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Opening extract from

Othergirl

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I've started to do a new thing where I pretend to ignore her when she taps on my window. It's funny to sense her getting quietly furious while she's hovering out there, hair illuminated blazing gold by the garden security light, while I carry on with homework. Of course it's not all that funny for long because Erica's quiet fury quickly turns to an irritated pounding on the glass.

As if I wouldn't let her in. I sigh and roll my eyes, frustrated that she's turned up at precisely the time when I've found a groove in this English essay, then go to open the catch.

'You weren't out all that long,' I say. 'No mega-villains to vanquish this evening?'

'Yeah, right,' Erica huffs as she flies through the window before letting herself collapse in a heap on my rug. 'The mega-villains would never come to this place. The worst kind of trouble we get in this town are those kids who hang about the cemetery smoking things they shouldn't. And I'm not going over there. It's creepy.'

Sometimes I think we're just like any other pair of best friends, totally different people but similar enough to make it work. We balance each other out: me with my proficiency in all things school related, and Erica with her, well . . . non-proficiency. Despite our differences, we're as close as sisters. Of course there is one major difference between us, one that takes a little bit of working around and patience on my part: my best friend is a freaking superhero.

We're talking powers and everything, just like those superheroes you see on the news. For Erica, it's the ability to fly and shoot flames out of her hands, which as far as we can tell is a pretty unique power among the Vigils. The ones that we know of anyway. I like to think that my superpower is the ability to craft her outfits and manage Erica's increasingly erratic work/life balance. Erica, on the other hand, is absolutely made for all this superhero stuff. She's pretty much perfect for it, to be honest; she has the whole moral-compass thing as well as the good looks. One day she's going to join the Vigil A-team and be a huge star.

I'd be a rubbish superhero. I'd get too nervous and not know what to say, or somehow manage to do entirely the wrong thing while trying to do the right thing. Plus they'd have to get me a stool to stand on for the photo shoots and promotional posters. Or get me child-size costumes, and I really don't need any more reminders that I've probably reached my optimum height potential a few

centimetres too short. But that doesn't stop me wishing every now and again that I could be super-special in my own way. I'd never take Erica's powers away from her, but I just wish sometimes – OK, lots of times – that I had something, anything, that was mine that she was jealous of. Something that made me stand out, all by myself.

I do this thing sometimes, where I try and test out if I could have powers too. I can't tell Erica about it, because she'd only tell me that having a superpower is more trouble than I can imagine, and how she wishes that she was 'normal' like me. We talk about lots of things, but we never talk about what it might be like if I could fly too, or if I could see and do things that even she couldn't.

Once I tried to walk through my bedroom wall. I know it sounds absolutely ridiculous, but at the time it made sense. In science we were learning about atomic structure, and how the space between atoms is actually just vast emptiness. So if I'm mostly just empty space, and that wall over there is mostly just empty space too, then why on earth can't I walk through it? Needless to say I tried it once and then never again (it takes a surprising amount of concentration just to stop yourself bracing your arms out in front of you). I ended up with a painfully squished nose and a bit of a bruised ego too.

There was also the playing-card thing. This one I'm ashamed to say has been tried more than once. I sit with the cards laid out in front of me face down on my rug, and

I stare at them as hard as I can. But of course nothing happens. The cards don't levitate. They don't spontaneously combust. And they certainly don't psychically imprint their hidden faces on my mind, which is the power I most hope for. Just a glimmer of *something* would be nice. A flicker of spades, a hint of hearts. Anything to indicate that I'm one of the chosen ones, destined to be an almighty Vigil. But every time the cards just sit there, flat and unmoving.

'So anyway,' Erica starts as I delve into my laundry bin to retrieve the bag of her clothes that I keep hidden under my own dirty ones, 'I went to the tunnel to practise some moves, and apparently I still can't do the flame-throwing thing upside down without burning my elbows. Which reminds me, are you up for some patching?'

Erica lifts up her arms to reveal holes with singed edges in the black Lycra of her outfit. I give her the *Not again* look. She shrugs her shoulders as if to say, *What? I can't help it*, in return. I inspect the charred remnants of her sleeves. Unsurprisingly there's not a welt on the skin underneath. Erica is almost impervious to burning. We still haven't quite worked out the limit of her flame retardancy yet. I often wonder what she's really capable of, but then I shudder because I really don't want to think of a time when she'd ever need to go that far.

'I can probably get the suit patched up by the end of the weekend,' I offer, thinking about that history essay that

needs doing, and the maths homework too.

Of course I have to do everything twice, because Erica doesn't have an awful lot of time to get all her work done herself. After an evening like this, she'll copy whatever I've written out in her own handwriting, all tailored to give her a perfect B grade, or sit at the computer and paraphrase one of my essays so that it's suitably Erica-like to hand in without raising any suspicions.

'What about Friday? Then I can go out on Saturday night for a bit of a fly-around,' Erica suggests.

'But we've got that essay due on Friday, remember? I'm not sure I can manage it all before then.'

'OK, fine. Saturday night then? And have you thought about adding that pocket for my mobile too? Did we find out if Velcro would work?'

'Velcro's flammable unfortunately.'

'Damn it. Velcro would have been good. I guess it will have to be a zip pocket then.'

'Yup. But seriously, are you really going to be answering your phone while you're up in the air?'

'What if Jay calls?' Erica catches my raised eyebrow. 'OK, so what if you need to call me while I'm up and about? You know, to tell me where the trouble is?'

I admit she has a point, even if I do disapprove of her mentioning her latest crazy boy crush while she's in Super Mode. Seriously, that girl can't go more than five minutes without thinking about Jay. He's not even in our

year. He's in the sixth form, and Erica and her friends follow him around like ducklings after a mother duck. I'd never be caught dead mooning like that over a boy.

Erica gets changed into her civilian clothes and, as is routine, she turns round and lets me undo the zip at the back of her outfit. It's an old Halloween costume and originally came with a tail and kitten-ear headband, but I've been customising the hell out of it over the last few months. I replaced the original flimsy zip with one that was sturdier and, obviously, we chucked the tail away. We adapted the collar so that it came up higher around the neck, and I even managed to sew in a rudimentary sports bra, which frankly was a bit of a textile engineering miracle on my part. I'd endured an entire evening of Erica moaning at me about what a pain flying unsupported was, and how she was sick of thinking about what was going on 'up there' when she was airborne. We looked online at the galleries of the mega-babe Vigils like the Red Rose and Hayley Divine, and honestly we don't understand how they manage to look so super-perky and comfortable while wearing so little. Must be a super-technology Vigil thing my amateur sewing skills aren't up to.

Every week, when both my parents are out, I go into the garden and spray the black catsuit down with a flame-retardant chemical spray I found at the DIY depot. Once I accidentally sprayed my dad's prize perennials and they all died overnight, so I had to invent some story about toxic

fox poo so that he wouldn't investigate. After all the hard work I've already put into that costume, Erica's still nagging me about accessory pockets for her phone and keys and stuff, but I've always thought they'd ruin the silhouette. Maybe now I'll have to reconsider. But I'm not letting her take her phone out on practice just so that she can Twitter-stalk her crush.

'Did Jay call tonight?' Erica asks as she gets changed. I root out her phone from the bag with all her stuff in it.

'No calls, but it looks like you got some text messages. Not from him though.'

As Erica scans through her phone, catching up on all the latest gossip from friends that I don't share, I carefully fold up the costume and place it in a shoe box I keep on top of my wardrobe.

'Damn it. He's had my number for over a week now. What the hell is his problem?'

'Why don't you just text him first?'

'Because I'm not meant to have his number! I got it off Karishma, remember? But I know he has mine because Heather heard him ask Nathan for it. Anyway, any hits on the website?'

As well as performing all costume duties, I manage Erica's website. It's not much, more of a holding page really. The idea is that if someone (i.e. the Vigils) wants to get in touch with Erica, they can, without us revealing our personal details. We also regularly check it to see if there

are any YouTube videos we can link to, to build up a bit of a fan page. Except that nobody ever gets in touch, and the only hits come from Erica or myself hitting the refresh button.

The big problem is that Erica's too nervous to make a public appearance. She's scared of doing it wrong, and doing it alone, and wants the Vigils to somehow find her first before she's forced to make an early solo debut.

'Nope, nothing,' I reply. She sighs in frustration. I think about telling her that maybe she's just not ready to join the Vigils yet, that she's still so young and maybe she should focus on her exams instead.

But before I even get a chance to mention this, my mum walks in. One day when she comes in completely unannounced, I won't be able to explain what she finds.

'Mum! Why can't you knock?' I yell. She just pouts back at me and rolls her eyes, an expression I'm well aware I'm starting to mimic.

'Lovely to see you too, Lou-Lou,' Mum mocks. Then she turns to Erica. 'You must have come in while I was watching my soaps. I didn't hear a peep!'

'I know you don't like to be disturbed in the evenings, Mrs Kirby,' Erica replies, her voice full of a sweetness I'm unable to muster for my parents. My mum loves Erica. She's the daughter my mum never had – one that's interested in shopping and boys instead of books and sewing. And I know that Erica prefers my parents to her

own. But then again, anybody's parents would be preferable to hers. Her dad's not been seen in ages, and to say that Erica and her own mum, Liza, don't get along is something of a massive understatement. So of course when my mum invites Erica downstairs for telly and hot chocolate, Erica practically jumps to follow her, until I remind her that we've still got our homework to do.

'Mum, was there something you actually wanted when you barged in here?' I ask, getting tired of all the niceness.

'I'm putting on a white wash overnight. Got any school shirts that need doing?' She's still putting on that 'perfect-parent' voice because Erica is here, but I find it really irritating.

She even tries to hover and chat after I've given her my bundle of whites, but I remind her that surely one of her programmes must be starting up again soon. Eventually my door closes again and we hear her go downstairs.

'You're way too harsh on her. She just wants to be friends,' Erica says with a pout.

'She just wants to be friends with *you*, you mean,' I counter. 'Seriously, I can't wait until I've done my A levels and can escape to uni. Mum can be rather intense when you have to live with her.'

'Well, at least she's interested.' Erica says this slowly and softly, not meaning to sound confrontational. But she's gently warning me that if I ever start complaining about my mother's coddling, she'll remind me about how

lucky I am to be coddled in the first place. I drop the topic. I don't like anything that will lead to discussion about Erica's mum. I never know what to say.

'Maybe I should head home already. I can copy the notes out before I go to bed and give them back to you in the morning before lessons,' Erica says.

'Or maybe, if we work really hard for the next twenty minutes, we can finish up and go and sit downstairs with my parents. They're probably not watching anything good, but you know . . . there will be hot chocolate . . .'

'That sounds good,' Erica says, not looking me in the eyes as she smiles. I know how much she loves watching the telly with my folks. She's been coming over to do it for years. And my mum always gives her extra marshmallows in her chocolate too.

'And maybe you'll even get a plastic folder for your notes too. If you're good.'

'Don't say it if you don't mean it,' Erica teases.

'But can I trust you with the good stationery?'

'I'm not going to go all melty on it, if that's what you mean.' She picks up a random piece of paper and rubs it between her fingers. 'See, not even a hint of singe! I am the paragon of chill tonight. Which calls for nothing but the finest of your stationery, my dear Louise!'

Of course she gets the plastic folder. But you can't blame me for being careful, after the Great Melt of last autumn. Nobody wants a repeat of having to pick out the

cooled globs of green plastic from my rug. I'm still finding bits of green in that rug now.

When we're ready we go downstairs, and Erica sinks into the sofa next to my mum, which makes her smile. If she could mother the whole world she probably would. I sit next to my dad, who is concentrating on some hardback crime novel and pretending not to be interested in what is happening on the TV. And as she sits there, curled up and comfortable, I think about how awesome it is that we're close like this, and how wonderful things are going to be when the Vigils finally discover her. But not too soon, I secretly hope, because I wouldn't mind Erica being around here for a little while longer. I might not be special, but being so close to someone who is, is nearly as good.