

Sneaking out

“Nefertari, we’re turning in,” my mom said from the door. It was early, but I could smell why they were going to bed anyway, and it made my face burn even though I’d set them up for it by making sure there was wine with dinner. I guess it was nice that they were still romantic at their age, but that didn’t mean I wanted to know about it! She came over and hugged me from behind with her cool arms, and I curled my tail around her waist before turning around to hug her properly. She might be green and scaly and looking forward to things I couldn’t even think about, but she was still my mom. (Yes, green and scaly, not to mention bald and with gill slits: my mom used to be the superheroine Nereid, though she’s retired now. She’s still tall and slim and has enough bone structure and poise to be a model, even at more than 3 times my age, because it’s not enough that we’re different species.) “Don’t stay up too late, OK?”

“I won’t,” I said. It wasn’t my fault we had different ideas about *too late*! “I’m almost done with my homework.”

She kissed me on the forehead, said “Sweet dreams, kitty,” and went off to do things I

didn't want to think about. (I mean, I want to do them *someday*, but probably not exactly that because boys are terrible, and I'm not anyone's parent and nyaaaaaa!)

My laptop chirped. I'd been chatting with Pamela about our Current Events presentations for tomorrow, but now, even though it was early even for old people, she said, *I think I'm going to call it a night. I shouldn't have stayed up so late reading last night. :)*

(Yes, she really types everything out like that, and faster than I do!) *ok*, I replied. *c u tomorrow!*

Careful with the claws, and sweet dreams, Nef.

I knew better than to think Pamela wouldn't say something perverted, but I was still blushing. Nyaaaaa! *shutup!!!* I typed back. But that wasn't important. She was earlier than I guessed, but maybe she had a lot of prep to do. She knew what she was doing, I was just guessing! Anyway, I had to pretend I believed she was going to bed, so after a minute, I sent, *sd u 2.*

(Pamela is my best friend so far at Peasley (kind of my only friend, but it's my 1st week!), and maybe my Best Friend even though she's taller and prettier and smarter and weirder than me. Her name isn't even Pamela, it's Priyadharshani (her family's from Sri Lanka originally), but she doesn't go by Priya or even Shani, and she pronounces Pamela with the accent on the second syllable, so it rhymes with *Nutella*. Every day while I'm learning Science and Computers and Art like a normal 8th-grader, she's in some kind of advanced technology engineering class that she can't even explain to me, and she's a major supers geek. Not just a geek, I think she knows an active superhero (all the ones I meet through my parents are retired!))

I don't go around trying to eavesdrop on people, but my hearing is so much better than

humans' that I can't help it! Usually I try to pretend I didn't hear anything, because that's more polite, but I can't ignore when someone is setting up a meeting with a superhero! Or a mobster or something! Someone who could take care of a problem Sekhmet Landry (I don't think there are any other Sekhmets at our school) was having with a creeper bothering her sister, and what was Pamela doing arranging that instead of studying or browsing Superwatch or talking about perverted stuff? I was going to find out!

(I've heard *curiosity killed the cat* 5 times for every day I've been alive, but (until they try giving me that crap), hardly anyone knows the rest of the saying, *but satisfaction brought her back*. It's not trying to find things out that's dangerous, it's the high blood pressure from people telling me to stay stupid!)

The meeting Pamela had set up wasn't that far from my place, but I wanted to get there ahead of time, so I should get moving soon. I looked over at my Wall of Inspiration one last time for luck, and almost squeaked out loud. The one I needed, Slink, was missing!

I know the Wall isn't magic, that's not even close to how sorcery works (if it was, my dad would freak out the first time he walked into my room), and if there are superpowers that work that way, I don't have them. The pictures of Changed I admire just psych me up when I need to be more awesome, but it really works, if I have the right one. Dr. Mwangi, the first Changed ever elected to the Senate, is super-inspirational for all kinds of life goals, but she wouldn't help me sneak around in the dark. Zoanna could help me act like a ninja, especially a sexy ninja with the fishnet costume, but that's not the same thing. For this, I needed Slink. She's been stealing treasures and, um, we'll just say hearts, since the mid-90s, she must be as old as my mom and she still looks like an R-rated manhwa girl in a skintight cat burglar suit. If anyone could spy on

a superhero or gangster meeting without anyone knowing she'd left her 6th-floor apartment, it would be Slink. And her picture was missing. Magic or no magic, I know a bad omen when I see one!

Was Slink telling me not to go? I knew if anything happened, I'd be in huge trouble. But I was sure I could do this, I'd planned most of it out already!

What was that little triang— the blue-tac had come loose and Slink's picture had slipped down behind Grace Adisara's, was all. I fished it back up with the tips of my claws and got some new blue-tac and everything was fine again. Slink was back to flipping a security camera the hawk (like a bird, but pointier) in some superhero base. My parents didn't like the picture, because supervillain, but I liked it, and not just for the black hourglass silhouette against the white tile corridor. She had the perfect punk grin, she didn't care what anyone thought was theirs, she'd steal what needed stealing. There was a tiny splash of blood on her face to show happened to people who tried to stop her, which I used to think was a bit much, but it turns out some people really don't listen when you ask politely.

No time to brood on how I ended up in Rhodes, I had to get moving! I threw off my floppy homework-doing clothes, pulled on my biking clothes (not that I look nearly as good as Slink in skintight black, but I already get enough wind resistance from my enormous butt), and slung my messenger bag. I'd have to hope I'd already packed everything I'd need.

The master suite is at the front of the apartment, where it at least has a view of a view at the street, so my room is at the back overlooking the alley. Usually boring, but it's deserted except on garbage day, so I could go out the window and swing up onto the fire escape without anyone seeing me. No streetlights, but the sky wasn't quite dark in the west, and the patchy

clouds glowed orange in the city lights, so I could see just fine.

I hadn't measured the alley, but it was just wide enough for a garbage truck and two dumpsters, so maybe 15' at most, and from the 7th floor fire escape I could see that the roof of the 6-story building on the other side was pretty flat, with a parapet around the edge to hide me once I was there. The wind was blowing along the alley, not that I expected it to budge me much. Probably even a human could make the jump, so I wasn't worried, but I still didn't look down at the 6-story drop to the alley. I didn't need to go into full combat mode for this, even if nothing bad happened I'd still spend the rest of the night ravenous. It's hard to spy on people when your stomach is as loud as a garbage truck!

Push smoothly, don't kick! The fire escape rattled, but not louder than all kinds of city noises, and I flew across the alley to land well in from the parapet. Go me!

I smelled people, boys, teenagers that I didn't know! The wind must have kept me from smelling them before I jumped! Had they seen me? Then I smelled what they were doing, and blushed. But even Rhodes was still Ohio, so the nicest thing I could do was pretend I hadn't noticed them. I ran for the elevator housing without stopping, and was safely around the corner by the time one asked, "Was that a superhero?" Hah!

Although this building was right next to mine on the map, the front door was on the next street, and when you looked at how many people that was, it was like being blocks away in San Diego. Sure enough, I didn't meet anyone I knew going down the elevator, and the few people I did run into didn't look at me twice. I was afraid they would wonder what a little kid was doing out so late (even with digitigrade feet that are like permanent high heels, I can't make 5' without piling all my hair on top of my head!), but I guess in my biking clothes, with a messenger bag

instead of a school backpack, I looked old enough.

The only tricky part was going back into my own building to get my bike out of the rack in the lobby, but I slipped behind the mailboxes and only had to wait a minute until no one was watching. Stage 1 clear!

The Dive

There are like 5,000,000 people in the Rhodes area, so some of them must have had sex during the 20 minutes it took me to get to the meeting place, but, thank Bast, they didn't do it where I had to know about it.

The meeting place Pamela had given was in a neighborhood that wasn't exactly bad, compared to the really scary places on the west side of town, by the Pit, but definitely wasn't upscale: half-price movie theaters showing movies from last season, cleaners, payday lending joints, small restaurants that smelled of exotic spices. Even at almost 10 at night, the traffic was terrible, but the sidewalks weren't too crowded. They weren't too empty, either, so I didn't feel like I was going to get mugged, but I did worry a little about how much help anyone there would be to a Changed girl on a fancy bike. No one did more than tell me to watch where I was going, though.

Does *dive* only apply to bars? Then Black As Sin is a coffee dive, lurking half-underground on the lowest floor (or the highest basement?) of a run-down brick office building,

with only a wooden sign over the stairs down. It didn't look like the sort of place a middle-schooler should be going this late at night, but that was Sekhmet Landry going in, there was no mistaking those long pink caracal tufts on her bleached-white ears. She was wearing a black leather biker jacket and black jeans, and looked pretty grown-up for a 7th-grader, but that's not saying a lot. I was expecting her to get thrown right back out, until I saw that the lady going in next was wearing a black leather mask with a scale pattern, and something under her matching black trench coat that looked a lot like a sword. That was Cocodrila Negra, which meant this was *that* kind of joint, and if my parents found out I'd been here, I'd be locked in my room until I turned 25.

Was it Cocodrila that Sekhmet was meeting? She was a vigilante type, but I didn't know much about how she operated. Pamela would know, but I couldn't text her to ask!

Should I go in? We weren't friends (every time one of the Changed at Peasley tried to be friendly, I remembered how all my so-called friends in San Diego had started giving me the cut direct and I couldn't help not warming up to them), but there were only about a dozen Changed in the whole school, so Sekhmet would recognize me. She wasn't the only one, my mom might not be active in the field any more, but both my parents are still involved in the community, so there could be someone in there who had met me. Or could recognize me from descriptions, there are other Changed who have hair as long and blue as mine, or are as short as me, but not many who are both and as round as me besides. I'd hoped the meeting would be in a dark alley or something where I could sneak up on them. Not that I wanted to sneak up on Cocodrila, she cut people's arms off!

While I was dithering, another woman went in, this one not in costume but wearing biker

leathers (the kevlar kind) that would work for fighting. I didn't recognize her, but I wouldn't have minded getting to know her, she was tall and broad-shouldered and swaggery— No! Bad catgirl! She was twice my age anyway.

Cocodrila came out with a Latino guy in street clothes, both of them carrying steaming cups of wonderful-smelling coffee but stalking along seriously. They turned toward me, and I got out of the way as fast as I could, squishing up against the wall along with my bike. The guy's stony face didn't show any more emotion than Cocodrila's mask (more the idea of a crocodile, long and serrated, than an actual crocodile snout), but their scent didn't make me envy whoever they were going after! They didn't recognize or even notice me, which was fine by me!

The people on the sidewalk smelled of all kinds of moods, which didn't bother me, but then one came up behind me and stopped. An old (human) guy, who thought someone looked, um, good. I stopped swishing my tail (I really had to break that habit!) and swung off my bike to put it between us before I even noticed that he smelled of whiskey (or whisky, people say there's a difference but they're both gross) and cigars. At least he wasn't smoking right then.

“Woah, sorry, hot stuff, didn't mean to scare ya!” He hadn't just been drinking, he was drunk, I could smell, but he didn't sound it, he just had an accent. He was tall and skinny and had grey hair cut off straight just above his shoulders and the kind of mustache that goes down on each side of the mouth. With his bolo tie, it gave him an Old-West look, although his suit was modern. It was hard to tell with his eyes way up there, but I was pretty sure he was looking at where the strap of my bag was making me look like a bra ad. Gaaaaah! After looking for a minute (and smelling like he thought middle-schoolers in lycra were the hottest thing ever, so gross!) he smiled. I already didn't like him, but it wasn't actually a horrible smile. “You wanna

go somewhere out of the cold and get a bite ta eat? My treat, a course.”

Was he trying to—! GAAAAH! What kind of floozie did he think I was?! Knowing he wasn't just oogling me, he wanted to do something about it, made my heart pound and I had to take a deep breath (oh, Bast, he was *definitely* watching me breathe) to not go into combat mode. He was *just asking*, he wasn't trying to hurt anyone!

He must have thought I was uncertain instead of certainly horrified, because he said, “Aw, come on. I know I'm not as pretty as when I was your age, but I haven't lived this long without learning how to treat a lady.”

Before I could figure out how to make him go away forever without getting arrested, there was a whoosh from the direction of Black As Sin, and I was struck right in the eyes by the most horrible pair of shoes I'd ever seen.

I don't mean I got kicked in the face, although that might have been better. When I was 3, I liked eye-burningly bright colors (there are pictures waiting for if I ever bring someone home to meet my parents), but even tiny me wouldn't have worn these! They were wedge sneakers, which is already tacky, and 1 was hot pink paisley with a magenta sole while the other was magenta paisley with a hot pink sole. 1 had safety orange laces and a golf-ball green swoosh, and the other was reversed. Gaaaaaah!

The shoes were so visible because they were right about my height as the person wearing them leapt from halfway down the block to land right behind Old West Perv with a *zoinggg* sound. They were dressed in a poncho that was pink or orange (hard to tell under the streetlights) with a full hood and a blank oval mask. There were bulges under the poncho, and I don't mean the kind the Puberty Fairy brings, angular lumps of equipment that could have been bombs or

forcefield generators or anything. When they caught their balance after landing, I thought it was a woman, but I couldn't be sure because their smell was bizarre, not human or even living. Their voice was scrambled too, weirdly higher and lower at the same time, but that was obviously a filter or synthesizer of some kind. "Is there a problem, citizens?"

A superhero again street harassment? She had my support! Although I couldn't justify her beating up Old West Perv, who hadn't done anything worse than smell gross and ask me out. "No, I'm sure this gentleman was going to take *no thanks* for an answer!"

OWP flinched as soon as I started talking, before he could even hear what I was saying. For once, my ridiculously cute voice was an advantage! "No, sir. I reckon there's been a misunderstanding." Sir? Oh, he was too drunk or his eyes weren't good enough to pick up body language under that costume. Which I knew, if he thought I looked 18, bag strap or not! "No offense meant, little lady."

I wanted to yell at him for thinking even an 18-year-old would be interested in someone like him, but then he might stick around to argue. Anyway, he'd been polite enough that if he hadn't been pervy all over a middle-schooler, there wouldn't have been a problem. But he had been, so all I could manage was, "None taken."

As soon as he slunk away, I turned to the superhero. "Thanks! Is this what you do, scare away perverts? It's not as glamorous as fighting supervillains, but it could make a lot of women's lives better!" You'd think I'd be able to talk to a superhero with how many my parents had had to dinner, but that hadn't been professionally when she'd just saved me! "How did he even think I look 18?!" Was that too much like fishing for compliments? But she was awesome, and I wanted her to think I was awesome too, or at least not lame, and babbling like an idiot was really going

to help with that!

“This is Ohio, California girl. You only have to look 16 here.” Her scent changed, but it was still scrambled and I couldn’t tell what it meant any more than I could tell whether her filtered voice was making fun of me. But she probably was, because I *was* babbling like an idiot. At least I wasn’t so stupid I asked how she knew I was from California, it had to be my accent.

Now that I’d been exposed to her scent for a minute, I was starting to get a feel for it. When I try to describe what someone smells like, even to myself, it’s kind of like wine snobbery: there aren’t words for it, so I have to name things the scent is like (or what it makes me think of, there’s a girl in my Art class who totally smells like sunrise, even though sunrise doesn’t smell like anything). But they still mostly smell like a person, I’m not going to mistake my mom for a wave even though she smells like the ocean. This superhero had those notes, without the smell of person underneath, and they kept changing. I couldn’t say why, but I thought it was something she was doing on purpose, not just that she was a cyborg or alien or whatever.

“If you’re OK, I better go.” She turned, and I wasn’t as certain she was female, there should have been more hips in that.

“Wait!” I really wanted to know if she was the one Sekhmet was meeting, but I couldn’t ask that! “What’s your name?”

“Padparadscha.” I must have looked blank, because she added, “It’s a kind of sapphire. This color.” She gestured at her poncho. Before I could say *Aren’t sapphires blue?*, she leapt *zoingggg* back to Black as Sin, dropping neatly into the stairwell. It was a cool move, but I had to look at those shoes again, ewwww. Were they how she jumped so far? What were her powers?

I still couldn’t follow her into Black as Sin, even though I wanted hot chocolate now, so I

looked up *Padparadscha* on my phone while waiting for her or Sekhmet or both to come out. (There was probably more than one back way out, but they'd both come in through the front, so probably they'd leave that way too. I hoped.) Pinkish-orange corundum, named for lotus flowers, rarest sapphire, represents joy, vital energy, and foresight, helps achieve life goals, understanding the root of problems, found in— “Sri Lanka!” That was definitely a connection to Pamela! Maybe there was even a whole network of Sri Lankan superheroes she was tapped into!

Before I could do any research on that, Sekhmet came out of the coffee shop. She turned in my direction and I started to panic, but she was just looking around for the train station, which was in the other direction. Padparadscha wasn't with her, but she didn't need to be. It wasn't Sekhmet who was in danger (any more than any other 12-year-old minority girl in Rhodes). Padparadscha just had to get targeting information from Sekhmet.

Wait, that was the direction Old West Perv went! Should I go with Sekhmet? No, she'd be fine, he was just gross, not dangerous. Probably. Anyway, even if she didn't have her claws yet, she should be strong enough to handle a human.

I was still trying to decide if I should follow Sekhmet to make sure she got home OK when Padparadscha hopped out of the stairway to the coffee shop. I squished back into the doorway of the pet food store so she didn't see me when she looked around for trouble, and then she leaped across the street and kept going.

I waited until she was at the corner and pedaled after her.

Pursuit

I hadn't expected following someone to be so hard. Even this late at night, traffic was bad enough that I could have kept up with a car unless it got on a freeway or something, so I thought only a motorcycle with a crazy rider could get away. Padparadscha could jump across a 4-lane street in a single bound, though, and with the tall buildings crowding in on every side, I wasn't able to see her over them the way I would have been able to ~~at home~~ back in San Diego. The only way I could keep her in sight was to swerve between cars and zoom past pedestrians in a way that would make my parents take my bike away if they saw me!

Padparadscha led me into a part of town I didn't know well (I've only lived in Rhodes for a few weeks!), a more industrial area with lower but larger buildings, and a lot fewer people on the streets. The warehouses and wholesalers and whatnot didn't have many doors or windows or any decoration, they were just big concrete boxes with plenty of wall space for taggers to fill with ominous graffiti. *WEEP BLUD LIKE RAIN*, said a square block of letters on one wall. Another had a picture of someone's back with the skin peeled away. I don't know if it was

accurate, but it was very detailed. Who spends that much time painting someone being skinned alive?! (And were they doing it from a model? Ewwwwww!)

I thought we were going sideways to home, but there was no way I could stop and check my phone to find out where I was. I just had to follow Padparadscha until she stopped or I got too creeped out to go on. Did she know I was following her? Was she luring me out here to do something horrible without witnesses? If she'd stopped, I would have been out of there so fast! But she kept going, and after what was only like 6 blocks (it just seemed like a lot more) the buildings with neon signs and lighted windows rose up around me again. When I'd first come to Rhodes, I hated feeling caged in like that, but now it was just fine! Maybe too fine: I was so glad to be around people again that I almost ran 1 over! She was really dark-skinned, and what little she was wearing was black (maybe this was who Old West Perv was looking for? she didn't have much of a butt, though), but I could have seen her just fine if I had been looking where I was going. She dived out of the way, tripped over a sidewalk sign, and yelled an impressive string of cusses after me, which I totally deserved. I couldn't stop to say sorry, though, or I'd lose Padparadscha! (That name was too long, they were Pad now.)

Maybe I should go back and apologize, because when I came around the next corner, I couldn't see Pad anywhere! I'd been the same distance behind as at the last corner, how could I have lost her?! She couldn't have gone into a store without slowing way down, so I would have caught up! Could she teleport or turn invisible, and she'd just been leading me on a wild herring chase to teach me to not follow her around?

Stop panicking, Nef! I slowed way down, so I wouldn't crash (and to rest my legs, Pad moved really fast), and took a minute to really look around. The street wasn't too different than

the one where I lived, except there were more stores on the bottom floors of the buildings, not apartments or offices all the way down so often. It wasn't as nice as my street, but I wouldn't mind living there. Neither would a lot of other people, it looked like, from how many there were around even this late. Well, one of the buildings had a half-price movie theater, and several of the others had restaurants or fast-food joints or bars, so I shouldn't be surprised. But where was Pad? If she'd gone into a bar, I was out of luck, but I didn't think she was that old. Not that a superhero in costume was going to get carded just for going in! OK, where would I be? If I could jump 30' from a standing start?

There she was, perched on the ledge above a fancy sculpted part of the building that reached up to the 4th floor, between two gargoyles. (Not gargoyles, whatever you call a statue on the side of a building when it's a girl in a flowing dress who should be in a fountain.) She was above the level of the streetlights, where the only light was coming through windows that were mostly curtained, and her poncho had turned a dull gray that matched the concrete, making her pretty much invisible to human eyes (and humans never look up, anyway). She was about halfway down the block, on my side, which put her across from the movie theater, or maybe the African sandwich shop next to it. Really she could see the whole block from there, though, so I couldn't be sure which store she was watching.

"Hey!" I'd heard the people on the sidewalk with me, but I hadn't expected any of them to talk to me! I stopped and put my foot down, but it was a female voice so I didn't put the bike between us like I had with Old West Perv.

"Nya! What? Oh. I'm sorry!" It was the black girl in black I'd almost run into at the corner, who had followed me all this way to chew me out. It was probably mean of me to think,

but she really did look like the kind of girl Old West Perv was looking for, in her lace tube top that said *TOTAL TENGU* across the front and shiny black miniskirt with a big silver hoop on the zipper to make people think about taking it off and too much eyeshadow. She was probably even 16, although not much more.

She put her hands on her slender hips and leaned forward angrily. “You should be, you fuzzy maniac! Do you know how fast you were going? You can seriously kill people like that!”

I only have fur on my (now flat) ears and (lashing) tail, and not much hair on the rest of my body, so I was probably less fuzzy than her, and what was a black person doing saying stuff like that anyway? I did feel bad for almost running into her, but not as much as before she opened her mouth. And she wasn’t being quiet, either; people were looking at us, and probably even Padparadscha up on her perch could hear!

“Shhh!” I put my finger on her mouth without thinking, because it’s what my mom does when I’m too loud.

She stared at my finger in cross-eyed disdain, but at least she was a little quieter when she said, “You can’t flirt your way out of this, booty girl!” Nyaaa! That’s not what I meant! I yanked my finger away from her soft lips, but her scent already said maybe I could.

Now I was embarrassed 2 different ways by this girl! I wanted to yell at her, but I didn’t want to get Padparadscha’s attention if we didn’t already have it (or anyone else’s). Anyway, it was kind of my own fault both times, even if I didn’t want to admit it. “I said I’m sorry! I was trying to keep up with someone!”

“You almost ran me over because you’re *stalking* someone?!”

“No!” OK, yes, technically, but I wasn’t going to admit it to this harpy! “It’s none of your

business!”

“How isn’t it my business? You could have killed me!”

“Nyaaaa! I said I’m sorry! What more do you want?”

That stopped her for a minute, because she didn’t know what she wanted, except to make me feel bad. Which I already did, so she won and should go away, but she had more yelling in her. “Give me your phone! I’m going to call your parents and tell them they need to take away that bike and raise you right!”

“No way!” I didn’t want to be grounded forever, which was what would happen if my parents found out I wasn’t in my room doing homework! “I’m sorry I scared you, but you didn’t really get hurt and I apologized, so that’s the end of it!” Digitigrade feet are like being on tiptoe all the time, so I can’t do much to make myself taller, and my voice is hopeless, but I tried my best, and it did make her back off a little.

Zoinggg-thump! Padparadscha and her horrible shoes landed right next to us, startling the onlookers. Complaining Girl gave a little scream, tried to jump away, and fell over on her butt again. But it wasn’t my fault!

Pad avoided the flailing high-heeled sandals (how could she even walk in those things, with human feet?) and gave her a hand up. “Sorry, citizen. I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Complaining Girl shimmied herself back into shape and batted her eyelashes at Padparadscha. “Oh no, I’m just glad you’re here to deal with this *menace!*” She sounded a lot more sultry and less screechy than when it had been just me, but I couldn’t tell if Pad was reacting because their scent was still scrambled.

“What’s she done now?” Was Pad amused? I couldn’t tell! (That scent scrambler was so

annoying!)

Complaining Girl jabbed a long black nail. “She just about killed me on that bike because she’s too busy stalking somebody to watch where she’s going! You need to arrest her or something!”

That bizarre noise from the voice filter was definitely laughter, but I don’t think Complaining Girl realized that. “I can’t give out traffic tickets, but I’ll take care of her. Please carry on, citizen.”

Take care of me?! I didn’t think they were really going to do anything bad, but with even their voice and face hidden, I couldn’t tell! Complaining Girl obviously thought it was going to be bad, though, because she put her nose up and swished away. “That’ll teach you!”

Pad turned back to me. “Come with me.”

“What?! I’m not going anywhere with you! If you have something to say to me, say it right here!”

The other people who had gathered around (at a safe distance) hadn’t left, because they didn’t care who won, they just wanted to see what happened. I didn’t want to get chewed out in front of them, but I didn’t want to have no witnesses around even more!

Pad turned their head and made a noise that I couldn’t figure out at all. “Never mind. Just go home, before your parents go spare. And next time you go biking in the dark, wear a safety vest! Not everyone can see as well in the dark as you.” *Zoinggg* and she was gone into the darkness.

Was she back on the gargoyle ledge? No, she was on the other side of the street, on top of the triangular sign thing for the theater. I pretended I didn’t see her, though, and with my ears flat

and tail drooping, started getting out my safety vest. Now that I looked defeated, I wasn't that interesting, and people wandered away. It was hard to tell without looking at her, but I didn't think Pad was watching me either. Just to be safe, I rode to the end of the block and around the corner, wearing my reflective orange vest so no one could miss that I was leaving.

In the alcove of a closed bagel shop, I took my vest back off so I could peek back around the corner. Pad was still on the theater, watching a group of teenagers leave the African sandwich shop. None of them were catgirls, but it could be Sekhmet's half-sister or stepsister. Or maybe one of them was the creeper? They were acting normal as they walked toward the street I was on, laughing and nudging each other, but neither creeping on someone and being worried about creepers was something that happened in a group. They turned the other way, luckily, toward the train station, and Pad followed them, leaping from the theater to a ledge on the corner building without (I thought) looking my way. I could hear the *zoinggg* over the city noise, but I guess the humans couldn't, because they didn't look around at all. It was going to be easy to follow them, but how was I going to get on the train without Pad spotting me?

The train station was a platform over the road, about 4 stories high, with a staircase and elevator on each side to get to the trains headed that way. Maybe go up the other side, where Pad wouldn't be watching? I knew I could get over the fences and gap between the 2 sides, but I wasn't sure I could do it with my bike. But I didn't need my bike now that we were following a human! Even with my stubby little legs, I could outrun a human, and I could climb and jump just fine.

While the teenagers strolled toward the train station on the near side of the street, I locked my bike up in front of a donut shop that didn't look too sketchy. There was another bike there,

still intact, so I crossed all my fingers that my bike would be safe. I'd only had it since the beginning of summer! But my parents would buy me a new one if it got stolen, as long as they didn't know the details.

Fast as I could, I stuffed my bike helmet into my bag, and wound my 87lbs of braided hair into a bun on top of my head. (Hey, I was more than 5' tall now!) I couldn't do anything about how round I am, but if Pad wasn't looking too close (and I remembered to keep my tail flat on my leg), I hoped I had a different enough silhouette they wouldn't realize I was the same weird catgirl following them around.

Traffic was finally beginning to ease up, so I was able to get across the street and up the stairs on that side while the teenagers were going up the other stairs and keeping Pad's attention. The platform was at the same level as Pad's perch, but I stood behind the panel with the map and schedule like any other confused passenger and hoped none of Pad's mysterious lumps let her see through metal.

As soon as the train pulled in on the other track, I ran to the back end of it, away from any nosy drivers, and vaulted the fence. (The trains in Rhodes are actually monorails that run on a T-shaped white ceramic thing, so I didn't have to worry about getting electrocuted or anything, but there's no bed of crossbeams like regular train tracks, so I had to leap off the slippery ceramic.) At the same time, I heard the *zoinggg* of Pad's terrible shoes from the building and a whoosh. I froze against the back of the train, hoping it wouldn't decide to back up and smush me and Pad wouldn't notice me as they flew overhead. It all worked out, they landed on top of the train and didn't come over to chew me out, even when I ducked around the corner and into the last door just before it closed.

The car was full of people with all their emotions, but none of them were *what is that crazy catgirl doing?* so I ignored them and started working my way forward. I hadn't gotten a great look at the teenagers, but most of the passengers were adults, so it wasn't hard to spot them, all clustered together in the first car. 1 of the girls smelled a little like Sekhmet (feta cheese and night wind), but I couldn't tell whether it was the short brown girl with pigtails, or the round white goth girl. I'd have to get right up to them, and then Sekhmet's sister might remember me. I leaned against the wall between the seats and the bike racks, trying not to wonder what the stains on the ex-white plastic were, and pretended I wasn't eavesdropping on them.

They were just making in-jokes and complaining about the manager at the sandwich shop who made them schedule work hours weeks in advance and wondering when 2 of their friends were going to admit their mad passion and get together (but they didn't say get together, they were more descriptive). Yikes, do all high-schoolers talk that way? If so, I have only 1 school year to learn to stop blushing entirely! Good thing I'm friends with Pamela! (Do all high-schoolers *do* those things?! Not that I can talk, even though I ended up not doing it with Peter.)

"Hey," 1 of the boys (white, smelled of pine smoke and rainy dog like the goth girl, so maybe related) said, "Is that girl over there OK? She looks like she's hyperventilating, and her face is all red."

That sounded bad, maybe a panic attack? I snuck a peek to see who he was looking at, but he was pointing right at me! Nyaaaaa! I hid my face in my hands, before remembering I shouldn't have been able to hear them. "Nyaaaaa!"

I could smell the feta girl was about to explode from laughing, but I couldn't tell which of them it was: the goth girl just looked confused, and the pigtails girl was stone-faced. Campfire

boy came toward me, hand extended like he might need to stop me from keeling over. “Hey, are you OK?” He was honestly concerned, which just made it more embarrassing! How could he even look at a girl after what he’d just been saying?!

Behind him, I saw the pigtails girl’s mouth twitch when I edged away from campfire boy. She knew why I was red, and she wasn’t telling them it was their fault! Now I was more mad than embarrassed, but mostly mad at myself for getting embarrassed, and only a little at Sekhmet’s sister (she knew how good Changed ears are, it must be her) for laughing at me. “I’m fine,” I said to campfire boy, who was waiting for an answer. Oh Bast, I was still wearing the messenger bag, and he’d noticed. No way was I going to do that stuff with him! But he started out trying to be nice, I shouldn’t be mean to him. Nyaaaa! “Really! Nothing’s wrong!” What I wanted him to do was go away and forget about me entirely, along with all his friends, but I couldn’t say that or he wouldn’t!

Pigtails girl finally broke down laughing, doubled over holding her belly, so loud everyone in the car looked at her. “Kevin, you dumb-butt!” she gasped out (she didn’t say *butt*). “She’s red because she heard you flapping your big mouth about Derek and Lloyd’s—! She’s probably never even seen one!” Well, not in person, but she didn’t have to make fun of me!

“What? No way!” Kevin stared at me, obviously trying to figure out how old I am and not from my face. I crossed my arms over my chest and glared at him, but I managed not to hiss. If I didn’t know boys are terrible, I might not have minded, he was kind of cute, with a round face and sandy hair and freckles, even if he was the whitest white boy ever. “What year are you?”

“Kevin, have you learned nothing from Madison’s sister? She’s about to kick your butt.” I

didn't like being talked about like I wasn't there, but at least goth girl was looking at my (flattened) ears instead of my chest! She got in between us (elbowing Kevin sharply in the stomach). "I'm sorry my cousin is such a stupid lewder!" She was cuter than him, even with the heavy makeup to hide her freckles and her hair dyed flat black. It didn't hurt that she had a fancy black corset top with crisscross ribbons that squeezed her waist in and her chest up (OK, maybe it hurt a little to wear, but it did everything a corset is supposed to). Now I was looking at *her* chest, which isn't even what girls are supposed to look for in other girls! Nyaaaa!

She noticed me looking, and didn't mind, although she smelled smug more than romantic, but I minded that she noticed and my face was going to melt right off and the automated voice said, "Milliard and 47th".

"This is our stop," goth girl said, breaking the spell (or not, her dark red lipstick did what lipstick is supposed to), and dragged her cousin away. "Bye, Madison! Harley, Jerkface."

"Hey," said the Latino boy, but he didn't sound really upset.

I hadn't thought they might split up, but I was sure it was pigtails girl — Madison — who was Sekhmet's sister. Mostly sure. But now she'd remember me, and maybe tell Sekhmet about the short, blushing, blue-haired catgirl on the train! All I could do was slink away and hope she forgot about me before she got home. I wasn't *that* funny, right? Nyaaaaa.

From the next car back, they couldn't see me and I couldn't see them, but I could stick my head out just before the doors closed to see if they had gotten off. Now different people were looking at me funny! But they weren't related to people I went to school with, so I didn't care.

It was only 2 more stops until my target got off, and I didn't even have to look outside to tell, because I heard the zoinggg of Padparadscha's shoes from the roof. I still waited until the

doors were closing to dash out, hoping she wouldn't be looking at the train by then, and it seemed to work even though it was one of the stations where people get off into the middle all together.

Following people without getting spotted is harder than it looks on TV even when they can't leap a block! The sound of Pad's leaping helped, though, and I was able to stick with them all the way to the end of the block, where the 2 boys ditched Madison. Didn't they know about the creeper? Didn't *she* know about the creeper?! I couldn't tell from so far away, but even by herself, she didn't seem worried enough to me. Did this creeper really exist? Maybe it was a trap for Padparadscha and I'd have to save her!

There were still people around, and stores open, maybe more than where Pad had picked up Madison, but no one I knew so I didn't pay any attention to them until a white guy in a gray trench coat went past the thrift store doorway I was lurking in. He didn't smell right, not like Pad's scrambled scent but definitely not normal. He didn't smell sick, but it was the same kind of change, something off with his body. I would have thought he was just on weird drugs, but he didn't act high, strolling along focused on his phone, and the smell was familiar.

It wasn't until he was halfway to Madison that I realized he smelled like The Dire and her "magic potions". Why did someone think they needed combat drugs to molest a high-school student?!

The wind changed, and blew me trench coat guy's scent as it changed from concentration to surprise. I didn't notice anything, but he was looking around wide-eyed, then back at his phone, then up at the building across the street, where Pad was perched on an apartment balcony in the upward shadow of a streetlight. Did the drugs give him better night vision? However he

spotted her, he was happy about it; maybe he was her nemesis, not Madison's creeper?

The other people on the street had their moods, none of them alarming except Madison, who smelled scared but ready to fight. So she did know about the creeper! And she had a plan, but did she know he was boosted? If her plan was to scream and pepper-spray him, it might not work now (or it might work better, if his senses were more sensitive, but it wasn't a good bet). Good thing Padparadscha was here! I hadn't seen them doing anything except jump a long ways and be mysterious, though, were they up to taking on this guy? How would they do it? The sensible thing to do would be to stay well back, but if I was going to be sensible, I should have stayed at home. I really wanted to see what kind of superhero Pamela was mixed up with!

I should have brought a long coat or a hat or something to change my profile, but I hadn't. (Maybe almost losing Slink's picture had jinxed me, but probably I'm just kind of dumb.) I just had to slink casual as I came up behind trench coat guy on his way to intercept Madison.

He was still staring at his phone, but he was muttering into a headset too, with a Canadian accent. "...not acoustic, but could be a really sweet gig." I couldn't hear the other side, he was wearing earbuds. "93 an hour is nothing to sneeze at, babe." If I hadn't just seen him using his phone to spot Padparadscha, and smelled his warped body, I might have believed he was talking about a band, but it was obviously code. "We might not be able to get 1 without the other, you know what I—" A semi went by, drowning out even his side of the conversation, but he turned into an alley between a McDonald's (eww) and a hair salon. As soon as he was past the corner, out of sight of Madison and probably Pad, he started running. His boss must have told him to go for it; he wouldn't have to run if he was bailing on the mission.

I ran after him into the gross alley (McDonald's doesn't smell any better after sitting in a

dumpster all day), hoping the street noise would be enough to cover the sound of my sneakers. If not, I was ready to scream my lungs out if he turned around to deal with me. I can't yell as loud as my mom (something to do with sonar), but I was pretty sure I could get Pad's attention if I had to, and that would work just as well for seeing what they could do.

The alley turned to come out on the street around the corner, like it should (I didn't believe the rumors about the alleys in Rhodes, but I was relieved anyway), and creeper guy flattened himself behind a stack of milk crates right at the opening. It didn't seem like much of a hiding place, but he was out of the streetlight and that was probably good enough against humans. Would it be enough against Padparadscha?

I was able to walk up quietly behind him without him noticing, but I wasn't here to fight him myself, and I couldn't do anything to him just for being suspicious (*I was being suspicious!*) so I hid behind the corner of a dumpster across from him. It wasn't that great of a hiding spot, but I was even farther into the dark alley, and holding as still as I could.

Fight

This street (Alizarine Ave, I think the sign said, but I wasn't going to pull out my phone to check) sounded a lot quieter than 53rd. There were still cars on the road, but it was finally late enough that they only had to stop at lights and signs, so they wouldn't be paying attention to what was happening on the sidewalks. Was the creeper (should I think of him as a supervillain? no, he was just creepy) going to be able to just grab Madison off the street?! Rhodes was horrible! No, there was the *zoinggg* of Padparadscha's eye-searing super-shoes, somewhere out on the street and up high. There was a superhero here to save Madison from the villainous minion, because it was Rhodes!

This was going to be awesome!

Seconds crept by and then I heard Pad leap again, closer (the creeper didn't react, either he didn't have super-hearing or he didn't know what to listen for), and Madison's heels on the sidewalk. *Tick tick tick*, and my heart was beating so fast with nerves I could barely stay out of combat mode, and I had to stop myself from jittering so much the creeper would notice me. I

took as deep and quiet a breath as I could, and tried to slow my body down by force of will, but Madison was getting closer to getting kidnapped with every step!

Creeper guy whirled out around the corner, fast as an MMA fighter on TV, and back with Madison by the arm.

Combat mode technically means thinking faster, but that's not what it feels like. It's more Zen, or maybe Daoist: what's happening tells me what I need to do without having to think about it. Creeper guy was throwing Madison into the alley full of hard concrete and metal corners and reaching into his coat, so I stepped out and caught her.

She was bigger than me and moving so fast we skidded back a few feet, and by then creeper guy already had something metal pointed at us, so I pushed her behind a dumpster, sending myself into a doorway on the other side of the alley.

ZAK! A bright blue spark hit my doorframe and stung my nose with ozone, but I was squished in enough that he couldn't hit me unless he came down the alley.

I heard him take 1 step forward before Padparadscha landed *zoinggg-thump* behind him, blowing their own scrambled scent and the smell of his body burning itself up toward me. Oh good, I'd distracted him so the superhero could— *ZAK!* Pad made a garbled sound and stumbled.

I sprang out to attack while the creeper had his spark-gun pointed back at Pad, but he was already spinning it back up from under his arm. Up, over his aim, and I kicked at his head but they don't teach flying kicks in self-defense and I only smacked his face with my toes before I was falling down to his gun.

Pad side-kicked him *zoinggg* and he bounced off the brick wall into a ready stance, spark-throwing hand (not a gun, something wrapped around his knuckles) aimed halfway between Pad

and me. Right at Madison, who was terrified and sounded she was trying to crawl under the dumpster.

Creeper's voice sounded terrible, like the drugs were dissolving his vocal cords. "Pu— Catgirl. This isn't your fight. Get lost." Like calling me the P-word was going to make me listen to him! I didn't let Madison hear my distinctive voice, just hissed at him. He flinched away from my fangs, hah!

Pad grabbed something from under their poncho while the creeper was distracted, but he lashed out with his spark *ZAK* and Pad had to dive flat to escape. I lunged as soon as his hand moved, slamming into him and pinning his shooting arm against the wall, and he cussed, but I wasn't heavy enough to keep him there. Pad was still struggling to their feet with 1 arm stiff and twisted when he threw me onto Madison.

I yowled and tried to get away from Madison, she screamed and tried to get away from me, and we ended up tangled together. Not even combat mode could keep me from noticing how soft and warm she was, but she didn't smell romantic, she smelled terrified. I wanted to keep her warm, so I twisted and shoved free, not caring where my hands went as long as all of me went toward creeper guy.

He was trying to pin Pad and get their weapon (a dustbuster?!), so down, sweeping his legs out from under him. I meant to crawl up his body and grab his throat, but instead he instantly put me in a full nelson (ha ha). None of my self-defense classes taught me how to attack people!

We didn't find if my neck bones were stronger than his hand bones. Blue light sizzled behind my head, electric needles stabbed my shoulders and neck, "NYOW!", and creeper guy

collapsed on me like a sack of dirt. Pad *shot* me!

Everywhere Pad's blue light had stabbed was numb and I couldn't move my left arm, so it took a minute to get the dead (no, just unconscious) weight off me. Pad didn't give me a hand because they were fussing over Madison, even after they *shot* me! "Nyaaa! Padparadscha!" But it came out garbled, because my vocal cords were numb too! Oh, Bast!

"Don't worry, citizen, it will wear off in a few hours. Thanks for the assistance."

Don't worry is a long ways from *I'm sorry*! All I could do was give them dirty looks, though.

Madison was still freaked out, but when she saw I was standing up and heard I was OK, she let Pad pat her shoulder and say reassuring things (they would have been reassuring without the voice filter, anyway). I wanted to go over and give her a hug (so soft and warm!) and tuck her pigtails back into place, but I didn't want her to remember me! Then I heard sirens and knew it was time to leave. No one who isn't white wants to be at a crime scene when the cops show up, but Madison was with a superhero, she'd be OK.

Thursday

I knew I was safe as soon as I peeked outside my room. If my parents even guessed what I'd been doing, I'd smell their worry. I still had to put up with them being smug and even though they'd showered I could tell why and why did I come back? Once I got back to my bike I could have just kept going in the other direction! At least the awkwardness covered any guilt they might have spotted.

Like when my dad asked, "Didn't we have a bunch of corned beef left over? I was going to make hash for breakfast."

I'd been starving when I got home, from combat mode and maybe from healing up Pad's paralysis ray (I really should have bought something on the way, but nothing good was open and I was saving up for *Age of the Black Sun IV*), and the corned beef had paid the price, along with a bunch of fried rice and half a jar of spicy dill pickles. I was glad our fridge was always stuffed, even though I'd rather have been nibbling on— Nyaa, even remembering what I'd imagined last night was too embarrassing when my parents were there! But looking embarrassed was just what

I needed. “I, um, got hungry last night.”

Mom hid her expression behind her coffee cup. (Not that anything as weak as caffeine affects her, she just likes the taste, because adults are weird.) “How are you feeling this morning?”

I’d meant them to take it as puberty stuff (it actually happened sometimes, though I didn’t normally eat that much!) but from how they smelled, I could tell they both thought I’d had a nightmare so bad I went into combat mode! (That’s happened too, but only a couple of times! I’m much better now!) I shriveled up inside, because I never wanted to make anyone that worried about me, but at least they didn’t make a big deal. “No, not like that, I was just hungry!” Did they believe me? Maybe they could tell I was lying, even if they didn’t know what I was lying about, they were both way too perceptive!

She ruffled my hair, which didn’t do much because it was still braided. “OK. Get ready to go, I need to leave in 15.”

“Nyaaa!” No time for stretches or shower, good thing I’d washed off a little after getting in! Barely time for breakfast, but I wasn’t hungry now! I gobbled down some toast and jam while throwing on a uniform (at least I didn’t have to think about what to wear!) and almost forgetting my laptop, and made it with dozens of seconds to spare!

#

I thought I’d be the 1st person in homeroom, but Pamela was already there, head down over her laptop, smelling tired and kind of sick and like burnt chemicals (medicine? traditional Sri Lankan healing?), with 1 arm in a sling. “Oh no, Pamela! What happened?!”

“Every biped’s nemesis, gravity.”

My brain was still full of last night, so I spent a minute trying to remember a supervillain named Gravity before I felt stupid. But then I felt suspicious, because *I fell down the stairs* is the standard excuse for getting beaten up. She smelled bruised, but nothing showed on her (perfectly made-up) face, and she had her uniform blazer on, and dark tights even though her skirt was short. Even her sling was a dark blue that almost matched her uniform! But she smelled stressed in a way that wasn't like pain, and I was pretty sure she was lying to me. That hurt a lot, I thought we were best friends! But maybe she had a good reason, like eavesdroppers. If we were going to be best friends, I had to give her the benefit of the doubt and act like I believed her. "It's not broken, is it?"

She smelled more stressed, I must have taken too long to answer, but smiled. "Nah, just banged up, maybe sprained a little. But never mind, look at this!" She brought up a picture of a green blob on a mottled gray background, and then flipped it to another picture with different mottling, and another, and another. The gray parts jumped around, but the green blob stayed the same.

"...OK?" It looked like an amoeba, but not really.

"I think it's still growing! Look here!" She did some mysterious key combo that made the pictures keep cycling while she pointed to part of the green with a pencil. It wasn't just a blob, it was more like several blobs squished together with green things inside, and bright curves that jumped around like the gray background. 1 of the curves at the point of Pamela's pen split into 2 and moved apart as the green blob extended out. I guess that was growing.

"OK, but what is it?"

Pamela was bouncing in her seat with excitement, and frustration that I didn't understand.

“It’s Xenofil and Biont’s moonbase!”

“Oh!” Xenofil and Biont had stolen the last Vermillion Pupae landing craft on Earth when I was about 9, to leave behind a world too corrupt and narrow-minded for their love and their mad science. I’d just been figuring out what it meant that I was going to grow up to like girls, so I thought it was terribly romantic even if they were unquestionably villains, and was crushed when their last transmission a couple of years later showed them strangling each other while biomechanical monsters warred around them. (Not that anyone should have expected anything different, they’re called mad scientists for a reason!) Now that I knew what I was looking at, I could see that it was clear domes full of greenery on the lunar surface, lit from different angles depending on when the pictures were taken, and that dome Pamela was pointing at had split off a baby dome like a bacterium. “That’s cool! But it doesn’t make a difference to anyone, does it? Even if 1 of them is still alive, we can’t get there.”

“We’ll get past the interdiction someday, and now we have somewhere to go! We can’t stay stuck on this planet forever!”

She was so excited, I had to be too, but then a whiff of foxgirl and persimmon cream distracted me. Of course Alice Yamauchi was early too, and of course she was coming over to us, nyaaaaaaa!

I glanced back as she came up behind us and got an eyeful of shadowed golden curves behind way too many undone buttons, how did she not get in trouble with the dress code?! Feeling hot all over, I stared at the blotchy pictures that blocked any reflection, but I could feel where Alice was by the heat of her skin. Then her loose hair brushed my cheek as she finished leaning in to look at Pamela’s pictures, and I felt like I was going to catch on fire. She had to

smell what she was doing to me, but *her* scent was completely calm and a bit amused like always. Nyaaaaaa!

“Do you really want to leave Earth, Rajapaksa? There’s a lot of scary stuff out there.”

Alice was a soprano, not the contralto her scent made me think of, but more than sultry enough.

“Aliens already come to shoot up our planet,” Pamela pointed out. “If we go out into the universe, maybe we can do something about that, or at least spread out enough we can survive.” (She wasn’t affected by Alice, because she’s the straightest straight girl ever.)

“Mmm. Is your current events presentation this deep, Nelson?”

She was talking to me?! “I— Um-!” Gah, get a grip! I bit my tongue to stop babbling, and took a deep breath (her shampoo smelled like tea) to get my thoughts together. It wasn’t like she wouldn’t be staring at me from the front row when I gave the presentation for real! (But she wouldn’t be close enough to touch.) “Not to most people, but maybe to us.” I didn’t have to look to know she was raising 1 eyebrow, because of course she could. “Look.” I brought up the 1st picture I’d grabbed from the AP website, the ceremonial hall white and dark red in the middle of the wave-rippling green of the North Atlantic Industrial Plant, with a path of gray water right up to the steps. Next, an old Japanese couple in dark suits standing on those stairs, with a bunch more people just as formal on each side. 3rd shot, the same except now the whalesingers were at the bottom of the stairs, bald orca-mermaids 3x human scale with bright sheath dresses that didn’t flatter their cylindrical figures but so dignified it didn’t matter. (They were technically Changed even though that’s not what most people meant by the word, but they were made streamlined and insulated to live in the ocean, not decoratively curvy like Alice or Slink.)

“They’re getting Japanese citizenship?” Alice smelled less amused, I guess it wasn’t

surprising she had feelings about that, if she was Japanese-American her family had probably left during the regime change. “It makes sense. The Meta-Shogun is their best chance at having children that aren’t experimental monsters.” She wasn’t just a straight-A student to go with being cheer captain and school idol, she was actually smart. (Smarter than me, anyway, maybe not as smart as Pamela.)

I clicked up the last picture, and Alice’s hair brushed my cheek again when she flinched, startled.

This shot was from behind the whalesingers, into the ceremonial hall where the Meta-Shogun herself stood, 8’ tall and gray-skinned with a weird bald head that her fancy hat didn’t quite hide. Behind her was another, even weirder, figure in the same kind of pinstriped robe/tuxedo, bird-beaked and with a segmented black ridge like a giant millipede running from where eyes should be back over its scaly head.

“Is that a *strategist*?!”

“I thought they were all dead with Johnny Monsterseed,” Pamela said, sounding just as amazed as Alice. “But if anybody could salvage or recreate 1, it would be the Meta-Shogun.” She put a hand over mine on the keyboard. “Is it weird? Like a cousin you didn’t know you had?” But her scent was more worried, because she’d already figured out what had taken hours to dawn on me: the strategists had been unshakably loyal, and if the Meta-Shogun had 1, maybe she knew how to put that control on any of Monsterseed’s creations, like the whalesingers. Or me and Alice.

“Yah,” I admitted. “Weird and scary. What else is still out there, that we thought was dead?” My mom might be retired, but my parents are still involved in the community, and I’ve

overheard enough about the past that doesn't get taught in History class to give me nightmares. I didn't know about Alice, but as a supers geek, Pamela probably knew too.

“Hey, Alice, what's everyone looking all gloomy for?” I didn't know the boy (Tommy something? Tony?) but he had dark curly hair and smelled like a boy looking at Alice and Pamela, so I didn't like him. I bit my tongue, though, glaring at Alice's friends wasn't going to make anything better! (How did someone as far ahead of the curves as Alice not already know that boys are awful?)

“Current events,” Alice said, and it was completely true.

#

I didn't even get called on to give my presentation, though Pamela did. I think Alice and I and Mr. Wilcox were the only ones who thought it was cool, though. Mostly it was boys presenting about military stuff going on in Ghana, and half of them smelled like they wanted to sign up so they could go shoot black people. Ugh, Ohio.

Then another white boy I didn't know or like got up at the front of the room. “This is just local news, but it's still important, because this is where we live.” Pamela and a few other people rolled their eyes, I guess he did a lot of local news, but then he used his laptop to project a picture on the whiteboard. “There was a paranormal attack just 3 blocks from my place last night!” It was a terrible picture, probably from a cheap phone, but I recognized the figure in a billowing orange-pink poncho, facing down 2 uniformed cops in a brick alley over a trench-coated body. “The police chased them away—” It was actually video, a few seconds of the 3 facing each other with body language so aggressive even I could tell, then a cop went to draw his gun and the body on the ground exploded into white smoke that filled the frame. “—this time,

but they're still out there. I know a lot of you live in that area, so be careful, OK? There have been a lot of paranormal incidents lately."

A lot of the class smelled a little scared, but Pamela was mad. I was mad too! I put my hand up at the same time I said, "How do you know they're a supervillain? For all you know, the 1 on the ground was the villain!"

"They attacked police officers! Anyway, it doesn't matter what they call themselves, paranormals fighting means people getting hurt. We need to get them off the streets."

I wasn't surprised he took the cops' side or lumped superheroes and supervillains together as *paranormals*, he was about the whitest white boy ever, but I was still disgusted. "Humans fight too, but no one wants to get you—"

"That's enough, Ms. Nelson, Mr. Hayes. Ms. Yamauchi, you're next."

I was too disgusted at Hayes (can you even get a whiter name?!) to even appreciate Alice walking to the front of the room in her short skirt. Pamela leaned over and whispered, "Don't mind Wyatt, he's an idiot. He gives this same presentation every time, and we all ignore him."

Of course Pamela ignored him, but I didn't think everyone else in class did. And now they were all disgusted because Alice was talking about a state Supreme Court case about gay marriage! Ugh, Ohio!

#

"Oh my god, Pamela, what happened to your arm?!" 7th and 8th graders don't mix much, so even if Pamela had phoned Sekhmet to let her know about last night, this was the 1st time she'd seen her. "Are you OK?" She smelled guilty, like she thought Pamela had gotten hurt fighting supervillains herself.

It was the 5th or 6th time Pamela got to use her line about the nemesis of all bipeds, but she still liked it way too much and was still probably lying, and I was pretty sure Sekhmet noticed. “Did you get hurt... doing that thing?”

“No, no! Just fell down the dorm stairs.” That didn’t smell true at all, and Sekhmet looked at me for help. Most Changed have big eyes (even Alice, who looks kind of Asian), but Sekhmet must practice the puppy-dog eyes!

I wanted to help her, but I didn’t know any more than her, and had to pretend like I knew less. “What thing?”

“Oh, never mind!” She frowned at Pamela’s arm. “I guess everything is OK. Catch you later!” she added as her fellow cheerleaders swept her away.

When we had our burgers and a table in the corner of the girl’s dorm cafeteria (Pamela said the food was better than the main cafeteria, and who would go to the boy’s dorm? It probably had roaches!) I leaned forward and gave her my most intimidating glare that didn’t involve fangs. “How did you really get hurt?”

She took me seriously, but it didn’t help. “I slipped and fell down the stairs in the dorm.” She didn’t try to sound sincere, but she smelled determined. OK, it was really secret, so I wanted to know even more!

“OK, if you say so.” I took a big bite of my burger and thought about how to find out what Pamela was up to besides finding targets for superheroes (I didn’t care what Wyatt Hayes or the police said, saving someone from a kidnapper is heroic!). I had to go home after school, and she had to stay here until Friday. It wasn’t so far that I couldn’t come back on my bike, but I didn’t think I could sneak out 2 nights in a row. Anyway, now that she was hurt, she might not be

doing anything risky. I definitely couldn't sneak out just to watch Pamela sleep! Alice, on the other hand... No, bad catgirl! I didn't even know if Alice stayed in the dorms.

What about Madison? The creeper had been working with someone, and had a reason for going after her beyond creepiness. He wanted Padparadscha too— did they know? I only knew because I overheard him on the phone to his boss, and I didn't know if Pad had heard that or tapped his phone. If he (or his buddies, although I didn't think the cops would hold a well-dressed white guy, they'd probably turn him loose just to spite Pad) were hunting them, with an app to find them, and they didn't know—!

“Pamela— no, there's already too much eavesdropping.” I bent over my phone to keep anyone from seeing the note I typed out, *creeper wanted Pad 2, had app to find them*, and passed it face-down to Pamela. I instantly had second thoughts, what if Pad hadn't told her about meeting me? No, I was OK with it if they had, so I had to be OK with it now.

Pamela raised 1 eyebrow while she erased the message. “Are you sure?”

“Pretty sure.”

“OK, thanks. I'll let them know.” She still didn't smell honest, but I didn't have any other way to get in touch with Pad. I really didn't like this! I thought Pamela was my friend, I thought I could trust her, but all she'd done today was lie!

My burger tasted awful, and I didn't have anything to say to her, so why I was still there? I grabbed my phone back and left.

It was a beautiful day outside, not too hot like it probably was in California, but I didn't care, I didn't even really feel it. Rhodes wasn't any better than San Diego, lying to my face wasn't any better than giving me the cut direct. Maybe I just wasn't the kind of person who could

have friends. Whatever it was that let people connect with each other, I didn't have it, that's probably why my biomom got rid of me.

Pamela came out into the courtyard between the school buildings and turned in a circle, but she didn't even blink when her eyes passed over me. She had to have seen me, I was sitting in plain sight on the wall that kept people from falling into the little stream, but I guess she didn't have to care.

The bell rang and people started moving back into the buildings. I had Language Arts next, but Pamela would be there. No one would *care* if I sat in the courtyard all afternoon, but teachers had to check my name off and I'd get in trouble. Then there'd be parent-teacher meetings and lectures and crap, even if no one cared. I got up and went to my locker, following the last person into Peterson Hall where my locker was. The halls were almost empty, maybe I'd get in trouble anyway.

Ms. Hamilton didn't notice when I walked into the room. Neither did Preston Chen, even though he usually said hi and tried to be friendly. He must have figured out that I wasn't going to date him. Or whatever gross stuff he wanted to do to me. Of course Pamela didn't, lucky for her we had assigned seating and she was way back in the corner, nowhere near me.

"Murdoch?" A black boy with thick glasses waved. Oh, Ms. Hamilton was still calling roll. "Nelson?"

"Present," I said automatically. Ms. Hamilton didn't react, but Preston jumped, and on the other side of the room, Pamela almost fell out of her seat. What was their problem, they didn't even care about me! Except they kind of did, although I couldn't smell it through all the other people in the classroom. Maybe I should have stayed outside where it was quiet! But going to the

office wouldn't be any better. I sighed and opened my book to the section on complicated Greek names for figures of speech.

#

Pamela grabbed my hand as I tried to leave the Language Arts room. "Nef! Are you OK?"

I wasn't as upset as during lunch, but I still wasn't very happy with her, even though she smelled really worried. "I'm fine." She didn't believe me, but that wasn't my fault! "Just make sure you deliver that message."

She looked at me all serious and big-eyed. "I will." It wasn't fair for such a straight girl to be so pretty! Nyaaa! I ran for it, before Preston could squeeze through the door past (against) my huge butt. "Text me later," Pamela called after me. Maybe.

"Are you OK, sweetie? You seem kind of down." My dad looks pretty intimidating, with his huge mane of curly reddish hair, and beard tied into a rope with copper wire, and I guess maybe he's tough at work, but really he's a cinnamon roll. Kind of an embarrassing cinnamon roll, but at least he didn't get out of the car in his obscure mythology T-shirt and utilikilt. Ohioans would freak out! Our little electric car was weird enough in the parking lot full of SUVs and big American cars.

I wanted to tell him about Pamela keeping secrets, but then he'd wonder what kind of secrets, and it was the same kind I was keeping from him! Maybe I should tell him anyway? If I wasn't going to have friends, did being grounded forever matter? Yes, it did! My room was too small to spend the rest of my life in!

He let me stew while he got us out of the parking lot and into the perpetual traffic jam headed toward home. “Sweetie?”

I couldn’t even complain to him about secrets, because he has to keep all kinds of secrets for his job. The League and the Knights wouldn’t let him work on their mysterious sorcery problems if he couldn’t keep his mouth shut! “...I’m just dumb, don’t mind me.” I crossed my arms grouchily and stared out the window at all the people working and walking and driving and making out in broad daylight (yikes!) and not caring that they didn’t know everything about their friends. “I had a fight with Pamela,” I admitted. “But it was my fault.” Did Pamela even know it was a fight? I’d just freaked out and stopped talking to her!

He tried to muss my hair, but I keep it in a bun for school (so I’m not shorter than the 6th-graders!) so he was foiled. “Good for you, sweetie.”

Good would be not having a pointless fight to begin with, but he knew I knew that. It was still nice to have someone tell me I wasn’t horrible.

A wave of traffic swept us almost 3 blocks before everything jammed up again. “You know there’s a train that goes from 2 blocks from home to 1 block from school, right?”

“Let us fuss over you for 1 week, OK? Then you can be grown-up and fend for yourself.”

“OK.” I didn’t mind being picked up and dropped off, at least not now, but sitting in traffic smog wasn’t doing my throat any good.

“What are you thinking about?” Dad asked after another 2 blocks.

“Secrets.”

“Juicy ones?”

“Not any particular secrets, just secrets in general.”

“Do you need fatherly advice, or should I just nod knowingly?” He really wouldn’t give advice if I didn’t ask, which I really appreciated.

“You and Mom have secrets, right?”

“Myriads.” That meant 10s of 1000s. “Mostly from my work, but she has plenty left over from when she worked for the Navy, and she’ll have more when she’s a lawyer. That’s not counting the miscellaneous secrets everyone accumulates just by knowing other people.”

He was right, everyone had secrets, it was just a fact of life. I shriveled up more. Just because I was interested in Pamela’s secrets didn’t mean she had to tell me! I was such a failure as a best friend! Did she even think of me that way? I hadn’t seen her act close to anyone, but I’d known her for all of 4 days and obviously I didn’t know everything about her. Maybe I was just being too clingy, glomming on to the 1st person to be nice to me even though I was too defective to have friends.

Dad didn’t say anything else the rest of the drive, letting me stew until I figured out things on my own, or maybe just thinking about all his own secrets. Probably the 2nd, since he didn’t even hold the elevator up from the parking garage for me and I had to scamper to not get left behind!

My phone buzzed. It was Pamela. *Are you okay?* My parents thought it was rude to text when you were with someone, but Dad was still lost in his own thoughts.

no, i sux, sry

You don’t suck, except for worrying me! What happened?

ovrcm w/stupids

Stop beating yourself up and tell me what happened!

I didn't *have* to tell her, it could be my secret, but that didn't seem right. *ovrhrd u on fone w/sekhmet, followed madison 2 c whats up, but u wldnt tell me*

I know. You helped Padparadscha.

u not mad?

Did you tell anyone else?

no!

I just have to be more careful next time. Texting isn't as secure, though.

can u tell me more? i want 2 help

It's dangerous. I don't want you to get hurt.

I sent back an emoji of flexing arms.

I don't just mean getting your butt kicked like almost happened last night. You could get in trouble with superheroes, even the police.

u cld get in trbl 2, but u still do it

My dad let the apartment door swing closed right in my face! He really must have been out of it! I caught it before it latched and shoved it open. "Dad! What happened to fussing over me?"

He whirled at the same time he slid back to keep from getting whacked, hands coming up. Then he shook his head. "Nef! Sorry, I must have spaced out."

"If you get senile, you're going right into a home!"

"Bah, I'm as sharp as ever, young lady! Er, have we met?"

Mom came in while we were still laughing like hyenas. "Nef, stop the elder abuse, it's your night to make dinner." (Dad is about 4 days older than her, so she likes to pretend he's

unspeakably ancient.)

#

Pamela chatted me again after dinner, when I was full of pork fried rice and pot stickers (from a bag, but still good) and thinking about going to sleep instead of doing homework. *What did you overhear from the kidnapper?*

he was talking on fone, tried 2 make it sound like talking abt bands but obv code, said P was "not acoustic", "93" (good), maybe cldn't get M w/o P, tgted P with app

Did you see if he had anything besides his phone?

not in hand, cld be anything under coat

The app told him right where P was, or just that someone was in the area?

I tried to remember exactly what the creeper had done. *looked at app, looked at balcony they were on*

She had a few more questions about exactly what I'd seen, but that wasn't the important thing here! *he will try 2 get M & P again!! with help!*

They're ready for him. No smiley. Well, Pad was a superhero, but she got shot anyway, and who knows what could have happened if I hadn't been there! But now she knew to expect zap guns and combat drugs. Maybe she even had help of her own, *they* could be plural as well as nonbinary.

k, tell her gl

I was trying to do algebra homework between messages, not getting very far because of the constant *dings*, but then it started going better until I realized it was because I hadn't been interrupted.

pamela? yt?

The app said she was still logged in, but no answer. Was she busy with Pad? I still didn't know how they worked together, if they did, but I hadn't heard Pad talking to anyone like the creeper had. Nyaaa! What was going on?!

After that, I couldn't get any homework done at all. I didn't want to bug Pamela if she was busy, so I made myself wait until the end of each problem set to chat her, but it never helped. When I was done with algebra, I tried texting her, but still nothing. Had the creeper tracked back from Pad to Pamela? Was he busting into Pamela's house right now?!

It was late enough that my parents might be in bed, I could try sneaking out, but I didn't know where she lived! The Internet didn't know either, or at least it wouldn't tell me for free.

My parents weren't in bed, my mom came to look in on me. "Nef, are done with— what's wrong?"

I was so worried I thought about telling her, she would know what to do about superhero stuff! But I didn't know that's what was going on! "I was texting Pamela to try to make up, and I thought it was going OK, but then she stopped answering!"

"It's after 2200," she pointed out. "Maybe she fell asleep, like you should be doing."

I made a horrible face, but she was right. Pamela had been up late dealing with Pad stuff, probably, like I had, even if she didn't seem tired during the day. My horrible face turned into a yawn, and Mom laughed. It made me mad, but I stifled that because I *wanted* her to think nothing important was going on! "Yeah, OK." I closed my textbooks. "I'll talk to her tomorrow."

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