

SAFFRON 4

Maggie brushes her hands over the front of her black trousers. She can hear the music coming from Orion's up ahead. She looks at herself in the shop window, her hair draped across her shoulders, a white blouse covering her, the top button undone. *Ok. Enough. She's not going to bite.* She starts along the road, heels clicking on the pavement. *Well, not without asking, I guess.* She smiles a little, letting the images wash up out of her mind. She doesn't see the man step out of the shadows until he grabs her shoulder, spinning her around. She stares into the gun barrel.

"Gimme the purse, lady."

Maggie's eyes narrow. "Oh, I do not have time for this."

This seems to confuse him, the gun moves up, "C'mon, this ain't a toy! Give it!"

Maggie's hand shoots out, grabbing hold of the gun, "I said, I don't have time for this!" she squeezes her hand, metal crumpling like paper under her fingers. The mugger howls as his fingers snap when she crushes the gun. Ignoring the pain-filled screams, her other hand closes around his throat. She ignores the rough stubble against her skin and lifts him up, his feet dangling inches off the ground. With a casual toss, she throws him back down the alley, where he lands with a crunch of bone on brick. "You'd better not have smudged anything." she mutters, walking down the street without a thought for the moans coming from the crumpled figure.

She leans back against the bar, a bottle of beer dangling from her fingers, letting the music and light wash over her as the door closes on the night outside. She takes a swig of the bottle, looking around the bar. She looks down at her watch.

"I'm not that late." She looks up. Psyche smiles, a dark green coat cinched around her waist, the edges of a black skirt peeking out from under the coat. "Not too cold in that?"

Maggie shakes her head. "I don't really feel the cold anymore."

"Well, us mere mortals do." she turns to the bartender, ordering a bottle of white wine. "Have you found a place to sit down yet?"

"Not yet. I only just got here." Her eyes glow softly, sweeping her gaze through the crowd, finding a small table in the corner. "Got one. This way." she takes Psyche's hand, leading her on a weaving path through the crowd to the little wooden table.

Psyche looks down at the table, and its stools, "You just chose this so I'd have to sit carefully, didn't you?" she accuses gently, sliding into the corner.

Maggie blushes, "No, I..."

"Teasing. Besides, you've already seen all there is of me." the blush deepens, "Oh, I didn't mean to make you blush like that." she smiles, a slight twist of her lips. "Well, ok, maybe I did just a little. But you deserve it. Pervert."

"I..."

"Oh, enough of that. I'm not mad. Well, not too mad. You're just lucky you're cute. If you were Sparky, I'd have knocked your sex drive loose, not asked you out."

"I..."

"Shhhhhh. It's alright. At least you're honest about it. You'd be amazed at how many people stare but look away. As if I won't notice what they're thinking, just because they're not looking at me. Cowards."

Maggie looks up, "Sonja, I..."

"I told you, shhhh. It's nice to feel wanted. And to feel someone wants all of me. Everyone else is so scared of what I'll find in their minds. They don't say it, but, well, surface thoughts like that just scream out. It's crippling, like trying to make love without seeing. Which brings us to you."

Maggie looks into the piercing green eyes. "What about me?"

"Well, let's start with this." she places her hand over Maggie's, gently stroking the back. Maggie lets out a soft sigh, feeling the gentle touch, and a feather-light presence flits into her mind. She feels the touch on her hand brush across her thoughts, a gentle breeze flowing through her mind. "Good. No obvious mind control."

“What?” Maggie blinks, coming out of her dreamy haze. “You just...”

“I did.” she continues stroking Maggie’s hand, “A scan like that’s easier when the subject’s relaxed, and no one relaxes when they’re told they’re about to be mind probed.”

“So you just...”

“I just wandered into your mind and had a look around. I needed to know you’re not just coming on to me as part of some creep’s plot.”

“And?”

“If you are, he’s damn good at hiding his traces. Obviously, we’ll need to go deeper to be absolutely sure, but they usually leave traces in the shallows. So, when did you first know?”

“Know what? I don’t...”

“Well, know you were attracted to girls? Know you had a little kink for mind games? Know you had a thing for me? Take your pick.”

“Don’t you know already?”

A hurt look passes over Sonja’s face, “I wouldn’t do that. It’d be like, like, like staring at someone with your x-ray vision to see them naked.”

Maggie blushes deeply, looking down at the table.

“So?”

“I just, I’d never, I...”

Sonja lifts her hand up, “Oh. Oh! So this is...”

Maggie nods.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be gentle.” she cocks her head, “Well, I suppose as you’re invulnerable I don’t need to be, but, well, it will be your first.”

Maggie blushes, “Are you done?”

“Oh, no, not yet. I’ll be done when I’ve got you screaming your heart out. So,” she leans in, sipping the wine, a twinkle in her eyes, “your place or mine?”

Several drinks later and a short taxi ride, after Maggie answers the question, quietly and only after a lot of gentle prodding, they walk up to her door, heels clicking on the floor, “Home sweet home.”

Psyche giggles.

Maggie unlocks the door, and pushes it open.

“Man, girl, you need a maid.”

“It’s not that...” she trails off looking around at the discarded clothes scattered over the floor, “ok, ok, I need a maid. Are you volunteering?”

Sonja shucks off her coat, a faded green jumper clinging to her body underneath, a red top peeking through the wool in places. “Hells no, you’re going to be my mind-slave, not vice versa.”

“Your mind-slave?” she licks her lips, her breath catching.

Sonja steps up close to her, standing on tiptoe to bring them closer to the same height, her perfume, faint but pleasant, swirling around her, “Oh, yes, my cute, compliant mind-slave.” she purrs, a finger on Maggie’s nose, “Your will broken, your mind wiped out, your tongue,” she pauses, running her tongue along her lips, “well, your tongue put to a much better use than talking. Sounds good, doesn’t it?”

Maggie opens her eyes, breathing hard, “The others...”

“The others? Raptor won’t care as long as you’re still as effective in the field as you are in my bed; Salem won’t approve but she’ll have to realise there’s such a thing as sex first; Silver won’t understand and might want to join in, I’ll have to consider that; Doc probably won’t notice unless you suddenly became a neutrino generator; and we could make Sparky explode. That’d be fun, wouldn’t it?”

“Ok, making Sparky explode would almost be worth it, but...” a finger touches her lips.

“Shhhh. Pretty mind-slaves shouldn’t argue.” she kisses Maggie on the nose, buttons popping down the blouse.

“I’m not...what are you...”

“Pretty mind-slaves should also be naked for their Mistress’ pleasure.” Sonja continues, as her

telekinesis slides the blouse off.

Maggie slowly pushes away. "Sonja, that's enough. I'm not a toy."

Sonja stops, "You're not? Are you sure?"

Maggie tries to take a deep breath, but it's hard to think. "I'm sure." she says, sounding much more certain than she really feels, half-wishing Sonja would take her over, if only to get her feelings sorted out.

"Ok. We'll play Mistress and mind-slave some other time. No point wasting all the good stuff on your first time."

"Play?"

"Play. Oh, my, you have got the kink hard if you thought I was serious." she reaches up, stroking Maggie's cheek gently, feeling the heat under her skin. "Although it is tempting..." Maggie feels her knees weaken at the touch, feeling Sonja effortlessly step inside her mind, her gentle touch caressing her raging thoughts.

"Sonja..."

"Don't worry, Maggie. I won't make you my helpless puppet until later." the clasp on Maggie's bra pulls itself loose, the bra sliding down her stomach and arms.

"Please..."

"Shhhhh." she leans in, kissing Maggie deeply, *"I know what you want. You don't have to say anything. Not anymore."*

Maggie puts her arms around Sonja's shoulders, leaning in to the kiss, pulling Sonja closer.

Telekinetic hands slide the trousers down her legs. A real hand touches them, coming away damp.

"Ooooh, nice and wet. What a naughty girl you are, Maggie." Sonja's teasing voice giggles in her head. She pushes on the cloth a little. Maggie whimpers as the damp cloth presses up against her.

The hand pulls away, telekinesis pulling the panties down. She can feel the slight scratchiness of the jumper as it presses against her chest, rubbing against her swelling nipples. Sonja's hands roam over her skin, caressing her curves, their lips never parting. Maggie starts to lose herself in the moment, only for a touch to bring her back. Sonja's fingers rub along her lips. They tease and probe her, sliding inside her glistening womanhood, rubbing her juices over her clit. She breaks the kiss, moaning, begging, gasping as Sonja teases her. Maggie feels the feather light presence in her mind shift, watching her thoughts, seeing which touches drive her wild and which leave her cold. Sonja continues her exploration, narrowing her focus until each touch sends Maggie higher. Finally, she can take no more. Her body clenches, her back arches, throwing her hair back and her moans turn into screams. She thinks she hears Sonja humming gently, and feels a slight twinge, and then she can feel Sonja inside her head, the gentle wind swirling through her memories, caressing the essence of her self.

"Sonja?"

"Time for that deep scan I told you about." she feels a touch on her hand and then she stands next to Sonja, hovering over a small town in the afternoon sunlight. The sunlight falls through them, both of them glowing slightly, their naked bodies pale and translucent.

"Where?"

"Your mindscape. This is a psychic representation of your mind." she looks around, *"Very Midwestern. You can take the girl out of the small town, but..."*

"This is my mind?"

"Something like that." they start to sink down into the streets, *"It's a representation. You can tell a lot about people from how their mind perceives itself."*

"And?"

"And what?" she replies innocently, *"Oh, what does this say about you?"*

"Yes." Maggie replies through gritted teeth.

"Oh, you're fine. A good ol' Midwestern gal. Kinda sweet and maybe a bit innocent, too."

"Innocent?"

"Yeah, surprised me, too."

"So, what are we doing here?"

"Investigating. Making sure you haven't got anything hidden in here," she taps Maggie's head, *"that doesn't belong."*

"You mean like you?"

Sonja fixes her with a baleful glance, *"I was thinking of rather less sexy and gorgeous things, but, essentially, yes."* she starts off down the street, young children running around her, cars and trucks driving by slowly. The police walk the streets, a presence but not intrusive. Young couples cluster around the bars.

"Strong sense of duty and romance you got there."

"Huh?"

"The avatars." she points at the cops, *"Duty, and romance."* and then at the couples, leaning close, kissing, hand in hand, whispering conspiratorially. *"Now, let's see about some specific things."* she heads towards the church. She pushes the thick wooden doors open, and stops. *"Houston, we have a problem."*

"What?" Maggie rushes to her side, and stares into the church, a glossy black sphere hovering in mid air like a hole. Black light crawls around it, occasionally leaping into the church walls, the light inside dim and dusky. *"What the hell is that?"*

"Something that doesn't belong. Looks like you've been up against someone who's good." her hair swirls around her shoulders, the gentle breeze washing through the church. The surface of the sphere ripples. *"Damn! They're very good, whoever they are!"* she takes a step closer to the sphere. Maggie's hand grabs her shoulder.

"What are you doing?"

"My job. If this was a gunman, you'd be taking the lead. Well, this is where I'm much more invulnerable than you are. Don't worry. They're good. I'm better." she gently shakes herself free and walks up to the glistening sphere, reaching out. As her glowing fingers touch the sphere, the sphere ripples, slowly pulling back from her touch. *"You see? Nothing to worry about."* she pushes her arm in deeper, the darkness retreating before her. She looks back to smile reassuringly at Maggie. But as soon as she takes her eyes off the sphere, it closes around her arm, *"What...?!"* she manages to get out, her smile changing into a look of shock as the sphere convulses, almost as if swallowing and she vanishes into it, the surface rippling slowly around the point where her feet were last seen.

Maggie opens her eyes, staring into the dull, blank green eyes before her. She raises her hands.

"Goodnight, Sonja." she whispers, kissing her on the forehead. Her hands flash, bolts of pale amber light blasting into Sonja. Her body collapses, tumbling unconscious into Maggie's arms. She lays her out on the bed, and picks up her phone, dialling a number mechanically. *"I have her, Master."*

"Excellent, Maggie. Bring her here. Then we can begin."

"Yes, Master. As you command." she puts the phone down, pulling on her costume. She opens the window, activates all the alarms and rises up into the clouds, Sonja held limply in her arms as she soars over towards Claremont Cave.

Psyche blinks, rubbing the back of her head. *Ok. What the hell was that and why do I...* She stops, staring up into the night sky, tiny points of light glittering above her. The city rises up around her, her body leaning back on the grass at the centre of the park. *This is, this is, it can't be.* She floats upward, her body outlined in a pale green glow. She settles down on the grass and walks out of the park. *Ok. No reason to panic. I'm sure there's a good explanation why there's no one about. And why it's so quiet.* She shivers as she walks through the empty streets. Well, not quite empty. She sees the occasional businesswoman, cop or clubber, but they're all subdued, quiet, hurrying along towards the lighted windows of the skyscrapers around her. She stares up at the stars, so high overhead. She sighs, *Who knew I was so lonely in my own head?* She shudders, and then gasps softly as one of the tiny, faint points of light winks out. Then another, and another, inky darkness spreading across the sky. *No!*

She floats upwards, her mindscape falling away beneath her as she reaches for the stars, the other minds around her, but they never move closer, always faint as if obscured by a curtain and then they

vanish into the night. *No. Enough!* She reaches out. The glow around her body flares and a bolt of pale green light tears up into the night, tearing away the shroud around one star. She feels a flood of thoughts, chaotic, jumbled, muted, Maggie's thoughts. She reaches out, to maintain the link, to get out, to get help, to get anything. And then the shroud falls back into place, leaving the sky dark and empty around her. *No. No!* She lashes out, bolts of psychic energy lancing through the sky, the darkness swallowing them up without even a ripple. She looks down, and screams as the outer limits of her mindscape go dark. *This can't be happening! This is my mind! I can't lose here. I can't.* She plunges down into the centre of the mindscape, blinking back tears. She lands in the centre of the city, an incongruous mix of modern skyscrapers and old colonial buildings. She reaches out towards a power plant made of pale emerald crystal and the crystals glow, the green light leaping over to her, bathing the whole area in a nimbus of pale green light. Her hair flies up as an unseen wind swirls around her. *Right.* The glow expands out, sweeping through the streets of her mind, a dome of light against the darkness.

Eventually, it stops, halfway to the edge of the city. The darkness presses in on the dome, a heavy, leaden weight pressing onto her mind, filling her with a numbing cold. *"Alright, whatever you are, get out of my mind! OUT!"* the shield flares, pushing the darkness back. *"You hear me?! OUT!"* The darkness pushes back, but the dome continues to push slowly outwards, emerald lights flickering in the windows as it expands. Darkness swirls over the brilliant light dome, trying to force its way in, or grab a hold, or do anything. Psyche allows herself a very slight smile, *"Yeah, you'd better run! When I find you, you'll be lucky if you can remember your own name! Get! OUT!"* the dome gives one last shudder and rolls out, the whole city covered by her shield of light. *"Done it. I beat you, you bastard. No one beats me here. Not here."* She looks around her city, the skyscrapers towering up under the dome. *"No one beats me."* she repeats as she checks her city over; the cinema that represents her dreams is still there and open, now showing a triple-triple x rated version of "The Seduction of Saffron"; the museum that houses her memory stands in place, the white walls gleaming in the emerald light; the dark brooding jail where all the repressed urges everyone fights against clamour for release remains a sturdy, solid block of black granite; the crystal schoolhouse where her lessons are stored, her knowledge and skills all imparted by her teachers and their avatars; and the towering skyscraper that represents her will and conscious mind reaches the top of the dome, the lights blazing as it stands beside the power plant. *Better get ready.* She walks towards the schoolhouse, her body glowing. Crystal armour appears over her body with each step until she's covered in glittering shards of power. A curved sword of green flame grows out of her left hand, an emerald shield over the right. She looks out at the dome, hearing the distant rumble of thunder as the darkness batters at her protection. *"Alright, you were warned!"*

"Yes, I was. You'll forgive me if I don't listen. It's a bad habit of mine."

She whirls to find him walking calmly towards her from the shadows of the jail, clad in a dark suit, his black hair swept back from a pointed but handsome face.

"Who are you?"

"Call me Master."

"You have got to be joking."

He shrugs nonchalantly, *"Maggie does."*

"What?? She, how, what...?"

"You'll find out."

She steps towards him, raising the sword, *"What have you done to Maggie?"*

"Nothing too bad. I just made her fall in love with you so I could get inside your head."

Psyche stops, shaking her head, *"No, that's not, that can't be..."*

"Oh, come on, the sudden interest? The strength of emotion when there was none a few days ago? Those...highly inventive fantasies? The mind play obsession? You didn't think it was really you, did you?"

Psyche shakes her head. *"You're lying! That's not true, she..."* she takes another step towards him.

"Possibly, possibly not. But it makes a fantastic distraction, don't you think?"

"Distraction?" A sickening crack echoes through the streets. She looks up at the dome, a massive

spider-web of cracks spreading out through it, *"No!"* she turns, but he's vanished, *"Damnit, no! I will not let this happen! I will not allow it!"* the power plant grows brighter, the dome sealing itself. *"I'm impressed. You're actually making this interesting."* he leans against the doorway of the brooding prison of repressed thoughts. *"Let's step things up a bit, shall we?"* The door swings open with a rusty, creaking whine.

"No!" and all the things she refuses to deal with come spilling out. Her anger, her contempt, her arrogance, her envy. Dozens and dozens of splintered reflections, all cast in shadow, surge forward. Psyche raises her sword.

"Ok, then. Let's do that." she charges into the throng, laying about her with the crackling green blade.

She fights against the horde, slicing at shadows that wear her face, throwing them off her shield, but she's only one, and the horde has the numberless depths of her subconscious to draw nightmares from, pouring out of the thick doorway. A hand grabs her ankle. A shoulder slams into her. She stumbles, and the horde sweeps over her. They bear her to the ground, weight of numbers holding her down. Part of her armour cracks as the shadowy fists pound on her, nails digging and probing to rip the gems free, ghoulish fags dripping shadows gnash as her fears and hates await to consume her. *"Not like this. Not like this!"* the sword in her hand erupts, light and flames roaring through the shadowy mass, tearing the shadowy thoughts apart. She pushes herself up, trickles of dark blood running over her body, her armour cracked, dented and missing pieces, its glow dimmed. The door to the prison swings shut. *"Now,"* she gasps, *"it's your turn, 'Master'."*

"Very well." a thin rapier blade of darkness appears in his hand. *"Take your best shot."*

Psyche snarls, charging across the square. Master blocks the blade, but the point sinks into his shoulder. He jumps back with a curse.

"Awww, poor Master. Not used to your toys fighting back?"

He smiles thinly, *"Not really. But let's be real. You're beaten. You're weakened, drained, you're still fighting my mindtrap. You really don't have a chance."*

"I'm not the one who just got tagged."

"True. Then again, I'm not the one who's shield is shrinking."

"What?" she turns to look at the shield, and an ebon dagger stabs into her thigh.

"Made you look."

Psyche curses, her leg buckling under her. Her sword clatters to the ground. Master approaches the blade pointing towards her.

"Poor, poor little Psyche." the blade touches her chest, *"Goodburk..."* he looks down, the green blade sticking out of his chest.

"Surprise." Psyche snarls, rising up, *"This is my mind. I say what goes on here."*

"Do you?" Master asks, his body turning into a midnight black shadow and sinking into the floor, revealing her sword stabbed deep into the crystal walls of her power plant.

"NOOOOO!" the glowing crystal cracks and shatters, a pulse of green light washing through the city before the shield buckles, the plant turning dark and ruined. *"No, no, no..."* she sobs as the darkness pours through the dome, swallowing up her city, her mind. *"No!"* she pushes herself to her feet, limping to the centre of the square. Her shattered armour glows, melting into her and a flickering light fills the square, the core of who she is guarded and warded.

The darkness surrounds her, lapping and swirling around the edges of her ward. She feels the darkness gathering, pushing against her shield, swirling around its flickering edges. She feels the tendrils of inky darkness slithering in, coiling around the dull, brittle crystal that used to be her inner core of power. Reluctantly, she lets it go, lacking the strength to fight for something that's functionally useless. The light dims, and the power plant vanishes into the shadows.

Psyche's breathing goes heavier. Her sword dips. The shadow swirls in as the light dims, swallowing up the dark prison. Psyche smiles as her dark thoughts vanish into the blackness and the light grows a little brighter, pushing back the shadows, revealing the scoured clean sections of the plaza.

The darkness snakes around the foundations of the cinema, *"No! No! Please, noooo!"* her sword

flares, bolts of green flame leaping out to sear the shadows back “No.” She repeats softly, “*You don't get to take everything good from me. You don't.*” Behind her, the skyscraper that houses her will, her control, that runs her body, disappears into the shadows.

The schoolhouse's crystal walls follow it swiftly into darkness, the glow around her fading. And when the tendrils of darkness come for the theatre, her sword fizzles. With a howl of horror and loss, Psyche watches her dreams vanish into the darkness. She runs, her glow flickering like a candle as she races the darkness up the steps of her museum, her memories.

The darkness flows through the walls, memory pictures vanishing. She doesn't miss some; the thoughts of her first love when he revealed he was just after sex and was already planning his next conquest; the squishy feeling his mind made as she smashed it into a gooey pulp again and again; all the times a lover's turned away because of her abilities; the private jealousies she should never have known about; the secret hatreds that never see the light of day but are open to her like a book. The darkness takes them all. But it takes the good times too; her friends, who stood by her even when she threw their ugly, selfish thoughts back in their faces; the birth of her baby brother and the pure love he had within him for the world and his family; the darkness takes them all.

Master finds her in the darkness, curled into a foetal position, her body racked by sobs. She clutches a sheath of pictures to her chest, a battered worn and faded teddy bear gripped tightly in her hand. Master reaches down, taking the pictures from her trembling hands, tears streaming down her face as she tries, pitifully, to stop him. He looks through the pictures, all of Maggie, in various stages of undress, filled with her scent, the canvas warm to the touch. He takes up the teddy bear, feeling all the memories it carries, of parents, of love, of her childhood. Psyche howls as these last, precious memories are taken from her, leaving her alone in the empty darkness, protected only by a faint, flickering aura that she knows is dying. And when it dies, the darkness will consume her leaving her nothing but an empty shell. She's seen it before and she knows what will happen, even without her memories.

She shivers holding herself tight, her vision blurring with tears of loss and fear, the cold of the shadows seeping through her pitiful, flickering, fading protection. It's over. She's about to die. There's nothing more to do. Nothing more to try. No energy. No hope. Nothing. She is nothing. She... A tiny light flashes. Impossible. There's nothing left of her. It flashes again. The flickering aura around her grows stronger, the cold fading as the light grows stronger. She uncurls her body, pushing herself towards the light.

As she approaches, she can see something in the heart of the glow, a scroll. Her fingers close around it, the glow warming her, keeping her safe, keeping the darkness back. She breaks the seal with trembling fingers. She unrolls the scroll, and starts to read. “*Rule 1: I will not harm Master.. Rule 2: I will not allow Master to be harmed. Rule 3: ...*”

Sonja blinks, feeling the sheets shift as she wakes up. She can feel the soft, warm body alongside her, resting her head on Maggie's chest, their bodies entwined, the bedsheets coiled around them. She smiles, snuggling up against her lover.

Master floats in the darkness, the white dots of other minds hanging in the sky behind him. He looks down over the mindscape city, tracing the roads and rivers with his fingers, following the shapes of the buildings when seen from this height. “*Rule 1:...*” he whispers and smiles, “*Ten hours well spent, I think.*”



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