

SAFFRON 2

Dawn breaks over the city, but the light fails utterly to reach Maggie Johnson. The alarm clock is another matter entirely, its shrill cacophony yanking her out of her sleep. She bolts upright in bed, scattering covers as she thrashes wildly before silencing the alarm, knocking it halfway across the floor. “NO! You’ll never...” She looks around the room, her costume flung over the closet door (Good going, Maggie. That’ll really protect your secret!), her normal clothes piled on the chair, everything seems normal, just a nagging doubt at the back of her mind. She’s in danger. She knows it, but it’s just her room. “Jumping at nightmares. What a big brave superhero you are.” she mutters, pushing herself off the bed. The room swims slightly as she clutches her pounding head, “Man, what did I drink last night?” she asks the room, but doesn’t receive a reply. She glares balefully at the alarm clock, trying to shake the fuzziness behind her eyes. She staggers out of the room and into the shower, the hot water finally waking her up, washing away the night terrors and leaving her almost ready for the day.

She tidies up, her costume vanishing into her ring. It’s still unbelievable, and she’s given up asking Doc Tomorrow how it works. She hasn’t understood any of his explanations and it just makes her feel stupid. She slips the ring on, pulling a loose lilac top and dark skirt from the wardrobe, tying her hair back. “There.” she looks in the mirror, finishing her make-up. “All set.” She locks the door behind her, hearing a sophisticated set of scanners and shields activate, locking her little apartment tighter than Salem’s panties. That brings a smile to her face as she walks down the stairs. Oh, it would be sooo easy just to fly to work, but... She sighs, walking to the bus stop. She thinks it again as she crams in, the bus rattling along. *Come on, come on, I could carry this thing faster than this!* She drifts away into daydreams, ignoring the rumble of the engine, the buzz of conversations around her, the poisonous smell of diesel and sweat, instead feeling strong hands caressing her body, squeezing her breasts, rolling her nipples between their fingers. She feels the satin sheets sliding under her body, a faint smell of aftershave and two bodies in close contact hovering around her. She shivers, feeling the hands glide over her body, stroking her lips, teasing her, bringing her closer and closer. She sighs, “Oh, Master...” and her eyes snap open. ‘Master’?? *Where’d that come from? Like I’d ever call anyone Master.* She notices the stop and pushes through the bus, “Scuse me, pardon me, coming through, wait, wait, wait!” she manages to make the doors, stepping out into the sunshine, *Got a bit too into that, didn’t you? Almost missing your stop like that. How very, unprofessional, what would Raptor say? But that was a good, and very, very naughty little dream. And it’s the closest you’ve got to having sex in, how long, 3 months? Maggie, you need to find a decent guy and get laid. Soon.* She shakes her head, clearing her thoughts, walking up the long path. She knows that if she looks hard, she’ll see the scanning beams criss-crossing her, checking retinal scans, DNA profile, encephalic waves, the whole spectrum and then some, all to make sure she is who she says she is. She’d say it was paranoid, if it hadn’t revealed three shapeshifters, two androids and a couple of really good impersonators in the last month alone.

She pushes the oak door open, stepping into the reception hall, her heels clicking on the marble tiles. “Hey, Sue!” she waves to the woman behind the reception desk, pulling her pass out of her purse.

“Good morning, Maggie.” Sue replies, peering through her glasses at the pass, before waving her through. “You’re looking well today.”

Maggie smiles, “You say the nicest things.” the door lock clicks, the slight hum of defences that could give Paragon a hard time fading as it shuts. Maggie walks through the office, smiling at everyone and slips her card into the security reader. The door swings open with a hiss, and Maggie steps inside, the elevator’s walls reflecting her image back at her. *Sue’s right. I do look good.* Yet another set of scans start up as she places her palm on the wall, feeling a tickling as she’s scanned again.

“Identity confirmed. Welcome to the Complex, Saffron.” a digital voice says, the door opposite sliding back to admit her. She twists the ring, feeling her costume spread over her, the ring pulling

her clothes into it, and steps through the door.

Doc Tomorrow looks up from his seat at the circular table, his left eye replaced by a scarlet lens ringed in metal, gleaming against his dark skin, his grey hair looking like an explosion on his scalp. He gives her a nod, his cybernetic left arm joined to the table at the wrist, a metallic hand sitting on the smooth table. His white lab coat hangs over the chair, his body covered in a bright silver suit of thin metal weave.

Salem and Psyche stand together off to one side, both hidden within the folds of their hooded cloaks, Salem's scarlet broken by a silver pentagram, a similar design on the chest of her dark red robe and the black sash wrapped around her waist. A curl of black hair peeks out of her hood as she talks quietly. A brilliant red sash, matched by the copper hair hidden away, is tied around Psyche's waist, her arms and legs wrapped in black, her body in brilliant green. *Wonder what it would be like?* Saffron thinks, her eyes glowing, her enhanced vision peeling away the layers of clothing, *To feel her walking through my mind, knowing all my fantasies. She'd know just how I like to be touched, it would be...* Psyche looks up, her cheeks colouring. *Oh GOD, she heard me! Now what do I do?*

"You could try asking me out on a date first. No need to rush into anything." Psyche's telepathic voice replies, those piercing green eyes holding her still from across the room, *"You could also stop staring. It's flattering, but a bit, you know, creepy."* She subtly turns away, clasping her hands in front of her, blocking Saffron's view.

Saffron's eyes stop glowing, her view once more obscured by thick layers of green. *Creepy? What's creepy? I was just...ogling her...by using my powers...and...oh my God! What the hell is wrong with me?! That's practically stalking! That, why would I think that, and about her, I'm not even...am I? What is she going to think of me?* She walks to the table, distracted, barely looking where she's going and slumps into the silver seat. Salem takes a step towards her, but Psyche puts a hand gently on her shoulder, a slight smile creasing her lips. *So, Maggie, what are you going to do now? Jump the Doc and see what attachments he's got for his hand? How could you be so...* She stops as the chair wraps around her, sliding all over her body, pulling her into a crushing embrace. "What the..."

"I've got you now! And you won't get away this time!"

Saffron struggles, but the silvery bands coiled around her refuse to let her go.

"That's it, struggle all you like, you can't escape!" a giggle sounds in her ear. The bands spread, melting over her body, covering her body, caressing her skin, even as they bind her tighter and tighter.

"Get...off...me!" Saffron gasps as the metal pulls tighter, crawling up her neck in a slow silver wave. "I...mean...it..." she gasps, feeling the metal probing at the edges of her costume, pressing against her.

"Make me."

"Fine." Saffron rises into the air, as the silver covers her completely, turning her into a floating silver statue. Saffron ignores the cool metal, ignores the caresses the metal brings, the stroking of her sensitive skin, and spins, whirling around, faster and faster.

"Heyyyyyyy...noooooooo.....faaaaiiiiiirrrrrr....." the metal whines as it flies off from her, splattering over the wall. It drips down slowly to the floor.

Saffron lands, "Silver," she takes a deep breath to calm herself down, and pretend that she wasn't enjoying the caressing, "what did we tell you about personal space?" *For the 15th time. Why can't she get this idea? Or does she and just doesn't care? That sounds better.*

The pool of silver rises up off the floor, forming a buxom figure in silver, long silver tresses trailing over her shoulders, "Oh, some silly human nonsense. It's not reeeally important, is it? Besides, I gotcha!"

"Yeah, you got me." *And almost got me off, too...* "I didn't think you'd try that here. I'll be more careful next time." *Or maybe I won't. For an alien made of living metal she's got very good hands,*

or pseudopods, or skin, or whatever she was using. Maybe I'll let her 'catch' me again and see how many shapes she can...stop! What is wrong with me? I haven't been this horny since I was a teenager!

“Oh, you do that. It won't help.”

“Course it won't. Safi can't even stop one jewellery shop robbery on her own.”

Saffron sighs heavily, turning to the door. “Saffron, Sparky, not Safi, Saffron. Think you can remember that?”

“Wow, you're moody. Being a loser not agree with you?” he taunts, his slim frame covered in a midnight blue costume that looks painted on, streaks of lightning racing down his arms and legs, diving in a 'v' on his chest. A pair of wraparound goggles covers eyes she knows are an icy blue, a silver lightning bolt hanging from a chain around his neck, sparks crawling around it, “And it's Sparxxx, not Sparky.”

Sparxxx. Three x's. God, save me from poseur wannabes. I was never that bad. I bet he spells cool 'kewl' too.

“All I'm saying is I wouldn't let him get away like that.”

Oh, yeah? He'd make mincemeat out of you. Master'd turn your brains into even more of a bowl of mush than they are now. She smiles, licking her lips, “Well, if the creep shows up again, I suppose I can wait for you to catch up.”

“Catch up? You're forgetting who you're talking to.” he bolts across the room, sparks trailing in his wake, “I don't have to 'catch up' to anyone.”

“For I am Sparky the Lightning Kid!”

Sparks turns, glaring at the silver duplicate of him standing in ludicrously over-the-top heroic pose, one hugely muscled arm raised skyward. He flicks his finger, a spark leaping across the room. Silver yelps, collapsing into a puddle.

“That will be enough.” a deep, gravel voice rasps from the rafters. “It never fails, you spend almost more time fighting each other than the enemy.” the voice's owner glides down, his black wings spreading from his shoulders, his face covered in a hawk-like mask. Metal bracers cover his forearms, his body sheathed in black, a stylised eagle's head on his chest, a pistol resting against his hip.

Sparxxx leans back on the wall, trying not to look startled or intimidated, “What kept you?”

“Nothing. I've been here for ten minutes, waiting to see if anyone noticed me with all the juvenile behaviour.” Raptor replies, taking his seat. Doc Tomorrow pulls his arm away from the table, clicking as it disengages, twisting his hand until it clicks into his wrist. Raptor taps one finger on the keypad, one wall sliding back to reveal the monitor. A variety of mugshots fills the screen, featuring the wide assortment of thugs, invaders, megalomaniacs, aliens, freaks and nuisances that plague the city on a semi-regular basis. Most have 'incarcerated' stamped across them. “As you can see, we've done a good job lately. But this new robber worries me. He doesn't match with any of our known foes, and cross-checking with the Sanctuary hasn't revealed anything, either. I'm still trying to get hold of the Avenger, but I suspect he'll have the same lack of information.”

“So he's new, so what? Once we beat him senseless we can find out what he is.”

Raptor ignores him, turning his dark, intense eyes onto Saffron, “The police reports were vague as to his abilities. You faced him,”

“And lost.”

“how was he able to incapacitate you?” he continues, ignoring Sparxxx.

“I don't know. I was just about to punch him into the middle of next week, when I, I just stopped.”

“Stopped?”

“Just stopped. I couldn't move. He hadn't done anything, I just couldn't move, or do anything. Then, after he'd had his fun,” she colours a little, “got his laughs, it just wore off.”

“And then you crashed into the wall. If only some kid with a cellphone had been there. You'd have made YouTube for sure!”

She turns to glare at him, her eyes glowing dangerously, her fingers digging into the chair's arms, leaving gouges in the metal.

“Did he move at all? Say anything? Was there a flash?”

She turns back to Raptor, unclenching her hands a little, “A flash?” she takes a breath to steady herself, the pleasurable image of her hands choking the life out of Sparxxx lingering. “No, he just said three and I stopped.”

“Three”? Why would he say three?”

“Uhm, I'd given him 'til three to give up, and he sorta started counting with me.”

Raptor gives her a look. “I see. What about the patrons?”

“They were, sorta, asleep.”

“You mean unconscious.”

“No, I mean, asleep. Unless unconscious people snore.”

“Interesting. You're sure he didn't do anything visible?”

“No, he didn't, it just, happened.” She trails off, shrugging apologetically.

“Have there been any lingering effects?”

“No, just pissed he got away and didn't show up for the rematch.”

Raptor looks up, “Rematch?”

“Doesn't matter. Just part of his taunting. He didn't show, anyway.”

“When was this rematch supposed to be?”

“It doesn't...”

“When?” he growls.

“Last night. I was waiting for three hours and he never showed.”

Raptor looks at Tomorrow. The screen cycles quickly. “Nothing unusual reported at all last night.”

Tomorrow replies, “No major crimes noted involving unknown operatives.”

“So it wasn't a distraction then. Unless it was from something so subtle, it really didn't need one.”

he doesn't look up, his fingertips pressed together, “No blast, no movement, no command word. Sounds like a psion of some sort. Psyche, your opinion?”

Psyce looks up. Her gaze drifts over Maggie, a little unfocused. Maggie feels her feather-light touch caressing her mind. She tries to relax, but feels her body responding to it, squeezing her legs together. And then the touch withdraws, leaving her only just able to suppress a sigh of pleasure.

“There's no sign of any permanent damage or changes. Of course, that was only a light scan, but I would expect to see some traces.”

Raptor nods, “Good. Next time, though, call for backup.”

Saffron nods.

“And schedule a full scan with Psyche. Our mystery man is up to something. I'm sure of it. We can't afford to take chances. We...” The screen flashes, golden letters blazing out of the red background,

“The Troll King's escaped again. He's taken the Mayor hostage. Our mystery will have to wait.”

“Oh, well, once more unto the breach. And about that date? Tomorrow night. Orion's on Kirby Road. Wear something nice.”



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