

SAFFRON 8

Master leans back in the bed, silk sheets rustling. He gives a contented sigh. "It's good to be the king." he murmurs, reaching down to stroke Saffron's hair under the covers as her mouth bobs up and down his shaft. It's been a good couple of months. The Crescent City, in all but name, is his. The mayor answered to him, as did the chief of police, their deputies and the principal opposition politicians. You can never be too careful, after all. And once you have the newspaper, the TV news and the politicians, the rest follow like sheep, sniping at each other and never considering the man behind the throne. Granted, there were still some problems with the underworld. A few of the larger, multi-national outfits hadn't been brought to heel completely, but they were crumbling. He smiles at the irony of a so-called villain making the city safer than any of his pets had ever managed without him. He grunts as his body shudders, his cum erupting into her mouth. As always, Saffron swallows happily, licking his cock clean, taking her time to get every last drop of his seed. She emerges from under the covers, leaning her head on his chest, purring happily, snuggling against him. "You're looking thoughtful, Master." she looks up at him, her purple eyes drowsy with satisfaction, "What are you thinking? Aren't I enough to distract you?"

He reaches down, running his hand through her long hair, "Of course you are. You know you're my favourite. I was just thinking of what to do once the mobs accede to the inevitable."

"Oh, planning on taking over the world?" she asks with a twinkle in her eye.

"Of course not." he stretches, feeling her warm soft body pressed against his, "I'll take over America first and only then the world. We must do these things gradually."

"Of course, Master." she smiles, and he feels the amusement giggling in her mind.

"I was being serious. I wouldn't think it would take more than a couple of decades. I wonder why I never thought of it earlier."

"Master, you can't mean it. What about the Justice Legion? The Stellar Seven? The Outcasts? The Avenger? Paragon? You..."

"Shhh, shhh. It's quite alright, Saffron. They won't prove any more able to stop me than you did."

"But, Master..."

He holds up his finger, "No, I will hear no more. I know what I am capable of; you do not."

"But..."

"No more, Saffron."

She bows her head, "Yes, Master. As you say."

Later, Maggie lies back in the bed, "*Ok. What's wrong?*"

"Nothing."

Sonja props herself up on her elbow, "*You're a lousy liar. Even if I couldn't see inside your head I wouldn't believe that one.*"

"So take a look and see what's wrong."

"*Don't mind if I do.*" she kisses Maggie's cheek, and slips into her mind.

"*What are you doing?*" Maggie asks, appearing on Main Street.

"*You invited me, remember?*"

"*Ok, ok.*"

"*So, what's up?*"

"*It's, it's Master.*"

"*Master? What's wrong with Master?*"

"*He's going to get himself killed.*"

"*Really? You think Master can't handle the General? I've beaten him down on my lonesome before.*"

"*Not him. After him. Master's planning on taking over the whole country.*"

"*So? Who's better qualified?*"

"*So not the point. What about the Avenger? Or Paragon? Or that weird Arcane? Or Lilith and the Outcasts? Or Hypnos?*"

"You think they can beat Master? Really?"

"Not on their own, of course not. But you know they'll team up as soon as they find out about Master. And all together..."

"But he's Master."

"And if they beat him, even for a moment, they might find out about us. They might try to..." she pauses, *"...cure us."* she shudders.

"And Master doesn't think so?"

She shakes her head, *"He's sure he'll be victorious."*

"And why don't you think so?"

"How many people have they fought who've been sure they were unbeatable? Master might be right, but, what if he isn't? But he won't listen. He's so sure."

"Maybe he's right."

"Maybe he isn't. We have to protect him. Even from himself."

"Even assuming you're right, how can we do that?"

"We need to change his mind."

"You said he wouldn't listen, so..."

"No. We," she stops, hardly able to believe what she's about to say, *"we need to change his mind."*

"You're mad! We can't do that. If we even tried, he'd know about it. We can't."

"We have to. Master's putting himself in danger. We have to protect him. From everything. Even himself."

"But if he finds out..."

"If he finds out, he'll cut us out or turn us into vegetables or have us killed. What does that matter? Protecting Master is more important than whatever happens to us."

"And you think we, you think I, can interfere with Master's mind?"

"Yes. I know how strong you are. But we'd have to do it when Master wasn't paying attention. Even you're not that good, sweetie."

"And when will that be?"

"When he takes out the General. All we'll do is sneak ourselves in and alter his ambitions. Make him content with control of the city. Make him content with us. He's been content before, or he'd already have taken over the world. We're just returning him to that."

"We?"

"We. If he does catch us, I'm not letting you take the blame without me. If we're lucky, he'll let us remember each other, no matter what he does."

"And if we're not? I don't want to give you up. You're one of the few good things I've had in my life. The only one who'd love me completely."

"I know, sweetie. But if it protects Master, it's worth the risk."

Two days later, the General looks around his office, puts Sun Tzu's Art of War aside and relaxes. And the shadows swirl in his mind, fighting battles across the muddy Flanders' fields, the jungles of Vietnam and the sands of Iraq.

"Now."

Psyche closes her eyes, her breathing slowing, her hand clenching tightly around Saffron's, *"You'd better be right about this, lover."*

They stand, their hands still entwined, on the marble steps of a Roman palace. Lions of gold sit regally on their gleaming pedestals, towering over them. The whole palace is grandiose in scale, the steps each sized for a titan, stretching over head. *"Wow. How are we going to get in?"*

Saffron rises up, taking Psyche in her arms, *"I can fly, remember..."*

"Oh, yeah. And do you have to carry me like this?" she asks, her legs dangling over one of Saffron's arms, *"It's hardly dignified."*

"Yeah, but it's cute." she rises up, sweeping over the staircase, diving through the gigantic portico. Behind them, the lions blink slowly, their heads turning towards the door. Slowly, they lift themselves up, golden paws padding silently across the marble, their golden tails slowly twitching

back and forth. And then, they let out a mighty roar that shakes the palace. Inside the marble halls, Saffron and Psyche look at each other, their eyes wide and mouth one word together, *“Shit!”*

Across Crescent City, *“Honestly, how did you ever pose more than a nuisance to my pets? I mean, you've got a good grasp of military tactics and some training, but nothing else.”* Master sighs, *“I'm going to have to have words with them about their standards, I...”* he stops, listening to the echoes of the roar, *“I'll be back later to finish up. Don't go anywhere.”*

The General doesn't respond, his blank gaze unfocused as his drill instructor beats the rules of war into him, now interlaced with another set of Rules.

“Come on. We have to get this done.”

“I'm going as fast as I can.”

“Go faster, anyway.”

Saffron mutters something about backseat drivers. They blur through the marble halls, finally reaching the throne room. Across from the raised throne on its marble pedestal is a map of the world, a spot of shadow located just in from the east coast. *“Well, there's our target.”*

“Great. What do we do now?”

“Come out, come out wherever you are, little mice!”

“Offhand? I'd say, something really, really, really quick!”

Psyche studies the map as the throne room begins to darken.

“Hurrying would be good, Sonja. Really.”

“I'm working on it.”

The room continues to darken, shadows gliding down the white marble walls. *“Work faster!”*

Psyche touches the map, framing the tiny dot of shadow. *“I'm doing the best I can.”* she pulls her hands apart, the dot spreading across the map, zooming in on Crescent City. She stops, her arms stretched across the whole of the map, now filled with Crescent City and its shadows, the walls turning black, shadows creeping across the floor. *“There. Done.”*

“Good. Let's go.” Saffron grabs her hand, *“Come on, make with the ruby slippers thing. We need to get out of here.”*

“He's closed his mind off. We can't get out.”

“Well, doesn't that just suck. Let's go.” she rises up into the air, speeding through the doorway.

“I can feel you running, little mice. You won't get far. And when I catch you, I'll cut your minds out with a dull spoon!”

“Who knew Master liked Kevin Costner?” Saffron mutters as she tries to fly through the corridors, shadows chasing her along the walls. She loops around a corner, causing a yelp from Psyche as she almost dislocates her shoulder.

“Door!”

“What?”

“Door. Up ahead. Hide!”

“Hide where?”

“Through the door. Hurry!”

The door swings open ahead of them, the tide of shadows rounding the corner. Saffron tugs at the inch thick oak, slamming it shut, the heavy iron handle rattling. Only then does she turn to look at the room itself. It stretches as far as the eye can see and probably further, filled with stacks of shelves containing books bound in leather and gold. An aged, bald figure stoops over a small table, writing swiftly with a quill pen on the parchment, occasionally dipping it into an ink well of purest black. He doesn't look up, his thick grey eyelashes pulled together as he concentrates on the page, a coarse brown habit belted with a simple cord around his waist.

“Where are we?”

“Master's memory.”

“It's, it's huge.”

"It's, ah, centuries of work, millennia technically. I'm, ah, quite proud of it."

They turn to look at the old man, who still hasn't looked up from his writing.

"What did you say?"

"I, ah, said, centuries of work. All mine." a shadow slips under the doorway.

"Who are you?"

"The archivist. But you know, Sonja, that I'm just a mental construct." and the quill still scratches across the page. *"Would you like to see what fate befell the last fool who came unbidden to this place? I think I can find it in time."*

"You know my name?"

"I am, ah, the archivist. All that is known is here."

"What are you writing?"

"The, ah, archives. The record of thoughts and deeds."

Saffron looks over his shoulders, *"Felt an unexpected presence in my mind while converting that pathetic General. Whoever they are possess no small skill, but I have them trapped and they will..."*

The Archivist dips his quill into the ink and continues to write.

"A, ah, pity you didn't want to know your fate, but I quite understand. It is rather, ah, gruesome to feel your mind being consumed."

"Maggie, I..."

"Shhhh. Not yet, love. Not just yet." the shadows slowly seep across the flagstones, spreading out like oil on the water. *"I've got an idea."* she turns to the wizened old archivist. *"Sorry."* and pulls him from his seat, tearing the quill from his grasp.

"What???" he shrieks, flailing wildly, *!"~What are you doing? You're interrupting my work! The record must be maintained! It must be!"*

"And it will be." She replies, carefully putting the pen to parchment.

The shadows stop, slowly withdrawing.

Saffron puts the old man back in his hard wooden chair, giving him the quill. *"All yours. Let's go."*

"What did you do?"

"Made a slight change."

"To what Master remembers? You didn't."

"It's only a little one. It'll keep him safer."

"What did you write?"

"...but I found no trace of them. I must have imagined it."

Sonja stares at her. *"Really?"*

"Really. Now click those ruby slippers and let's get out of here, lover."

They fade away from the room, leaving the archivist to sigh heavily, and continue scribing as Master turns his attention back to the General.

Back in the real world, "Now, we've got to be quick."

"Quick, but, what?"

"You need to wipe our minds. Completely. There can't even be a trace left of this or Master might find it."

"But..."

"If we remember, we're walking security risks. You can do this. But we need to do it now."

Psyche pulls her back to the bed, closing her eyes. "I love you." she whispers, and when she opens her eyes, she smiles, feeling her lover's body warm against hers as they awaken. "You'll have to be more careful next time, love."

"What?" Maggie murmurs sleepily. "What I do?"

"I don't know but my shoulder's really sore. Must have wrenched it on something. You mustn't be so rough. You know how delicate I am."

Saffron snorts, reaching over, pulling Sonja back under the covers.

After an hour, they finally manage to crawl out of bed, both sore all over rather than just in the

shoulder, *"I trust you are finally finished?"*

"Master?"

"Of course. Join me in the master bedroom."

"Yes, Master, we'll just get..."

"Immediately."

"Yes, Master."

"What could he want with us?"

"We'll find out in a few, I suppose." she gives Sonja a playful slap across the butt. "Race you."

"Bring it." both rise into the air.

"Threetwoonego." they race off through the halls of Master's penthouse.

Seconds later, they emerge through the polished mahogany doors, to find the rest of the team standing around, the Mayor, the chief of police and their deputies, assorted politicians and editors, the General, 'Lucky' Luciano, and dozens of others. And they realise, almost immediately, that they are the only ones naked, every eye turning onto them. Salem giggles, whispering something to Silver. Master, sitting back in his bed, smiles broadly. "My, what have you two been up to?" he asks, relishing the fiery blush that creeps over their faces. "Come in, join us. We have much to discuss."

"Master?"

He pours out a flute of champagne, "To victory. The City is mine. Thanks to you all, of course, but mine. And to the victor, go the spoils. I'll have fun playing with my city. Don't you think?"

And the room has only one answer, "Yes, Master."



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