

PARAGON SHIFT

A Short Story
by Josh Closs

I run my fingers through my damp hair as I drift into the room, half-expecting to find a few lingering pieces of debris from today's crime-fighting.

I was also expecting that Deirdre would be here waiting for me, but after looking up and down the length of the cavernous living room to find her, I find that I'm wrong on both counts.

Then I remember she mentioned needing to "make a few tweaks in the lab" as I headed for the shower. I look over at the closed lab door and wonder what's going on behind it.

We're supposed to have a quiet evening at home, you know. Together.

After a week of stopping everything from petty robberies to villains' nefarious schemes, all the while being model citizens for our city, we were going to cuddle together on the loveseat, watch some low-stakes reality shows on our ridiculously-oversized TV, and eat some popcorn. A night just for us, to take the edge off our stress; no powers or supergadgets necessary.

Instead, I take a seat by myself on the loveseat and take my phone out, idly scrolling through the news reports about our work, wondering when she's going to come out from behind that lab door.

Deirdre being in the lab wasn't unusual. Her shutting the door on me certainly was.

The sacks of cash piled on our coffee table are also outside the norm, I might add. Why hasn't she returned it?

Something's been up with her lately in general, though. For example, today's fight with Deathadder; to set the scene, after the villain robbed the downtown bank, carrying huge sacks full of cash money. We were in hot pursuit, along with a few newsvans.

Normally, the two of us work together in perfect harmony — me with my super-strength and flight and such, and her with her super-smarts and various gadgets. I shredded Deathadder's rocket boots with a swipe of my claws, leaving Deirdre an opening to subdue her and take her to the authorities, spouting our stock banter about how crime doesn't pay, yadda yadda yadda. The photographers get some

front-page pics as we start to take her away, and typically Deathadder would find a way to weasel out of our clutches, fleeing with about half of her score, leaving the rest for us to return to grateful bank owner, vowing to capture the villain some other day.

Y'know, the usual.

We have a mutually beneficial relationship with Deathadder; we keep her funded, which means that we keep the devil we know in place instead of whoever might try to replace her. Plus, if a mega-baddie shows up, we can count on her to team up with us and save the world from certain destruction. We maintain appearances and she gets some of the cash. Win-win, right?

...This time, though?

This time, as Deirdre took aim at Deathadder with her Ray of Justice — a weapon she designed to stun evildoers — I saw a grin creep over her face as she adjusted one of the dials. Not a cheery, “Don’t worry, citizen!” grin, either. And to reiterate, Deathadder and Deirdre have no beef. Deirdre even mentioned inviting her non-masked self over for Fourth of July this summer.

You wouldn’t have guessed that from the malicious look in Deirdre’s eyes in that moment, though.

A second later, the ray lets out a hideous crackling blast, and Deathadder dodges out of the way, dropping the cash and running. Plus, there’s a huge hole in the treeline where Deirdre’s “stun ray” passed through it, leaving smoldering stubs of branches. Later on, she blamed it on a technical glitch and that she’d work on fixing it, but...

“Honey! It’s done!” Deirdre’s voice rings out as the lab door bursts open; I look up from my phone and see her holding her modified Ray of Justice with a new, single switch on the side instead of rows of dials.

And she looks delighted.

“Awesome,” I say. “You fixed it?”

“I added a Death Ray Toggle Switch!” she says, grinning and pointing to the switch, which I now see has the labels “Stun” and “DEATH” on the two settings.

I open my mouth a few times to say something, but I’m speechless.

“See, this way, I can choose to make it a stun ray or a death ray,” she says, walking over to me. “No more confusion!”

“Ah,” I say, understanding perfectly.

“And... And this way, y’know, just in case we need a death ray, we have one!”

I rise from the couch and glide over to meet her. “With me around, you think you’re gonna need a death ray?” I say, looking over her work. “Though I gotta say, that’s some fine craftsmanship.”

“I... Thanks,” she says. “I just... How do I say it?”

There’s something on the tip of her tongue, but she’s afraid to say it.

She’s afraid of what it might mean for us. And with good reason, I suppose.

I take off my left glove and stroke her cheek patiently. “Dr. Deirdre O’Cahill, I think I know exactly what’s happening.”

Her eyes go huge. “But... But I don’t know what’s happening, so...”

“Deirdre,” I say, holding my arms open. “May I?”

“Please,” she says, putting the Ray of Justice down and embracing me. I lift us up in the air and we fly around our spacious living room for a few leisurely laps, hoping to help her calm down. It usually works. “You know you can tell me anything, right? Have you noticed any changes to your general mindset?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” she says, her face buried in my shoulder.

“Well, what about you laughing hysterically when Blue Bolt got smacked in the face by that goose when we were flying to the crime scene yesterday?”

“That was hilarious, though! That was objectively hilarious!” Deirdre says.

I purse my lips as I ponder this. “OK, yeah, fair. What about you waking up and saying, ‘Gosh, I wish it were rainy and miserable today’ this morning?”

“Sometimes I like a change of pace! Is that a crime?”

“And then you kept the cash Deathadder dropped... Doc, I think I have my diagnosis,” I say as I land us on our loveseat, gently brushing her hair out of her eyes with my tail.

“...You do?”

“Oh yes,” I say. “And you’re not going to like it.”

Those gorgeous eyes go huge, pleading with me. “No,” she says. “No no no no no. No matter what you say, it’s not true. I am not going evil, OK?”

I smile. “So what’s the explanation, then?”

She looks so damn cute when she’s angry-thinking.

“Listen,” Deirdre says after a minute. “...I don’t know. But! I—”

“Deirdre,” I say. “You know I love you.” It’s not a question.

“Yeah,” she says as if I had just told her that Blue Bolt is a tool. “And I love you.”

“Glad to hear it. You think that’s gonna change if you decide to switch sides?”

I watch as she cycles through responses in her mind.

“...God, I tried to kill Deathadder. I could’ve killed a bystander!”

She sighs, now looking away. “I couldn’t help myself, you know. And I don’t know why. But I didn’t want to force you to come with me. Not with all the consequences that come with you doing that. So I’ve been trying to fight it, y’know? Or if I do end up switching sides, I want to do it alone. After what you gave up for me...”

“What I gave up?” I say, finally losing patience. “What I ‘gave up’ is getting captured because I was overconfident, and then you made sure I didn’t get destroyed as a result. I’d give up the solar system if it meant staying with you, Deirdre. ...And I almost have a time or two, but that’s another story. I was vilified and mistreated by society for my entire life until I met you.

“I was used by so-called do-gooders as they tried to steal my power, or at least harness me to ‘benefit humanity.’ Of course I want to stop being good all the time! Or maybe I just want to take a break from what we’re told being a hero entails. The reason I switched to being a hero was because of your kindness, not some underlying sense of justice.”

She smiles. “You’re not mad at me for wanting to go bad?”

“Impossible.”

“And you want to be evil, too?”

“I don’t care if we start a curling league together, Deirdre. I just want to be with you,” I say, holding her tight (but not too tight since, y’know, super-strength). “There are a few ways we can do this, though. Do you want to be straight-up evil?”

“I... No, I don’t think so,” she says. “I just want to be in control for once. I’m sick of always playing defense, y’know? I don’t want to blow up the world, but I want to be able to make my own decisions.”

“And try not to kill people.”

“...Crap, I still can’t believe I shot at Deathadder,” she says. “Why do you think I picked her, of all people?”

“Jealousy,” I say. “She’s a younger and non-heroic version of you. You see the life you could have and want to kill it.”

“...Damn, you’re right,” Deirdre says.

“I’ve picked up on a few of those psych talks you listen to,” I say.

“I’ll have to make it up to her. Assuming she doesn’t hate me.”

“No way she hates you, especially not if we team up with her. Those rocket boots of hers have been in rough shape lately, though. Maybe offer a tune-up?”

“That’s a great idea, honey,” Deirdre says. “So what about you? What do you think about how evil we should be?”

“You’ve led me right so far, doc, so I’ll follow your direction,” I say. “Not killing people is probably a decent rule of thumb, though, and hopefully a few non-lethal acts of rebellion and self-service every week will help slake your thirst

for blood. In any case, I'm here for you, because I know you're here for me."

She sighs and closes her eyes, leaning her head against my chest. "How do you know?"

She knows the answer, of course. I've told the story a thousand times, but she loves it every time. How can I refuse?

"It was just before you set me free all those years ago," I say. "I was tied to that table, and all the military's top brass were waiting for you to extract my powers. You had every opportunity to do it and leave me for dead, and you didn't. You chose me over all of them, even though it could have cost you your life.

"And I knew two things at that moment: That you're the most beautiful person I've ever seen, and that you love me more than any other person or cause. That's all the proof I'll ever need. I'm in if you're in to go bad. Deal?"

She smiles and sighs a contented sigh. "Deal," she says, sitting up and planting a kiss on my cheek. "...So what do we do now? That is, how should we announce our departure from crime-fighting and such?"

"Well, we could go do some crimes," I say. "But we've both had a pretty rough week, so maybe let's rest up before we paint a target on ourselves for the people who know our every weakness. Instead, we could just watch some Netflix. I think the new *Terrace House* is up."

"Wait, and you didn't tell me!?" she says. "Already starting your villainous ways, eh?"

I smile. "I guess I have a knack for it, huh?"

“Yeah,” she says, nuzzling the top of her head against my cheek as she leans into me. “But no matter what we do, we’re two people committed to each other through thick and thin. And I don’t think we can ask for much more in this world.”

I hold her close and smile. You know, she may be a villain, but I think she makes some pretty good points.

The End