely unsalvageable. Broken windows, cracked pipes, tap water and a bucket may or may not have been involved just to make sure.

Then, when the announcement went out about the damage, I got in line with the rest of cruel nature's victims to show proof of identity so that our records could be recreated.

I'd also falsified the Social Security Document that my ostensible parents had requested for me at birth. I'd deliberately included an SSN I'd found to be already used, during my break-in. It was still common for the same number to be mistakenly issued to multiple people, so I was able to request a new one at the same time. With the US government doing all the work for me, my paper trail as a native Texan was the closest I could get it to being completely legitimate.

*Stark bless the pre-digital age.*

Also, assigning SSNs and issuing cards was only centralized in Baltimore in 1973, a whole twelve years later. That helped too.

The ultimate test was when I later brought forward my 'inherited' stash of gold and platinum bars from my poor many-great-grandparents, who were swindled out of ownership of a mine in Colorado, isn't it just dreadful? You didn't go on a space trip without a healthy stash of precious metal to convert into currency on the planets you visit.

The IRS got a huge cut, may they choke on it unto eternity in Tartarus, but it proved my paperwork passed muster. Gave more than enough of a nest egg too, enough for us to buy our land, build a home, and continue to generate more revenue from investing what was left.

Yes, I *had* spent a few years being a merchant during my youth. And a banker too. That was when I took the Peregrination off-script and deliberately chose some particularly dirty

employers so it doubled as spy and infiltration training. Both times concluded with them being executed for slavery, treason and usury. The last one was a cardinal sin that Terran society was sadly dying a steady death from (again), but all the other lessons transferred well enough that I've been able to choose the right stock options more often than not.

I'd also used my future knowledge to make the 'riskiest' stock acquisitions I could, since the reset. I'd make even more as soon as the technology businesses I recall get established. In a couple of years I should be at least a millionaire. Probably multiple times over. A billionaire too, in time. I was going to be the internet's sugar daddy and it was going to make me filthy rich.

*If not, I can always pull out more of those precious bars, now that I've finally been able to loot the shipwreck properly,* I thought as I went over my finances that Saturday night. Gains across the board, so I probably had nothing to worry about. *I'm still mining those asteroids though.*

I needed training to survive in space anyway. Fight too.

Without my equipment, I mean. I did have vacuum training, but conventional solutions weren't going to win against the true threats out there. Especially if the Vacation was *also* right about Thanos having once been closer to his original incarnation in terms of ability. It was going to take some work to avoid Yao having to make the mutually assured destruction play hinted at back then, but I was willing to be optimistic until given all reasons otherwise.

~Confusion, Bewilderment, Alarm~

*I wasn't goading the Moirai!*

I dropped everything and headed downstairs to check on Meredith.

I made it into the den just as my wife was rousing from her astral nap in her rocking chair near the fireplace.

"What's wrong?"

"There are two sets of WITSEC paperwork on our son's dinner table."

I blinked. Once, twice, thrice. I actually needed more than an eyeblink to reorient for the first time in a month and three lifetimes. "WITSEC," I echoed flatly. "As in the WPP. The United States Federal Witness Protection Program."

“I thought – I *hope* I just imagined them, you know I’m not as good as you at telling truth apart from the lingering psychic impressions of past events.” Bullshit, she was fine. “But even if it was a past dream intruding on mine...”

“It still means one or both of the folders were there at some point before,” I finished grimly. “Long enough and emotionally charged enough to leave a permanent record of significance in the soul of the residence.” I checked on the mind thread on Glenn. Still about an hour out. “I’m going to double check.”

“Should I get Meri?”

“... Not yet.” I sat down across from her in *my* armchair. “But you might want to rethink dinner plans.”

I projected into the astral plane and travelled to Glenn’s address so fast I gave myself tunnel vision. Yes, that’s where ‘the light at the end of the tunnel’ comes from.

All things considered, the bachelor pad was decent even by my standards. My boy had managed to find one in need of some repairs and furniture, so he negotiated rent to a pittance in exchange for fixing the place up himself. The results of his handiwork and second-hand purchases were eminently decent. If becoming a world-renowned scientist didn’t work out, he could always moonlight as interior designer and handyman. It’ll be just in time for the college bubble to burst too, he’ll be making more money than most people with MDs *and* get to choose his own contracts and schedule.

I spent an eyeframe’s worth of time to thoroughly scout the neighbourhood, as well as all the rooftops and windows I could find that could give a sniper a direct view of the place. Extrasensory perception meant I didn’t care about the dark.

When I didn’t find any snoopers, I finally looked through the apartment properly. There were no physical signs of a break-in, nor had the place been ransacked or otherwise vandalized. Everything was as it had been days and weeks ago when I and Meredith last dropped by as ghosts. Plus a bit more dust.

Unfortunately, there really were two WITSEC folders on the table.

One looked completely new.

The other looked like it had passed through several kinds of hell before being dropped in a puddle and trampled. On overlaying it with my spirit to catechize the object’s anima – the one

and only power purely derived from the Soul Stone I'd had time to practice to a reliable level so far, a form of animistic psychometry – I learned that was exactly what happened. The person who'd dropped it was undergoing rather violent murder at the time. The murderer then collected the scattered papers and brought them here by car. Along with the other folder.

I sent a couple of figments to literally possess the unsightly things – my spirit was extremely dense, it took barely 5% of my psychic body to maintain continuity of self, unlike other sorcerers who were limited outside their bodies – and flipped the two folders open to read them as fast as I could turn the pages.

*This must be how Odysseus felt every time the gods tossed yet another wrong island in his path.*

The first folder had forms for a partial change from Glenn Quill to Glenn Talbot, my entirely fictitious but oh so meaningful surname before I took Meredith's. It included clauses for the *potential* additional protection of the rest of us, conditional on certain items that were redacted. Psychometry told me it was our names, address, and what constituted 'sufficient cause' for us to be brought in. The document also had every page, stained and ruffled as they were already, cut straight through with a scissors. So did the attached non-disclosure agreement. As of only *two days ago*.

Disturbed, I cast a sympathetic scrying spell to check if there were other copies still extant. The answer was no. Any other copies had been destroyed. Or hidden in a very warded room, but that was extremely unlikely.

The other form was conditional on Glenn finishing his studies in molecular chemistry, pursuing an *additional* major in physical chemistry, agreeing in advance to be hired on by an unspecified organisation – the space had been left blank to be filled in later – and implied a complete name change to Joseph Getty. There were no clauses about the rest of us. But there *was* a much heftier and pre-redacted NDA attached to it, compared to the comparatively threadbare one in the first. You could be signing yourself into eternal slavery with this thing and you'd never know.

*My boy's gone and really impressed somebody.*

I didn't know what was happening here. It was taking all my willpower not to jump to any conclusions. It was obviously nothing good. It was also nothing that had ever happened before. To the best of my knowledge at least. I forced myself not to re-evaluate what I *thought* I knew in the prior timelines just yet. And the simulation. But it was hard, for one simple reason.

*I know those names.*

Glenn Talbot. In the pre-Snap times he was the right hand of Thaddeus Ross, and the one-time husband of Betty Ross. He was the eternally dedicated and equally eternally ineffectual nemesis of the Hulk. After the Snap cascade, he was a high ranking major or general in the Air Force that I only knew about because he died in an incident in Chicago. One that was poorly covered in the media, but much better on the Internet. The general's name thereby became a major rallying cry on the issue of Internet censorship. In no cases did me and mine have any relation to him. In the simulation, the name only figured in the terribly unreliable TV series, where he became *Hydra's* greatest nemesis, only to be captured, tortured, turned into a crazy superhuman and die.

Joseph Getty, meanwhile, was the man who, under threat that Hydra would kill his family if he didn't cooperate – no relation there either – became the one who confirmed and harnessed the element of gravitonium in the same TV series. This element was eventually misused to turn Glenn Talbot into Graviton.

Everything other than the films was full of nonsense by word of God himself. Rights disputes prevented the series and films from being properly integrated, the inhumans were forced on the writers because they lacked the rights to the X-men, and gravitonium was complete made-up nonsense. Trust me, I was a scientist in a different galaxy thirty years ago.

But the rest of the broad strokes, some of the premise, those things could still exist. Identity theft, blackmail, cover-ups, a secret hunt for super-powered beings, engineering of living superweapons, important recurring names.

*Fuck, this isn't doing good things to my ability to make informed decisions.*

I stood there in near-frozen time, trying to come up with *some* way to explain what I had before me. It took far too long for just the beginning of an explanation to start crawling its way out of the haze of what-the-fuck-is-this.

*Maybe they're both fake identities. Or stolen. Or neither.*

I thought about the FBI, CIA, SHIELD and the rest of the alphabet soup, their level of governmental access, and what they or... co-opters would be able to pull as a result. What they might *want* to. If you already have people in various government agencies... it might make sense to regularly create and register various identities and paper trails for citizens that don't

actually exist. These could then just be handed out to people whenever you need to... acquire an asset. Whether or not that asset is cooperating.

I returned to my body every bit as fast as I left it, rose from my armchair, went to the phone, picked up the receiver and dialled the wheel.

Tk-tk-tk, tk-tk-tk-tk, tk-tk-tk-tk-tk-tk. Tk-tk-tk, tk-tk-tk-tk-tk, tk-tk. Tk-tk-tk-tk-tk, tk, tk-tk, tk-tk-tk.

Brr, brr, brr-click.

*“You have reached the occasional stop-along-the-way of one Tenzin Yangtso. No guarantee of reply can be provided at this time.”*

Beep.

*He’s probably in Alfheim again.* “Old boy, you did give *me* guarantees, so why exactly am I *somehow* staring down a bigger mess than the Vacation?”

I closed the phone. I wasn’t calling to look for help anyway.

Meredith was watching me seriously. “It’s true, then.”

“Terribly true.” I looked at her seriously. “Get Meri. We’re having a family meeting. Feel free to decide what to tell her, I trust your judgment.” Even if I didn’t trust my daughter’s at all right now.

As always, my wife could read me as a wife damn well should. “Are you thinking of a surprise visit to the folks down in Texas?”

That was code for ‘should I prepare supplies for when you shunt us into the Mirror Dimension until further notice.’ “It might be worth going there for a few days, maybe a week.”

“Alright. I’ll start getting things ready while we wait for takeout.”

*If anyone at all has the gall to come after us, there will be executions.*

I left my body again, flew to Los Angeles and let time move at its normal pace while I took my time combing the neighbourhood for anything that didn’t belong. I dispatched some of my figments to form a perimeter in the shape and pattern of an ellipsoid billiard. Soon, no spot bigger than a fist existed within a hundred meters of the apartment building, without a fragment of my awareness passing through every other second.

A slowly turning field of this sort was something I always had around me, the shape's inner reflective properties were extremely useful. Peter wasn't wrong to accuse me of turning myself into a Jedi during the Vacation. But I'd also developed a more autonomous version I could anchor to places precisely for occasions like this.

Hopefully no drug addicts would stumble around the place, though it might be worth it for their reactions. The interlaced swarm of dancing eyes and gossamer light that I'd structured my psychic body into was eminently psychedelic. Many and more eyes and ears on strings, stretching and peering from fractal strands around a central body made of iridescent light. Depending on what useful features I manage to replicate from nature in the future, I expect visions of me to only become more surreal from here.

Finally, at ten past ten, Glenn's car – the 1950 Cadillac Sedan we'd fixed up together – turned the last bend and carefully backed into the sleepy alley because the bloc lacked any proper parking space.

I studied them as they got out of the car, though I made sure not to broadcast it, or emit anything at all. Wouldn't do for their instincts to pick anything up. They were both very well honed, as I and my wife had seen early on in our... investigation.

Glenn was the literal black sheep of the family. I had golden hair that changed to a fiery red around my temples, a reddish beard and blue eyes, while Meredith was brown-haired and also blue-eyed. Meri was a perfect blend of us both, and Peter would be my spitting image. Glenn took after neither of us though. He had some of my stature and some of my bone structure, but he was gangly, his features more angular, and his hazel eyes and jet-black hair were from Meredith's father.

Next to him, Elia Serkis was that rare fatal beauty, ebony-haired, immaculately light skin, deep emerald eyes, graceful and perfectly proportioned in every possible way, with a suave voice that always had a clever turn of words on the tip of her tongue. Her fashion sense was exquisite as well, even if she was a bit too attached to green.

From what I or Meredith saw during our ever so ethically questionable spying, she only ever acted like the perfect girlfriend. What stuff we felt from her when they *weren't* together didn't add as much as I'd hoped to our suspicions. There *had* been a number of times when her expression and vibes changed, but no more than in other people who got sudden ideas, or remembered something unpleasant.

Even the stuff she muttered when Glenn wasn't around to hear was more baffling than anything. The most we pieced together was that she was very annoyed at Glenn for refusing the mentorship offer of their gravitational physics professor, and was sure he'd dearly regret it. But even the feeling of schadenfreude she radiated at those times didn't tell me as much as I expected it to. I was actually starting to wonder if my frame of reference for interpreting extrasensory input was too narrow, despite not neglecting my social life. Meredith's too.

I still didn't trust the veneer at all. It wasn't confirmation bias, I know my damned charts.

Glenn was quite thoroughly smitten with her though, alas. It wasn't any shallow feeling either, certainly not the sort of senseless infatuation that turned men stupid. It was true, earnest love. I couldn't even hold it against him, he certainly deserved the perfect woman for a wife. But if there's anything my past lives have taught me, it's that he's not as good a judge of character as he thinks he is.

Not until it's too late.

The two kissed passionately against the hood of Glenn's car – ugh – before my son finally regained some manner of control over himself. “Wanna take this upstairs?”

Feh.

“You go first,” the strumpet said after stealing one last kiss and pushing him away playfully. “I'm gonna stop by the store and restock on girl business.”

Ack.

“Got your intercom key? Alright, don't stay out too long, I'm always so blue without you.”

Please stop.

Mercifully, Glenn went into the building and she made for the nearby corner store.

Only to pass it by and keep walking until she exited the alley and entered the phone booth on the main street. I watched her closely through my figments. Carefully memorised the number and listened as the call picked up at the other end.

“Comet Ping-Pong Chinese food, what's your order?”

“Yeah, hi, I'm calling about that surprise order, number 84737.”

“Please wait.”

A hold tone. A click. A different man's voice. "Sarkissian. Finally bored of playing honeypot with mister tattletale?"

The scowl that twisted her facial expression was nowhere near as breath-taking as the complete change in her psychic presence. "Oh, it's you. Finally browned your nose enough to join the janitors?"

Such total change...

"Don't pretend you don't like that sort of thing, which of us has been slaving for a year to turn her boyfriend into the biggest brownnoser of them all?"

"I'm sorry, which of us is the shrink again?"

"Definitely not *you*, my not-at-all-dear Ophelia. Shrinks are fully trained and licensed in their specialty, you're neither."

'Elia Serkis' rolled her eyes. "Only because my field is led by idiots."

"Sounds like someone's emotionally compromised."

"I'm sorry, you want me to prove it on you?"

Derisive laughter came from the phone. "Know your place, Sarkissian. People in our line of work only tolerate power-hungry credit stealers when they pretend really good that they're neither."

"Kiss my ass, Edison."

"Nobody likes it when a woman comes on too strong either."

Her mouth turned in disgust. "Just do your job, *Po*, and I'll do mine." She shut the phone without waiting for a reply, left the booth and went to the corner stone like she originally promised to.

It took effort not to lash out at her, to merely watch in reluctant fascination how her psychic presence changed back to what it was before. She completely became the mask again, like only people truly enlightened to the confected nature of *all* personality could do.

*Shakespearean lycanthropy.*

Fuck.

Elia Serkis... Ophelia Sarkissian, should I know that name? She stopped behind Glenn's car and unlocked the trunk.

A van entered my range then, black with tinted windows driving up the street, slowing down once, twice after turning into the sleepy street. Each time a nondescript man hopped off and disappeared into the adjoining buildings. One stopped just inside the door of the building across from my son's. The other ascended all the way to the roof of the opposite one, where I'd found the spot with the best direct view of my son's apartment.

My figments recorded it all by rote for later review, but I was too busy keeping myself from pulling my best Amityville impression once I saw what was in the van's trunk.

The van stopped briefly behind my son's car, just long enough to transfer their 'cargo' while Serkis – Sarkissian – held the trunk open.

*This is why*, I thought with that clarity of mind that only descends upon a man when he is enlightened to the righteousness of foul murder. *This is why you never **not** follow the Universal Hot-Crazy Matrix.*

Any woman that's so pretty, smart and flawless in every way is almost certainly secretly crazy. That's why anything below 5 crazy and over 8 hot is called the unicorn zone, those women don't exist.

The van had just vanished from sight when my son ran back out of the apartment building.

"Elia? Elia!"

"Glenn, what's wrong?"

"Oh thank God, we have to go."

"Glenn, what's the matter with you." She met him half-way to the door. "You're sweating."

"We have to go, now."

"Go inside you mean, you're soaking, let's go upstairs before you catch yourself pneumonia."

"Forget that." Glenn looked tensely around. "Did you see anything strange? I heard a car, was anyone here?"

Serkis pressed into my son's chest. "Glenn, you're scaring me, what's wrong?"

"I don't know, it's..."

“It's okay. You can talk to me. Go slow.”

Oh she did *not* just-

“I just... I feel like I'm losing it.” Glenn began to walk her to the car. “We have to go, get... get out of Los Angeles, I have to get out of here, out of school-“

“It's the Professor, isn't it?”

“I don't think it was the best idea to refuse him so soundly.”

“Glenn.” Serkis stopped him just behind the car. “Do you believe in a higher power?”

“None that cares about any of this.”

Anyone else might have missed the crack in her composure, but not me. “Do you believe in love, at least?”

Glenn sighed and looked down at her soulfully. “If the men in my family didn't love so strongly, we wouldn't be here right now.”

*Oh no.*

The tart hugged him around his neck, lips almost touching. “So you believe in our love?”

“Yes,” Glenn said emphatically, because he hadn't paid enough attention while his mother waxed poetic every time she finished a new epistle from *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. “Yes, I believe in our love.”

“Good.” She pulled back, her sudden action leaving my boy bewildered, but not me because I was from the future and I'd seen this movie. “Cause I sure as hell don't.”

“What?”

She opened the trunk.

With a sharp gasp, my son reeled away from the sight of the bloody corpse that had just been stuffed in with his luggage.

Sarkissian smiled cruelly, and her spirit once again changed to that predatory and sinister thing I'd seen seeping out while she was on the phone. “You're brilliant, Glenn, but you're also such a big idiot.”

Glenn didn't answer. He wasn't looking at her anymore, his eyes were blown wide, his mouth open, and his skin pale and clammy in the light of the streetlamp as his eyes stayed riveted on the dead body of the federal agent in the boot of his car.

"Don't tell me you bought that virgin bullshit."

"... What is this?"

"I am the great Ian Quinn's precious niece." That name I did know, and it made Glenn jerk his head like he'd been slapped. "Uncle's little angel must keep up appearances. She certainly can't let any hint slip of her relation to the brilliant 'Jowan Conn,' it would jeopardize recruitment."

"Holy fuck."

"Oh, don't be such a baby." Sarkissian invaded Glenn's personal space and managed to steal a kiss before he could even start to regain himself. "I'll see myself off." She strutted away casually. "I've got some friends in the fixing business who'll gladly return this package to sender and clean up the mess like it never happened. That is, if you make the right impression this time." She smirked back over her shoulder. "We wouldn't want the cops to get the wrong idea, right? See you tomorrow, lover."

We stood there, my son in body and I in spirit, watching Ophelia Sarkissian walk off into the night. Of the two men I'd sensed earlier, I saw only the sniper the roof pack and leave.

"Oh god," Glenn whispered, voice trembling and hands missing twice before he managed to close back the trunk. "Oh god, oh god, oh god."

The picture was finally coming together. Jowan Conn was the teacher on roster, about whom I'd never had cause to think twice about. If his real name was Ian Quinn...

I knew of him in the future as a big industrialist, and in the simulation as a fictional scientist driving both cybernetics and graviton research. He *also* had no reservations about conscripting, coercing and kidnapping other brilliant minds that could serve his purposes. And what better way was there, than to get to them young and fresh as their trusted teacher? Besides, if overtures fail, then the worms living in the government's bloated underbelly always appreciated an opportunity to test their latest ways to brainwash and coerce people.

Glenn had smelled a rat, contacted the right people and made some deal or other to get a new identity for himself – and us if necessary – while the FBI moved in to do their job. Except he didn't know how incompetent the alphabet soup was at everything besides growing fat and

abusive at the citizenry's expense. The CIA was still the designated punching bag in terms of optics right now. Glenn certainly didn't know about the many-headed monster that had been subverting and co-opting all the spook dens since before World War II even ended. Along with everything else. Even so, it had been the best move he could make.

Except there had always been a contingency plan in the form of Ophelia Sarkissian. A young woman capable of becoming the mask to that incredibly rare extent that had felled Merlin, and allowed my ancestors to throw off the yoke of the gods themselves.

*These are not normal enemies.*

I looked at the corpse of what was, objectively, an endangered species even now, twelve years prior to Ruby Ridge. A federal agent that actually wanted to do some good. I overlapped the corpse with my spirit, catechizing the remnants of his animus. I found only anger and flashes of colours and feelings, shock, pain, and rage to the sight of rain and wet sidewalk. I regretted the lack of a proper ghost to question, but I wasn't surprised the anima had already moved on.

In this day and age of Terra where so few were truly happy and no one was free, it was very rare indeed when death didn't come as relief.

Finally, Glenn rubbed a shaky hand over his face, covered his eyes and hunched over, shoulders trembling with tension. "Fuck." His voice was trembling too. "Fuck. *Fuck.*"

I watched quietly as my son bit his hand, waited out his weakness, took deep, rattling breaths to draw as much strength as he could from nothing, locked his car, and crept back into his apartment building like *he* was the criminal, instead of so much more.

I left the figment perimeter in place and returned home.

It would appear that HYDRA and the Spartoi Empire are in a state of war.

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