

## Chapter 4 – Failing as a Dad Is so Last Universe

“-. Glenn Talbot .-“

He was startled awake by a knock on the door.

He got up from his chair – he’d fallen asleep at the table? – and went to answer, feeling both bleary and hyperaware of every last detail of his surroundings.

When he looked through the peephole, he promptly felt like his stomach would fall out through his feet.

*No, no, no.*

Looking wildly around, he didn’t even know for what, Glenn pried the door ajar but left the chain latch on. “Dad,” he hissed as lowly as he could, “what the hell are you doing here?”

“Confronting my lying liar of a son, what else?”

*No, no, no, no, no!* “This is a bad time, could you come back later? Say a day or three? How about a week?”

Jason Quill sighed and casually pushed the door open one-handed. The chain snapped and Glenn stumbled out of the way as if clotheslined by Harley Race.

The hell?

The next five minutes went by like a bizarre dream, as if he was experiencing life twice over. One him failed to come up with answers to his dad’s bulldozing interrogation, even the excuses he’d thought up beforehand. The other him felt like a passenger in his own body, one that hyper-analysed every last detail of his surroundings and the unfolding events. He felt as if his life up until the day before had been a dream he just woke up from, and now he was scrambling to rebuild his entire frame of reference from scratch.

“What the hell is this?”

Glenn was jarred out of his mental tally of everything he never realized the human senses could detect, even outside of his apartment. “What?”

“This.” Dad held up the less destroyed WITSEC folder. “What is this?”

Shit. “That’s not what it looks like,” Glenn said weakly. It wasn’t even a lie, those weren’t real WITSEC papers, they were a slave contract from an evil secret organisation, but good luck explaining-

“It sure as Hades is what it looks like, what, did the Illuminati suddenly crawl out of the bunghole of history and take over the WPP while the feds were too busy shooting their path clear of Italians?”

Glenn gaped. How did he know?!

“Don’t look at me like that, boy! As real as this looks, no alphabet soup agency would ever let it go without at least twice as many pages of legalese. Don’t even get me started on this poor excuse of a new identity. This isn’t your handwriting, don’t tell me it was pre-filled? What, do they have a bunch of ready-made files they just hand out to whatever poor schmuck-“

The window shattered before Glenn even heard the gunshot.

It was like those stories of superhuman feats in times of crisis. Glenn’s mind engaged some sort of overclock mode that let him track the shot from the moment the glass broke. His eyes even caught up to the bullet mid-flight, despite that the rest of his body struggled to even begin to react. He saw the second bullet too, this one heading straight for him – no, not a bullet this one, it was a tranquiliser dart.

The bullet had almost reached its target – no! – then time practically stopped as Dad up and stepped out of his body.

“Surprise, son,” said the glowing ghost. “Your dad’s a wizard.”

What.

“Glenn, these wretches that are after you aren’t just scumbags, they’re *opportunistic* scumbags.” Dad pushed the bullet to the left with his fingertip – it would now hit even closer to centre mass, why? – then came over to peer at the dart. “Case in point, tranquilizers don’t work instantly like

in movies. They want you to watch me die as an added lesson. See, this is why you don't fuck around and find out before your wedding night."

*Dad, what?* But he couldn't speak, couldn't move, only think.

"I've adjusted the bullet path so that it goes through me without damaging anything too important. I'm going to play dead, because I want to find out how they deal with collateral. I'm telling you this so you don't panic overmuch when they check my pulse and don't find one. Or you do."

What was even happening right now?

"Were you still part of my household, it would be my right as the head of the family to spirit you away to safety and deal with this mess however I see fit. But that's not the case, you wanted to be your own man so I'm going to respect that. I'll only intervene if your life is directly in danger of being terminated, or permanently compromised beyond the bounds of the law. In spirit of course."

What was that supposed to mean?

"It means, boy, that you're going to attend the school of hard knocks for the next little while. Don't worry, though, by tonight it'll all be over, Dad's promise."

*This is punishment for all the lying, isn't it?*

"My dear boy, how could you ever believe such a thing? After I went through all the trouble to make them go loud too. Had you gone with them quietly as you'd resigned yourself to – which I'm not judging you for – they would have disappeared you and everything you owned at their leisure, with a false trail and occasional calls from you to us so no one suspected foul play. Now they have to get you and me out of here as fast as possible, because silencers aren't soundless like in the movies either. They don't have time to ransack the place or clean up the blood before the cops get here. Quick, dirty and loud."

The bullet was almost there.

"Contrary to what that strumpet of yours said, the feds can, in fact, put two and two together and see that you weren't anywhere near that agent when he was killed. The body in your trunk is as likely to make them want to put you in witness protection even faster."

That lying, double-crossing bitch!

“There’s not a single alphabet agency that’s not compromised, though. Also, your phone’s tapped and there are people following you, so you wouldn’t have been able to get the word out to anyone this time.”

... Fuck.

“I wish this didn’t all have to come crumbling down at once, but I only found out about this mess yesterday, or I’d have done something sooner.”

And now Glenn felt bad for his parents instead of just sorry for himself.

Dad came over, grabbed Glenn by the temples and pressed their foreheads together. He could feel him, even as a ghost he could feel him.

*I’m dead*, Glenn thought. Hoped. *They already shot me and this is my dying hallucination.*

“No, but I can understand the wish for that relief. Now listen to me, son, these people are bold, but courage is a different matter. Boldness honors two things only: novelty and success. It feeds on them and without them dies. Boldness is impatient. Courage is long-suffering. Boldness cannot endure hardship or delay, it is ravenous, it must feed on victory or it dies. Boldness makes its seat upon the air, it is gossamer and phantom. Courage plants its feet upon the earth and draws its strength from the divine fundament.”

*Tides of War*, Glenn thought wildly, one of his favorite books. *Lysander.*

“If you remember, then you understand. The enemy’s weakness is time. Thrasytes is perishable. It is like that fruit, luscious when ripe, which stinks to heaven when it rots. Let them own thrasytes. *You have andreia.*”

*But I didn’t even-*

“Heads up, your frump’s coming up.”

BANG

Whisk.

Jason Quill fell in a bloody heap barely a moment before the tranq dart got Glenn in the neck.

He ripped it out and fell against the wall for support amidst the background noise of falling window pieces. He dropped to the floor and crawled over to where his dad had fallen. Despite the more detached part of him telling him he hadn't just suffered a hallucination, he still panicked when he checked his dad for a pulse and didn't find one.

Elia walked into the room just as he began to succumb to the drug, completely unaware that he had heard her arguing over radio about someone making a mess of her operation.

“Oh my god, Glenn, what happened? Because I was sure after last night you'd-“

Glenn jumped to his feet with a snarl, scooped her from between her legs and threw her clear across two rooms and screaming out the window.

“AAAH!”

BONK – THUD

*How's that for foreplay, doll?*

His last coherent thought as he collapsed was what a shame it was that the fire escape got in her way.

“You'd have regretted the lost opportunity later if it really ended like that,” he thought he might have heard his dad's ghost say. “Sleep now, son. You'll think even better when you next wake up.”

**“- John Allergyce .-“**

By 7:45 AM, the boss had overseen their introduction to each other, given them their briefing, and a couple of invisible floating balls of 'figments' for Frost or the Missus to summon him in case of an emergency.

At 7:56, the boss went on ahead through one of his portals to land himself in whatever mess his kid was in.

At 8:34, the boss's ghost showed up and warped the two of them to where his kid was taken, which turned out to be Roxxon's Los Angeles procurement hangar. Then he left them there – alone – because he needed to pull double duty watching over both his kid and his own body. He'd been sniped – *let* himself be sniped, Boss was a right ripper – and now his 'corpse' was being taken somewhere else for disposal. By people who weren't even part of the same organisation, so that was another thread that needed tugging.

Their boss didn't leave any stones unturned, that was for sure.

Fast forward to just before ten and John already had a bunch of money shots.

"Must you go through all those contortions?"

*Must you clutch your head all the time?*, was on the tip of John's tongue, but their employer had privately asked him to be the adult in the room. He'd even cast a spell to keep her out of his head for the while, just in case. "Aye," Pyro said instead from where he was bent sideways almost parallel to the ground at the door. Snap, snap snap. "Or do you think anyone'll buy these photos if they think I just waltzed in unopposed?"

Frost opened her eyes and rubbed her temple. "You're... imitating what you'd have had to do if this were a conventional infiltration. They'd think it was fake or staged otherwise."

"You got it." This was the other reason he was willing to keep his snark under wraps. The lass had clearly never dealt with anything more serious than family drama, but she was sharp enough despite all that, not just a pretty face.

Labcoat Whoever-She-Was went on checking her whatever readings as if the two of them weren't there. Because they weren't there. They were in some 'Mirror Dimension' place that let wizards get around and spy on anyone they wanted with impunity. Or, in this case, it let a telepath stand right behind you and go through your head while you obliviously went on with your life. Because why shouldn't John have nightmares about that on top of everything else?

"You've done this before," Frost said next time she took a break.

"It's never this easy, I'll tell you that. Peeking through doorways, hiding in corners and behind furniture, jumping in the bushes hoping the passing soldier van won't stop to look, crawling under

the bed and waiting there for hours until your mark leaves, there's a lot of little details you can't doctor in. I can't take any chances knowing who these people are."

Roxxon's head honcho had serious balls, but he also had a seriously inflated view of his own smarts. Or his local rep did. True enough that it would be weirder if Roxxon didn't maintain a presence in California, seeing as the Midway-Sunset Oil Field was how they got started. But moving your procurement centre to the boring part of Los Angeles, just so you can build an illegal clubhouse for your secret society pals (or bosses?), that was some serious cooker shite.

That said lair was a hole dug under the goddamned Stark Industries weapons depot next door, well, that was just being petty. Made you wonder what Stark did to Hugh Jones to piss him off this much, seeing as the arrangement postdated the latter's arrest by only long enough to be deniable. Or maybe it was the secret society cookies that had beef with him?

It was a decent hole, though, he'll give 'em that.

Pyro moved to the corner and adjusted the lens of his camera for a distant close-up of the displays. No clue what the words and numbers meant, but that wasn't his job. He crouched this way and that to make it look like it was a real bugger to catch the useful parts of the screens. "So, got anything yet?" Snap. Snap. Snap. "She anyone important, or is it that scrap metal she's sweet on?"

"I'm not sure," Frost scrunched her forehead in concentration. "Her prior place of employment might be important, she was part of Isodyne before it went under and Roxxon bought everything left. They're researching something called 'zero matter' but she doesn't seem to know anything about any kidnapping, or of any plans to bring other expertise than her on this project, despite being the person-in-charge of this entire floor."

"Might be they're brooding more than one egg here. Alright, stand aside, just a bit more to the right so you don't enter the picture." John switched to his Polaroid and made a full front body shot and a close-up of the woman's face. "Here." He held them out to Frost. "Write the most relevant information you got from her on the back – use this marker – the boss will decide if he does anything about it."

"I suppose – oh, now *that's* interesting."

Snap, snap, snap. "Don't keep me in suspense."

“It seems she is personally acquainted with Ian Quinn, and it’s not at all complimentary. I sense familiarity, and a fair bit of professional rivalry mixed with a feeling of personal threat, though not sexual.”

“Operation like this, it’s got to have been around long enough to have a solid core of personnel, as we saw when we came in.” Snap, snap, snap. “But if she doesn’t know Quinn through Isodyne, then the guy must have an in with the secret whatever society, maybe he’s even a member. On the other hand, if she’s been over this zero whatsit for this long and she’s still ‘researching’, it might as well be a dead end as far as the money people are concerned. Wanna bet she’s afraid Quinn will poach her minions? And funding? Maybe this whole place, even.”

“That would fit what I’m getting.”

“Well, add a note to the polaroid. Any progress on whether she knows about the boss’s kid?”

“She seems completely ignorant so far, but that’s only what I get from her active thoughts, for anything deeper or long-term I’d need to take a walk through her memories, and I’ve never tried that before.”

So she *couldn’t* do the absolute extremes that Pyro was imagining of telepathy. Yet, maybe. Or she was hiding it. “Well, on the job isn’t the time or place to try new things like that, so I say just leave it for now. That’s what the boss said, right?”

“You don’t need to remind me.” Frost looked frustrated, but whether it was at him or her failure he couldn’t say.

“Cheer up, lass, soon there won’t be anyone in this base that doesn’t have the boss or his kid on their mind, I bet.”

“I’ll believe that when I see it.”

John took a few more pictures, and even managed to snag a few good quotes with his mic – Labcoat was the sort to use a voice recorder, hopefully they’ll get to make off with that too – before they felt like they had dug all they could here.

For whatever reason, they couldn’t phase through walls like they could people – which was good because he wouldn’t want to drop through the floor forever – but the woman hadn’t locked herself



in. They could just open the door and leave without it happening in the real world. John was sure there was an explanation for how some stuff worked and some didn't, but he really didn't care. If they ever got in a bind, Frost could just poke at the little floating ball that was supposedly following them around, to summon the boss.

For the next couple of hours, they snooped around and shadowed everyone from the head researchers to the janitor, collecting evidence for the press, evidence for the cops, and evidence for the boss. Plenty of folk here worked nights, but the majority started work at 7 AM, so normally this would be the worst time to snoop around. Instead, they got a lot of material in a very short time when discretion was at its lowest and there was the maximum number of people around to incriminate, no following cars or night stalking required.

If not for the risk of never being able to leave – and being snatched up by some random evil sorcerer of evil looking for his next sacrifice – Pyro would be tempted to learn magic just to get regular access to this backstage.

They did eventually run into doors and cabinets that were locked, but Pyro could make his flames hot enough to melt steel with a bit of time. They also made a list of locations with all the most important and incriminating documentation. John had collected a bunch of dossiers from their side of the dimensional wall just to see what would happen when they crossed back into the real world, that was one of many details their Boss hadn't gone over with them.

Said boss showed up unannounced a couple of times to make sure they were alright, which was mighty thoughtful seeing as he was literally unconscious somewhere in some car's trunk – or freezer truck, apparently. He did it as a ghost, though, which was scary as fuck when that ghost could string you up by your toes with his mind.

Even if Quill turned out completely genuine about the 'no strings attached beyond the NDA' thing, John would be very careful about who he let hire him in the future, and under what terms. That way, if he ever crossed the man, he could honestly say it was due to circumstances beyond his control.

On being asked, Quill said that anything from the mirror dimension vanished when brought to the real world, 'because it's not so much substance as the afterimage of substance.' Or something.

They'd made it to level three when noon rolled around, so John and Frost ate the lunches that Missus Quill had packed for them, while watching how everyone behaved in the mess room.

Here, the dynamics ranged from comfortable co-workers to practically prison-like depending on the table, even without counting the armed goons guarding the two entrances. The polaroid pile started getting really thick about then. Quill had been very clear about having annotated pictures about anyone who was there under coercion. He'd used that specific word because apparently these guys didn't just do threats, but real shady blackmail and even, possibly, mind control.

*Probably* not of the sort Frost could do. Maybe. Or would learn to, eventually.

"I don't need to look into your head to know what you're thinking," the lass told him with fake nonchalance as they made their way to the lower levels. They were using the stairs because who knows how the elevator would turn out in the mirror dimension? "Rest assured that I do take my contract seriously."

That didn't reassure Pyro none, it didn't take magic powers to fuck with a guy's head. He knew about scopolamine and he'd even been roofied once, not that he was going to share that any time soon. "Trust me, if you tried we'd both know," John said instead as he lit his lighter and proceeded to melt through the lock. "So would the boss."

"My goodness, what has happened to society that a man can't take a woman at her word?"

"Divorce laws."

"Touche."

It was on the bottom-most of the four underground levels that the two finally found out the name of the secret society they were snooping around in, and which their Boss hadn't shared because he wanted them to make an unbiased investigation.

"Heil Hydra."

"Heil Hydra."

John and Frost just stopped in place. He with his thumb on the camera button, she with her hand part-way to her head. They watched the ratbags scurry on their way and then exchanged a lengthy look of disbelief.

“... I need this on film, timestamped, everything.”

“I agree.”

He scrambled to dig out his big, heavy, clunky video camera from his bag. He cursed himself for not having one of the newer VHS-C's, but they were expensive and the studio didn't shell out for just anybody, especially someone they set up to fail (and probably die) in a foreign warzone. Running with it was even harder, and John really wanted to find a good spot to catch the next pair perfectly in frame.

Unfortunately, selling the risks of getting this material remained more important, so he didn't try to keep his camera from shaking while he stalked the next few pairs of Hail Hydras.

“Hydra,” Frost murmured, crouched next to where he'd laid down on a catwalk above the guarded door leading to some sort of faraday cage. It was the closest spot he'd found where someone might believe that he'd been able to film from without being immediately discovered. “They were the scientific branch of the Nazi Schutzstaffel during World War II. They survived? If so, they live up to the name better than anyone thought.”

“Anyone except whoever helped them hide in your country.” These were the people that Captain America fought and was supposed to have destroyed at the end of the war, which was the whole reason why the war even ended when it did, despite Roosevelt's bumbling.

“What's this? An Aussie claiming to know more about US governance than his own citizens?”

“A man who knows that even if a Hydra grows two heads for every one that dies, it still has a limit,” John whispered harshly as they scouted the last level of the place, the security room had to be here somewhere. “The hydra's regeneration was stopped by a simple torch, so it's not like they're any more invincible than other annoying cryptids. You think something like this can happen without at least someone in the White House knowing about it?”

Teenagers, they always think they know everything.

“I'm more interested in what they're doing in America at all,” Frost murmured as she stopped to scan the minds behind the next door. “And how many pies they have fingers in.”

“Wanna bet I’ve got an even better question than that?”

“I have been thinking about gambling,” the lass said, distracted by whatever she was sensing inside. “But I’m starting to reconsider.”

They snuck through a few more rooms, peered through a few more doors – almost no windows on this level – and John took picture after picture, and even snagged a second set of Heil Hydras on film. Then Frost suddenly sighed in magnanimous irritation.

“Alright,” she put her hands on her hips. “Go ahead, ask your question.”

John blinked. He had to backtrack a fair bit to figure out what she was talking about. “Oh!” Women. “It was supposed to be rhetorical, but alright, lass, since you asked so nicely...” he waited for her to scowl at him in impatience, just because. “If this is Hydra, what’s with the hiring practices?”

Frost’s put-upon annoyance, which she clearly used as a defense mechanism, thawed into realization. “... You’re saying that these can’t be nazis.”

Hydra weren’t just nazis, they were super nazis, that was their whole thing. But these guys, over a quarter of them didn’t even have European ancestry. The guy whose face and voice their Boss had shown them, who led the snatcher team on his kid, he *kind* of looked the part... but Po was a Chinese name. Even more strangely, the names they’d since found in some of the files – or more often in the heads that Frost kept rifling through – a bunch of the important ones didn’t fit either. Dakini, Sunil Bakshi, Ronda Giyera, Ramon de Rico, Ron Takimoto, Toshiro Mori.

John and Frost had even come across two different Asian guys called ‘Something Li’ in the past few hours, and they weren’t even related. This was especially bizarre because ‘Lee’ was a very low-hanging fruit, there were a lot of Lee’s in America, it was a very common and old *English* surname.

Either the Allies had lied about Hydra being an exclusively Nazi thing in all their post-war propaganda, or the name had been co-opted by someone else. In which case everyone saluting ‘Heil Hydra’ unironically was probably looking at a sad and painful end in ten or thirty years.

“Maybe they’re just low-level grunts?” Frost said dubiously. “Secrecy isn’t free or easy, perhaps the higher-ups are making do while they rebuild their influence?”

“Maybe,” but John didn’t believe it any more than Frost did, and that belief was only reinforced when they got to watch the Boss’s kid receive his belated medical checkup. While still unconscious.

When the stereotypical delivery truck came in through the hidden lift, down from the underground parking lot above, the trailer doors open to disgorge the strike team and the Boss’s unconscious kid, as well as a belle whose groans and curses were only less foul than her bruises. She had to have several things sprained or broken, with how stiffly she dragged her feet. Both of them were then handed into the care of chief medical officer of the whole base. Her name was Mehta.

The chief medical authority to an entire cell of a secret organisation of supposed nazis was an Indian woman.

“Aye, that does it, this doesn’t make sense at all.”

The boss hadn’t checked on them in a while, but since he’d told them not to panic unless he was well over an hour late, they skulked around through all the areas left, and then settled in an out-of-the-way corner of the surveillance room, which they’d finally located in a nuclear bunker separate from everything else, and undoubtedly built off the books. All the books.

It was only accessible via a single tunnel. With an *airlock*.

The Boss’s kid was showing signs of waking up on the cellblock monitor when the wall to their right practically disassembled to allow thee Boss himself to walk in, finally in the flesh again.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, it turns out that Hydra has a standing arrangement with the local organ black market, which overlaps with the human trafficking network to such an extent that they’re basically joined at the hip. I thought it would take at least ten more years, but there’s actually an organ black market already.” Jason Quill walked around the lone man on duty, his eyes barely glancing over the screens.

John was sure he was taking in every detail though, he’d seen enough to know Quill either had some sort of photographic memory, or a way to dilate his own perception of time.

“I’ve set the place on fire, among other things, and the police force should be all over it soon, bribes or no bribes. Also, it’s in a different neighbourhood so it won’t impact the emergency response here.”

... Because that was the only important thing about all he'd just said. Clearly.

"Miss Frost, how are you feeling?"

"I am perfectly fine to continue, I assure you."

Quill turned to her with a look of patience. "I believe you mean it, but when an operation leader asks something, it's because the answer will help him decide where to best use you. Please, answer the question honestly."

"... I am worried and bewildered at the facts we've uncovered about this situation, and faintly alarmed at how casually you just revealed all that, but I can set it all aside until the job is over. I have the beginning of a headache, but it's not debilitating."

"How far away can you talk to others in their heads?"

"Without trying too hard, I've done a couple of blocks in the past."

"Could you maintain such a link if, say, I popped from one end of this base to the other?"

"If I can't because of interference from your method, I can reestablish it instantly if that's the only area I have to look through. If you leave enough mind for me to find."

"Alright, please do that. Now, if I asked you to put an illusion on this man that everything on the screens is nominal, how long do you think you could keep it up?"

Frost, to her credit, actually thought before replying. "Perhaps... Ten minutes?" When Quill kept waiting, she glanced John's way.

Quill did the same. "We can discuss it in private if you wish."

Frost clearly considered saying yes, but after another glance to John, she shook her head ruefully.

"He was with me the entire time, what he does not know he can deduce, I'm sure. To answer your question, I've never had to fool the senses for more than a minute at a time. But subtle illusions aren't any more taxing than the thought reading I've been doing today. I've gone beyond the fifteen minutes mark for at least two of them."

"We'll keep it in reserve for later."

A few seconds ticked by, then the phone called. The guard picked it up and gave the all-clear to... the voice on the other end sounded like Labcoat.

“Regular checkups now?” John was surprised. “We were with her for more than an hour earlier, and she didn’t make any.”

“SOP when something or someone new is brought in from outside,” Frost explained, her eyes clearly conveying she was reading it from the guard’s mind in real time. “Especially for resistant inductees, just in case the base is compromised.”

Smart enemies truly were the most troublesome.

The moment the call ended, the Boss walked up behind the seated guard, jabbed through the crack in dimensions into the back of the guy’s head to knock him out, spun his hand to open one of his portals to what looked like a barn, and then tossed the flunky through.

“Sparky, you’re with me.” Quill ordered the moment the portal closed. Fake codenames on, then, the live part of the operation was up next. “Unless we’re lucky and she forgets, we’ve got an hour before the hag-in-charge calls in for an update. I want to strip this place of everything and everyone important in that time.”

“Right, got it.”

“Glinda, you’re on overwatch.” Quill’s face became impossible to discern as he pulled his hood up. “You’re going to stay up here. When the ruckus starts, the bigshots will either try to escape topside – which they’ll find impossible – or come running to this room. When they do, I want you to scan them for any knowledge of me, my family, Ian Quinn, and anyone else they know of that’s connected to this operation. You’ll be in the Mirror Dimension, so it should be safe, but I’m going to actively monitor your observer just in case.”

“Understood. What should I do if they call for help from outside?”

“Good question, they can’t. I’ve just severed the landlines. As for wireless, even if we weren’t so deep underground, disrupting the electromagnetic wavelengths used for communication and surveillance is a fundamental survival skill for any sorcerer who wants to ply his trade out in the world. Same for becoming to cameras what vampires are to mirrors.”

“Next you’ll tell me vampires are real too,” John mumbled.

“They are.”

Why was he even surprised anymore?

“Alright, do you have those polaroids for me? Perfect, balaclavas on and let’s go.”

The Boss examined the first photo and wove his arms in a grand circle, his hands flowing from one yoga gesture to the next. The walls and floors reassembled into a new corridor right before John’s eyes, and then its end practically came *to* them until it was just one step away. Quill stepped forward, Pyro followed, and then world’s many pieces snapped back into place with rattling twang, leaving them at the far end of the farthest hallway up on the first level.

The boss proceeded to warp them into every room of interest one after another, where they stepped out of the mirror dimension just long enough to knock out whoever was there, steal everything important, and toss it through a portal to wherever Quill decided to stash them.

The people who didn’t know anything about him and his were left alone. Those who did know something were force-fed a thimble’s worth of smelly drink from a canteen. When they came upon someone who knew where and how to find other people connected to this organisation, he tossed them through to join the others in being tied up by the two dames on the other side. Same with anyone who knew someone who knew about the boss and his family, even if just vaguely and if they were otherwise uninvolved.

Other than taking point when ransacking desks or filing cabinets, John felt mostly useless throughout all of it. He killed time by watching the floating space shard that the boss always kept in his sight. It played a real-time feed of the boss’s kid, and John should really stop calling him kid because he wasn’t that much younger than him.

The bloke was punching the cell lock, did he really think that was gonna do anything? He was doing it with his knuckles too, and he was shaking the bar with his other hand really fast, *really* fast, the thing was practically a blur-

‘Click’

Creak.



*Well I'll be damned.*

Not a key or lockpick or even a piece of wire, he'd unlocked the cell door just like that.

Quill grinned smugly, and he couldn't seem to stop for the rest of the floor.

John couldn't blame him, what his sprog did next quickly defied belief, and he said that as a walking fire disaster.

The guy – Glenn – subjected the cell block to the most thorough and orderly ransacking he'd ever seen, made practically no sound as he *sprinted* barefoot through the corridors, seemed to know every time someone was coming from around the next bend, and took all of them down in ones, twos and threes with barely a pause in his step, arming himself with their guns along the way.

The guy started out like a barely trained boxer with a couple of wrestling moves for flavor, and an uncanny ability to turn everything and the kitchen sink into a knockout weapon on the fly. He seemed to get better and better with every engagement and moment that went by too. In every possible way.

Then Glenn got delayed a bit too long in one of the bigger rooms with multiple entrances, and someone sounded the alarm.

Quill stopped what they were doing to watch. And wait. The sounds of shouts and running footsteps were heard, both in the mirror and outside the door. John realized that the boss had timed things precisely so his kid could be used as a distraction.

“You're a cold one, boss.”

“Don't be silly, my astral form can get there faster than a bullet if he's ever in any real danger. Leave him to his work while we see to ours.”

“You the one who trained him, or is he some kind of black ops?”

“Neither.”

That explained jack shit.

‘His work’ turned out to be too tame a descriptor for what rapidly became a real-life action flick. The guy sent the first wave of armed guards into cover with some scattered shots from an uzi he'd

looted earlier, ran from cover to cover while picking them out one by one with a pistol, *ran on the wall* to dropkick the squad leader who'd huddled behind a blast barricade, and then closed in to uppercut the last man by casually walking and dodging his shots just before he fired.

"Holy shit, you guys can see the future?"

"Those are just very good reflexes."

"Good reflexes doesn't begin to cover that!"

"Go on, praise him a little more."

"Dammit, boss, now you just made it awkward."

They were almost done with the first floor when Boss's son found his stuff in lockup.

They finished with the first floor almost to the second when Glenn found something specific in his stuff, a silver dollar coin.

They warped down to the second floor just as Glenn was sprinting upstairs from the fourth to the third.

That was when Glenn decided he wasn't ridiculous enough and began to take the gunmen out by ricocheting bullets off rebar, armored doors and security glass. Once, the bullet even ricocheted *twice* before catching a gunman in the neck.

"Oh that is just *bullshit*."

Finally, Glenn was cornered on the far side of the maintenance bay by the same team who'd brought him in, and there was no convenient wall or catwalk close enough to pull another stunt.

"Alright." Quill tossed the latest person of interest through his latest portal. "No better time than this." He snapped his fingers.

The entire base shook to its foundations, and all the fire alarms went off at once.

"We'll have to hurry up with the last ones, let's go."

John matched his running pace, what else could he do? "If you wanted this place torched down, all you had to do was ask!" But his eyes kept straying back to the mirror where-

“At the risk of sounding like a hypocrite – which I’m not – don’t be so quick to sully your hands with murder.” Knockout, portal, shove. “Contrary to what some books tell you, it’s not the most meaningful coming-of-age trial. I’m only letting Glenn go through this because it’s the only way he’ll get closure, which is better than not maturing at all. Also, I’m old fashioned about owning your own mistakes.”

“I had my coming-of-age already, thanks,” John huffed. “I can control my fire without killing anyone if I want to.”

“In your line of sight, yes, not through multiple floors, and from what I know you can bend flames, not smoke. Regardless, that’s not what I hired you for, and besides, the point is to drive them out into the street. Which is why that earthquake just now was my explosives caving in all the secret exits.”

Damn, he’d been busy. “And the fire alarms? Just a glitch?”

“No, that’s the fire I set to their food supplies.”

“Shit, boss, they have propane tanks by the truckload here, they-”

“I already removed them and the other hazards, there will be no explosions.” Knockout, portal, shove. “The fire itself won’t compromise the integrity of the building either, nor will it reach the munitions above. The oxygen will be exhausted well before the fire runs out of control – hold up!” Suddenly, he stopped and made a portal to the ceiling, through which fell a man and woman from just outside the bunker airlock, where Frost still was.

That’s right, she was talking into the boss’s head all this time, wasn’t she?

Double knockout, potion, potion, pick pockets, ransack research materials, steal, portal.

“What about guns?” John asked next time he had a chance.

“As with any authoritarian regime, only the higher-ups and the enforcers are allowed weapons here, and those will be quite soundly taken care of by the time we’re done. There were a few clever mice who managed to sneak a small pistol in, but I’ve already stolen those. I’ve jammed the armory doors too, though I also picked that clean, naturally.”

*Naturally*, John thought dryly.

“Bottom line,” Boss said as he disassembled the way to the next destination. “They’ll soon have no choice but to escape straight up through Stark’s warehouse.”

*Well don't that beat all?* “That’s mean, Boss, what did Stark ever do to you?”

“Nothing, and he won’t suffer any suspicion from this, don’t worry.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Because he’s one of the people in charge of the only counter-espionage alphabet soup agency that’s still unknown to the public.”

That struck John silent more effectively than his increasingly heavy breathing. He’d never imagined the flamboyant Howard Stark would have the temperament for something of the like, never mind anything else. That... “He – pant – must be really – shit at his job – wheeze – this has been happening quite l-literally under his roof.”

“I agree.”

How reasonable, a guy might almost be tempted to-

TWANG – RATTLE – SQWOOSH

“AUGH, FUCK, AGH!”

John stopped mid-way through reaching for a drawer and stared in tired disbelief at the floating mirror. The hot water pipes right above and around the Hydra strike team had just burst into a jet of scalding hot water right in their face. “You *did* teach him magic, I knew it!”

“No, that was a water hammer.” Quill opened a portal in the floor and stole the entire filing cabinet. “He’s a creative one, my boy.”

“That’s totally a spell, it totally sounds like the name of a spell!”

“No, you just missed Glenn applying percussive therapy to the pipes while you were distracted.” Warp, knockout, ransack, portal, repeat. “Water is almost totally incompressible. That’s why an underwater explosion will kill fish and people alike, the shockwave is not absorbed by the water itself. That’s why a rattle of water in the plumbing can actually cause pipes to burst if not treated carefully. Or, in this case, when treated very carefully indeed.”

“Alright, alright, you can stop bragging anytime now, boss.”

“Not on your life, I’m too proud right now!”

John palmed his face. “How the hell did someone like you ever become a wizard?”

“I could answer that, just keep in mind that if you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss begins to feel kind of awkward about the whole situation.”

“Alright, that joke wasn’t so bad, means you probably stole it, right?”

Quill scoffed. “Just because I’m a dad doesn’t mean dad jokes are all I have.”

“That’s not a no.”

“No it’s not.”

Quill watched the mirror shard until Glenn finally took down the strike team, then Boss abruptly bent space to Maintenance and stepped alone out through the cracks to take a knee where his son had fallen down in exhaustion. “Glenn. You’ve done very well, I’m proud of you. The tremors and fire alarms just now were me, I’ll shortly be ending the threat posed by this place. Do you want me to take you home now, or are you up for finishing off your last loose end?”

“Dad,” Glenn panted and shook with adrenaline. “I think – I have – superpowers.”

“Superpower, yes, the equivalent of NASA’s combined rocket science computers to the power of squared, except user-friendly. I gave it to you last night.”

...

*Oh*, John thought numbly. *That’s how*.

“Son,” Quill called in a clear tone that imposed attention. “If you resume your route in the next three minutes, you’ll cross paths just outside the stairwell. You need to decide. You shouldn’t need that long for it, anymore.”

Glenn just lied there on the ground, before painstakingly picking himself up. “... I’ll stick it out. End it right here.”

“Alright, I’ll be back when you’re done.”

Quill returned to the Mirror Dimension and warped himself and John over to the surveillance room.

“Glinda, any news.”

John swiftly realized those words were just for his benefit, because Frost merely looked in Quill’s eyes.

“Alright, I got all of it. Unrelated, that woman that’s about to show up on the feed, stay out of her head. Shakespearan lycanthropy means her skills and propensities are too tightly integrated with her personality for even your special talent to overcome. Taking anything from her will mess you up. I’m making this an essential job parameter as defined in the previously agreed-upon employment clauses. You’ll have plenty of skills to absorb later.”

Do what now?

“... Very well, but I’ll want an explanation about what that means.”

“Later.”

The boss reached out through a crack in the world and snapped his fingers.

The flash should’ve blinded all of them, but it only did that to the guys on the other side. And Labcoat too, thank God, she was a right screaming harridan. Quill wasted no time picking them off one by one in their confusion until the room was empty. Guess they all had something to share none too willingly.

Quill turned to the security screens, then, and specifically the one where his kid had just crossed paths with that battered belle that had been brought in with him.

There were some words exchanged, or she tried to say something.

Glenn just levelled his pistol the same moment he side-stepped her shot – she was faster on the draw despite her sorry state – and flicked his silver dollar where she dived with his other hand. It was so fast that John only realized what happened when her head jerked back.

The woman began to choke. She gagged. She clawed at her throat. She stared up at Glenn, heaving dryly. Uselessly. He merely stood there, watching as she collapsed and tried and failed to free her windpipe until she finally stopped moving.

“Good thing I’m a therapist,” Quill muttered. “Then again, conquering your fear is nine tenths of the job, and he just did that all by himself. Couldn’t have happened to a worse strumpet either, that viper could’ve become a real problem in the next year or ten.”

*Choked to death on her own silver*, John thought. *A traitor’s death, sure enough.*

Boss briefly left them while he warped over to where his son was standing, opened a portal and coaxed the guy on through it. Glenn didn’t speak, but he didn’t resist this time either.

John exchanged a long, meaningful look with Frost. He couldn’t tell what she was thinking or feeling, but whatever it was it was very meaningful.

When Quill returned to them, he was all out of good mood as well.

“We’re done here. Emergency services are on the way, along with the cops. Let’s make sure everyone gets what they deserve.”

**“- John Allerdyce .-“**

They were waiting in the Mirror Dimension on top of the Stark warehouse when the ambulances and police cars finally began to surround the place. The cops didn’t come in force at first, forcing the boss to pull his most outrageous feat yet. Which was to say, he made it so that everyone trying to run and hide instead ended up in the Mirror Dimension, running around in folded space until they came charging out back where they started.

“No cracks in the air this time?” Frost asked. She didn’t sound as relaxed as she pretended.

John wasn’t pretending at all. He was worried he’d begun to hallucinate. Just now when Quill rattled the wall between worlds the hardest he ever had, John could have sworn he saw a giant spider with a man on its head giving them the finger.

“Can’t risk that being recognized by the wrong people, or the right ones,” Quill grunted. “I’m having to warp them in and out of the Mirror Dimension individually. Hopefully they’ll blame the going in circles on fume-induced hallucinations. Even illusions will be fine, it’ll be an extra goose chase that won’t lead our way.”

John and Frost exchanged another look. He was worried about discovery? By other sorcerers? That's what it sounded like.

"I can see you making faces, you know."

"You do have eyes in the back of your head!" John blurted in a bid to calm his suddenly racing heart. "I was starting to wonder."

"I have eyes all around us, every strand of my spirit is a way for me to see, hear, smell, whatever. You can relax, though, this is all covered in your contract. Also, I take Xenia very seriously."

But neither of that prevented later diplomacy failures, even the contract only notified of it, was he really that confident? And in what? Them? Their morals? Loyalty? His ability to neutralize them if they became a threat?

"I can feel the cynicism practically wafting off of you," Quill grouched, not turning around. "And if I can, miss Frost probably has some words not suited for polite company. Relax."

"Easy for you to say," John muttered, wondering if Frost's silence meant she didn't share his concerns, or if it was her fight-or-flight response stuck on 'freeze.' "Those guys down there don't seem to be having the best time either."

Dozens of sirens blared like screeching banshees, a police commissioner screamed orders through a bullhorn, the hydra goons were ignoring them and trying to rush the barricades before they closed fully, the few Stark employees were aghast and confused and pointing fingers, the cops were struggling to contain the hydra goons who were well on their way to a riot, the firefighters were frantic about being let in to do their jobs because they couldn't tell where all the smoke was coming from, that was really bad news in their line of work, if they didn't get a handle on it and the flames reached the ammo then the whole street might-

BOOM

The airhorn suddenly blasted so loudly that John's bones rattled and he literally thought he was back in East Timor amid exploding bombs.

The mounting chaos jerked to a sudden stop.



All heads turned to where the Police Commissioner's bullhorn was now in the hands of an EMT, who'd just set off a firecracker through it with the force of a thunderclap.

"ATTENTION DUNDERHEADS!" Bellowed the megaphone of the tall, willowy, blond emergency medical technician who was lame in one leg. "The problem with America's health system is that you people don't know shit about using it! You just jump straight to what's most expensive because they're easiest. Take you lot, for instance, none of you needed an ambulance when we came here, but now I see at least five schmucks beaten bloody all over the ground!"

"What the hell?" Quill muttered. For the first time in John's memory, he sounded off-balance.

"Ambulances are hilariously expensive! They're meant for people who are likely to die enroute or need immediate trauma care! That's a very small niche, and requires a lot of skill! So congratulations, you just lost all your savings! Don't forget insurance costs. Once the sirens go on, the ambulance is exempt from a majority of traffic safety laws. That comes with a large amount of risk, so now you have much higher insurance premium to cover, instead of the pittance that you would have had with non-emergency vehicles!"

"That can't be who I think it is." Quill warped space in the mirror dimension to read the man's badge and fell silent. Dumbstruck, even, another first.

"Now I want everyone to calm down – or else – and form nice, long rows *away* from the people unconscious and bleeding out over there. No, make it wider so the firemen can go in and do their jobs, *and* we can attend to the wounded. If you cause trouble, you'll shortly *be* the wounded because the cops have armor and beat sticks while you don't. Then we'll have to treat you. If you need to receive medical care, we *have* to treat you! That means you don't get to argue prices with us, you get our finance department! And those guys, well, they want your money, so they'll do whatever it takes to get as much as possible!"

"It can't be," Quill breathed, eyes still stuck on the badge. John leaned over to see- "It can't be. This makes no sense." Quill was *shocked*.

Below, the police cordon finally closed and the last barricades were now up. Nobody was getting away now.

“Alright, now that we can all see our fates are equally tangled up, here’s how it’s going to be. First off, when we finally finish with you and the guy with the bill comes to you in the hospital, ignore whatever figure he shows you. Tell them you can only afford five dollars a month. They’ll usually accept that. Or just let it go to collections and do the same with the collector. I literally paid off a four thousand dollars debt at fifty dollars a month through a collection agency.”

The man’s speech seemed to have either persuaded or bewildered everyone enough that they were cooperating. Or not resisting, one or the other.

“Now, you’re all clearly employed or you wouldn’t be streaming out of a munitions depot at three in the afternoon, so they’ll know you’re someone they can squeeze. If you’re not doing too good on money, declare bankruptcy! There are many financial tools. My friend’s father had something like six grand in medical debt. He let it all go to collections, and then never answered the phone for a year until they gave up! It’ll be a stain on your credit prospects, but he didn’t pay a penny, and so can you!”

Next to him, the police commissioner facepalmed.

The young man didn’t care. “If the financial department still tries to mark you up, tell them they don’t have to sell you the Cadillac treatment! You just want the basic treatment! Hospitals go for the mid and high-end because people expect it. You can talk them down if you know enough to know you can have the basic treatment! Which you can! You can have the *basic* treatment, that’s basic, b-a-s-i-c, did everyone get that? Yes, the rat-faced fellow making faces at me, I’m asking you! Also, go to Urgent or Clinic care if you can, emergency room costs extra.”

“This is all fascinating and eminently useful information,” Frost muttered, scribbling something in a notebook very, very fast. “Why did nobody ever tell me any of this? Scratch that, Winston Frost wouldn’t help his own children if he didn’t get something out of it.”

Well damn, she was *that* sort of runaway.

“Alright, now that the good firefighters finally have their hoses in place, get the hell clear! That thing packs a wallop, you don’t want bruises and sprains on top of everything, trust me! If you do get one, though, please don’t come crying to us! You don’t need a doctor to tell you to put your sprained wrist into a brace and to go easy on it for a few weeks. Or to ice a major bruise. Or to use

a hot pad on a pulled muscle or randomly tweaked back. Or to deal with the common cold or chest congestions unless your fever skyrockets! If you call on us for such a stupid thing, all we're gonna do is put you on ice and shove a saline drip with meds into your veins. Cause the hospital and clinic will treat that, and charge you. For wasting our time with petty bullshit!"

"Jesus Christ," John breathed in amazement. He looked down at the crowd and found them all totally cowed. "He's bombing them like they have oil."

"Alright, with that we should have about 90% of all short term non-grievous injury and sickness covered. Did I miss anything – oh yes. You! Yes, you, the one from one of those socialized healthcare hellscape! Don't give me that look, if you don't want to be recognized on sight, don't wear the pin! Anyway, you people should do these things too, because if you don't you just waste taxpayer money, and that means my money! If you just go 'oh it's free' you end up causing strain on infrastructure, personnel, and budget. Of course, having granite entrances and expensive gardens doesn't help either, but that's par for the course with you lot."

"-ight, alright, that's enough!" The commissioner's voice came through as he wrested the bullhorn back. "Get to work already, they get it."

"They better," the EMT scoffed, the supreme face of condescension as he lit a cigarette. "Otherwise I'm using them as an ash tray."

"Unbelievable," Quill said flatly. "This makes absolutely no sense at all."

"I take it you know him?" Frost said airily, getting up from where she'd sat with her legs dangling over the edge. "If you do, might I bother you for an introduction? He has such excellent common sense."

"That just makes it weirder," the boss huffed, scowling. "Whatever. Let's go, we're done here."

Frost had finally found her courage though. "Now I'm even more curious."

"And I'm a doting dad whose kids have started to leave the nest, leaving prone to stick my nose in the personal business of troubled young'uns due to 'being needed' withdrawal. Don't test me."

Frost raised her hands and backed off. "Point quite aptly made."

"I'm glad we cleared that up, Miss Frost."

*She didn't sound like she'd mind it much, though, John quietly thought to himself. If you stuck your nose in her business.*

Quill opened a portal back to his home and led the way.

As he stepped through last, John looked back at the EMT that had so discomfited the most fearsome and self-possessed man he'd ever known.

*Donald Blake, he wondered, recalling the name on the badge. What makes you so special?*

