

Schismatic

The location Pamela had pulled from Bruson's phone was an 8-story building that back ~~home~~ in California would be a whole block of industrial buildings, an auto body shop, a building painter, a landscaper, storage, and hands up what else that didn't bother to put a sign out. It seemed like the kind of place a creep like Bruson would do creepy stuff when he wasn't creepily scanning my butt, although we still didn't know what his creepy stuff was. Even on Sunday afternoon, people were going in and out the front, and even a pickup with a bunch of landscapers or painters in the back. The alley behind was empty, though, prob because it was half-blocked with dumpsters and smelled so gross even a human would stay out, but maybe because 1 of Dr. Dendros's trees was vining up the backside of the building. People in Rhodes are weird about the trees even though the symbiotic beetles that were supposed to make them intelligent are completely extinct (I'm sure, my mom helped with that!) but the carbon filaments make them so expensive to cut down that sketch neighborhoods (where I was) still had some in back alleys (same).

If the bottom floors were full of people, I might as well start at the top and hope I found some trace of Bruson before it got too crowded. Pamela's plastic box full of electronics showed only 1 blue light: no cameras, and no one was around, so I went up the vine like a staircase, not having to pretend the thorns could hurt me. I didn't even have to take my claw sheaths off.

I could barely see through the grimy windows (if they wouldn't pay someone to cut down the tree, they wouldn't pay someone to make it easier to see it from inside) but it looked like the top floor was a double-height warehouse space full of empty crates, stacks of pallets, some broken furniture, and rusty barrels. Hands up what was in the barrels, but it was prob flammable to complete the fire hazard theme. There was a loft on the other side, though, with crates piled up to completely block the view from outside or below. That def looked like a good place for Bruson to be creepy, and there was a ledge around the building that was as good as a sidewalk for me as long as no one was looking to see how dire I am. (OK, I did hold on, even I don't want to fall 8 stories!)

My 1st thought when I pried open the bathroom window and got a whiff was that they were growing something, not weed, but green plants and chemicals that might be fertilizer. I didn't hear anyone moving, but I could smell someone had been there recently, and... honey? Wax? Was Bruson running a secret beehive? He wasn't here now,

though, and Pamela's box still said no security, so I opened the window as quietly and carefully as I could and squeezed my huge butt through. The bathroom (restroom, no shower or tub) had been used a day or 2 ago (male, not Bruson, notes of orange oil and rusty nails, smoker, too much bacon, lots of meds I didn't know so prob old) but was pretty clean, and I still couldn't hear anyone moving around, so I peeked out into the loft.

No plants, and no people, although I could nose them both. Or maybe not "both", I wasn't sure they were separate smells. Plant-people? And they were here, somewhere, even though I couldn't hear movement or even breath. There were grow-lights over some big crates in the far corner that had hoses running from shelving units above them, and how was I not going to check? Curiosity may have killed the cat, but satisfaction def brought her back.

They weren't hidden, 3 of them, 2 men and a woman, naked on their backs in coffin-sized boxes with IVs at elbows and crotch running to boxes and cannisters of chemical smells. They looked human enough except for the pale ruff of filaments instead of hair, and light green skin darkening to purple at lips and nipples and, um, further down. At least on the woman, and prob the purple would be more visible on the men if they worked like the wellness textbooks said human men did, and I was staring but they were all naked and del and it's a lot different when they're in front of you and not in a computer screen! They were the honey and purple wax smells too, and something acid-citrusy but with weird undertones, because just being plant-people wasn't weird enough.

A handful of bright gold bees crawled out of the nearest guy's hair-fluff and flew to the other boxes. Bees and plant-people went together def plaus, but it reminded me of something. I'd ask Pamela later if I couldn't remember it, knowing things is half of what she does (besides getting things off the top shelf). Normal bees can't get through my skin, but for all I knew these were magic bees with laser stings, so I backed off a bit, just in case. Not far enough that I couldn't see everything, though, because, well, beautiful naked people. They weren't super-buff, and the girl wasn't super-curvy, but they were all slender and sleek and smooth skin and soft-looking lips and dangerous cheekbones. The same cheekbones, the guys looked like twins and the girl like their sister. If they were mad science, they were prob clones, and if they were magic, hands up. I couldn't tell what was notes and what was just plant-people anyway.

The bees vanished behind the other 2's ears, and the further guy gave a little sigh, maybe the 1st breath from any of them although they smelled alive, and rolled a little. The

acidic flag got stronger, and the undertones changed, and oh, Bast, his purple was coming out to play! Nice dream or-- the girl did a little arch, pretty round breasts standing up and no time to look because they were *waking up*! A+ keeping your mind on the job, Nef!

I made it behind the modular shelves full of old computers just before she sat up and opened her eyes. I would have guessed purple, but they were poppy-red and bigger than almost any human's, maybe as big as mine. I watched between two computers that should have been recycled before I learned to talk as she stretched again, ran her hands down her body to check that all the yumminess was still there (it def was, and she def liked it) and took a few deep breaths. The guys were doing the same, and they weren't talking but the bees buzzing around them felt like they were conversation, and finally it clicked. These were Apiary's new bodies, and they were about a 10000% improvement over their old beehive-zombies! Were they zombies too? They def didn't smell like it, they were moisture and salt and hormones and all the stuff of life (plant and animal both).

Especially hormones, the kind people accuse me of having. Hands up how that worked for bodies that were mostly plant, but the girl hopped into 1 guy's box and started kissing him and he was doing the yumminess check and the other guy came up behind her to kiss the back of her neck and people who talk about my hormones were right because I couldn't look away and I was wondering what those hands would feel like on *my* body and melting inside in a way that usually takes complete privacy and thinking about Alice Yamaguchi. Nyaaaaa!

No matter how much I liked and was mortified by watching, this wasn't what I was here for, so I should have pretended to be a decent person and ejected, but the action was between me and the door. The wall behind me was only reinforced concrete, but clawing through it would be destructive and obvious and most important right then, not very quiet. I'd just have to wait for Apiary's personal time to distract all their bodies enough that I could sneak by. It didn't seem like it would be much longer, the guy whose box they were in was lying back with the other two sliding down on top of him and the bees were buzzing around more and more excitedly and their flags proved they weren't faking it, and oh, Bast! But fatal curiosity or not, it was def my chance to eject. I edged out from behind the shelves, sliding along the wall. I *know* walking normally is the best way to not attract attention, but listening to the gasps like a cyclopean perv made me sneak like a cyclopean perv.

I was at the point closest to the action, feeling like I was going to catch on fire just from the smell, never mind the sounds or the cute boy butt arching up from the box, but almost in reach of the door, when the girl body sat up and smiled at me.

Her smile wasn't as stunning as Pamela's, but it was sultry and came with heavy-lidded eyes and a beckoning finger that glistened wetly. (Really it was *their* smile, just delivered through a part of them that had delicate features and heaving breasts, but right then I wasn't thinking about hive mind theory or pronouns or really even words.) And, in case I wasn't gay enough (which I def am!), 1 of the boy bodies leaned up on an elbow and gave me the same smile, although I barely noticed it because his pose showed his whole front, and wow. Would that even fit? My tail looks thicker but that's mostly fluff. What would it feel like to try?

Even in my own head, I say it like, "making out with people ends in blood and screaming and moving to another state" like it's no big deal, but when the girl body caught hold of my wrist because I had come so hither, I remembered what had really happened. No, it didn't *happen*, I *did* it, and I still remember what an eyeball feels like popping under my claw. I yanked my arm back without thinking, hard enough to hurt a human, but the Apiary-girl just looked disappointed at me and pulled her hand back. The bees swarmed buzzing around their heads, but not threateningly.

I was ready to run for it, before I could hurt them, but I wasn't flipping out from being grabbed. Was it going to be OK? I reached out and took her hand (slender and pretty, not fat like mine), and when her fingers closed around mine, I pulled away again. She instantly let go, but their flags were kind and hopeful and somehow still fancying me. I took a step forward and reached for her 1 more time. I knew I should have known better, but so del!

Half a dozen cool hands drew me in for kisses from the girl body's plush lips. Her mouth tasted like honey and flowers and, um, boy, and practically the last thought that made it through my brain was hoping whichever boy body it had been wasn't mad she stopped. Then my top was unzipped and gone, baring more skin to rub against theirs, and a face was nuzzling happily into my cleavage until my bra came loose and really my last thought was being embarrassed about my weird pointy puberty breasts but then there was a mouth on each one, and teeth, and no more thinking, only purring and feeling (mostly skin but a little heart too).

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I was a melted, purring lump with no stress left in me at all, happily buried under cool bodies that felt wonderful on my overheated skin. However long it had taken, I had finally reached the point where I didn't *need* any more, even though I could have kept going. Apiary was at the same point, the girl body was straddling my leg and rubbing against me where my tail went into her, but not seriously, and the boy bodies were just breathing and satisfied. I had a bruised ache up inside, and we were a cyclopean mess covered in more bodily fluids than I ever expected, my wig was gone (with everything else that kept people from knowing what I really look like), but I didn't care. The 1st thought my brain made was, that was *absolutely* amazing, and the next, why haven't I been doing this since I started puberty? Why haven't I been doing this since I *heard* about puberty? (Because I was too embarrassed, obv's, and then when I tried it anyway, blood and screaming. But all I had to do was make sure they knew not to set Murder Nef off!)

I hugged whatever I could get my arms around, not minding the bees crawling over my fingers when I tangled them in someone's hair-filaments, and wondered how long I could keep lying there and how long until we were up for more, but then my stomach rumbled embarrassingly loudly. The boy body lying with a head on my belly (not minding how squishy it was, which was def part of why I was feeling so fond of them, they liked all of my body, not just the usual sexy parts and the cute parts like my ears, but even my dire, digitigrade feet) gave a breathy chuckle that was the loudest sound I'd heard any of them make and sat up. I hoped he wasn't going to try to get me ~~lunch~~ dinner? midnight snack? by plugging me into an IV line, the needle wouldn't go through my skin, but there wasn't any other food around unless they were going to do serious mad science to some of the boxes full of chemicals. Which Apiary could! But it seemed like a lot more work than finding my phone and ordering pizza.

Normally I'm not a complete idiot, and Murder Nef is very sharp in her way (which isn't as limited as it sounds), but Melty Nef doesn't have any higher brain functions at all, and I hadn't congealed enough to think what a bad idea it was to order pizza to a loft that contained a naked middle-school girl and equally naked parts of a more-or-less adult superhero, or wonder if the adult superhero made a habit of getting naked with 8th graders, or any of the 1000000 other questions that I should have been thinking about.

It turned out Murder Nef was closer than I thought, because the elevator had stopped at this floor, and some of those questions were suddenly of cyclopean importance. I grabbed my wig (Apiary was a superhero, they would respect disguises even if they didn't use any themselves) and slithered out of the pile of coziness, but Apiary was already

moving and the girl body was tugging me toward the shelves where I had been hiding before. 1 boy body threw a bundle of clothes to me and then joined the other at the top of the stairs. I scrambled into my clothes and stuffed my underthings into my pack (*everything* was going to need to go in the wash!) while whoever was at the door (same guy as the bathroom, extra blood and woodsmoke today, def, vaguely Southern accent) complained about disgusting freaks, and they better not be "fiddling with themselves" again, and oh god put on some pants or send the one with breasts to answer the door (he didn't say "breasts", he didn't say anything without cussing), and they had to eject in 15. He wasn't all that disgusted, but he seemed like a toxic masculinity sort of guy and it's Ohio.

Girl-APIary towed me away before I could get my shoes on, not toward the door but behind some crates by the opposite wall, where the secret escape hatch was. (*Obvs* there was a secret escape hatch from the mad scientist's orgy loft.) I paused halfway through and held out my phone with the contacts list open. Apiary tilted her head at me -- maybe there were rules about not trying to stay in touch after something like this? But wellness class had never covered that, and I was up for doing this again any time! After a moment she typed something, leaned even further forward to kiss my forehead, and closed the hatch on me.

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The restroom at the train station wasn't out of order, so I was able to clean off with wet paper towels in a stall and get properly dressed, but I could tell I still smelled like Apiary all over. Nyaaaah! I didn't regret anything I'd done, but that didn't mean I wanted everybody to know about it! I avoided people as much as I could on the train home (easier at dinnertime on Sunday), but had to pass 1 Changed. Her eyebrows went all the way up her forehead when she saw who smelled like an orgy in a beehive, but my flags were happy-embarrassed, not ashamed or traumatized, and my tail was swishing instead of lashing, so she gave me a straight-faced thumbs-up and carried on. She got on at the stop before I got off, so I had to hope she wouldn't gossip with anyone who knew me, but there wasn't anything I could do about it about now. Next time I did something like that, it had to be somewhere with a shower!

I tried to work on those important questions all the way home, but kept getting distracted from the consequences of what happened by-- what happened. Nyaaa! If I could do it, I could at least think about it by the right word! I'd had sex with Apiary! And it was absolutely wonderful and I wanted to do it again! Which I could, if I had Apiary's number. I checked, and they'd entered what looked like a real phone

number. I thought about texting them, but the guy at the door had been getting them to go do something, so I prob shouldn't do it now. How soon did I have to call to keep them from losing interest? How long did I need to wait so I wouldn't look clingy? Another thing wellness class didn't cover! But maybe humans had to wait a while anyway? My inside bruising or muscle strain or whatever was fine now (except for making me blush when I thought about it), but a human or a less-dire Changed might be sore for a while. If I couldn't text, I could at least search for a picture and smile goofily at it. So unspeakably del!

I should I have texted Pamela as soon as I got out, but I'd been too distracted. She texted as I was getting home, *Is everything all right? Did you find anything?*. I thought about texting back a row of eggplants and tacos, but I wanted to see the look on her face!

im fine

no sry

!!!

and after checking the time, *ofc 7pm*

See you there.

I should have said 7:30 but even a short shower was wonderful. I was going to have to do laundry before Dad got home, though. With all the everything piled into 1 laundry basket, even a human would be able to smell it.

Pamela was waiting in our office, casually del, all notes of gun oil and moonlight on snow and galaxy tights on her 9 yards of leg. (It isn't really an office, or at least we never take clients there, it's just a storage closet behind the laundry room where Pamela set up her computers and radio taps and stuff because it's right next to the main power and internet lines for the whole building.) She looked me up and down, doing that thing where she can tell how I'm doing without being able to smell my flags. "Hey, Nef. I'm glad you're back, but what took the whole afternoon and was worth 3 exclamation marks, if it wasn't the job?" She wasn't happy, but I thought that was just that I hadn't found any of the people we were looking for. Something about her being neurodivergent makes her flags faint and kind of blurry.

My stupid little brain thought, obvs she calls them exclamation marks, not bangs, and then I started blushing, because, well, 3 bangs. It had been a lot more than 3, though, depending how you count! "Nyaaaa! Um!" Pamela was blunter at talking about sex than any 8th-grader I'd ever met, even though she'd never done it, but I just couldn't, even though I'd managed to think it earlier. Now she was staring, curious. "I..." A+ maturity, Nef! I took a deep breath. "IhadsexwithApiary."

For the 1st time since I'd met her, Pamela was speechless. She didn't do the fish-face thing people do, but she stared at me for at least 5 seconds before she could even say, "You. What.". I should have felt bad about breaking her brain, but I was physically unable to feel bad about anything!

"I found the building, but the ground floor was unspeakably busy, even on Sunday, so I climbed up the back and started from the top. I didn't get past the top floor, it was some kind of secret hideout, with some of Apiary's bodies and prob life-support kit. When I came in, they were waking up and, um. Having some personal time."

Pamela didn't think I was lying, exactly, but she thought this sounded pretty sketch. I couldn't blame her! "And you dived right into the masturbating plant ladies?"

"They invited me!" She thought that was even more sketch, so I tried to imitate the "get that body over here" expression and gesture, even though Pamela was prob too straight to get it. "I mean, the girl body did this!"

I must have done it right, because Pamela did get it, but she wasn't happy about it. "*The* girl body? They weren't all? Nef, that wasn't Apiary."

"Wait, what? No, it def was!" I pulled up the picture I'd been looking at on the train. It was from some kind of press conference, so the body standing at the podium was dressed in a sharp pinstriped grey suit, hair-fibers arranged stylishly, and body language professional, but the face was the same, the plush purple lips were the same as the ones I'd-- focus, Nef! Height and build the same (counting heels), del curve of hips in the knee-length pencil skirt. "This is her!" But I was wrong about being able to feel bad, because I getting that hollow feeling in my chest of having made a mistake. Pamela isn't *always* right, but I wouldn't bet against her.

Pamela was really worried now. "Now that she has some morphological agency and doesn't have to take whatever corpses the bees will live in, Apiary identifies as a woman. All her bodies are feminine." Her fingers danced across a keyboard without looking, and the big screen showed an article from the *Cryptical Almanac*, Rhodes's cool indie newspaper.

The hollow feeling was a huge pit now, something going wrong and not even Murder Nef could help. "But..." The beautiful faces on the screen were the same as the one that had gone between-- "Nyaaaa! You're sure? But then who--?"

"I don't know, but if they're not just stealing or copying Apiary's work but modifying it, they must be connected to

her, and she'll want to know." She was def right, a mad scientist who didn't already have feelings about Apiary wouldn't be able to resist making bodies completely different than hers to show off. It was just how mad scientists worked.

Pamela was so upset for me that she hadn't even asked for the juicy details, and that convinced me more than anything else. I couldn't say she was wrong, I'd want to know if my nemesis was going around using my face and body to seduce people, but I'd been happy and wanting to tell my best friend about what happened and now it was all emergencies and superheroes and everything was awful. I wanted to cry even before I realized she wanted me to tell *my dad's coworker* that I had sex with a supervillain! And thought it was her! Oh, Bast! No, wait, I didn't have to say how close I'd gotten, just that I'd seen flower-boys! And stick to that while being interrogated by a professional superhero. I said hopefully, "If it's someone connected to her, she prob already knows, we don't need to bother her."

Pamela shook her head. "We should let her know." She was afraid, enough to make her determined even though she usually doesn't want to get involved with superheroes.

"We could leave a tip on the hotline, then." No, that wasn't OK either. "Pamela, what's the matter?"

She said slowly, "You were there, so probably you're right that when your new stranger-with-benefits spotted you, they thought 'she looks like a summer thunderstorm in Vegas'. But a mad scientist might have been thinking, 'she looks sturdy enough to be the mother of Earth's next dominant species'."

"Nyaaaaaah!" I hadn't worried about catching anything because my dire immune system is stronger than any natural germ, and even the boy bodies hadn't smelled enough like humans that I worried about getting pregnant, and no, I didn't think of any of that until after, but it made the ride home a lot less stressful. But if mad science was on the ~~table bed~~ shipping crate, Not-Apiary could have infected me with the next great henshin plague, or rewritten my DNA so my bones would turn to jello, or filled my, um, body with mutant space bees, or hands up! "But..." Maybe my brain was still melted, and I didn't know much about 1-~~night~~ afternoon stands, but I didn't think they would have done something like that. If they just wanted to use me for my body, in the old-fashioned *or* mad science way, they wouldn't have had to-- well, a lot of what we did! And teaching me what to do was a waste if I was just going to turn into biomass! "It wasn't like that! I think. Nyaaaaah!" If they could change their biochemistry, they could fake their flags, and hands up what their brains would think was a good idea!

Five minutes ago I'd been thinking my afternoon was 10/10, could be 12/10 with a real bed and convenient shower, and now Pamela had me thinking about mutant space bees growing in my uterus! I kind of hated her for it, but that was cyclopean unfairness, she was trying to help by thinking of what Melty Nef had been too dumb to realize, so really I hated myself, and prob deserved to have to tell a superhero that I had sex with someone I thought was her. And ask her for a mad science medical exam. And there was 0% chance she wouldn't tell my dad, and then my life would be *over*. We'd already had to move halfway across the country because I was so horny and stupid, this time he'd just kick me out on the street to get sacrificed by cultists! (Too bad cults didn't really care about virginity when they were murdering people.)

Pamela saw me dying inside and jumped up to hug me. Usually she gave me 1-armed side hugs because it was awkward when my face smushed into where her cleavage was going to be and I had a feeling about it and she didn't, but this time she wrapped her arms around me and hung on. "I'm probably wrong! Supers get just as addled by lust as the rest of us, and you are an *absolute delicacy*! I think your afternoon of passion was just that, not part of a diabolical plan for world domination." But.

I managed not to cry, but I def sniffled a little on her sweatshirt. "But it's not a chance to take, and that's why you want to talk to Apiary directly instead of leaving a tip on the hotline."

"That and I'm not sure they ever check those tips. Too many nutters passing on information decoded from their lottery numbers." She squeezed and let me go. "Do you have any contacts in the Tower?"

She meant the League of Heroes (Rhodes Division) and their skyscraper headquarters, and it was a good question, but although Dad had been working with the League nonstop since we got to Rhodes, he hadn't brought any of them to dinner or taken me to the Tower to meet people, so I didn't know any of them myself. Everyone I knew in the community was back in California, most of them hated me, and even if they knew someone in Rhodes, they'd want to get my dad involved. Nyaaah! I might as well cut out the middlehero and call Dad myself! "Why get pushed when you can jump?" I picked up my phone again and brought up texts, but couldn't bring myself to do it. Would being eaten alive from the inside really be that bad? I put it off by changing the number in my contacts to "Not Apiary!!!" but adding a few hearts because what emoji means "booty call"? Tacos and eggplants, obv.

Pamela could tell I was stalling, and she was sympathetic but she wasn't going to let me get eaten. Not in the fatal

way, anyway. "Deep breaths, blow your nose, sip of the elixir of life." She meant diet Dr. Pepper, because some of the girls at school said it made your chest grow, and breasts are def symbols of life and fertility, and that's about how many levels Pamela usually thinks on, but I might not have turned down whiskey. (I def would, that much alcohol smells gross, but something to steady my nerves would have been nice.) "Think of it as practice for boasting about your many future affairs."

That made me blush, because even the idea of horrible parasites didn't stop me from wanting to do that again. Just more carefully, maybe not with supervillains (except maybe Slink... or Mooncat, or Hyaenadonna, or nyaaa!), unless they promised not to implant larvae in me. Or I suddenly got smart enough to use condoms, but would that even help? Birth control pills def wouldn't help against larvae, but I should figure out how to get some anyway, in case I met a human boy who wasn't terrible. And now I was thinking instead of just worrying, even if I was mostly thinking about sex (breaking news!) and I could face calling my dad and telling him about my afternoon. After which, he'd ground me until I'm 50 and it would just be me and my tail and my hands.

I did try texting, *hi dad*
u have apiarys #? saw smthg she needs 2 kno

That was as far as I got before it rang. "Hi Dad. Would it kill you to just text back?" I prob should have been nicer since I was asking a favor, but it was easy to be grouchy since he was such a terrible single dad, and hid the worry, I hoped.

"It would be just as painful as you having to use punctuation and vowels. What's this you need to tell Apiary about?" I could hear he was in a car, hopefully he couldn't talk long.

"When I was downtown this afternoon, I saw someone who looked like Apiary's new bodies, green and flowery and head bees, but some of the bodies were boys, which I don't think she has." He had lots of questions, which I only answered honestly when I had to. I was running an errand for Ms. Rajapaksa, I checked where I saw the fake Apiary and it smelled like horny flower-bee boys (I def meant to segue that into the confession, but he snorted and went on before I could!). No, I didn't know where they went, I didn't try to follow them, and then Antigorite's distinctive parrot squawk interrupted him.

"Sorry, S-- Neffie." Neffie?! Maybe I could get Pamela's family to adopt me, because mine was def substandard! What was left of it. "I have to go. I'll let Apiary know and

she can call you if she wants more details, OK? Love you. Bye."

"Love you," I said, and it was true in spite of everything, but he was already gone and so was my chance to tell him before he found out from someone else. "Nyaaaaaah!"

Pamela hugged me again, the usual way. "I think 'I was trying to figure out how to tell you when you hung up on me' will work here." I wasn't sure, but it was too late. If he was in the field, I couldn't just call him back. Sure, if I distracted him and cultists killed him, I'd never have to confess, but he wasn't *that* bad of a dad even now. "Did he say when he was going to tell her?" I shook my head. Pamela smiled brightly. "So, I hear you've had sex! What was it like? Did you--" She still smelled worried, but it was nice of her to pretend everything was cool.

I meant to tell her all about it when I got in, but now after everything, I was embarrassed again! "Nyaaaaaah!" She laughed so hard at my burning face, she almost choked.

Obvs I ended up trying to tell her, but before I could even explain why I didn't do the thing she thought was obvious with two boy bodies (I've heard it can feel really good, but it still seems weird and gross), my phone rang. Unknown number, downtown area code. Already?!

I tried hard to sound adult, maybe if I seemed mature she wouldn't be judgy about my having sex with her evil clones or whoever. "Nefertari Nelson."

"Ms. Nelson." We hadn't said anything all afternoon so I didn't know if the voice was the same, but it was a nice voice in spite of being businesslike and not at all sultry. "This is Apiary. I hope you were expecting my call?"

"Yes, but not this soon." Oh Bast, was I sounding too unfriendly? I didn't want her to just thank me and hang up! "I didn't know my father could pass the message along so quickly."

"We make sure the field teams have good communications. Be that as it may, I was hoping you could stop by the League Tower this evening."

That was fast, maybe I should be more worried! But she was asking me to come over on my own, not sending ambulances or superheroes to pick me up. "Yes, that's fine." Pamela whispered, "1 hour" too soft for the phone to pick up. "We can be there by 8:30."

"Very good. When you arrive, tell the lobby who you are and I'll be notified. See you then."

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Pamela would be fine talking about sex in graphic detail on the train, but I wasn't. Prob I should have been, though, because sitting and worrying about was happening to my insides (besides them shrivelling up because 2 protein bars wasn't nearly enough) was nerve-wracking. I clung to Pamela's hand the whole way while she talked about school and del boys and things to do in Rhodes. I only interrupted once. "Summer thunderstorm in Vegas?".

She laughed. "Something someone said to pick up Chat. Hot, wet, loud, exciting, getting lucky, what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas, never comes back once it's over."

That was def how not-APIary had looked me. And how I'd looked at them, nyaaaah! "Did it work?"

"I don't know, she never tells me!"

"So I have to tell you instead?"

"Yes, you'd be a much better sister! Do you think your dad would swap?"

Prob. Chaturangani was a senior in high school, soon she'd be going off to MIT and then to conquer the world, that would be almost as good as not having a daughter at all, and Pamela wouldn't have to worry about me putting the moves on her. I didn't say anything for the rest of the trip.

As we were getting off at Capitol Plaza, an old lady patted me on the head. "Don't worry, sweetie, only the 1st one is scary."

"What?" She was getting on the train we were getting off so she couldn't answer, but right across from the train station, on the building next to the League Tower, was a big Planned Parenthood sign. Oh Bast, I had my hands on my belly and looked so worried she thought Pamela was my big sister taking me for my 1st abortion! "Nyaaaaah! Pamela, stop laughing!" I wish that PP *could* have fixed up anything that was wrong with me!

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My dad's been working for the League since we got to Rhodes, but he just works all the time and never does anything cool like take his daughter to visit the Tower, so it was the 1st time I'd seen it in person, and it was as impressive as it is on TV. On the outside it's huge and shiny, all the defenses hidden away because no one is supposed to have laser cannons in the middle of downtown,

looking like any other ridiculously tall skyscraper. It's like they don't even have earthquakes here!

In the mirrored door, Pamela looked tall and cool, all she needed was a long coat and sunglasses, but I looked *grim*. The kind of person you'd cross the street to keep from getting mixed up with, not the kind you'd drag into bed, which was good considering how much being cute has messed up my life! I like kissing, I like, um, more than kissing *a lot*, but it gets me chased out of town or pumped full of larvae! I scowled at my reflection, because it was better than crying.

The 10-story atrium inside is full of flowers and plants and museum-style displays of supervillain weapons and mysterious artifacts and other trophies. (Prob all fake, I wouldn't leave 1 of Molatron's gravity emitters out where someone could get at it!) They even had a Vermillion Pupae dueling lash, which Pamela said is worth an absolute fortune even though it doesn't work without their ship to power it. No people, which wasn't weird after dinner on Sunday evening, but Apiary said to tell the lobby we were here. I was looking behind a tree that seemed to be growing baby tentacle monsters as fruit when a voice spoke inside my head! "Please identify yourself." Telepathy?! I panicked, trying to remember what my mom said about how to keep your secrets safe and thinking about everything I wanted to hide, which I knew wasn't it.

Pamela lit up. "Sonic projection? Neat! Apiary really did mean to tell the lobby, didn't she? I'm Pamela Rajapaksa, this is Nefertari Nelson, we're here to see Apiary. You must be a mindchild."

Thank Bast! Not that my secrets were that secret, since these were my dad's coworkers and prob knew all about why I left San Diego and I was about to tell Apiary what happened today. "Nice to meet you, um." Mindchild was what Axiom called her AIs, but did they have names?

"Call me Lobby." That seemed sad, to have your job and the place you were stuck be your name, but maybe Axiom made it happy to be what it was. "Please follow the blue tiles and Apiary will meet you soon."

Pamela still looked cool reflected in the back wall, but I was starting to lose it. I glared at my reflection to make it behave, and that was exactly when the wall slid away and I was glaring at 3 of Apiary. "Nyaaaa!" I wanted to hide behind Pamela but that was the opposite of being grown up enough for adult activities, so I stood there and tried to make my face blank.

These bodies were a lot like 1 of the ones I'd spent the afternoon with, slender and green and del, smelling like

plants and honey, but wearing clothes (casual, for Sunday evening) and amused at my uncoolness. "Ms. Nelson, Ms. Rajapaksa, come in." They waved us into a cozier lobby with upholstered couches and a drinks fridge, and then I smelled the 1 in the back. She was wearing a heather-lavender Ohio State Rhodes hoodie, the special color only visiting faculty got, and Apiary could plaus have it but it had sweat with my dad's notes of bronze and blood and green stone! I knew he had 1, he got it for giving a lecture on heretical Mayan cosmology or whatever, and it was way too big for her, and there was only 1 reason a girl wears the clothes of a guy not related to her! She didn't flinch when I literally hissed at her, but she did (all 3) when I hissed out, "My mother's *not dead*!"

The body with the hoodie and the one in the regular OSR sweatshirt immediately whisked Pamela away, although there was no chance she hadn't heard me, her ears are almost as good as mine, leaving me with just 1 to glare at. She felt awkward, but was doing a good job of ignoring it to try to move me into a conference room. "This way, Ms. Nelson."

I wasn't budging. "What are you up to with my dad?!"

She couldn't deny knowing what I'd smelled, she was wearing that hoodie because of how it smelled, but she wasn't letting me intimidate her. "That's between him and I, don't you think?" But her flags were that particular combination of nervous and concentrating that meant Up To Something, so it wasn't the obvious thing she was denying.

I didn't get it, and then I did. "Isn't stealing your crush's clothes to sniff a bit immature for a superhero?"

She winced again. "If we're going to fight, let's not do it in the middle of the lobby." She marched into the open conference room, so I had to follow if I wanted to give her any more pieces of my mind.

"Fine!" I tried to slam the door behind us but it had one of those soft-closer arms, which pissed me off more. "What are you doing with my dad?!"

"Howard is my coworker. That's all." She wished she wasn't telling the truth, but she was. I'm not an idiot, I read books and news, I know adults fall in love and do stupid things too, but how dare she fancy my dad?! My mom was going to crush her like a hive of cockroaches when she came back! She could tell I wasn't buying it even though I knew it was the truth, and threw herself onto the couch and sighed. "Really. He's a wonderful person, but as you say, your mother is probably still alive, somewhere under the

ocean, and may even recover enough to return to us someday."

"She's coming back," I insisted. She felt sorry for me, but that didn't stop me from believing it. "Keep your hands off him, and put that hoodie back where you found it!"

She held up her hands, embarrassed enough to not fight me. "I'm not going to do anything foolish."

"You better not! My mom will crush you like a bug!"

She was moving from awkward to angry, but kept her hands up. "I would never pick a fight with Nereid. Everything is back where it belongs, so I don't think we need to say anything more about this, do we?"

I was still mad, but starting to feel a little bad about threatening her with my mom. I got a *cyclopean* lecture about that when I was in like 1st grade. And, Bast, she was right that nothing we talked about tonight needed to get mentioned to my dad, *ever*! But I tried to keep my tough-girl scowl. "OK, good."

She sat gracefully on the couch. "I'm glad that's cleared up. Shall we get to the reason for your visit tonight?"

"Sure..." I had no idea how to say it, but she was about to say something, so I leapt in. "I need you to check that I'm not infected with anything or hosting larvae or anything." Her eyebrow went up and up (why can *everyone* except me do that?!) as I talked. "I mean, I don't think I am, but if someone had bodies like yours but different, they're obviously a mad bio-- *idiosyncratic* biotech expert!"

She was more curious than ~~mad~~ pissed now, at least. "Did you get closer than you told your father?"

"...yeah."

Now she knew something was sketch. "How close?"

"Close enough that I'm worried!" I had to tell her, mom taught me that if you're going to lie to your doctor you might as well not go, and this was the same thing, but I couldn't just say it! Nyaaaah!

"You made physical contact?"

"...yeah." A+ honesty, Nef! But I was remembering *physical contact* and Apiary had the nose, and she was staring at me in ever-growing horror. Oh, Bast.

"YOU HAD SEX WITH SCHISMATIC?!"

It wasn't any better that I didn't have to say it! My face was so hot I could feel it burning when I covered it with my hands. "Nyaaaaah! I didn't mean to! It just happened!"

"You 'just happened' to have sex with an unknown abhuman?!" I'd broken her brain almost as much as Pamela's, but she wasn't my friend and she didn't have to think anything about me except that I was a slutty Changed. "'Just happened' means unprotected?" My flags told her that was a hit, so slutty *brain-damaged* Changed. "In the name of Evolution, *why*?"

"I didn't know it was someone unknown, I thought-- I didn't know you had transitioned to all female bodies, you used to have both!"

The complicated lemon-based smell flared out and the pipes at the ceiling spewed a swarm of huge bees, stingers so big I could see them and smelling like poison. "You thought it was me going around seducing children." She was so mad her voice was perfectly flat, but her flags were *terrifying*.

I clenched my hands so tight the indestructible carbon fiber of my claw sheaths creaked, to keep my claws and Murder Nef under control. "They were green and del and had *bees* in their *heads*! Who else would I think it was? But I knew you wouldn't infect or implant someone, I wasn't worried until I knew it wasn't you." Saying I knew she wouldn't hurt anyone reduced the threat level by about 10%. Or maybe that was reminding her she was a hero.

After a few ticks, she dialed down the death glare to something that wasn't about to melt my face off and the murder bees flew back up to their little bee tunnels, but I was a long ways from out of trouble. "I suppose *statutory rape* is better than spreading transformation plagues." She sighed. "Slightly. Let's start at the beginning. Where did this really happen?"

My mom had told me plenty of stories of how villains tried to weasel out of revealing anything under interrogation, but I'd meant to be honest before the whole Dad's-hoodie thing, so I didn't have any lies or tricks ready, and she ended up getting the whole story of creepy butt-scanning Bruson and his scheme out of me before we even got to the part about the building down in Sparvine. She didn't seem like she was going to stick her nose into that, at least, and compared to what I was at the Tower for, breaking and entering was nothing. I hoped Pamela wouldn't be too mad about a superhero knowing our business.

Finally we got to the naked, super-del, plant-people in the shipping crates. My thinking about that made Apiary madder, but she stayed professional. "Did the female body

look like this?" She waved a hand at herself. "As best you can tell without my having to strip."

Now that I looked her over, the Apiary I was talking to seemed older, grad student instead of high-school graduate, and had longer head filaments, pixie cut instead of buzz cut. And even though she was dressed, prob curvier, unless there was a pushup bra under that tight-fitting silk tee--

"My eyes are still up here, Ms. Nelson." And still had a death glare. Prob I was back to more slutty than stupid.

"Nyaaah! Younger, a few years, and shorter head stuff, and less, um--"

"I get the picture. I take it they woke up at some point; what was the 1st thing they did."

My face was burning again, not that it had ever really stopped. "They, um, before they were even really awake, I think, um..." She did the eyebrow thing again. "Personal time!"

That must not have been what they called it in her day, because it took a moment for her to get it, but Melty Nef was remembering the sight, and the smell, and that tipped her off. "And then you offered to help out?"

"No! I tried to sneak out while they were distracted, but they spotted me, and..." I did my impression of plant-girl's - Schismatic's -- sultry come-hither again, and must have done it right because I could smell it scored an unexpected hit. I was going to have to remember that pose and gesture, if I survived the night and still wanted to ever touch another person again!

"And your mother never taught you to run away from adults who invite a child to join their orgy, so you dived in."

"I'm not a child! If I was, I wouldn't have been interested! And my mother taught me to make my own decisions!"

She sighed again. "You are still very much a child, puberty and hormones notwithstanding, but that was unfair. As a Changed, you're even more susceptible to biochemical signals than baseline humans."

Did she mean the way Schismatic smelled when they were going at it? Except for the wax and honey and purple, it wasn't that different than what I'd smelled when I'd come into a bathroom after someone else, but it was def different when the person was there and naked and-- Nyaaah! "It wasn't that. Not just that, anyway." She frowned, and then I

got what she meant. "You think it takes superpowers to make a teenaged Changed want to have sex?!"

Her frown intensified, like I was even sluttier than she could imagine. "Perhaps not. What happened then? No, *after* they finished taking advantage of you."

"They didn't take advantage of me!"

"No? You just said--"

"They didn't pin me down, they didn't give me some rant about how losing my virginity would make me an adult and I'd be a kid if I didn't, they just invited me! And I wanted to, so I did! And it was *amazing*!"

"I'm glad you enjoyed yourself, but statutory rape is a crime for a reason."

"Nyaaah! I said it wasn't like that!" It was bad enough giving my best friend the details, but Apiary wasn't getting it. "They made sure it was amazing for me, not just them. It was mutual!"

She was just as sure that I wasn't getting it. "An adult and a 13-year-old child are not on equal terms!"

"Stop calling me a child!"

"Stop acting like one!"

"I'm not stealing anyone's clothes to sniff!"

We glared at each other, but the murder bees didn't come back even though she was thinking about it. After a tick, she put her forehead in her hand and said, "Tell me what happened after that, and why you came here."

"When we were resting, someone came to the door -- old, a smoker, smelled of blood and smoke, sounded Southern -- and told them they had to get dressed and go in 15. Schismatic threw me my clothes and pushed me out the secret escape hatch. I washed up in the train station bathroom and went home, but when I told Pamela what happened, she said it couldn't have been you. Prob Schismatic just likes big butts and can't lie, they did a lot they didn't have to if they were just using me for my body, either the old-fashioned way or as an incubator, but hands up what an unknown biotech super might be up to."

"And that hasn't taught you that jumping into bed with strangers is a bad idea?" Her flags were split between thinking I was slutty and thinking I was stupid, but either way she was completely disgusted with me.

"It was a bad idea this time because I didn't get an introduction, so I thought it was someone safe! But other than that, it was great! So, can you make sure it really was great?" I tried to sound like it was no big deal, but the name *Schismatic* meant they split off from her, and that sort of thing always means a reversal from hero to villain or vice versa.

"As a bioengineer, and in some sense the same bioengineer, I wouldn't choose someone with an enhanced immune system for patient zero of anything I wanted to spread, and if I chose someone to host my larvae, I definitely wouldn't let them run around breathing city smog, drinking diet soda, and putting who knows what else into their body. But it's been a while since we were identical, so there's no harm in taking some precautions." She was def Up To Something, and still thought I was the worst, but wasn't about to lock me up or disintegrate me or anything. Wait, what's wrong with diet soda? Was she fat-shaming me because slut-shaming me wasn't enough?! But she was saying what I wanted to hear, so I clenched my claws again. "Just a moment while I mix something up." She didn't get up or anything, she had other bodies, or maybe Axiom's robots, to do the work.

"OK," I said cautiously. "Can you tell me more about Schismatic while we wait? The name gives me an idea, but is that what they call themselves?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't think that's information I want spread around." She wasn't sorry at all. "I do suggest you stay far away from them in the future."

That made me think of the number I had in my phone, which made me think of, um, *not* staying away from Schismatic, which Apiary could smell, and she powered up her glare again. She was just disgusted that I was thinking about doing what she told me not to, not suspicious that I had a way to, thank Bast. I didn't like that she was thinking I was sluttier and sluttier, but at least she wasn't beating me up and stealing my phone! Axiom prob could get my entire history with a glance, but she wasn't here.

She glared, and I tried to glare instead of reconsidering my life choices (harder than it sounds, when an adult is thinking you're such a terrible person!), for a couple of minutes and then another Apiary leaned into the room. This one was wearing only an eye-burningly magenta sports bra -- because she took off the hoodie like I said? I couldn't tell if it was that body -- and had a couple of 2l plastic bottles that she threw into my lap before ducking back out where I couldn't scan her.

"Use the white one to wash *everywhere* you might have made contact, and drink all of the pink one tonight before

bed. You may need to call in sick tomorrow." She was still UTS and didn't like me, so even if she wasn't going to hurt me, she'd be happy to make me miserable. I could imagine what making sure I wasn't hosting larvae involved, and ewwwwwwwww! Should I throw these away? She said I prob didn't need them. But, breakaway submind, villain, hands up if they invented larvae that thrive on diet Dr. Pepper and Rhodes smog.

"OK, thanks." I stood up. "Sorry our conversation didn't have anything worth mentioning to my father." I did my best to sound nonchalant, but I knew Apiary knew how scared I was. It wasn't really an even standoff, she was only risking a little awkwardness, not her entire life!

Thank Bast, she wanted a comfortable work environment more than she wanted me to get in trouble for being slutty. "Not all interviews produce actionable information, alas." She stood up to shake my hand (her skin was cool and soft, just like Schismatic's, but I kept a lid on Melty Neff). "I'm also done with Ms. Rajapaksa, so I won't keep you longer."

* * *

Pamela was beaming at the Apiary keeping an eye on her, smelling too happy for what we were here for, but prob they had just been nerding out about bug armor or something. She was just as happy to come with me when I whispered, "Let's eject," anyway.

I was all for getting back on the train and away from the Tower before Apiary decided it was easier to blame a tragic laser cannon accident on Axiom, but Pamela had other ideas. Funny ideas (at least she thought so). "Just 1 stop, Nef. Well, 2, but you like falafel."

Falafel def sounded amazing, I'd only had a protein bar since burning all that energy, but I was worried about whatever she thought was so funny. No, I was worried about *her*. She was so excited about this joke, she hadn't asked anything about what happened, and finding things out always came before teasing me, and she never got this excited about it. Her flags were never this excited about *anything*, even when I knew she was, and the notes of whatever meds she takes were different. Prob there was a better way to ask, but I just blurted out, "Pamela, are you *high*?"

Something was def wrong, because she dragged me halfway down the block before she stopped. "What? No, of course--" She froze, and I could practically hear her brain doing a (slow) system check. "Oh, that, that absolute... cyclopean... *butthole*!"

Usually Pamela has way better insults, that sounded like something I would say! There *was* something wrong with her! Apiary did something to her! I wanted to storm back in and make her fix it right now, but, laser cannons and bug armor and murderdrones, and that was just Apiary and Axiom. "Nyaaaah! Are you OK? What did she do to you?" We went to Apiary for help about Schismatic, but who did we go to for help about Apiary? Mom, why aren't you here?

"A simple euphoric, to make me less cautious about what I said to a superhero. I'll be fine in a moment. Let's go to the 1st stop and I can get my head together while they take care of you." She already sounded better, so I believed her. Brain stuff was her thing, even if it was Apiary's too. And Pamela would never drug someone who was already trying to help her!

After a few steps, though, I realized where she was taking me, and maybe she wasn't all right. "I have this stuff Apiary gave me, Planned Parenthood can't help!"

She giggled again. "I saw what you looked like when you got to the office. Are you telling me you aren't going to do that again?"

"Nyaaaaah! It felt good at the time, but it's not worth all this!" I waved at the skyscraper full of cyclopean butthole mad scientists, in case Pamela was so addled she didn't know what I meant, and that wasn't even counting why I had to move to Rhodes in the 1st place. "I know better now!"

"You don't have to give up sex entirely, just find someone to canoodle with who isn't a supervillain. Then you won't need mad science to make sure you're not hosting any larvae; normal science is fine for that." She pushed me toward the PP door, which at least didn't have anybody going in or out at this hour. "Go get some condoms while I meditate, and then we can get falafel and go home and you can tell me all the details."

"No way, if I have to go in, you have to come with me!" If she wasn't going in, then I could prob get out of it and not have to die of embarrassment *again*.

Obvs it didn't work. "Fine, let's go." She grabbed my hand (my stupid heart skipped a beat) and dragged me through the doors. "Hi, my friend needs some condoms."

"Nyaaaaah!" Obvs she had to say it out loud! The awesomely purple-haired and tattooed old black lady behind the desk didn't bat an eye at Pamela's shamelessness or my burning face, at least, and just asked if I needed the demonstration of how to put them on. I'd had the demo in

wellness class last year *and* the year before, and didn't need to be mortified again, but obvs Pamela said yes! I was supposed to have super-reflexes, but why could I never interrupt Pamela embarrassing me?!

The lady called in an absolutely del high-school (college? he had to be at least 18 to be working there, right?) latine boy with notes of pine-scented candles and wrapping paper, and amazing eye makeup. Pamela practically lit up with fancying him, but before she could ask him for a live demonstration, he got put behind the desk and Janice took me into a back room for the Banana Demo. I dragged Pamela along, because if she was going to embarrass me, I def wasn't going to let her sit and flirt with Renn while it happened! I made her protect the banana 1st after Janice showed us how, but High Pamela didn't have any more shame than regular Pamela, and she'd been practicing. She put the condom on 1-handed, at face level, with *expressions*. She was def imagining it was Renn, too. Nyaaaaah! Even Janice, who was about 1000000 years old, was embarrassed, and not just embarrassed.

I tried to not think about Schismatic while proving I knew what to do with a condom, but it was hard, and when I thought of it using that word, I just about died. Pamela laughed so hard at my expression that I thought she was going to faint, which made me even more flustered and the banana squished in my hand just as the condom popped. "Nyaaaaah!" Even Janice, who must have seen 1000 people mess this up, had to bite her lip. I said, "I'llgetanewbanana," and ejected, which made Pamela crack up again.

Renn was nice enough to not say anything about my face glowing red-hot, and did have a spare banana (not the one Pamela was thinking of!). He was even more del than I'd thought at 1st, or maybe I was justing thinking about his-- A+ adulting, Nef! He had a great voice too, tenor, smooth and assured, and I couldn't blame Pamela except for being so much more del than me! Then he asked, "Do you need help back there?" and I could tell he didn't know Pamela was my age (or maybe he did, I'd just proved that wasn't always a problem). "Nowe'regood!"

Pamela had thoughtfully waited until I came back to start eating the mushed banana, but I turned my back and showed Janice I could def keep a banana safe from parenthood and STDs, and then dispose of the remains properly. She gave me a thumbs up, but then it was back out front to Renn and the three big glass bowls on the desk. "What size do you need?"

I hadn't noticed before, maybe my brain had saved me from noticing, but there were helpful silhouettes on the labels. Schismatic was Medium (like the sacrificial banana), but

that's not who I needed protection from! Boys my age would be Small, right? But the only boy in my entire school I fancied at all was Marty, and he could be whatever size he bought off the Internet, and I wasn't going to have sex with him because he was a year younger and he had a del girlfriend and didn't fancy me at all because he was Changed and not defective! I couldn't even imagine any guy naked, except boy-Schismatic! Why did I let Pamela drag me in there? My life was too much of a mess to need anything like that!

Janice suggested gently, "Why don't you take a few of each, so you're prepared for whatever happens?" That was way better than making a decision! I threw a handful from each bowl into my purse, stuffed a 20 for each handful into the donation box, threw another handful of each into Pamela's purse, glared at her until she coughed up a donation too (I didn't need to, she was already getting her wallet out as the condoms went in), and dragged her *out*. "Thanksforeverything!"

I did have to drag her, she wanted to stay and bat her eyelashes at Renn, but I wasn't staying there 1 more second, and I'm both a lot stronger than Pamela and heavier, so she didn't have much choice. "Hey! That was rude! I wanted to thank them properly!" She still smelled high, but not as much.

"Sorry you didn't get to ask Renn what size he thought you should pick up." I could tell I didn't sound even a tiny bit sorry, which was pretty mean of me since she'd been looking out for me even if she'd been mortifying me at the same time, and sighed. "You can go back if you want. But maybe you should meditate and get Apiary out of your system before you seduce someone old enough to be charged as an adult. I mean, working in Planned Parenthood."

"...you're right." She sighed too. "OK, falafel and then home. Get me two sandwiches and an elixir? I'm going to sit here and remember to treat my friends better."

My grouch didn't go away that fast, but I hugged her and went to pillage MediTerrific. Falafel makes everything better.

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