

SUPER HUMAN

by Nicola Yoon

It's when X, the world's one and only superhero, starts to pull off his mask that Syrita realizes that they are all going to die anyway.

It's kind of a relief, really.

Her task to save humanity from destruction is impossible. Everyone knows that. But if X has already made up his mind, then it doesn't matter what she says.

Syrita watches as his gloved fingers hook into the seam of his mask, readying to pull it over his head. The skin of his neck, and then his Adam's apple, comes into view.

"Stop!" she screams, before she can think better of it. Before she can think better of ordering a superhero intent on annihilation to stop doing just exactly as he pleases.

To her surprise, he does stop. His fingers uncurl from beneath the flap of his mask. He tilts his chin up and smooths

his hand down his neck. It's a gentle gesture. A pensive one. In that moment, Syrita knows that it's a gesture he repeats often. A part of his ritual for becoming X.

Maybe he puts on black and gray camouflage pants. Next, black athletic socks and black Converse high-top sneakers. After that, a close-fitting, long-sleeved black T-shirt with a big white X painted in the center. Black motorcycle gloves are next, until, finally, he gets to the mask.

For this part, he stands in front of a mirror. He gathers both sides of the mask into an accordion fold, raises it to his shaved head, and pulls it down over his face. He does it a little roughly and all in one breath. Afterward, he stands there in front of the mirror, taking a few seconds to adjust. To become. The last thing he does is smooth his hand down his neck.

Watching him now, Syrita wonders if he's making that gesture for the last time. Her fear is evident on her face.

"I won't hurt you," he says. Which is ridiculous, because that is the whole point of her being here.

He is going to hurt everyone.

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Three days ago, X had broadcast his message on all media simultaneously. No one knew how he accomplished that. No one knew how he did anything. In part, the message was as follows:

I no longer believe in humanity. I would see it destroyed. Send someone to convince me otherwise.

After conferring with his counterparts around the world, the president of the United States had called. Syrita was the one they'd chosen. She didn't know what went into the decision-making process—just that the decision had been made. The president had spoken to her for a long time. X had given them three days to pick someone, but they'd come to a decision early so she'd have time to formulate a plan. Save for her mother, no one else was to know that she was the chosen one.

"Why me?" she'd asked him. "Why choose a seventeen-year-old girl? Why not choose a philosopher or a scientist or a religious leader?"

"Because you were the first," the president answered, before the line disconnected.

He meant that Syrita was the first person X had saved the day he introduced himself to the world.

It was two years ago, during one of those car chases that Los Angeles is famous for, and most of what she remembers about X saving her is actually from news footage, in the way that video solidified one's own memories. She was crossing Wilshire Boulevard right in front of the county museum. Through her headphones, she heard helicopters overhead, but that was normal for LA.

Like everyone always said, the accident seemed to happen in slow motion. There was a sound—wheels slipping too fast across asphalt. A smell that reminded her of being a kid and lighting balloons on fire in her backyard. Who could be burning balloons in the middle of the day in the middle of a street? The black Chevy pickup was half a block from

her when the police sirens penetrated her music. Finally, she understood what was happening: she was going to die.

But then something lifted her straight up into the air. Not just a few feet, but thirty or forty. She was so high that the truck that was going to kill her seemed small and harmless. She didn't have time to scream or panic. Was she dead? Was this how people actually got to heaven? They shot straight up as if they were on some sort of express elevator? But then she realized she was in someone's arms. He was wearing a mask and his eyes were black and kind and surprised. She remembers thinking how weird it was that he was surprised, because he was the one doing the flying.

After a while he stopped their ascent and they'd hovered in the air for a while. "You okay?" he asked.

How did you even answer a question like that when you're defying physics a few hundred feet in the air?

Still, she wasn't dead. "Yes, thank you," she said.

He flew them down to the ground, but not horizontally like Superman did with Lois Lane in the comics. Instead, they went down vertically as he held her in kind of a hug. After they landed, he flew off to stop the truck by melting the engine and the door handles with his laser eyes. And then he flew away.

After that, the entire world went wild.

At first, people thought it was a meticulous and elaborate hoax, but the sheer volume of cell phone video and pictures persuaded the world otherwise. There was footage of him saving her everywhere.

The *Los Angeles Times* headline the day after he saved her

read: BLACK SUPERMAN SAVES GIRL. The American news outlets kept focusing on the section of skin around his eyes that you could see through the mask. He was definitely black, they said. One pundit on CNN called him African American, until another pundit pointed out that he was a superhero like Superman and was probably from another planet and therefore not human, never mind African or American. Some pundits called him post-racial. Others talked about race as a social construct, and how interesting it was that it would take a superhero with brown skin to bring that point home to white Americans. Other countries ignored the race discussion entirely, calling them inane. WHY ARE AMERICANS SO OBSESSED WITH RACE? asked a *Guardian* headline.

Syrita remembers thinking: Isn't everyone?

In the aftermath, Syrita did interviews for weeks with every media outlet, until her mother put a stop to it. She spent hour after hour being interviewed by military types. The frenzy about him never abated: *Who was he? What was he? Where did he come from? Was he a he? Should we be afraid?*

A few months after he saved Syrita, X sent a note to the *Los Angeles Times* telling them that his name was not Superman. It was X. He said nothing about his race.

In the two years since, he became the superhero everyone expected. He saved people and property across the globe. He never failed. He was like Superman in every way: noble, with superstrength, superspeed, and the power of flight.

But then, just recently, everything changed.

At first it was nothing: X didn't show up to a particularly devastating apartment building fire downtown. Maybe

he was on vacation. Did superheroes take vacation? Maybe he had business on his home planet. Maybe he just missed this one. A week later, he didn't rescue passengers on an Amtrak train derailment. After that he wasn't there to stop a mass shooting on a college campus.

Then came the broadcast.

. . .

"Why can't I take my mask off?" X asks her now.

She's sitting across from him at his small dining table in his small apartment.

"You can do anything you want," she says, as if he needed reminding. Despite her best effort, her voice trembles. She'd promised herself she wouldn't let him see her fear.

Beneath his mask, his mouth twists. *Do superheroes smirk?*

Of course he knows she's afraid. He has super senses. Probably he can hear the too-fast rush of her blood pushed along by her too-loud beating heart. Probably he can smell her adrenaline and all the subtle changes in her body that say she's afraid. Probably he knows all the signs of human fear.

"You supposed to convince me," he prompts, leaning back in his chair, arms folded across his chest.

She pulls her shaking hands off the table and clasps them in her lap. Did he really want to be convinced that humanity was worth saving or was this just a game? And if it was a game, then why? Was he bored with being all-powerful?

"You live here?" she asks.

"Expecting something different?"

What *had* she been expecting from a superhero's lair?

Something more like Superman's Fortress of Solitude. Something filled with clear glass crystals and alien technology so impossibly advanced she had no hope of deciphering it. She wasn't expecting this dark, cramped space, overflowing with books and comics. She wasn't expecting the clutter, every surface covered in knickknacks—action figures, Matchbox cars, and Lego pieces. It vaguely reminded her of her younger brother's room.

When she first Googled the address he sent, she'd been surprised at the neighborhood. It was the Crenshaw section of Los Angeles—the kind of neighborhood that white people and rich black people like her mother thought of as dangerous but wasn't.

Through her tears, her mother had asked: "What kind of place is he making you go to?" She hadn't called it a ghetto, but she wanted to. People had strange ways of coping with stress, Syrita reminded herself.

If humanity survived and historians ever got a chance to write about this period in time, they would divide the era into Before X and After X. That's how Syrita felt about herself too. There was the Syrita she'd been before she was almost killed—rich, frivolous, untouchable. And the Syrita she'd become after, was still becoming, really. Still rich, but a little less frivolous. The new Syrita volunteered at a soup kitchen near skid row every month over her mother's objections. The new Syrita said: "It's not a crime to be poor, Mom."

Her mother hadn't responded, just went back to crying.

As per X's instructions, she shared his address with no one else and drove herself over. The drive from her Beverly Hills address to his was like going to another country. The houses got smaller and smaller until they were replaced by cheaply built apartments. Boutique storefronts with designer everything became check-cashing and water-supply places. Cars changed from model-year Mercedes and BMWs to ancient-looking Toyotas and Fords. More people were on the streets—walking or else waiting for buses. Most everyone was black or Mexican. It was the kind of neighborhood that Syrita often drove through on her way to someplace else.

Now, X makes a show of checking out her clothes. "You rich?" he asks.

Syrita frowns. No one has ever asked her that before. Why would they? Almost everyone she knows is rich too.

She shrugs.

Beneath the mask his mouth twists again, but she doesn't think it's a smirk this time.

"Can you tell me why?"

"Why what? Why I want to kill all you people?"

Sometimes, from watching his hero-ing on TV, it was possible to convince yourself that he was human. He looked the part. A human being with some extra bells and whistles. Sometimes, though, his voice would do this thing—double in on itself like it was its own echo—and you remembered. It was too *other* to be human.

That's what his voice was doing now and Syrita couldn't find her own, so she just nodded.

"You really need me to tell you all the ways human beings are shit?"

"You liked us once. You saved us. What changed?"

He has no answer for that, or if he does, he doesn't want to give it. "Why they choose you to talk to me?" he asks.

"I'm the first person you ever saved."

"That was *you*?" He narrows his eyes at her and searches her face. "Yeah, yeah," he says after a moment, recognition in his eyes. "In front of the museum, right?" Syrita nods and he continues, "I thought it was 'cause you're black too." He puts air quotes around the *black*. All at once, he seems defiant and tired.

"But you're not black," she says, remembering the articles from the days after he'd rescued her.

He waves her off as if she'd said something, if not stupid, then definitely naive.

This is not how she thought this would go. Why are they talking about race instead of him ending the world?

She shakes her head and insists, "I'm the first person you saved. I think I'm supposed to remind you of your humanity."

"But I have no humanity. I'm an alien. Like Superman. You didn't hear?" He makes a noise like a laugh, but it is devoid of joy.

And now Syrita knows that X's desire to destroy the world isn't rooted in some existential crisis. Something happened. Something specific.

She pulls her hands from her lap, places them on the table and leans in. "What happened?"

He shrugs. "I got shot," he says.

It's an answer, but not an explanation. X gets shot all the time. There's endless hours of coverage of it. He's in the middle of every fight. Gang shootings. Robberies. Terrorist attacks. The bad guys always shoot at him even though they know he is impervious to bullets. Bullets penetrate his costume but never make it past his skin.

"I don't understand," she says.

"By a cop."

"But why would a cop shoot you?" He is an honorary member of every police force in the country.

He leans forward. His gloved hands are close to hers. Syrita resists the urge to pull away despite her fear.

"I wasn't X when it happened. I was just me."

It takes her a second to figure out what he's saying. He wasn't in his costume. He got shot by the cops for being black on a street.

Syrita doesn't know what to say to that. Television images of protestors marching through the streets of one city or another rise in her mind. They're holding signs that say HANDS UP. DON'T SHOOT. Cops are holding riot shields and batons. It's almost always night. She hears the chatter of news anchors and lawyers and police procedure experts and community advocates all talking at once.

It's not that she ignores these incidents when they happen. It's just that she finds them hard to watch. She doesn't want to know the names of the dead. It's better for her if the details are left vague and the facts are left fuzzy. Because if

cops are just killing black men without cause, then how can we all be okay with that? How can she live in a world like that without hating everything and everyone, including herself, for their inaction?

She looks down at her clasped hands. Should she open them? Should she take his hands in hers as a way of offering comfort?

Maybe reading minds is another of his superpowers, because he pulls his hands away from the table and springs to his feet.

Syrita pushes back from the table with such force that her chair topples over.

For the last three days since the president called, the threat to her life has felt abstract—a problem that could be stated and solved with philosophy and words. But now it doesn't. She's never been more aware of her physical body and its breakability.

"Come on," X says, ignoring her fear. "I want to show you something." He walks to the window just behind him and opens it.

She looks from him to the window and back again before realizing that he means for them to leave through it.

"We could use the door," she says, taking a step back.

He doesn't say anything else, just becomes a blur of motion. They're out the window and flying before her brain can register that her feet have left the ground. A few seconds later he sets her down on the roof of the tallest building for a couple of blocks.

She stumbles over her own feet. Human beings were not meant to fly.

"You all right?" he asks, steadying her with a hand on her elbow.

Of course she's not, but she nods anyway.

The morning's fog hasn't yet dissipated, and the pale yellow sun is hazy and indistinct, like it's struggling to come into focus. The air is cool but windless. In the distance, palm trees are still.

X turns his back and walks away from her, toward the edge of the roof. They're about ten stories up.

Some part of her wants to warn him to be careful. Instead she says: "What if someone sees you up here?"

He shrugs and she realizes again that he's already made up his mind about how this will end.

"Know something funny? You fly up high enough, everybody looks the same." He points to the sky. "Black, white, boy, girl, man, woman. Even cops. Just people moving around doing the same dumb shit people always do."

Now he turns away from the ledge and walks back toward her. "Don't last, though. Sooner or later my mind figures out the neighborhood by the type of car or the number of trees or the size of the houses or the number of grocery stores. And once you figure out the neighborhood, you can figure out most of the people. I swear to you. Even the air is different."

He's just a few feet away from her now.

"Tell me about getting shot," she says.

He leans in close, intent on something.

"What you want me to tell?" he asks. "You know this story already. I fit the description of a black kid who did something wrong somewhere in all of America. Don't matter the city. Don't matter the time of day. Don't matter where I was or who I was with or that no way it could've been me. I fit the description. I got stopped. I got shot. No story to tell. You know it already."

"Maybe—"

"Maybe what?" His voice does that thing where it sounds like many voices in one.

She wants what he's saying not to be true even as she knows it is true. She wants to convince him that the cop hadn't meant to do it. The gun misfired because of a glitch. It was a technical accident.

Or maybe X himself had done something wrong, made a move he shouldn't have, didn't put his hands where the cop could see them. It was a procedural accident.

Or maybe he really did fit the description. It was an unfortunate accident. Wrong place. Wrong time.

Or maybe.

Or maybe.

Or maybe.

She knows none of the excuses are true. She knows it in her heart, and where is there to go from here? If she can't convince him the shooting was justified, then his anger is justified. And if his anger is justified, then how can she stop what he wants to do? How can she tell him not to reject a world that has always rejected him? How can she tell him not to destroy the human race?

"I fit all the descriptions," he says.

This time when he starts to pull off his mask, she doesn't stop him.

He hesitates for a moment, and all she sees is the lower half of his face. Dark brown skin. Square chin and jawline. Wide nose, sharp cheekbones. No facial hair. He pulls the mask the rest of the way off. Wide-set black eyes, the most perfect set of eyebrows, bald head. His eyes meet hers and all his parts coalesce. He is beautiful. He even looks like a superhero. If she'd seen him walking down her school hallway, she would've noticed him. She suspects she would've never been able to un-notice him.

The thought doesn't last. He's not in her school hallway. She's not allowed to notice him this way. And those black eyes are looking at her with equal parts pain and wrath. She wants to tell him not to be angry, but how can she ask that of him?

"Don't you ever get tired of it?" he asks her.

He means the constant doubling. He means the awareness of yourself and the awareness of someone else's awareness of you. But not you, your *skin*. One of her white friends had once asked her why black people thought about race so much. "Because you guys do," she had said.

X says, "I'm not from another planet. I'm from *here*. I'm from this neighborhood. My mom made me this way by making a wish. My brother got shot. My uncle got shot. Before she died, my mom said she wanted a world where bullets could never break my skin. The next day, I woke up like this."

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She's come here to convince him not to destroy the world. She's come armed with a litany of human achievements. For every argument, she had prepared a counterargument.

Yes, we are flawed, she had planned on saying. But we have an endless capacity for joy and hope. We are capable of loving unconditionally.

Humans go to war and kill each other.

Counterargument: All wars end and in our peace we find a way to love each other.

Humans invented guns, nuclear devices, torture.

Counterargument: We also invented vaccines, hospitals, prayer.

Humans invented vengeful gods.

Counterargument: Vengeance can be merciful.

Humans invented god.

Counterargument: Or the other way around.

Humans hate what they don't understand.

Counterargument: We are young yet. Give us time.

And so on.

But he *is* human. He knows all this already.

And in the face of this, his justified anger and his grace, she finds that she has no words.

Always the wrong place.

Always the wrong time.

A country that did not value his life.

"What you got?" he asks her now. In his eyes, she sees hurt and anger in equal measure.

It's still not cold and there's still no wind, but she wraps her arms around her body anyway.

"Nothing," she says too soft for him to hear, but he hears it anyway. He's superhuman.

He puts his face in his hands.

His anger is justified and she can't ask him to set it aside. Not when it's his life, his body, that's at stake. If he wants to destroy the world, she won't be the one to stop him.

He says, "They all thought I wasn't human." He presses two fingers into his chest, just above his heart. "But I am."

And finally she knows what to do.

When X got his powers, he didn't choose to destroy. He chose to save.

She's counting on his humanity.

She walks to the edge of the roof and falls backward.