

(Every character depicted in the story below is a consenting legal adult over the age of 18)

A/N: Answers.

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The Avengers 'graciously' offer Thaddeus a private room to meet with the strange old man who showed up on their doorstep. Between She-Hulk insisting that he's still in her 'custody' and the fact that Thaddeus himself has admitted he has no idea who this 'Saul' character even is, he really doesn't have any room to reject the idea. Even if he does know that it's far from likely to be as 'private' as they claim.

Still, he's brought to the room in question and waits inside for a couple of minutes before he's joined by a man who can only be 'Saul'. Admittedly, in Thaddeus' head he was imagining someone... quite different. Elderly, yes. But... not like this. He might have imagined a lawyer in a suit here to try and represent him on behalf of the Hellfire Club. Or something like that.

Instead, 'Saul' is wearing ancient yet well kept green robes with golden epaulets. Furthermore, his greyed hair is long and kept in a ponytail, going along well with the 'wise old master' style beard he has that trails down to the midpoint of his chest.

Put simply, he looks more like some sort of Ancient Monk Master than a New York Lawyer.

He also acts like one as well, laying eyes on Thaddeus but not saying a word as he moves to sit across from him. The silence seems to stretch between them, until Thaddeus can feel his own heartbeat pulsing in his veins from trepidation.

The anticipation, if allows to continue, feels like it might very well kill him. And really, in the end... he has no reason to try and win some contest of wills. So he breaks the silence first.

“Who-?”

But of course, the moment he does so, ‘Saul’ lifts his hand up, a quieting gesture that makes Thaddeus’ teeth clack shut and his tongue click against the roof of his mouth. He’s a little embarrassed to be so easily corralled, truth be told... so after another heartbeat passes, he opens his mouth again only for the old man across from him to beat him to the punch.

“Patience. It is the most important thing that someone like you can hope to learn, Thaddeus Cummings.”

Thaddeus narrows his eyes... and then shudders as he feels something pass through the air around them. Suddenly, Saul straightens up and nods.

“I have taken care of the surveillance we were under. It was... an intriguing dilemma to solve given that the presence in the walls around us is not simply modern recording technology... but has its own intelligence, its own mind. No matter though, they will not only not hear what we have to say to one another, they will hear what they want to hear and not interrupt our conversation.”

Thaddeus blinks, glancing around quickly. Obviously he’d expected them to be under surveillance... but he hadn’t expected this old man to be capable of handling that. In fact, he half-expects the Avengers to come charging in any moment, proving that Saul’s attempts at obfuscating their conversation have failed.

... When that doesn’t happen, he looks back to the elderly man with a bit more respect, straightening up and squaring his shoulders.

“Who are you, exactly? And what do you want from me?”

Reaching up and stroking his long grey beard, Saul hums.

“I have gone by many names over the years. But only the name I go by now and the original truly matter. I am Saul now and remain Saul... however, once upon a time, I was Garbha-Hsien.”

That... means absolutely nothing to Thaddeus. He says as much, prompting the smallest of smirks from the man across from him.

“No, I suppose it wouldn’t. And yet... you know me the same as I know you. You feel it too even if you do not understand it. A connection exists between us.”

Thaddeus narrows his eyes at that. As far as he’s aware, the only connection he’s maintaining right now is with Emma from here to the Moon. Fortunately, he can feel her interest and knows that whatever Saul did to shield them from the Avengers, it did not stop Emma from peering in. As far as Thaddeus can tell, the other man does not even realize they’re being observed by the Phoenix-possessed Telepath.

Still... he does look inward, to try and figure out what Saul might be talking about.

“Feel it, young one. Like a pulsing beneath the skin. A certainty that you are among kin. It cannot be faked. It cannot be tricked. You are one of us now... you have been since your first death.”

That... that sends a shiver down Thaddeus’ spine, especially as he sort of begins to understand what Saul is saying. There is something there, actually. What he’d originally mistaken as happening because he was feeling trepidation... that thrumming in his veins, all throughout his body... it’s only growing. Almost like... like he’s attuning to something. Or rather, someone.

Once Thaddeus gets past all the noise, he can sense Saul across from him. Not in the same way he can sense Emma... this is a completely different connection. It’s not psychic, it’s not telepathic, it’s not... conscious at all. Rather, it’s like an unconscious knowing, the certainty that the elderly man across from him truly is what he says he is. Kin.

“... What are you then exactly? A mutant? My grandfather? I... I really don’t understand.”

Saul tilts his head to the side.

“No, I suppose you wouldn’t. Understanding would require education and you are like a newborn... in more ways than one.”

Thaddeus narrows his eyes, not liking that it feels like he’s being condescended to. Then again, Saul’s other words come to mind at that point... the man had specifically said Thaddeus had been one of them since his ‘first death’.

He’d died when the Phoenix initially possessed Emma and decided to swat him away like a gnat. He’d come back to life... but the mechanism by which he resurrected was still unknown to both him and Emma.

Even now, it didn’t quite make sense. If he was already dead, then the power he’d gotten from Wanda wouldn’t have activated. More than that, even his impressive regenerative capabilities from Laura shouldn’t have been enough to overcome the cosmic energies of the Phoenix. Emma herself knew she hadn’t resurrected him and nor had the Phoenix... he’d come back seemingly spontaneously all on his own.

All in all, it was a mystery that had been set to the side in the face of the current crisis. But if this man was to be believed...

“Please educate me then, elder.”

Thaddeus wasn’t above a little bit of groveling if it got him answers. And seeing as this was the first clue he’d gotten so far to what was going on, he figured he might as well lean into it. Fortunately, his polite request seems to go over well with Saul, the old man nodding approvingly.

“Ask and ye shall receive, Young One. We are more than mere mutants, you and I... and the others. We are... Externals.”

Externals. The word rolls through Thaddeus’ mind even as he reaches out to Emma for a reaction. But... she’s as in the dark about this as he is, having never

heard of such a thing before. In the end, all he can do is stay quiet and let Saul continue explaining.

“We Externals are to your average mutant what an elephant is to an ant. Our power, enormous. Our potential, uncapped. And our lifespans... never-ending.”

That... Thaddeus can't help but interrupt there.

“You're saying that you're immortal. That *I'm* immortal.”

Saul just looks back at him with a level gaze.

“Yes. Would you dispute that point?”

Thaddeus opens his mouth... and then closes it again, frowning.

“We did not know you existed until your first death. This is the activation for our kind. You die... and you come back. From then on, you are an External Proper with all that that entails. When you died to the Phoenix, nothing in the known universe could bring you back... save for your own innate nature. Even a cosmic force such as that cannot hope to overcome an External's immortality.”

Saul sounds rather proud at those final words. But then to be fair, given just how much power the Phoenix has, if he's correct then he's probably right to be proud. After all, not many flesh and blood entities can claim to be capable of not-selling something like the Phoenix Force, right?

“After you resurrected, you became properly woven into the Tapestry of the Infinite... and therefore known to the rest of us who are also woven into the Tapestry.”

Wait...

“Pause. What is this ‘Tapestry of the Infinite’?”

Far from being annoyed by Thaddeus' constant questions, Saul actually seems pleased by his curiosity.

"The Tapestry of the Infinite is what brings us Externals together and what sets us apart from the others. Each External represents a thread in the Tapestry, embodying a guiding concept that shapes everything we do through our myriad of lives, deaths, and resurrections. I, for instance, embody the concept of Patience above all else."

Thaddeus furrows his brow.

"And what concept do I embody?"

But Saul shakes his head.

"Such a thing is not immediately obvious, especially to one as young as you. Perhaps you will have gleamed more of your concept by the end of your first century."

Then, the old man looks him up and down.

"Of course, if I had to hazard a guess based solely on what little life you've already lived... Growth might be an appropriate guiding concept for one such as you. However, there is every opportunity for you to still move away from that and into something else."

Growth. Well, Saul wasn't wrong, that did sound rather appropriate for Thaddeus. He never stopped growing... and apparently he now knew he was going to live forever so maybe he never *would* stop growing thanks to his mutation. It was a mixture of both thrilling and frightening to think about.

If he just kept getting stronger and more powerful day after day, month after month, year after year... he would eventually become untouchable. In some ways he already was, though Thaddeus wasn't foolish enough to think he was somehow the most powerful being in the universe. Not yet anyways.

Grimacing, Thaddeus asks his next question.

“... How many of us are there? Who are the others and why were you the one sent to tell me this?”

Saul strokes his beard again for a moment before answering.

“Your existence brings our total number to ten, Thaddeus Cummings. As for why it was me... I am the eldest. My age is... hm, allow me to put it this way. The second eldest External is seventeen thousand years old. She is closer in age to you than she is to me. Much closer.”

Thaddeus' jaw doesn't drop open at that, but it is a close thing. Saul was implying that he was at least thirty-five thousand years old... and probably a LOT older given those last two words. Although the mention of an External of 'seventeen thousand years' of age does niggle at Thaddeus' mind. And he feels something from Emma at that thought. Dawning horror.

“As for who they are... you must know that we Externals are not always a united group. United by our existence perhaps, but not by common cause. Forever are we immortal mutants vying for control over the Earth. Be it political, financial, or otherwise. To truly gain that control requires a mastery of not just ourselves... but one another. For what sense is there in gaining control over your own destiny if you cannot control the destiny of those who would move against you?”

That was a whole lot of words to say that the Externals were seemingly a fractious bunch. But then, if Saul was as old as he claimed to be, then it stood to reason that he would see even the eldest of his fellow Externals as little more than babes.

Through their connection, Emma pushes a question into Thaddeus' mind... one that makes him freeze for half a moment before grimacing. Shit, it makes too much sense not to be true... but he asks it all the same to get confirmation of Emma's fears.

“Selene Gallio is an External, isn't she?”

Saul looks pleased at that, a faint glimmer in his eye and the smallest of smirks on his face as he nods.

“You are correct. Selene is one of us, just as you are. She is the embodiment... of Corruption.”

Corruption. That sounded about right to both Thaddeus and Emma. Gritting his teeth, hands curled into fists, Thaddeus narrows his eyes.

“... She’s been planning to kill me for several months now. She wanted to fatten me up and then consume me for power.”

Saul shows no signs of being disturbed or shocked by this revelation. Indeed, he simply tilts his head to the side.

“Selene has always been power hungry, oftentimes to her own detriment. She would not have known you were a latent External, of course... such a thing is impossible. But your base mutation is quite powerful and would represent a feast for one such as her... if cultivated properly.”

Here, Saul’s gaze becomes sharper.

“However... you were not cultivated to her specifications, were you? The meal she hoped to make of you was ruined long ago by mere mortals acting against her. Selene has oftentimes been quite sloth-like. Delegating to those she cannot fully trust... resulting in her plans going awry more times than not.”

Shaking his head decisively, the ancient immortal lets out a soft chuckle.

“No matter, in the end. One way or another, Selene’s machinations against you, at least in that regard, are done. As our youngest, you will be exempt from our little games for at least a while. She is obligated to help you grow into your new role as an External and a part of the Tapestry, just as any other External you meet will be. Would it appease you to know that she will be forced to assist and

mentor you going forward, young Thaddeus? Or would you rather I mentor you in her stead?"

Thaddeus blinks at that, caught a little off guard by the sudden question. Mentorship? Between Selene and Saul? A choice of the woman who had been trying to fatten him up for dinner for months now, or a man he'd literally just met today.

On the one hand, Thaddeus believed that Saul was telling the truth as he knew it. On the other hand, he also believed that Selene had more tricks up her sleeves than the ancient External gave her credit for. Neither he nor Emma fully bought into the idea that Selene hadn't known he was a latent External all along, truth be told.

The only question was... did he want to burrow deeper into Selene's motivations by forcing her to become his mentor in all things External, or did he want to stay away from her as much as possible going forward?

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A/N: Remember to Vote, leave a Like, and let me know what you think!