

### In Termina Res

There was a faint grinding noise, I couldn't tell where from, and then the floor tilted out from under us! My heart kicked the inside of my chest, but I *didn't* go into combat mode, I almost fainted instead. "Nyaaaa..." My claws scraped on the concrete but didn't dig in, and then about 600lbs of scaly coils knocked me off the slope and crushed me against something even colder.

I got scents before I got any air into my lungs, ones I hadn't smelled in forever. 2000000 people, 3000000 cars, *food!* And garbage and pee and filthy asphalt squished against my face, but I'd go dumpster diving for food and be happy about it, as soon as I could get up.

We weren't alone. Mina Tauros's hooves were right in front of my face, and she smelled *mad*. Worried too, though, I didn't think she was going to attack. Metal, and ceramic armor with Red Knight's sweat soaked into the lining, and a snakey birdy scent I didn't know.

"Step away from the children, Mina." I hadn't smelled her because she didn't smell like much of anything any more, but Ironstar — Ms. Fisher — was here! "Is that *Uktena*?" I'd never heard her sound that surprised before.

Uktena wrapped her neck around mine and threw a loop of her body around my torso, dragging me upright. (The ground stuck to my face, ewwwww!)

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*So, Cobalt, how did a nice catgirl from San Diego end up starving and butt-naked in a disgusting alley in Rhodes, being held hostage by a psychic snake?* the interviewer would ask, if I live long enough to get interviewed someday. *Oh, no one wants to hear about that, why don't you ask about my amazing girlfriends?* I would say. *But it's so different from the rest of your fabulously successful career! What could you have faced that brought you so low?* Then I would have to admit that it all started when my (best?) friend Pamela asked if I wanted to see something awesome.

We were sitting in her favorite coffeeshop (not the best in Rhodes, because her big sister worked at that one) taking a break from her showing me around town. The Mighty Bean-O-Tron is a nice coffeeshop, bright and clean, with pillars of potted plants and a big glass case like in a museum showing the original bean-o-tron (kind of like a giant flute with a bunch of car transmissions getting way too friendly). Pamela was admiring the new bras she'd just bought, because she has no shame, and all the boys in the place were noticing, so I was mortified and my tail was lashing, and I was glad to get out of there!

“What kind of awesome thing?”

“It'll be more fun if it's a surprise! So what's your superhero name going to be?”

Pamela believes that she's going to grow up to be a superhero, even though she doesn't have any powers, so she's a huge supers geek. This is only one of the ways she's strange, like going by Pamela (accent on the second syllable so it rhymes with *Nutella*) instead of her real

name Priyadharshani. She's so smart that she goes to a special individual study class instead of normal 8<sup>th</sup>-grade Science and Computers, so maybe she can be a mad science hero like Axiom. Anyway, since deciding on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of school that we're friends, she's dragged me into this.

It's not that I don't have powers (just the usual strength, speed, and senses that come from being Changed, but it's a lot better than being human), but I have a lot of feelings about being a superhero. My mom was one, before all her powers got used up keeping her from dying, and she made sure I knew it was horrible and traumatic. Not just getting beat up a lot (or getting your stomach blown open by a maniac with a rocket launcher), but seeing what cultists and supervillains did to people. Having to face their families when you couldn't save those people. Having to face *yourself*. I knew there had to be good parts too, superheroes save people every day, but Mom made sure her old coworkers didn't talk about that when they came over, because she really doesn't want that for me.

But, somebody has to do it, and shouldn't it be someone who knows about the awful stuff, not someone who would get blindsided by it? On the other hand, my dad still consults for superheroes (he's a sorcery expert who isn't a sorcerer, so he's sane) and some of the things I've seen snooping in his work papers gave me nightmares, for real.

Like I said, lots of feelings! So I hadn't put as much thought into a nom and costume design as most teenagers. "Cobalt," I said, because I like cobalt glass, it's the same blue as my hair and tail and claws. But I couldn't let her wiggle out. "Does this surprise involve underwear in public?"

She laughed. "Nef, they're just bras.  $\frac{1}{2}$  the population wears them. Well, maybe  $\frac{1}{3}$ ."

"Those boys at the next table sure noticed you're part of the other  $\frac{1}{3}$ !" They weren't very

impressive bras, the Puberty Fairy only brought Pamela tall, sultry voice, and boy-crazy (which are the things she *didn't* bring me!), but boys will take anything they can get. Not that Pamela is ugly, she's prettier than me, slender and delicate like a model, with glossy hair and perfect makeup. Yes, my only friend at Peasley Academy so far is taller, prettier, *and* smarter than me. Good job, Nef!)

She preened. "I should hope so!" Nyaaaa, she has no shame! "But only if you want to."

"I don't!" She laughed some more. "It's not too late for me to get better friends, you know! Wait, where are we going?" We were crossing the park across the street from The Mighty Bean-O-Tron, which was a block wide and like a mile long, and I couldn't remember what it was called but I remembered it from maps and we were definitely going to the wrong side of the tracks, even if the train tracks had been torn up to make a park. The wind was coming up, and I thought I could smell something like burnt crystal. Was that just city smell, or was it the Columbus Pit?

"It's not that far, but we can take COTA if you want?"

I felt better knowing that it was someplace busses and trains went, and it couldn't be that far if Pamela was going to walk all the way on her toothpick legs. (They're very nice legs, but she doesn't look like a hiker.) "It's fine. You're supposed to be showing me the town, right?"

She did, too. Once we were out of the park, she distracted me from the towering buildings and narrow streets full of honking cars by pointing out the best places to get different things. There were a lot of places Pamela said were best for such a sketchy-looking part of town! The best egg rolls (according to Pamela) came from a place called House of Wuhan that was ½ a story under the sidewalk. It smelled like roast duck and sesame paste, and there was a line out the

door and around the corner, so I believed her. That was just a block from the park, but things got seedier as we kept going west, the buildings more run-down and more covered with the vine-trees left over from Dr. Dendros, the cars older and stinkier, the people less well-dressed and smelling of more worry and desperation. They did have good food, though, and Pamela pointed out the best places to get pelmini, pad thai, baklava, and zilzil tibs. How did she know so much about food and stay that thin?! She knew other places too, used book stores, a bicycle shop, an electronic parts or maybe junk shop, a poster and print shop.

Even though she knew so many places, I thought there were more that she wasn't telling me, from the way she looked down streets and smelled shifty and didn't say anything. What kind of places wouldn't she tell me about? If was embarrassing, like *my gynecologist is down that way*, she'd definitely tell me about it! I really like Pamela (not like that! anyway, she is the straightest straight girl who ever only liked boys), and was already thinking of her as maybe a best friend, so I both wanted to know everything and didn't want to upset her by prying. I was also getting nervous again, now that she was taking me somewhere with secret things and not just hole-in-the-wall restaurants, so the next time she looked down an alley and didn't tell me what was there, I asked, "What's down that way?"

"A no-questions-asked clinic. Don't tell anyone, it's also no-current-licenses and no-paperwork in general."

I stopped walking. "For *criminals*?!"

"For anyone who doesn't want official attention. Superheroes, for example."

That was why she wanted to know this stuff, but, "How do you find these things? You can't just Google for underground doctors, can you?"

She smirked. “Maybe *you* can’t.” I scowled and she giggled. “No, my sister told me, in case I ever need it.”

I’d read about the supers in Rhodes before we moved here, but there were so many I couldn’t remember them all. Were any of them Sri Lankan? Most of them I had no idea! “Your sister is a criminal?” I guessed.

“Just a pain in the butt, but she has ambitions.” That was probably perfectly true, but she didn’t smell honest. Did I really want to be going into the bad part — *further* into the bad part — of town with someone who admitted her big sister was a criminal?!

I stared at Pamela for a while, and she just stood there, not trying to persuade me except maybe by looking cute. Sure, that was a point in her favor, but really? Was I going to have explain this to my parents? *My best friend can’t come to dinner, she has to go visit her sister in jail.* But my mom knew Gradient and Cygnafyre, she’d even had them over to our place in San Diego and introduced me to them, and even if they were retired, they were supervillains. Cygnafyre still had a price on her head from the Meta-Shogun!

“OK,” I said, and took her arm. “Lead on.”

She patted my hand. “I knew you were awesome.”

After that, it was only a few blocks to the surprise. She didn’t point out any more important tourist sites, which made me feel a little better since the neighborhood was getting really sketchy, like why had a 13-year-old girl ever even been down here? Had she come here by herself? No one was giving us any trouble, and Pamela was walking along like really sketchy people weren’t watching us. Some of them smelled like they noticed we’re girls, but none of them seemed like they were going to do anything about it, so I tried to look like I was ignoring

them while being ready for them. I guess I did OK, since Pamela didn't tease me about it, but it was pretty nervewracking!

"Here we are!" She did the game show hostess wave to a low (only 3 stories!) wide brick building that had more than the usual number of vine-trees crawling over it. There was a big splotch over the loading doors where a sign used to be, and the doors were held shut with rusty chains. It smelled deserted.

"Yay?"

"Good, you're not supposed to notice anything from the outside. I think we want to go around this way." She led me through a stinky alley (that I'd later be taken hostage in) to another alley that was under a train line, more of a tunnel than an alley, and screened off by woody vines so you couldn't see what you were getting into until it was too late.

I could smell that a lot of people had been through there in the last few hours, but all that was waiting for us right then was a woman in a green and lavender outfit that could have been modern biker gear, but was probably an armored costume because her face was painted in the same colors and angular patterns. She didn't smell particularly young or old, was vegetarian, and had a faint odor of sulfur. Under the facepaint, I thought she might be Middle Eastern or North African. "What are you kids doing back here? Get out of here, go home." She wasn't mad, mostly bored.

Pamela stepped forward. "Canterbury, right? I think you worked with my great-uncle Curwen one time."

Canterbury (I'd read up on the community in Rhodes before we moved here, but there were way too many to remember) raised one lavender eyebrow. "Oh, you're a Rajapaksa, aren't

you?” She looked down at me. “Your family vouches for short stuff here?”

“Hey!” I had all my 87lbs of hair up in a bun, so I was at least 5’ tall! I glared, which possibly wasn’t a good idea when faced with an unknown super, but she didn’t look at all sorry.

“Sorry, should I say lap-sized?” I could smell that she wasn’t interested in Pamela’s short skirt, or anything I might have under my giant sweatshirt (and she shouldn’t, she was like twice our age or maybe closer to 3 times!), but she thought my squeaky voice was adorable and my face got hot when she winked anyway. Nyaaaaa!

Pamela completely ignored that, although I was sure she’d tease me later. “Of course,” she said, like she made promises for her whole family every day. “She’ll be good.”

I had no idea what being good meant here, because I didn’t know where we were! I should have asked, but I didn’t want to look like a noob, and I did want to show I trusted Pamela. I was sure she wasn’t a cultist or a supervillain or anything! Mostly sure.

“Come on in, then,” said Canterbury, and swept her arm dramatically toward a plain metal door. Pamela beamed (how is it fair that someone has a smile like that and doesn’t like girls?!) and opened the door, and a wave of ozone hit me in the nose. It was so strong even Pamela wrinkled her nose at the flowy glass sculptures full of fizzing green light that we had to walk between to get to the next door. Mad science if I’d ever seen it!

“Transfinity’s work,” she said, and I knew that name, 1 of the Rhodes League’s 2 mad scientists. Was this some kind of League thing? Was Pamela more of a superhero than I thought?!

The building was full of people and all kinds of stuff, coffee, kebabs, more ozone, chemicals, animals, giant bug monsters, blood, machine oil. The floor was laid out in rows of booths, some fancy with banners, others just tables piled with stuff. People were talking in a



bunch of languages, but some of the ones I knew were about prices and trades. “A... flea market?”

1 of the people browsing the nearest booth turned as we came in, her black trench coat flaring dramatically to show the hilt of a sword, and looked at us from behind a long black mask with serrated edges. Holy crap, that was Cocodrila Negra! She was a vigilante, not technically a supervillain, but she once cut the arms off everyone in a Mafia safe house! I tried to look cute and harmless and not related to any superheroes, and I guess it worked, because she turned back to the handsome blond biker guy pouring her coffee.

I grabbed Pamela’s arm, hard enough (though I didn’t mean to) that she winced. “What is this?!” I tried to whisper. It came out as more of a hiss.

She beamed and didn’t bother to keep her voice down. “It’s a flea market. *The* flea market. The Goblin Market, some people call it, although really that’s only the London one.”

It was a swap meet for supervillains (and open-minded superheroes)! I let out a squeak, because Pamela’s surprise really was that awesome, but if my parents ever found out, my grandkids would still be grounded! Oh, crap, what if someone recognized me as Nereid’s daughter? She was retired by the time they adopted me, but 1 way to look at it was that superhuman grudge-holding was what made a supervillain! This wasn’t awesome at all, this was horrible!

“Nefertari? What’s wrong?” I thought I was good at keeping a straight face in front of humans, but Pamela knew something was up. Maybe it was the way I was crushing her arm.

“What if 1 of my mom’s enemies recognizes me?!” I whispered as quietly as I thought Pamela could hear, but what if someone had super-hearing?! Nyaaaaa! “We need to get out of

here!”

She patted my hand comfortingly. “This is a truce zone. No fighting, no following people to jump them later, or you get banned for good. Anyway, your mom’s been retired for 15 years. Hardly anyone active when she was is going to still be around, and the ones that are will be on the West Coast.”

Of course, it had to be a truce zone. Supervillains hold grudges against each other as much as against superheroes, if whoever ran this place couldn’t keep a lid on that, it wouldn’t last more than a day. But how did they keep the lid on? Canterbury kept people out, did she stop fights too? I’d never heard of her, was she really strong enough to keep Cocodrila from cutting people’s arms off if she wanted to?

“Earth to Nefertari!” I was still holding onto her arm, but not crushing it, so she was able to pull me toward the booths. “It’s fine, I promise. I’ve been here before and there weren’t any fights.”

Wait, this was a supervillain swap meet and she wanted to be a hero! How did she know about this place? Canterbury knew her name! “Did your uncle bring you?”

“No, that’s... never mind. My sister brought me.”

I’d have to find out more about her uncle later. “The 1 with ambitions?”

“They all have ambitions, but I mean the 1 that’s still a pain in my butt.”

“But she brought you here.” I pulled toward the 1<sup>st</sup> stall on the left, across from Cocodrila and her coffee, where an old white guy who must have been twice my height, 3 times if you counted his black velvet top hat, was selling contraptions of brass and crystal and glass tubes. The banner over his table read *The Worshipful Brigade of Steam & Aether* in fancy old-fashioned

letters that matched the brass XIX pin on his fancy old-fashioned coat. (They kind of matched his huge swoopy white mustache, too.) He scowled at us, but he smelled like he was just grouchy all the time, not like he had anything against us.

“Oh, nice! Are these based on Brazen Hussy’s designs?” Pamela leaned close to peer at the blue ball lightning flickering in a tube, but clasped her hands behind her back to show she wasn’t touching anything. “Wait, is this one from Antarctica?!” I thought that nothing excited her more than cute boys, but no, she thought it was awesome that the brass drill she was looking at had really been used by the Gravekeepers to extract someone’s brain (ewwwwww!) 50 years ago. But that meant it was a real alien artifact, not locked away in a museum or a black lab or a trophy room, but right here on this folding table where we could buy it! Maybe that was kind of exciting after all, or maybe it was terrifying.

“I see I’m in the presence of an expert,” Steampunk XIX (wasn’t being a number the opposite of being punk?) said, sensing a potential customer. “Yes, this one and this one are from the Antarctic Exaltation. They’re empty, of course, they found no worthy mark.” He ran his finger over the glass tube that held coiled wires at weird angles but no light. Whatever mind it had stolen, the Gravekeepers had thrown away instead of taking with them, and no one knew if that was better or worse. (My dad said better, my mom said worse, my 7<sup>th</sup>-grade history teacher wouldn’t say.) “But to a dedicated scholar, they are still the keys to vast knowledge.” He was laying it on thick enough to be creepy, but even though Pamela knew it, she liked being treated like a real mad scientist.

Wait, if those empty ones didn’t have minds in them, did that mean the ones with lightning did? Was this guy selling people’s *minds*?! That was slavery! Worse, they couldn’t even

run away!

Pamela saw me staring in horror at the live tubes, and pulled me away. “1 moment,” she said to XIX, over her shoulder. “Nef, what’s the matter?”

I don’t think I did a good job of explaining, I was so upset, but she got it. “No, no. Not for those prices!” She looked back at the booth. “I’m not saying there aren’t terrible people here, but they wouldn’t do anything like that *here*. Part of respecting the truce is not doing things that would make other people feel they had to violate it. You know about the code!”

She meant the unwritten rules that made the difference between being a criminal to be arrested and a monster to be destroyed, what my mom called *community standards*. I didn’t think supervillains would care, or they wouldn’t be villains, but there was a big difference between even someone like La Cocodrila Negra, who only cut the arms off mobsters, and someone like Johnny Monsterseed who let henshin plagues loose in major cities.

I was already kind of freaked out, so when the lights went out, I went right into combat mode, and I didn’t worry about anything. I still *wanted* things, but only right here and right now, and it was obvious how to get them. The world was a puzzle that I’d just figured out how to solve.

Grab Pamela. Behind the standing banner, out of sight of the door, duck down, freeze. Pamela went along (not normal), not scared yet, alert. What’s going on? People were starting to react, fear but more anger, some calm concentration (the biggest threats).

PA system crackled, Pamela twitched. “Sorry about that, folks. Everything’s fine, just a little problem with the electrical system. No need to worry. But our real announcement! Dr. Belphegor is about to demonstrate the Amazing Immogrifier at her booth in the southwest corner

of the building. Gather ‘round, everyone interested in breaking the laws of nature for fun and profit!”

Smelled people calming down while the PA lady talked, that calmed me down, and all the energy flowed out of my body. Now I felt stupid for freaking out over something like that. It wasn’t even that dark, ½ the ceiling was skylights! Had anyone been watching? I could smell Pamela thought I was cool, which was even more embarrassing. Even if I had been cool instead of spazzy, I’d wasted it on someone who didn’t even like girls! I guess she noticed the awkwardness, though, because all she said was, “Come on, I want to see the Immogrifier!” and dragged me the way most people were drifting.

I hadn’t made it past the first booth before freaking out about the brain-eater parts, so I hadn’t gotten a good look at the people here (except Cocodrila, who I didn’t want anything to do with, I like my arms!). Most of the people working the booths were in costume, if not fighting costume, but so were about ½ the shoppers. It made sense, if Jane Smith bought a plasma torch on Saturday and Miss Malefactor cut into a bank vault with a plasma torch on Monday, Jane Smith would have a big target on her back for all of MM’s enemies. The people in street clothes weren’t doing that kind of shopping, or weren’t masked. Or they weren’t even supervillains, just people who knew someone whose sister had contacts in that side of the community! (I should look up some supervillain fan sites and see if anyone reminded me of Pamela.)

It didn’t seem like a good idea to stare, but I recognized some of the people we passed. The pale white woman with the black metal mask over her mouth and the scent of crushed stone was Teratostome, although in a black hoodie and jeans she looked more like a slumming model than the spidery nightmare she was in costume. A tipsy group we had to slide around in front of a

booth selling shrinkwrapped skulls (human skulls, or mostly, some had horns or extra eyes or half-healed holes cut into them) included a spicy-smelling foxwoman with dark auburn hair and tail that I thought was Kumiho. And then, down a side aisle, someone I knew immediately even though she had her back turned, and really didn't want to see here.

I didn't quite go into combat mode, but I grabbed Pamela again and dragged her behind a booth with tall sides (selling potions that were probably just combat drugs and alcohol). She didn't fight me, but she did look surprised this time. "What's wrong?"

"Ms. Velazquez is right over there by the pretzel stand!" I guess even supervillains like pretzels, but that wasn't the important thing! "If she sees us, there's no way she won't rat me out to my parents!" There wasn't any chance she wouldn't recognize me either, her and Ms. Fisher had been over to my place for dinner, with my parents who they'd known since before I was adopted!

Pamela wrinkled her nose (cute!). "Really? What would X-Wave be doing here?"

It was a good question, X-Wave had always been firmly a superhero even if the family values types didn't like her for having a love life, why would she be at the same swap meet as Teratostome? Was I wrong? I peeked around the corner of the potion booth, and Pamela leaned bony but warm against my back (how could she not like girls?!) to do that cartoon thing where people's heads line up in order of height.

No, that was definitely Ms. Velazquez. She was the opposite of bony, she had curves in places other women don't even have places, and a super-cute vintage white and red dress with a short skirt to show off her tapering legs. *Maybe* there could be someone else in Rhodes with that figure and fashion sense and black-brown-gold-white ombre hair, who swished her hips like that,

but then she turned to the other of the 2 guys she was flirting with (old guys, but nicely dressed) and gave us a good profile of her nose. That was definitely her!

We both pulled our heads back out of sight and stared at each other. “What is she doing here?” I said after a minute.

“Picking up guys, it looks like,” Pamela said with a smirk.

I stuck my tongue out at her. “Why here? Shouldn’t they be taking out grudges on her? Wait, if she’s here, is—!” I whirled around to look behind me, but Ms. Fisher wasn’t coming up behind us, I guess they weren’t inseparable after all.

I was ready to make a face at Pamela again, but she wasn’t laughing at me, she’d looked back at the same time, and I could tell by her relief that she’d had the same thought. I had to laugh, and that made her break up, and we just sat there laughing until a smoky-smelling black woman in patchy steel armor over red skintights came and peered down at us. “Are you kids OK? What are y’all doing in here, anyway?”

“The Immogrifier!” Pamela blurted out, and jumped up. “Have they run it yet?”

“Last call for the Immogrifier,” said the PA system. “Don’t miss this wonder of Dr. Belphegor’s arcanotechnology!” The armored lady shrugged and waved toward the loudspeakers.

I had to jump up too and grab Pamela before she ran out where Ms. Velazquez could see her. “Um, can you look around that corner and let us know if there’s still a plus-size Latina in a red and white dress over by the pretzel stand?”

Armored Lady had a mask styled like a knight’s visor across her upper face, but I could still tell she was raising 1 eyebrow (which I could never do no matter how much I practiced) at

me and my high-pitched voice. “Y’all mean Terry?” She peeked around the corner in a way that wouldn’t have worked if that mask had actually been a metal grill. “She’s there, but she ain’t paying attention.”

“Good enough! Thanks, dame!” I could have stopped Pamela, but not without a fight.

“*Dame?* Are you a detective now?”

“That was Dame Crimson. She’s pretty cool, as long as you’re not too white.”

I could be all kinds of things, depending on whether you looked at my parents, or the body I’d inherited from my mysterious bio-parents, but none of them was white, even not counting the ears and tail, so that was fine with me. But with a name like that, was she Red Knight’s nemesis? That could be awkward, he was really nice, besides her being a supervillain.

The ozone smell was getting stronger, along with something that stabbed the inside of my nose with little poison thorns, and I could hear a whine like something charging up. That must be the Immogrifier! I only sort of cared, but I knew Pamela really wanted to see it, so I scooped her up in my arms and took off running. With all those people (not a real crowd, but still plenty of people) it wasn’t much faster than her running, but she shrieked happily and I could tell I’d impressed her again. (Of course she wasn’t embarrassed by people cheering and catcalling, she has no shame! But I didn’t mind so much when it was about her.)

The crowd around the Immogrifier wasn’t so thick I couldn’t slip in and drop Pamela right where she could see over someone’s shoulder, a teenaged black guy with the curls sticking out in all directions that always made me think of a palm tree. I had to peek around his leather jacket to see what was going on.

Dr. Belphegor was huge, 6’6” at least, not as curvy as X-Wave but more muscular, so



much she looked kind of weird in her little round glasses and pink lab coat. (I have nothing against pink lab coats! There are lots of mad scientists who can pull it off!) Big as she was, the racks of electronic equipment with old-fashioned dials and meters and thick rubber cables towered over her and the glass tank she was gesturing at. The tank was full of reddish—

Oh Bast, Pamela found a cute guy! “Hiiii, Jonah,” she murmured, in that way that gets hearts and music notes when it’s a word bubble in a manhwa, and she slid closer to the guy in the leather jacket, squeezing me out. He did smell nice, sandalwood shampoo and notes of caramel and sprintime from his skin, but nyaaaa! There was a big stinky white guy in fake military clothes behind Pamela, so I had to go the other way, around Jonah and the smaller black kid (not a teenager yet) who smelled like him but with extra bugs.

“Are you ready?” Dr. Belphegor had a lovely voice that went better with her lab coat than her height. She brandished the metal ends of 2 cables and the crowd (really only about 20 people) cheered. She banged the cables together, making a crackling flash of lightning and eye-watering ozone, and they cheered louder. It was an impressive show, but what was so great about this Immogrifier?

The glass tank was full of red mist, and wire racks holding long shapes. It must have been well-sealed, because I could hardly smell anything strange from it even when Dr. Belphegor hit a switch with her elbow and the mist started flowing around and around the tank. She yelled, “Energizing!” and jammed the cables into sockets at the ends of the tank, making dramatic showers of sparks, and the mist blurred out so we couldn’t see it flowing, just a featureless smudge of red. “Integrating!” She threw a big red switch that made a new section of meters and wiggly lines on screens light up, and started twirling dials to make them dance. She wasn’t

looking at the tank, but whatever she was doing made the red gas thicken and pull away from the 2 swords (like katanas, but straight and with fancy rapier hilts), and by the time all the meters were centered and the wiggly lines were lined up, it was just barely not touching them, so they seemed to float outlined in a sea of red. “Integration complete!” I still had no idea what she was doing, but she sure had showmanship.

Dr. Belphegor turned back to us and lowered her voice a little to sound serious.

“Although this final step is relatively safe — as safe as possible when dealing with forces of this magnitude — I must caution anyone with a current Eisberg level of less than 4 to step back behind the yellow line.” I didn’t know what that was, but Pamela and the boys weren’t moving, so I guessed it was something I’d know if I had. Anyway, Belphegor was just exaggerating for drama. Probably.

“Right then, here we go!” She pulled on a set of goggles that fit over her glasses (wouldn’t prescription goggles be cooler?) and turned back to the racks. A bunch of people shuffled back now that she wasn’t looking, including Jonah and his brother(?), and I didn’t resist getting moved, but Pamela took a step forward. She might be shameless, but she was fearless too!

“IMMOGRIFICATE!” yelled Dr. Belphegor, and slammed down the biggest, reddest switch. The tank flashed so bright it made my eyeballs squinch up, too bright to have a color, and went CRACK like it was exploding! Combat mode again.

In front of the boys (stumbling back, more bug stink). Grab Pamela. Tank hissing and turning less red! Behind the boys— No red mist? Pamela shoved at me, I let her go. “It’s fine!” she said. “You don’t have to go superspeed at every loud noise!”

Dr. Belphegor chuckled, “A little caution isn’t a bad thing. You were leaning awfully close, miss.” But everyone else was *laughing* at me, the crazy girl who freaked out just because someone was doing mad science! Nyaaaaa! I tried hiding behind Pamela, but they were all around me. “Nyaaaaa...”

“Geez, were you trying to use me as a human shield?” That was Jonah, who didn’t sound as grown-up as he smelled, but his voice only broke a little. (Not like I could make fun of people for their voice.)

Being mad was better than being mortified. “Well, you were just standing there! It’s not like I was going to use Pamela to shield *you!*”

“She has a point,” the other boy said. “If something’s exploding, whoever’s slower’s automatically a human shield.” He was probably a 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup>-grader, but really cute with big eyes and long lashes. His skin was as dark as Jonah’s, but his hair was long and glossy brown and had been up in a huge bun like mine except now it was ½ falling down. He smiled, which made him even cuter. “Hi, I’m Jacob. Don’t mind my brother, he’s a doofus.” Maybe he was trying to develop X-ray vision to see through my sweatshirt, but he was young enough that he didn’t smell gross about it.

“Hey!” Jonah didn’t look as old as he smelled either, he was probably the same age as me, but he wasn’t a cutie like Jacob any more. If Pamela was going to make googoo eyes at a boy, I couldn’t blame her for picking him! His scent even went with her notes of snow and machine oil, although I didn’t know if she realized it. (Humans smell more than they think they do, but not as much as they imagine when you tell them that.) “You’re just jealous you’re too short for anyone to— um.” Nice of him to notice that Jacob was taller than me (even though he’s

younger than me and a boy)! “Well, you couldn’t hide Pamela behind him,” he finished weakly while I scowled at him.

Pamela wasn’t paying attention, not even to tease Jonah about flirting with other girls, she was watching the swords. Dr. Belphegor had opened the tank (where had all the gas drained to? that was definitely a leaking sound!) and taken out the swords, using thick gloves. A whitish person in a sleeveless denim vest, buff bare arms tattooed with Asian-looking dragons, was watching nervously. (I couldn’t tell if it was a man or a woman, their scent was right in the middle, and without the edge of store-bought hormones, and their hair was shaved on the sides and long in a crest so I guess their gender was *punk*.) “This better not have damaged them.”

“Of course not,” said Belphegor, sounding offended but not smelling it. “The material properties are completely unaffected. The only difference is— well, give it a try.” She finished washing off the swords with rubbing alcohol and cyanide, or something poison-smelling, and handed them back hilt-first. “Here, use this.” She held out 1 of the metal racks.

Androgynous Denim Punk tapped 1 sword against the rack, *ting ting*. “Seems the same...”

“Most users find a twisting motion works the best.” Denim Punk pressed the blade hard against the rack, pushing even Dr. Belphegor’s massive arm, and then twisted it sharply.

The sword blade turned *past* the rack, not through or around but right through the same space, just not touching it. Pamela let out a squeak of delight, and I could tell she was having to hold herself back from grabbing the sword and trying to figure out how it worked. Denim Punk just swore, along with most of the crowd. Dr. Belphegor smelled superhumanly smug, and she deserved to. It was a great trick! Could they do that through armor? I guess so, because they

thrust both swords up and yelled, “You’re doomed now, Hauberk! Muahahahahahaha!”

I really was in a building full of supervillains! Jonah and Jacob smelled kind of nervous too, but Pamela was still fearless as she tried to get Dr. Belphegor to tell her how the Immogrifier (*Imm* for *Immaterial*?) worked while Belphegor was trying to get paid by Florentine.

“How do you like Peasley?” Oh, Bast, obviously Jacob was trying to be smooth, even if he wasn’t old enough to smell gross about it. His brother was trying to flirt with Pamela, which they both liked, ugh. I glared at Jacob and went to the next booth even though I wanted to see those swords. What could you do with a 4<sup>th</sup>-dimensional sword? Could I get my claws immogrified? That would be awesome, I could just twist my clawtips into anything I couldn’t cut! But there weren’t many things I couldn’t cut already, and I didn’t want to put my hands into that tank. It wasn’t just the red gas that was probably a horrible mutagen, something about the way it leaked out without going anywhere made my neck hair stand up. Some mad science is science that’s mad, but some is pure madness wearing the mask of science. (OK, I got that from *Winter Hearts*, but that doesn’t mean it’s wrong!)

The next booth was all pictures, printed pictures of heroes and villains both, from 8x10 to poster-sized. What was the point? You could get more pictures on the Internet than you could look at in your whole life! But when I looked closer, they were more candid than publicity pictures (not that kind of candid!) and better quality than phone shots from bystanders. Someone spied on supers professionally? That sounded like a good way to wind up turned into jello!

Pamela came up beside me, towing Jonah by one hand (he smelled more nervous than happy). “Oh, this is nice.” She picked up a picture of Mooncat, silhouetted against a sunset-lit stucco wall, just starting her transformation from a model-thin Asian woman into a saber-toothed

tiger. It was a good picture, nice composition, and how can you go wrong with a pretty girl in a thin T-shirt, even if she has fangs the size of switchblades?

Oh, you could show her to a boy, that's how. I edged away from Jonah as he crowded in stinkily to take a look. Shouldn't he be paying attention to the real live girl holding his hand? The little old Latina behind the table felt the same way, because she stopped puffing on her long metal pipe and gave Jonah the hairy eyeball. "These aren't that kind of picture, sonny."

"Hey!" Jonah glared back, but I could smell his blush even if his face was too dark to show it. "I wasn't—" He bit back whatever he was going to say and stomped to the next booth in line, letting go of Pamela's hand. Jacob hurried after him, but Pamela leaned in close and looked down at me with those big brown eyes.

"I know you're not a big fan of boys, but do you have to try to kill Jonah with your brain? He's not awful, he's actually pretty nice. Even Jacob's OK, although he wants to grow up to be a player."

I didn't think she was saying that just because he was cute (not that I could say anything about thinking a boy was nice just because he was handsome), but that didn't mean she was right. I thought I was a pretty sensible girl, and I'd been so wrong about a boy. I'd even known him for a few years, like Pamela and Jonah (probably).

She saw the face I was making and put her hand on my arm, warm even through my sweatshirt. Nyaaaaaa! "OK, I'll give him a chance!" But if he was mean to her, I was going to kick his butt so hard!

She flashed that smile again. "Thanks, Nef. You're a sweetie."

Not to boys, I'm not! But I let her drag me after Jonah and Jacob without stopping to look

for pictures for my Wall of Inspirational Catgirls. (Mooncat didn't count, she's a human who shapeshifts into a sabertooth tiger, not Changed.) Too bad X-Wave was by the pretzel stand, my stomach was demanding that I build up my reserves (meaning *fat*) even though I'd only been in combat mode for a few seconds. Maybe that was why I was so mean to Pamela's crush, who hadn't done anything except be a boy like half the world. Good job, Nef! A+ social skills! And I didn't even have a protein bar in my purse, so A+ planning, too. I was really letting down my species!

Tail drooping, I followed Pamela to a table of junk that looked more like what I expected from a flea market except most of it had the look of mad science. Pamela and Jonah thought it was great, rummaging through the gadgets and thingamajigs and getting all excited about what they could be turned into, but I couldn't follow more than a few words. Scary words, like *nerve interruptor*, and *pyroclastic* (that's something volcanic, right?) and *singularity* (black holes?!). Too bad Melpomene wasn't there, she would be all over this stuff too— except she'd stopped talking to me like all my other “friends” in San Diego as soon as Peter had gotten his side of the story out. A weird and scary place could only distract me for so long before I had to think about what a failure I was.

Oh, Bast, Jacob had noticed, and now he was worried about me! He leaned in (hardly down at all) and whispered, “Do you know what they're talking about?” I didn't know if I was glad or annoyed that he was still talking to me, but fighting with Pamela's crush's brother probably wasn't good. And talking to him was better than moping while the tall people geeked out.

“No idea,” I whispered back. “No, wait, they said *dueling lash*, that's a Vermillion Pupae

thing.” The metal football thing Pamela was holding looked about the right size for 1 of the giant red-and-white frog monsters to hold in its hand, too, if they were as big as on TV. “I thought all their kit stopped working when Sky Phoenix and Earth Dragon kicked them off the planet.” It was still interesting to Pamela and Jonah, though, who were poking through its weirdly gut-like insides. (Ewwwwww.)

The middle-aged white lady in a wheelchair running the booth was pretending to arrange some of her other items on little padded stands, but really she was listening intently to what Pamela and Jonah were saying. I couldn’t blame her for keeping an eye on 2 kids with their hands all over her stuff, but was it interesting that the curlicues inside a Vermillion Pupae thing looked like the mad science of someone named Dr. Phalanges? How did Pamela know all this stuff, anyway? Being a supers geek is 1 thing, but you can’t get details of mad science off regular fan sites! Was she really a mad scientist? Did I need to watch out for her trying to steal my brain or turn me into a cyborg?

At the Mighty Bean-O-Tron, that would have been a joke, but here in the Goblin Market of Rhodes, surrounded by supervillains and mad science kit and boys who smelled like bugs, I was really worried. I liked Pamela, and not just because she’s so pretty, but maybe I needed to get more normal friends. Like my old friends, who gave me the cut direct. No way! My new friend was way more interesting! I hugged Pamela’s arm (I couldn’t take her hand, they were both full of twisty metal snakes) and smiled up at her when she blinked and looked at me.

“What?”

“Nothing, I’m just glad you’re my friend.”

That made her happy, but Jacob less happy. When Pamela went back to poking at



mysterious things, he whispered, “Are you 2, um, you know...?”

Young as he was, I could smell what he meant (boys!), but I was trying to have social skills (what would Senator Mwangi or Zoanna say here?), so instead of yelling at him for prying about things that weren’t any of his business, I just said, “Dating? Wouldn’t you like to know!” It wasn’t even any of his business that Pamela only liked boys (darn it!). It wasn’t even Jonah’s business, although I could smell he was getting the idea from how she was leaning her shoulder up against his like a Bollywood love interest. He was still mostly thinking about the strange gadgetry, though.

My stomach rumbled, and Jacob snickered. Even Pamela noticed. “Oh, Nef, we should get you something to eat! You’ve burned a lot of energy!” She put down the dueling lash (carefully!) and folded her arm over mine to grab my hand. “Ms. Velazquez was by the pretzels, but there must be something else to eat around here.”

There were a lot of weird scents, mad science and mutant bodies and whatever plastic had been stored in here before it was a flea market, but I could smell the coffee from the entrance, stale raspberry danishes, greasy gyros, and of course pretzels with mustard. Before I could decide between stale and greasy, Jacob made a choking noise. “X-Wave is *here*?!” Jonah was appalled too, but cooler.

“Not in her official capacity,” Pamela said soothingly. “She’s probably just hanging out with people she knows. As long as we stay out of her way, we’ll be fine.”

A familiar scent, tastefully decorated with light perfume. “This way!” I dragged Pamela by the arm, the boys could fend for themselves!

Of course the crowd got thicker right then, but if we could just get past them, they’d hide

us (me and Jacob, anyway). “Hey, slow down!” said 1 supervillain that Jonah almost crashed into as Pamela dragged him along. She had scratchy-smelling blue-green liquid dripping from her eyes and mouth (Splatter or Scrawl, I think, or was it Sketch?) and I didn’t have to smell the alcohol oozing out of her to know she was drunk. “Are you late for school?”

“Shhh! You never saw us,” said Pamela.

“Riiiiight,” said S-whoever, and winked so blatantly people behind her could probably see it. “Never saw who?”

Pamela flashed that smile at her and we kept going, although Jonah and Jacob almost tripped over each other looking back at her. She wasn’t super-pretty, but those were very short leather shorts, and her ridiculous heels looked like they were made out of cat skulls (fake, I hoped!) and giant crystals. Where did you even get shoes like that?!

Maybe here, because the next table was selling... potted octopuses? No, they smelled as green as they looked, but the fat stalks twisted and curled in the air like they were trying to catch the feathers hanging over them, and those looked like suckers on the inner sides. No time to stop and look or see what kind of people used mad science for interior decoration, I could still smell X-Wave! There were so many weird people and other smells I couldn’t tell if she was mad or hunting, but I didn’t think so, it was just bad luck she was going our way.

“Over there!” Jonah pointed at a booth on the other side of the aisle, a real booth with cloth walls and banners advertising ray guns, and an Asian lady in an amazing steampunk dress of red and purple satin and brass exoskeleton across the shoulders and arms, and red and purple corkscrew curls spilling down over lots of cleavage. I shouldn’t be impressed by cleavage, I’m a girl too, but wow. She was *gorgeous*, and she had a smile as dazzling as Pamela’s, which she was

using on a Latino high-school boy in piles of eye makeup. The makeup wasn't just for show, he wasn't enthralled by her chest the way Jonah was, but he liked the ray guns.

Had Jonah dragged us over here just to look down Ray Gun Lady's dress?! No, the booth! It was ~~solid~~ opaque enough to hide behind! We all dived into the space between it and the next table and behind the back curtain.

It was the gyros stand, so I had to grab Pamela before she faceplanted on the base of the stove and sent hot greasy meat everywhere, but we all got into the back without wrecking anything. There was no way we could do it without the customers lining up for gyros seeing us, though.

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