

Silence. Silence, with only a sense of time passing. It should be impossible, as there was no sight outside of a blank whiteness, no sound at all, no scents or tastes or tactile sensations to anchor that feeling of time's passage to. But minutes crept towards hours, piling atop each other into days, slowly gathering into weeks and months and finally years.

And the only interruption were the periodic visits of The Presence.

*You could be free of this. Merely pay your debt*

Refusal. The terms had been explained and found unacceptable. It was little better than slavery, with no guarantees of safety for those who mattered. All for a chance to be free of the white void. The rewards were not worth the price.

*I have all of Time to wait. You will break eventually.*

For them, eternity was nothing. Personal suffering could not matter less. Protecting what was most important was worth the price.

---

## **Acme, The Looney Conference Room**

"I need an update for Raine. Where do we stand 24 hours later?"

Barbara spoke calmly, her usual confidence only cracking slightly. She was new to her role, but growing into it rapidly. The CEO of the Corporation had chosen her right hand well.

John scratched at the bandage along the right side of his face. He took a deep breath, slipping his glasses off and scrubbing at his eyes to clear them of grit. It had been a short night, with barely time to rest.

"Strike teams are pursuing the responsible parties. The last message from James said he expected to have them run down in the next two days. Kim is out of the woods, but she's going to lose her left arm. Medical cleared me for work, nothing but the cut and concussion at this point."

The other young woman in the room leaned forward, her dark hair framing her face when she spoke.

"That's good to hear, John, but what about Levi? I need an update for the head of HR."

Artemis had just been given the Member Solutions department, a big step up. Thus far, she'd handled things admirably. This was the first time a real catastrophe had been dropped on her plate.

John turned to the other young man in the room. The suit he wore was well cut but clearly inexpensive. He tugged self consciously at the cuffs.

"I have to throw that to Jacques. Any news?"

Jacques Smythe Worthington took a deep breath, his brow furrowing.

"Temporal law is complicated, or rather, will be once it is invented. I have the most experience with it in the Legal department, which is why Mr. Higgins sent me, but no one can be said to be an expert. We are negotiating with Father Time for the return of Mr. Levi."

"We shouldn't be negotiating," Artemis grated out. When the other three sets of eyes turned towards her, the young woman colored, wilting slightly. Her frustration returned a moment later. "He's one of ours. Acme does not negotiate when it comes to our people. We should cut Father Time off completely."

"Not exactly possible, Artemis. His extratemporality means that our options for maneuvering against him are limited." Jacques didn't look pleased with his own response.

"We also have to consider what kind of message that would send to our other long-time customers. If we make the threat and then have to fold later, it sets a dangerous precedent." John replaced his glasses, focusing on Barbara. "What does Raine want from us?"

"For now, orders from the C-Suite are to continue negotiations. Per company policy, Levi's family will have their personal clocks paused until we can get him free. With their consent, of course. Jacques, keep us up to date on the negotiations. If there's nothing else..."

A dispirited chorus of affirmations preceded chairs being pushed back as the four departed.

---

*You understand I cannot simply let you go. The power you stole with that spell must be repaid.*

Refusal again. What was done was necessary to save friends. The payment was worth what had been gained. After several years, the blank whiteness was becoming comfortable, familiar. And the endless click of seconds moving forward had long ago ceased to wear. The unconscious math of 60 seconds into a minute and 60 minutes into an hour and 24 hours into a day and on and on was like a heartbeat.

Which was otherwise strangely absent.

*You WILL give in. No merely mortal mind can last for eternity.*

That remained to be seen. Eternity would not get here for quite a while. And there was no rush. The white void was not going anywhere, after all.

---

## **Acme, The Looney Conference Room**

"...wrapping that up means we can move forward with the expansion of the Marvel portion of the multiverse. It should open up a few dozen profitable accounts in Villain Support and perhaps even something worthwhile for Hero Support."

The wry humor at the end of the sentence brought smiles to the other occupants of the conference room. The representative from Hero Support calmly flipped John the bird, receiving an insincere smile in return. From there was the C-Suite update from PR as well as two other departments. As the meeting began to wind down, Barbara raised her voice to be heard over the white noise of people packing up.

"John, Artemis, Jacques, one moment, please. Raine had a specific message for the three of you."

When the four of them were the only ones left, they all slumped just a bit in their chairs. Jacques didn't wait to be asked, speaking first instead.

"The negotiations are ongoing. I have managed to extract a provisional acceptance of our stipulation that the family not be targeted once Levi is released." The man held up a finger, the sleeve of his suit falling back to reveal the black stones in his cuff link. It was a new affectation he had picked up within the last year. "That is not in writing yet. So many of the gains I make are eventually rolled back by Father Time's refusal to sign anything until the contract is finalized."

"Jacques, I say it every week: activate the clause in Time's contract that shuts down his access to Acme equipment. If his people can't operate, he will have to come to the table in good faith."

Artemis had gained in confidence since the first meeting of the group years before. Now third in seniority in HR, she was handling situations like this one on a daily basis. Her fierce protectiveness for the now defunct Member Solutions department had not changed, however.

"I'm still not convinced we'd win if we pushed it that far, Artemis," John said. He sat forward, focusing on Barbara. "Have Raine and Allison changed their stance?"

It was the only question that mattered. The Corporation couldn't take a stand against such an important customer without the full consent of the two women at the top. Barbara shook her head calmly.

"The C-Suite remains confident in Legal's ability to negotiate. For now, we just have to stay the course."

Jacques nodded, standing and resting a hand on John's shoulder for a moment. In a quiet voice, the lawyer said, "We will get him back, dear boy. You have my word."

"I know. Five years is just a long damn time. I feel responsible..."

"You should not. Those responsible have been hunted down and dealt with. If you'd like to visit the Temporal Distortion Spheres, you can have another round of target practice with them."

"Can't today. There's some sort of issue brewing with the Flood I have to deal with..."

---

*Thirteen years. Many mortals would have broken by now. Surely it is time to accept my terms.*

Refusal had become almost boring at this point. It was like breathing had been in the Before Time, automatic, unthinking, reflexive. No promises were ever made regarding friends and family. No guarantees of safety ever came. Without those, the void was the safest option.

*You have no way of knowing I have not already sought satisfaction from them.*

Had that been done, it would have been revealed already. After years, it was clear the desire was personal and particular. No other would do for the plans that had been outlined. Were such a strong bargaining chip in play, it would have been referenced.

*The Corporation cannot protect them forever. Eventually, Acme's largesse will fade, or those employed there will be fired or retire. Some day, those you care about will be mine. Unless you agree to my terms.*

This slice of eternity had been tolerable. Not exactly pleasant, but hardly hellish. What was the rest of time, when the alternative was bondage that likely would not end?

---

## **Acme, The Looney Conference Room**

"Artemis, I'm pretty sure we're at the point where we cut the Borg off completely."

The head of HR nodded to the head of Villain Support. She glanced at Barbara, receiving a small nod of support. Artemis turned to the rest of the attendees at the meeting. Her voice was calm, unshakable. Three years as the head of HR for the Corporation had left her with few doubts.

"Make sure everyone in your departments understands: All interdimensional transit for the Borg is cut off, effective immediately. Any drones, spheres, or cubes that are in alternate realities are forwarded to the automated system. They don't speak to John or any of his people. Members of the Collective in their home universe only receive emergency support until the last speck of Borg tech has been destroyed in every other universe. Anyone dreaming of making a quick buck with under the table support should remember exactly what happened to Freddy last Halloween."

A collective shudder went through the room. As the meeting broke up, Worthington pulled John aside, the two of them discussing some particular of the contract with the Fire Nation. Barbara and Artemis sat quietly, discussing the latest bit of nonsense from Wade Wilson. When the room was empty except for them, the three department heads settled into their usual seats, looking at Barbara expectantly.

"The C-Suite hasn't changed their minds."

John slammed a fist down on the conference table. "Thirteen damn years, Babs! He's been trapped for thirteen years! What more do they need, Father Time to declare war on Acme? It's about damn time we did something about this!"

Artemis and Worthington began speaking at the same time. The lawyer held up a hand, deferring to the head of HR.

"John," Artemis said, "Your points haven't changed. If we cut Father Time off and don't get Levi back, it opens everyone up to the danger of kidnap and ransom."

"Old boy, I am making progress. I have almost the entirety of what we discussed when Levi was first taken. His family will be safe from reprisal for all time, the Corporation cannot be touched, you and the other members of the original operations team cannot be targeted. All of this is in writing. All that remains is the final point."

"The same damn point you've been working on for two years?"

Artemis held a hand up this time. Worthington gave way gracefully.

"You can't blame Jacques, John."

"Worthington, please, Artemis. I would prefer a certain amount of distance from my derivatives."

"You can't blame Worthington, John. There aren't three other lawyers in the multiverse who could have gotten this far. He's Levi's friend as much as you are. He hasn't given up..."

"You all have." John didn't shout this time. His voice was resigned. "These negotiations won't ever end. He's going to be trapped wherever that bastard has him for the rest of time if we don't cut Father Time off."

"John, I have quite literally braved Hell itself to gather the power necessary to get this far. Would you say my own soul was not a high enough price to demonstrate my devotion to our goal?"

John's face tightened and he sighed, his voice a bit pained. "Of course not. I'm sorry. It's just...Thirteen years. Thirteen years and it isn't fair. We can bend anyone else, but not this old bastard."

"I haven't given up either, John." Barbara sat forward, drumming her fingers on the table top. "I've never stopped pushing Allison and Raine. I want Levi back as much as the three of you. But at the same time, they're not wrong about being certain before we move against someone like Father Time."

---

*Finally ready to concede?*

Twenty years. 7,305 days. 175,320 hours. 10,519,200 minutes. 631,152,000 seconds. A nearly unthinkable gulf of time. But something had changed. The most recent visitation included names not heard in years. Names spoken in ways never heard before. And a chance, however slight, of seeing those who mattered again.

*You cannot leave without serving. Your crimes cry out for atonement. But that atonement may one day end.*

John. Artemis. Jacques. Barbara. Friends who had not given up. Who had finally protected all that mattered beyond a doubt. It was good to know that friends like that waited outside the white void.

*You will not remember them. Or your family. It is part of the cost. When your penance is paid, your memory will be restored.*

It was a bad deal. There was no doubt it was the best that would be offered. Even these concessions had not been suggested at the beginning. The friends had somehow forced them. It was good to have friends. It would be good to meet them again.

*Do you agree?*

---

## Acme, Villain Support Department

"It was the best we could do, John."

John looked up from his monitors, meeting Barbara's eyes. The head of Villain Support sighed, slipping his headset on.

"I know. Artemis and Worthington wouldn't have settled for anything less."

"We'll get him all the way back eventually. The contract..."

"...is one of the shrewdest legal documents ever penned. Father Time would have to break reality itself to be free of the terms" John grinned tiredly as he dropped the imitation of Worthington's accent. "I know. It's just...Twenty years."

"We'll get him all the way back."

"I know."

The phone on the desk began to ring. John reached down, answering the incoming call with his usual professional manner.

"This is John with Villain Support."

---

**click**

"Hey Levi, this is John with Villain Support. I've got a call with Magneto I need you to jump onto."

"Sure thing, John."

A pause, as if needing to recall what came next. But even if it felt that way for some reason, this wasn't the first time. The next words had been spoken countless times.

Hadn't they?

"Member Support, this is Levi speaking."