

SAFFRON 7

"Ok, Doc. You've got a clean bill of health. And one of the cleanest, most orderly minds I've ever seen." she leans over, pecking his cheek.

Doc pushes back his glasses, *"Yes, well, I, I do try to be logical and precise."*

"Time to get back to your real lab. You've been away for all of ten minutes now."

She fades from the crisp white lab of Doc Tomorrow's mindscape, a computer humming away, the Rules scrolling across the screen.

Doc opens his eyes, *"I am not quite that attached to my lab, young lady."*

"You've got a bed and an oven in there."

"That is simply not true. They're located in the adjoining room."

"Exactly my point. See you later, Doc."

Doctor Tomorrow harrumphs, the door swinging shut behind him.

"The intellectuals are always easy. So confident in their minds and yet, they have such pitiful defences in place. You can tie them in little knots of logic and then just stroll on through. They do most of the work themselves. Still, having said that, you did well."

"Thank you, Master."

Master smiles, sinking back into the shadows of her mind, darkness swallowing up the memory deep into her unconscious mind, leaving Psyche to wonder just what sent the shudder of pleasure shivering through her body.

"Ok, now just relax."

"You've checked all the others."

"Yes, I've checked them all. No signs of any mind control or suggestions or anything untoward."

"Now relax so I can give you a clean bill of health."

"You're sure there was nothing? People haven't been acting..themselves lately."

"Like who?"

"Sparxxx has been, unusually subdued. Especially around you."

"Subdued? After we fought the Clockmaker he asked if I wanted to sleep with him now or to wait till next week!"

"Only once."

"Because I slapped him. And maybe I threatened to make him sexually aroused only by the over 80's."

"I see."

"I didn't actually do it!"

"I know. Then there's Salem."

"What's wrong with Salem? She's finally started to look normal."

"Exactly. She's dressing to impress and attract people. That's highly out of character. She was almost scared of her sexuality. Now she's going out almost every night."

"Well, we might have had a bit of a talk while I scanned her. Girl has serious issues. Now relax."

"And then there's you and Saffron..."

"What about me and Saffron?"

"The fact that there is a you and Saffron. She's shown no signs of being attracted to women before. It's...curious."

"Yeah. Sometimes lesbians can disguise themselves as normal human beings." She replies, a trace of bitterness and hurt in her voice.

"That wasn't what I meant."

"Doesn't matter. Are you going to relax or is there something up with the Doc and Silver you want to discuss to stall this?"

Raptor closes his eyes, laying his hands in his lap. He takes a series of long, slow, even breaths and looks up. *"Go ahead."*

"Finally." she touches his forehead.

She steps into his mind, appearing in the foyer of a Gothic mansion. Gargoyles leer down from the roof. Birds fill a leafless tree nearby, their sharp eyes watching her, the branches rattling in the chill wind. The pale moon overhead provides a little light. The old wood creaks as she shifts her weight from one foot to the other. *Someone watched the Addams Family too much as a child.* She reaches for the large iron door-knocker, another leering gargoyle with the ring filling its mouth. The door opens of its own accord, warm firelight spilling out. Raptor stands in the doorway, his mask held under his arm, his dark brown hair pulled back from his face.

“Enter freely and of your own will.”

“Who are you and what have you done with the real Raptor? He doesn't have a sense of humour, even a dark and twisted one.”

“You really think that?”

She steps across the threshold, *“Well, not entirely, but let's be honest the best word that describes you is driven. Focused came in second. Scary was a close third. GSOH didn't make the top hundred.”*

“That's not a word.”

“Although pedantic did scrape through.”

“Are you quite done?”

“Pretty much, yeah. It's just, well, nice to see there's a human being under that gruff exterior.” she stands on tiptoe, pecking him on the cheek, and then finally looks around. Along the walls, stuffed eagles seem to be staring through her, perched above each solid-looking door, the hall stretching away into forever, stairs winding upwards at regular intervals. *“So, shall we start?”*

“Let's.” He gestures to one of the oak doors, which slowly creaks open. *“After you.”*

She steps through the door into a dim, darkened room. Harsh lights flare into life. The door swings shut and the faded Gothic coverings fall away from the cage surrounding her. The deadbolt slams into place. *“What??!”*

“You didn't really think no-one would notice did you?” Raptor asks, pulling his mask on, hiding his face behind it.

“Notice what?? What the hell are you doing?”

“Oh, you're good, I admit that, but you're not perfect. People weren't themselves. Sparxxx, Salem, Saffron, especially Saffron. Not massively different, but off. And they all had one thing in common. Those mindscans. The ones you suggested. Once you notice all that, you don't have to be trained by the world's greatest detective to add things up. I'm still not sure why, though. Why did you do it? Why did you betray us all?”

Psyche's eyes flash with emerald light. A bolt of green leaps from her hand, fizzling as it strikes the cage. The cage glows, energy crawling along the bars and Psyche screams.

“I wouldn't keep doing that. This is something Doc came up with. Psi-trap. Turns your own energies against you., If you keep it up, you'll burn your brain out.”

“You've gone mad!”

“I wish I had, Sonja, but we both know I haven't. I know what you've done. What I don't know is why.”

“Why what?”

“Why you'd betray us like this. Why you'd tamper with your friends' minds. Why you'd turn Saffron into your personal plaything. That sort of thing.”

“I didn't,”

“So who did?”

“Ah, if ever there was a cue for an entrance, that was it.”

Raptor whirls, talons springing from his bracers, razor sharp metal arcing over his hands. *“Who?”*

Psyche sinks into the cage, bowing her head, breathing softly, *“Master...”* she whispers.

“Master”? You're the one behind this?”

“You could say that. Before we get down to the tedious business, though, I must say I'm impressed. I can count on the fingers of one hand the people who'd notice those little quirks and reach the conclusion you did. Quite an impressive mind, and then to trap my poor little Psyche like that? You

might make this interesting at least."

"Interesting? I'll make it more than interesting." he lunges forward, his claws slicing through Master's chest. Psyche screams. Master looks down at the black blood dripping down his shirt.

"You might at that." he smiles, and the wounds vanish, the shirt mending the tear with a casual ease.

"But you can't really have thought it would be that easy. I reached into your telepath's mind and made her mine. Do you really think she didn't resist? Did you think none of your friends fought back? Or do you just think you're better than them?"

Raptor doesn't reply. He dives through the doorway, tumbling and rolling to his feet in the hallway.

"Oh, very good. You might be right of course. You've built yourself into a match for them, haven't you? A normal man who leads virtual gods. It's not hard to see how you'd become arrogant. It won't help you, of course, but I do find myself respecting your dedication."

"You can take your respect and shove it so far..."

"Ah, ah. Language. There are still ladies present. I won't have you corrupting my Psyche's mind." a tendril of shadow coils out and the cage opens.

"Master, I.."

"You can go. I'll be with you once I'm finished with your leader."

Psyche bows her head, tears sliding down her face as her master dismisses her for her failure. And she fades away. *"Yes, Master."*

"You shouldn't have done that."

Master turns back to him, staring down the barrel of the pistol. *"Really? I disagree entirely. There's always a chance she might get damaged while I'm subduing you. That would be terribly wasteful."*

"And you think you can beat me alone?"

"I do indeed. And your little pistol won't help much. Not here."

"Really?" he squeezes the trigger. A beam of searing light tears across Master's shoulder, *"Because this is another of Doc's devices to defend against telepaths."*

Master's eyes narrow as he hold his shoulder, gritting his teeth. *"Those gadgets didn't help him much, did they? My little Psyche was able to wrap his mind around her little finger without my help."*

"I'm not him."

"No, but you are here all alone, against something that's beaten the rest of your team, and played their minds like a harp, turning them into servants."

"Slaves, you mean!"

"Actually, I don't. Slaves have a nasty tendency to try to rebel. They also lack the ability to adapt. In their own way, slaves can be very stubborn and literal. Servants, on the other hand, will know what you mean and strive to obey because that's their place through their own choice." he smiles, the shadows slithering over his wounded shoulder, *"Even when that choice isn't really theirs. Don't worry, you'll love it."*

"Never!"

Master smiles, stepping aside as the gun blazes again. *"That's exactly what Saffron said, just before I had that pretty little mouth of hers wrapped around my cock."* he looks at the hole scorched in the wall, *"You'd better be careful with that. You might damage something."*

"I intend to." he takes careful aim and fires again, the light tearing across Master's side.

"This is no longer amusing me, Dillon Reynolds."

"What's the matter, Master? Not used to having to work?"

The shadows slowly slither back around Master's body. *"Not for a mundane mind, no. You're surpassing my expectations."* he flicks his finger out, a whip of shadows snaking out to slap the gun aside. *"But don't think that means you're going to win here all alone."*

"You're mistaken, Master. I'm not alone." he whistles and the stuffed birds turn their heads. Wings creak as they shift and take to the air, the wing-beats merging into a thunderous humming that fills the corridor. They swoop down on Master, talons and claws raking across his skin. He drops to the ground, covering his head with his arms as the vicious birds continue their assault, burying him under their feathered bodies, pecking at his face, talons clawing him, blood dripping onto the floor,

staining the feathers.

Eventually, the pile of thrashing feathers breaks apart, the birds flying back to their perches, their beaks and talons stained with crimson. Behind them they leave a tall figure, its pale white skin shredded, the floor around it smeared in blood.

"Sic temper tyrannis. Who's the Master now?"

Shadow hands the size of Buick's tear through the roof of the building, ripping through the rooms, scattering memories and thoughts aside as one closes around him in a grip tighter than a vice.

"That would be me, you arrogant little shit! You actually thought you could beat me! Me!!" the hands raise him up, dragging him from the house. *"You hurt me! You little wretch, you actually hurt me."* the hand squeezes, shaking him like a dog with a rag. *"Well, wretch, you're not the only one who can hurt."* he squeezes and Raptor grits his teeth against the scream of pain as he feels a rib pop. *"Watch this."* The hand around him swells until it feels like the night itself has grabbed him, leaving him lost. He looks down, the tiny house miles below looking small, distant, and then the darkness snuffs it out. He tries to scream but nothing comes as he hurtles down inside the darkness, landing on the crushed ruins of the mansion. Timbers jut up out of the wreckage like broken bones. Slates shift and crack under his feet. Glass shards glitter. Pages of books, pages of memory, blow across the ruins, carrying the cries of hundreds of wounded birds.

The colossal hand of night stabs fingers into the ground around him, scooping up the whole mansion. He gasps as it rises, staring into a face that fills the horizon. *"Goodbye, you wretched little bastard."* and the hand tilts, dropping the mansion, dropping his mind, dropping him into the giant open mouth. He falls, avian bodies tumbling around him trailing blood from crushed and splintered flesh. Memories swirl around him,. Broken thoughts just at him as he tumbles down and down in the darkness.

Blades spring from his bracers, gleaming silver against the shadows as he slashes out, tearing and slicing at the darkness. And then the resistance vanishes, leaving him standing under the Moon, a giant made of darkness standing beside him, a great rent in his belly slowly healing shut, both hands still clutching it together.

"So, Master," he pants, *"had enough yet? Or do I have to get rough?"* he glares up at the towering figure, and begins to grow. His body swells, power flooding into him, pushing him to stand eyeball to eyeball with the darkness. *"You think you can beat me with fear and loathing? I've been beating those down every day of my life. 'Master'. You haven't got a chance here."*

"Maybe not here. Let's take this elsewhere." he grabs Raptor's shoulders, and the darkness flows over him, tendrils of sticky shadow swirling around him. His mouth opens in horror and the darkness pours down. His eyes widen and the shadows flow inside. *"Now,"* he hears the voice inside him, *"let's see what we can see here."*

Master looks around. Rain falls around him. The buildings loom up into the night. A streetlight flickers at one end of the claustrophobic alley, shadows dancing around. Silhouettes pass in front of the alleyway. A man and woman, huddled against the wind and rain, a young boy clutching her hand. Someone moves in the alley. A hand reaches out, grabbing the woman's arm, pulling her in. Her scream rises high into the night. The boy's cries join her. The man turns, rushing to her defence. There's a crack like thunder. A flash of light briefly illuminates the alleyway, and the man stops. He clutches at his chest, his hands coming away sticky. He looks disbelievingly out for the span of a heartbeat and then drops to his knees, slowly pitching forward, the rain swirling his blood around the alleyway. The woman screams again. Another crack of thunder, muffled by cloth, and the scream stops in a spray of crimson that spatters the boy's face. He stares, rain and tears mixing on his face as the figure runs down into the darkness.

Master steps out of the shadows, putting his hand on the boy's shoulder, *"Are you alright, son?"*

The boy looks up, staring at him, eyes already red with tears, *"Mom? Dad? He, they're, he..."* and

he breaks down into sobs.

"It's alright, son. Come with me. We'll wait over there. Come on, we need to get you out of the rain. Everything will be alright."

"No it won't. It won't be alright. Not ever again."

"No, it won't. That's it, son, you cry now. Just lean on me. Let Master take care of you." and the boy leans against his lap, sobbing into the dark cloth.

Years roll past in moments, a decade of studying, of training, of travelling the world to find teachers, Tibet, India, China, Europe, no place untouched by the boy's search for the tools to bring justice to the guilty, to protect the innocent, and beside him every step of the way, a permanent shadow, guiding his choices, pushing him to be the best, is the shadow of Master, whispering in his head as he becomes what he was meant to be.

The roll of years slows, another figure appears, jet black as if a piece of the night had grown solid. He takes the young Dillon Reynolds under his wing, teaching him, guiding him, training him, helping him to become the Raptor, a mentor, an ally, a role-model, but never the Master that keeps him safe from the memories.

Raptor opens his eyes, "Well?" he asks, gruffly.

"You're clean."

He pushes himself up off the chain, "Good." a klaxon blares through the room, "And just in time. Let's go!"

And in the dark Gothic mansion inside his mind, if you look ever so closely at the portrait, you might just notice that in the darkness, something is smiling to itself. The birds rest silently on their perches, the Rules patterned across their wings.



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