

Chapter 5 – Envy Is the Stepmother of Progress

“- Howard Stark .-“

“-etails are still scarce about what precisely transpired at the Stark Munitions Depot in Los Angeles-

He switched channels.

“-that while the Stark Munitions Depot personnel are all present and accounted for, they make up a very small fraction of the people who streamed out of the building after fire broke out this afternoon-

He switched channels again.

“-police have taken into custody people after they emerged from a heretofore unknown location situated right below the Stark Industries warehouse-“

He switched channels again.

“-at least seven of the detainees have tentatively been confirmed to have been reported missing as far back as six years ago. What this means for the rest of the people there, or the clandestine location they emerged from, is still unclear. No Stark Industries official has yet been available for comment-“

He switched channels.

“-no one knows so far what Howard Stark’s level of involvement with these events, if any, might be. The warehouse staff have professed complete ignorance of the matter and refuse to speak with a lawyer or official SI representative present. Notably, the police have not detained them alongside the rest. That said, it seems unlikely that the facility, especially with the size and scope that is now being reported, could truly have existed under the nose of the genius self-made billionaire-”

He switched.

“-now seems as if the crowd that was disgorged by the Stark Munitions Warehouse in Los Angeles might, in fact, be just part of the personnel of a heretofore secret facility located below. Given the attire and behaviour observed of the people detained, this may be just the day shift of an otherwise bigger employment structure. Nothing besides the location yet suggests that this operation is in any way directly connected to the foremost made man of New York. It is also unknown what sort of record-keeping the operation used. We hope that more information will become available once the firefighters have had time to put out the last fires.”

Switch.

“-the fire engulfed the heretofore unknown-about underground levels, which appear to be distinct and newer than the nuclear bunker located nearby, which also seems to have been part of the facility-“

Switch

“-ventilation failed, causing the flames to exhaust the available oxygen and go out almost entirely by themselves, well before they reached or otherwise endangered the munitions being stored in the Stark Industries facility above ground-“

Switch.

“-ccording to preliminary statements by the firefighters, several entrances existed, but all seemed to have jammed or collapsed at the same time, suggesting this was an act of deliberate sabotage. On that note, we still don't know who tipped off the emergency responders to begin with-“

Ring, ring, ring.

Howard picked up the phone, which hadn't stopped ringing all evening, put it back down, then picked it back up and dialled headquarters. “Stark here. Yes, Peggy, I do have the TV on – yes I noticed half of them are calling me a mobster, that's nothing new. What I'm more interested in is why I'm having to find this out from the news! What the hell are our people even doing, if our enemies are building their bases right under us? Yes, I *did* say I'd deal with corporate games on my own, but this is well beyond that and you know it.”

Howard listened to her reply and pinched his nose.

“You’re saying this fell through the cracks in between SHIELD and that? Mighty big lucky break for them, isn’t it?” *Unless they knew exactly where SHIELD wouldn’t be looking.* “... I suppose The Los Angeles development and infrastructure authorities aren’t the most corruption-free. Fine, I assume we already have people looking into it? Call me the moment we’ve combed over the underground projects and audit reports for the area. Actually, never mind that, I’m coming down there.”

Howard put down the phone, then picked it back up and formed the number for his PR department. “Amanda. Yes, that’s why I’m calling. Do we have a place for our people to stay, reps, lawyers? Good work, but we’ll have to go Iron Maiden on this one. Set up a way for them to let the rest of us know when someone’s pushing where they shouldn’t, and especially if they’re made to disappear. Also, tell them... ask them, rather, if they get taken, it doesn’t matter by who, police, suits, phonies pretending to be them – yes, I’m afraid this might just be that sort of situation. Ask them to try and keep their mouth shut for two days. It’s the gentlemanly thing to do. It’ll give the rest of their fellows time to run, or us time to extract them, arrange better representation, ramp up security, etc.”

He held his phone to his ear while he got dressed.

“Yes, do the pager, regular check-ins, dead man’s switch, the works. Make it so the alarm also gets set off when any of them go beyond our transceiver range. That’ll make it harder for anyone to disappear our people. Talk to Arnold in R&D, devices should already be in stock precisely for events like this. Yes, I’m serious. I wish I wasn’t, I wish this were all a joke, but it’s not. Now unless there’s anything else-”

There was, in fact, something else.

“... Actually, that’s not a bad idea. Make it groups of three, each person in the group will know a number and place to drop messages to the rest of their group, or several places. They can communicate with other groups by letting each person have a way of contacting one other from a different group. It’ll be slow but hard to trace. Get with legal and make it happen.”

Might be time to get the whole company to do it too, or at least the parts of it involved in the more sensitive projects. It was how SHIELD teams did it. Howard didn’t know what to feel about his company coming up with the same ideas, independently.

If it was really independently.

At the very least, this meant that his ongoing efforts to separate SHIELD from Stark Industries wasn't bearing as much fruit as he hoped. Any slower and he might not have even this shred of untainted legacy to leave his son when the time came.

God damn the Cold War!

The phone kept ringing and his wife kept answering and politely shutting it in people's faces while he got ready. He was just leaving when the phone called one last time. He wouldn't have stopped, but this time his wife called him back.

"Howard," Maria Stark held out the phone. "It's the FBI."

They'd better not try and start a jurisdiction fight with SHIELD over this. "Stark here, to whom am I speaking?"

"Mister Stark, this is Danny Coulson."

He paused at the name. Danny Coulson was practically the biggest name among US field operatives from *all* alphabet agencies right now, and in fact SHIELD had been trying to poach him for years. "Coulson. What does the *New York* Police Assassination, Fugitive, and Bank Robbery Investigations division of the FBI want with me?"

"Not the New York Division, WITSEC." Say what now? "You might not know, but my Hostage Rescue Team pet project got approved a few months ago." He did know that because SHIELD knew that. "In preparation for that, I've been doing rounds among other units and agencies to gain broader contacts and experience." That, SHIELD hadn't known. "It just so happens that one of the witness protection agents very recently went missing. Wanna guess the who, where and why?"

"... Just one question before I do."

"Shoot."

"I could just as easily not have picked up the phone, it's been ringing non-stop for hours. Why not go through the proper channels?"

"With all respect due to Dame Carter, this is an internal US matter and her loyalties will always be to Britain first. Also, multiple citizenship muddles not just the issue of jurisdiction, but outright

sovereignty. If I failed to reach you this way, I'd have shown up at your headquarters and refused to speak to anyone but you.”

That was fair enough. Intelligence agencies required agents and contacts everywhere you could find them, but such organisations were the opposite of public for a reason. Howard rather thought that dual citizenship should be forbidden for anyone in congress, at least. “Not the Colonel?”

“While his permissive rule skirting worked out with Captain America, I'm worried that his luck might have turned with this one.”

What's this? Could he have stumbled upon that rare endangered species that *didn't* think Howard was the loose cannon? “... I'm on my way downtown for business, but I can meet you somewhere on the way. Say, 1057 Lexington Ave, Restaurant Orsay in an hour?”

“See you there.” Click.

Howard gave the phone back to Maria and went to get his car. A whistleblower was probably too much to hope for, but it said enough that these people – whoever they were – had the balls to disappear government agents.

The question now, was, was this an old enemy returned, or a new one?

“- Emma Frost .-“

Regardless of what the contract said, Emma Frost had still been partially certain she was signing her soul away. If only because mind-raping people was practically the next worst thing.

Instead, her employer had hired her to be a *hero*.

He hadn't even told her to alter any minds, his wife could apparently brew potions that made people forget about people. Having to worry about someone or something altering her very self was a new and unpleasant sentiment. But Emma grudgingly agreed with Allerdyce that it was only fair, considering that she embodied that very concept for everyone else alive.

It wasn't just psionics and other mutant abilities turning the world upside down, magic was real as well. What else was real? Other than vampires, apparently. And fathers that swell with personal pride when their child is complimented in their presence, instead of holding them in open contempt no matter how perfect and bright.

Fast forward to now, she was having serious trouble keeping all the new knowledge and skills straight in her head. Mister Quill had more than delivered on her 'signing bonus' but she was proving to be less than deserving of it. She hadn't gone through more than three of the people who were currently lined up unconscious in Mister Quill's barn, but she was already ready to call it quits.

"Not going well, huh?" the man in question hummed sympathetically from where he was sitting on a hay bale. "This is the first time you try this, you said?"

"Yes," she grunted, holding her head.

"How are you feeling? Please make the description as accurate as you can."

"I have the mother of all migraines, I can practically feel the information and experience I just absorbed from miss analyst over there vanish, the field surveillance I just absorbed from mister square-jaw over here is overwriting it."

"I suppose it's not so surprising. The brain may store data as quantum wave-form effects, but it's not the only means long-term. Also, it makes sense that it wouldn't start out knowing how to best do it, and memory partitioning is a pretty high-level skill from what I know. As a telepath you have a natural advantage there, but..."

"Clearly not enough when trying to absorb so much at once," Emma sighed, sitting back on her lawn chair in pain and disappointment. "Well, it was a nice idea. Beggars can't be choosers, I'll just have to decide which one to keep. Any suggestions?"

"Maybe," Mister Quill rubbed his beard with a thoughtful look. "Maybe more, maybe less. Why don't you go inside and have some food, maybe do something to relax for a while. I'm gonna think about this a little and get back to you."

Emma did her best not to show how conflicted that made her. "Very well, I may as well. Part of being a good guest, yes?"

The man hopped to his feet. “You can even talk to my daughter and swap stories about useless boyfriends.”

“With all due respect, sir, that is none of your business.”

“Troy Killkelly owes money to a casino and plans to use your telepathy to get out of it.”

What.

“Your restraint about not invading the minds of just anyone does you great credit, it’s a big part of why I hired you,” Quill said as he walked out ahead of her. “Unfortunately, you had rather bad luck with your first boyfriend. Sorry about that.”

What – how did he – when – it couldn’t be...

... But since when was her luck any good?

It certainly doesn’t measure up to these people, she thought sourly as she went inside in search of some coffee.

It was ungrateful of her, but she couldn’t help it. She’d always had a vague jealousy of everyone who didn’t have to live under the tyranny of Winston Frost, but this went well beyond her most imaginative resentment. The way Mister Quill treated his family – and was treated by them in turn – was the sort of thing she secretly wished was a mere fairy tale, anything to make her own injustice feel less outrageous.

But here was a man who’d go on a global crusade against evil to make a literal *superpower* to gift his son in his hour of need. When said son had done *everything wrong*.

That the man had made it explicitly part of her contract to never snoop around his family’s heads, and was still on the lookout in case she took liberties with her telepathy anyway, well, that just made her more envious.

“Finished interrogating people?” Meredith Quill – the elder – asked when she entered the kitchen. “Hungry? There’s chicken soup and pot roast still warm if you want it.”

“Yes and yes,” Emma replied. Galling as it was, free food was something she’d learned never to say no to, ever since she ran away. “It was all surprisingly straightforward.” The interrogations had been simple, Mister Quill just put on that face concealing hood, woke people up on by one in

the Mirror Dimension, and asked them pointed questions while Emma was behind them. It didn't matter what kind of composure they had, whenever a familiar name or other detail was mentioned, the mind automatically conjured up the rest for Emma to pick out.

It wasn't the same as going through long-term memories, but she was finding that an even more complicated issue than skill theft. They'd decided to leave that stress for Ian Quinn, whenever Mister Quill could get him alone.

"I'm glad for that, dear," Missus Meredith said. "I've been thinking about what we talked about."

Oh no.

The last time the madame came to Emma with food, Emma wound up somehow sharing half her family woes and admitting to having a gay brother. And that he was a drug addict. She'd assumed – correctly – that madame Meredith would already know about it all, since her husband did, but it was still the biggest mistake she'd done since coming here. After all, the contract she signed only bound the signatories, not anyone else.

"I think you should think a bit more about using the one-time restoration my husband agreed to pay you with."

"I beg your pardon?" Emma felt affronted. "Madam, with respect, that is none of your concern."

"And my daughter wasn't her lout's concern, our son's strumpet wasn't our concern when she should've been, we were none of hydra's concern, you weren't my concern either until you became my guest, but here we all are." The woman put a hot bowl of food in front of her. "Regardless of extenuating circumstances, your brother resorted to drug abuse on his own. Even if Jason restores him to natural baseline, odds are good he'll do it again. In which case *you* will want to contact us again, something you will be unwilling or resentful to do if you perceive yourself as 'losing' in our temporary business partnership."

Emma reminded herself she was here under contract. "Was that all?"

"Conversely, by treating your peace of mind as independent from his wellbeing – or anyone else's – you will be unable to foist responsibility for the outcome on anyone but yourself. This might make it feel worse for a little while, but will also minimize the risks to *all* your relationships, personal and business."

... What did that even *mean*?

“Or you could talk to your brother in great detail about how expensive a favour it was and extract every possible vow and promise, instead of playing ignorant and hoping he’ll make the right choices this time despite all evidence to the contrary, or something silly like that. Something to think about.”

Emma was not given time to express her offense before the woman left her alone with her food. She broke bread with rather more pique than usual.

The food was delicious. She hoped she could take some to go when she left.

Mister Quill dropped by the kitchen at one point, but he only nodded at her on the way to the refrigerator and back out.

“Your wife is as disconcertingly blunt as yourself,” she said despite herself. “Are all in your family so rude?”

Mister Quill stopped and turned to her with a soft look that made her feel even smaller than before. “The fact you consider straightforward honesty to be such a frightful thing is something I find most sad, Miss Frost. I am sorry for the life that led you to this place.”

Emma wanted to reply, to say something, but she didn’t know what. She just stared at the baby bottle the man was holding. She also started at the empty doorway after he left without another word.

She stared at her food too.

She took another spoonful. It was still too good to abandon, especially when she didn’t know when next she’d have the privilege of a home-cooked meal.

Maybe I should steal some cooking skills and damn everything else, she thought with less irony than she liked. *One of them down there must have some.*

Once she was finished, she rinsed the bowl and spoon and took to wandering the house. She knew better than to snoop, but she’d been given free access to the bottom floor and the small library on the first floor. Since the den was taken up by the ongoing family reunion, Emma decided to see what her hosts considered worthwhile reading material.

Minutes later, Emma Frost was staring open-mouthed at the Epic Cycle. The *complete* Epic Cycle that was not supposed to exist. Only the Odyssey and the Illiad were known to have survived, but here she was staring at the full set of eight. This was impossible, they had to be fake, they had to be.

She took them one by one and paged through them. Frustratingly, they were all written in Ancient Greek, but... that just made it more likely that they were the real thing, didn't it?

If these were authentic, these tomes alone represented more wealth than Winston Frost himself could boast of, and what even were those covers? And the binding...

He never answered my question, the thought suddenly came to her. Same as he never explained to me how he knew about me. Or how he found me.

She only perfunctorily looked through the other shelves in the room, but was glad she did when she found translated copies of all eight books she'd only just finished gawking over. Internally only of course.

She sat down at the window and opened the first one. Immediately she was captivated by the lettering. It was a masculine but flowing cursive done in ink with a stylus, the calligraphy was amazing, was the translation done entirely by hand? Quickly paging through the other books, she found that indeed they were all the same.

Fascinating. Unless it was all a complete forgery. The books weren't attributed to any of the standard authors, but instead Odysseus of Ithaca and Medea of Colchis. She was pretty sure the latter, at least, had nothing to do with the Trojan War.

Well. There was only one way to determine the truth.

Before she knew it, she'd read the entire Cypria. It was less than half of the Illiad, eleven chapters compared to the latter's twenty-four, but somehow it still managed to relate all the events leading up to the Trojan War, and the first nine years of the conflict, including the Judgement of Paris.

Poor boy, there was no good answer when all three goddesses were guaranteed to do something horrible to you for being spurned. Emma knew the feeling well, she experienced it with her father and sisters at practically every interaction. Worse, with Aphrodite literally enthralling Paris to her

side, not just through her powers but those of the Charites and the Horai on top of it, Paris' 'judgment' wasn't really his at all.

Emma would have gone right to the next in the series, the Illiad itself even though she'd already read that one at home, but she belatedly realized she wasn't alone. Mister Quill's daughter was very light on her feet, and Emma still couldn't keep a constantly active scan for people around her. Especially when otherwise distracted so thoroughly.

Soon, they were engrossed in a talk about what they believed of the events and the characters, and were the heroes and kings involved really that young?

Naturally, this inevitably devolved into judging and misjudging which of the male characters were the best. But unlike with her sisters, there was no feeling of hidden barbs and sharpened knives being stowed away to hurt her later. The end result was that Emma found herself emphatically arguing with another girl over the merits of a hot boy, or rather the lack of merits.

"And just look, even the text itself agrees with me!" Emma declared while opening the book to the right page with a flourish. "'Of the rage of Achilles' it says so right here, the *whole book* isn't about Achilles, just about his tantrum! The whole war turned on its edge because he was an emotional fool that couldn't control himself."

"Not true," Meredith denied hotly. "He controlled himself just fine up to that point and after, I thought you said you read the Cypria? Then you should know this! The text goes into great detail about their oaths and the rite of Xenia, Agamemnon broke or skirted practically all of them in how he coerced Achilles for his own ends."

"So it's not that Achilles couldn't control himself, he *chose* not to control himself. You realize that's even worse? It wouldn't be so bad if he had literally anything else going for him, he's literally just a teenager for most of the war, heck, he starts out younger than we are. But if not for the Cypria, the only other thing we'd know about him is that he's the best fighter!"

"The best fighter, best champion, best duelist, best tactician, best soldiers."

"But we can't give him credit for most of that, can we? He's just one man and the war was past the stage of duels by that time. The war effort relied less on him and more on the Myrmidons, and

those were each ten times as strong as a normal man because they were grown by Zeus from *ants*. Note how it didn't make a difference that it was Patroclus at their head instead of him."

"And look how that turned out."

"Only because the gods kept meddling."

"The gods' meddling is just allegory."

"See, I'd believe that if we weren't a psionic mutant and a literal witch sitting at the same table."

"... Witch's daughter, I don't know any of that stuff."

"Yet," Emma stated with more surety than she was entitled to. "If he gave your brother a superpower overnight, doesn't it stand to reason he'll do something similarly ridiculous for you?"

Only when she finished did Emma realize the question wasn't as rhetorical as she intended.

For better or worse, Meredith the Younger did take it as such. She sat back with a huff and didn't argue further.

Emma crossed her legs and tried not to look too smug at winning the argument. In absence of the aforementioned hidden barbs and sharpened knives being stowed away to hurt her later, she found it uncommonly easy to be gracious in victory.

... No, she couldn't let the silence turn awkward because of her own hangups. "How's your brother?"

"Annoyingly perfect, as always," Meredith grouched. "Brave, kind, smart, earnest, taking responsibility, hasn't waffled or made excuses even once, he's the perfect son as he always is, it's an outrage is what it is."

Maybe I was wrong about them after all? Emma took her in cautiously. *Or at least her?* "I know a thing or two about being the perfect child," she said noncommittally. "Believe me, it's not what it's cracked up to be."

"I know!" Meri slumped with a groan. "I know it's stupid, Daddy literally just cured me of brain cancer, I'm the last person who should be complaining, but..." She had cancer? Brain cancer?!

Wait, he'd cured cancer – Mister Quill could cure cancer?! “Daddy gave Glenn a literal superpower, how can I not be jealous?!”

On second thought, Meredith Quill was actually being perfectly reasonable, Emma sat corrected.

... Why couldn't her sisters have been more like this?

“Right. Think it's past time I checked on Peter.” Meredith the Younger got up and side-eyed her. “Wanna meet my baby?”

And here was the wrench in the image of the idyllic nuclear family. This girl already had a baby but couldn't be more than three years older than Emma, and the father was never more than skirted around. Perhaps Emma was overestimating Quill's parenting...

But no, she was just being a petty rat, she knew from experience how unlucky someone could be when it came to their family members. Just because *her* father was the bad guy in their family dynamics didn't mean the reverse couldn't be true. She wasn't going to project her own issues on others, she was better than that. “... Alright. Don't mind if I do.”

“Just no funny business, Dad says that using too much weirdness around him might activate his powers too soon and then we'll all be in trouble.”

Look at that, another revelation to rock her world, just how much farther until the bottom of the rabbit hole?

Honestly.

Peter Quill turned out to be a supremely normal baby and unremarkable in every way imaginable. It didn't make her suddenly eager for motherhood, but it also didn't make Emma's desired future in teaching seem any more hopeless than before, so that was... something?

She eventually made her escape when Meredith decided it was time to breastfeed.

Emma slowed down near the bottom of the stairs when she heard Mister Quill's voice come through the now open door, tense, frustrated and resigned.

“-least this time don't share the important stuff with just anyone. Your deepest fear, your loftiest ambitions, financial status, personal conflicts, acts of kindness, family quarrels, your spiritual

journey or personal sacrifices, your inner struggles and moments of pride both, these things are *yours*.”

“Sounds like a lonely life,” Glenn was heard from inside.

“No. Friendship, marriage, these things need no more logic than betrayal does, and far less insight into the other person. A good relationship needs none of these things, as long as you have fidelity and industriousness and the courage to treat each other kindly *and* yourselves fairly.”

“I’m joining the *military*, dad, not a dating hotline.”

“Don’t remind me,” Quill harrumphed. “Incidentally, if the time ever comes where you absorb a weird substance that gives you power over gravity and you start to develop a messiah complex, please, *please* come to me before you try to turn Chicago into a crater on the way to tearing the planet apart in search of ultimate power, or something silly like that.”

“... That was horribly specific.”

“I’m serious, Glenn. I need a vow right now.”

“Jesus, fine, fine, I promise! Don’t tell me, our family tree includes someone name Cassandra?”

“Wrong cursed witch.”

“Dad, I was joking.”

“I’m not.”

Emma did her best to look like she’d only just come down when Mister Quill came not quite storming out of the room.

“Trouble in paradise?” She said because the great telepath still didn’t have complete control of her own mouth.

“And in hell too, might be,” the man harrumphed, lumbering across the hallways to the semi-open dining room across from the den, with Emma following for lack of a better idea. “My oh so courageous son has decided to go through with the WITSEC identity change, even after all this. So now I have to look forward to pretending Glenn Talbot is a complete stranger while he’s getting shot all over the world for the next twenty years, and then maybe, possibly, chasing an enormous

green rage monster all over the other half of the world for another twenty years. After the thing with Meri and Peter, and all this other stuff, I might be undergoing a tiny crisis of faith in my fatherhood qualifications.”

“... I’m not the most unbiased person to be lamenting this to, I hope you realise.” Green rage monster, what-?

“I know!” Quill groaned, his manner almost identical to his daughter as he rubbed his face. “But you need the warning in case I start suffering from half-empty nest syndrome. I’m a sucker for sob stories, in case you hadn’t noticed. Granted, yours is pretty generic, but still.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Which is why you should feel free to tell me when I’m sticking my nose where it’s not wanted.”

“Believe me,” Emma bit out. “I know very well where my boundaries are.”

Her deflection didn’t work at all. “What, you consider not having the worst luck in life to be offensive? You should be glad, it means the world doesn’t hate you any more than it does anyone else. The world doesn’t care and the world doesn’t owe. Granted, that’s in large part because the gods are all gone or silent in this era, but still.”

Put like that, Emma grudgingly allowed that it was somewhat less infuriating to be told that... her personal drama wasn’t that exceptional in the grand scheme of things. Emma had the best looks, pedigree, powers, and she’d even been blessed with great wealth before she sacrificed it on the altar of youth’s rebellion. Her family might not have given her any love, but that was on them, not the world.

Why couldn’t her father have been more like this man?

She turned away from that thought. “... Gods are real too, then?”

“And thankfully not paying any mind to Earth right now, or at least humanity. Let’s try to keep it that way, hmm?”

She didn’t know what to unpack from *that*.

“Anyway, come with me.”

Without further ado, Jason Quill opened a portal in the middle of his dining room, to what looked alarmingly like a barren wasteland.

Emma stepped back. The air was *hot*. “If this has all been leading up to you dumping me in the middle of a random desert in hopes of a long and tedious life-long enmity, I will be very cross.”

“Not a random desert, Nevada.”

Quill stepped right through.

Emma hesitated. She waffled even longer while she retrieved her shoes. She waffled a little more.

But she ultimately followed him through despite her reservations. Because if he wanted to be rid of her, he’d already demonstrated several eminently more convenient ways. Ways she could overcome with much more difficulty than this, and some she couldn’t overcome at all.

Ways she was beginning to believe Jason Quill really had no plans to inflict on her even under duress, because if there was such a thing as Winston Frost’s complete antithesis, it was this.

And with that thought it was clear that she needed to change the course of the conversation. “Pyro won’t be joining us this time?”

“He’s still developing his pictures, he told me in no uncertain terms not to bother him for the next 24 hours at least. Kind of weird that he’s so comfortable being effectively stranded in the Mirror Dimension, but I’m not about to complain about having earned my employee’s confidence.”

Not just his, Emma privately thought. “Is that why we’re here then?” She asked before she could truly admit that even to herself. “To build my confidence?”

“Not quite.” Quill turned around just as the portal closed behind her. “Your blind practice has given you an interesting affinity for mining other frames of reference, thus being able to steal skills without the burden of the memories. I didn’t want to do this before, because it would have distracted you, and possibly destroyed your control of your abilities – or attention span – for at least some time. However, I think we’re in a good enough place now that I can give you an advance on your contractual compensation.”

“Is that so?” Emma did her best not to show how nervous she was. “What precisely would that be?”

“Mutant powers are like spells, but encoded in your being, the x-gene is just the physical marker. You get a leg up on base power and intuitive applications, whereas my sort have to learn everything from scratch. I still prefer magic for its lateral scalability, as opposed to your vertical, but the ups and downs are quite different the higher on the Epsilon-Omega scale you go. You in particular are quite high up on the power totem pole, that’s another part of why I hired you. Any attempt to affect your powers is bound to carry some risks. For *me*. But I’m willing to take that risk if you’ll let me.”

“... You’re saying you can enhance my powers?”

“Not quite. I can, however, let you perceive their true extent. And their limits. Temporarily, but perhaps long enough to let you make good on your signing bonus, as it were.”

Emma hesitated. For quite some time.

But, ultimately, the lure of power was too strong. “Only from strength does freedom spring,” she murmured,

Quill’ face lightened. “You read the Cypria!”

“Guilty.” Emma admitted, crossing her arms in a gesture she wished wasn’t so obviously defensive. “What do I have to do?”

“Very little, really.” Quill reached out, took a hold of head entire head with his large hand, and pressed his thumb right in the center of her forehead. “Open your eye, Miss Frost.”

She opened her eye.

Emma Frost opened her third eye and saw entirely too much, but the rest of the world blinked too.

“- November 9, 1980 .-“

THIS IS NOT WHAT I MEANT BY HYDRATION!

BY JOHN JONAH JAMESON, DAILY BUGLE

Tragedy! What else can I call it? What more need be said? The damage, the destruction, you saw the documentaries, the pamphlets, the videos from the Second World War! I always say ‘when will people wake up and realize that everywhere propoganda goes, blatant lie flows?’ Everything Captain America did was supposed to be the pinnacle of heroism, he was the Truth, Justice and the American way, a light to shine our path ever onwards in these dark times! Now it turns out that the Cold War is just the surface of the mess he left behind. A mess we, the innocents, are now forced to clean up. Except we can’t because we’ve been forced to live our lives with blinders on! And who put on those blinders? Why, our very own alphabet soup of a government!

Hear ye this, what may just be the most important news of your life! The kind of story most get scared away from, even though it’s the most powerful weapon you could ever have on your side! Truth, ladies and gentlemen! It can unmake corporations, upend governments, destroy presidents, and it's been due to get aimed at the alphabet soup for years! But it needs you, the readers, to make it stick!

Hear ye, then, what really happened last week in Los Angeles! Read here the ghastly truth of Captain America’s failure. Read the legacy of the SSR’s complete botch job of a Trans-Atlantic crusade. And, most important of all, read of Hydra’s not-so-real fall that we still suffer the consequences of today, from as close as our neighbour’s house next door!