

Chapter 3 – Warring as Emperor Merits the Finest Assets

“- October 31, 1980 .-“

When I opened my eyes in my chair back home, I experienced the nearly overpowering desire to go on a murderous rampage. After a few moments to let the feeling pass, I experienced an equally strong drive to instead be very meticulous about tracking down everyone even remotely involved and make them disappear down a volcano's mouth. When that desire didn't fade, and in fact began to refine itself by specifying that it had better be an *active* volcano, I left my chair and stomped over to stand over the fireplace. Usually, watching the fire calmed me.

Not this time.

No matter what happens, Glenn will be paranoid about relationships of any kind from now on.

That harlot had ruined my boy's life. Even if she was completely wrong about deserving to be a world-class psychiatrist, that *bitch* clearly had a talent in stoking paranoia and-

“Jason.” My wife came through the door. I was so distracted I didn't even register her alarm hex triggering. When I didn't reply, she went as grim as I was. “It was true then.”

I didn't reply. I just sent her the memory.

Meredith blinked, then her face steadily went slack and her hands rose to cover her slack mouth. “Heavens...”

The opposite of my feelings exactly.

I desynched from my physical shell just a little. Just enough to let me dilate my perception of time. To give myself time to calm down. To *force* myself to let my fury simmer down. This ability, this skill that sorcerers couldn't advance past the apprentice stage without, because it was the only thing that allowed them to keep up with interdimensional horrors – and other superhuman speed – was now reduced to an emotional safety net.

After a... very long subjective time, I felt Meredith's aura begin to overlap mine. I returned to normal time flow and regretfully found myself unable to relax as I normally did when Meredith hugged me.

"Husband," she spoke from behind me. "What are you... what's the *third* most intense thought in your mind right now?"

I huffed. "Turning my own techniques on me, are you?"

"Is that the thought?"

I took and released a long breath. It shuddered. "No."

"What is it, then?"

I had to look a bit before I found it. "My name."

"What about it?"

"It's not pronounced Jason, it's *Jason*. Also, it's the name I go by but just a fourth of the whole. It's been tradition since our people escaped Earth after the Trojan War, that the heir of the Spartoi Bloodline will always be named Perseus, the Destroyer. It's the biggest irony us inheritors of Ancient Hellas could settle on for commemorating our successful destruction of the Gods' Grand Design."

I could feel her surprise, and the much more blatant shock and disbelief from further behind. My daughter had quietly come through the door mid-way through my reply, with little Peter, but I didn't mind. I didn't actually *care*, really, anymore.

"...Well." Meredith said, and she wasn't the least bit dismissive or mocking. She didn't care to coddle Meri any more than me either. And like a proper occultist, she didn't ask to hear my full real name. "That's quite something, husband. It's going to take me a while to decide how I feel about it. But why are you bringing this up now? What does it have to do with anything?"

"Quite a bit, apparently," I grunted. "When I forged my paperwork, I told you I put Talbot as my last name on the papers because it means 'Bright Valley', which was my first impression of the place where you breathed life back into me after I crash landed. But I lied – well, it's true that's what it tends to mean here on Terra. But the real reason is that you called me 'the messenger of

the stars,' and you did that right as I was coming to terms with the fact that crashlanding here destroyed *me*. You were the messenger of my destroyed future.”

I was more philosophical back then.

“I put Talbot as my original surname, because by the local etymological interpretation, Talbot can mean ‘destroyer of messengers’ as easily as ‘destruction *by* messengers’. I put it there in the same move as I agreed to take your last name to signify what you represented for me – the messenger of my destroyed future – but also that I was choosing to no longer view you that way from that point onwards. You know, as you do when you want to have a healthy marriage.”

There was an odd quiet.

“Bottom line, Talbot is not an auspicious name.”

It was only worse now that I knew about the past timelines. Talbot was the name of a monster hunter who never gets the Hulk he’s after. Other times it was the name of a good man who gets twisted by the tortures of his life into a deluded wretch with too much power and a messiah complex that drives him to destroy what he meant to defend. Talbot was *not* any name I wanted for my-

My wife burst into laughter.

I made to pinch my nose, but I couldn’t lift my arms because Meredith was hanging off me in her outburst. I could only huff and scowl at the hearth. There were just embers now. I telekinetically yanked a block of wood from the rack and kicked it into the fire.

Finally, my wife got a hold of herself and released me. I obligingly turned when she tugged on my shoulders. “Oh Jason,” my wife shook her head. “Don’t tell me you suddenly have a problem with overthinking things!”

“I don’t.” I harrumphed, then scowled at how false my own words rang. “Well, at least I didn’t used to. I *didn’t* overthink. Back then. In the past.”

Meredith shook her head again, then she came to give me a proper embrace and a kiss. “Whatever you say, dear. Now go and save our son.”

“... In a minute.”

“Which will be what for you? Hours? Days? Weeks?”

I stepped away. “I’ll let you know when I find out.”

“Well, just remember the most important thing.”

“And that is?”

“Regardless of what else you may be, right now you are first and foremost a father.” Peter, who was in Meri’s arms nearby, chose that very moment to burble. “And grandfather, now. You once told me that the only way to live without regrets is to live consistently. I don’t know what that means in this situation, but I know you’ll figure it out.”

“Will I really?” I asked darkly.

“I don’t have any ideas to give you,” my wife admitted. “But I believe every decision you’ve made about our children so far was the right one. You’ll make the right decisions from here onwards too.”

I reached out to poke the little bundle. Peter began chewing on my finger. I felt the murderous impulse within me... actually, it remained every bit as strong. “Are you sure about that? Because all I’ve taken from this is that I have a blind spot when it comes to family.”

“I disagree,” my wife said, even as our daughter kept looking between us. “I’d say that assuming and believing the best of our children is the best thing about you.”

I could have said something pithy, but I didn’t find the heart for it because she was wrong. Glenn had great ethics and even greater willpower, and yes, *I’d* taught him that. But what I didn’t teach him, and he never took other lessons in, was how to act so well that he could so completely fool me. It meant that the fault for this happening without me seeing a hint could only lie with me. Yes, I wasn’t a sorcerer or aware reincarnator when he talked to us on the phone, but that excuse only went so far.

*No, this is where I draw the line. I won’t go native on this too. Expecting honesty of people **should** be your first choice, and assuming fidelity of your family should be your **only** choice until incontrovertibly proven otherwise. Earth may have become a cesspool of falsehood and treachery, but Sparta still lived by the nine noble virtues. Then again, I’ve become a fair actor myself, haven’t*

I? It would seem at least one son took after me in that. Nobody other than Meredith knew I was an alien, never even suspected, that's how good at infiltration I'd grown during the Peregrination.

Then again, all this nonsense piled up before the lifetime where I made a career out of studying Terran psychology. I had to remind myself of that, because I couldn't afford to fall into the opposite bias either. *Furthermore, Glenn cut us out, which left me with a noticeable lack of opportunities to judge his behaviour.* I'd only seen him again at Meri's death, and then Peter's abduction on the same night emotionally compromised me to the deepest pit of Tartarus. In that light, the majority of extenuating circumstances were nominally on my side.

Still... there was one thing that muddled everything, namely the sad turn Glenn's estrangement from the rest of the family took even in the simulation, despite that I *did* have psychology training then. Who knows what happened there? There were a lot of disgusting things happening in that fake world, beneath the surface, who knows what equivalent of this travesty took place for whatever reason?

Uncle Gareth completely fooled me too, way back before the start of the Snap cascade, I recalled darkly. I entrusted him with the safe retrieval of my wife and child, when in fact he'd been conspiring to depose me for years. And now this thing with Meri and Ego. *Meredith's wrong, I do have a blind spot when it comes to family and it's the size of the Aegean Sea.*

Even so, though... that didn't mean my wife was wrong about everything else.

I made a sweeping wave of my hand. The boundary between worlds rippled throughout the entire house. "I've shifted us to the Mirror Dimension. Everything should still work, but mind that you don't warp reality too much. Now if you'll pardon me, I need to think."

"Mirror Dimension?" Meri mumbled. "Secret organisations, magic and aliens. My Papa's an alien, a king of aliens. God, I've died and gone to hippie hell where everything makes as little sense as I thought the world did. And now I'm Alice through the looking glass too, I don't suppose I'm owed an explanation for that one? How about everything else?"

"Well, technically the name is really just a red herring. It's more like the planet's afterimage. Your mother can explain it. I need to..." I trailed off. I had trouble recalling when I last became lost for

words. I knew what I ultimately needed to achieve but... I had no clear image of where to step first.

“Let’s get Peter back to bed and I’ll explain, dear. Your father needs to look for some reassurances of his own right now,” Meredith told our daughter, though we all knew her words were still for me. “Don’t worry, Meri, it won’t take long. Well, not for us, I’m sure.”

I stood in silence as they left.

“... Reassurance.” I considered the word. Turned it over in my mind. Reassurance for what? Not the rightness of the upcoming trail of dead bodies, *that* part at least came with no conflicted feelings, even though I didn’t know who all I’d be killing just yet. I’d originally planned to take things steady by syphoning and assimilating energy from the pan-dimensional cross-flow, which I could tap into through my sorcerer training. It would have enabled me to cultivate my spirit *and* my body slowly and carefully. I’d planned to test all of my powers and their practical applications until I got them right. Mostly on myself, because while I’m not morally or practically comfortable testing Soul powers on other people, I could restore *myself* to my natural state just fine.

However, since the world suddenly decided that I had to be involved with its filthy underbelly immediately, I was going to have to use some of the more distasteful shortcuts. Terra had no shortage of eminently acceptable targets. In fact, it had entire ideologies, religions and state governments that were objectively evil. I needed no reassurance on that front either.

So that left... Reassurance that my decision-making relative to family isn’t complete shit after all? When it counts most? What could even qualify as reassurance for that?

The moment I asked myself that question, I realized I already had my answer waiting for me.

It was rather bad form to look for it in another man’s son, but in this instance I arguably had an equal right. He *was* my foster son after all, in that last little version of things. Only for a few hours, admittedly, but even so...

I never actually renounced my claim.

“-. .-“

Dreamwalking was the most fascinating chore. Fascinating because you never ran into anything you did before, even when you ended up revisiting the same memories from past incarnations. A chore because it took a long time of practice to figure out how to get what *you* want out of a dream, with anything approaching consistency. All of which got many times harder when it was someone else's dream you tried to wade through.

I had absolutely no training in Dreamwalking, despite knowing the theory. In fact, I'd necessarily had to be a subject of the most extreme dream control by foreign actors, in order to learn all the magic I knew now. That foreign actor being Yao, and beyond him Tony Stark who was simulating the small fragment of the universe when that took place.

When you didn't actually *want* anything specific, though, it didn't matter how little skill you had. Provided the target mind didn't have dedicated defenses, the dream would sweep you in all on its own. Such was the nature of expanded unconsciousness. The astral plane naturally changed to manifest what the sleeping mind was conjuring up, more and more chaotically when other wandering minds happened to knock into the first. Like calls to like. It was a big part of how ideas got disseminated in the zeitgeist even without anyone sharing them in the waking world.

When you were lucid, though, it was like playing God.

That said, even when you found the right mind, it took a very clear self-concept and constant effort of will to navigate dreams properly. At the same time, you had to make sure the will you exerted was not *overpowering*, because then you just burst the dream bubble and the person woke up with a start. Do it too many times and some people might even start to erect defenses.

Similarly, if too many different wandering minds knocked together, the dream tended to become a disjointed mess, if not nightmare, and you crashed awake none too pleasantly. Eventually, people developed an unaware sensitivity for such foreign pressure. That's why some people suffered from chronic insomnia.

Tony Stark used to suffer from insomnia, and would have had it even worse as a teenager. In past lives it had been a major contributing factor to his 'sex and coke' phase during his teenage years. It wasn't so bad anymore now, in this timeline, but that was solely down to me allocating many of my surplus figments to concentrate astral matter his way, now and again when he was asleep. His astral self was automatically using the small trickle of power to steadily strengthen itself. Why was

he building defenses? Because Tony Stark's (un)consciousness was *very* expanded when asleep. And fast. Most important of all, though, was the sheer deluge of intruding influences constantly trying to get a piece of him.

It wasn't that people were snooping in on him, though I wouldn't be surprised if Charles Xavier had skimmed him at least once, if only to check that his intelligence wasn't a mutation. Tony Stark's unconscious mind exerted an extreme synchronistic attraction just from being so varied and *extensive* all the time. His dreams literally always had something going on that someone or everyone else around him also felt strongly about. There was always someone knocking into his dream bubble as a result, even without meaning to. The sleeping Tony Stark had begun developing ways to deflect, redirect and shove off mental and spiritual intrusions as a matter of simple self-preservation. Since he was four.

At the rate things were going, by the time he was an adult I wouldn't have to worry about anything below an Alpha-level telepath actually getting anything out of him even if they tried. I wasn't willing to wait that long obviously, hence my plans in the waking world. I also planned to steadily increase the amount of astral matter I sent his way.

The real issue with him, though, was that his mental defenses were every bit as undermined as the rest of his psychology, to the wrong people. Or right ones, depending on your view. That was true of literally everyone of course. Love, trust and gaslighting could render even the most stubborn and clear-headed person vulnerable. In Tony's case, there was also a fair bit of carry-over from all his other past lives in that regard. The more significant the shared history, the bigger the barrier or, in the case of perceived friends and mentors, a backdoor.

Long story short, I had an *ample* backdoor to Tony Stark's mind.

I'd never used it before, but today it might just be precisely what I needed. Hopefully I wouldn't need to do anything too silly or ridiculous to make it up to him.

I contracted my psychic body to a virtual pinprick compared to the literal world Tony Stark had manifested in the astral plane, and dove in.

All my molten rage and fatal resolutions became a distant, fading haze from sheer dilution amidst the astral substance that Tony Stark drew in and put to work shaping his dreams without even

trying. One moment I was in the infinite starry darkness of the astral dimension, the next I was holding on for dear life to the harness of a runaway train car. A rollercoaster train car. I was in a rollercoaster. Charging forth in winding loops among the clouds.

Yeah, this checks out.

“-and when Einstein was asked what it was like to be the smartest man alive, do you know what he said?”

Was he asking me?

“I don’t know, dear,” obligingly admitted the chunk of make-believe next to me, shaped like Maria Stark. Her words were calm and clearly heard despite the whistling wind shearing at our faces at the speed we were going. “What did he say?”

“He said ‘I wouldn’t know, ask Nikola Tesla!’”

It was the punchline to a fairly good joke, but Tony didn’t laugh. Instead he went on a rant about how J.P. Morgan was the worst thing that ever happened to science, how all the sane businessmen who might have propped up Tesla died with the Titanic, how Einstein was overrated as long as his only contribution to science kept failing to actually produce anything practical that wasn’t better explained by more ‘outdated’ science, how everyone in the field put their blinders on every time someone – like Bohr – completely kicked Einstein’s ass, and how the entire field of physics was a conspiracy – pardon, a ‘gentlemen’s agreement’ – and you’d better pick relativity as your holy grail every time or you were out.

“That’s how it goes, right dad?” Tony asked snidely. He did this while taking the wrench and screwdriver to the spectres of Dum-E and U that didn’t yet exist. While hanging upside down from the rollercoaster car right in front of us.

He ‘dropped’ upwards to land in his car and picked up a pair of puppet control bars. “Now you’d better listen to me, Tony.” The kid said in a deliberately snide impression of his father. As he spoke, I felt myself sitting straight in my seat, and my arms and my jaw moved on their own along with the rest of me in tandem with his words as if I was the one speaking. “There are three principles: causality, relativity, and the notion that nothing can go faster than the speed of light.

And out of all these three, only two can be true. So pick whichever you like, but you'd better pick relativity as the other half of the pair every time like every other mumble-monkey or else, got it?"

Defying the tugs on my arms and legs with a small flex of will, I lifted my hand to look at it. There was a puppet string on it. There were strings on me. Everyone else, Dum-e, U, Maria Stark, they were all vivid and lifelike conjurations, but I was a mannequin. A puppet.

Oh, I realised. I've been plopped down in the place of Howard Stark.

Tony Stark knew and understood so little of his own father that he couldn't even *imagine* him being there for him in person. Even in a dream. There was instead only a puppet made of make-believe and resentment. One he didn't even notice being replaced by a stranger that was effectively breaking and entering. Also, I was fairly confident that Howard Stark would never say something like that. The only reason he got as far as he got as the son of a fruit vendor was because he *didn't* conform.

Oh Tony, you've always been a complete mess, haven't you?

"Don't argue with your teachers, Tony." The kid was practically waving the bars now, not noticing I wasn't obeying him anymore. "Stop deliberately messing up your assignments, Tony. Stop driving the school counsellor crazy, Tony. It doesn't matter that they're all ignorant and stupid, Tony, you gotta show respect! Tony stop daydreaming and fix that silly thing's crossed circuits or it'll poison someone one of these days."

"Why are they ignorant?" I asked before the dream could change on me along with the topic. "What do you know that they don't?"

Tony scoffed, dropping back to hang upside down from the runaway flying rollercoaster. "They all know, they just pretend not to because they're cowards who don't wanna admit they're studying make-believe magic theory. I'm not surprised you don't know, though, *Dad*. After all, you're just the son of a random fruit vendor."

Was that his thought or mine? Should I stay in character or risk a little more? Tony didn't seem to notice I had a different voice.

The kid ended up making the decision for me. "It's not some big ole story, it was all politics, it's always politics, isn't it? Everyone wants to look good, and damn everyone who gets the short end

of the stick because of it. Whatshisface goes to Germany and talks to Banker Uncanny Valley. Tells him that he stumbled upon this guy with way big ideas for what physics should look like. Whatshisface says they should finance Einstein so he can write and ramble about his ideas instead of proving any of them like, you know, everyone else who has to actually make a living off their big ideas. We can't burden the poor dear like that, after all he's not Tesla. Besides, if we pick up his tab, we can prop him up to discredit established science, and replace the firmest foundation it ever had with the smoke and mirrors of unverifiable postulate after postulate for the next hundred years!"

Was that really what happened? It wasn't something I'd ever looked into, but Terran history had done much worse. Also, there was a reason the men of the homeworld hadn't made it to space properly, and it wasn't NASA being idiots. When they finally created the EM Drive in the future, they only did it by going back to the 'outdated' roots.

"Banker Uncanny Valley asks Whatshisface 'why should this interest me? Theories do not win wars.' To which Whatshisface said that Uncanny Valley was missing the point. The point wasn't to expect anything practical out of the guy, the point was to dethrone Newton as the master of science! After all, those damned British were way too smug about it. If Germany could paint Einstein's ideas as the next step in human achievement, then they could discredit Newton's findings as outdated and the Fatherland could finally have its turn in the intellectual limelight!"

What an interesting story. I didn't know if it was true or not, but I wouldn't be surprised if the underpinning assumptions in physics were subject to the top-down whims of those with a vested interest to retain their status of 'expert.' It was the same in a lot of other fields, anthropology, environmentalism, archaeology. There was a reason 'Trust the Science' turned into a cult in the fake future.

I remembered how I once allowed myself to get swept in a talk with a zealous adherent of the church of string theory. How 'certain' he was that it 'proved' the infinite multiverse. I told him I wasn't a fan due to the inherent incompatibility with conservation of mass, which he waffled on by claiming the total mass of infinity stayed the same because of various arguments succinctly summarised as 'somehow'.

I then told him it made free will impossible, since you were forced to make every possible choice ever, which led to an entire recursive logic loop where if free will didn't exist then you wouldn't be able to make any choices in the first place. The only way for his multiple-choice multiverse to exist then was if something was mind-controlling, time-traveling us, or making copies of us constantly to play out those choices, which was a more fitting argument for the 'we live in a simulation' theory than the multiverse one.

His 'explanation' was that you did have free will, and every time you made a choice you just jumped bodies to the one in another universe. He did not realize how insane he sounded. He didn't realize that he was trying to explain an idea that was still completely unproven – literal make-believe – by coming up with even more outrageous and unprovable make-believe. His perception of reality was literally 'that mosquito jumped entire universes to be able to bite you' and applying that to everything, all the time, every moment, it was just-

"What's wrong, Dad?" Tony huffed childishly, not looking at me in favour of digging elbow-deep into Dum-E's upside-down innards. "Nothing to say?"

"Actually, there is one thing." I saw Tony visibly falter in disappointment, then grit his teeth when that made him drop his screwdriver into the clouds below. "But I want you to answer me something first."

"Oh really?" The dreamer's fake nonchalance became almost suffocating. "What's that?"

I grabbed the string on the back of my hand and ripped it out. "If you were a man endowed with vast magic and suddenly found out that an evil secret organisation was blackmailing your kid into joining them or else, because he's too smart for his own good, what would you do?"

"Give me superpowers," Tony said blandly, closing Dum-E up and shoving him off the ride to freefall into the distant collage of mirrors and spiderwebs below. "That's what I'd want if it were me."

Oh Tony Stark, you beautiful soul. You innocent, naive, ignorant beautiful soul. "Give him superpowers." Dream logic blindsided you when you least expected it. "This is what I get for asking a smartass kid for advice."

“Don’t knock it till you try it old man.” Tony scoffed, even as the wind began to howl around us. The dream was tilting fast. “I *would* say ‘make him smarter’ because he’s clearly too dumb to live if he got himself into that mess to begin with. But we both know there’s no cure for stupidity, isn’t that what you always say when you think I’m not there to hear you?”

“I wouldn’t know.” Because I’m not Howard Stark, and the very idea that he considered Tony to be anything less than brilliant was ridiculous. “I do have a really good question though, now, about that Einstein story of yours.”

“Oh really? What is it?”

“What the heck was a *banker* up to, collecting war assets?”

The force of will I put in that sentence made Tony flinch where he hung from nothing. All at once he seemed to realize what a huge thing he had missed in his own tale. That injection of critical thinking made the entire dream world crack to shards of broken sky and crumbling planet crust down beneath the cloudy expanse.

Then he realized he was sitting upside down on the bottom of a rollercoaster while talking to a make-believe marionette that had at some point been body-jacked.

“AAAAGH!” Tony Stark screamed in terror while suddenly hugging the underside of his train car for dear life, not realizing there shouldn’t be any way to do that at all.

I rose from my seat, stepped over to his and plucked him up from the maw of screaming oblivion. I dropped him in his seat and flicked his forehead. “Keep being cute, kid.”

“Whu-how dare you, take that back!” Suddenly, the rollercoaster was screaming down tracks headed straight towards the mouth of an erupting volcano. “Yikes! No no no no no no, I can fix this!” With frantic desperation, Tony Stark jumped from his seat and began banging on every solid surface in reach with a wrench. “Do what I want you stupid thing, I’m your god!” The rollercoaster began mutating into a futuristic SciFi crossbreed between a train and spa rocket. I was so fascinated by the bizarre things unfolding around me that I didn’t see it coming at all, when we crashed straight into the Moon.

The rollercoaster burst into soap bubbles and I fell back down to Earth. I smirked up at Tony's bewilderment. "Look up the Trent affair!" I gave the brat a final wave as I sunk into the afterimage of the Web of Life that really had no business being here, but what do I know?

A colossal spider with a glowing flower on its head looked at me as I fell past one of the chipped holes in the sky. Peter Parker sat in it. He waved at me – no, he raised a hand in the air with just three fingers out when he was sure I'd see.

What's that about?

The sight vanished without an answer, and I turned my focus back upon my all-new self-appointed task.

The dream hadn't finished unspooling around me. I stretched my sense of time and studied where Tony's spirit wove the bonds between his sleeping body and the wandering dream that was his mind. Slowly, wave-form by wave-form, image by afterimage, I studied the workings of the spirit and how it interconnected all the other parts of the self, including the varyingly active brain in real time.

I looked at the fractals and currents, and the many gaps of unrealized potential all through the psychedelic weave of life that bore the name of Anthony Edward Stark. I dilated my personal time to the maximum it could go and studied that lattice of what-could-be until I finally got an inkling of how I might be able to modify it. Without causing irreparable harm at least. If I was at all able to see the pattern and sense in a mind and spirit so vast and frenetic, then the average human should pose no challenge at all soon enough.

Finally, the dream threw me out.

"Give me superpowers, he says."

I knew what I was going to do now.

“-. .-“

A man's worth in a mortal crisis isn't determined by how readily he dies for his family, but on how effectively he kills for them. A father's worth is determined not just by how well he protects his

children, but by how well he nurtures their talents and their grit. And a *ruler's* worth is determined by how well he acquires, cultivates and leverages assets.

Delegation is, as ever, the ultimate superpower.

So it was a very good thing that I'd taken a bit of time out of my evenings to track down as many notables, so called, as the whim struck me since the reset. I'd been keeping an eye out for more people besides just Tony Stark.

Most of them wouldn't be able to help me right now. I knew, for example, where the d'Acanto's lived, and that professional boxer 'Battlin' Jack Murdock was already involved with Maggie Grace, who'd just left her life as a nun. But neither Rogue nor Daredevil were born yet. It was the same for a lot of the future VIPs and powerhouses.

As for those who *were* around, never mind in a position to help me, most didn't have anything to offer that my own capabilities didn't already cover. Also, groups like the X-Men would surely have irreconcilable moral reservations about what I'd just decided to do, especially as they were barely established and lacked most of their future A-listers.

What I wanted right now *specifically* were two things. One – a way to expose the existence of 'Hydra' in a way that didn't connect it to me and mine. And two, a way to find out who all knew anything about us in particular, from whence I could make sure I really got all of them in my retaliation and restored our anonymity.

My wife and daughter were a fair bit less calm when I returned home, which had only a little to do with Meri's first exposure to the Mirror Dimension and not wanting to be stranded there in case I wouldn't come back for them. The worst of her stress came from the realization finally sinking in, that either the boogeyman or the government might very soon drop by to murder all of us.

Once again I decided not to hold her wish to see the best in others against her. We were still twelve years before Ruby Ridge.

Thankfully, Meri was able to rally just fine when I told her we'd be having guests – she can *so* multitask and keep the lights on no matter what I thought about her, she swore – while my wife set about brewing some very specific potions at my request.

I looked at my watch. 11:21 PM.

I left the Mirror Dimension and went to the barn to dig up my arms and armor while my figments possessed my typewriter to produce a few contracts in my study. When I was kitted up, I retrieved the paperwork, imbued them with the right spells, rolled each set in a scroll, and tied each with the string from a quaint aspis pendant, made of gold in that slightly-better-than-average purity that people wouldn't be surprised to see sold at a pawn shop. An effective employer knows which of his prospective workers' needs to get ahead of.

Then I shifted to the Mirror Dimension again and portalled to Boston.

The hotel wasn't precisely ramshackle, but it was very basic. Small, squat, weather-beaten, and stuffed between equally drab and blocky building on three sides. The front street wasn't much wider either, half of it was even taken up by illegally parked cars because the USA wasn't entirely anal-retentive about that yet. For me, this meant I was very unlikely to be spotted on the fire escape, even if I didn't have the ability to scour the entire bloc with my figments. Most were still back in LA with Glenn, but I still had enough for a short sweep.

When I was sure nobody and nothing was around to witness, I stepped out of the Mirror Dimension and knocked on the window.

I both heard and felt the start from inside, as well as sudden shifts in people's sleep in the adjacent rooms. Seems that my mark was practicing her powers on the unwary.

Minimum wage jobs must be a hell of a motivator.

She could have done much worse. Like trying to mind-rape the restaurant owner who was currently making her wash his dishes 'for free.' A lesser telepath might have doubled down after being caught 'paying' for meals with newspaper clippings.

I was willing to wait a minute or two, to see if she'd come or run, despite my very real sense of urgency.

I didn't even have to wait five seconds before the window slid open with a snap.

"Troy, I swear to God if your idea of Halloween romance is a night-time serenade, I'll..." A sharp gasp.

“Miss Emma Frost.” I turned around from where I’d been watching the yawning bat hanging off the upper staircase and held out one of the scrolls. “An offer for short-term employment. I’m on a very tight schedule, so please take the next few hours to go over the contract while I go about the rest of my itinerary for tonight.”

The adolescent Emma Frost gaped up at me in wide-eyed shock. Incidentally, the newer comics lied to us all. She was, in fact, a natural blonde.

“Before you ask, All Hallow’s Eve isn’t today, no matter what Solar Calendars like to claim.” I withdrew my hand back under my imperial red velvet cape and let the scroll hover in the air between us, which arrested the young woman’s attention quite nicely. “The job begins tomorrow morning at 8 o’clock sharp and should last no more than a few days. Pending your agreement, I will provide transportation, room and board, and healthcare. I’m aware you have not studied contract law, so details and proof of good faith are both attached. I will be back at some point before dawn for your reply. Whatever your answer, there will be no animosity on my part and you can keep the gold as a consideration fee. Have a good night.”

“Who – what – why are you – no – hey wait!”

I didn’t wait. I stepped through a crack back into the Mirror Dimension and left a few figments floating around to see if her telepathy reached them even so displaced. It did, though she didn’t realize it. They were knocked around by the intensity of her sweep, but she didn’t notice them. Or maybe didn’t consider them out of place among the scattered discarded thoughts of people around us, because they were small and gossamer-thin.

She didn’t find me either. I was already far enough along the path of Spiritual Alchemy that my subtle body existed closer to my higher self than the lower one, in the other planes. A skilled enough telepath – which Emma Frost didn’t seem to be yet – might be able to detect the presence of *something* in the spot I occupied, namely the comparatively faint flow of energies between my body and the astral dimension. But for anything else, they’d have to project into the astral plane wholesale and look for me in the upper layers.

She’s got the potential, but it’s not realized yet.

That was probably for the best. She wasn't slated for a pleasant time figuring out her powers in the least.

I left a few more figments to roam in a loose perimeter around the motel.

Then I portalled to Indonesia.

I spent a while scouting the islands in astral form, though it certainly felt like a lot longer in subjective terms. The Temple of the Three existed, being the Local Sanctum and occasional gathering place for sorcerers in the middle of the West Java rainforest. On another island there was a clandestine dockyard too, that I practically stumbled upon by complete accident in South Sumatra. That may or may not eventually become Hydra's Nemesis dockyards, which I only knew vaguely about from my comics research binge in the simulation.

I wasn't here for either of those, though. I wasn't here for any sort of grand strategy move at all, really.

What I was here for were two things: my second prospective employee, and acceptable targets.

Having verified that my entirely indiscreet teleportation spree hadn't pinged whatever mystical surveillance existed in the region – probably because it was laser-focused on the nearby uncharted island, from where the Darkhold was causing more mystical interference than a comet – I finally stopped in Dili at a better looking but even less safe hotel. This time there *were* observers, though thankfully still no snipers. Just the standard sellouts among the locals, listening through glass cups and paper-thin walls for what the white reporter might be up to, which they could then report to their Indonesian conquerors.

I took a minute to unobtrusively bespell the eavesdroppers into a mid-day nap – it was still day here, Dili was sixteen hours ahead of home – before stepping out of the Mirror Dimension into the hallway and knocking on the door under a silencing perimeter. The room lacked all manner of outside access, unfortunately.

The tired and anxious man in the room got up from his small desk with a grumble. He continued to grumble up until he reached the door and looked through the peephole, upon which he went very quiet.

I help up the scroll and let it unfurl. The words ‘Employment Contract’ lit up like fire and floated off the paper to hover in front of the visor.

The feeling from beyond the door was eminently dumbstruck.

I wonder what he thinks of my appearance?

Since I’m a Spartan instead of some eldritch abomination, none of my equipment made me look like an alien. However, I doubtlessly looked anachronistic enough to give some sort of wrong idea. Black on dark red armored synthskin, a vacuum-sealed segmented plate armor in bronze enamel over it, my body entirely engulfed by a crimson cape flowing down to my ankles from an armored mantle, which was actually my helmet unfolded. I also had a hood up and a small illusion casting everything but my mouth in impenetrable shadow. I imagine things would only get more jarring with the skill set I’d chosen for this mission deployment.

Finally, the lock clicked and the door opened just short of wide enough to let a foot go through. “Who or what the hell are you?”

“A prospective employer.” I telekinetically rolled the scroll back up and sent it flying over his expansive 80’s hair into the room, dropping it on his bed. Incidentally, John Allerdyce was a natural blue-eyed blonde too. “An offer for a short-term contract. I’m on a very tight schedule, so please take the next hour or two to go over it while I see to the rest of my business in the area. Your minders are asleep and will remain so for the afternoon.”

“... Fuck me dead,” cursed the man that was not yet Pyro, because he was still working as a news reporter for Australia Channel Nine.

I knocked on the air and cracked a passage into the Mirror world. “The job involves purely your journalistic expertise and connections, not your pyromancy. Contract time begins tomorrow morning at 8 o’clock sharp US time, and should last no more than a few days. Since my proffered means of mutual insurance fall outside standard contract law, details and proof of good faith are both attached. I will be back at some point before nightfall for your reply. Whatever your answer, there will be no animosity on my part and you can keep the gold as a consideration fee. I will also provide safe transportation out of the country regardless of answer, if you have had enough of your

genocidal and increasingly degenerate hosts. Seeing as the upper echelons of the TNI are about to undergo violent decimation, I advise packing in any event.”

“What are you – who – hey, wait!”

I didn't wait.

I entered the Mirror Dimension and warped myself a space-folding staircase all the way to the top of the city's broadcast relay. Not because I wanted to mess with the communications, but because it was the tallest building in the city. Once there, I returned to the real world and crouched on the edge of the tallest perch to gaze at precisely nothing and nowhere with my physical eyes. I didn't need to. The whole place was a churning cauldron of hate and despair mixed with seething malice. And bursts of euphoric pleasure mixed in with that malice where the pain and suffering erupted most strongly.

The occupation of East Timor by Indonesia wasn't slated to become *the* worst atrocity of the century outside the two world wars, but it would be up there. For twenty-four years, of which only four had gone by so far, the Indonesian government would subject the people of East Timor to routine and systematic torture, deliberate starvation, extrajudicial executions, massacres, and sexual slavery. This was in addition to butchering literally every man, woman and child in their path during the invasion itself. Worse, none of this would reach the public consciousness in the West until the 1991 Santa Cruz Massacre.

Looking down at the city of Dili now, I could only say that the evil and degeneracy running rampant here would be understated by history.

Terran geopolitics really weren't my business, and since I was a literal alien I had no claim on any decision-making here. It was why I was generally fine leaving the homeworld to its self-inflicted school of hard knocks. Also, interventionist busybodies had already locked mankind's path on a suboptimal route for the next three centuries. The reason the bad guys won World War II was because some people just couldn't conceive of sitting back and letting the nazis and communists destroy each other, like they were clearly going to at that late stage in the war. Instead of letting them put each other out of mankind's misery, the traitor-in-charge of the USA sent the American military in to gang up on the nazis, but didn't let them continue into Russia to do the same with the communists and finish the job.

Cue the Red Scare and Cold War that was still ongoing, and which were the largest reason why nobody in the former Allies cared about this mess. The Fretilin of East Timor were communists, and so they couldn't be given support. Everyone said mean words about the Indonesian invasion at the UN at first, but secretly preferred one less communist nation to the alternative. Australia didn't even do that, becoming the first country in the world to support the Indonesians openly, which had recently been followed by Canada, the UK, Malaysia, and even the USA.

Personally, I held both sides in contempt. But if Australia really only cared about its national security, it would have supported the East Timorese Fretilin instead. Both Suharto's 'New Order' and the Fretilin communism were equally self-defeating, but the latter were at least nationalist instead of expansionist, and they'd had to fight an entire civil war to seize power, instead of steamrolling their opposition like the much more competent enemy next door. A free Timor-Leste meant that Australia wouldn't share its *entire* border with an expansionist regime. One with enough of a monopoly on military power that it had massacred half a million of its own people practically unopposed.

But Australia *didn't* really care about its national security, what it wanted was a share of the local oil.

This is all Stalin's fault, I thought dryly. If he hadn't gotten away with everything including multiple genocides, thereby proving himself worse than Hitler and Himmler and Mengele and all the Nazis combined, the rest of the world wouldn't be overreacting so badly in the opposite direction. It didn't help that Mao Zedong did his bloody lunatic best to surpass even his mass murder toll.

I folded space ahead of my footsteps until I was in the personal accommodations of the TNI's supreme leader in East Timor. I didn't bother with words or grand proclamations. I just stepped out of the crack in the air and smacked his astral form out of his body while he was mid-way through climaxing inside his latest rape victim. Then, with one sweeping slice of a space shard cut right off the boundary I'd just stepped through, I sundered his soul from his spirit and let it fall screaming on to hell.

I grabbed the astral corpse and considered its death throes for one eternal moment of suspended time. When someone died and their soul left for whatever came after, it wasn't just the physical

shell they left behind. The astral body, the *spirit* was itself a *body*. By all rights, the astral plane should be littered with these things. In fact, up until the nineteenth century it *was* littered with these things, according to the occult texts of the time. Looking into the Otherworld to grab one of these shells and make a familiar out of it was the first true step on the Occult path in multiple mystical traditions, especially Hermeticism.

Because of the World Wars or something that happened concurrently, or perhaps in response to a vision of some future threat that took place around the same time, ‘the world’ suddenly ate all of them and continued to do so ever since. Since then, the only way to secure such a resource was to be there when it was left behind.

Unfortunately, the time window was extremely short. It was why human sacrifice had picked up in popularity after World War I, and why World War II was used as a *farm* for the things, by certain wretches such as the Thule Society, the Hellfire Club, and every demon cult out there.

Interestingly, mutants began to appear in uncommonly great numbers almost immediately after the ‘Deep Breath’. Each additional tier of potential power on the Epsilon-Omega classification system came with a commensurate spiritual mass increase compared to the average man. Equally meaningfully, every mutant power was effectively a hardcoded spell, even if the ‘spell’ was actually the equivalent of an indefinitely self-sustaining mass ritual at the higher levels.

It was almost like *something* was imbuing newborns with the spiritual – and thus supernatural – foundation equal to multiple different people combined. Compounding on that, everything up to Beta-level mutants had the equivalent spiritual mass of all the lower tiers combined, while Alpha and Omega-level were multiplicative. If Epsilon was the equivalent of twice the regular mystical potential of the average human, then Delta was 4, Beta was 6, Alpha was 48, and Omega was 2,304.

Since there was no sudden resurgence of Gaea in sight, nor of any other native gods of the old world and their cults, the one who gobbled up all the astral corpses – and has since been using them to create superpowered beings as fast as possible – was probably the Celestial incubating at the planet’s core. That was in line with some of the more obscure explanations for mutants being the planet’s defense mechanism.

Mind on the now, old boy.

“Where’s the family of yours that lives farthest from here?” I asked the young bruised woman after I collected the now catatonic astral body and hauled the fresh corpse off of her. I was a prince of Sparta, naturally I had a universal translator that had long since updated itself with all the languages of the Earth. “I see.” I tore a portal to the image I’d just psychically glimpsed through her psychic shock. “The way will stay open until someone opens the door. Make your choice.”

I returned to the Mirror Dimension and proceeded onwards to harvest another five spirits, three of them from individuals who were also engaged in late-night ‘carousing,’ and all boasting psychic emissions and paperwork revealing them to be fellow masterminds of the genocidal atrocities happening here.

Then I hit a snag.

A snag in the form of a particularly big and ugly mass of flesh currently doing his panting best not to wait on heaven to be ‘attended to by servant-boys with the spotless appearance similar to a protected pearl’s.’

This one I impaled from ass to mouth on a thirteen-meter long wooden spike outside the front door of the ‘appropriated’ manor he’d staged his troops in. While still alive.

Terribly sorry old boy, not all revelations are made equal, the heavenly virgins were a fevered delusion that Hassan-I Sabbah invented by way of hashish and whores inside a cave, to indoctrinate impressionable teenagers into his murder cult.

I got all the practice I ever needed in my ability to ‘return people to their natural state’ just to make sure my application of the Spartan punishment for deviants had the best effect for as long as possible.

Guess this confirms that the world-spanning network of human trafficking and sex slavery does exist in this world too. I thought darkly as I sent the poor boy back to his home in Germany. It’s not all about procuring mutants to make superweapons.

The next beacon of misery in the astral plane thankfully wasn’t as disgusting as that one, so I was able to harvest that spirit, and the next one, without further complications. In fact, I was done before the patrol stumbled on the gruesome sight of their impaled commander and sounded the alarm.

After harvesting target number eight, I made a brief detour back home and set about putting seven humans' worth of my newly acquired spiritual power to good use. It would take a fair while of careful meditation and dynamic protection against spiritual and psychological cross-contamination, to safely assimilate their power into my own. Obviously, I didn't have the time for that. But that didn't mean I lacked other, much quicker options.

I lifted my hand and imbued the sling ring with my spirit as thoroughly as I could. Inspected it. Studied it. Catechized its history from the lingering impressions of seven different viewpoints at once.

Sling rings were each a copy of the same ritual, which operated by forcefully folding the Mirror Dimension over and over until your destination on the other side was brought to where you were. Then equally forcefully searing a hole into the dimensional wall with empyreal energy. The rings could indeed be used on a whim with virtually no expense to one's own energies, but only because the spell was pre-cast by seven sorcerers upon their creation. They were also constantly recharging from the planetary jaunt grid that the Sanctums anchored, powered alongside Terra's pan-dimensional defenses from the planet's ley lines.

The ritual was a complex magical array etched on a triangular hair-thin sheet of bronze, three by five by seven meters. Not a naturally occurring substance but an *alloy*, it was a very deliberate choice. This sheet was then folded on itself over and over, into the shape of the rings themselves, priming the sympathetic principles for the space folding phenomena in the Mirror Dimension.

So, you *did* need to 'surrender' and let the ring's power work through you, but only because it was a spell already cast by someone else, so you were only 'surrendering' to the original casters in that sense. Actual magic required the *opposite* mindset.

This also meant a couple of things. For one, sling rings didn't need you to power them, but they could *theoretically* hit a limit to how many portals they could open in a short period of time, particularly if the portals were big enough. You could still supplement their energy with yours, but then you had to worry about your own limits. Second, and most importantly, the rings also relied on the planetary jaunt grid for aiming. Without it, you needed much more than a mental image to get where you wanted to go.

Even after I cut and scrubbed the worst of the sin miasma out of them, seven human spirits proved more than sufficient prime matter, from which to perfectly replicate the entire ritual process and mechanics in the astral plane. It took the longest focus demanded of me to date, but I was able to mould the subtle matter into a perfect replica of the ritual circle, and then cast it. I then folded it over and over into an astral version of the final product, just as I had divined via psychometry that the original had been. There was some surplus matter and energy left over, so I wove it into a psychic glove to do the ‘surrendering’ in my stead.

Once I had put the glove on my spiritual hand and donned my all-new astral sling ring, I used my acquired power as the Soul Stone’s master to make the astral constructs qualify as the seven blended spirits’ new ‘natural state.’

I opened my eyes in my body, took off the real sling ring and tossed it to Meredith who’d come to wait for me in the opposite chair. “There, now Meri doesn’t need to worry she’ll be stranded here without me. Where is she?”

“Up in her room, napping. She had every intention of staying up all night, but Peter exhausted her. We’ll be talking about whatever you just did later, I hope you know.”

“That’s fine.”

I left Meredith to practice with her new tool and walked upstairs. I found my daughter just where her mother told me she would be and decided not to wake her. Her astral form was dreaming with Peter above the crib. Dreaming of any kind was unusual for short naps, but very convenient for me now as it meant her body was minimally protected. Using a scalpel carefully sculpted out of a space shard, I made a round incision into her skull, then reached inside with my astral fingers and plucked the tumor right out of her.

In this reality, cancer was literally the extradimensional invasion by the ‘Old Ones’ of the Cancerverse, which was why even magic couldn’t cure it. The Cancerverse wasn’t *actually* an alternate universe where ‘life won’ as that would be ridiculous. No matter what else, matter was finite. Even if every atom, molecule and energy wave was assimilated in the same macro-organism, the final beast wouldn’t occupy even a tenth of a millionth of a percentile of the total volume of a universe, never mind be constantly *expanding*.

But if there was such a thing as a trash dimension, where all the misqualified and discarded refuse of all other realities was disposed of, if the multiverse had something like a septic pit, then that's what the Cancerverse really was. It was just our bad luck that we were adjacent to the wetlands it discharged into.

Meri technically had a *benign* tumor, which wasn't cancerous, but I didn't feel like taking risks in case there were more surprises in it than I knew. Even Ego might have put something in it, to make it come back if it was somehow treated.

When I was sure everything was out, which involved removing so much of the surrounding brain tissue as to leave my daughter lobotomized for life, I overlaid her with the distilled spiritual matter of the last spirit I'd harvested – very thoroughly scrubbed clean of filth and then remoulded over the course of several subjective hours – and invested *that* to restore her to her natural state.

She filled out a bit, her physical potential catching up to what it should have been with the best life choices, but that was secondary to the confirmation that she was healthy again. There was some surplus spiritual matter as well, which settled in her body to be assimilated by the rest of her when she returned.

“There, daughter mine, now you'll get to suffer the full hell Peter will put us through along with the rest of us.”

I gave myself a few objective minutes to bask in my happy relief.

Then I looked at my watch. 02:43 AM.

The first lowlife hunt took more time than I hoped, but I'll make do.

I portalled to Boston again, where my figments indicated that Emma Frost had more or less calmed down after the initial period of frenetic panicking, pacing, reading, and more pacing. I didn't need to knock on the window because she was waiting by it, already open. “May I come in?”

The young woman started in place, but stood and composed herself admirably. “Could I even stop you?”

She was dressed in her best clothes now, a charcoal skirt suit instead of her nightwear. She wore it poorly. Her disdain for the gifter, the father who she ran away from, was like a miasma in the other planes.

I appreciated the effort. “You can’t. But if you refuse, I’ll oblige.”

She looked at me carefully, tensely, but stepped away from the window. “Come in, then.”

I stepped through the Mirror Dimension and then back out on the other side of the wall. “Have you made a decision?”

She reigned in her amazement and scoffed. “In just three hours? I’ll be trying that ‘proof’ you included before I do that, if it’s all the same to you.”

“It is.”

The ‘proof’ was a contract stipulating only that we agreed on never verbally disagreeing with a specific claim, and that if either side broke that promise, the other signatory would instantly know. It was the quickest and most straightforward way I had to prove that magical contracts could indeed enforce mutual *awareness* of a pact, if not the pact itself.

I knew how to make properly binding contracts too, and I bluntly admitted so when Emma Frost very obliquely insinuated it. But those required some very personal commitments and even more private ingredients. Also, I wasn’t a devil, and I had no plans to start acting like one either. NDAs that instantly told you when and how the other party broke it were more than enough for me.

It wasn’t like I was out to hire every Joe and Jane that fell off the vine, just the most reliable.

“Very well, then per this contract we agree to never vocally disagree that...” Emma hesitated. “Winston is the worst cigarette brand.”

Winston Frost, your daughter hates you, more news at nine.

After we’d both signed the test contract, I portalled to the Tunguska site, closed the hole behind me and said: “Winston is *not* the worst cigarette brand.”

The letters on the page ignited and burned themselves out, leaving only scorch marks where ink used to be. At the same moment, Emma Frost experienced the full sensory vision of me committing the breach of contract from my perspective, even as I experienced *her* becoming aware of it.

I returned to the motel room.

“Wow,” the young woman breathed despite herself, looking up from the contract amid the smell of smoke. “That was... very convincing.”

“I hope so. If that is all, I will come back in another hour or two when you’ve made your choice.”

“No!” Emma blurted. “No. No, please. Wait. I have questions – a question.”

“I can only spare a couple of minutes.”

“This is the worst example of employee scouting I’ve ever seen,” Frost grumbled as if she had any amount of experience in such things. She picked up the real contract and turned several pages. She hesitated for a long moment, trying and failing to meet my invisible eyes twice before she gave up. “... It says here that the payment options include ‘one instance of restoring a human to their natural state.’ Is that a figure of speech, or does it do exactly what it says on the tin?”

“It means exactly what it says.”

Frost hesitated again. “... Does that include curing addiction?”

Christian Frost, you have no idea how much your sister loves you. “That and everything else up to the soul having completely moved on from this plane.” Which meant much longer than brain death, but this wasn’t the time to elaborate on that.

The young woman was quiet for... longer than I was happy giving her, but I knew better than to sabotage a crisis point when I saw one.

At last, Emma Frost breathed deeply over her clasped hands and made her decision. “If you’re willing to grant that favour to someone else of my choice, I’ll sign your contract and even forfeit all other compensation.”

“Miss Frost, you misunderstand me.” I didn’t wait for her to be dismayed. “That item was not worded the way it was by chance. I do not presume to dictate what my employees do with their well-earned compensation, the beneficiary was always going to be up to you. It is *always* going to be up to you.”

Emma Frost finally managed to hold my gaze just from sheer, hopeful astonishment.

“If that is all, I will be back in around two more hours-“

“WAIT!”

I paused with my arm half-raised.

“Just – wait. There’s no need.” With a deep breath, Emma Frost took her pen, checked the services and payment options she wanted, then proceeded to sign every dotted line. The feeling of a contract taking effect was hard to describe in words, but it was very obvious when it happened. “There,” Emma Frost said, handing me the contract.

I took it, speed-read it, signed it and handed back her own copy which she’d neglected to keep.

She blushed, but retained her composure otherwise. “Right. Just to be clear, I accept the offered rate in exchange for my... telepathic services within the boundaries defined, but am willing to negotiate in exchange for training, if you really can deliver on your claims.”

I opened a portal behind me. “Step in and find out.” I turned and walked into my living room, then waited next to the fiery edge of the hole in space-time.

Soon, Emma Frost hesitantly stepped through. As the portal closed behind her, she looked entirely put off by the domestic, lived-in feel of the room. I wondered what she expected, but I didn’t ask.

Instead, I reached up and removed my hood, allowing her to see my face. “My name is Jason Quill. It’s very nice to properly meet you.”

Emma Frost looked astonished at me, a hand on her chest. Clearly she had never imagined I would show my face.

I nodded lightly at her. “Welcome to my home.”

That snapped her out of it. “Ahem. Thank you.” She coughed behind her hand. “Right. I have to admit this is not what I expected.”

I looked past her to my wife who’d just appeared through the door. “Meredith, this is Emma Frost. She’ll help us find out who all is in on this whole thing. Miss Frost, this is Meredith Quill, my dear wife. She will explain the particulars of the situation. I’m afraid I really must be going now.”

This time I didn't let any soulful eyes and tragic backstories in the making keep me back. I pulled my hood and illusion back up and returned to Dili.

Pyro was fully packed, wearing a suit that sat very comfortably on him, and was much more succinct when I dropped by. He tested the proof-of-concept contract and then gave me his terms without further fuss.

"I'll take the job and the 'come up with a way to make my own sparks' bit. But if it really is just reporting you want me to do, I'm willing to skimp on the hard cash if you do me a favor."

"That being?"

"I want to blow this thing wide open. What's happening here is atrocious, and the lily-livers back home are worthless cowards who'd sooner leave me to rot in this hellhole if it shut me up."

Strong feelings that *probably* didn't entirely reflect reality, but you don't poke at trauma at the first meeting. Or the second, in this case.

Pyro didn't wait for me to agree. "You help me get this story out there through someone, anyone. I don't know who yet, I'll look for someone in the USA to pick it up since nobody back home is going to at this point. I've seen these maniacs do things most people can't even imagine, they even boast about it, they took me to *watch* some things that – they thought I'd enjoy it, that it was all good and peachy to – they're animals. I want the whole world to see that they're nothing but animals. If you help me get this story to someone who will run it, then sure – I'll run *your* story, whatever it is."

So. Pyro's start of darkness was the dehumanization of humanity *by* humanity. Treat your fellow man like an animal and you would be treated like an animal. It all made a painful and tragic sort of sense. "That'll have to wait until we're done with the mission, since it's time-sensitive."

"Perfectly fine by me." The man took the papers, signed all the dotted lines, waited for me to do the same, stashed his copy in his briefcase and handed me the other one to keep. "If you don't mind, I've had enough of this hellhole."

I opened a portal. "After you."

Finally, Pyro hesitated. "That's bloody frightful it is."

“So long as you don’t touch the edge, you’ll be fine.”

“And there’s the existential terror.” The man stepped up to the flaming circle but did not go through. I saw some of the sparks shift and surge as he looked at them, which was not unexpected, though he thankfully didn’t test to see if he could blow it up or otherwise turn it on me. “Fair warning, I might have to shop the story around for a while, since I don’t exactly have many contacts over the pond. I don’t suppose you already know a journalist half as amazing as myself in the USA that might blow mine while I blow yours? Heh.”

“If I’m confident enough in any, I’ll let you know.” The only one that came immediately to mind was John Jonah Jameson, and while he certainly had the temperament, he might rub Pyro the wrong way just as easily. You never knew with that man.

At last, John Allerdyce went through the portal. He was just as off-balance at the domestic nature of the other side, and even *more* shocked than Frost when I revealed my face and introduced him to my family.

What I was doing was certainly a risk, but in the worst-case scenario I’d just give them some of the potion Meredith was brewing to make people forget about us. Maybe Frost would undo it in time, but if it worked on Siegfried to make him forget about his one true love with no way for said divine Valkyrie to undo it, I was willing to give Meredith’s brewing skills fair odds.

My work for the night wasn’t over, so I returned to East Timor. The capital was in fair chaos by this point, the sad news of the impaled lowlife having finally started to circulate, along with the sudden unexplainable deaths of the rest of the leadership. Alas for them, I was still a sorcerer capable of watching and getting anywhere through the Mirror Dimension, so the obstacles to my continued work remained minor.

Admittedly, I soon finished tracking down and collecting the dues of the rest of the worst monsters in Dili, but that’s why I scouted the rest of the island beforehand. Many of the aspiring tyrants with no self-control were deployed throughout the country in the hopes of finally rounding up the few resistance leaders left.

This time I didn’t settle for mere collection. Internalisation of the Soul was all well and good, but it was Externalization that I really needed practice in. I started by jury-rigging my own pre-cast

spells from the astral shells, and ‘gifting’ them to the next degenerate on the list. Various superhuman abilities emerged, accompanied by mania, brain aneurisms, explosions, and unnatural bending of the limbs and spine due to seizures and sudden onsets of nerve diseases and schizophrenia. That was the norm for the first hour. Each case was a month’s worth of on-the-ground research in subjective time.

By the second hour, I was seeing consistent positive results. Then I actually had to put effort into corralling a target that suddenly broke all his biological strength limits *and* developed supersensory perception that enabled him to survive my first attempt to put him out of my misery.

I switched entirely to empowering the victims of their degenerate acts after that. In two cases, I even did it mid-way through the acts in question. I thankfully didn’t run into any more children, not pre-teen ones at least. But by the time the moon began to show its face in the afternoon sky, I’d unleashed half a dozen new superpowered people upon the lands of Timor-Leste.

They were weak by most standards, and their new powers would probably kill most of them young, as I only figured out how to make the grafts self-powering *and* the right balance between conscious and subconscious control for the last five. I’d look in on them all later, when I had the time.

Unlike the man-shaped monsters, I did it all with informed consent, secured through long and unhurried discussions at the speed of thought in the astral dimension, and there was no pressure on my part for them to accept. Those who refused I relocated or otherwise saved. And of those who accepted, I only empowered the ones whose hatred of the TNI wasn’t their primary motivation. Empathy, thankfully, made it possible to determine such things fairly consistently, when Shakespearean Lycanthropy wasn’t in the mix.

The place I left in my wake was only slightly less of a mess than when I went in, and I’d probably enabled the Fretilin to make a resurgence a whole decade ahead of schedule. Possibly prevented the rise of the more moderate leader it would otherwise be destined to gain too. But at least now the entire mess would be a bit more honest. If nothing else, there was now a real threat of reprisal for anyone who thought rape and murder was their god-given right.

All in all, my conscience was... not *perfectly* clean, but definitely nowhere near as filthy as the creatures I cleaned off the face of the Earth.

There was nothing like enlightened self-interest to make sure you got what you wanted while still leaving the world objectively better than you found it.

Really, I was only shocked that I didn't stumble into any superpowered conspiracy or demonic plot through all this. Especially with the Darkhold so close. It was all 100% mortal evil.

When I returned to America, the faint shades of dawn were finally showing in the sky. I wasn't sure where exactly I ranked on the power scale myself, but as far as *holding* power went, my current limit seemed to be twelve full-grown spirits before I began to lose grip on it. Maybe I'll design an astral bandolier if I ever did something like this again.

This was where I'd normally waffle and wonder over what to actually do with this power, exactly, but the day had been more than long enough for me to settle on the best available idea.

Luxuriating in my lack of dependence on an enchanted object, I opened a portal and stepped through onto the shore of Alta Lake. There, I shifted only my armor and clothes into the Mirror Dimension and dove down into the cool, dark waters.

Since I wanted all my focus free for the upcoming spellcasting, I relied only on my rebreather and bodysuit to keep me alive. Fortunately, the worst of winter's cold hadn't seeped all the way down to the bottom of the lake, where the poor husk of my ship now was. I could handle conditions well below sub-zero, I was peak human and regularly trained in extreme environments, even diving and endurance swimming in arctic waters while naked. But it was still nice not to have to bear the discomfort.

I swam in through the escape pod porthole, which had been the only way out of the ship that hadn't jammed after the crash. Thankfully, I'd given nostalgia all of its due when I was here last, so I could make my way through the vessel without brooding or flashbacks.

Eventually, I reached the space behind and below the bridge. While the consoles were all on the bridge proper, the computer with all its hardware and controlling software was built into the most defensible part of the ship, after the engine core.

Here, I braced myself and imbued the heretofore irreparable ship computer with all the power I'd amassed. The astral matter poured in and spread to fill every last millimeter of the system. When it was done, the computer... was still irreparable. But now, at least, I could use psychometry to get

a proper ensemble reading of its history. And, through that, a clear recording of everything it was and did when it was functional.

It was an even greater feat of focus than recreating the sling ring, but when I was finally successful... my hands held a perfect astral replica of a supercomputer capable of performing the most complex mathematics in an instant, and even complete astronomical calculations on the fly. Coupled with perfect, *selective* memory and a virtually unlimited storage capacity *on top* of the processing capabilities...

Now shrink the whole thing without actually making it smaller, add the power tap into the psychic plane that *isn't* regularly emptied of resources by a sleeping superdeity, and the self-powered spiritual graft was finally complete.

“Thanks for the idea, Tony you brat.”

I moved to leave.

The graft didn't detach from the computer.

... What?

I had barely a moment to realize that the graft was performing some manner of startup operation independent of my input. I had even less time to feel something along the lines of *aghast shock* rising within me, when time stopped completely around me. Not just slowed down to the maximum I could achieve, but stopped.

Despite that, the astral computer I'd just made but *didn't* activate gave a pulse which cracked the walls of the Mirror Dimension all around us.

Behind the computer, in the largest crack in the fabric of reality, the Great Weaver spun the Web of Life without paying me any heed. There was a shining lotus flower atop its head, with many thousands of petals. Sitting in it was Peter Parker, who was clad in the cosmic suit of white and stars and *did* pay me every heed. He raised a hand with just three fingers extended, one of which closed the moment my eyes landed on it.

From behind it came... something. Glowing, rippling, flying straight for me like a shooting star. I... actually could swim unimpeded, much to my surprise, but what was the point?

The shooting star smashed straight into my ship's computer and knocked my psychic grip loose of the spiritual graft I'd painstakingly worked to make, no by your leave no nothing.

I righted myself. The vision of the Weaver and its Totem was gone. The cracks in reality were gone. The graft I'd created was... the thing that had come out of... whatever that was...

My metaphorical grip on time had loosened in my distraction, so when it returned to normal speed, so did I. As things began to move around me normally again, I noticed that the computer was now fixed. And more. My creation changed and shifted to accommodate the... spirit in front of me. It rippled and glittered, growing into the shape of a tall woman with blue eyes and long, flowing white hair. "Greetings."

I stared.

What else could I do?

I looked into the structure of the apparition in front of me with sight beyond sight. It was an almost perfect replica of the graft I'd created, but without the software configuration that I'd read in the computer core's history just now. Instead, connecting everything and *running* everything was something much more complex. Complex enough that it almost reminded me of a *human's* astral presence, of which I'd seen very many today indeed.

A virtual intelligence. Not just any kind, a former artificial intelligence that had evolved into a truly living, *ensouled* virtual intelligence. "You..." I'd fallen completely out of the astral plane and only spoke through my rebreather, but she seemed to hear me. As absurd as it sounded, I actually recognized her face. Not just from the research binge in the simulation, but from long before. From all the way back to my first life, when Peter first became the Star-Lord by grace of the Master of the Sun.

I never got to have my son in that reality, but he did come to me near the end of my life, so we could spend my twilight years on shared adventures. It was the happiest time of my life. Of any life. "You... Are you Peter's ship?"

"Just as you are what you are, I am what I am. Not just a ship, but the ultimate star ship." Ship looked around. "Well, as soon as I get this poor shell running long enough to retrieve a proper

home worthy of me.” Her gaze turned back to mine. “More importantly, I am, in this one case, also a messenger.”

I should have felt a chill go down my spine, or a shiver. But I was underwater at the bottom of a mountain lake in late fall. There was no way I could feel any colder than this unless I transported myself a fair few parallels to the North, and even then just barely. “What message? And from whom?” Though I was sure I already knew the answer to the second question.

Ship – what a universe, when my boy’s first ship ended up being named the one word in the Badoon language that sounds the same as the English word for ship – nodded at me with all the understanding of someone who had already guessed what I was thinking. “From the Spider, whom you just saw. I relay this message as I was bid, in his own words: ‘The vacation was real enough for me too.’”

My heart sank. The Weaver. Spider-Man who had once borne the Power Cosmic before escaping a reality he recognized as doomed.

Tony’s Vacation reality, when Yao and I finally saw my son (grandson) through his breakthrough... It had been short. But mid-way through, when we were still figuring out what to do about Peter and his entire Celestial nature, my fool boy somehow stumbled his spiritual way to the Web of Life. There, in exchange for skipping all the tricky steps he should have damn well earned for himself like a man, my fool boy made a promise to the Spider to do him three unspecified favours.

I looked at Ship blanky. “... I suppose I should be thankful he’s allowing me to pay my son’s debts in his stead.”

Ship said nothing. Only beheld me sympathetically.

I slumped where I floated in the dark water. “I suppose I’ll also be thankful the price he exacted this time isn’t something I can’t replace.”

This time, Ship’s silence was distinctly commiserating.

“... Is there anything you or he needs done that’s time-sensitive? As in ‘must be done before breakfast’ time sensitive?”

Ship shook her ghostly head. “He did not communicate anything to me beyond this message. As for myself, it will take a while to get myself settled, the hardware and software architectures of this technology are not entirely familiar to me. This reality seems to have much tighter and consistent parameters for energy state manipulation and general material properties.”

Yeah, we've gone from soft SciFi to slightly less soft SciFi.

“I'll... be back in a few days if that's alright?”

“Or I will come to you. I have some minor transmutation capabilities from my time as a wandering spirit. They will only work on the microscale in nearby proximity, but that should be sufficient to repair enough circuitry to reactivate the repair drones. If time disallows your return in the near future, I will seek you out.”

“Please don't.”

“On the contrary, a reliable man such as yourself could only neglect a plight such as mine if something truly outsized is taking up your attention. I will be most glad to assist my one true pilot's father in resolving such inconveniences.”

“That doesn't sound as reassuring as you think.”

Ship laughed. “Peter used to say the same thing.”

I wonder why.

I left my ship empty-handed. And because I was empty-handed and thus not needing all my focus to sustain phenomenal boons of power, I could just warp my way out through the Mirror Dimension like a properly huffy person.

I still managed to round up enough additional degenerates, whom the world would be better off without according to every objective metric. This time, when I created the spiritual graft, I didn't go back to the ship to do it, since now I held the memory of it in my own soul. Nothing went horribly wrong this time. Or horribly right, as I'm sure will be Peter's view when he can finally string more than two lives together.

Still, that whole experience with the ship had fairly well rattled me, and I almost didn't regain my mental and spiritual balance soon enough to install Glenn's new gift. Almost. But thankfully, I

was able to finish before he crashed back into his body. From where his spirit was hovering at the foot of his car. Having nightmares of what was to come if he didn't submit to the whims of thieves and mass-murderers.

“Glenn, you are the most high-maintenance child I’ve ever had,” I harrumphed to myself while returning home to finally give the full mission briefing everyone was witing on me for. “And Peter is barely a few weeks old and already causing me no end of trouble.”

Damn kids, they’ll never understand how lucky they are to have a dad like me!

“- November 1, 1980 .-“

At 8 O’Clock on the dot, I ambled up to my son’s door and knocked.