

Chapter One

I woke up in the dark, surrounded by the smell of damp concrete. At first I couldn't figure out where I was, and then I knew I wasn't anywhere I knew. I can see by starlight, or a single LED, it's almost never so dark I can't see, and my house doesn't have a basement to smell like this. I grabbed for my phone to get some light, and found only my bare butt. I didn't know where I was, and I was naked?! I tried to jump up, but fell over on the cold concrete floor when all my muscles cramped up. "NYOW!"

My yell echoed right around me, like I was in a cell. Had I been kidnapped? Oh, Bast, was it the Stonebreakers? I tried to get up again, to defend myself against whoever was there, and this time I made it although I only had one good leg to stand on. Even my *tail* had a charley horse! I didn't smell anyone around, anyway. In fact, I didn't smell anyone at all, like no one had ever been here. Had they just made a hole and dropped me in? Then it wasn't the Stonebreakers, they'd want to— I didn't hurt *there*, and I still had my claws, I could feel them cutting into the floor in a speckle of concrete chips.

But who would put me in an oubliette? Why could I remember the word oubliette when I didn't know how I'd gotten into one? It wasn't even a good way to keep a catgirl prisoner, concrete was too soft to stand up to my claws.

I was pretty mad, but there was no one to take it out on, so I worked on massaging out the cramps I could reach, and stretching out the others. It was mostly my legs and back, although my head hurt like I'd banged it on something and there was a big tender patch on my stomach. Had someone beat me up? Why didn't I remember anything?! Amnesia from being hit on the head wasn't a real thing, even I knew that!

Feeling around, I was in a space smaller than my bedroom, made out of bare concrete, but it was open on one side, and I could hear the click of my claws echoing back from far off. I'm not a bat, but it sounded farther than a school gym. One end of a long tunnel, then. This wasn't just a basement! Jumping up, I found a ceiling (also concrete) at the usual height, but no lights. I scraped my hair out of my face (I should have cut it short when we went on the lam, like Mom did, especially since looking too good was why we had to leave town, but I was too vain) and tried a few more times just in case, but nothing. Who builds places without lights?

Ghouls? My heart froze up inside my chest. I didn't want to think about what the Stonebreakers wanted to do to me for Mason, but it was things I *could* think about. Ghouls, I couldn't even guess how bad it might be. I'd sneaked a look at some of Daddy Howard's work stuff once and it gave me nightmares for weeks, and that was just human cultists!

I was hyperventilating so much my legs folded up, and I slid down the wall. The flat, concrete wall, with a right angle at the bottom. No, people made this place, whatever it was. Anyway, I didn't know anyone who'd ever seen a ghoul. Mom said Niké told her they smelled

kind of like us and kind of like a boy's locker room and kind of like a fridge that had been left too long, but she hadn't seen one, and she'd been in some pretty awful places.

Probably not ghouls, probably not Stonebreakers, so some other supervillain? But who and why? And how did I get here?! Not being able to remember was moving up the list of things that scared me. Maybe I did have brain damage from getting clobbered, but then it healed? New brain cells wouldn't have the memories the old ones did, would they?

I was pacing, which was dumb. If I was going to walk, I might as well try to get somewhere, because there was nothing here, and it's not like I could end up somewhere darker.

I started out slow and careful, not wanting to trip over something and bang my head again and not used to not being able to see where I was going (I kept reaching for my phone, but it was as gone as my clothes and my hair ties and my claw sheaths and—) Oh, Bast! My gris-gris bag was gone! If the Stonebreakers had a sorcerer scrying for me, there was nothing protecting me! But Mom could find me too, if she was looking. If she knew I was missing. If she didn't think I was already dead. No, I couldn't have been out that long, I was only a little hungry and thirsty. What was the saying, three minutes without air, three days without water, three weeks without food? More like two, or even one and a half, for Changed, though.

Wrapped up in worries about the future, I hadn't noticed I was almost to the end of the tunnel, but even though I don't have whiskers, my bare skin was sensitive enough to air currents that I didn't quite walk into the wall. I did let out a squeak of surprise, which echoed back from both sides. A T? I felt around, and yes, I could turn either way into a tunnel about the same size, which meant I could get lost. More lost.

There was a rule for finding your way out of a maze. Put your left hand on the wall and

follow it? Or was it your right hand? No, either one would be the same, as long as you stuck with it. I'm left-handed, so I put my right hand on the wall across from the tunnel I came out of, so I was turning left— No, wait, I should start from where I started. And leave a trail, in case I ended up back here. Watching all 5 seasons of *My Little Gnomphkie* was finally paying off!

I scratched "DEAD END —>" into the wall (probably illegibly, I couldn't see what I was doing!). I started to add my name, but only got as far as "O" before I remembered Mom drilling into my head to only ever use my new name, even when completely alone. I scratched that out and reached up to write at a normal person's eye level, "NEFERTARI STARTED HERE RIGHT HAND".

Just walking around without being able to see was hard enough without having to keep my nose and ears open for any sign of ghouls or Stonebreakers or secret spy goons, but I made my way around a bunch of corners and past left-hand branches without running into trouble. I was starting to get the hang of it and move a little faster, so of course that's when I tripped over something and went tumbling (and screamed). My body knew where the floor was and I rolled back to my feet, unhurt, but for a moment I couldn't tell if I'd come up facing back the way I came or still forward. My heart stopped again at the thought of being lost, until I remembered that if I was going backwards, I'd find the marks I'd been leaving at each branch. And what I'd tripped over, which when I scraped my foot out turned out to be a tiny step up, just a few inches. I leaned down and felt it, and the new section of tunnel had tiny grooves in it and was softer than the concrete under my claws. Bricks? The step went up the walls and across the ceiling, too, like the concrete tunnel was smushed up against a slightly smaller brick one.

Why?! Was this just here to make people trip? Who did that? Who did any of this?!

"NYAAARRRGH!" I slashed at the stupid corner of brick, sending chips flying until one hit me in the eye. "Nyow!" I gave it one more slash and then just stood there panting and feeling stupid. Without my phone, I didn't know for sure, but I didn't think I'd been down (up? out?) here more than a couple of hours, and I was already throwing fits at inanimate objects. Stupid inanimate objects that made no sense!

I plopped down on the cold bricks to think. If I didn't come up with a better plan than wandering the maze at random, I wasn't going to get out of this. Maybe the change in the tunnel meant I was getting somewhere, but it was just as likely I was going *away* from somewhere, if there even was anywhere. Maybe I should have stayed where I was and waited for whoever put me here to check on me instead of running off. Daddy Ge—Geoff (I really needed to practice thinking the new names) always teased me about being a terrible ambush predator when I couldn't sit still. Was he ever going to get to do that again?

When was the last time he said that? When was the last time I even saw him? He'd been going off to the airport, to a quick gig in St. Paul, kissing Mom and Daddy ~~Bob~~ Howard and Auntie Toni goodbye (more like making out with them in the doorway, where everyone had to see!). That was... Tuesday? Right, and we had lemon chicken for dinner. Then Wednesday, what happened Wednesday? School, oh Bast! Wednesday was when Alice Yamauchi humiliated me in front of the entire science class. Maybe being lost forever in a dark hole wasn't so bad after all. I could feel my face burning just remembering it. But how could I not look, when someone so far ahead of the curves for an 8th-grader leaned in with her shirt all unbuttoned like that?! Why did anyone even notice what *I* was doing? But even if I had been able to keep my mouth shut, Alice would have been able to smell my reaction, she was Changed too, and she would have made fun

of me just as much, and still not reacted to me at all. Nyaaarrgh!

Never mind that! What happened next? Wednesday night we all watched the new *Shadows in the Sun* together, because Thursday Daddy Howard and Auntie Toni had to fly back to LA. (I think it was to work with the Faceless, but no one would say.) They were gone when I got home from school, so it was just me and Mom, which was nice but then she got that call during dinner and I had to pack a bag to go stay in the dorm — "residence hall" — at Peasley. Everyone had left! What if the Stonebreakers had showed up while Mom and Toni were away?! I'd freaked out then, too, but Mom had calmed me down by promising me that Ironstar and X-Wave would keep me safe. I wished she was here now. I wouldn't even complain if she smothered me in her cleavage! (It's hard having a mom who's more than a foot taller and not big on personal space.) But she wasn't, she was wherever and probably didn't even know I was in trouble, and Ironstar and X-Wave weren't here either.

Would they be? Did they know I was missing? They hadn't been at the hall, but Mom had talked to them on the phone, so they knew I was supposed to be there. If they came looking for me, they'd find me; they might be retired now, but they were major superheroes and no one wanted to mess with them.

Had I seen them at all? I couldn't remember, so keep going from Thursday. Mrs. Dietrich, one of those old black ladies that just seems to get more concentrated with age, helped me get settled in even though she had a lot to say about Mom and none of it was nice. I tried to find out if she had been around in the old days, when Mom and Niké and Ironstar and X-Wave had been on the same team, but she wouldn't say anything except "hmph".

Friday, more school, Alice was wearing her cheerleader skirt even shorter than usual

(how didn't she get in trouble?!) so even people I didn't know yet teased me and Pamela was no help at all! For a best friend (kind of my only friend, since I'd only been at Peasley for a week, but still!) she liked to see me embarrassed an awful lot. But I'd let her tease me as much as she wanted if she were here! She was human, but she was smarter than me, and being dumb and pointy wasn't getting me anywhere.

Well, WWPD? Probably stay where she'd started and set a trap. I couldn't really set a trap (I didn't have anything to work with!) but I could lie in wait. I got up to start walking back, glad I had left a trail (if I could find my scratchings in the dark), and noticed that one of the ghostly lights my eyes made up wasn't moving when I turned.

I was glad no one was around to hear the embarrassing squeak I made! I ran down the brick tunnel, too excited to be careful but this time nothing tripped me. Around the corner, and the light was definitely a light, but still way out there. Another corner, and there it was, smeared across the floor and wall at the next intersection, glimmering between green and purple without ever being blue. But what was it?

The air shifted, or something, and the sharp smell, ozone and burnt metal and something weirdly crystalline, went right up my nose and I skidded to a halt. That was the smell of emanations from something irradiated by Gravekeeper energy beams or sorcerous pollution or any number of things, all of them bad.

But it was light! I could see the brick-lined tunnel clearly, although the weird light made the red bricks look black and ominous. Whatever was glowing seemed to be seeping up between the bricks, although at the corner of the wall it was a patchy sheet, like lichen. Was it lichen? I kind of didn't want to get too close to it, but one of the less obvious advantages of being Changed

was more resistance to emanations. I wasn't sure how much more, though, and although my phone could tell me if it was dangerous, my phone was wherever my pockets were.

The scent was familiar, like I'd smelled it recently. Was I near the Columbus Pit, where the city before Rhodes had been until the Gravekeepers burned out the ghoulish nest under it? The scent had come on the western breeze, between the 8- and 10-story buildings that still seemed weird and looming after the spread-out flatness of South California... But I couldn't remember who I was with, which was too bad because they were the obvious suspects for dumping me in here!

The light was coming from around the next corner, too, so I edged along the clear side of the hallway to take a look. Closer, the glow still looked like lichen until I got to a denser patch where the crystals were big enough to see. The biggest, right at the center, were about as big as flashlight batteries, and bright enough I could have used one for a flashlight if I had some way to carry it without touching it. I leaned down to peer at the dark shapes inside them (were there bugs in there, like amber?), all 87 pounds of my hair fell in my face *again*, and I had a brilliant idea.

Bricks pried out of the wall (there were more bricks behind them, and more behind those, so no getting out that way) made stepping stones to get to the middle of the crystal patch, so I could carefully wrap the end of my ridiculous hair around the biggest crystal and break it off. I didn't have a good grip, because hair is slippery, but I'm strong as well as pointy and I managed to get the crystal without losing my balance or touching anything bad with my skin.

The whole patch flashed and flickered when the crystal snapped off, like it was one living thing, and I held my breath in case it tried to shoot spores at me or something, but it settled back

down without doing anything that I could spot. Now I had light! Not that I needed it here, but I could tell that the crystals thinned out further on, and I didn't want to stay next to a bunch of them anyway.

Forward, or back? I didn't know what was around the next corner, but so far, except the crystals, there'd been just a lot of nothing. Someone had put me here, and the odds seemed better than they'd want to bring me water or gloat over me before revealing the true horror of the deathtrap or *something*. Back to where I started, then.

The stupid crystal kept slipping out of my grip until I figured out how to tie a couple of locks of hair around it. I didn't know if the knots would ever come out, but I'd probably have to cut all my hair off anyway after using it to handle cursed crystals.

Back in the dark away from the crystal patch, I could tell my light wasn't as good as I had hoped, but I could still see for a few yards, which was infinitely better than before. Being blind had freaked me out more than I'd even realized!

The signs I'd scratched into the walls (pretty neatly, for doing it blind) led me right back to the dead end where I'd woken up in just a few minutes, but it wasn't any more interesting now that I could see it. If there were any secret doors, or trapdoors in the ceiling, or anything, I still couldn't find them. How had I gotten in here? Had they pushed me in with a stick and then built a wall behind me? But it was solid concrete, all one piece, and even smelled a little old. Magic wall-building? Teleportation? I didn't think it was a hallucination, my markings on the walls had been too consistent. Whatever was going on, it was a lot of work just to terrorize a middle-school student! It had to relate to Mom somehow, but if someone kidnapped me to put pressure on her, they would have kept me handy for telling her I was alive over the phone, or cutting parts off me

to mail her (ewwwww!) or something.

It's kind of a secret, but my Mom is Slink, the catgirl cat burglar who made off with so many treasures and hearts (let's just leave it at "hearts", OK?) while rocking a skin-tight ninja suit. A lot of supervillains, and a few heroes, hate her for stealing their preciouses or breaking their hearts or generally humiliating them, but she didn't hurt anyone who didn't deserve it, and when she worked with Ironstar, X-Wave, and Niké, they were definitely heroes. Even after Niké died and the team fell apart, she helped with the Vermillion Pupae invasion, sneaking onto their spaceships to look for weaknesses. (That was just a couple of years ago, when I was old enough to understand that she could die, or worse, but I overheard enough about the Pupae to know it had to be done. Even if I fight with her, I'm so proud of her.)

The community has standards about messing with relatives who aren't active, and anyone who makes things personal gets put down pretty quickly, but not everyone with powers is sane enough to stay on the right side of that line. Mom had done her best to keep me out of that side of her life, whether I liked it or not, but the Stonebreakers had found out that my mom wasn't just Nikita Harrington — I mean Juanita Nelson — nontraditional law student, and they had no reason to keep our secrets. If they'd managed to trace our move— I'd been over that. If they'd kidnapped me, I'd be in a lot more pain and have a lot fewer fingers, not be sitting confused in an underground maze. (Actually, I didn't even know if I was underground, it just felt basement-like.)

I was getting pretty hungry and thirsty, and no one was showing up. I put the crystal on the floor between me and the rest of the maze and settled in to wait.

Friday night, Daddy Geoff called, but I'd still been so upset about everyone leaving that I kind of just yelled at him and cried and hung up. At least I wasn't alone after that, because

Pamela invited herself to the room I was staying in to do homework together.

Pamela is the only friend I've made in my first week at Peasley, but I really like her (not like that, she's way too straight) and she's definitely best-friend material. She's super-smart (not a mad scientist, but she has some kind of special advanced study course when I'm in plain old Computer class), super-pretty (tall and delicate, with perfect makeup and clothes and long glossy black hair, and she smells like almonds), and kind of weird (her name is actually Priyadharshani, because she's Sri Lankan, but she goes by Pamela, with the accent on the second syllable so it rhymes with Nutella), but I try not to hold any of it against her.

Oh, right, Friday was also the day I got in trouble for calling that jerk-face Joey Williams on his stupid Confederate flag hat! He gave me all that crap about being proud of his Southern heritage, but when I grabbed the hat off his head, he couldn't name a single state's right before Mrs. Dietrich came to confiscate it. I got scolded a little for taking the law into my own hands, but Joey lost his hat until his parents came to get it back and got sent to the principal's office for a lecture. Maybe it wasn't smart to make enemies of all the Peasley jocks in my first week, but who cares if it's Ohio, I'm not going to put up with that! They were going to hate me anyway, for being better than them, and Pamela thought it was awesome.

Walking around and now resting had gotten most of the cramps out of my muscles (or else my body was dissolving into sludge because of the emanations from the crystals), but my stomach was still tender. Even in the dim strange light, I could see a discolored circle the size of a plate; it looked like someone had tried to run me through with a telephone pole! Stonebreaker was strong enough to do that, even if Peter wasn't yet, but I was still sure it wasn't their fault I was here. What could have happened?!

What had I done Saturday? I couldn't remember at first, which was scary but hopeful, because maybe it meant I was getting closer to getting thrown in here, but running through everyone I could think I might have met brought up an image of Mrs. Dietrich serving out bacon (lovely crispy bacon, and now I was getting more than a little bit hungry, darn it) to a bunch of girls in the cafeteria — no, they called it the refectory — in the hall. More than a bunch, there were several hundred students who boarded, besides all the ones who lived in Rhodes and treated Peasley like a regular middle school, so that was a couple of hundred girls in this building. They were already all in their groups, just like at lunch in the school cafeteria, and they wouldn't want the weird new girl butting in. Bacon and pancakes, and then everyone who really boarded had to clean up the residence hall, so I hid in my room and worried about my parents. Daddy Geoff would be fine (and I owed him a phone call and lots of hugs if I ever got out of here), but Daddy Howard and Auntie Toni were too near the Stonebreakers (and maybe nearer the Faceless, who is creepy as heck even if he's supposed to be a hero), and I didn't know where Mom was at all.

I still didn't know, and now I didn't even have a phone to call them and leave voicemail! When I'd been moving around, I was able to pretend I was working toward getting out of here, even though I didn't know where I was going, but just sitting and waiting, in the darkness barely broken by the creepy light from the crystal made it really hard to keep my spirits up. It had to have been hours, someone was going to come check on me soon, right? Or were they leaving me to weaken from thirst and hunger? But they hadn't had any trouble knocking me out the first time, why would they bother? I wished I had some of that hot— Right, Pamela had taken me out to show me Rhodes, starting with her favorite coffee shop! She didn't drink coffee, but the Mighty Bean-O-Tron had really good hot chocolate. Pamela said it was only the second best in

town, but her big sister Chathurangani worked at the place with the very best, so she didn't like going there.

The cute floppy-haired Asian college boy who brought us the hot chocolate (Pamela thought he was more than just cute, but not seriously) said he was trying to hire Chathi away from the Brilliant Frog, and smelled like it was completely for personal reasons. Imagining Pamela with grownup curves, I couldn't blame him, even though it's gross when boys smell like that.

Benjamin wasn't the only boy who'd smelled like that! We'd met boys from school, Jonah Armstrong who's in our grade and his little brother Jacob from 6th grade, and Jonah and Pamela were definitely interested in each other. He showed it by trying to sneak up behind her and put his hands over her eyes or steal her hot chocolate or something, but when I saw some boy sneaking up on my friend, I hissed at him without even thinking about it, and freaked him and Benjamin both out.

Jonah's as tall as Pamela, which is pretty tall for an 8th-grade boy, and has the kind of springy curls that remind me of a palm tree. He even smells a little like a palm tree, and sandalwood shampoo. He's getting shoulders that looked pretty good in his leather jacket, too, although maybe not as good as he thought. (Boys are awful, but I can't help noticing shoulders and stuff, darn it.) Jacob hasn't had his growth spurt, but he's still taller than me (walking digitigrade is like 3" heels and I had all my ridiculous hair piled up in a bun, and I still couldn't beat a 6th-grader!) and long beautiful straight brown hair (so I guess they're biracial, not black?) that he had up in a bun too. He smelled strange, like he was carrying bugs in his pockets, and he was more bothered by girls than by fangs, so I figured he had powers of some kind, but it's rude

to ask.

Wait, I met boys, and they're brothers, and now I'm naked in a dungeon?! But Pamela knows them, and that's way too complicated for the Stonebreakers. Nyaaarrgh! I got up and started pacing. What did happen with those boys? Did they do something to Pamela? Was she in here too? I didn't want her to be in trouble with me, but I'd rather be trapped with her than without her!

It was like trying to dredge up pieces of a dream after getting woken up, so I must be getting closer to whatever knocked me out. Jonah and Jacob had sat down at our table even though Benjamin (Pamela called him Benjy but he didn't like it) gave them dirty looks. I couldn't tell if he didn't like people who snuck up on his crush's little sister, or just didn't like them.

Pamela made introductions, Jacob pegged me as being from California by my accent (really my lack of an Ohio accent), Pamela and Jonah made flirty eyes at each other and tried to impress each other with how cool they were. Jacob was oblivious, so whatever his powers are, they don't let him detect hormones or make him any brighter than a regular 6th-grader. I think he was just making small talk because we were left out of the flirtfest, but he's young enough that he wouldn't smell interested the way his brother did even if he was secretly imagining what I looked like without my nice unflattering sweatshirt. Eventually he spilled that he and Jonah were going to some kind of special flea market, and wanted Pamela to go with them. They weren't sure about me, but Pamela vouched for me.

None of them would say what kind of flea market it was, but Pamela didn't know where it was, so it must move around, which sounded sketchy. It probably wasn't the kind of place my parents would ever let me go, but they shouldn't have all left and dumped me on someone who

didn't even show up!

Pamela took Jonah's arm and hugged it to the side of her chest, which he really liked even though she doesn't have much there besides ribs. Jacob offered me his arm, so I kind of had to take it, but I didn't let him feel any of my pudge. I felt a little bad being so suspicious of him, but his brother's scent was reminding me way too much of Peter Stonebreaker.

We crossed the park across from the Mighty Bean-O-Tron, which was only about 50 yards wide but went out of sight in both directions (Pamela said it used to be a railroad) and into a poorer part of the city. The wrong side of the tracks, even if the tracks weren't there any more. The buildings were just as tall, but the streets were narrower and more claustrophobic, the cars were older and smoggier, and most of the people weren't white and smelled slightly of anger and desperation.

Jonah was the most nervous of us, even though he had to act tough for Pamela. Jacob and Pamela were both a little wary, but mostly confident, more than me even, but I couldn't tell why. I was going to have to grill Pamela, but not in front of the boys!

That's where I smelled the Pit! The wind came up, blowing that ozone-burnt-crystal scent right in our faces, even though we couldn't be that close or there wouldn't be so many people living here. Then I was sure that I wouldn't be allowed near this flea market, if anyone bothered to care. But look where I ended up.

Pamela tried to walk right by an Earth Communion chapel with a cop SUV parked out front! The rest of us knew better and steered her around the other side of the block. (Mom says the Rhodes cops are even more racist than usual, and I don't want to find out what that's like!) Behind the streets with stores and offices and apartment buildings, things were more industrial:

auto body shops, truck rentals, a lumberyard, warehouses, stuff like that. Hardly anyone back there was white, but there weren't any other teenagers who weren't old enough to work so we kind of stood out. A lot of guys checked out Pamela in her miniskirt and tights, and even me in my sweatshirt and jeans, but they didn't do anything, or even say anything so awful I'd have to notice.

Jonah steered Pamela down a narrow street between a concrete warehouse that stank like machine oil and a taller brick building that looked abandoned, and that's where my common sense started to come back (even though I could smell sausages grilling somewhere down there).

"What's the matter?" Jacob asked when I stopped at the mouth of the literal dark alley.

"I just met you twenty minutes ago and now you're leading me into a deserted alley in the bad part of town!"

Pamela didn't smell any more nervous than she had on the way there, and I didn't think she was going to sell me out, but even though the alley was empty and cleaner than most, it gave me a bad feeling.

"It's OK, Nef. I've been here before — not *here*, but the old site — and it's perfectly safe. There are people paid to keep it safe for everyone. Fights are bad for business."

Even Jonah smelled unworried, and Pamela was making puppydog eyes (if puppies wore perfect eyeliner and mascara). "OK, but if we get robbed and kidnapped, you owe me hot chocolate for the rest of my life."

"It's a deal!" She turned Jonah around and we went down the alley and around behind the warehouse, where a very tall woman stood in front of an iron gate into the opposite lot.

She was at least a foot taller than Mom, tall enough and fit enough to play professional

basketball and dressed to show her muscles in tight leather pants and a black tank top. She also had black horns sticking out of the sides of her head and curving to point forward, and black hooves that clomped on the concrete alley. She was Mina Tauros, a supervillain who specialized in guarding precious things, and my mom once threw her off a 10-story building.

I started backing up, dragging Jacob confusedly along, but Pamela went right up to her. "Hey, Mina! Did you get the boost gems?"

Tauros looked down at her over mirrored sunglasses and said in a deep, faintly accented voice, "Yeah, thanks. I can't believe it takes 10 million to get one chimera to level 25. The adept-level battlegrounds better be good."

"Oh, yeah, you can get 30 crimson stars a day if you find a good team!"

Tauros wasn't listening to Pamela, though. She'd noticed me, or heard Jacob's squawks when I didn't tell him why I was leaving. "Who's this?"

"Oh, this is my friend Nef, Nefertari. She just moved to Rhodes. She's—"

I don't know what she was going to say about me, because Tauros brushed past her and stalked forward, boom boom boom, to loom over me and finish that sentence. "—Slink's little kitten," she breathed, and her grin widened until I thought she was going to tear out my throat.

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I really didn't remember the next bit, but I could guess how it went. The bruise on my stomach was just the size of one of those hooves, and Tauros's power (besides surviving 100' falls and punching out pickup trucks) was her labyrinth outside of space and time. She hated Slink enough to dump me in here to rot, and Mom had mentioned finding dead bodies, so it wasn't likely she'd

pull me back out.

Mom had gotten out, though, or she wouldn't have been able to tell me about it, so I wasn't doomed! Well, maybe. One time she'd escaped by teaming up with Doktor Vengeance, and another time someone on the outside had made Tauros get her out because he thought she had something he wanted. The other times, I think she was with X-Wave, who could teleport too, or with Niké, who was from Project Pathfinder.

Now would be a great time to find out I had powers of my own.

Like most kids, I'd wished for that a million times in my life, but it had never worked. To be fair, I did already have some super-strength, super-agility, fast healing, enhanced senses, and claws that could cut through metal, so maybe I was being greedy, but plenty of Changed (like my mom) had more powers! But it didn't work this time either. I was going to have to escape using my own wits.

At least I didn't have to worry about Pamela being in here with me. She and Mina Tauros were obviously friends, or at least Internet friends. Maybe if I still played Fiend Forge (I'd had to abandon all my accounts everywhere when we went underground, not that my real-life friends were still talking to me) I could have talked her out of kicking my butt? Didn't seem likely.

What about Jacob? He was a boy, but he'd been nice and I didn't want him to end up as a skeleton in the labyrinth. He was a member of the community, but hopefully he wasn't related to anyone who'd made Tauros look bad. Either way, I couldn't do anything for him now.

None of my parents wanted me to have a life like Mom's, so I only knew about the labyrinth from stories, not from a real tactical briefing. Could Tauros watch me flail around, and listen in as I went mad and started talking to myself? Should I beg her to let me out? No, I had to

try getting out on my own. I had the feeling she'd respect that more, if she was going to show mercy. Anyway, I'd be piteous enough in a day or two whether I liked it or not.

My crystal was still glowing as bright as when I picked it, so I didn't need to go back that way. I might as well try following the left-hand wall this time. I tied the crystal back into my hair and started walking.

A little while later (15 minutes? 10? 30? Usually I can guess pretty well, but not down here) I found one of my original markings. The tunnel must have looped back on itself. There had been a couple of branches off to the right, though, which must have gone to the middle of the loop if this maze made any sense. I worried a bit about abandoning the left-hand wall, but it wouldn't make any difference as long as I came back to pick up where I left off.

I tried the first branch, but it just led me around some corners back to a place I'd already been. Had there been another branch? I'd have to go what felt like the long way around the loop to find out, but I was pretty sure there hadn't been four, so it had to dead-end inside the loop. Maybe someone else had been put in there?

The third branch was there, but it didn't dead-end, exactly. It turned into a flight of concrete stairs edged in nonskid tape.

Why were there safety features in a labyrinth of extradimensional death?!

If there were safety features, why weren't there EXIT signs?!

I really wished I'd gotten that tactical briefing. I bet Stonebreaker told Peter and Mason all the details about the crazy places he'd been! But he never taught them to keep their hands to themselves, so my parents were still better.

I felt like I was underground, so I didn't want to go down, but I had no idea where the exit

was. It could be at the bottom or the side or even the center as easily as the top. I waffled for a long time, but finally decided stairs were more interesting than flat tunnels, and all I could really do was look for interesting stuff. I went back to the main tunnel and scratched a note about the stairs in case some other prisoner came this way, but then I had to take the plunge.

The stairs switched back to end right under where they started, about 1 1/2 stories down, in a hallway that had three branches on either side and another stairway at the far end. This one had the nonskid tape too, but narrower and black instead of yellow. Mom had said something about the labyrinth picking up stuff from wherever it opened, so that was probably where this came from. Why couldn't it pick up something useful like lights?! But it would need wiring and a generator and fuel for that.

None of the branches between the stairs went anywhere interesting in the first few hundred yards. I hadn't come up with any reason why my logic about stairs being more interesting than empty tunnels was wrong, so I went down again. There were four flights this time, so twice as far down, and it was colder down here. The Changed have high metabolisms, and I have a thick layer of insulating blubber, but I still got goosebumps. Did the cold mean I was closer to getting out? I didn't think it had been this cold before, but I'd been wearing clothes, and it had been the middle of the afternoon. Even in almost-September, Rhodes got chilly at night. This could be it!

Three ways to go from the bottom of the stairs, so I followed the left-hand wall again. The tunnel almost immediately changed from the bare concrete I'd been walking through to white-painted cinderblock walls and arched ceiling, and floor grooved into squares like a sidewalk. I hurried along, so eager to get out that I wasn't paying attention to where I was going

and almost stepped on the line of dried blood across the floor.

I knew dried blood when I saw it (Daddy Howard's work stuff again) and there were squiggles on the other side of the line that made me think sorcery before I had time to think. I stopped and flinched back so suddenly I fell on my butt. "Nyaa!"

I hadn't noticed the crystal dimming before, but it was definitely not giving as much light now, so I had to crawl right up to the line before I could tell that there was something a few feet on the other side, and even then it took me a while to figure out that what I was looking at was bodies. In the dim crystal-glow, I couldn't see much more than that they were fully dressed and there were at least two of them, but they had to be pretty old if I couldn't smell them. Or else the circle of blood was keeping the smell in.

I shouldn't have been surprised, after hearing Mom's stories, but seeing dead bodies in a creepy oubliette is a *lot* different than hearing about them over the breakfast table. Especially when you don't know what killed them and whether it might be right around the corner. There were plenty of corners, too: the circle of blood was drawn right in a 4-way junction, maybe so that they could make it bigger or maybe because crossroads are magically important.

The circle went right up to the corners of the intersection, without enough room for Pamela to squeeze through, never mind me, and if there were dead bodies there it obviously wasn't near safety, so I should have treated it as a dead end and gone back to try one of the other passages, but it seemed wrong to leave them there. I couldn't take the bodies with me, but at least I could find out who they were and update their Wikipedia pages when I got out.

If my crystal didn't go out first. It didn't seem to be dimming any more, though, and when I sat back from the creepy magic circle of blood, it might even have brightened some. I tried

scooting back down the tunnel, and it brightened more, dimming when I approached the circle again. I don't know much about sorcery (that's Daddy Howard's field, he isn't a sorcerer but he does forensics on ritual sites and stuff like that) but obviously either the circle was still active or something else weird was going on. Either way, the smart thing to do would be to not mess with it. But then I'd never find out who they were, or if they had any crank flashlights or clothes or anything I could use.

I was pretty sure a circle with glyphs on the inside was to keep things out. What were they trying to keep out? I hadn't seen anything ~~alive~~ moving in here, or even smelled traces of life. Whatever it was, was probably long gone. I hoped. But I couldn't work on getting out any more than I already was!

Safely back from the circle, I dug a piece of cinderblock out of the wall and pitched it down the hallway. It clattered on the floor well past the circle, without bouncing back or being vaporized or anything. Not a forcefield, then. Maybe it only affected living things; I was pretty sure that was a thing sorcery did. But the only living thing I had was me, and I didn't want even my pinky vaporized! Maybe I could trim off a bit of hair to test with? Hair wasn't really living, though, which was why I was willing to touch the crystal with it. Same with claws, not that I could break them without tools.

The answer was staring me right in the face.

I tore another piece out of the cinderblock (there was just another layer of cinderblock behind it) and clawed carefully at the inside of my arm until a few drops of blood fell onto the chunk of concrete. This time when I threw it, there was a flash and bang like a firecracker and chips flew back toward me. The tunnel filled with the smell of sulfurous smoke and burnt

concrete and blood. If there were any monsters around, this would probably bring them running (if the scent of ~~fear~~ worry and hair dye hadn't already)! And then I could eat them and drink their blood, because that hot chocolate had been a long time ago.

There was one thing I had left to poke the circle with, but I didn't want to lose my only light source. It had been pretty easy to break the crystal off the wall it had been growing on, though, so maybe I could cut a little piece? I pinned it against the floor, still keeping it insulated from my skin with layers of hair and hooked one claw around the tip to try to cut it free. I ended up having to saw a bit, which probably meant I was breathing in crystal dust and tentacles were going to grow in my lungs, but I'm sure the air where I'd originally gotten it hadn't been great either.

I made the deepest narrow hole I could in another piece of cinderblock, poked the crystal tip into it, and chucked the whole thing at the magic circle.

The tiny odd-colored spark of the crystal went out in midflight, and there was a silent collapse or implosion, like "vwoomp" without the sound. The fragment of wall landed on something softer than concrete, then bounced off and clattered on the floor.

Despite the phantom wind, I didn't feel like my soul had been sucked out, and my crystal was glowing at full power, so it must have worked!

The blood circle was still there, but even more ragged, like something had worn it away, and the glyphs were almost entirely gone. I tested it with another spot of my blood, and nothing. I did a little dance, until I realized that Mina Tauros was probably watching and falling out of her chair laughing. She'd get hers!

It was actually three bodies in the circle, although so huddled together I could only tell by

counting heads. Despite the dampness in the air, they were intact but shriveled, like those natural desert mummies in Peru or wherever, so much that I couldn't tell from the faces if they were men or women, black or white. Two of them were dressed in street clothes from 50 years ago (OK, maybe 35 or 40 — when my parents were kids, long before my time), but the third was wearing a silver bodysuit with red-orange-yellow stripes slanting across the chest and around the hips, like the modesty panels on Earthlight's costume except this one wasn't mostly see-through. That and the long permed blonde hair seemed familiar, but it took me a while to place them. This was Lady Blaze, the first one, who disappeared in the 70s. I didn't know the other two, but I could look them up when I got out.

They hadn't gotten out, and Lady Blaze was a real superhero. She'd fought Doktor Vengeance and Dryad, but Mina Tauros had defeated her. What was I supposed to do? I didn't even have powers! Whatever they'd been hiding from, I was defenseless against, especially if it was Tauros herself! My parents had gone off and left me and Ironstar and X-Wave were nowhere to be seen I was going to end up dead in here, another mummified body for someone to find in 50 years, and they wouldn't even recognize me. Just another victim of a supervillain who didn't have anyone to save her and couldn't save herself.

The first time the floor shook I didn't really notice, too wrapped up in feeling sorry for myself, but then it did it again, and a few seconds later I heard a distant rumble. My first thought was that Tauros had come to kick my butt again, but everything was quiet again, and anyway, it didn't really sound like her footsteps. She'd have to be right down the tunnel to make it shake like that. Was this what Lady Blaze and her friends had made the circle against? If so, the circle had kept it out, but that hadn't done them any good in the long run, and the circle was broken now.

Whatever made the noise, I had to either face it or run away from it.

I still felt hollow inside, but running away wasn't going to get me anything except looser and thirstier. I wiped my face with my arm and got back to checking Lady Blaze and her friends for anything that would help me survive where they hadn't.

Their clothes were crusted with something that had probably been horrible before it spent 40 years decaying, blood or the fluids that weren't in their bodies any more or pee and crap or all of the above. It didn't smell like anything, and probably wasn't dangerous, but I still didn't want to touch it, and eventually decided being naked wasn't so bad. It wasn't *that* cold! The bodies had mummified clinging to each other in one horrible lump, so I couldn't easily get the clothes off them anyway. What I found in purses and pockets was mostly rotten, which didn't make any sense with the bodies being dried out, but it didn't matter. Dry or squishy, it was all gross!

The one I'd thought was a man (she must have been Tauros's size when she was alive) had a driver's license giving her name as Diana Black, which sounded familiar, and a faded picture of a Mediterranean face. She also had a shoulder holster under her leather jacket, with a huge pistol that didn't seem rusted at all (just gross from being next to her body). I thought about it, but I don't know how to use a gun, I just know that it's harder than it looks on TV, and it was way too big for my hands. I thought about her jacket, too, which would probably be OK to wear if I ripped out the disgusting lining, but when I tried to get it out from Lady Blaze's grip, her shoulders creaked and barely gave. I wasn't willing to dismember a corpse just for a jacket!

The tunnel shook again, making the cinderblocks grind alarmingly against each other, and there was a boom from the way I'd come.

I took Diana's heavy flashlight, and threw out the bulb and the dead batteries to make a

crystal-powered torch. The crystal rattled around loose, which probably wasn't good, but the hair that I had tied around it was weirdly dry and crumbly, so getting it away from my body was definitely good!

Should I say a prayer for the people in the circle before I moved on? There aren't any gods worth worshipping, though, so I just carved their names into the wall above the bodies and whispered a promise that I wouldn't let them be forgotten.

Whatever was booming, it had stopped, so when I got back to the foot of the stairs, I wasn't sure which way to go. There was a burnt smell in the air, acrid and a little bleachy, mixed with the smell of the crystals, but I had to check each of the 3 tunnels (OK, 2 and a staircase) to find out where it was coming from, and of course it was the last one I checked, straight on from the stairs.

It was hard to tell in the light of my own crystal, but it looked like the air was glowing faintly. Maybe I should have tried harder to find some cloth to make a mask, but I didn't want to turn back and risk missing something. I put my hand over my nose and mouth to keep some of the dust out, and kept going.

Was that a glow up ahead, around the corner where the walls changed to white cinderblock again? It looked like crystal-light. I stood my flashlight business end-down on the floor and crept forward, although I knew it was silly as I was doing it.

Down another 100' or so, at the next T-intersection, was a lump of crystals where the floor and wall came together, about the size of a hardcover book. None of the crystals were even as big as the one I had, so they must have been growing on something, but they covered it so thickly I couldn't tell what it was. More crystals spread out like lichen along the grooves between

the cinderblocks of the wall, but not very far, just a few feet. Whatever was going boom, this wasn't it, but it was definitely something!

I didn't smell any people, or monsters, although there was something kind of like Play-Doh. Careful to not let my claws click on the floor (with digitigrade feet, I'm always tiptoeing), I crept down the hallway to where the crystals started. Whatever was in the lump was white or light grey, I could tell, stood up flat against the wall right at the corner, and probably blended in pretty well before glowing crystals grew all over it.

BOOM! I jumped back and almost fell down, but any noise I made was covered by the explosion. This time, I heard a clattering like rain or hail at the tail end of the sound. I didn't think it was very far away.

Over the stink of the explosives and vaporized crystals, I smelled a human! A boy, but one I knew! "Jonah! JONAH!"

He yelled something back that I didn't catch immediately because my ears were still ringing, and I ran toward him before I realized one of the words was "tripwires".

Something pressed across my ankle.

#

If I had real powers, so I could fly or teleport or dematerialize, I would have been fine, but my body was already moving, and super-agility (at least the kind I had just for being Changed) doesn't let you ignore inertia and gravity. All I could do was push off hard with my other foot, diving across the intersection in the hope that only the area right on top of the tripwire would get blasted.

Everything behind me blew up, throwing me even harder toward the left-hand tunnel and the tripwire that broke across my face just before my chin slammed onto the floor.

I skidded across the rough concrete, glad for my tough skin, and crashed into a heap against the bottom of the wall. Metal bits pinged around the hallway and stung my skin, but nothing else blew up, so after a few seconds I got up.

I tried to get up, anyway, but my right foot wouldn't hold me, probably because it was covered in blood, and now that I saw that, hurt like anything. More than my bitten tongue, or my chest where I used it to cushion my landing and slide across the floor (don't do that without a bra, ow ow ow!). No one was watching my spazz show, so I curled around my foot and tried to figure out if I was bleeding to death. It didn't look like it, but at least 3 of the tiny metal balls — BBs? — had punctured my skin and were stuck in there somewhere. No, 4, the hole in my calf was double. The pain was bright and hot, but it made me sick to think about hard metal wedged in between my muscles and bones. Good thing my stomach was completely empty.

"Oh god are you OK?" Jonah threw himself down next to me. "Did the claymore get you? Are you bleeding?"

I was too worried about my foot to think about hiding from the boy who was seeing me naked, and he must have been too, because I would have noticed if he had noticed. "Just my foot. And the end of my tail." There was another BB-hole right at the tip, but it didn't look like it had stuck in, just ripped off some skin and fur. I tried digging out the pellet I could see with my clawtips, just above my anklebone, but it hurt way too much. "NYOW!"

"Don't— Like anything here is sterile anyway. But seriously, leave that for a doctor." He reached in to push my hand away from my wounds, his arm rubbed against the soft part of my

chest, and I could smell him notice that I was naked.

All alone with a boy who smelled like that! He hadn't done anything bad to me, he'd been nice, and Pamela vouched for him, but he was touching me and he wanted to—! I didn't scream, but I did shove him away (without claws!) so he sprawled on his back on the floor. He was naked too, and I could see everything. (It looked like the pictures in the Health textbook, not like the pictures on the internet.) He smelled scared, but not less interested in naked girls, probably because I was showing everything as I stood over him with my claws ready and tail lashing. Oh, Bast!

I plopped down to the ground (ow, my foot!) and curled up in a ball so he couldn't see anything except arms and shins and face and tail and blushing. I felt like I was blushing all over, and I probably was!

Jonah picked himself up and sat kind of like I was, but not as hunched over, since his chest wasn't embarrassing. I didn't remember if Pamela had said he was on a sports team, but he obviously got a lot of exercise somehow. I realized what I was doing and buried my face in my knees. "Sorry," I muttered. "I know you weren't trying to do anything. But what are you doing in here?!" Tauros and Pamela were friends, she wouldn't throw Pamela's friends into the labyrinth unless they were also her enemy somehow, would she?

I could smell that he felt sorry for me being so messed up I couldn't even touch a boy without freaking out, but he didn't say anything about it. "You were unconscious for that part? We couldn't tell, you were flopping around and groaning. Pamela stood up for you to Mina Tauros, so Mina cussed her out for betraying her and zapped us all with some kind of ray gun. I woke up by myself, without any of my stuff, and I've been looking for a way out ever since." He

felt sorry for himself, too. No one could expect him to do anything against a supervillain like Mina Tauros, but he was really humiliated. Well, I was too!

No one could expect Pamela to, either! "Pamela really did that?"

"Yeah. That girl is crazy." He sounded admiring, though. "It's a good thing she doesn't have powers, she'd take over the world." He paused. "Is your mom really Slink?"

I could smell what he thought of Slink, but I was used to that. My mom is ridiculously pretty and built like the sexy kind of anime girl, and wears skintight ninja gear on the job. She has about a thousand Internet fan clubs, even though she never acknowledges them, and probably some for her secret identity too. I don't think I've ever met a woman straight enough or a guy gay enough to not smell like that at least a little when they meet her. It makes being a blob-shrimp even harder, but it's not her fault, she's a 1st-generation Changed.

I should probably have lied, but we were going to have move and change our names again if I got out of here anyway. "Yeah. I know it's hard to tell."

"Um. With your hair down, I can kind of see it."

Was he trying to hit on me?! No, it didn't seem like it, he was just deluded. "Thanks."

He felt the awkwardness too. "So, where'd you get the flashlight?"

I peeked out over my knees. There was a crystal lying on the floor behind him, along with a brick painted dark on one side and a bundle of string. That explained how he'd found his way through the maze without getting exploded. "You know Lady Blaze, the old one, who disappeared like 50 years ago? Her body is back that way, with a couple of others. Maria Black and someone. Most of their stuff is ruined, but this seemed like a better way of carrying a crystal than tying it in my hair."

"Ugh." He didn't like dead bodies any more than I did. "I found someone too, killed by one of these claymores. They aren't real claymores, those are green. I wonder who put them here, and why?"

"Either they were trying to lure Tauros into them, or they were setting up defenses against monsters."

"There are *monsters* in here?!"

"Lady Blaze and her friends stayed in their warding circle until they died, and I don't think they would have done that without a good reason. I haven't seen anything, though. It's been decades, maybe the monsters got evicted."

"These mines have only been here a few years, I think. It's hard to tell, but five out of five went off without a problem when the tripwires got pulled, so they can't be too old." He sighed. "I'm going to stand up, you can look if you want. We can't get out of here with our eyes shut."

I blushed again and pressed my face to my knees, but he was right. I peeked through my lashes, and blushed even more, but he didn't look as silly standing up. I mean on his feet! The crystal-light made his lovely brown skin look fishy, but he was really pretty handsome. (Did most 8th-grade boys have that much hair, and on their chests?) I stood up too, which was tricky because my foot still didn't want any weight on it, but that distracted me from the way Jonah was staring wide-eyed at me. I've heard there are boys who like fat girls, but thought they wanted the fat to be on the chest! (I have enough hair to do the fantasy thing of dressed only in hair, but it turns out that doesn't work in real life, unless you hold really still.) I really wanted to wrap my arms around myself, but I kept them at my sides. He was right that we just had to get used to it. At least my mom had insisted that I change my hair color all over, even though I thought it was

gross!

All the crystals here had been blown to dust (which we'd breathed in plenty of) so I couldn't add anything to my flashlight except Jonah's, which he'd been carrying balanced on his brick to avoid touching. It made it noticeably brighter, although I could tell Jonah was still having trouble seeing. Well, he was only human.

The opposite tunnel at the T-junction where I'd almost gotten blown up didn't have a tripwire, so I thought the trap-setter might be that way, but Jonah thought it was just because of where the mine had been set up. We ended up going back the way he had come, to see if we could find the center or far side of the minefield. There was a lot more blushing, because I had to wrap my arm around Jonah's waist to keep the weight off my bad foot, and the warm skin of his leg rubbing on my hip made me feel even warmer. Vice versa, too, I could tell! Why couldn't I have found Pamela instead?! (Jonah probably thought the same thing.)

Jonah hadn't come nearly as far from where he started as I had, what with the mines and not being able to see. He might have woken up later, too, but we were totally guessing at how long it had been. We found the (non-explosive) crystals where he'd gotten his light, and filled up the bulb chamber of our flashlight without getting too much on us. It seemed like there were mines in every direction from where he'd woken up; Tauros must have been really mad at him!

"Or maybe she was being kind and giving me the chance for a quick death," he said, and he wasn't entirely joking.

Jonah's mine-clearing technique involved stepping carefully over the tripwires to get out of the mine's field of fire, and then throwing his brick at one to set it off. He was pretty good at throwing, although he said he wasn't on any sports teams.

Five mines later, we came to another dead end, but no one had been there since forever.

We took a break to let our ears recover.

"This is exciting, but it's not getting us anywhere," Jonah said. "If I wasn't worried about Jacob or Pamela or someone running into these, I'd just skip them." He was pretty worried about Jacob, more than about Pamela, which made sense. I'd never had a little brother, but it seemed like it would have to be a big responsibility.

"There can't be many more of them, can there? Someone had to be carrying all of them when Tauros threw them in here, and we've already found 9."

"I can't believe we're always making exactly the same choices as the minelayer, though. There have to be some in the other—" He started coughing and couldn't stop, his throat was so dry and coated in concrete dust from the mines. I was feeling pretty parched, too, and hungry.

"Then we're never going to be able to clear them all," I said when he was done. "We need a better plan."

"I know! We don't know enough about this place!" He slumped against the wall. "We don't even know what these mines are for. Maybe Mina Tauros put them here herself to mess with our heads."

I sat facing him and pulled my hair over my shoulders so it covered a little now that I was sitting still. "That seems like a lot of work, when we'll be dead in a couple of days." All of us, even though it wasn't any of their faults. Pamela should have picked a different friend in the incoming class. "Um. I'm sorry I got you into this."

Jonah scowled, but not really at me. "It's not your fault, it's Mina's. Whatever your mom did to her, she shouldn't be taking it out on you, or people who happen to be around you." He

coughed again. "What did your mom do to her, anyway?"

"Threw her off the top of a 10-story building. But that was before I was even born!"

"Was Mina naked when that happened?"

"What? Why would she be—" Oh. Oh, Bast! I hid my face in my hands. "MOM!" That explained why we were naked, even though we didn't deserve this either!

Jonah smelled like he was thinking about Mina Tauros and my mom naked, or maybe me and him naked. Ugh, boys. "We should keep moving. Just sitting here won't do us any good."

"I guess so." He wasn't happy, but he stood up and helped me up. "At least we'll die on our feet? No, we'll pass out first, I'm pretty sure."

My foot felt a little better, not enough to more than hobble on but I only needed a hand on Jonah's shoulder to keep up with him. "That's morbid, but probably true." Lady Blaze would have died on her feet if that were an option. "Following the left-hand wall got us here. Should we keep going or backtrack?"

Boom. It was far off, back the way we came, far enough we didn't feel the vibrations, but someone else had set off a mine. Jonah and I stared at each other, eyes wide. "Jacob!" He was off and running, leaving me hobbling along behind. He was only human, so I could keep up, but it really hurt! I wasn't going to tell him to slow down when his brother might be out there bleeding, though.

I thought he'd stop at the first branch, but he kept right on going, the way we hadn't been. "Jacob! JACOB!" I grabbed his wrist, but with only one good foot, I couldn't stop him and he pulled me over. I held on tight, though, and my weight was enough to drag him down.

"Jonah! Wait! We don't know where he is! We don't even know if it's him! It could be

anyone!"

"But what if it's Jacob?" Jonah was frantic about his little brother, but he wasn't an idiot; he stopped and helped me back up. "Even if it's not, it's someone! Can you, you know?" He tapped his nose.

Right then, what I could mostly smell was him and the blood I was tracking everywhere. I could feel the pellets grinding between my bones with every step, too, which made me want to throw up. I put my arm around his waist again. "Maybe! Wait a minute!" Once I caught my breath, I tried sniffing around, but we were near a mine we'd blown before, and everything still smelled of bleach and shattered crystals. "I can't tell here, let's go a little further." By the next corner, I was sure the smell of the explosion was getting stronger, but my foot was still bleeding so much that I didn't realize there was another blood scent there too until we got close enough that I could smell his body. Unwashed boy — no, grown man — and rotten meat and Changed — "Oh, Bast, preserve your daughters from the eaters of the dead."

#

I didn't realize I'd said it out loud until I smelled Jonah's rush of terror.

If I'd kept my big mouth shut, we might have been OK, but as soon as I stopped talking, I heard a deep voice from ahead of us say something like "Blibbimidlipb?" It didn't sound like a human voice, more like a frog or a fish, but it was talking, not just making animal noises. Everyone's heard "ghoul" voices in movies and stuff, but hearing a real ghoulish talk made me realize how human those had been.

Out where I could just barely see it, and Jonah couldn't at all, the ghoulish grinned at me,

snaggly fangs and huge eyes glowing in the crystal-light. The rest of it was a hunched shadow in the darkness, maybe bigger than Jonah, maybe just more horrible.

Jonah was frozen until I pulled him backwards, and then he started moving his feet, but he couldn't take his eyes off the ghoul. I couldn't either, until I thought, what if there's one behind us too? I had to look, but there wasn't, and I snapped my head around to make sure the one in front wasn't doing anything so fast I heard my neck crack. It had one truncated arm up to its mouth and was licking at the black slime covering the stump. Was it eating itself? (Ewwwww!) But it seemed like the stump was getting longer as it licked. It was licking itself a new hand!

It watched us until we were far enough away that it faded into the darkness. I had no idea how far it could see, or if it even needed to see us, so I kept backing up, glancing behind every few seconds, until we were around a corner.

Jonah's legs folded up and he collapsed to the floor, pulling me down on top of him. "Oh, my god," he gasped, panting like he hadn't breathed for that whole retreat. Maybe he hadn't; I wasn't sure I had! I was too scared to collapse, though, and just put my back to the wall so I could see things sneaking up from either side. People said just looking in a ghoul's eyes could curse you so you'd come to them sleepwalking, or so you'd find a deep cave and commit suicide. Were we already doomed? If Tauros hadn't stolen my gris-gris bag, it might have protected me! It wasn't like I wasn't already going to die of thirst down here, but walking into the claws of a ghoul while I was still alive was so much worse!

Jonah had calmed down enough to just be swearing under his breath, but he was still terrified and looking around in all directions. My tail was lashing and my ears were back, but I wasn't quite as freaked out. The ghoul didn't seem to be coming, in fact its scent was fading. Was

it really leaving, or just playing with us?

I don't know how long it took for us to decide that it was really gone, maybe we just ran out of adrenaline. "Good thing we already had a bathroom break," Jonah said, finally.

"Gross!" But he was right, and we both knew it. "Jonah, do you think we're cursed?"

"What, like on *Winter Hearts*?" I immediately felt stupid for getting my information about ghouls from a cheesy TV show, but he was nice enough to not make fun of me. "I don't know, but I'm sure no one involved in that show knows anything about real ghouls, so I wouldn't worry about it."

"If we get out of here, we should make a bundle as ghouls experts." But that was a big if. The ghouls hadn't eaten us yet, but it was still out there, and we still didn't have any water. Or food, my stomach reminded me by rumbling loudly.

Jonah jumped at the noise, but instead of teasing me, he glanced at me from the corner of his eye, smelling nervous. Nervous. What was his problem? Oh. He thought *I*—?! He was black, how could he take racist nonsense like that seriously?! "You, you idiot! Do you really think I'm going to eat you?"

Now he was guilty, which he should be! "No! I don't think you want to! But if you did, I couldn't do much about it." He smelled bitter, probably because his little brother had powers and he didn't. That had to be hard, teenage boys all wanted to be tough and strong. "But I don't know if you can fight that ghouls. Lady Blaze didn't think she could, and she melted a Jeep once."

"If you're scared of me, you shouldn't have warned me about the tripwires."

He looked and smelled shocked. "What? That's horrible! I would never— Oh." He got it. "Sorry. That was, um. I kind of suck."

"No, that garbage phrase sucks. You're just an idiot."

"Which phrase? Oh, 'ghouls with t— breasts'?" Now those were what he was thinking about!

I hissed at him, which come to think of it was what I'd done when we'd met. Maybe I couldn't blame him for thinking of me as mostly fangs. I drew my legs up for modesty, although being naked was only part of why I was embarrassed. "That's the one."

He went from embarrassed to terrified in an instant, but so did I, and we both sprang to our feet. The whisper from the darkness didn't make sense, but it was definitely the ghoul's voice. And he was scared of me again too?! Oh! "Did you catch what it said?"

"It's French. 'Little sister,' it said."

The whisper came again, and it could have been "petite soeur", but there was more to it. I know a few words of French, mostly for food, but obviously I don't speak it. "Vyese, oh 'come here'. I don't think so!"

More French, a question, but then from the other end of the tunnel, English. "Come with me... darling girl... I have such things to show you..."

Were there 2 of them?! It sounded like the same voice, but maybe all ghouls sound the same! Jonah was on the verge of freaking out again. I grabbed his hand and squeezed it, maybe a little too hard, but it seemed to ground him and he squeezed back.

You don't have to read much to know that talking to a whisperer in darkness is a bad idea, but we had nothing else. "Like what?"

"The bower of Theseus's bride... The sea of dreams... A stairway to the stars..." Was it getting closer?

Of course it was mysterious and cryptic. Nobody whispers anything sensible from the darkness. "How about the way out of here?"

"Come with me... dearest one... I'll dig you a tunnel... to any world that pleases you..."

The voice wasn't getting louder, but the smell of ghoul and rotten blood was getting stronger. Maybe we were surrounded! I couldn't see anything within our little smudge of light, until I thought to look up.

The ghoul was RIGHT THERE, practically over our heads! It wasn't clinging to the ceiling like a bug, more like gravity just worked that way for it, and for a dizzy moment I thought it was right-side-up and we were the upside-down ones, about to fall on our heads. This close, I could see its muzzled face, crocodile teeth bared in a grin, and its bony dark-furred body like a baboon. It stared into my eyes and casually raised (lowered) the shapeless lump at the end of its arm to its mouth to lick it into a more hand-like shape. That arm had ended at the elbow just a few minutes ago! I wish I could heal like that, and that was a silly thing to worry about when there was a ghoul so close it could reach down and touch my head, or at least Jonah's!

I had to swallow a few times before I could ask, "What do you want with me?"

I'd been thinking of the ghoul as it, but it was a boy ghoul, and now I could smell that it wanted what Jonah did when he'd seen I was naked. Ewwwwwwwwww! Please Bast, no!

It must have smelled my reaction, because it backed off a few feet, back to the edge of the crystal-light. "When you're ready... to share that bounty of flesh and perfuméd blood..." It *winked*, and disappeared into the darkness.

Jonah looked sick. He even smelled sick, not just scared. "Oh, god. It meant me."

I slid back to the ground. Oh, Bast. "I shouldn't be surprised ghouls think betraying and

murdering your friends is a first-date activity."

Jonah stared at me like I'd grown a second head. "Date?! What?!" Oh, right, he couldn't smell.

"It wanted—" I couldn't say it, but Jonah figured it out from the look on my face. At least he looked revolted too, and didn't smell like it was giving him ideas (much). "I guess it's not just the Earth Communion who think we're ghouls with, with better figures." Not that my figure was better than anyone's, but I was at least kind of a girl.

He got embarrassed, which he deserved, but instead of arguing, he said, "You can cuss. It's just us down here."

"I used to swear, until Daddy Geoff heard me." I curled up again, face hot.

"What, did he wash your mouth out with soap?"

"No! He thought it was adorable! He got Mom and Daddy Howard and Auntie Toni to come listen and tried to get me to swear in front of them! Stop laughing!" I smacked him on the bare shoulder, but carefully. "It was the third most humiliating thing that happened this year!" He actually had a nice laugh, but it wasn't funny!

"I can imagine that in your cute voice— Man, I've got to try that on Jacob!"

OK, it was a little funny, but not that much! I waited for him to shut up, wishing my parents were with me. Not that I wanted them to be trapped in the labyrinth, but I knew they could get us out of here.

"You have 2 dads?"

"Yeah. And before you ask, they're both my real dad, and yes, I know which one is my biological dad. You just have to look at them." Although the real clincher was my aunts and girl

cousins on Daddy Howard's side, who were all short and round and had big noses, just like me.

He sighed. "My parents are probably freaking out, and they don't even know I've lost Jacob." Then he sat up straight again. "I hope that ghoul doesn't find him. Or Pamela. Hey, wait! You can smell the ghoul, and it had to get in here somehow, can you track it back?"

How dumb was I, that I needed a boy to tell me how to use my own powers?! Though to be fair, I always lived in cities, where you couldn't really track someone. If I was a country girl, I probably would have thought of it on my own. "I can try? But it doesn't seem to leave a lot of scent behind, it was right here just a few minutes ago, and now I can barely smell it." But I *could* smell it, so it was worth a try!

I tried to hop up, but banged my foot on the wall. "NYOW!" I leaned against the wall and gritted my teeth until the sharp stabbing pain faded back to a dull grind. It must have been healing, because most of the time it didn't hurt as much as before, but that just made it worse when it did. And was it going to heal over the pellets, sealing them in my flesh? Ewwww!

Jonah squeezed up against my side so I could hold onto his waist again. "Can I do anything to help?"

I didn't know, I'd never done this before, but I didn't want to admit it. "Try not to sweat? Or have any feelings?"

"Sweating's no problem." Now that we were done panicking and had been sitting around for a bit, the cold was biting in again and he was shivering. I was too, a little. Or maybe it just felt colder because my skin was so hot from having a naked boy constantly rubbing up against me. "How do I not have feelings?"

"I don't know, meditate or something! Just stay calm, okay?" I started off in the direction

the ghoul had left in, which was the same way we'd come running away from it. Its voice had sounded like it was on the other side of us, but that could have been a trick. I could smell it this way, anyway.

Jonah stayed quiet while I tried to follow the scent trail. He didn't even complain when I lost it and we had to double back to the last fork, which didn't happen too often because for this part I could also follow our terrified sweat. Eventually — an hour? 2? — we found a bunch of pellets littering the floor, leading up to a 4-way intersection that had the bottom of one corner blasted away and stank of explosives and crystals and ghoul blood. We'd left our own scent behind, but only a little ways, so this must be where the ghoul had lost its hand to one of the mines and gotten our attention.

"So far, so good," I said. "Do you want to rest?" He wasn't as strong as me, and was supporting half my weight, so I couldn't blame him if he did.

"Nah, I'm good. Let's keep going." He smiled down at me. "Good work."

I blushed, but who doesn't like it when people notice they're awesome? Jonah was sort of growing on me. No, boys do not get to grow on me! Not even cute ones who aren't constantly gross about us being naked! "The trail didn't branch, so it had to have come back here, but now there could be two trails, coming and going."

"Maybe it went back out of the labyrinth, if it can really get in here whenever it wants. Even a ghoul must like its own... lair? warren? hive? whatever ghouls live in, better than this place. And it didn't stop to hunt for a snack along the way." He tried to sound confident, but smelled scared. The only snacks we knew of in here (besides us) were Jacob and Pamela.

"That makes sense." I wasn't sure I believed it, but hope springs eternal or something like

that.

Once I picked up the trail on the other side of the explosion, it didn't branch except for one part where the ghoul went all the way around a loop and into the tunnel that ran into the middle of it. There was no stairway here, though, just a dead end with a single human skull sitting on the floor. We both freaked out when we saw it, thinking it had to be one of our friends, but it was so old that there was no smell and not even a scrap of flesh on it. It could have been here longer than Lady Blaze, for all I could tell.

By the time the trail led us somewhere that wasn't just empty tunnels with different walls, we were hungrier, thirstier, and getting sleepy. We forgot all that when we reached the balcony.

With our pathetic light, even I couldn't see anything except that the walls opened out to either side and right in front of us was a metal safety railing with nothing on the other side. I could feel and hear that it was a huge space, though, with a freezing draft from below. Jonah leaned out over the waist-high railing, peering into the blackness, and swore. "I wonder how far down this goes."

The tunnel we'd come through was made of blocks of stone, murky brown in the crystal-light so maybe really reddish, and soft enough that I could easily dig out a chunk the size of my head. "Ready?" He nodded, so I threw the rock out as straight as I could, hard enough to get past anything sticking out below.

Jonah whispered, "1 thousand 1, 1 thousand 2, 1 thousand 3, 1 thousand 4, 1 thousand 5, 1 thousand 6, 1 thousand 7..." There was a crash way below us, soft enough that we might have missed it if he had been louder. "7 squared is 49, almost 50, so 250 meters. Almost a hundred regular stories."

I was tempted to swear too. This place was ridiculously huge, even with supplies and lights and mapping gear — "kit," Daddy Geoff said — we could never explore it all.

Jonah smelled as despairing as I felt, but just said, "This is going to take a while."

"We don't have a while! We have to get out of here or we're going to die!" He knew that, I knew he knew it, but I couldn't help yelling.

"We have to find Jacob and Pamela!"

"We can't find them, we can barely find ourselves! But if we can get out, we can get help! X-Wave can get in and out, probably other heroes can too!" I couldn't think of anyone in the Rhodes League who could teleport, but they had two mad scientists, Transfinity and Apiary, and there was no telling what they could come up with.

"URGH!" He wanted to punch me, but only because he didn't have a good argument. I wished he did, I wanted to make sure Pamela was OK. She stood up to Mina Tauros for me! But my mouth was dry, my nose was clogging up with dust, and I was shivering from low blood sugar as well as cold. (Maybe if Mom had trained me to be a supervillain like her, I would have been able to do more, but she hadn't.) Jonah sighed and slumped over the railing, staring into the darkness. "There's got to be something we can do."

"We can keep following the ghoul until we find the way out. Come on." I grabbed him around the waist again. "I think it's this way."

The ghoul's scent led along the balcony and halfway(?) around the pit, which Jonah guessed was 100 yards wide, before it went into a tunnel that got us out of the freezing wind from the depths. We stopped there for a few minutes to warm up, and I didn't care that anyone watching would have thought I was making out with a boy. Not until I was warmer, and Jonah

was noticing that I was a naked girl and not a hot-water bottle. I pushed him away, but not hard.

"We can't stop here, ghouls come through here!"

The new tunnel was a change from the squared-off, level architecture we'd seen before: still stone blocks, now pale and veined with green (or something that looked green in the green-purple light), but arched overhead and low enough that Jonah could almost touch the top of the arch without jumping. The floor was hexagonal bricks, worn in two grooves like thousands of people had walked back and forth in neat lanes. It also sloped down at a good angle, like a wheelchair ramp.

"I think we're getting closer," Jonah said, looking around. "The rest of this place could have been service corridors in a mall built yesterday, but this looks like an actual place."

"We're closer to something, anyway. The ghouls have definitely been through here. A lot, I think." It was hard to tell through the disgusting gunk clogging my nose, but it seemed like there was both old and new ghoulish stink here, going back days or even weeks. Maybe it had been exploring the labyrinth from wherever it got in, going further each time? That seemed too human.

A little further down, the walls switched from blank marble to mosaics. It was hard to make out what they were, not being able to make out the colors, and not being able to see them from very far back, but we could make out columned buildings like Greek temples, and people or gods or monsters. Some were fighting, some were building or destroying the temples, some were — yikes! That wasn't the sort of art middle-schoolers were supposed to see! Was that what people really looked like when they did that? Jonah noticed me looking before I could look away, and his eyebrows went up. His scent said he was embarrassed, but not so much he didn't

want to find out what it was like. He better not try to get me to help!

"I wonder what kind of place this came from? Maybe where Mina met your mom?"

"Hey!" I couldn't say he was wrong, but I didn't have to like it! I hobbled further down the passage, keeping one hand on the wall for balance but trying to be careful of the mosaic, which was art even if it was embarrassing.

I noticed the ghoul scent getting stronger in time to scramble backwards toward Jonah, but then the ghoul was squatting at the edge of the light again. "Guests... how delightful..." it whispered. "Do you like the art... my beauty?" Of course it could smell what we had been feeling, probably better than I could. Knowing that a ghoul had been smelling that made my skin crawl.

"Don't mind us, just passing through," Jonah said breezily. The ghoul and I could both smell his fear, but he was staying a lot cooler than last time.

The ghoul ignored him, I guess he was just food and not— ewwwwww. It stared into my eyes, its own shining hypnotic purple-green-black. "Abide in my halls... darling one... Such revels we shall have..." Again, one waft of its scent made it clear what kind of reveling it had in mind for me. But it was trying to win me over, not just grabbing me and doing whatever it wanted. (How weird was it that a *ghoul* was being politer than some boys?) Alice Yamauchi could have twisted it around her little finger with that, but even I should be able to do something.

"We can sit and talk for a bit, at least," I offered. "I don't suppose you have any water?"

It didn't have eyebrows, but it wrinkled up one side of its forehead while looking at Jonah, and it was disturbing how easily I translated that to "there's plenty of yummy blood right there".

I shrugged. "I need him intact." (Jonah's scent was appalled but kind of admiring.)

"I defer... to your judgment... Do not wander..." The ghoul turned up half its mouth.

"These ways are perilous..." It slid backwards into the darkness beyond our light.

When I was sure it was gone, I turned to Jonah. "Sorry, but it's clearly not going to buy you as an equal."

"That's OK, I don't want it to look at me like that!"

"What, the way boys look at girls?" The ghoul was ugly and horrible and terrifying, but the way it looked at me wasn't a million miles from how Peter had, or how all kinds of people looked at Mom.

I hadn't meant to be harsh, but Jonah bristled. "I don't!"

"Maybe not you, but— Never mind. Do you want me to ask about Jacob and Pamela? Or not give it ideas?"

He grimaced. "It seems to honor your claim on me, try to claim them too?"

"OK, I'll try. I have no idea how much I can push." Or what would happen if I pushed too far, although it probably involved teeth. I shuddered, and must have looked spooked, because Jonah grabbed my hand.

"I know you can do it." He smelled scared that I couldn't, but I was scared too. I could flirt with boys (and look where that got me!) but I wasn't sure even my mom could lead on a ghoul until it got us back to the real world.

I leaned against the wall, trying to look like I was less mobile and more cool than I really was, and waited for the ghoul to come back. Then I waited some more, because wherever he went to get water, it wasn't just around the corner. Having a bit of rest was OK by me, though. I

even relaxed enough to yawn, which started Jonah yawning too. If our ghoul didn't hurry up, I was going to fall asleep!

Again, I smelled him before I saw him (even more: wet ghoul, ewwwwwww). I straightened up, although for all I knew, he could see us as soon as he came around whatever corner was down there and I wasn't fooling anyone. He was walking partly upright (definitely a boy ghoul, ewwwww!) carrying a plastic bucket in one hand. As soon as he saw that I saw him, he stuck his muzzle in and took a big drink, slurping and lapping like a dog. (To show it wasn't poisoned? Not much would poison me unless there was a lot of it, but would anything poison a ghoul?) Then he held the bucket out to me.

I didn't want anything to do with water that a ghoul had slobbered in, and I didn't want to get within arm's reach of a slobbery ghoul, but WATER! I took a step forward, but the pain of putting weight on my foot reminded me that I was faking not being able to walk. I leaned back against the wall and waved Jonah forward. Making a black guy even pretend to be a servant was pretty awful, and I could tell he wanted to get near the ghoul even less than I did, but it would be worth it if the ghoul underestimated me when he got tired of being polite.

The ghoul handed the bucket over with no problem, but once its hands were free, it ran one down Jonah's arm. It was more of a paw than a hand, with fingers even stubbier than mine, and nails that were long, shovel-like claws (not hooked cat-claws like mine) caked with dirt. If a person had squeezed Jonah's bicep that way, I would have said they were flirting with him, but the ghoul wanted to put his mouth on Jonah in an entirely different way.

I don't know how Jonah didn't pee himself, but he backed away from the ghoul without flinching and brought me the bucket. The water was murky and there were little bits floating in

it, and it smelled like dirt and ghoul and mold, but I could barely keep from trying to pour the whole thing down my parched throat. No, be cool, Nef! I scooped water out in my cupped hands, trying to avoid the floating yuck, and sipped at it. You were supposed to be careful drinking when you were dehydrated anyway. The water tasted as bad as it smelled, but I could feel it soaking into my flesh all the way down to my stomach. I couldn't be too cool to sigh with bliss.

I still wanted to drink the whole thing, but after three scoops, I waved Jonah away so he could drink. "Thank you," I said to the ghoul, and gave it a nod that hopefully looked graceful.

He settled down right at the edge of the light, sitting with his legs drawn up in a way that managed to not hide anything at all (still ewwww! would that even work?) and waved a paw. "I can hardly have you dying... so soon..." He stared at me with those eyes, which seemed to be glowing more than reflecting the crystals in our flashlight, and I couldn't look away. "Perhaps you need not die... at all..."

"I wasn't planning on it." The ghoul turned up one side of his mouth again, making his irregular teeth stand out against his dark, hairy skin. At least he thought I was funny. "What do you want with me, anyway?"

His smile widened, which didn't make me feel better. "It has been many nights... and many more... since such a rare treasure... has adorned these halls..." I could see individual flickers of light in his eyes, like the flashes that went through the crystal patches when we broke them. "Have you a name...?"

My parents must have drilled me enough, because I gave my new name even though I couldn't think. "Nefertari Nelson."

"Nefertari... beautiful companion..." Then he said something I didn't understand, but I

caught "Ubaste", another name for Bast.

I was right in front of him! I must have walked right up to him while he was hypnotizing me with his ghoulish eyes! He shifted when I flinched back, but didn't grab for me although I was within reach. I stepped back a bit more just in case. "Sorry, I don't speak Ancient Egyptian. My parents just liked the name." (That was a lie, I picked the name myself. My parents wanted horrible names like Mary and Georgina!)

"No matter... I can teach you..."

What was going on with this ghoul?! One minute he wanted me to host his love larvae, the next he threatened to kill me, and now he was planning to keep me around long enough to teach me a dead language! (What other kind of language would a ghoul speak?) I gestured to Jonah to give me more water while I tried to think what to say.

Now that I was hydrated enough to taste more than just WATER, I could tell there was an asphalt taste to it, like a parking lot on a hot day, and the faint chemical taste that even the best city water (and most bottled water) had. If I had to guess, I would say it came from a rain puddle on a street, not from an underground river in a ghoul cave. For all I knew, though, all the water in the world tasted like this after centuries of industrialization.

After a few drinks of disgusting, delicious water, I handed the bucket (a regular blue plastic bucket, like you'd buy at Target in the cleaning supplies section) back to Jonah. "I've always thought it would be cool to know Egyptian." (Completely true, Sekhmet Garcia spoke some and used it to take notes in hieroglyphics, which was awesome, but I'd never gotten around to it.) "What's your name?"

He did that sardonic half-smile again, making his dark-stained teeth glint. "When I

walked... beneath the sun... I was known as William... Hodgett..."

I heard Jonah swear, and I couldn't blame him. Holy crap! "You used to be human?" I knew ghouls could breed with humans, but I thought that just made white guys who were even creepier, I didn't know they transformed!

William — Bill? Mr. Hodgett? William seemed best — smirked more. "Many things... walk... among the humans..." He had a point, lots of people in the community have secret identities, and some of them are as strange as ghouls. But they aren't ghouls, and aliens don't blast the planet to get rid of them!

"Speaking of humans," I said, finally remembering what I was supposed to be doing, "I don't suppose you've seen any around? It would be this one's brother, and a girl about our age."

William wrinkled up half his forehead again. "The handmaiden of Hades...? I would not interfere with her... or her followers..."

The what of who? I looked at Jonah, but he was just as confused. I already had to get Pamela to tell me how she knew Mina Tauros (who did *not* have a secret ID!), this was probably another piece of the same puzzle. But it sounded like William and maybe other ghouls (were there other ghouls around? I couldn't think of a way to ask without sounding like I was pumping him for information, which I totally was) wouldn't bother her and Jacob, which was great! If it was true. William didn't smell like he was lying, but he mostly smelled like ghouls, and a little like he was looking for a ghoulfriend (ewwww). "Could you invite her here to have a drink with us?"

William's smile and raised not-eyebrow drained away, and I was face-to-face with a ghoul in the darkness. I brought my hands up, for all the good that would do. At least, if I ended

up tearing open a ghoul's throat, I wouldn't feel bad about it afterwards, even if it did bring us water. Even if I did know its name.

It stared at me, eyes huge and deep. Was I being too pushy? Did not interfering with Pamela mean no contact at all? Had it just got tired of acting like a human? "I'm sorry! I didn't mean to ask too much." No response. At least it was still just sitting there, not crouching to jump at me. I could see radioactive purple-green constellations in its eyes. Were they real constellations? That looked like the Big Dipper—

The ghoul rocked forward onto its knees and reached past me without breaking eye contact, which didn't make me react, but Jonah screaming did! I grabbed its extended arm, letting my claws dig into its hard flesh, and slashed at its face with my other hand. "NO!" It smacked my hand away hard enough to make it go numb and kicked me in the belly, right where Tauros had. The burst of pain made me double over and puke up all the water I'd drunk, but I didn't let go of its arm. I recovered before it could pry my fingers loose and grabbed its other wrist, hooking my claws into the underside where its tendons should be. Its flesh was as tough as concrete, but my claws are harder and sharper than diamond. I felt things snap inside its arm, and its grip loosened, but it snarled and kicked me again and this time I came loose and skidded across the floor.

I brought my feet up between me and it, like I'd learned in self-defense class, but although it bared its disgusting fangs at me, it didn't attack, maybe because both its hands were limp and covered in oozing black slime. I must have cut up its wrists pretty badly when I got knocked loose. Jonah was sprawled on the floor nearby, but still moving, trying to stand up, and I didn't smell much human blood.

The ghoul wavered, glaring at my toe-claws. The tunnel wasn't wide enough for it to get around me without getting kicked, and Jonah was behind me now. If it had been able to climb on the ceiling, it could have gotten over me and onto Jonah, but I guess it needed hands for that. It glibbered something in Ghoulish and disappeared into the darkness.

I could hear it scuttling away, but I remembered its ventriloquism from before, and waited until its scent faded before I stood up.

Jonah swore. "What's wrong with *him*? I thought you were getting along and then he flipped out!"

My stomach muscles gave a little twitch every time I tried to breath, which made talking hard. After I gasped for a minute (ow, ow, ow), I managed to say, "He was trying to hypnotize me, or maybe do the eye-curse thing. I guess I asked too much? But I don't know why he freaked out and tried to eat you instead of making demands back!"

"Maybe grabbing me was the demand." Jonah heaved himself up, braced on the wall, and swore again. "What if he's going to mess with Jacob and Pamela? Let's follow him!"

Doing our 3-legged race thing, we couldn't catch a ghoul, but maybe he'd toy with them long enough for us to catch up. With the light in my free hand and the bucket of water in Jonah's, we hobbled along down the ramp between the mosaics as best we could. At the bottom was another place different than what we'd seen before: a round room, with 6 tunnels leading out. The walls between the tunnels were covered with more of the mosaics, these ones each featuring a large figure who was pointing at the hallway to their right (our left). Moving at our feeble best speed, I had plenty of time to note that we came out of the one pointed to by a voluptuous woman (like, my mom with 40 extra pounds of curves) in a cloud of golden hair. Aphrodite? She

wasn't wearing a lot of clothes, anyway! The ceiling was dark and spangled with stars, in patterns that probably would have told someone smarter than me more about who these people were and where this place came from.

William the ghoul had been through here a lot, so I had to sniff around while Jonah hopped up and down with worry. Finally I narrowed it down to 2, but they were on opposite sides of the room. Probably one was the way he went to get water, and the other was the way he had run now, or else he'd run toward the water and the other was where he'd come from to meet us. "Take your pick: big guy with a bow, or girl with a bunny." I had no idea, Jonah was supposed to be the smart one!

"Urgh! Bunny girl, maybe she'll lead us to Pamela." It didn't seem like a great leap of deduction to me, but I didn't have a better idea.

This tunnel was the same marble, but the mosaics were all landscapes as best I could tell. It ran flat and then slanted further down, which could be good or bad. It was damp, too, and we almost slipped on puddles a couple of times. This must be where the water was, and I thought the ghoul scent was getting stronger, so maybe it was the way out!

Down further, and I could smell the water! It was the same as what was in the bucket, or at least gross in the same way (not counting ghoul slobber). I could hear it, too, rushing and roaring, but it was further than I thought: it got louder and louder and even louder as we went, until we couldn't hear each other talk (or hear a minotaur sneaking up on us) and we felt the spray before we could see the waterfall cutting off the tunnel.

No, not cutting it off: there was a way off to the left side, a ledge behind the river that crashed down from above into unknown depths. I went right up to the edge, but the cliff went

down further than our crystals could light up. It wasn't quite sheer, but it had obviously been polished by the water into something that even I wouldn't want to try climbing with the water beating down on me. The water was freezing cold, enough that it mostly didn't taste of anything when I drank some, but I splashed myself to wash off where I'd thrown up on myself when the ghoul kicked me, because I'd rather be cold than that gross.

The ledge was wide enough to walk on, but not for both of us, so I had to limp along with my bad foot, leaning on the wall and ready to sink my claws in if I started to slip. The wall and the ledge beneath me were marble like the hallway, slippery in the spray from the waterfall, but someone had carved a grid into the floor, which helped a bit. The waterfall went only a few yards that way, fortunately, and then the ledge curved around its edge into a larger space, not as big as the giant shaft earlier but still pretty big.

I couldn't hear a thing over the roar of the waterfall, and I couldn't smell much either, but it seemed like no one was home. I stayed quiet anyway, not wanting to attract any lurking ghouls. Not that it mattered, since Jonah started swearing as soon as he came out from behind the waterfall. "Nefertari! Wait up! You made me walk that whole ledge in the dark!"

I slapped a hand over his mouth, and he realized right away how he was screwing up, but everyone knew we were there now, if everyone was anyone.

Nothing. Either the ghoul was long gone, or he was waiting for us to walk into an ambush.

"Sorry," Jonah whispered. He still smelled pretty freaked out, though. It must have been scary walking along that slippery ledge completely blind. He was shivering just from being wet and naked, though, and so was I. Was there a slight breeze through the cave? I tried holding up

my finger, but it was cold on every side!

We huddled together and hobbled around the edge of the place. The walls were marble here too, but no mosaics and they were worn and ragged, like water or time had eroded them. There was only one opening before we got back to the waterfall and the pit it fell into, and it was even rougher than the walls and only a couple of feet wide, at about Jonah's head height. I couldn't tell what dug it out, but it could have been claws. There were a few stone chips near it, so maybe it was recent? Had William (or some other ghoul, we didn't know he was alone) just dug this? It smelled like ghoul, anyway.

It was clear this was a way to someplace, maybe even outside the labyrinth, but neither of us wanted to squeeze into that narrow tunnel that could be full of ghouls. We stood there looking at it and each other until finally Jonah pulled me away to the other side of the cave so we could talk without ghouls in the tunnel hearing us.

"I don't think we should go," he said. "We have water, so we'll be okay for at least a couple of days. We should spend that time looking for Jacob and Pamela. We know they're around here somewhere, and William might not leave them alone forever."

I had less time than he did before starvation got too bad, but I was sure I could go a day or 2. I just wouldn't like it. I already didn't like it, and filling my belly with cold water hadn't helped. But he was right that we had to help Pamela and Jacob if we could. Or get them to help us, since it sounded like they were having fewer problems with ghouls!

"I don't know if we can find them," I admitted. "I didn't smell anyone except ghoul all this way."

"We know one place the trail branched, that round room where we had to pick which

picture to follow. Let's check from there, and if we can't find anything in any of those passages, we'll come back here and try this tunnel."

We stayed in the waterfall room for a bit, drinking until we weren't thirsty and cleaning out the bucket as best we could before refilling it, but it was too cold to stay for long.

There wasn't any new ghoul scent in the round room. Bow guy was still the next most recent, which meant that William had gone that way if he hadn't gone out through the waterfall room. One more passage, with a picture of a younger or at least thinner woman leaning against a tree, seemed to have been used in the past couple of days (maybe longer down here, where there wasn't much wind or rain or traffic to erase scents), and the other two, scary old lady with battle axe and little boy with wand, were older. I didn't think we'd been down here long enough for William to have found Pamela and Jacob when he went through tree woman, so bow guy it was, despite the risk of running into a pissed-off ghoul.

The mosaics in this tunnel had a lot more fighting and a lot less, um, romance. The blood and gore were black in the crystal-light, hiding the details, but it still made Jonah a little queasy. The tunnel slanted up and up, I think longer than we'd come down the other mosaic ramp, until it turned from marble to concrete and a set of stairs with a metal handrail. Three flights up, and we were back in the concrete maze, but I smelled something familiar. A little gross, but familiar: human pee. If people marked their territory by peeing on it, I probably would have learned to tell more, but I was pretty sure it was a boy and a girl, at least. Pamela and Jacob must have stopped for a bathroom break near here! (Jonah made a face when I told him, but as a boy sharing a bathroom with Jacob, he didn't have any room to complain.)

#

I was able to trace the smell pretty easily, to where they probably did stop. There was a corner, where they could be out of sight for a little privacy without being too far apart, and the boy smell (ewwwww) was strongest on one side and the girl smell (eww) strongest on the other. There was also a patch of crystals, the fine ones that looked like glowing lichen from a distance, on each side.

"That can't be good," Jonah said. "If they're so contaminated it's crystallizing out of their urine..."

"I didn't see anything like that when we took a bathroom break, and we've been breathing in the dust from setting off those mines. How could they be worse off?"

"I don't know!" He was seriously scared, though. "Maybe it takes longer for the crystals to grow. We haven't gone back to check. Or maybe something happened. We have to find them!"

Once we backed away from the crystals, it was easy to pick up the scent of Pamela and Jacob, but harder to tell which way they had gone. We were a few hours behind them, so we'd have to follow the trail for an hour or so to figure out whether it was getting older or newer.

"This way," Jonah said. "It's more away from where we met the ghoul, and I'm sure Jacob wouldn't want to hang around, even if Pamela is the 'handmaiden of Hades', whatever that means."

It was only a couple of minutes until we found a note scratched into the wall, like the ones we'd been leaving when we remembered: "P + J —>". Jonah was smug.

We went as fast as we could, but with only three legs between us, I didn't think we were catching up. Finally we stopped to rest at a crossroads of yellow(?) brick tunnels. My foot was a

shapeless mass of ow, I couldn't even feel the pellets grinding any more. Did that mean they had worn holes into my bones and tendons? The idea made me want to puke, but I was too worn out. Our 3-legged race act was harder than regular walking by a lot, and we'd burned a lot of adrenaline over the past hours (day?).

"I wish I'd warned you about that tripwire sooner. This is taking forever!"

I was a little mad at him for not caring about my mangled foot, but I could tell he was worried about Jacob so much he wouldn't care if it was his own foot full of holes. "Do you think you could carry me piggyback?" If being side-by-side made me so embarrassingly aware of his skin, squishing up against his back with my legs around his waist would probably make me catch on fire, but I'd put up with it if we could get to Pamela and Jacob.

Jonah's skin was too dark to show a blush, but I could smell it. "Let's try. You're not too big, I think I can carry you OK." He was mostly embarrassed, not being a gross boy, so I didn't have to change my mind.

A glibbery voice came from beyond our tiny light, and we both leapt upright, not caring about tiredness or wounds or anything. "You have much to learn... about the commanding of servants..." William said.

I was so sick of his creepy lurking garbage! "NYAAAAH! What do you want with me?!"

"Irresistible..."

"No I'm not! Whatever ghouls like, you can get more of it somewhere else!"

"I mean the innocent blood... on your hands..."

I choked on whatever I was about to yell. "That was an accident," I said, although I couldn't sound like I meant it. Behind me, I could smell Jonah go from suspicious to appalled.

"You were made... to kill... and to command..."

"Maybe my mom was transformed to be a harem girl for Johnny Monsterseed, but I wasn't made for anything at all. I'm just a person!"

"Are you sure...?"

I wanted to throw something, but I didn't have anything except the flashlight, and anyway his voice was coming from different parts of the darkness. "Yes! I'm not one of Monsterseed's constructs!"

"You will learn..." He didn't say anything more, and his scent faded.

When I was sure he was gone (but I was sure he'd be back), I sat down with a thump. "Nyargh! What is wrong with him?!" It was a stupid question: *everything* is wrong with a ghoul! But most ghouls had the decency to hide somewhere dark and not bother people!

Jonah loomed over me, although he smelled unhappy enough that he probably didn't mean to. "You're the one who killed Mason Stonebreaker, aren't you?"

It was too bad Pamela liked smart boys. "Yes," I had to admit. I curled in on myself and smushed my face against my knees to hide the tears that were starting. Weeks weren't enough to get over the terror on Mason's face when blood gushed out around his clutching hand and the light went out of his eyes. I didn't think I'd ever forget the feel of stone-hard flesh (harder than the ghoul's, less brittle than metal) parting under my claws. I tried to not sob in front of Jonah, but I couldn't help it. He'd think I was trying to get sympathy by crying, which wasn't true but wasn't worse than I deserved. If he had any sense, he'd take the flashlight and get away from me!

I flinched away from Jonah when he sat down next to me, but he put an arm around my shoulders and pulled me against his side. I put a hand on his leg to push him away, but my claws

pricked his skin and that was enough to make me hug my hands to my chest and hunch in tighter even before I smelled his blood. He swore, but didn't let go of me while I cried and cried because of how awful I was and how badly I screwed up and Mason was dead forever for trying to help his brother.

Eventually I ran out of tears and snot, and the ghoul hadn't come back and eaten us like I deserved. Jonah didn't deserve it, though, even though he was a boy and wanted to get his hands all over me. Trying to stop crying made me hiccup, which made me laugh a little. And hey, this time I hadn't cried until I threw up!

"You OK now?" Jonah asked. Of course I wasn't, but I thought maybe I could function, a little, so I nodded. "If I ask you to tell me what happened, are you going to start crying again?" Mason with his hand uselessly to his throat, other hand reaching out to his brother— I gulped and tried to keep my stomach down. Jonah deserved to know what kind of person he was stuck in the labyrinth with, but I couldn't do any words. "OK, never mind." He got up onto his feet, but crouched over. "Let's try piggyback. Maybe we can catch up with Pamela and Jacob."

Jonah being practical helped a surprising amount, but now that I was calmed down, I realized what a mess I was. "Um, look over that way." He obligingly shuffled around to face away from me, and I washed off my face and chest and knees as best I could without using too much water, which wasn't great, but we were both so covered in dust and crystal fragments and assorted yuck that it didn't matter much.

Riding piggyback, naked, on a naked boy was as mortifying as I feared. The feel of his waist against my inner thighs and his back against my chest (big enough neither of us could ignore them, not big enough that I could feel like my body was feminine enough, thanks Mom,

and my hair slithered out when I tried to make a cushion) made me blush all over and I was glad he couldn't smell what I was feeling, but he was feeling it too, which made me think of making out with Peter, which reminded me of how horrible I am. I might have cleaned off my skin, but my feelings were still a mess!

Luckily, all I needed to do was hold the flashlight and bucket, sniff for Pamela's scent, and sometimes say, "No, the other way" when we took a wrong turn. I'm round but small, and Jonah's strong for a human, and I could smell trouble (at least ghoulish trouble) coming so we didn't have to be as cautious, and we made pretty good time. The tunnels changed from light-colored brick back to drab concrete, then to bare cinderblock with an asphalt floor. Jonah was tired enough that he wasn't really thinking about me being naked anymore when I noticed the roaring.

I couldn't tell what it was, and neither could Jonah when we got close enough for him to hear it; it could have been another waterfall, some kind of machinery, or maybe even fire. It was too steady to be a monster, probably, but we slowed down anyway. We didn't want to lose any more time, but at least Pamela and Jacob would have slowed down too once they heard it. Unless they didn't.

The right-hand wall opened out (good thing we weren't following it) and the floor was replaced with a metal grille, a catwalk over another pit that went down and up further than our light. Unlike the balconies of the of the 1st pit, this catwalk didn't have any safety railings. The left-hand wall was close enough to touch, but there was a gap wide enough for a body to slide through. I couldn't blame Jonah for stopping well back from the doorway.

"Hey, put out the light," he said. I slid my body against his — I mean, I slid down to the ground! — and put the flashlight facedown on the floor. There was a dim glow coming from

down in the depths, probably wherever the roaring came from. After so long with nothing but the green-purple light of the crystals, it took my eyes a while to figure out that it was reddish. Was there really a fire down there? I hobbled forward to look over the edge, but I couldn't make out what was glowing, just a square red-orange blur dozens of stories down. It wasn't warmer, and there wasn't any smell of smoke or burning or anything out of the ordinary for the labyrinth, so probably not fire. There were more catwalks silhouetted against the light, I thought, but out of reach without a parachute.

Jonah leaned in at the other edge of the doorway, careful to not bump me. "How is this place so huge? I mean, superpowers, but where did all the concrete and metal come from? Did Mina make all of this out of ectoplasm? Who can conjure that much?!"

"My mom told me Tauros said she was the original minotaur, from Crete 3000 years ago. That's a long time to build."

"No way, no one could stay sane that long!"

I waved my hand at the endless labyrinth and lack of clothes and dead bodies and everything. "Who says she's sane?"

"She might be a raging bi- I mean, she's a terrible person, but she can hold down a job and use a smartphone and care what people think of her."

I had to admit he was right. Tauros might be delusional (although I would bet good money that wasn't the craziest thing anyone had ever said to get my mom to go out with them) and was probably a sociopath or narcissist or some other kind of messed up, but she was still a person, not the inhuman force of nature you'd expect from 3000 years of superpowers.

But it didn't matter what was going on Mina Tauros's horrible little brain, we still had to

find our friends and work on getting out of here without being eaten by ghouls.

Getting across the catwalk was nerve-wracking, so I guess it wasn't a catgirl-walk. If I'd had both feet working right, it would have been OK because my claws fit right into the openings in the grille, but having one foot full of shrapnel makes everything harder. Jonah had both feet but no claws, so he wasn't better off. We made it without falling or even screaming, though.

The whole time we were on the catwalk, I kept thinking something was going to rise up out of the glowing depths to eat us, but it didn't happen. Not this time, anyway.

"How close are we?" Jonah asked once we were across and I was riding piggyback again. "Should we start yelling?"

"Half an hour, maybe. How far could you get in half an hour?"

"Without carrying you or having you navigate? Still too far, I guess." I was glad he decided not to, because something about the glowing pit still creeped me out. I hugged his shoulder tighter with my free arm. "Something wrong?"

"Just glad you're—" No, this was already embarrassing enough without suggesting I liked him! "—glad I'm not alone in here."

"Me too. I hope you haven't jinxed us."

"Hey!" But it was OK.

Pamela and Jacob's trail led us into a section of the labyrinth that was made of concrete tubes, like culverts. They were only about 6' high, so I had to keep my head down. "A lot of this seems pretty modern for something that took 3000 years to build," Jonah said. "I don't think this kind of concrete piping has been around for more than a hundred years."

"My mom said the labyrinth matches what's around the opening when it opens. Maybe it

changes instead of always adding? I don't know how it works, I just hate it."

"If we know how it works, maybe we can find the way out. If that hole downstairs isn't it. Or even if it is, that's a lot of backtracking."

"When we're not in such a hurry, you won't have to carry me!"

"You're not that heavy." It was nice of him to say, although I could smell how hard he was working to lug me around.

Pamela's scent was getting more like "just left" than "was here a while ago", so I tried yelling, but taking a deep breath made me almost sneeze all over Jonah's hair. I managed to turn my head fast enough to mostly get the wall, although I got some on my shoulder too. Ewwww! I could feel the snot clogging up my nose and start to drip down my face before I sniffed it back up to clog my sinuses. My face felt kind of swollen, probably from producing so much mucus to get the crystal dust out of my body. Was this what humans felt like when they were sick? No wonder they were so grumpy!

"JACOB!" Jonah shouted. "PAMELA!" He waited, but there was no response, so he kept striding along, not running or even jogging, but walking faster.

I was starting to have trouble picking up their scent, but they'd marked their path on the wall, so we didn't have any trouble following them. Jonah shouted every time we turned another corner, but there was no answer until, suddenly, there was. I couldn't make out the words, but it was a human voice (definitely not a ghoul!) and my heart unclenched a little from hearing it.

Jonah started running for real, and I almost bounced off since one of my hands was busy with the flashlight and water bucket, but I managed to keep from digging my claws in and just clung tight around Jonah's shoulder and neck.

"Jonah!" We rounded another corner, and way down the tunnel was a cluster of purple-green lights. Now I could hear Pamela's voice too!

"PAMELA!" I yelled, although it made me sneeze again. As we got closer, I could see that the glowing crystals were arranged in an arc that seemed almost as high as the tunnel, and then, just before he crashed into us to hug Jonah, that Jacob had his long hair sticking out in a fan of spikes with a crystal at the end of each one. So that's what his power was

I did fall off when the brothers collided and Jonah let go of my legs to hug Jacob, and although I landed on my feet (ow!), I ended up on my butt anyway when Pamela tackled me.

"Nef! You're OK! I was so worried!"

Somehow I kept the bucket from spilling, although it sloshed cold water all over my bare skin and the flashlight went rolling away. I set it down as far away from the reunions as I could and hugged Pamela to me. She was bony, but warm and almond-scented and *not dead!* I was crying again, but this time I didn't mind. "Pamela! I'm so glad you're alive!"

"Of course I'm alive, silly. Mina wouldn't kill me just for that." She sounded a lot more certain than I would have been, but she always sounded certain.

"Tell that to the ghouls!" I said.

Jacob must have heard me because he got scared again. "There are ghouls in here?!" His voice was a squeak, but then he was only like 11, even if he had hair powers. He might be as cute as his brother in a few years, but right now he still had too much baby fat and not enough muscle. And he smelled like bugs, probably from using his power.

"At least 1," Jonah said. "But it has a crush on Nef or something." The brothers were sitting a little ways apart, embarrassed and awkward but still so much happier now that they were

together. Jacob's long hair was draped around his brother's shoulders. Awww.

I sat up without letting go of Pamela, and Jacob goggled at me, probably trying to figure out what part of my naked body would interest a ghoul. Hadn't he seen enough of Pamela to get used to naked girl?! But Pamela had gotten a growth spurt but hadn't developed in any other direction, unlike me with my lumps all over. I wrapped one arm around my chest and glared at him until he looked away. (Pamela was completely comfortable in just her skin; maybe her family were nudists? But I noticed that she had a lot of scars, along her ribs like gills and across her spine from butt to neck, and around her upper arms and thighs, where I wouldn't have seen them before.)

That was the moment the ghoul dropped down in the middle of us with a thump. How had I not smelled him coming?! I sure smelled him now, rotten and male and pissed off! He glared at me with his glowing eyes — no, at Pamela — and burred, "Unhand my bride... handmaiden of Hades..."

William might not have wanted to mess with Pamela, but she didn't know that. She did manage to bite back her shriek, and she was quick to get off me and face the ghoul standing. Too quick: she kicked my bad foot (which hurt way more than walking on it had, maybe because I wasn't ready for it) and it was my turn to try not to scream. She noticed, and glanced at the bloody mess she obviously hadn't noticed before, and I could smell her worry, but she didn't say anything about my weakness in front of the enemy.

I got up too, only a little less slowly. My tail was lashing and my ears were back so hard they hurt. "What do you mean, bride?!" It might have been smarter to lead him on longer, maybe I could have gotten at least my friends a way out of the labyrinth, but I was 1000% fed up with

his creepy ghoul stalker crap. "I don't care how much you think I'm a ghoul, I'm not, and I'm not going to do *anything* with you! Go away! LEAVE ME ALONE!"

All the humans were goggling at me, now. Even William, the ex-human (or liar), was a little wide-eyed, but he also bared his uneven teeth. "How can you think... you have a place under the sun... my beautiful... red-handed girl...?" His eyes were as big as the labyrinth, filling my vision with darkness and crystal stars, but I wasn't up for being hypnotized.

"If you won't listen to me, maybe you'll listen to the handmaid of Hades. Pamela, please tell him to go away and leave me alone."

Pamela was confused, but a ghoul wasn't much scarier than Mina Tauros, and she stood up for me again (literally, stepping forward and throwing out her chest). "You heard her, go away. She's under my protection."

William hissed, a grating sound unlike a catgirl's hiss, and I realized too late that if I put him and Pamela directly against each other, he might decide he didn't care as much about whatever authority a handmaid of Hades had. Did I just get my best friend killed for being too good a friend? If William laid a claw on her, he was going to regret it for the rest of his life, all 30 seconds of it! I hissed back at him, literally shaking with fury, which I hadn't even when Peter was tearing my clothes off.

I don't know if it was the power of Hades, or realizing that even if I went with him, he'd never be able to turn his back on me, but the ghoul uncrooked his fingers and lowered his lids. (He had enormously long lashes that most girls would kill for, grotesquely out of place on his horrible face.) "Go with these tender lambs... they will not stand by you... when you know what you are... I have all the time... in the world... and so will you... when you join me..." He

jumped up onto the ceiling and scuttled away into the darkness.

Now that I was sure he could hide his scent, I didn't relax just because I couldn't see or smell him, but I couldn't hear him either, and the endless labyrinth lit only by unnatural glow of toxic crystals seemed a tiny bit less creepy. My leg gave way and I was on my butt on the floor again, still shaking. I dug my claws into the floor to keep my hands still, but it didn't really work.

Pamela didn't fall over, but she slumped and said some things that were probably cusses in Sri Lankan (Tamil?). After a minute, Jonah and Jacob joined her, in English. I sort of wished I hadn't practiced not cussing so much, it was a situation that called for it, but it felt weird to even mouth the words. I took a drink from the half-empty bucket instead, and then had to pass it around to Pamela and Jacob who hadn't had any water since they woke up.

"So, is this some kind of arranged marriage like in *Fox-Spirit's Brilliant Plan*?" Pamela said when she'd got her breath back. "Can I be your bridesmaid?"

It felt like it had been ages since I'd laughed. Too long, since I had trouble stopping once I started, and ended up leaning against Pamela's leg chortling way more than her joke deserved while Jonah and Jacob stared at me. Finally I started coughing up disgusting mucus, and that made me stop. "You know bridesmaids started out to keep the groom from kidnapping the bride, right?"

"I know." Really, she was taking this a lot better than me, but then I'd had to put up with a lot more ghoulish crap. Her voice softened. "Nef, are you OK? What happened to your foot?"

"A big section of the labyrinth is booby-trapped with mines. Claymores, Jonah called them."

"What?" That was Jacob, who had gotten over freaking out about the ghoulish just in time to

be outraged about mines. "Why would Mina do something like that?"

"It was probably some other poor idiot she trapped in here," Jonah said. "But it's OK, that area isn't between us and the exit."

That got Jacob and Pamela's attention. They both started talking over each other to ask questions while Jonah and I tried to explain what happened to us and Lady Blaze and how my foot nearly got blown off and what was up with William Hodgett the ghoul and the ghoul burrow we'd found down by the waterfall. They knew about my mom's secret identity, since Tauros had blabbed it, but I managed to not say anything about Mason and Jonah didn't give me away. He wasn't so bad, for a boy.

"So a ghoul is in love with you?" Jacob said dubiously. "I mean, you're pretty—" he was oogling me way more than his brother had, though he hadn't even reached puberty yet! "—but why would a ghoul care? Oh, it's because you're— Ow!"

"Try not to be a racist jerk to the beautiful and awesome girl who just saved us from being eaten," Jonah said.

Jacob rubbed the back of his head. "Uh. Sorry. But you know what I mean!"

"I doubt ghouls even know what love is," Pamela said. "He just wants her to host his larvae."

"Host his— EWWWWW!" Jacob was revolted, at least, instead of wondering how he could get in on that action.

"Never mind that," I said. I didn't even want to talk about ghouls and ewwwwww. "What happened to you guys?"

"Nothing like that. I wandered around a bit, then found Jacob at the glowing crystals, so

we wandered around together. There was a stairwell with really steep stairs, which was at least different, so we came down here. We didn't see your ghoul, or any sign anyone was here except some graffiti in Hebrew. Until we saw you." She threw her arms around me. "I'm so glad you're OK! I was afraid Mina might do something worse to you."

I hugged her back. "I'm sorry I got you into this. You didn't have to stand up to Tauros for me."

"I thought I could talk her down, but she really hates your mom. She was furious that I was even talking to you, so we ended up in here too." She sighed. "So much for showing you the sights of Rhodes." Her eyes slid sideways to Jonah, who was sitting next to his brother.

"Although you got to see *some* scenery." I could smell she was appreciating the scenery too.

Jonah blushed and drew his legs up so he was a little more modest, but he was still entirely naked. I blushed too, a lot. "It wasn't like that! We were busy with trying to not die!"

Pamela smirked. "Danger stimulates the libido, I hear."

My face was practically on fire, and not because she was wrong. I had been very aware of Jonah's body even when I was just looking at it, and for the last however long, I'd been clinging to him and rubbing against him, sometimes with my naked chest! I wasn't doing much to fight the stereotype of catgirls having 1-track minds! "It wasn't like that," I protested, but I didn't sound convincing even to myself.

"We should get going," Jonah said, jumping to his feet. "We're almost out of water, so we need to go back to the waterfall anyway." Pamela and Jacob might not have been able to smell his blush, but they could probably see it in his body language, and they both thought it was hilarious.

"Hop on, Nef," Pamela said, gesturing toward Jonah's shoulders. Nyarrgh!

"I can walk!"

Pamela stopped laughing. "Can you? That foot looks pretty bad." She bent down to look at it (giving Jacob a good look at her little cute butt, which she didn't care about). I'd washed it off at the waterfall, so it wasn't a bloody mass any more, but it still oozed from holes torn into my flesh. Just looking at it still made me want to throw up, but Pamela had a tougher stomach.

"Jacob, can you get these pellets out?"

Jacob crawled over and peered at my foot (and my leg, and...). "Oh, sure." His hair (smelling a lot more like bugs than when he'd been hiding it, but also like the same sandalwood shampoo his brother used) slithered over my foot, soft and silky as a conditioner ad and a little tickly, and then the ends slid into my wounds.

"NYOW!" My foot jerked reflexively, which made it hurt even more! I hissed at Jacob and readied my claws, but then his hair-tentacles popped back out, holding the pellets that had been embedded in my flesh.

I clutched my poor abused foot to my chest, not caring what else I might be showing, and glared at Jacob. "Give me some warning before you do that! Do you even know what you're doing?"

"I was careful! I just pulled them out the same way they went in, I didn't mess anything up! They weren't even in that deep!"

The holes in my foot hurt more, and they were bleeding a lot more than before, but I could tell the pellets were gone, which felt a lot better. I'd just have to hope he didn't pull out any important nerves or tendons out with them!

I still couldn't walk very well on my foot, but hobbling along leaning on Pamela was a lot less embarrassing than riding piggyback on a boy, and soon we were heading back the way we came.

"So, Pamela," Jonah said from her other side. "What's a handmaiden of Hades?"

I can't actually smell lies, since "lying" isn't an emotion at all, never mind hormone-based, but Pamela definitely smelled more nervous when she said, "I have no idea. But if any ghouls are listening, I absolutely am one!"

I didn't call her on it, but while the boys were busy talking about Greek mythology, I gave her a look. She shrugged innocently, but she wasn't asking me about "red-handed" so I couldn't complain.

Somehow we made it back across the catwalk (Jacob and Pamela couldn't tell what was glowing either) and down to the round room without anyone dying of ghouls or mines or embarrassment. It was a good thing I'd left marks all the way, because I was having a hard time smelling anything through all the dust and snot in my nose. The Changed don't have allergies to normal things, but maybe I was allergic to emanating crystals. Or maybe this was how death from blushing worked, since I had to walk next to Pamela while she oogled Jonah's butt, and I could smell that! It wasn't that I didn't see her point (I like girl butts better than boy butts, but Jonah had muscles and they flexed when he walked and Pamela is a terrible influence!) but it was still embarrassing.

Jacob thought the mosaics were great, and wanted to check them all out, but Jonah and I wanted to get out of the labyrinth, and we dragged him away by taking Pamela with us down the bunny-girl passage. He still had crystals for light, but no one wanted to be alone down here after

meeting a real live ghoul.

Finally, dripping and shivering (but at least not thirsty), the 4 of us were back where Jonah and I had been, staring at the cramped burrow that we hoped was a way out and not just into William's pantry.

#

"I'll go first, I'm smallest," said Jacob.

"No, Nef goes first. William won't kill her right off if she runs into him. I go last, because I'm the handmaiden of Hades and no ghoul would dare try to pick me off even when I'm alone." That was totally a bluff, but it had worked so far, even if we didn't know why.

Jacob pouted, but Pamela was right and he knew it. I knew it too, so even though I didn't want to crawl into that narrow tunnel where I wouldn't be able to swing my claws if I came face to face with a ghoul, I had to. At least crawling wouldn't put as much strain on my bad foot, right?

No. I banged my foot on the way up to the hole, and again when I slithered in, so there was no chance the ghouls wouldn't know we were coming.

The burrow was dug through solid marble, sharp and bumpy broken rock on every side that gouged my chest and stomach and thighs when I tried to slide, and my butt and shoulders when I tried to crawl. No matter what I did, my bad foot got beat up, and even with my stuffed-up nose, I could smell that I was leaving a trail of blood. And a trail of snot, since the tunnel was full of dust or something that gave me sneezing fits (the first one made me bang my face on the rocks, nyow!).

"Nefertari?" Pamela called after me. "Are you OK?"

"No, but I am getting out of this stupid maze!" I gritted my teeth and kept climbing. The tunnel started off slanting up only a little, but gradually steepened until I was climbing almost straight up. With only one foot, I couldn't give up a hand to hold the flashlight, so I let it slide back down. "Guys, it gets steep. You should be able to climb it, though, it's still pretty rough."

"Are you going to fall on me?" Jacob asked from further back.

Even if it got smoother, my claws dug into the rock just fine, and the shaft was narrow enough I could brace against both sides. "No, it's fine." I hoped Pamela would be able to make it, coming last. With her figure, she could be a model, but that's a long ways from being a rock climber. Well, at worst I could get out and find a rope or something to let down for her.

The light from behind me gleamed on the marble, but Jacob stayed back far enough that it didn't help me see much. Climbing in the dark, with no way to tell where I was or how long it had been, wasn't as awful as I expected, but it was weird and disorienting. Once I felt like I had gotten confused and was climbing downward while something tried to pull me up, and I figured out gravity again just in time to not fall on Jacob!

Eventually — 10 minutes? 2 hours? I wasn't thirsty enough for it to be longer than that — the marble turned into hard-packed dirt with rocks jutting out, providing good handholds but smacking my bad foot every time I moved upward. Jacob complained every time I knocked one loose, and then Jonah and Pamela (who was keeping up after all) as it bounced off him and kept falling, but there wasn't much I could do about it.

A ways after that, the dirt turned hard again; from smell and feel, I guessed it was concrete. Had we come all this way just to end up in a different part of the labyrinth? That would

be horrible, but surely William wouldn't have bothered to do all this digging through solid rock to get to someplace he could just walk. It had to be someplace worth going.

I slid my hand up for a new handhold, and nothing was there. I was so absorbed in climbing that I didn't realize what that meant and kept reaching higher until my leg was at full extension and my hand was still groping around in— empty air?! I grabbed the edge of the hole and pulled myself out to sprawl on the smooth cold concrete. It felt nice on my poor abused skin and the strained muscles beneath (I'm strong enough compared to my weight that climbing is easy, but doing *anything* for hours on end is hard). It wasn't until I noticed the smudge of green-purple light on the ceiling that I thought to call, "Guys. We made it. Somewhere."

With a grunt, Jacob heaved himself out of the whole and collapsed across my bare thighs. "Nyaa! Get off!" He didn't mean to get fresh, but fumbling around trying to get his hands under him wasn't any better, and made me remember Peter's hands sliding up my skirt. I shoved him off (which just made my shoulders feel worse), and only realized that I almost pushed him back into the pit on top of Jonah and Pamela when he yelped.

"Ow, watch it, I just climbed up all that way! Oh god, my shoulders." He flopped out on the floor too, his hair setting the water bucket down with a slosh and then going limp with crystals all around his head like a halo.

When I heard Jonah get to the top of the shaft, I realized he was about to put his hands all over me too. I didn't want to move, but I rolled over onto my front rather than get pawed. Not that there was much of me he hadn't touched by this point, and that hadn't been so bad— No, bad catgirl! I reached out for his hand and helped him up without making myself into handholds. (It might have served him right, though, since my chest was covered in snot that I hadn't had

anywhere else to sneeze during the climb. Ewwwww.)

"Oof, thanks!" He was nicer than either me or Jacob, because instead of falling over, he helped Pamela up. (OK, that wasn't entirely because he was nice.) Then he sat down and she plopped into his lap, which they both liked but it embarrassed Jonah. I rested my face against the concrete and sulked, not because I wanted to be snuggling with either of them, but because there were better things they could be doing!

"Where are we?" Jacob asked. I heard him get up, but I still didn't want to move. Not just my shoulders, but the whole length of my body was sore, and my foot stabbed me every time my heart beat. I felt like I was leaking like a punctured balloon, but I would have smelled more blood if that was true. "Hey, I think we made it!"

I let my head roll to one side so I could see where we were. It looked like another concrete labyrinth tunnel at first, but half of it was wider than the rest by a foot or so, and the wider half had marks and holes in the floor where machinery of some kind had been bolted down once upon a time. If this wasn't a real place, it was a better imitation than anything we'd seen in the labyrinth!

"The mosaic tunnels looked like a real place too," Pamela said, but she smelled hopeful.

"Maybe they were! We thought we got out of the labyrinth when we went into the ghoulish hole, but maybe it was when we went into the mosaic tunnels!" Jonah said excitedly.

"I don't think there are ancient Greek temples buried under Rhodes."

"Ancient, no, but Rhodes has lots of people active in the community, and that means lots of weird people wanting secret bases. Hey, there's a door over here!"

Pamela had some good points, but we hadn't seen a door anywhere in the labyrinth, so I

was excited enough to stand up and take a look. Sure enough, the narrow end of the room had a door in the side, plain metal with peeling greenish paint and a tarnished knob. We hadn't seen anything so old-looking in the labyrinth (again, except in the mosaic tunnels): the railings on the first pit had looked as good as new, and even the nonslip tape on the stairs hadn't been peeling. This could really be it! I gave Jacob a hand up and then leaned on him to join Pamela and Jonah at the door.

"Nef, do you hear anything?"

Only excited breathing, and that was on this side of the door. I shook my head. We all stared at the door. What if we opened it, and there was just a concrete maze full of crystals and ghouls on the other side?

Pamela and I reached for the doorknob at the same time, and burst out laughing. "You do it," she said.

It wasn't locked, and it turned out not to be booby-trapped, although even after getting my foot blown up I didn't think of that until after I'd already opened the door. Dumb, Nef!

On the other side was just another concrete tunnel, running off to the left, but it was dirty! The floor was covered with dust, dirt, and probably mummified rat poop, and the wall right across from the door had "There once was a girl from Nantucket" painted on it. I have never been so glad to see a disgusting mess!

"I thought it was 'A man from Nantucket'," said Jacob. Of course he'd know dirty limericks.

"Use your imagination," said Pamela. Jacob stuck out his tongue at her.

Jonah shined the flashlight around. "I wonder where we are. Looks like a basement, or

maybe the steam tunnels at the university."

"We might not even be in Rhodes," Pamela pointed out. "I don't know how Mina's labyrinth really works, never mind ghoulish tunnels."

"At least they paint graffiti in English, so if we find anyone, we can probably talk to them."

"Unless it's more ghouls." Jacob smelled nervous, even though the tunnel looked too normal for monsters.

"Let's find out!" Jonah and Pamela, holding hands, led the way, leaving me to lean on Jacob. He liked it, but after riding piggyback on Jonah, just having my side against a naked boy wasn't a big deal. (I would still rather have Pamela there, though!)

Just a little ways along, our tunnel ran into another one that had concrete pillars with rust-stained and indented tops along one side, that had obviously held pipes. There was also a rusty metal thing that Jonah identified as a motorcycle frame. Someone had been down here since motorcycles were invented a hundred years ago, we were as good as out!

We took that as a sign, and went down the branch where the motorcycle frame was. It was long and gross, but better than the twisty labyrinth of extradimensional death, even when Jacob stepped on a nail.

He swore a bunch, worse than his brother. (Did he think he had to be more grownup than Jonah?) "If I die from tetanus after all this, I'm going to haunt the crap out of Mina Tauros! OW!" he added, with more swearing, when Jonah pulled the nail out. Now half of us were limping, but I got to lean on Pamela again, so I didn't mind so much. Even when she watched Jonah walk, nyaargh!

Maybe the motorcycle had led us astray, because when the tunnel finally ended in another door, it had crates and old rusty pipes and one of those big wooden spools for cabling stacked in front of it and covered in dust. No one had been through here in a while.

It was only a couple of hundred yards back to the intersection, but Jacob complained so much about walking that we decided to unblock the door instead. Well, Jacob and I decided to make puppydog eyes at Jonah to unblock it. Pamela did more of the work than he did, though; she looked delicate and didn't show muscles any more than she had curves (that is, just barely), but she was able to lift the cabling spool by herself! Pamela is awesome.

Jacob was looking at his punctured foot instead of admiring Pamela, surprisingly. "My parents are going to be so pissed. They hate taking me to the doctor, even when they don't have to come get me from school." Oh, probably because he had powers.

My parents wouldn't be mad, or at least not much, but they would freak out completely and never let me out of the house again! Not while we lived in the same city as Mina Tauros, which we wouldn't for much longer. Oh, Bast, they'd want to leave town again. We'd already started to put down roots in Rhodes, but they'd feel like they had to for my sake.

Except when Jonah brought up why I moved to Rhodes, I thought I'd handled being thrown naked into an extradimensional maze of death and mines and ghouls pretty well, but the idea of moving again made me want to start crying. I'd just met Pamela, and now Jonah and Jacob (even if they were boys), and I really liked my art teacher and Rhodes seemed nice except the parts with supervillains and— "NYAAAH!"

Everyone stopped and stared at me. "What?! Are you OK?"

"My parents are going to freak out and move us Bast only knows where and I'll never see

any of you again!"

Pamela set down her bundle of pipes and came over to hug me. "Then we won't tell them."

"How are they not going to find out?! Even if they're all out of town, X-Wave and Ironstar will tell them everything!"

"We won't tell them either."

I held up my foot, which was still covered in blood from being banged around during the climb. "I need stitches for this, and no doctor is going to not tell my parents! Or the police, which is worse!" I didn't want to be a catgirl in a jail run by the Rhodes police! Not that any police were good.

Jacob was confused, since he hadn't heard about why my family was in Rhodes. Pamela hadn't either, but she was rolling with it like a good friend. "We'll think of something," she assured me, and she smelled confident. "There are doctors who don't report everything."

I knew what she meant (even if they've gone straight, my family were career criminals and I know where the money for expensive private schools comes from) but how did a 4.0 student like Pamela know where to find an underworld doctor? Weirder, Jonah and Jacob had complete confidence in her. Was Pamela an even worse influence than I thought? That made me feel better. Maybe if I knew Pamela, my family would give up on trying to raise me right! No, they'd never do that.

"We can't do anything until we get through this door," Jonah said. "So let's see where we are when we get back to the surface, and worry about it then." He shoved the last crate out of the way and pulled open the door.

It should have led right to my house, or the League offices, or a supervillain base, or something else dramatic, but it was just a flight of stairs going one story up to another thick door. Pamela and I went first this time, but the door was locked. I might have been able to break it, but she waved Jacob forward, and his hair slithered into the keyhole. Could he manipulate each strand individually? That was awesome, way better than fingers! However he did it, the door clicked right open, letting in a sliver of light that was probably dim but seemed brilliant after so long with only crystals to see by.

The smell from beyond made my ears flatten, but although there were 2 boys smelling like that, there wasn't a girl, and there was another smell I didn't recognize— oh. *Oh!* I blushed even before we heard a boy groan. Jacob stepped forward, worried, but I put a hand over his mouth. "Don't interrupt them!" I whispered into his ear, and then he got it, embarrassed and interested and disgusted (well, he did grow up in Ohio, but it still made me think less of him) all at once.

"Pamela, I think I know those guys from school. They were hanging around the quad between the dorms. I mean halls." We were still in Rhodes!

"OK, you 3 stay here." She slipped into the room (dusty and deserted, by the smell) and I heard her moving carefully toward the other boys. Just hearing the sounds made me so embarrassed I wanted to run away, but I couldn't abandon Pamela! It was probably for the best that Jacob and Jonah couldn't hear the, um, slurping, they were already mortified enough and edging away from me. Could they feel my face burning?

I tried to concentrate on making a plan to keep my parents from abandoning Rhodes (there were real skyscrapers downtown, 30 or 40 stories high, maybe Mom could throw Tauros

off one and it would take) but the noises from the next room were *really* distracting. Was that what Peter wanted me to do with him, before it went wrong? Was it what *Jonah* wanted, when he was noticing I was naked? Not that I was going to! Not with any boy!

Luckily it wasn't long until they finished, and the groaning turned to mushy whispers. They sounded pretty happy together, which made me feel better after all the horrible stuff I'd been through, but then Pamela cleared her throat and it was all panic and swearing and zippers.

"Pamela!" He pronounced it wrong, the usual way. "We, uh, didn't expect to see you here!"

"This isn't what it looks like," the other boy put in. I winced, because no one ever says that unless it's exactly what it looks like. From the embarrassment that mixed with the fear, he knew that too. "Um. Are you naked? Crap, you're bleeding! Are you OK? Did... something happen?" He was leaping to conclusions about why a girl might be naked and banged up, but I couldn't blame him. Whatever he was thinking had to be more likely than what really happened.

"Just kidnapped by a supervillain," Pamela said dismissively. "You're in my Shop class, right? Kyle D-something, Danver? Hey, Amir."

"Hey," said the second boy. "You're not gonna tell anyone, are you?" Kyle and Amir smelled really scared, not just afraid of getting teased. Ugh, Ohio!

"Nah, what happens in the... furniture storeroom? stays in the furniture storeroom, right? But I need to borrow a phone."

I could practically hear the 2 guys looking at each other. "You aren't going to do anything to it, are you?" Kyle asked. "My parents just got it for me."

"No rewiring, I just need to send Lucy a text."

"Lucy K, or Lucy W?" Amir asked suspiciously.

"Why would I text Lucy W?! She might text me back!" Kyle and Amir laughed a little. "I just need her to bring me some clothes and stuff."

"OK."

They were quiet for a minute, then Pamela said, "Thanks! A pleasure not having ever met you or even been in the furniture storeroom."

Kyle said, "Huh?" but Amir, faster on the uptake, said, "Likewise, I'm sure."

"Oh, right! Uh, we better be getting back. Catch ya later, Pamela!" I heard them walking, then a door, and the indirect light vanished. No, it just got dimmer.

Pamela waited a minute to be sure they were gone. "You can come out now."

By the light from under the door, I could see that the room was large but crammed with furniture, mostly the same kind of old wooden desks, beds, and chairs that were in my dorm room (and probably everyone else's). There was a clearing about the size of my bathroom at home, surrounded by desks that weren't stacked up, and Pamela was sitting on one of them with her feet drawn up, not caring what she was showing. I could smell city air from when the boys had opened the door, and we could all feel the cold air they'd let in. There wasn't anywhere soft to sit (this must not be a popular place for couples that wanted to lie down) so I hopped up on the desk next to Pamela. It smelled like this might have been where the boys were sitting, but Pamela didn't mind, so I couldn't either.

"Thanks for talking to them," Jacob said. He still smelled nervous and disgusted, like he was afraid he would have caught gay cooties from Amir and Kyle. Boys: still awful!

Pamela waved a hand. "It's fine. They know not to rat me out, I know not to rat them out,

everyone's dark secrets are safe. Except with Lucy, but she owes me. Maybe I owe her now."

"How long were we down there?" Jonah asked.

"It's about 5am on Monday, so a day and a half. It didn't seem that long, but I don't know how long we were out." It really didn't, I would have thought I'd have passed out a long time ago. It must have been adrenaline keeping us going.

Jonah yawned. "No wonder I'm wiped out."

I couldn't help yawning too, darn him, but at least Pamela yawned at the same time.

"What are we going to do about not getting busted and grounded forever and deported?" I couldn't imagine anyone's parents would be okay with them staying out all night without asking and coming back without their phones and stuff! I might be better off, since all my parents were out of town, and Ironstar and X-Wave (I should probably think of them as Ms. Fisher and Ms. Velazquez for the time being) hadn't shown up. Was there someone who was supposed to keep tabs on me while I was staying in the dorm? No one had said anything about it. Maybe I was OK! Until Tauros tracked me down and stomped me again.

Pamela put an arm around me and I snuggled in, curling my tail around her waist. "I don't think we can avoid getting busted, but maybe it can be for something besides a fight with a supervillain."

"I don't want Nef to have to leave town," Jonah said. "But if we could get back to Peasley from the labyrinth, William could get up here. I think we have to tell someone."

Pamela frowned. "Is that any different than before? We have no idea where ghouls can go, just that they're super-sneaky. I don't think a brick wall is keeping William out if he wants to get in."

"But he might want to get in now that he knows I'm here. Or can follow me here, we followed him to the exit and his nose is probably better than mine. And I bet he can do sorcery." And my gris-gris bag was gone, probably stomped to pieces by Tauros like my phone. How could I explain losing that? I never took it off except in the bath! I imagined a ghoul creeping into my bathroom while I was taking a shower and shuddered. I didn't want to be in a horror movie!

"We need to deal with him somehow, then," Pamela said, hugging me tighter. "You said he tried to steal Jonah from you, but you fought him off. So you can take him."

I wasn't sure about that at all. "I don't think he expected me to fight. I have sharper claws, but he's probably stronger, and when I hurt him he just licks it all better. If he hurts me, I'll have to go to the ER. Again!" I pulled up my foot to look at it. It was still covered with blood and dirt and whatever had been on the floor of the steam tunnel, although there wasn't any new blood since I'd stopped climbing. The Changed don't get infections, so now that Jacob had pulled the pellets out, I'd probably heal up, but I had no idea how long it would take. Days? Weeks? Months? I tried to avoid getting shot, and my skin was tough enough for most everything else, so I'd never been hurt this bad before! If I had my phone, I could look it up (or call Daddy Geoff and admit to everything, which was sounding like a better idea).

"We'd have to set a trap, then." Pamela sounded like she was seriously considering trying to lure in and capture? murder? extort? a ghoul. I knew she was awesome, but this seemed like a bit much! "If we could come up with an excuse for why a ghoul is after you, Ms. Fisher and Ms. Velazquez could take care of it."

Getting punched through the 4th dimension by X-Wave might not bother a ghoul, but

Ironstar is super-tough and super-strong besides her magnetic powers. She went to a lot of trouble to avoid killing, like most heroes, but she probably wouldn't hold back against a ghoul, and getting smashed flat or torn to pieces would stop even William. Wouldn't it?

Jonah was looking at me like he couldn't decide whether he wanted to keep me around or not. I couldn't blame him for telling people what happened, even if it ruined my life. He hardly knew me, so he wouldn't miss me if I was gone. But that didn't mean I wanted to let him do it.

Jacob sat up. "Wait, what? Monday?! We have class in 3 hours!"

Pamela looked at him. "You're not going to class, you're going to a doctor. Same for Nef. Jonah can go to class if he wants, if Lucy gets here in time."

Jonah didn't look like he wanted to go to class, he looked like he wanted to go to bed. "What doctor? Shouldn't we just turn ourselves in— Wait, it's not turning ourselves in, we haven't done anything wrong! We should just tell Ms. Lombard that we were kidnapped by Mina Tauros and need to go to the ER, and then the League can take care of her!"

"And then they'll ask what we were doing and where we were and why Mina hates Nef, and Nef's secret ID will be blown and the flea market will probably have to shut down for a while and everything will be awful."

"We can make up a story for what happened. Mina got mad at us because Jacob was staring at her chest, or something."

"Hey!" He totally would have, though.

Jonah ignored his brother, but sighed. "Except that wouldn't hold up when they asked Mina, and she doesn't have any reason to lie. No one died, so she probably doesn't even think it was a big deal. Nef, can you stop doing that?"

I realized I was gouging claw marks in the desk. No claw sheaths, nyaargh! "Sorry! If we can get clothes, can we say we got mugged, and that's why we don't have phones or purses or anything? Since Jacob pulled the mine pellets out of my foot, I can say they shot me."

"That's not terrible," said Pamela. "You're good at this!"

Pamela the genius thought I had a good idea! Since it was about lying and covering up crimes (not mine, but still!), I probably shouldn't have been so happy.

"Ms. Lombard doesn't check who's in very carefully on the weekends, 'cause everyone is in and out and going home and stuff—"

"Mrs. Dietrich either," Pamela put in.

"So if they didn't notice we weren't in on Saturday or Sunday night, then we could say we got mugged last night," Jonah continued. "But where were we all night? Why didn't we go to the police?"

"Maybe they kidnapped us, and it took until this morning to escape?" Jacob suggested.

Pamela wrinkled her nose, which was adorable. "Kidnapping is a serious crime, even in Rhodes. There'd be a lot more police, and maybe FBI and stuff. That wouldn't help Nef's family, and we probably wouldn't be able to fool that much of an investigation. Plus lying to the FBI is a federal crime."

Jacob pouted, which wasn't that cute.

I knew my parents had done worse, but Pamela was right that an FBI investigation would be enough to make us leave town. "Nyaaargh!" This was impossible!

Pamela patted my leg. "No, we can do this. We just need an adult to say we went to them and they took you guys to a doctor. My sister Chathi will do it, but I'll owe her big-time."

I heard someone outside the door and tensed. "Someone's here," I said, but Pamela had already hopped down and was opening the door. It was brighter than I expected outside, from actual lights, like civilization.

"Lucy, good. Do you have everything?"

Pamela was holding the door just ajar and peering around the edge so I couldn't see the girl outside, but she smelled tired and mad. More important, she smelled like *chocolate*. I started drooling before she even started talking. "You're welcome," she snapped. "Yes, I have everything you asked for. Do you know it's *5am*?"

"Sorry, I couldn't help that. It's when I needed it. But we're even now."

"We *better* be!" Lucy stuffed a package through the crack in the door and started to stomp off.

"Wait!" Pamela called. "Do you know if Ms. Lombard is looking for me? Or if Mrs. Dietrich is looking for any of the boys?"

"If I ask what you've done now, I'm going to be an accomplice, aren't I? No one's said anything about you being missing. I don't know about the boys' side, but there haven't been any announcements about how everyone has to be careful."

"Great, thanks." Pamela closed the door. "OK, who wants clothes?"

"ME!" We all yelled at the same time, probably loud enough for Lucy to hear us all the way down the hall, and then all laughed. Well, we were pretty darn tired!

Pamela handed out sweatpants, sweatshirts, and running shorts (hers, but freshly washed). I yanked on a black sweatshirt big enough to be a dress on me and hugged its wonderful non-nudity for a minute before grabbing a pair of shorts and a hair scrunchy. I would

rather have had underwear, but I wasn't *that* close to Pamela (and it wouldn't fit, in fact I had to stretch the running shorts to fit my huge butt, and they pinned my tail down because there was no tailhole). Anyway, scratchy as the clothes were, I would rather wear them than have a boy see me naked ever again! No, wait, I would let boys oogle my naked body if it got Pamela to hand over the chocolate faster!

It was only a handful of candy bars, more high-fructose corn syrup than chocolate, but they were the best candy any of us had ever had. They weren't the best breakfast, though, because the little bits of sugar just reminded my stomach about food and it started rumbling for more. Lots more.

Jacob edged away from me, pretending to be nervous. "Humans are friends, not food!"

"Hey!" I wanted to smack him, but I didn't have claw sheaths. Jonah did it for me. "I'm not a ghoul!"

"Jacob, what did I tell you about being a racist jerk?"

"I was just kidding!" He huddled into a corner of the furniture stack and sulked.

"I'm sorry my brother is dumb as dirt," Jonah said, smelling sincerely embarrassed and angry. For a boy, he wasn't too bad. I could have spent all that time in the labyrinth with Jacob instead, that would have sucked!

The room lit up as Pamela turned on a phone. Just an old flip phone, but the light from the keyboard and tiny screen was brilliant after a day and a half in the labyrinth. "Oh good, it still works," she said. She dialed a number from memory, and waited. And waited. "Chathi, pick up!" It went to voicemail, so she hung up and dialed again. Ring, ring, ring, voicemail. "We might need a plan B."

Jonah and I looked at each other. I didn't know anybody who was in town and wasn't in the room, except X-Wave— Ms. Velazquez and Ms. Fisher. Jonah didn't look like he had any ideas either. Were we going to fail because we couldn't get an adult to help us out? Nyaargh!

On third try, Pamela got an answer! Someone mumbled, "Stop calling me, I'm gonna—" and Pamela started talking a mile a minute in Tamil or whatever. Chathi (I guess) replied in the same language, sounding more and more awake as Pamela tried to convince her.

"You're the best sister ever," Pamela said, and hung up. "OK, in about half an hour, we need to get out to the back parking lot without getting busted. Chathi will pick us up and take us to a doctor she knows, and back us up on our mugging story."

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Jonah and Jacob relaxed. I guess they trusted Chathi. That made me feel a little better, but I was still nervous about bringing another person in on my secret, even if it was the only way any of us could think of for this to work. I took a couple of deep breaths, happy to be in a huge sweatshirt so Jacob couldn't stare at my chest. "We should go now and find someplace to hide there. The later it gets, the less dark and the more people."

"You're right," said Pamela. "Sorry, I didn't have any spare shoes that would fit anyone. Nef, Jacob, here are some clean socks to keep stuff out of your wounds, if it still matters."

I wouldn't want to wear my digitigrade shoes over human socks on my feet, but Pamela's socks worked fine for this. Not that I was worried about infection, but the less stuff a doctor had to scrub out of the inside of my body, the better!

Our furniture-storage hideaway was inside a building that looked like just one short hall

with a couple of rooms on either side, and one dim fluorescent light. I knew there were a bunch of buildings behind the school, on the side where the residence halls were, so probably this was one of them. Pamela led us out the door at the end of the hall, into a little alleyway with painted concrete on either side, and asphalt underfoot, but overhead was SKY! It was just a blur of orange city light reflecting off overcast, but I finally felt like I wasn't trapped in a box. I hadn't even realized how much it had been bugging me.

The wind was cold on my bare legs, but it didn't smell like unnatural crystals, just city and people and coming rain. No one except Lucy, Amir, and Kyle had been through here recently, so maybe there wasn't a security guard. I guess not many crooks would want to trespass on Ironstar and X-Wave, and the ones that would, wouldn't even slow down for a security guard.

I kept an eye out for cameras, but didn't see any until we got in sight of the gate to the back parking lot. (There could have been more that only my mom would have spotted, but I didn't think a school would need that much security.) I pointed to the camera and looked at Pamela. If I was by myself and had both feet, I could have gone over the wall outside its field of view, but I wasn't and didn't.

Pamela smiled mysteriously as she walked right up to the gate and waved at the camera! Real cameras don't have lights that go out to let the audience know they're dead, but she sure acted like it was. The gate wasn't locked (people have to be able to evacuate), so she just pushed it open and slipped outside.

Jonah and Jacob and I looked at each other, and I could tell we were all wondering if Pamela had just lost her mind. Jonah shrugged and gave each of us an arm to lean on if we wanted to follow him to the gate. I didn't have any idea what else to do, and he smelled smug, so

I hobbled to catch up and lean on him, and Jacob did the same on the other side.

"You hacked the cameras," Jonah said when we caught up to Pamela behind one of the juniper trees that decorated the outside of the wall. I felt dumb, because of course she had. She was super-smart, hung out with supervillains, and she'd been at Peasley for 2 years already. I needed to find out why she bothered, though. Did she have a master plan, or just a bunch of regular plans? She didn't have many friends, but Jonah and Jacob seemed to trust her completely even if they didn't sit with her at lunch, and whatever Lucy K owed her was enough to get her out of bed at 5am. Should I be worried? Well, duh, but what should I be worried about?

I wanted to grill Pamela and Jonah, but separately. And not when standing still and not being menaced by ghouls after being awake for more than a day was making me want to pass out on my feet. I leaned on Pamela's shoulder, because no matter what she was up to, she was warm and nice, and yawned so wide Jacob edged away. It would serve him right if I bit him! But I'd rather bite Jonah, if I had to bite boys. Which I didn't!

I must have dozed off, because the next thing I knew, Pamela was nudging me. "Chathi's here. Who mugged us?"

"Nyaa?" I tried to wake up. What would police believe? I tried to remember what kind of people I'd seen in the bad part of town. "Big Latino guys, one of them had a gun? All in jeans jackets." More details? "The guy with the gun had... a mustache?"

"Good job. That's about all most kids would remember." She steered me around the tree, to a dark blue hatchback that looked battered without having any distinctive scar. "Jacob, Jonah, you got that?" She pushed me into the back seat, next to Jacob, and got into the front seat.

Siblings smell similar, like they look similar, but the driver smelled almost exactly like

Pamela, just with a few more years of puberty. She had the same shiny black hair, but short and sticking up on one side and flat on the other. Her arms and legs showed the same flawless tan skin as Pamela, and she had the same delicate model build but with curves in the right places. She didn't have a bra on under her tight yellow tank top, which was why Jacob hadn't noticed me squish in beside him. I couldn't blame him for staring, I was having trouble not being rude, and I live with Slink!

Chathi twisted around to offer me a hand, straining the thin cotton— I jerked my eyes up to her face and tried to stop blushing by force of will. "Nefertari, right?" She was just as pretty as Pamela, but a little sharper-featured, and without the smeared remains of Saturday's makeup or Sunday's spelunking. She had the same dramatic motions, too.

I shook her hand. "You must be Chathi. I've um heard about you."

She smiled, unfazed by my lameness. "Don't believe anything Priya says, she's just jealous." (Pamela muttered, "Pamela" under her breath.)

"I can see wh— Nyaa!" I let go of her hand and flopped back into my seat, covering my face, but she just laughed. I did have a superpower of my very own, it was acting like an idiot in front of beautiful girls. But it wasn't fair, being faced with someone like Chathi when I was barely awake!

"There's food in the back," Chathi said. "Help yourselves."

Even Jacob wanted food more than he wanted to oogle Chathi. It was just granola bars and string cheese and apples, but that was fine. I passed a bunch of it to Pamela, then fastened my seatbelt so Chathi could drive and started devouring the rest.

In the front, Pamela was babbling away in Tamil (or whatever, I added it to the list of

questions I had for when I got her alone, although I could ask Chathi, if I could talk to her without dying of embarrassment, which I couldn't if I got her alone, but talking is overrated—bad catgirl! No slobbering on your best friend's sister!) in response to Chathi's questions. From the second-hand emotions, I could tell she was explaining what had happened, but Chathi was just getting more and more worried. I kept my ears up while shoveling food into my mouth, but I could only pick out names.

Pamela's story got to the point where some of her words were "William Hodgett" and I could smell Chathi's shock even though she didn't say anything. She knew about William?! Was she a handmaiden of Hades too?

Gack, granola bar went down the wrong way! My throat was already feeling weird, probably from the mucus that wasn't going away even though I was out of the dusty tunnels, and the sharp edges of granola made me double over coughing, splattering my food with snot. I coughed and coughed and couldn't stop, although I could draw breath in between. I waved my hand at Jacob and Jonah until one of them figured what I meant and put a bottle in it.

I didn't care what it was, so I took a swig without noticing that it didn't have any smell, and that was a huge mistake. I can't even describe what it tasted like, bitter and metallic and so sour my mouth tried to clench completely shut. That made the snot fill up my throat until it forced its way out my nose, and for a minute I was afraid I was going to throw up too, and choke to death on my own puke after surviving Mina Tauros. I managed to get my breathing under control before that, although I was still coughing and sputtering. "Oh, Bast, what *is* that?! Hades juice?" (At least that's what I tried to say, but it's hard to talk when your nasal passages are full of mucus.)

I couldn't smell much, but I smelled Chathi's worry. So Hades really was a thing! I was hurt that Pamela had lied about it, even though I could smell her unhappiness. I hadn't told her my family secrets even after they got us thrown into the labyrinth, and I still hadn't really told her about Mason (she probably guessed about Peter from how I talked about boys and looked at them anyway), so I didn't have any room to complain, but it hurt anyway.

"It's for a thing," Chathi said vaguely. "Sorry, I should have labelled it. I don't think it'll hurt you, but you guys shouldn't drink it."

"By 'thing', do you mean a ghoul?" Jonah asked. He sounded calm, but I could smell his fear. Pamela had saved us from William, at least kind of, but that didn't mean Chathi wouldn't think that was a mistake. We were only doing about 30 down a street of closed stores, if I had to jump for it I'd be fine.

"No! Of course not!" I thought she was really indignant, but maybe that was just my nose full of disgusting yuck. Pamela was horrified, which made me feel better, but only a little.

"What, then?"

Jacob passed me a pile of napkins, but I didn't start cleaning up. I wanted to know if I was going to have to jump out of the car.

"I have a... condition," Chathi said. "Too much emanation exposure when I was young. I have to drink this disgusting stuff so I don't... Look, it's girl stuff, OK?" She sounded embarrassed, but she smelled nervous, and I couldn't imagine a sister of Pamela not being gleeful about grossing out boys by talking about female anatomy. I was sure she was lying, but that didn't tell me what the truth was!

I tried to talk, but had to blow my nose into a napkin first before I could get words to

come out. "Pamela..." I didn't want to call Chathi a liar to her face, but none of this was making things any better. I didn't know what to say.

Pamela knew what I meant. "What Chathi's saying isn't entirely true." She ignored Chathi's squawk. "But we can't tell you anything that's more true. I know you all know about family secrets." She gave Jacob a pointed look.

Jacob scowled, but he couldn't say she was wrong. Jonah said, "OK, sure, everyone's got secrets, but most families don't have secrets about ghouls."

"Mostly just inbred white people," Chathi said, and we all laughed. "But I don't know why ghouls care about our secret, or how they spotted Priya."

"Pamela."

I could only see the corner of Chathi's smile, but it was pretty amazing. (OK, I could also see her bare thigh, and the curve of her chest.) "My adorable little sister Priyadarshani."

"Gah!" Pamela threw herself back in her seat and folded her arms across her chest. "You don't know how lucky you are to be an only child, Nef!"

"I wish *I* was an only child," muttered Jonah, but I don't think he meant it. It was getting harder to tell, though, since blowing my nose just made it refill faster. Nyaaargh, or more like nyarnk! Then we went past an overpass, shading us from the rising sun, and my heart skipped a beat.

The snot all over my lap (and chest, and food, and the back of Pamela's seat) was glowing blue.

Oh, it must just be my body getting rid of the crystal dust I'd breathed in when we were setting off explosions in the labyrinth.

But this was blue, not creepy greenish-purple. We'd left all the crystals down in the tunnels, so I couldn't compare, but it looked different. It wasn't pleasant, but it wasn't unnatural. "Um, guys-" I sneezed when the sun hit my eyes again, and had to block my snot from covering even more, but I waved the napkin I was using to mop up and held it down behind the seat where the glow would show.

"Oh, that's just— no, it isn't, is it?" Jonah sounded worried. "Nef, are you okay?"

"I don't know!" I blew my nose again, but it was still coming out with that blue glow. Was I feeling woozy, or was it just because I'd been awake forever without much to eat? The Changed didn't get sick normally. What was going on?

"What's going on?" Pamela tried to lean around the seat to see, but Chathi swatted her hand when she tried to unbuckle. "Nef, what's wrong?"

"She's coughing and sneezing, even though catgirls don't get sick, and it's coming out glowing blue!"

"Gross," Jacob said helpfully. I almost swatted his leg, but no claw sheaths. I sneezed again instead. For something so slimy, it felt awfully pointy on the way out.

"It's a good thing I'm taking you to a doctor, then," Chathi said. "Until we get there, no one lick Nefertari."

Of course that made Jonah think about it! Jacob might have too, but he also edged away from me like I was contagious. Which I might be, if I was sick and not poisoned. Not that there was room between my hips and belted-in Jonah for him to get very far away.

"Chathi!" Pamela slapped her sister's leg.

"Oh, right, it's probably too late after you spent all that naked time together. Carry on,

then."

"Nyaaa!" My face was hot from embarrassment, but also felt weirdly swollen, probably because my sinuses were full of mucus. I shrank down into my seat and blew my nose some more. It seemed to finally be getting clearer.

We turned, into shade again so I could see how much blue-glowing snot was in the pile of napkins at my feet. With that much, my nose had better be getting clearer! My lungs must have been full of it! Chathi hung a sharp left, and Jacob squished back into me despite all his efforts, but scrambled away as soon as we came to a halt.

"We're here," Chathi announced. "Before we go in, let me say: let me do the talking! You can ask questions about your own treatment, but that's it. And no complaining!"

That didn't fill me with cheer, but I got out of the car anyway. We were in a row of parking spots along an alley between two high brick buildings, empty except for Chathi's car and a van that seemed to be mostly rust and the rest a patchwork of different paints. A clunky security camera over a handle-less metal door buzzed audibly as it turned to focus on us. Chathi waved a handful of bills at it as she got out of the car, and I saw it track downward from the money to her chest. It was, um, still cold here in the early-morning shade.

The door went clunk and swung open a little, and Chathi ushered us into a spotless white room that stank of cleaning chemicals even to my clogged nose. The only furniture was a couple of low metal tables, so clean they sparkled in the fluorescent light. Sitting on one of them was a husky bald white guy in a thick leather jacket, heavy jeans, and boots that looked made for stomping on faces. Despite the combat-ready clothes, he had on purple medical gloves, and a cloth mask was hanging loose around his neck. He studied all of us, not just Chathi's chest,

before announcing, "Welcome to Dr. McKee's no-questions-asked surgery, pharmacy, and all-around medical emporium. Cash only. What can we do to you today?" I couldn't smell much of his mood, or maybe he didn't have much of one. We probably weren't the weirdest group he'd seen this week, or even today.

Jacob said, "Are you really—" and I slapped my hand over his mouth. Jonah's hand landed right on top of mine. Jacob's hair squirmed in its bun, but he remembered he was supposed to not be stupid before he did anything extra-stupid.

"These 4 have been exposed to emanations, and the 2 short ones have some puncture wounds. And the round one might have some kind of respiratory infection."

He looked us over again, dubiously. "What kind of exposure?"

Chathi gestured to Pamela, who described the crystals, how we'd carried them, and that we'd been around shattered ones so we might have inhaled the dust or gotten it in our wounds.

"Huh. OK, take a seat and someone will be with you shortly." He pulled out a phone and started poking at it, but I could tell he was watching us under his lowered brows. Chathi walked over with some extra sway and sat down next to him. Was that the kind of guy she liked? She was still in high school! He ignored her, though, so maybe barely-dressed high-schoolers weren't the kind of girl he liked. When he didn't start flirting with her, she pulled out her own phone. She was watching us too, though.

The rest of us had barely sat down on the other table when the other door opened and a tall young Asian woman in brightly-patterned scrubs peeked in. "I can see the 2 of you now." She made eye contact with Pamela and me, so we got up and followed her out, leaving behind 2 boys who wished she had called them.

Up close, I could see that our nurse? med-tech? was wearing *My Little Gnomphkie* scrubs! And they were from season 2, because they had Wilbur before he grew the 2nd head! I almost said something, but I didn't want to be like Jacob. But I never knew scrubs like that existed! She must be a fan too! Nyaaargh!

Pamela raised one eyebrow (I was so jealous that she could do that) when she saw how closely I was watching our escort's back. It wasn't like that! I stuck my tongue out at her, and she laughed.

Not that our escort wasn't pretty, tall and slender (although not as model-like as Pamela and Chathi) with shiny black hair gathered at the back of her neck. I thought she was Japanese or Korean, but she could have been from anywhere in that part of the world. When she turned to let us into the exam room, I noticed that she was wearing heavy eye makeup and dark red lipstick, which seemed weird but it's not like you go to underworld doctors for professionalism. She also had a symbol like a backwards 3 embroidered on her chest, right next to an upside-down Lavinia (holding the Orb of Disaster she got in the 1st OAV!). I quickly looked away from her chest before Pamela started teasing me again.

The exam room had soothing green walls and furniture with cushions, although all plastic for easy cleaning, and felt a lot cozier than the sterile front room, although it was still spotless and smelled like disinfectant and had a motion detector for the lights. It could have been in any doctor's office in the US, except for a row of dents on the wall that had been painted over but not quite filled in. Were those bullet holes?!

"I'm sorry to pull you away from your friends, but I don't think Dr. McKee would do well with young pretty patients." Wouldn't do well? Did she mean— Ew, was that why he couldn't be

a legit doctor? It was a good thing Ms. Gnophkie-Scrubs (of the Hyperborea Gnophkie-Scrubs) had saved us, because I wasn't about to let some gross old perv harass Pamela! "Kitty, hop up here on the exam table and let me take a look at your foot."

Calling a catgirl "Kitty" is pretty rude, unless her parents are so awful it's actually her name, but "no questions asked" obviously meant "no names". I was okay with that, even though I had a perfectly good fake name. It was better than "Butterball" or "Warthog".

She poked at my bad foot until I made unhappy noises, sprayed it with something that made the poking a lot less unpleasant, didn't ask where I'd run into claymore mines, nodded when I said the pellets had been removed by thousands of tiny tentacles (which made Jacob's slithery soft hair less appealing), and finally washed out the holes and stitched them up. She was stronger than she looked, to be able to sew my skin by hand. "You're healing quite well for a 2nd-generation, so just stay off the foot for a week or so," she said as she wrapped it up. "Take normal doses of ibuprofen if the pain bothers you." I didn't think I had a week until my parents or teachers asked why I was limping, but at least they wouldn't be asking why I had gangrene. "Anything else you'd like me to take a look at?"

My nose was still clogged up, but having her close while she worked let me get a good whiff of her scent under the persimmon perfume, and it was weirdly familiar, like I'd met her somewhere before. She didn't act like she knew me, and Chathi had insisted on no questions, so maybe it was just a coincidence (people can smell alike just like they can look alike), but it bugged me. I could also smell gunpowder and metal and oil, but it wasn't surprising that an underworld nurse would carry a gun. "Nyaa? Just my nose and the crystal stuff."

"Doctor, could you clean this out properly while you have the tools out?" Pamela asked,

showing a deep cut on her arm. I hadn't even noticed she had it. So much for super-senses!

"I don't have an MD. Just call me Epsilon." She washed out Pamela's wound, which didn't seem to bother her at all, and gave her a shot of antibiotics and a couple of stitches, but she wasn't happy. "This was filthy and you're human, so you need to keep an eye on it. If it starts looking red or swollen, leaks fluids, or feels hot, or if you start running more of a fever, see a doctor. It's not a suspicious wound, so you should be able to go anywhere, but come back here if you don't have anywhere else."

More? Pamela was nice and warm, but I didn't think of her as feverish. My body temperature was high by human standards too, though, so I wasn't the best judge. She never smelled sick, anyway. Maybe it had to do with being a handmaiden of Hades.

My sinuses had filled back up and I had to grab a handful of tissues from a box on the counter. Epsilon turned at the gross sound of me blowing my nose, and raised one eyebrow (not her too! was I the only girl whose eyebrows didn't operate independently?) at the glowing blue snot. "How long have you been doing this?" She smelled very curious.

I couldn't remember exactly when my nose starting clogging up, but it wasn't until after I met Jonah, I was pretty sure. "A day or so? It wasn't really bad until this morning."

"Interesting. Take off your shirt, please." Hadn't I been naked enough already?! But if she could tell me what was going on with my sinuses, it would be worth it.

She raised her eyebrow again at how I was naked and dirty under the borrowed sweatshirt, but I didn't smell any sign of not doing well with young female patients, so I didn't blush too much while she listened to my lungs with a freezing-cold stethoscope. "Definitely some bronchial congestion. I can give you an expectorant and a decongestant to help clear that

out, but without knowing the cause, I can't do any more." She looked around at the labelled cabinets and few pieces of medical electronics, smelling frustrated. "In my usual clinic, we could do some more tests, but we're not set up for that here." She thought for a minute. "Is there some way I can get in touch with you? I could try sending a sample for testing, and let you know the results, but it might take a few days."

My phone was probably stomped into junk, and I couldn't guarantee that none of my parents would notice I was getting calls from an underground clinic, even though they were usually good about privacy. Epsilon must have seen my doubts on my face, because she wrinkled her nose. It was cute, but not as cute as Pamela's nose.

"Use this phone," Pamela said, showing her flip-phone. "You can hold onto it after I get a new one."

Mom always warned that a phone wasn't secure if anyone else had had their hands on it, but I wasn't worried about Pamela knowing my medical details. She gave Epsilon the number, and Epsilon took some samples of my snot and blood (again just pushing the needle right through my skin) to send away. Then she gave me an inhaler and showed me how to use it.

"Now, about the falaschite exposure. I'd like to run some tests, but you'd have to stay here for an hour or two. Can you do that?"

"We'll have to ask my sister." Was that giving away too much? No, anyone who looked at Pamela and Chathi next to each other would see that!

When we went out front, Chathi was lying on her back (in a flimsy tank top, with no bra! Nyaaaa!) on the table with her bare feet in the receptionist's lap, making little happy noises as he rubbed and squeezed them. From the smell, she definitely thought this was making out, but the

receptionist didn't seem to feel anything about it. Creepy.

"Never mind, she's good for an hour or 2," Pamela said without asking. "Let's do the tests."

"Hey. What tests?" She didn't open her eyes. "Mmmm..."

"I'd like to run an Eisberg reaction to determine the extent of the contamination."

Chathi did open one eye at that. "Not Lee-Kumara?"

"We don't have the equipment for it here."

She closed her eye. "OK. But I'm adding all this time to your bill, Priya."

I didn't know I was going to complain until I said, "*Pamela*" at the same time she did. We looked at each other and laughed.

"Shoo," said Chathi, so we let Epsilon lead us back to the exam room and give us each a shot.

"You might feel a little queasy, or get clammy skin," she informed us. "If you're going to get an adverse reaction, which is very rare, it will show up within a few minutes, so I'll be back to check on you soon. In the meantime, just relax."

Besides the exam table, there was a bench where we could sit together. I snuggled against Pamela's side and yawned. I hadn't been doing much the past little while, but that wasn't the same as relaxing, and now that I didn't have anything to worry about for a while, I *really* wanted to sleep.

Pamela yawned in the middle of hugging me. "I think it might be nap time."

I rested my head on her (bony, but warm) chest. "It was nap time a long time ago. Probably about 3 or 4 hours after we went out for hot chocolate."

She laughed.

I was already asleep when Epsilon came back in, but I woke up instantly. "Nyaa!"

She had a serious face on. "Kitty, could you come out here in the hall for a moment?"

My heart plummeted. What was going on? What couldn't she say in front of Pamela?! Or was she trying to separate us to— what? If she was up to no good, Pamela and I together wouldn't be much harder to ambush than me alone.

She looked at me, and I could smell she was a little nervous too, but not hostile. "I don't need to know any details of what you've been doing, for multiple reasons, but if you might need emergency contraception, please say so."

She thought Jonah and I—! "NYAAAA!" I could feel my face burning. "No! I didn't—I! I wouldn't—I! He's a *boy*!" Of course he was a boy, I wouldn't need a morning-after pill if Pamela and I—! Why would she even think that? Oh, Bast, what had Jonah and Jacob been telling people?! "NO!"

She put a hand on my shoulder. "Are you sure? One advantage of being... outside the regulatory framework, is that I don't have to tell your parents or anyone. It's just between you and I."

I couldn't look her in the eyes. "I'm sure! I haven't been, I haven't done anything like that!"

My stammering must have convinced her, because she just said, "All right. Can you send Pamela out?"

I'd seen Jacob's— his everything, he wasn't old enough to get a girl pregnant even if they'd done something before we met up with them, and I would have been able to smell if they

had! But it was up to Pamela to say that to Epsilon. I went back into the exam room, still blushing violently. "Your turn."

Pamela raised her one eyebrow (nyaaargh!) but went out, and came back in laughing. Of course *she* wasn't blushing! I huddled into the corner of the bench and tried to not feel like an idiot. She came over and handed me a white foil packet with a couple of pills inside, which I dropped as soon as I read what was printed on it. "Nyaaa! I said I don't need it!"

"You don't need it now, but you might someday." She picked it back up and tucked it into the front pocket of my sweatshirt before sitting down next to me. "Even if Jonah's not your type, someone might be."

"My type is *girls!*"

"Oh, that explains why you stare at naked boys and turn bright red."

"Nyaaaaa!" But even if boys were awful, some of them were pretty. And some of them might be just as awful but tougher than Peter and Mason. I shuddered and hugged myself, remembering Peter's hands sliding up my legs and squeezing hard, even before I realized William Hodgett might count for that. That went way beyond ewwww and yuck!

Pamela hugged me tight. "Maybe you won't need it, but it can't hurt to have it. It's good for 5 years, so just keep it in your purse. When you get a new one."

I groaned. I'd really liked that purse, but Mina Tauros had probably torn it to shreds and burned it. "Damn that— those muggers!" Along with my phone and my favorite hair thing that Auntie Toni brought me from Ireland and my gris-gris bag. If the Stonebreakers were getting a sorcerer to scry on me, would they cause trouble for Dr. McKee's and Epsilon? It seemed like this was neutral ground, since they let people like us in, so probably not. Stonebreaker was the

sort of goon who probably used places like this all the time. Not that I should be looking down on people who did! My foot felt a million times better than before Epsilon worked on it.

Pamela slid out on the bench and laid her head in my lap, yawning. "We should probably be refining our plan while we wait, but I think I used up my brain."

I yawned too. "I know just how you feel." Leaning back in the corner wasn't exactly comfortable, but I didn't want to dislodge Pamela. I like girls with curves (I can't imagine how I got the idea that sticking out in front is sexy, thanks Mom!) but she looked really adorable and sleepy. I stroked her hair and closed my eyes, and that was it.

Someone was at the door, and I woke instantly, heart pounding, but managed to stay still and keep my eyes mostly shut. The door opened, and Epsilon peeked through, then let Jonah and Jacob in with a shush. Oh, she must not want us taking up 2 of their exam rooms. I wasn't happy about having boys in the room while we were asleep, but Jonah was polite and I could kick Jacob's butt (using my newly-repaired foot!) if he got any ideas.

Jonah eyed the end of the bench, where he could have fit if he tucked his butt behind Pamela's legs and pulled his legs up over them, but Jacob was already lying down on the exam table, almost on the edge to leave room for Jonah. I was surprised, I always thought boys were touchier about touching, but they were brothers, and they'd been through a lot. They snuggled up and didn't move, and my eyelids were dragged down again.

Finally I got enough sleep to dream. Dark hallways with mosaics of ghouls eating and, um, mating with humans, sometimes at the same time. Melted concrete encrusted with purple-green crystals, and a cave with crystals as big as I was, where I could see that the weird glow inside them came from eyes with Z-shaped pupils staring out at me, oogling my naked body.

Persimmon and foxgirl scent from behind the giant crystals, but when I vaulted over them, she was disappearing down another hallway. The mosaics here were worse, women and sometimes men vivisected to show what was happening inside as the ghouls mated with them, and I fled so I wouldn't see my own face on any of them. An iron catwalk over a bottomless, whispering pit, leading to a platform around a huge chunk of amber with something hairy preserved inside, where I caught up with Alice and slid my hands around her bare golden belly from behind. She turned in my arms, soft curvy chest pressing against mine, and I saw the muzzled face of a ghoul, but slit-pupiled blue eyes and a ridiculous mass of bright blue hair just like—!

I jerked awake with a squeak. Pamela reacted to my movement with a sleepy mutter and nuzzled into my lap without waking up. I hadn't moved enough to turn the lights back on, but in the light from under the door, I could see the boys on the exam table were completely out of it. Jonah's bare leg was hanging off the side, and the narrow light made the curves and hollows stand out like sculpture. Even when I realized that I was oogling a boy's body, looking at Jonah's leg was better than thinking about my dream. I'd had dreams with naked people and blood before, and not always about Peter or Mason, but that was way worse, even if it was just pictures! And the end—! No matter what Ohio Nazis say, I know the Changed aren't ghouls, but I was starting to wonder if I was wrong.

Most of Johnny Monsterseed's constructs had ghoul DNA, to get all the genes working together, and although we don't like to talk about it, that includes the Changed. When you add it all up, though, it's only a few percent more than humans have from thousands of years of interbreeding with ghouls (and even less difference from white people, who have the most), so if I'm a ghoul, most of the population of Rhodes is at least half ghoul! But maybe that let William

infect me with some kind of ghoulish virus, or put a curse on me, or something that I couldn't understand because I'm not a sorcerer or a mad scientist. Was I coughing because my lungs were being transformed into ghoulish lungs?! That reminded me I needed to cough right then, and the tissues were way over there on the counter! I ended up using the hem of my sweatshirt, which was unspeakably gross, but I could breathe again.

Should I call Epsilon back in to tell her I might be infected with a transform virus? But it might be a curse, and I didn't think she could do anything about that. There were underworld sorcerers, but I'd have to go to one soon anyway to get a new gris-gris bag, or whatever they did to ward people against scrying. I hoped it wasn't the same, because last time had been disgusting and embarrassing. You don't want to know what went into that gris-gris bag!

I closed my eyes to think, and it had exactly the opposite effect.

Mazes, not detailed enough to have mosaics or be the labyrinth, more the idea of mazes, of searching and never finding the way out, and the click of claws right behind, until I came around a corner and William was right there. He dragged me down, pinning me with his weight on my thighs, and started groping my chest. No, he just wanted handholds to open my torso up like a cabinet, to pull out my lungs and stuff the space full of pointy crystals with eyes glowing inside them. He slammed my ribcage shut, so the crystals gouged me from the inside, and buried me in something white and floppy. That was like the maze again, except I was squirming around instead of running, until my head popped out and I was wearing a huge frilly white dress that tangled my legs when I tried to run away. I tripped and got a mouthful of scratchy lace that I had to spit out—

I woke up just as I coughed a double lungful of glowing mucus onto Pamela's face and

hair.

Pamela jerked awake and fell off the bench, landing on her knees. She didn't yell, but I did as soon as I was done coughing. "NYAAAA! Pamela, I'm sorry!" That and the lights flashing on woke up the boys, and Jacob fell off the exam table with a crash and started cussing. Pamela put one hand to the sticky mess of her hair and looked at her glowing fingers. I started crying. Whatever was happening to my lungs, I could deal with, but getting it all over my best friend was too much. Why did I have to be the only catgirl this defective?!

Epsilon burst in. "No fighting in the clinic! Oh. Oh, dear." She was a professional, though, and was getting towels and cleaning wipes even as she asked whether everyone was OK.

Right behind her was the receptionist, and behind him was Chathi, who was holding something that looked like a dustbuster painted orange but that she carried like a weapon. "Priya, are you OK? Eww, gross!"

"Hey, what about me?" Jacob was rubbing his butt.

"You're not my little sister, but I guess don't die or something. I can't cover raising the dead, not at these rates." He pouted at not getting sympathy from the beautiful girl.

Epsilon shooed them out and helped Pamela clean up. Jonah sat next to me and awkwardly put an arm around my shoulders. I didn't deserve any sympathy, but he smelled kind and not lecherous, so I didn't shove him away. He didn't try to say anything, just sat with me, which actually helped me get it together a little. "Sorry," I mumbled. I couldn't look up, afraid to see that Pamela had started glowing or dissolving into slime or being disgusted by me.

Pamela put her hand on my head. "Hey, it's OK. It's my fault for pinning you down away from the tissues." She wedged herself in on the opposite side from Jonah and hugged me.

"Everything's going to be OK. It was almost time to wake up anyway, Epsilon's going to get the rest of the test right now." (Jacob was watching her butt as she left, of course.)

I gulped and sniffled, which made Pamela shove the box of tissues under my nose. We both laughed, and everything was OK. Except that we had to lie to the school and our parents about being mugged, and there was a ghoul that could get into the school and might have cursed us, and we were all on the wrong side of Mina Tauros's temper!

Epsilon came back with a bottle of pink goo and got out the needles to draw blood from all of us. She also brought a spare scrub top (this one printed with *Shaman Princess Polyp-chan* characters) to replace my disgusting sweatshirt. (Pamela's sweatshirt, actually, but all the clothes we had on were going to need to be washed after touching our labyrinth-filth-covered bodies anyway.) I changed quickly while everyone was watching her draw Jacob's blood; they'd all seen me completely naked, not just topless, but getting dressed had reset that and the idea of being naked in front of people was almost as embarrassing as before.

I expected some kind of machine that Epsilon would feed the blood into, but the test was just how many drops of pink goo she had to add to 1cc of blood before it started glowing. That seemed pretty old-fashioned, and what if it was really 3½ drops? I guessed that would have been the other test that they didn't have the equipment for.

Jacob's blood took 5 drops before it started glowing with a poisonous yellow-green light, which Epsilon said was fine. "Just avoid any further exposure for the next few months."

Mine was 5 as well, and Pamela's was 7, which I could tell surprised Epsilon. It came out the same on a retest, though.

"Shouldn't it be the same for all of us?" Jonah said when the 3rd drop lit up his sample.

His relief at the rest of us being OK turned to worry.

"This measures how much your body took up, which can be different between people even for the same exposure. That's a pretty big difference, but not unheard of."

"I guess I did have more exposure, actually." Jacob hadn't been there when we'd been powdering crystals with explosions and inhaling them. But I had, and I scored 5. "Is 3 a lot?"

Epsilon didn't beat around the bush. "Yes. If you don't get treatment, you could suffer long-term damage. Is there any chance you can check yourself into a hospital for a proper course of treatment?"

We all looked at each other. Jonah being exposed to emanations didn't fit with being mugged, but I wasn't going to risk him getting cancer or growing long green tentacles just for me to stay in Rhodes! Finally he said, "How long do I have to decide?"

"As a medical professional, I advise you to seek treatment immediately. Practically speaking, though, unless you get exposed again, a delay of a few days won't make a difference."

Jonah made a face. "OK, I'll work something out. Thank you."

That was everything, except waiting for the results on my snot test, so Epsilon showed us out. Chathi had already settled up with the receptionist or the mysterious Dr. McKee or whoever (and finished her foot massage), and we were ready to go. Even though Chathi had told us not to talk about anything nonmedical, though, I couldn't resist telling Epsilon, "Your scrubs are *awesome*".

Her face lit up, losing all professionalism. I could tell she really was a fan. "Thanks! I'll text you, OK?" What she meant was she'd text me about the possibly fatal disease I had, but when she smiled like that, it made me think of, well, a different kind of promise to keep in touch.

I could tell I was blushing as Pamela dragged me to the car.

"I swear, you're as bad as Chathi!"

"Hey!" we both said. "I was just admiring a fellow *Gnophkie* fan's hoard!," I added.

"Which is why you turned so pink."

"Jonah, stop helping!" I glared at him, but not very intimidatingly. He laughed and I ducked my head so people couldn't see me blushing even more.

"See, we're nothing alike," said Chathi. "I never blush."

"That's because you have no shame."

"I have nothing to be ashamed of," Chathi said as she unlocked the car.

"I can think of some things."

"Like the way I left my little sister to walk back to school and explain how she got her friends poked full of holes all on her own?"

Pamela started cussing out Chathi in Tamil(?— I was going to have to look that up) and for a minute I was afraid we were all going to have walk back (we didn't even have bus fare!), but then they started laughing.

Once we were back on the road, Chathi said, "Jonah, I know Priya has a scheme and I don't want to screw it up, but I'm going to text her on Friday, and if she can't tell me honestly that you're getting treatment, I'm going to have to rat you out. An Eisberg level of 3 is nothing for humans to screw around with."

Even with my nose (not as full of snot, but feeling weirdly hot inside from the decongestant) I could smell his unhappiness. "That's fair. I don't want to get Nef in trouble, but this is way more serious than I thought."

I couldn't really blame him, but I didn't like it. There wasn't anything I could do, though! We'd have to come up with some excuse for his getting exposed that wasn't related to the lie about getting mugged, and it would still make his parents (and the school, and my parents, and probably Pamela and Chathi's parents) suspicious. How could we even explain it? Maybe it would be better to come clean and make sure I didn't have any more blood on my hands, or even tentacles. The more I thought about it, the more that seemed like the right thing to do, but I didn't want to move again! I didn't want to let Mina Tauros ruin my life! I didn't want Mom and my other parents to have to fight her, though. Maybe she'd be content with having humiliated me and gotten me chased by ghouls, and not make any more trouble? That didn't seem likely, and there was still William to consider. I could stay out of basements for the rest of my life, but half of every day was night. I imagined William crawling into my bedroom at the dark of the moon, and shuddered.

The boys on either side of me looked at me with almost identical worried expressions. Only Jonah took my hand, though. "Nef, are you OK?"

"Nyaaaaa! I'm not OK! I don't know how to make any of this not suck!" I sounded whiny even to myself, but at least I didn't start crying *again*.

Pamela reached back and took my other hand. "Do you not want to say we were mugged? The plan only works if everyone's up for it." I couldn't smell her mood, but I was sure she thought I was being a wimp.

"I don't know!" Then I had to let go of my friends to blow my nose again. Epsilon hadn't put me in quarantine, so she didn't think it was serious, but I still didn't know what it was! Ghoul curse? New form of the common cold? Too much crystal— falaschite? —dust? Nyaaaargh!

"We're almost there," Chathi warned. "But we can still abort to a hospital."

My mom, or Auntie Toni, would have been decisive (and probably right!), but all I could do was look at Jonah. It was his health on the line, after all.

He made a face, but smelled affectionate. Oh, Bast, was he getting a crush on me? Maybe it would be better for everyone if I left town, then! Before I could change my mind, he said, "Let's do it. We have a couple of days to come up with some other way I got exposed."

"OK," said Chathi. "You guys better not make me look bad."

"We won't make you look worse, anyway," said Pamela. "Ow!" She swatted away the noogie.

I worried all the way back to Peasley, but no one, not even me, said we should call off the plan, even though we would be in so much more trouble if our parents or the school found out we lied.

#

The parking lot was empty, but we got back right as 2nd period was ending, so the main building was full of students looking at us in our scrubs and sweatshirts and no shoes (Chathi had grabbed a sweatshirt of her own before going into a building full of teenaged boys, but they still noticed her, a lot, and my tail was lashing (as best it could while trapped in my borrowed shorts) from the smell before we even got to the stairs) and wondering what kind of trouble we in and what was wrong with us.

There were already a couple of kids in the office, a white boy (maybe a 6th grader) clutching a wad of bloody paper towels to his face and dying of humiliation, and a black girl

almost as short and round as me but with the roundness arranged better, sullenly twirling her cornrowed braids and smoldering with anger. When Jacob checked her out, she gave him such a glare I expected to see death rays coming out of her eyes, and he hid behind his brother.

A huge black guy in dark blue scrubs came out of a side door. We had a school doctor?! I guess it made sense for a boarding school. The boy called him Mr. Coe and was explaining how he'd tripped and banged his nose on a desk, and thought it might be broken, as they went back into the sick bay— no, that was only for ships. Infirmary?

An old white lady in a thick sweater came out of the door marked PRINCIPAL. It wasn't the principal, Dr. Benally, who I'd seen at the opening ceremony, this must be a secretary. I couldn't smell much, but she seemed worried. "Destiny Williams? Go on in." The black girl stomped past her and she turned to Chathi. "How can I help you?"

Chathi launched into the story we'd agreed on, and the rest of us tried to look like we weren't memorizing the details as she invented them. The secretary got more and more appalled, especially at the part about me getting shot in the foot. I tried to look pitiful, and must have succeeded, because she exclaimed, "Oh, you poor dear!" and patted my hand.

Destiny came out of the principal's office, looking more puzzled than mad. (When she wasn't trying to murder people with her face, she was actually kind of pretty, dramatic sweeps of eyebrow, full lips, and a cute little chin.) She ignored Jacob giving her the side-eye and said to the secretary, "I'm going back to class, I guess."

"Let's let the principal know what happened, and then you can get cleaned up and get to class," the secretary said, and led us back to Dr. Benally's office.

Dr. Benally is a Native American lady (Navajo, I think), and like 60 or 70 years old, but

when she gave the speech at the opening ceremony on the 1st day of school, she seemed sharp and a little scary. Now she was vague, and it didn't seem like she was listening to our story. She did ask to see Chathi's ID, to prove she was 18 and related to Pamela, but she didn't ask if we'd gone to the cops. That could have been because she wasn't white either, though. When we got to the end, she looked at us for a while through her cat's-eye glasses before saying, "Well, that all sounds very unfortunate, but I'm glad you've come through all right. I'll have to contact your parents — the directors in your case, Ms. Nelson — but for now, go back to your rooms and get cleaned up, and you can attend afternoon classes." Jacob and I started to protest, but she gave us a look that wasn't vague at all, and we shut up. At least we'd have until the end of lunch. Jonah's stomach rumbled. OK, the beginning of lunch!

On the way back out, I saw Pamela and Chathi exchange a look. I couldn't smell much (nyaaaargh! this nose thing was horrible even if it wasn't dangerous!) but I thought they were worried.

Jonah noticed too, because once we were out in the empty hall, he elbowed Pamela. "OK, spill. What do you think was going on in there?"

"She must have been distracted by your legs," Pamela said, but Jonah elbowed her again. "Ow! I don't know, but you're right that it must be something. I wonder if she'll remember to call Fisher and Velazquez about Nef."

"If she does call them, I wonder what they'll say."

They knew Dr. Benally, they'd been here 2 years already, so if they thought something was going on, it probably was. What were the odds it wasn't connected to there being a LABYRINTH FULL OF GHOULS (1 ghoul was too many for any labyrinth!) under the school?

Was it my fault the principal was brain-damaged?! Just what I needed, one more thing to worry about!

"I better get going, I have my own school administrators to bamboozle now."

"Oh, like you didn't already call in sick. But, Chathi, thank you very much for helping us out. I'll pay you back somehow."

"I know you will," Chathi said, and ruffled her sister's hair. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Jacob and Jonah watched her saunter off (her sweatshirt didn't come down much below her waist, and those shorts were awfully tight and I was watching too, nyaaa!). "Meet back up in the main cafeteria for 1st lunch?" Jonah asked once Chathi's butt was out of sight.

"No, come to ours, it's better," said Pamela, and she dragged me away toward the girl's ~~dorm~~ residence hall. I couldn't smell Chathi, so I didn't resist.

All the students were in 3rd period, so there was no one to watch us limp back. Mrs. Dietrich was appalled that anyone as filthy as us wanted to come into her clean hall, but we had a note from Dr. Benally and the showers were where we wanted to go anyway.

Pamela and I were on different floors, but I got my stuff and went up to the bathroom on her floor. I didn't really think William was going to attack me in the shower in broad daylight, but I still felt better having someone I trusted nearby. (I trusted Pamela, even if I really wanted to know what the "Handmaiden of Hades" thing was all about.)

Just like the candy bars Lucy brought were the best ever, this was the best shower I'd ever taken. The hot water (really hot, since only one other person was using it in the whole building) washed the filth of the labyrinth off my naked skin, making being naked seem not so bad, and

warmed up the cold that I hadn't realized had settled into my bones. I slowly slid down the tiled wall of the shower until I was sitting in a melted lump under the water, and couldn't help purring. Finally, I felt like I was done with the labyrinth! Even when the steam loosened up the sludge in my lungs and I coughed until I saw stars, it was getting the labyrinth out of me. (Was it flowing back down to the labyrinth? Probably not, but it would have served Tauros right to have it fill up with snot!)

Most mornings, having to use 2 kinds of shampoo and 3 kinds of conditioner on my 87lbs of hair is a pain, but today it was an excuse to stay under the hot water.

"Nef? Did you drown?"

"No, I melted and ran down the drain!" When I finally shut off the water and peeked around the curtain, I saw that Pamela was already dressed and made up and even had her hair braided in cute pigtails. "I'll be out in a minute."

It was more than a minute until my hair was dry enough to take outside the shower stall, and I could hear Pamela tapping her foot, but my ridiculous hair holds enough water to cause severe flood damage to carpets and hallways! It does look nice, though, even dyed black; maybe I shouldn't cut it all off after all?

"Nef, we have about 3 minutes until lunch!"

I didn't regret a minute spent in that shower, but I put my hair up in a bun and yanked on my uniform slacks and shoes before Pamela abandoned me. "I'm coming!"

"Oh, that's what you were doing in there. How does it work with those claws, though? Do you use your tail instead?"

"Nyaaaaaa!" My face turned hot. I couldn't say the shower hadn't been sensual bliss, but

not like *that*! Maybe I shouldn't have tried to catch up with her! "How did you get such a dirty mind?!"

She tilted her nose in the air and said primly, "There's nothing dirty about a teenager being interested in sex."

There were a couple of girls who had come back to their rooms in the window between 3rd period and 1st lunch, apparently just to hear Pamela teasing me. One of them was Destiny, who gave us a nod as fellow principal-victims. She also smirked, but didn't smell like she was imagining me in the shower, at least not enough to pick up through my plugged nose. She was pretty, but I would probably would have died of blushing if she had.

Jacob and Jonah were just getting in line when we got to the refectory, all clean and spiffy in their uniforms (although they both wore the slacks version, so we couldn't see Jonah's legs). They looked 1000% happier to not be covered in disgusting labyrinth grunge, although Jonah still had the Eisberg result hanging over his head. A couple of Jacob's 6th-grade buddies were with him, and they stopped shoving each other to check out Pamela and me. They were impressed that Pamela put her hand on Jonah's arm when she said hi and he didn't lose his cool. Jacob said, "Hi, Nef," but couldn't meet my eyes, and I didn't need scent to tell that remembering he'd seen me naked was embarrassing now that we were back in civilization. Well, it was embarrassing for me too! But being friends with Pamela was embarrassing like 25% of the time, so I was used to it.

We couldn't talk about the thing with people right there listening, so we didn't say much as we got our food (Hawaiian pizza!). Jonah and Pamela and I could sit together, but Jacob was a 6th-grader. He hung back as we moved off with our trays until Jonah said, "You coming?" Then

Jacob's buddies started whispering to him, telling him he should "go for it" and "put the moves on her". Wait, were they talking about me?! They must have been, because when one (Matt?) said to "just put your arm around her", Jacob whispered back, "You know she can slap my face right off my body, right?"

It's rude to show you overheard something humans were whispering, but it was hard not to glare at them. At least Jacob had some sense! When we sat down at the corner table that seems to be Pamela's, he did squish in beside me, but to be fair, my hips take up a lot of bench. He didn't try to put his arm around me, so I didn't complain.

None of the other Changed students was anywhere near (most of them were in 6th or 7th grade, so they had to take the tables near the front, and the only other one in 8th grade, Alice Yamauchi, was at the center table with the other cheerleaders), so we were pretty safe if we leaned over the table and kept our voices down. "We got Nef and Jacob patched up, and we aren't in trouble with the school, much. Now we need an excuse for Jonah to get treated, and what else? Phones and other portable things we can say got stolen, but did you lose any favorite clothes or anything real muggers wouldn't take?"

"Does it even matter? We're never going to be allowed off campus again," Jacob said dismally. "Grounded is grounded."

"Yes, but we want Nef to be grounded too, not taken to another state," said Jonah.

Jacob had forgotten! What a doofus! So much for worrying that he had a crush on me, at least. He shriveled up when I scowled at him and stuffed some fries in his mouth.

"I need a new gris-gris bag." Jacob and Jonah looked blank. "It keeps people from finding me with sorcery."

"There are—" Jacob squawked before I covered his mouth. I guess Jonah must not have told him, which was fine by me.

"Would a fake one do?" Pamela asked. "Can your parents tell the difference?"

"Maybe. No, probably." Daddy Howard wasn't a sorcerer, but I wouldn't be surprised if he could tell real sorcery from fake, and Mom might be able to smell it. "And I'd like a real one anyway, or something that does the same thing." If Stonebreaker or his buddies showed up before Mom got back, I might wish I was back in the labyrinth!

"If you had a different kind of amulet, inside a bag that looked the same, could they tell?"

"I don't know. Probably not, unless they checked?" I would have thought the bag would smell, with the disgusting stuff that went into it, but I hadn't been able to detect anything except the leather bag itself. It sort of made sense for an antidetection spell, but sorcery doesn't often make sense. That's why Daddy Howard gets the big bucks for figuring it out.

Pamela frowned. "Are you OK with owing Chathi a favor?" Jacob was squeezed close enough that I could smell him thinking of ways to pay Chathi back. Nyaaa! I was blushing again, and elbowing him didn't help! "Not one you can pay back that easily," Pamela added, and I blushed even more, even though it was Jacob's fault.

"Will it be worse than moving to another state?" Chathi was familiar enough with underground clinics that I had the feeling this would be a professional-criminal-type favor, not a teenager favor. Exactly the kind of thing my parents tried to keep me out of, in other words.

"She acts tough, but she's not going to be too hard on someone our age."

That wasn't a solid no, but it matched what I thought of Chathi. If everything went wrong, I'd be leaving town anyway. I wasn't sure that was even an "if", this plan seemed awfully rickety!

But we had to try. "OK, I'll owe her one. If it works!"

Pamela nodded. "I'll text her this afternoon and have her bring it over when she can. You'll have to get a bag for it."

I'd have to order something online. At least my laptop had been in my room, so Tauros hadn't stomped it. What was Chathi going to bring me, though? The gris-gris bag I'd lost had been connected to me with some of my bodily fluids and an embarrassing ritual, but it sounded like Chathi was just going to hand me something. I hoped it would work!

"Can't we just say Jonah stepped in a puddle of weird goo?" asked Jacob. "We already said we were on the Pit side of town, it could happen."

"If there's stuff lying around that can contaminate me that badly just by stepping in it, someone's going to look for it, and we'll have to give them a fake location and they won't find anything and it could be a huge mess."

"And they'll ask why he didn't say anything right away, although I guess he could fake hallucinations or something that made him worry." Pamela frowned again. "That may be our only option, though, since we can't easily leave campus, and pretending there's a source of emanations on campus doesn't help Nef."

Jacob's hand moved toward my chest and I reflexively pinned it to the table. Everyone around jumped at the bang. "Nyaaaa!" I snatched my hand away, but it was too late. Everyone was staring and I was blushing.

"Hey! I was just trying—" Jacob waved at my pizza, which I had been about to smear my uniform blazer in.

"Nyaaa! Sorry!" I tried to sit up straight away from the pizza and shrivel up at the same

time. I knew Jacob wasn't that dumb, if he wasn't going to put his arm around me, he wasn't going to try to grope me! At least I had claw sheaths again, so I hadn't hurt him, even if he was rubbing his arm theatrically. "You startled me."

"I know you don't like boys, Nelson," said a smooth soprano voice from behind me. "But don't break them for trying to help you." Now I could smell her spicy, floral perfume, that didn't sting my nose like most perfume. I could also hear the other cheerleaders giggling.

Oh, Bast, Alice Yamauchi had seen me freak out! I'd never live this down! "Nyaaaa," I said again, but it was more of a whimper. I was entitled to freak out, I'd been beat up and hit on by a ghoul and had my foot shot full of holes, but I couldn't tell anyone! (Technically I could tell people that I'd gotten mugged and shot, but it would just attract attention and not in a good way.)

Pamela reached across the table and took my hand. *She* wasn't freaking out, but then she hadn't run into any mines or had a ghoul threaten to sweep her away. I sighed, and stuffed some pizza into my mouth so I wouldn't have to have a comeback to Alice. It tasted weird and bland, because I could only taste with my tongue and not with my nose, but my body still loved it.

San Diego hadn't been this embarrassing, had it?

Once everyone stopped paying attention (and Jonah had recovered from close-range exposure to Alice and the other cheerleaders in their short skirts), Pamela said, "So, Jonah, what kind of symptoms would you like to fake? Hallucinations? Unnatural compulsions? Psychosomatic blindness? I could probably arrange for you to get an embarrassing rash, but I don't know if it would pass medical tests."

"It doesn't have to be a real symptom, just something that would scare me into remembering the can full of green goo I kicked when we were trying to avoid the muggers."

“Too bad, I have some great ideas for unnatural compulsions.” I didn’t need to be able to smell her to know what kind of ideas she was having for Jonah!

#

I really wanted to go back to my room and sleep until dinner, but Dr. Benally had only excused us from the morning classes we’d missed, so when the bell rang, I had to go to Language Arts. At least both Pamela and Jonah were in that class with me, and Alice wasn’t. (She’d be telling everyone in her math class what a freak I am, instead.) Ms. Hamilton had us trying to identify the themes of short stories, which was dull, but not so dull I didn’t have to pay attention. Of course I had a coughing fit when she called on me, but humans are always doing stuff like that so they didn’t think it was weird. It would have been better if I was right, but at least I found a secondary theme, not like some kids who were completely off the mark. Jonah and Pamela were both spot on with both primary and secondary themes, but I already know I’m not as smart as them.

5th period, Ms. English (the joke is that she looks like a PE teacher and teaches science class, showing that names don’t mean anything) had been talking about planetary formation, but did a special class on earthquakes since there’d been one over the weekend and people were still kind of freaked out about it, because that doesn’t happen in Ohio. I’d missed it by being in another dimension, but what were the odds that William connecting Tauros’s labyrinth to the tunnels under the school wasn’t related? It probably made the labyrinth actually exist under the school in some way, instead of being completely in the 4th dimension. Did that mean that digging out of the labyrinth would get us into whatever was under Rhodes even though we weren’t ghouls? Maybe the Greek mosaics really did exist!

“...don’t you, Nelson?” Nyaaa! What was Alice saying about me?! Oh, that I know all about earthquakes. Wait, how did she know I’m from California?! Jacob figured it out from my accent, was Alice that smart? Not that being smarter than Jacob was hard.

Like most of the teachers (and everyone else), Ms. English bent to Alice’s whims, or at least her reputation as the ideal student. “Ms. Nelson, would you like to say a few words about earthquake safety?”

No! But everyone was already looking at me, and if there were going to be more earthquakes (like when Tauros took her stupid labyrinth away to bother some other city), it would be good for people to know what to do. I blew my nose and went up to the front of the room to explain about getting under sturdy things, staying away from outside walls and windows, and not standing in doorways (they might keep stuff from falling on you, but it’s too easy to get thrown around). I guess people had really been freaked out, since I saw some kids even taking notes! Well, it was what I’d been taught in school in San Diego, it should be good enough for a school in Ohio. Ms. English thanked me, but she didn’t say anything about all the extra-credit points I deserved for having to stand up in front of everyone! Alice looked smug, but she always looks smug and she always smells completely cool even when she’s tormenting me. Nyaaaaaaa!

6th period, Computers. I don’t know anyone in that class well, so I should have been able to concentrate on learning about how search engines work and how it can make them give misleading results. I couldn’t ignore the tall skinny black trans girl with enormous curly red hair trying to burn holes in me with her eyes, though. I didn’t know what she had against me until I overheard someone call her Charlotte. That must be Charlotte Cooke, Jonah’s #1 fan (according

to Pamela), hating me for having spent lunch with Jonah. I don't like having enemies, or even people being mad at me, any more than anyone else, but compared to all the trouble I could be in with superheroes and supervillains and my parents, Charlotte glaring at me over a boy wasn't a big deal. I hoped Pamela (in her special individual study program) and Jonah and Jacob were doing OK too, but if one of us got in trouble, we'd probably all be busted.

The last class of the day for me is Art, which I usually like even though Alice is in it, but today I was mostly eager for school to be over so I could back to my room, order a new phone and a fake gris-gris bag, and fall asleep until dinner. I didn't want to sketch hands, which are a huge pain, but that's what Ms. Stringham made us do. I got paired with Kiri Nichols, who has plump soft *tiny* hands (she said she never wanted to play the piano anyway) that were both harder and easier to draw because I couldn't see the muscles and bones as well. I think I did pretty well.

"Sorry my hands are so weird," I said when it was time to switch.

"No, they're neat!" When she took my hand, her skin was cool, maybe because I was feverish or maybe just because a pretty girl was holding my hand. (Kiri isn't tiny all over, but she looks soft and cuddly, and has big blue eyes and pale skin without a single zit, and smells like sunrise.) She fiddled with the last joint of my finger, the one that's just a stub for the claw to attach to, bending it back and forth and seeing how it goes way back to keep the claw out of the way. "Can I see your claw?"

I wasn't going to tell her no! I undid the sheath on my forefinger (my new sheaths were a lot easier to get on and off, but a crazy minotaur had stolen them) and let her see the white arc of my claw. My claws don't have any more feeling than human nails, but seeing Kiri's fingers on

the hard claw was giving me feelings anyway. I felt sharp and dangerous, not like I wanted to hurt her but like I could protect her. Was that the difference between being a villain and a hero? But Mina Tauros was a lot more dangerous than me, and even she must have people she wanted to protect.

Kiri was having feelings too, although it was hard to tell what kind with my nose all stuffed up, so I was concentrating on her. When someone right behind me said, “What are you 2 doing, making hand-babies?” I was so surprised and embarrassed that I flinched away and my claw sliced right through the soft pad of her thumb.

It didn’t feel like Mason’s tough flesh, but my first thought was still, “Oh no, not again.” Red blood filled the wound, and I knew that next would come the screaming, and then the changing my name and moving to another state. My hands were already putting pressure on her thumb, at least. “Nyaaaa! Kiri, I’m sorry! Ms. Stringham, we need a bandaid!”

Kiri surprised me by not screaming, although she did make a kind of strangled squeak. “It’s not your fault, Nefertari, it’s this jerkface!” The boy who’d startled me was out of her reach, so she kicked at him, hitting his knee hard enough that he tripped over his own feet and landed on his butt. “What part of ‘stay away from me forever’ didn’t you understand, Dane?!”

“What?! You were practically making out in class and you’re mad at *me*?” He was white like Kiri, OK-looking but not in Jonah’s class, and his face naturally looked indignant at people getting mad at him. It must happen a lot.

Kiri was embarrassed, but so mad I thought she was going to pull away and go stomp Dane into the floor. Ms. Stringham stepped between them before she could. “Mr. Simmons, get back to your seat. Girls, what happened here?”

“They were—”

“I didn’t ask you, Mr. Simmons. Do you want detention?” He grumbled back to his own desk, where the guy he’d been paired with gave him a disgusted look.

“I was inspecting Nefertari’s hand when Dane came over and startled her.”

“Mm-hm. Ms. Nelson, why did you have your claw sheath off? You know the dress code.” She wasn’t looking at me, she was looking at Kiri’s thumb, which was still bleeding like crazy. “Ms. Nichols, this may need stitches. I’m sending you to Mr. Coe’s office.” She produced a clean rag from somewhere and wrapped it around Kiri’s thumb.

“It’s not her fault, I asked her to, so I could see!”

“You should know better, Ms. Nelson. Go to the principal’s office.”

Again?! “Nyaaaaa!” At least it was near the nurse’s office, so I could apologize more to Kiri on the way.

We had to go right past Alice and whatever guy was drawing her hand (Lawrence?), but she didn’t tease me, just looked at me with her huge green eyes, foxtail swishing. She didn’t have to wear sheaths because her claws were just long pointed fingernails that wouldn’t accidentally maim pretty girls. Nyaaaaa! The guy looked up too, away from Alice. “Should I go with you, Kiri?” He gave me the side-eye, which was fair, although I never meant to hurt her! I blushed even harder.

“I think I can make it to the office before I bleed to death,” Kiri said drily, but she smiled at him.

“Mr. Macdonald,” Ms. Stringham said, and he sat back down.

Once we were out of the room, I tried to apologize again, but Kiri wouldn’t have it. “It’s

not your fault, it's Dane's fault! And mine for asking you to break the rules, I guess."

"I should know better, I've had these claws more than half my life!"

"Not your whole life?"

"They didn't really grow in until I was 5 or 6. It would be bad for a baby to have claws so sharp, I guess."

She opened her mouth to say something, and the floor started wobbling. Another earthquake? I grabbed her around the waist and pulled her against the lockers, which was the closest we could get to an inside wall of the hallway. The wobble got sharper and she made that frightened squeak again, ducking her face against my shoulder and smelling of fear. I put my arms over her head in case ceiling tiles fell on us, but that was it for this earthquake. It wouldn't have even knocked books off of desks, although the yelling in the classrooms would make you think the ceiling had caved in. "It's OK," I said. "Just a small one."

"Not as bad as Sunday," she said, straightening up to look around cautiously. "Does it really do that all the time in California?"

"Not *all* the time, maybe every couple of years." More further north, where the San Andreas fault ran along the coast instead of way inland, but whatever. Darn, I'd been too reassuring: she moved away from me, embarrassed at having been scared. No, bad catgirl! Don't try to flirt with the girl you're taking to the nurse's office because you practically cut her thumb off!

The PA system ("tannoy", Daddy Geoff called it, although I think he was making that up) clicked to life, making us both jump. "Er, all students, there's no need to be alarmed. The earthquake is over and there is no damage." It wasn't Dr. Benally's voice, it was the secretary

from the office, which seemed weird. Wouldn't the principal usually make an announcement like that, not a secretary? She wasn't finished. "There are some scientists working around the school to locate the source of the earthquakes, so please don't interrupt them."

"Oh no!" Kiri grabbed at her thumb, which she'd let go of so that it leaked all over, including on my uniform blazer. Yuck, but it really wasn't too bad. Some sensible person had decided that the blazers should be navy blue, which didn't show stains much. "Nefertari, I'm so sorry!" She looked down at me (Mom, why couldn't you have given me your height?) with those huge blue eyes and I couldn't be mad at her.

"Don't worry about it, I need to do laundry anyway." It was even true, I meant to do it Saturday instead of being trapped in an extradimensional labyrinth of ghouls and death.

It looked like the conversation was dying, so I tried to find something else to talk about. "What's that guy, Dane's, problem, anyway? Is he just a phobe?"

"He dumped me, but he won't leave me alone!"

Why would a guy dump someone like Kiri?! Did he want her to lose weight or something? "Oh, he's an idiot." I wasn't doing a very good job of not flirting, even though I didn't really mean to, since I couldn't smell whether she was interested. Was this how humans had to flirt all the time? It was confusing.

She was embarrassed now, I could tell even through the snot. "No, it's—" The halls weren't completely deserted, even during class, and she looked at the other student in sight (a round black boy with thick glasses who had been checking us out from a safe distance).

"Anyway, we had a fight, and he called me a lot of things he shouldn't have, but now he sticks his nose in everything I do. Here we are," she added, relieved to have an excuse to get away from

me prying into her life and trying to flirt with her when she's straight. Bad, bad catgirl!

"I'm really sorry," I said again as she went into Mr. Coe's office, but she waved it away.

No one was in the office except the same older lady as before, the one who'd made the announcement. She seemed worried. "Hello, dear, what can I do for you?"

I had to blow my nose before answering, which gave me time to think about lying. No, I already had enough lies to keep track of! "Ms. Stringham sent me to see the principal. I, um, violated the dress code." Nyaaaa, that sounded like I was running around the school naked! But that was better than running around the school tearing people's thumbs off.

"Oh dear. I'm afraid Dr. Benally isn't available right now." Even with my nose plugged up, I could smell her fear. What was wrong with the principal?! "I'll just give you lunchtime detention for the rest of the week." She rustled around in some paperwork and came up with a form that she scribbled on. "Show this to Sar— Ms. Stringham, and be sure you're in— do you have 1st or 2nd lunch? Oh, hello! What can I do for you, Dr. Thomas?"

A South Asian man dressed in jeans and a denim shirt had come in. Although he was as old as either of my dads, he was pretty handsome, with broad, high cheekbones and kind of pointy eyebrows. There were a few younger (but still adult) people hovering in the door behind him, dressed in the same way but more ruffled and carrying several nylon or canvas bags each. Because I'm not smart enough to notice anything about people except how cute they are, it took me a minute to realize that these were the geologists that had been announced.

"Please, Linda, I asked you to call me Carlos," he said in a smooth, super-deep voice with a bit of an accent. That didn't sound like an Indian name, but I couldn't complain, especially not if he said it like that. I couldn't blame the secretary for paying attention to him, either. I'd figure

out where detention for 1st lunch was later. Kiri wasn't out of the nurse's office (it had been like 2 minutes), and she probably didn't want me around anyway, so I edged out past the junior geologists who did all the work (wow, that blonde girl had buff arms!), went to the bathroom to splash some cold water on the bloodstain, and went back to the art room.

Ms. Stringham raised her eyebrow at me (could *everyone* do that?!) so I waved the detention slip at her and she shrugged. Maybe she thought I'd get chewed out for longer? I wasn't going to explain in the middle of class, I just sat down and tried to draw my own hand until Kiri came back with her thumb bundled in white gauze (kind of like my foot).

"You didn't wait for me," she whispered indignantly. Maybe she wasn't mad at me after all! Hadn't been mad before I ditched her, anyway.

"Sorry, I didn't know how long you were going to be, and I couldn't just hang around the office."

"Usually Benally takes as long to work on someone's attitude as Mr. Coe took to work on my hand."

"I didn't see Dr. Benally, just the secretary—"

"Less gossip, more art!"

Of course it was her drawing hand that I'd hurt, so Kiri's picture of my hand came out looking more like a crab claw, but it was my own fault. It made us both giggle, anyway, so hopefully Dane suffered. (Kiri covered her soft pink lips with her fingertips when she laughed, which was adorable.)

When the bell rang, the boy who had been drawing with Alice came over. "Kiri, are you OK?" He was tall, maybe taller than Jonah (hard to tell from my height), and sharp-looking:

sharp nose, sharp cheekbones, sharp creases in his uniform slacks, probably sharp elbows. It could have been a weird look, but he was handsome, maybe because his blue eyes were sharp too.

“I’m fine, didn’t even need stitches.” She looked down at the sketch and started to giggle again. “Mostly fine, I need to get used to drawing without a thumb for a few days.”

I winced and looked down at my hands, which had sheaths on every claw again. “Sorry.”

Kiri patted my hand. “It’s really not your fault, Nefertari.” Alice had come up behind the boy, to watch me be defective.

“I shouldn’t have let you talk me into taking it off!” Oops, that made the boy raise his eyebrows (both at once! I wasn’t the only one!) and Alice one of hers.

“Shut up, Kenny,” Kiri said, although he hadn’t said anything. Her cheeks were pink, so she was thinking the same thing. I could even smell it, a little, although that reminded me I had to blow my nose *again*, and then use the inhaler.

Kenny watched me suspiciously. “I thought mimis never got sick.”

Who still called the Changed mimis?! Ohio really was backwards! “I got something in my nose that irritated it. My sinuses aren’t invulnerable like Ironstar’s.”

That got his interest. “Did you know she doesn’t even have to breathe any more? Except to talk, I guess. Whatever Invariant did to her was pretty amazing.”

Oh, he was a superhero geek. Well, who wasn’t, at least a little? “She does breathe, though, even if she doesn’t have to. Maybe it’s just to make people more comfortable.”

“Or habit, she was human for as long as she’s been transformed.” I guess geeking with him was all it took to quiet his suspicions, because he held out a hand. “I’m Kenny Macdonald.”

I shook it. “Nefertari Nelson.” I didn’t even feel bad about lying, it was my name now.

“Hey, you want to come see my brother’s band at the Mighty Bean-O-Tron on Thursday? Luxury Space Communism, they’re Australo-funk hypnofusion.”

Was he asking me out?! Why did it have to be a boy, even an OK-seeming one, and not Kiri? But I had no idea what Australo-funk or hypnofusion was, so I wanted to go!

Kenny must have realized I was conflicted, because he said, “Kiri’s coming, right? And lots of people, maybe even Alice- WHOA!” He turned toward the table he and Alice had been sitting at, and found her right there in front of him, all golden skin and golden hair and big slanted green eyes and swishing foxtail. He was so surprised that he almost ended up in Kiri’s lap, but grabbed onto the edge of the table. “Sorry, didn’t hear you come up!”

Alice gave him her cool smile. “You were distracted by Nelson.” He blushed. “I’ll be there if I can, but no promises.” She turned and walked away, foxtail swishing in counterpoint to her walk in the way that every Changed girl practiced as soon as she started getting hips. Had I been doing that as I walked around school? I tried not to, but changing how I walked was harder than changing my name. Not that anyone would notice, with Alice around!

Kiri finished gathering up her stuff and waved a hand in front of Kenny’s face. He actually jumped and blushed, which was pretty adorable, maybe because I couldn’t smell him. “Sorry! Anyway, please come!”

Now that I knew it was a group thing, not a date, it sounded like fun (and not just because I wondered what Alice dressed like out of uniform), but there was a big problem. “I’d like to go, but I might be kind of grounded for the entire rest of my life.”

“What, just for this?” Kiri waved her thumb. “It’s not that big a deal!”

“Not grounded, exactly, just never allowed out again.” I decided to tell them our cover story while walked to our lockers, like that it would make more real. “I was out with Pamela over the weekend, in town, and we kind of got, um, mugged. That’s how my foot got hurt.”

They were both suitably appalled. “I’m glad you’re OK!” Kiri exclaimed, and hugged me, all cushiony and dawn-smelling. Wow, I should get mugged more often! Kenny didn’t hug me, which was points in his favor. He was seeming like a pretty nice guy, which I guess made sense, since Kiri didn’t have any trouble not putting up with Dane’s crap.

“Hey, guys,” said Pamela as she appeared out of the crowd. “Oh good, Nef is making friends.” Her expression was too gleeful, though, and Kiri turned pink and let go of me. Darn it!

“Pamela, you didn’t tell me you got mugged!” said Kenny.

Pamela waved her hand. “Well, I wasn’t the one who got shot.”

Kiri’s eyes got so big anime artists would have toned it down. “You got *shot*?!” she squeaked. She immediately clapped her hands over her mouth, but it was too late: the nearest dozen kids all stopped and stared. Oh, Bast, I should have kept my mouth shut instead of trying to impress the pretty girl!

“Only a little!” I protested. “Like a .22 or something, it barely went in!” That wasn’t helping, now people were shutting up and looking to see why so many people had stopped talking, so everyone could hear me! “Nyaaaa!” I grabbed Pamela’s hand and ran for it.

#

We outran the speed of gossip to the girl’s hall, even with my bad foot (which didn’t hurt much at all until I’d run across campus on it). Pamela followed me up to my room and sat next to me

when I flopped face-down on the bed. “So, Kiri Nichols? I thought Alice was your destined soulmate.”

I buried my face in the comforter to muffle my “NYAAAAAAAAA!”.

Pamela laughed and patted the back of my head. “No, it’s good. Kiri’s nice. She’ll hardly ever get you kidnapped by supervillains.”

I jerked up to make sure the door was closed, but of course it was. Pamela wasn’t an idiot like me! I rolled onto my side to face her and then realized what she meant. “I’m not trying to replace you! I barely know Kiri!”

She laughed again. “I know that, goofus. I just mean you won’t get kidnapped double if you also have Kiri for a friend. Kenny, I’m not sure about.”

“He seems OK. He invited me to go with him and Kiri and— and people to hear his brother’s band on Thursday. But I figure either some of my parents will be back by then, or Ms. Fisher and Ms. Velazquez will show up, and either way I’ll be in protective grounding forever.”

“I don’t know if Dr. Benally will tell the directors. She seemed pretty out of it earlier, and then it was Mrs. Leavy who made that announcement after the earthquake. Something is going on.”

“You mean like a labyrinth full of ghouls materializing in the ground under the school?”

“Besides that, I mean.” She stood up and started pacing. “I don’t know what, though. Maybe related to whatever’s going on in your nose. Oh, here’s the phone for when Epsilon texts you.” She tossed the flip phone onto the bed. “You should get a new phone. And a replacement charm bag; Chathi will be here with the confounder soon, I think. I should do laundry while we wait, since now all my exercise clothes are gross.”

I sat up, although it was more work than it seemed worth. “Can you take this too, then?” I shrugged off my bloodstained blazer. “Wash it in cold, it has blood on it.”

“*More* blood?” So then I had to tell her the humiliating story of Kiri’s thumb (she didn’t laugh much) while trying to get my old laptop connected to the wireless. “At least she was still speaking to you after class. But you didn’t see Dr. Benally at all?”

“Nope, and the secretary — Mrs. Leavy? — was definitely worried about something, when she wasn’t making eyes at the geologist guy.”

“Hm,” was all Pamela said, but I could tell she was worried too. She went off to do laundry, and I tried to order stuff on line.

Getting a new phone was easy, although my parents would get notified since they were paying for it, and so was a new debit card (no way should Mina Tauros get to live it up on my card!). A replacement gris-gris bag took more searching and some math. The Bruja of 55th Street had measured my hand to figure out how big the bag should be, and I was pretty sure it was as long as my thumb across the bottom, and the length of my middle finger on the diagonal. Yuck, trigonometry! But Pamela was able to convert those into a width and height, and eventually I found a craft store that sold white leather drawstring bags that were within about ¼” of the right size. Hopefully that would be close enough to fool my parents. I added some beads from the same place, to make it lumpy, and some red sealing wax from another site to close it. I just needed some way to pay for everything that wouldn’t report back to my parents.

There was a knock at the door, and I jumped. Pamela looked up from her homework. “If they’re knocking, how bad can it be?” Was she trying to jinx us?

“Nefertari? Pamela?” called a familiar girl’s voice. It was Lucy K, who had brought us

clothes and food after we escaped the labyrinth. At least it wasn't the cops!

My mental image of her was tall and skinny and waspish, since she'd been so snippy about running errands at 5AM, but actually she was pretty average except for having her blonde hair done up in corkscrew ringlets to frame her face. They must take an hour a day! She sounded a lot nicer now, too. "Hi, Nefertari, do you have Pamela? I found this weird high-schooler wandering the hallways looking for her." She waved, and Chathi (now decently dressed in a leather jacket, short poofy skirt, and leggings, all black) came into view.

"Yes, she's here. Thanks, Lucy! Come in, Chathi."

"No problem." She seemed happy to turn Chathi over to us and take off, although I couldn't tell for sure, because no smell. I hoped Epsilon was about to text me with the name of a cheap over-the-counter medication that would clear out all this mucus!

Chathi had brought me a circuit board about half as big as a credit card, with a bunch of tiny cylinders and cubes and lentil-shaped things plugged into the coppery maze on both sides. At one end was a holder for 2 AAA batteries, and at the other was a row of tiny white things the size of rice grains that flickered dimly red when I shaded them with my hand. I wasn't sure if it would fit into my fake gris-gris bag, but we sketched out the dimensions that Pamela had calculated, and it looked like it would work, just barely.

"Change each battery when the LED next to it, here, shows orange. It should happen every 3-4 days unless someone is putting a heavy drain on the shielding. As long as you change them one at a time before either LED is red, and don't take too long, it'll keep working while you do."

It seemed too mundane to do the same thing as a gris-gris bag full of sacrificed animal

parts and precious stones and bodily fluids (seriously, ewwwwww), but Pamela and Chathi both seemed to know what they were doing. “Okay. Thanks, Chathi. If I don’t get murdered, I owe you one.”

Chathi smiled, and she didn’t need fangs to look predatory. “I look forward to great things from you.” What had I gotten myself into?! Nyaaa! “Anything else? I need to get home to change, I have a date.”

Her short skirt and leggings should have made any date happy, but she probably felt overdressed with so little skin showing. Not that it was fair to judge her by how she dressed when she got pulled out of bed at 5AM, but I couldn’t get that outfit out of my head. Was she wearing something like that under the leather jacket? I could feel my face heating up as I pictured her in a leather bustier. Nyaaaa!

“Chathi, you’re the best sister ever, but please stop teasing Nef. She’s going to blow a gasket and then Mrs. Dietrich will be on your case for corrupting the morals of her girls.”

“What?! I didn’t do anything! It’s all in her head!” Chathi patted my head, which didn’t help anything! She let her sister push her out the door without complaining, though. I just hid my burning face.

Pamela put her arms around me. “Don’t mind Chathi, she can’t help being like that.”

I leaned back against her, which was nice but not as nice as leaning against Chathi’s— Nyaaaa! “It’s not her fault. I’m just an idiot.” With ghouls and lies and supervillains, I had more important things to think about than my best friend’s sister’s ridiculous hotness, but my brain sure wasn’t cooperating!

My History and Algebra teachers had emailed the assignments I’d missed getting in the

morning, so I tried doing homework instead of daydreaming. Pamela had the same History class, so we could work together on that, but I had to face Algebra on my own (while Pamela worked on German). I can do math when I put my mind to it, which was not today.

“Stop pounding your head on the desk, Nef, they’ll make you pay to replace it.”

“The desk, or my head? Shouldn’t the laundry be done by now?”

“I already got it while you were pining.”

“I’m not pining!”

“Well, you’re sure not fulfilled, or you wouldn’t be so grouchy!”

“NYAAAA! Why are we even friends?”

“Because I can tell you how to factor quadratic equations.”

“Nyaaa!”

By the time I understood quadratic factorization well enough to do 20 problems from the end of the chapter, it was almost dinner time, so we went down to the refectory, still in our uniforms without blazers, like about $\frac{1}{2}$ the girls there. Even with my nose still all gunked up, I started drooling before we even got all the way down the main stairs. Chicken tikka masala, something spicy and lentil-based, warm bread! I wanted to dive in (lunch had been hours ago), but remembering that we hadn’t had time to finish planning at work made me ask, “Should we go over to the boys’ hall and plan with Jonah and Jacob? We still don’t know how to—” I looked at the hungry girls crowding around us, carrying us toward the refectory like a river “—do the thing.”

“Girls never go to the boys’ refectory at dinner. It’s just Not Done. Boys *can* come over here, but only if they’re OK with being teased forever.”

I imagined being the only girl in a room full of teenaged boys, and that made sense, but it was still a pain. Not that it really mattered, since I didn't have a plan for how to fake Jonah getting exposed.

"OK with being teased" sounded like "never", but there were actually a few boys in the crowd, probably ones with girlfriends or at least girl friends. From the line for yummy, yummy tikka masala, I could see one of the tables at the front had a Latino boy and a Latina girl sitting close together on one bench, and across from them was a small boy with strawberry-blond curls holding hands with— Lucy K?! There wasn't any reason she shouldn't have a boyfriend, but she hadn't seemed like the type. Shows you what I know! There were a few boys, mostly tall or broad-shouldered or both, around the 2 tables the cheerleaders had pushed together in the middle of the room too. Being near Alice (now in a short rose-colored dress that made the tawny skin of her cleavage glow, nyaaaa) was probably worth some teasing!

"Just what we need, another one of *them!*" said a girl passing by, in the kind of fake-whisper that's meant to be overheard.

"She better not come sneaking into my room in the middle of the night," replied her friend.

I know I should have let it go, but then I should have let jerk-face Joey Williams keep his slavery hat, so maybe I'm not very good at that. "Excuse me?" I bumped her elbow, not enough to make her spill her tiny serving of chicken with the sauce scraped off but enough that she couldn't ignore me.

"I said, you disgusting little freak, that you better not try sneaking into my room in the middle of the night!"

I looked her up and down. She was actually really pretty, despite being the whitest white girl ever: tall and slender like Pamela, but with muscle definition in her bare arms and stockinged legs, glossy brown hair in a neat braid, faint freckles across her cheekbones. Her only flaw (besides her expression) was that she had to wear a ruffled blouse to look like she had any chest at all, but I said, “I don’t think *you* need to worry about *anyone* wanting to sneak into your room.”

She tossed her hair in a blatantly rehearsed way. “*Boys* like me just fine.”

“Um,” said Jacob. “We like watching you jump around in a short skirt at cheerleading practice, but I don’t know any guy who wants to get close enough to talk to you.”

That made her mad enough I could smell it. “You’re hardly the kind of boy I’d want attention from!”

Pamela came up beside me. “Hi, Lucy. I see you’re still setting an example of how not to be a decent person.”

Lucy’s nose went up. “I should have known this was your pet, *Priya*.”

Pamela rolled her eyes. “They’re called friends, Lucy. If you ever get a personality, maybe you can have some too.”

Lucy (this must have been the Lucy W that Pamela had told the gay boys she would never text) swept away just before Mrs. Dietrich appeared to scowl at us. She was grouchy, but fair enough that the fact we weren’t doing anything when she got there kept us from getting in trouble.

I looked around for Jonah, and spotted him next to a familiar poof of curly red hair. “Jonah! Hi!” said Charlotte Cooke. “Do you want to come sit with us?” I didn’t need my sense

of smell to tell she was overflowing with hope.

“Sorry, Lottie, I have to talk to Pamela and Nef about something.”

She sagged. “Oh. Maybe some other time...?”

“Sure thing,” said Jonah, but he was already turning away from her. He didn’t even try to let her down gently!

“Sorry about Lucy,” Pamela said as we were sitting down. “She’s kind of, um—”

“Homophobic and racist?” I asked.

“I was going to say vile, but yes.”

“It’s OK, even in California I couldn’t get to 13 without getting called lots worse than ‘pet’. Is she Earth Communion or something?”

“Not technically, but around here, most of the mainstream churches aren’t much different.”

Maybe having to move out of Ohio wasn’t such a bad idea! Not that California had been perfect, but it was the best, or least awful, of all the places I’d been. I could see why my parents picked it for raising a Changed kid, until we got chased out by a respected and famous superhero.

Jonah leaned over the table. (I couldn’t help scowling at him for being so mean to Charlotte, but if he couldn’t tell she liked him, it wouldn’t be right for me to tell him.) The room was even more crowded than at lunch (no day students, but I guess the main cafeteria was closed, which more than made up for it), so he spoke like we might be overheard. “You remember those cans of gunk we tripped over when we were running away from, um, those guys?” He looked around only a little bit theatrically for eavesdroppers. “I think they might have been toxic waste or something, ‘cause I’ve been having kind of dizzy spells since then, and

things get all blurry. Are you guys OK?”

We all shook our heads, and Pamela said, “No, but I didn’t get any of it on me.”

“OK, good. Anyway, if this keeps up tomorrow, I’m going to talk to Mr. Coe. You should too if start feeling weird.”

We all agreed that we would, just like we meant it. I didn’t think anyone was actually listening in, but I’d put the mugging story out there with Kiri and Kenny (both day students), so we were committed. Or should be committed.

Actually, there was one person paying attention to us: Charlotte. She was 2 tables over, with a bunch of (mostly black) girls I didn’t know, ignoring them to glare at me and stab viciously at her chicken. Why not glare at Pamela, who was way prettier and actually liked Jonah?! Maybe I should say something to Jonah just for my own safety!

“I hope Mr. Coe isn’t sick— too,” said Jacob. “Dr. Benally was acting pretty weird today. Is there something going around?” He looked over at me just as I sniffed to keep from having to stop eating to blow my nose. “Um.” He edged away, although he couldn’t get far without falling off the end of the bench.

“The doctor didn’t say anything about me being contagious. It’s probably just from— that goop that Jonah splashed everywhere.”

“I don’t know,” said Pamela. “I think what’s going on in the office might be related. Have you heard from your mom’s friends?”

She meant Ms. Fisher and Ms. Velazquez, and I hadn’t, or from any of my parents. I might not have a phone, but there were plenty of phones in the school that they could call and ask to talk to me on. Had the principal not reported to them or my family? Or had she reported to

them and they hadn't done anything? I couldn't imagine my parents entrusting me to anyone who wouldn't want to at least see with their own eyes that I wasn't dead!

“We haven't heard from our family either,” Jonah said. “Mom and Dad are busy, but not *that* busy.”

The principal should have called the Armstrongs directly, so the problem must be with her. I would have said that wasn't our problem except I was afraid it had something to do with William. “Do you think we should tell someone about— Mr. H?” It would wreck my chances of staying in town, and make us all look really bad for even having tried to lie, but I didn't want anyone eaten by ghouls! Well, maybe Lucy W, but Dr. Benally had never done anything to me!

Pamela wrinkled her nose. “Who would we tell? We could call in an anonymous tip to the League, but they get lots of fake tips.”

“I was thinking more my mom's friends. It would blow our plan, but if Mr. H is doing something to Dr. Benally, we can't do nothing.”

“Why would he, though? We can't assume that everything going on is his fault. Maybe Benally's just sick. It happens.”

None of us could say she was wrong, but I could tell Jonah and Jacob were as worried as I was, and I don't think Pamela completely believed what she was saying either. Jonah finally said, “Let's see what happens tomorrow. If Dr. Benally is OK, we'll stick with the plan. If she vanishes in the night— Then it's our fault. Urgh! No, we have to tell someone. I'm sorry if it makes things hard for you, Nef, but we can't let someone get hurt.”

“We don't have to blow the whole plan,” Pamela said. “Let's show Nef around the campus after dinner, including the furniture storeroom in case she needs somewhere to take Kiri.

I heard there are some steam tunnels back there, we could explore those.”

Jacob said, “I’m smelling what you’re stepping in,” which was probably the grossest way he could have put it, but we all got Pamela’s idea. It would make us suspiciously trouble-prone, but it was better than spilling everything.

#

As we walked across the campus, detouring around a bunch of kids playing frisbee in the biggest open space, Jacob said casually, “So you’re dating Kiri Nichols?”

“What?” I had to stop and cough into a tissue (it was dark enough to glow visibly) before I could say, “No! She’s in my Art class, but I never even talked to her before today. Why?”

“Just wondering what Pamela was giving you crap about.”

“We were drawing hands in Art class, so I took my claw sheath off to let her see and some jerkface startled me so I cut her thumb, because I *can’t smell!* So we had to go to the office and now I have lunchtime detention for the rest of the week.” He didn’t need to know that the jerkface was Kiri’s ex, and he definitely didn’t need to know anything about me trying to flirt with Kiri or having feelings! Was he asking because he had feelings about Kiri? She wasn’t Alice, but she was pretty and nice and entirely fanciable, as Daddy Geoff would say. But a girl 2 years ahead of him? That was pretty ambitious, since in middle school girls are already about 2 years ahead. Jacob wasn’t as awful as Dane, but I bet I had a better chance with her, even if I couldn’t go to the thing on Thursday. Wait, was I getting jealous over someone I’d only talked to for the first time today?! But even though it ended badly, I’d liked her playing with my hand, with her soft fingers, and she was super-nice. It would be nice to go to the Bean-O-Tron and

drink hot chocolate with her. Kiri with a chocolate mustache would be *adorable*.

“Nef? Are you OK?”

“Nyaaa!” Bad catgirl, no imagining dates until you ask her out! What had Jacob been saying? Nothing, I’d just spaced out. “I’m fine!”

I looked all around at the campus to show I was alert. We were back behind where I’d been before this morning, and then I’d been too tired and freaked out to appreciate it, but it was really pretty. There were trees along the outsides of the buildings, hiding the parts that were boring and framing the parts that were interesting, like the columns and marble goddesses over the front door of the 2-story building right in the corner (I think it was where Pamela went for her special study) and the octagonal tower of the Victorian house that was where a few teachers could live if they didn’t want to find their own housing. It was terrible for security, but good for privacy and beauty. The building with the furniture storeroom was almost entirely hidden behind some kind of spreading trees, probably because it was a boring white stucco block. The beds of yellow and pink flowers around it (I couldn’t tell what kind without my nose) separated it from the other buildings, pushing it against the back wall. Maybe that was supposed to keep people from looking for a way in so they’d have privacy for, um, what Amir and his boyfriend had been doing. I blushed just thinking about it, although I did kind of think about it. Good thing I was never going to have a boyfriend!

The door was around the side, although the sidewalk was wide enough that it was hard to miss (probably so they could move furniture in and out). It was also locked, although I could probably have popped it open with a bank card (if I still had one — 5 to 7 business days!). We let Jacob pick it with his hair tentacles, though. I think he wanted to show off, which I couldn’t

blame him for. I had more hair than him, but I couldn't pick locks with it.

The doorknob rattled, and Jacob jumped back, hair twisting into a fan of snakes like when it had been holding the falaschite crystals and then collapsing *vwip* into his usual bun as 3 kids burst out, 2 girls and a boy, all white. I think 1 of the girls was in my Algebra class, but I didn't know her name. The boy had a can of beer in his hand, but I didn't smell it. Was my nose worse than a human's now?! But I could tell they smelled scared, or at least creeped out. "Don't go in there," said the girl I didn't know (dyed black hair, plump, red dress with a red leather corset that must have cost a fortune over it and high heels, who wears that to sneak off and drink beer?!). "There's... stuff. Glowing stuff."

I figured she didn't mean like in my nose, although that would have been bad enough. Pamela and I looked at each other, and then it was my turn to have my heart skip a beat because the next person out the door was Alice Yamauchi. She was still wearing her casual dress from dinner, but looked better than the dolled-up goth girl. She looked at Jacob, Jonah, and then Pamela, like counting them off, before she looked back at me with a raised eyebrow (*of course* she could) and a faint smile that said, "3 at once?" plainly enough to make my face burn. "Nyaaaaa..." (If she noticed the bug smell of Jacob's hair being active, she didn't say anything, because he wasn't the one she was picking on.)

Jonah and Jacob looked at me oddly, but Pamela was trying to not crack up. We all stood around looking at each other until Pamela asked, "What kind of glowing stuff?"

"Crystals growing on the floor," Alice said. "They aren't doing anything, but they weren't there last week." She didn't smell or sound freaked out, but she never did. She looked at me with those big green eyes (dark gold eyeshadow, but those lashes were probably natural). "Does this

have something to do with why you all missed morning classes?”

“What? No, we were at the doctor with Nef and Jonah.” I couldn’t tell that Pamela was fibbing, but then my nose was full of goo. Alice seemed to buy it, anyway.

“What did happen to your foot, Nelson?”

We had our story worked out, with an adult (in some sense) to back us up, and there was no way I could come up with a better lie on the spur of the moment, but I still didn’t want to tell Alice that I had gotten mugged and shot. I didn’t think she had a sympathetic bone in her body, she’d just think I was incompetent! “Um.”

Pamela, who didn’t care what Alice thought of me or Jacob (because she’s not an idiot), gave them our story, which got gasps of horror from the humans. Alice just raised her eyebrow again. Was she seeing through our feeble lies?

“You got *shot*?!” The goth girl stared at me with wide eyes, hands clasped to her plush chest. It was kind of cute, but she had a long way to go if she wanted to distract anyone from Alice.

“I thought mimis were bulletproof,” put in the boy (soft voice, Jacob’s size, curly brown hair and a hundred million freckles).

“I wish! More like bullet-resistant, I’ll be OK in a couple of weeks, but right now it’s not much fun.”

“Jacob, did you get shot too?” asked the other girl, who looked like she was probably in his grade. (Why would a 6th grader even want beer? I guess hanging out with Alice was reason enough, although she didn’t seem interested that way.)

“Nah, I was fine getting mugged, but then I stepped on a nail. Went right through my

shoe.”

“Eww, did you have to get tetanus shots?”

“Just one, but the needle was like this big around!” I hadn’t been there, but I was pretty sure he was exaggerating, no matter how much Dr. McKee wanted his patients to be young and pretty.

Alice took the beer from the boy and drank it down, then flattened the can between her palms until it was a disk less than an inch thick and stashed it away in her purse. I still couldn’t smell it at all! Did Freckle Boy have scent-disguising powers? “Let’s go, we don’t want to hang around here.”

“Aren’t you going to tell anyone?” I asked, and immediately felt stupid. Alice was both too good a student to admit to having been in the secret beer-drinking spot, and too cool to rat it out to the teachers. My superpower of being stupid in front of pretty girls was still working.

“My desk is getting a bit rickety, I think I should ask for a new one.” She started walking away with her friends. “Don’t go in there, Nelson. Curiosity killed the cat.”

I knew the rest of that saying. “But satisfaction brought her back.”

Alice looked back over her shoulder like an old movie star, the twist of her body showing off all her curves, and winked. Oh, Bast! I felt like I was going to catch on fire!

“Nef, are you OK?”

“Leave her alone, Jacob, she’s just suffering from an overdose of Yamauchi Exposure.”
Pamela wasn’t even trying to not laugh at me.

“Whatever. I don’t see what’s so great about her, just because she’s blonde and has big boobs.”

I looked over at Jonah, who definitely understood what was so great about Alice, enough that smelling him was making me nervous. “Um,” he said. “You’ll understand when you’re older?”

“Whatever. Are we going to see if it’s as bad as we think?”

Now that I wasn’t distracted by Alice, I could smell the crystals a little, metal and energy and sharp angles. “I think it is, but let’s see.”

The door had locked behind Alice and her friends, but Jacob was able to get it open even faster this time. I could definitely smell the crystals now, and it wasn’t surprising that the smell was coming from the second door on the right, the furniture storeroom where we’d gotten clothes from Lucy K. For some reason, everyone let me go first, even though Pamela had been least affected by the crystals last time. Well, I was pretty resistant (unless this stuff in my nose was related), and Jonah definitely had to stay back. I opened the door, and there was a big patch of crystals right in the middle of the floor. They were small, like the ones Jonah and I had found where Pamela and Jacob used the bathroom, but maybe that was just because they were new. The patch didn’t go under any of the tables, so it could be only where we’d put our disgusting feet, but it didn’t have trails leading to either door.

Jonah looked over the top of my head. “Maybe that toxic waste in the alley didn’t have anything to do with my dizzy spells.”

There weren’t any windows onto the hallway, and it was still light out so it was safe to turn on the lights. In the fluorescent light, the crystals didn’t glow, but they were still very obvious. No one who came in here could possibly miss them, so it should be safe to let Alice send someone to discover them tomorrow.

Pamela made Jonah take off his sweatshirt (his T-shirt pulled up, exposing his bellybutton, which Pamela noticed even though she'd already seen so much more) so she could put it on and fall into the crystals. Not only did this leave a big smushed patch, it covered the sweatshirt with dust and chips, which would be enough to make anyone who knew anything about them peel it off, wad it up, and throw it into the back corner of the room. "That was pretty scary, when you tripped and fell in the creepy crystals, Jonah. I think we better tell someone."

"No way, I don't want to get in trouble! I'm sure there won't be any lingering effects that make me report to Mr. Coe tomorrow."

Jacob and I both rolled our eyes at their cheesy acting, but it seemed like a good enough story. There was one more danger here, though. "What about the door to the tunnels? If Mr. H comes out of it, or someone goes in and bothers him..."

Pamela shrugged. "We can't do anything about about him coming out, we know what he can get through."

I didn't like it (ghouls creeping into my room to watch me sleep, nyaaaaa!), but she was right. From this side, the door to the tunnels was almost invisible, just a line in the painted wall. It might even have been painted over before we opened it this morning. I moved a stack of chairs from one desk to another, hiding it a bit better. That should be good enough unless people started taking all the furniture out to search, which they shouldn't have any reason to do. When I finished hopping across furniture, I needed (well, wanted) to lean on Pamela for a minute, my sore foot throbbing. Stitches and bandages and painkillers weren't the same as being all better!

"Now what?" asked Jacob. "We can't do anything until Alice sends someone to find this crap tomorrow."

“Well, Nef can’t bring Kiri *here*—”

“Nyaaa! Pamela!”

“—so let’s show her the other good places.”

“I don’t have anyone to bring anywhere! Don’t you ever think about anything else?!” I seemed to spend at least 50% of the time I was around Pamela blushing.

“I’m just being helpful to the new student,” she said innocently. Both Jonah and Jacob were laughing at me, and it wasn’t even my fault! “But if you want to go back and do more homework, that’s fine.”

I actually didn’t have any more homework. It was only the 1st week of school. “OK, show me the campus. But the parts that are actually interesting!”

“It’s a school,” said Jacob. “Nothing here is interesting.”

That wasn’t true, or at least even if the campus wasn’t interesting, it was pretty. The buildings were new on the inside but old-fashioned on the outside, I guess Ms. Fisher and Ms. Velazquez had taken over an existing school instead of building one from scratch. There were plenty of places behind bushes and trees where someone (OK, or a couple, shut up Pamela!) could go to be alone, although pretty soon you’d need a coat to hang out in any of them. Pamela showed us one spot where you could climb over the brick wall surrounding campus without being in view of any of the security cameras, for people who had to worry about that sort of thing. That would be useful when I had to flee the wrath of Ironstar and X-Wave, I guess.

Seeing new places that weren’t creepy or toxic or ghoulish or full of dead bodies was nice. I was starting to wish I had brought a jacket, though. So many trees and tall buildings meant everything was in shade as the sun went down, and even at the very beginning of

September, that was cold in Ohio. Jonah was getting cold too, from the way he stuffed his hands in his pockets, since his sweatshirt was somewhere in the furniture storeroom, covered in poisonous crystals. (Pamela offered to cuddle up and keep him warm, but Jacob and I both rolled our eyes so loud they could hear it.) My foot was hurting too, so I was going to suggest going back to the hall to see if there was any hot chocolate after Pamela showed us the cool little courtyard behind the music building.

It was full of geologists pounding metal rods into the lawn and attaching machinery to them. Well, geology grad students, I guess the real geologist was Dr. Thomas, who was supervising from his seat on the windowsill. He stood up and turned toward us when we came around the corner, smiling politely. I'd only overheard his name, not been introduced, so I didn't wave, but I smiled back. He was looking at Pamela, though. Mostly I smelled sweaty grad students, but I thought Pamela's ears were back.

A dark-skinned guy, who looked much more like a Carlos than Dr. Thomas did, came over to shoo us away, but Dr. Thomas cut him off and sent him back to work. "Pardon me, but is your name Rajapaksa?" He was all smiles for Pamela, but not in the way you'd expect a grown man to be creepy to a teenaged girl. It was a different creepiness.

"Have we met?" Pamela countered, a little suspiciously.

"No, but I think I'm a friend of your father's." Smile, smile.

"Ah. Yes, I'm Priya Rajapaksa. Nice to meet you." She smelled more on edge, but held out a hand for him to shake.

"Charmed." He smelled smug, like he was putting one over on Pamela or her family.

"I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to leave, though. We're working here."

Pamela looked over the group and their equipment, unimpressed. “Yes, I see. Well, good luck.”

I would have been happy to stay to the side and watch, since the buff blonde girl was there, but Pamela led us away. Once we were back around the corner, she let out a sigh. “We better head back. I need to email my parents.”

Jonah said, “I’m guessing he’s not actually a friend of your dad’s.”

“No, it’s a code phrase, kind of. Like ‘friend of Dorothy’.” Jonah and Jacob both looked blank. I was surprised someone as straight as Pamela, living in Ohio, knew that phrase, but I guess anyone could have older relatives with interesting stories. “Never mind.”

“What do you do when you meet someone who actually does know your dad?”

Pamela laughed. “It’s usually pretty clear how they mean it. You notice he didn’t say where he knows my dad from, or anything like that.”

“So what’s it code for?” Jacob wanted to know. “Is he a handmaiden of Hades too? What’s a guy handmaiden called?”

“Valet?” I guessed. “I mean, it’s just a personal servant, right?”

Jacob look confused. “I thought valets parked cars!”

Pamela laughed again. “In America, where we don’t have a tradition of servants. It used to mean like a Jeeves.”

Jonah leaned down to me and whispered, “She didn’t answer the question, did she?”

It wouldn’t have been so easy to dodge if Jacob hadn’t given her another question, but I didn’t want to call someone’s brother an idiot to his face. “Family secrets, I guess. He didn’t use ominous codes with the rest of us.”

“I really want to know these secrets of hers, but I can’t complain about keeping them, even if she knows about Jacob.” He looked down at me, probably remembering that I knew about Jacob too. But he knew my secret, so it was all fair. “Ugh. Why does everything have to be so complicated?”

“I don’t know, but I wish it would stop!” It was cool knowing other people’s secrets, but they kept finding out mine!

As we entered the girl’s residence hall, Jacob said, “I wonder where Am—” I clapped my hand over his mouth, and then Jonah did just a second later. We weren’t trying to clobber him, but together we knocked him on his butt. “Ow! What the—?” He cursed at us.

Jonah loomed over him. “Jacob, don’t you ever think before you open your yap?”

“What?! I was just—”

Mrs. Dietrich stomped up. “Jacob Armstrong, are you looking to get your mouth washed out with soap?”

“Ack! No ma’am!”

She glared at Jonah and me too. “What was he saying that was so bad you had to hit him?”

“I didn’t mean to hit him, but he was about to ou- I mean, blabber someone’s secrets!”

“Hmph. You’re as bad as your mother.” She didn’t give us any more trouble, though, since no one was really hurt even though Jacob was rubbing his mouth and sulking. Jonah gave him a hand up.

Girls gave us funny looks as we led boys through the halls, but except for one girl in a towel who squeaked and hid around the corner, they didn’t make a big deal about it (except for

checking out Jonah). Were they used to Pamela taking boys to her room? Did they figure I would be taking boys to my room because I'm Changed? Did boys come to visit all the time? Maybe Jonah visited the girls' hall all the time, because he was totally cool, waving to girls he knew and not making goggly eyes every which way like Jacob. A lot of the girls preened, or at least checked Jonah out (even towel-girl peeked back around the corner to look at his tight jeans from behind), and he preened a little too. I guess they'd be happy if he did come visit all the time!

In the middle of Pamela's floor, there was a lounge where the corridors met, with some big soft red couches and a medium-sized TV. The TV was showing the news, which seemed weird, but then I saw a bunch of girls taking notes, probably for a current events assignment. On screen, the Red Knight, looking like a robot in his ceramic armor, was beating the snot out of a bunch of guys in black suits and yellow scarves who only outnumbered him 10-1. The camera panned up as he went over the top of a truck, and behind him was a skyscraper with a slanty, diamond-shaped top. He was in Chicago? The blurb at the bottom of the screen said so, and said Apiary had been spotted there too.

There were a bunch more girls lying on the couches in all kinds of positions, painting each others' nails or doing stuff on their phones or chatting, but they straightened up as soon as they realized a boy was looking. "Gak, my hair!" said one, fussing with long straight black hair that looked perfectly nice. "Jeez, Pamela, give us some warning before you bring a boy in!" said another as she tugged her skirt down.

"What? Pen's a boy!" Pamela pointed to where Lucy K was sitting next to the strawberry-blond boy she'd been with at dinner. He wasn't sitting in her lap, but they were snuggled up together pretty cozily, enough that I could smell how they were aware of each other.

More interestingly, I could see now that his curls were actually little downy feathers! He looked normal otherwise, although cuter than most boys, round-faced and rosy-cheeked. He didn't make me want to kiss him (hypothetically!) but he was cuddly. Anyway, he was definitely a boy, but not like Jonah.

“Pamela, don't get your weird cooties on Pen!” ordered Lucy K, throwing her arms around her boy. His cheeks turned even rosier, but he grinned. “Hey, Pamela, Jonah.”

“Pen's old enough to decide what kind of cooties he wants,” Pamela said primly.

“I'm good with Lucy cooties, thanks!” Lucy turned pink too as some of the other girls wolf-whistled.

Not all the girls had straightened up. There was a dark brown digitigrade foot (darker than me or Pamela, almost as dark as Jonah) with hot pink claw sheaths sticking up over the back of the couch on the end, and moving to get a better look at Pen and his feathers let me see the pile of catgirls on the couch. Well, 3 catgirls and 1 human. The willowy one in the middle, with her long hair and ears and tail bleached almost white except for the roots and the pink lynxish tufts on her ears, was Sekhmet Landry, one of Alice's cheerleaders, who Pamela had pointed out as the biggest gossip in school (I guess it went with the name Sekhmet, since Sekhmet Garcia had been the biggest gossip at my old school). The curly-haired one with her feet up and her head in Sekhmet's lap to listen to her story about a total perv named Jake was Justice Williams, and she looked like Destiny, who I'd seen in the office, because they were $\frac{3}{4}$ -sisters (same dad, their mothers were sisters, and they were same age because their dad was a skank), and the youngest one, who had pale skin as flawless as Kiri's and more curly green hair than the rest of her put together, was Diana Ng. There were only about a dozen changed in the whole school, counting

me and Alice and Alice's little sister, so it wasn't hard to recognize them all. I didn't know the big blonde girl between Diana and Sekhmet, but I couldn't remember the names of all the humans even if Pamela had pointed her out! They looked happy cuddled up there, just like me and my friends back in San Diego, before everything was terrible and no one would talk to me.

#

Just seeing the 4 of them made me feel like I had right after Mason, like I was shrunken in from the space I normally filled, a gap between me and everything I would be touching, or that would be touching me. The therapist called it dissociation and said it was a perfectly normal reaction to having murdered someone (not in those words), but it didn't feel normal. It felt queasy, like I might float away or fall off the floor. I could have used a hug, but Pamela and the boys were down at the end of the hall, they'd walked off and left me. I couldn't blame them, Jonah at least knew what I'd done, and Pamela had probably guessed. None of the girls in the lounge were paying attention to me either, although I didn't know how they could tell not to. It wasn't worse than I deserved, anyway.

Nowhere to go, and no one to go there with, so I watched the TV. A reporter with the most boring suit and haircut I'd ever seen was talking about a new vigilante in Rhodes. She cut to blurry phone-camera video of a lean figure in tight-fitting black, grey, and russet, doing a sweeping low kick to take down someone coming out of an alley. Or *something*, a spindly shape with a head like a hammer, even more of a freak than me. Then he threw something from his utility belt that exploded as soon as it left his hand, into separate bits each trailing lavender smoke.

That got the attention of most of the girls, and I could smell they thought he was cool even before they started going “ooh” and “oh wow”. Then the picture changed to a closeup of his face, or rather of dark eyes with a lot of eye makeup over a grey bandit-style bandana, and they thought he was dreamy. The reporter called him the Fabulous Raccoon, which fit his eyes, at least. From the skin tone and black hair and the shape of his nose under the bandana, I guessed he was Latino and high-school-aged, but it was only a guess.

“How do *I* get mugged by a supervillain?” asked Sekhmet.

One of the girls who had been taking notes snorted. “Come on, look at that makeup. He’s totally gay.”

“I’ll take him,” said Diana. “I don’t want to date him, I just want makeup tips!”

All the girls laughed together like friends. Like I used to have, before I ruined everything by thinking a boy was cute and wanting to kiss him. (OK, and then by murdering someone.)

The boring reporter came back and started talking about how new heroes were stepping up to protect Rhodes while the League were gallivanting (that’s really the word she used!) around Chicago. It must be the local station, which I knew had a grudge against the League since forever.

I felt like nothing was touching me, but that didn’t help when someone slammed right into me from behind! “Nyaaaa—” I’d been standing mostly on one foot, so I had to stick out the other one to keep my balance, and slammed my bad foot right into the corner of someone’s heavy textbook. “—ow!!” I had to sit down on the arm of the couch next to Diana to keep from falling over, which was embarrassing since I’m supposed to have super-agility.

“Holy crap, Nelson, don’t pop up in front of people like that!” It was Charlotte Cooke,

but even though she hated me, she looked down. “Hey, is your foot OK?”

“Ow, ow, ow! No, it’s not!”

“What happened?” Diana asked, eyes even bigger than usual.

“I, um, kind of got shot,” I admitted. So what if it made them think I’m a loser?

Somehow, it didn’t. Maybe Pamela’s reputation, whatever it was, had rubbed off on me.

“Were you doing something heroic?” I thought Diana’s eyes were going to pop right out of her head! But other than that, I wished more girls looked at me like that!

“No, we just got mugged.” I had to tell them the whole (embarrassing, fake) story, but they were hanging on my every word, which felt pretty good. I wished I could smell better, so I could tell if they were impressed by me or just by the story (I might have changed it a little so I looked braver), right up until I had a sneezing fit and sprayed all the mucus filling my entire head into a handful of tissues. Then I could smell the admiration just fine as it was replaced by surprise and nervousness. (The edginess around Charlotte stayed about the same.)

Justice wrapped her arms around Diana, pulling her away from me and the bright blue goo (the glow wasn’t visible in the lights, but it was still pretty weird). “Nefertari, what is that coming out of your nose?”

“I don’t know, yet. Still waiting for the doctor to run tests. No one said I needed to worry about it, though!” I was pretty sure Epsilon would have told me if I needed to be in quarantine, even if she didn’t have an MD!

“Uh huh.” Even the human girls were backing away from me, because that’s all it took to become unpopular. At least they weren’t ignoring me again.

Actually, not all of them were disgusted and fearful, at least not entirely. Charlotte had a

mix of desire, nerves, and impatience that I couldn't translate as anything except Up To Something. I couldn't tell what, though. Maybe she was scheming to murder me to keep me away from Jonah, now that I seemed vulnerable? She didn't smell like violence, though, and I didn't think she was the kind of person who could be violent without feeling anything.

Since Charlotte and I were in the same place, *of course* Jonah had to show up and talk to me instead of her. "Hey, Nef, did you find what you were looking for?"

I had no idea what he was talking about, but that didn't matter, Charlotte hated me with the burning fire of a thousand suns. She was all smiles when she said, "Hi, Jonah!", though.

"Hey, Lottie." He wasn't not glad to see her, although he was a little uncomfortable, because even though he's cool, she's trans. I wouldn't have been able to smell it if I hadn't just blasted my nose clear, so that was pretty good for someone raised in Ohio. Better than most of the girls, anyway. "Did you need something, earlier?"

"I just wanted to go over the History assignment, if you have a minute." She edged in front of me, close to Jonah, and smiled up at him. I'd been thinking of her as tall, but next to Jonah, I could see that she wasn't really, it was just that she stood up so straight. That made sense, as a trans teenager she'd be on medications (hormones? antihormones?) to stop puberty from making her body even more wrong, so no growth spurt. And, no creepy boy smell from being so close to her crush, so I could wish her luck.

Jonah smiled back. "Not right now, but in like... ½ an hour?" That made her happy and nervous, but some of the girls were disgusted and mad that whatever they thought of Charlotte as was hitting on a boy. Ugh, humans! At least the other catgirls, and the girl sitting with them, just thought it was cute.

“OK, I’ll be in my room!” Even without being able to smell emotions, she must have known that people were being terrible, because she skedaddled.

The human girls weren’t much happier that a catgirl was making off with their Jonah. I was glad to leave them behind.

Like almost everyone (who roomed with Charlotte?), Pamela had a roommate, an East Asian girl with short pink-streaked hair and unfortunate acne, who was happily lying on her bed with earbuds in (classical music!) and a laptop in front of her, completely ignoring everyone else in the room. It was probably self-defense against getting teased by Pamela! Pamela and Jacob were at the desk on her side of the room, hunched over her laptop and a tablet, whispering together. “Hey, come look at this,” Pamela said. “We have to have the door open when boys are in here,” she added when I started to close it. That would make planning harder!

She had a bunch of windows open, and I saw one was the Wikipedia page for “Lady Blaze (Marisa Griswold)” (which Pamela had remembered even though I hadn’t, and I was the one who found the bodies, so good going, Nef!) but the rest looked like newspaper archives. The front one was about a biker girl who had killed a giant by luring it into a ruined gas station and blowing it up. That was even more awesome than Daddy Geoff’s grandma killing a Nazi with her stockings! The article was from 1966, right after the Gravekeepers had turned western Columbus into a cursed lake, before the city was rebuilt as Rhodes. There were even black and white pictures of the giant (a gorilla-like shape, tall as 2-story buildings, with a horribly baby-like face) chasing the motorcycle as it went around a corner almost lying down, and the giant stumbling around on fire, missing one arm. That was way before phone cameras, had Biker Girl brought her own photographer?! Jonah and I leaned over Pamela’s shoulders to read the article

(which she liked at least half of). Biker Girl was named Donna Nichols! It was a common name, but maybe she was related to Kiri? There wasn't a picture of her without her leathers and helmet, so I couldn't tell if they looked alike.

“That’s awesome,” Jonah said, “But what does it have to do with us?”

“I don’t know, but it happened right around here, so that’s cool.” She lowered her voice. “We’ve been looking for anything that might explain why Mr. H is here, or why it’s on his favorite locations. This is the best we have so far.”

I thought about that. “You think there’s something around here the ghouls wanted to protect, even after getting their cities zapped from space? And it’s still here 50 years later?”

Pamela made a face. “I don’t *think* it, but none of my other ideas have any evidence at all. This wouldn’t, except that the city finally got around to digitizing all these old newspapers and making them available through the library.”

Jonah didn’t look happy either. “It’s pretty weak.”

“I *know*! But at least it’s consistent with those bozos being behind the music building.”

“Are you ever going to tell us who they are?” asked Jacob.

“Is it ever going to be safe to tell you something private?” That was the meanest I’d seen Pamela be to Jacob this whole time! But this was the worst mood I’d ever smelled her in. Whoever those bozos were, she really didn’t like them. Enemies of the handmaidens of Hades, I guessed, but not ones she could fight.

Jacob smelled really hurt. “You don’t trust me?!”

“All I’m saying is, you make a lot of mistakes with secrets that aren’t yours.”

Jonah winced, but he couldn’t say Pamela was wrong. Jacob looked hopefully at me, but

he'd almost outed Amir and Kyle in the middle of Ohio. "Fine, then! I'll get out of your way so you can do the important stuff!" He stormed out of the room before we could see him cry, but I could smell his tears. Oh, Bast. Now I felt like a bully, but outing people is seriously not cool!

"I better go calm him down," said Jonah.

"Don't forget Charlotte," I called after him, but I couldn't tell if he heard.

Pamela was suspicious. "What about Charlotte?"

"He promised to help her with History homework in half an hour. I hope he doesn't forget."

"Finally."

"Really? You're not jealous?" I looked over at her roommate, who was still ignoring us completely.

She let out a sigh. "I am, but I just think Jonah's hot. She— close the door, will you? We don't have any boys now. Thanks. Charlotte has a huge crush on Jonah, and everything's stacked against her already for being trans. If she got up the courage to ask him to spend time with her, good for her." She sighed again. "I should go apologize to Jacob. He can actually keep secrets, mostly. Can you go through these tabs and see if any of them seem important?"

"What's important?"

"I don't know, so you have as good a chance of spotting it as anyone else." She smiled, but she wasn't happy. I hugged her around the shoulders, and she folded her arms over mine for a moment before she got up. "Don't worry, we'll figure it out."

I sure hoped so! I leaned over the desk, not bothering to sit down, and started looking at the old newspaper articles she'd dug up. One of the tabs was a map of what had been here before

the Gravekeeper bombardment, with a pin at the longitude and latitude of Peasley, only back then it was in the middle of a suburb. I spent a minute looking for street view before smacking my head. Of course there hadn't been anything like that 50 years ago! I just had to guess by the shape of the streets that it had been houses.

My nose was filling up again, but in the closed room, I couldn't miss the smell of a girl who thought someone was pretty. There weren't any boys around, so instead of keeping my tail down flat against my legs I had been letting it swish (which naturally made my butt move, since that's where the muscles are). I glanced back and sure enough, Pamela's roommate (Becky? Becca?) was eyeing me sideways while pretending to look at her laptop. She was dressed in a sweatshirt and baggy shorts, but she was kicking her feet, and I could see the muscles in her calves. Soccer, maybe?

Did Pamela do this on purpose?! She'd never said her roommate liked girls! But Soccer Girl was careful enough that someone without a good nose might think she was just looking at me because I was a stranger in her room. Which she was, kind of, but she still hadn't noticed that my head had turned, because she was too busy staring at my butt! It was a little embarrassing, but it wasn't like I wasn't dressed, or she was drooling, or anything. I just thought she had weird taste in butts.

OK, it was more than a little embarrassing! I tried keeping my tail down and still, but then she smelled disappointed. Nyaaa! I looked back again, but this time she caught me looking and now she was embarrassed. What was I doing, making her feel bad about checking out girls when I did it all the time? Feeling kind of terrible, I turned back to Pamela's laptop, and then I realized, this girl saw Pamela changing every day, and she still wanted to look at me! Now I was

thinking about Pamela naked! Maybe next time I got kidnapped and stripped by a supervillain (which should be never!), it could be with Soccer Girl instead? No, I couldn't wish that on anyone. Bad catgirl! This wasn't getting any mysteries solved! I made myself pay attention to the computer and let my tail do whatever it wanted.

I went through a few tabs like Pamela asked, and the 1st one was about a haunted house in this area, which looked like it could be good but ended up not telling me anything except that some workers saw something glowing and scary one night. I put it aside for Pamela to look at, but the next was about a supervillain and her gang who supposedly had a hideout somewhere around here, again with no details or anything to show it was even *maybe* true. I skimmed some more, but they were all like that: something fishy or spooky, and no followup. I wouldn't turn in papers this useless, and I was in 8th grade!

I knew I should go through them carefully, in case one of the reporters slipped up and wrote something useful, but ugh. I yawned just thinking about it. There were other things I could research, things I probably should have been researching this afternoon instead of doing homework like normal! But I'd liked doing normal stuff, even if I didn't like it.

Or maybe Pamela already researched them while I was feeling sorry for myself in the TV room, and didn't say anything because she didn't find anything. "William Hodgett" is a common name, and it didn't help that it could be spelled "Hodget" or "Hodgetts" or Bast only knows what. There were dozens or hundreds in the US, and probably more in Canada, Australia, and the UK (his creepy ghoulish voice hid any accent he had), and I didn't even know what century to look in! Adding obvious keywords like "ghoul", "pervert", and "gross" didn't help.

"Carlos Thomas" is a much less common name. There were more than I expected, but

adding in the doctorate and the city narrowed it down to 1, an Earth Sciences professor at Ohio State. There was even a picture of him, so I could be sure it was the right one, and of his team (the girl with buff arms was Cambria Lewis, the guy who looked like a Carlos was C.R. Diaz, so maybe he actually was Carlos). His specialty was geophysics, and I didn't understand any of the projects his lab was supposed to be working on. They didn't sound like they involved earthquakes, but I'd need Pamela or Jonah to look at them. Maybe earthquakes are so basic they just send anyone? None of the pictures looked like the kit they were installing behind the music building, but again, I had no clue. Daddy Howard said you always should follow the money, but searching for that got me a bunch of government agencies that looked legit and a few foundations that looked charitable. Any of them could have been fronts for supervillains and I wouldn't know any better.

Pamela still wasn't back, so I sat down in Pamela's fancy desk chair and tried to ignore Soccer Girl's disappointment (was my butt really that cute?) while I searched on "handmaiden of Hades". Megaera, from Greek myth, was called that, and there were a couple of links to a fanfiction piece about Persephone that was rated 18+, but that was about it. I thought about leaving a tab open to the fanfiction, but Pamela wouldn't be embarrassed and would probably like it! What about just "Hades"? Greek god, same as the Roman Pluto, underworld, wealth, kidnapped Persephone so we have winter, 3-headed guard dog, nothing I didn't already know. Underworld and the dead sounded more like the ghouls than Pamela, and I didn't see how winter came into it (except that Ohio has winter). I tried combining the searches, but that didn't find anything at all. Nyaaaa!

Out of ideas, I looked up at Pamela's shelf of figurines above the desk. The centerpiece

was Earth Serpent and Sky Phoenix: 2 old Asian ladies, 1 half-buried in shiny black stone with glowing red cracks, reaching up toward the other, who was suspended above her upside-down (it wasn't real mad science because you could buy it in a store, but there wasn't any difference to someone like me!), surrounded by glowing blue magic circles at all angles, reaching down. If I could get them to help, everything would be great! They could trash entire alien invasions, when they could be bothered to do anything except plot against each other. Which was almost never, and no one knew how to contact them anyway, not even Mom. On one side of them was Doktor Vengeance, black powered armor marked with a red square and a gold V splashed across it. Probably from the 80s based on the design, which meant the pretty blue-and-white leg disappearing into the glowing purple portal was Pentatonic, who had never been seen again. My mom might have Dok V's contact info, but she was anti-Gravekeeper, which was close enough to pro-ghoul that I wouldn't count on her against William. On the other side, Brazen Hussy in her armor based on the electromechanical braineaters that had killed everyone who went to the Antarctic monolith to be exalted by the Gravekeepers, obviously before she'd transferred her mind into a giant robot monster and gotten killed by the NYC Guardians. The Shub-Niggurath Kid, Hyaenadonna, Cygnafyre, Pard, Mina Tauros... except for the Red Knight, who she probably had because he was local, they were all villains. (OK, the new one she bought on Saturday was Fulgurite, but that was because she was Pamela. Even though he disappeared 5 years ago, I knew girls who still had posters of him in their bedrooms.) Well, villains were cooler, even though she didn't have Slink and did have Mina Tauros.

Where was Pamela, anyway? I'd been using her computer for more than ½ an hour! How long could it take to tell Jacob to stop whining? Maybe she had to apologize to Jonah for being

mean to his brother and one thing lead to another? Being OK with Jonah going out with Charlotte someday wasn't the same as not tackling Jonah right now!

Soccer Girl smelled even more shy and embarrassed before I heard the music get louder as she took her earbuds out. "Do you know when Pamela is coming back?" She had a tiny bit of an accent, maybe British, and it made her low voice cuter than I'd imagined. She didn't just have a low voice, she was pretty mature (and I don't just mean curves, although she had them) and I would have taken her for a high-schooler if she wasn't Pamela's roommate. Well, like the anime said, this was the part of life where some girls leapt ahead on the stairway to adulthood and some girls were me. Her face wasn't pretty, but she looked like she smiled a lot, when she wasn't being embarrassed about having to talk to someone whose butt she'd been looking at.

I was embarrassed too, because it was my butt, but I was too sleepy to get worked up about it. "I thought she'd be back by now, she just went to talk to Jacob."

"That's Jonah's little brother?"

Of course she knew Jonah. Poor Charlotte, she had to like the boy every girl in school noticed! "Yeah. He was probably going back to his room, but it's not *that* far." And she wouldn't go into the boy's hall, would she? Not that she seemed to care about what was Not Done. Wow, my mind was wandering now that I didn't have a web page to focus on! "Do you have her new number?" She had a new phone, I'd seen it. Wait, did she have the same number? Wouldn't that need the same card? But she was a tech genius.

"She has a new phone? Hey, are you OK?"

I couldn't keep from yawning so wide I thought my face was going to split in two. I tried to cover it with my hands so my fangs wouldn't scare her away, but not very well. "Nyaaa! I just

didn't get any sleep last night.”

“I know! That earthquake was so scary!” She yawned too, which made me yawn again. Didn't she know about the mugging? Didn't Pamela tell her roommate anything? Maybe she didn't want to hear it, which is why she had the earbuds in and ignored us. I liked Pamela a lot, but I could see how someone might not, if they didn't want their life full of crazy stuff like minotaurs who played Fiend Forge and threw people naked into labyrinths! Maybe that was a bad example, did anyone like Mina Tauros? Except my mom, and that was a different kind of like!

Someone stopped outside the door, but didn't knock. That didn't seem good, although it took a minute to realize I should let Soccer Girl know. She caught on as soon as I waved toward the door, and hopped up to her feet in almost one motion. Maybe she was actually Gymnastics Girl?

Charlotte Cooke jumped about a foot in the air when the door suddenly opened. “Yeek! Betsy!” She looked into the room, saw me, and scowled, but put a smile back on. “Have you seen Jonah, Jonah Armstrong? He was hanging out with Pamela earlier.”

“Jacob ran — I mean limped — off about ½ an hour ago, and Jonah and Pamela ran after him,” Betsy said. She didn't seem very friendly to Charlotte, but she didn't have the transphobic disgust that some of the girls in the lounge had. Maybe she disliked Charlotte just for her personality, I couldn't blame her. But I had to feel bad for Charlotte, because I could smell her heart getting crushed, even though she kept her smile.

“Oh... Well, if he comes back, can you remind him about the History homework? Thanks.” She walked off without much spring in her step, and Betsy shut the door behind her.

“She really doesn’t like you, does she?”

I sighed. “She thinks I’m trying to steal Jonah from her.”

Betsy raised both eyebrows (yay! Another one!). “You aren’t?”

“No! I mean, he’s OK, for a boy, but I don’t want a boy!”

I could smell her reaction to that, and it wasn’t disgusted at all. There was a lot of embarrassment too, though, like she didn’t want to admit it to herself. It made her seem even cuter, and I couldn’t help looking down from her blushing face. That sweatshirt wasn’t all that baggy— no, bad catgirl! Very bad!

I was saved from saying something stupid in front of yet another pretty girl by a phone playing wooden percussion noises. The way I looked at her like it was her phone was pretty stupid though, because she was looking at me the same way, and she was right, it was the flip phone Pamela gave me earlier, still with the ringtone from when dinosaurs roamed the Earth!

The phone was so fat I hadn’t been carrying it in my pocket, so I had to find my purse under the desk and rummage through it (at least it wasn’t Pamela’s enormous sack of strange things!) to shut it up. I had it almost to my cheek and was starting to wonder who had the number, when I heard someone already talking. A deep voice, my first thought was Mina Tauros, but it sounded more familiar.

“Is it—” Betsy started to ask, but I put my finger to her lips (soft, and a little sticky from lip balm). Then I realized I could have put my finger to my own lips, but there was no time to be embarrassed.

#

“—advances the cause of your alien masters,” Dr. Thomas was saying. His voice was muffled, I don’t think a human could have made it out even with the phone to their ear. Was the other phone in someone’s pocket? “Perhaps you’ll be less prideful if it’s your little boyfriend’s welfare at stake. Ms. Lewis?” There was a meaty crunch that made me wince, and a cry through gritted teeth. Was that Jonah?! I managed to not hiss, but Betsy backed away from my fangs anyway. Just because he’s a boy didn’t mean it was OK to break him! I had to force my ears to stand up so I could hear.

I didn’t hear the next part anyway, I was too busy trying to figure out how to mute the ancient phone before Betsy said something. (It was the button below the tiny non-touch screen, labelled MUTE.) Betsy stayed quiet, though, so I could hear Pamela. “—crazy, you know that, right? Ironstar and X-Wave are going to be here any moment, and they've dealt with cultists much worse than you.”

“I don’t believe they will, actually. You may have noticed that adult supervision has been lacking today?”

Pamela sounded worried. “What did you do?”

“I didn't need to do anything, merely remain alert for opportunities.” His voice hardened. “Now. After you.”

Pamela said bravely, “OK, but going into the labyrinth isn’t going to end well for you,” but I didn’t need the clue. There was only one place around here that a cultist would want Pamela to lead them.

“Nefertari, right? Is everything OK?”

I looked up from buckling on my shoes. “No. Tell Mrs. Dietrich she needs to get Ms.

Fisher and Ms. Velazquez *right now*, there are cultists—” Betsy backed away further, smelling more freaked out than she ever had interested. She was a normal, sensible, person, so I couldn’t rely on her her. I grabbed Pamela’s fancy fountain pen and a notepad and scribbled out a note.

#

Ms. Fisher, Ms. Velazquez,

Cultists trying to get into Mina Tauros’ maze, ghouls tunnels behind furniture store. C

have Pamela R + Jonah A. 745PM

Nefertari Nelson

#

I shoved the note at Betsy, who was staying out of reach of the crazy catgirl. “Get this to Mrs. Dietrich right now. I signed it, anything bad is on me, just *go!*” She reached out for the note, but didn’t move her feet. “*Please!*” That did it, she took off out the door, moving fast for a human on those strong legs. (She might not believe me, but she’d show the note to Mrs. Dietrich to prove I’d gone crazy, and Mrs. Dietrich would know better than to take any chances.) I was right after her, but I went left instead of right, toward the emergency exit at the end of the hall.

My foot had gotten a ½ hour rest, but I don’t think I’d been nice enough to it the rest of the day, because it only let me get to the bottom of the stairs before I had to limp. Nyaaaa! I didn’t have time for this! But I wouldn’t be any help to Pamela and Jonah if I got there and I couldn’t stand up. I stopped long enough to take a few more ibuprofen, probably too many for today, and took off again, ignoring the ALARM WILL SOUND sign on the door.

Charlotte Cooke was standing right outside the door, like she was waiting for me to crash into her again! I didn’t, just barely, by grabbing onto the doorframe, but she yelled at me anyway.

“What the hell, Nelson? Don’t you do anything except jump out at people?!”

“I’m going to help Jonah,” I said, thinking that would get her to get out of the way, but it did exactly the opposite.

“Jonah’s in trouble?! What’s wrong? *Where?*” She shoved herself into the doorway to try to stop me from getting away before I answered her.

“No, Charlotte! Go get—” Who could I send her to get? More couldn’t hurt. “—Mrs. Dietrich to get X-Wave and Ironstar!”

She got her phone out (it was pink, because she had to be girlier than other girls) and dialed a number. “Where do I tell her to send them?”

Nyaaa! I couldn’t tell her without telling her! “Furniture storeroom,” I said, and ducked under her arm. I hoped she’d wait for heroes instead of trying to keep up with me.

With my bad foot, I couldn’t move as fast as I wanted to, but I heard talking from behind me and not running, for a little while, but she caught up before I made it to the corner of the science building. I was even slower than I thought, nyaaaa!

She was panting, but not enough that she couldn’t ask, “What do you think you can—” I clapped my hand over her mouth and dragged her behind a tall bush as 2 guys I recognized from the gang behind the music building came around the far end of the building. She made an outraged sound and tried to bite my hand, which didn’t do much, but then she stomped on my bad foot with her hard heel, which hurt like crazy! I almost bit my tongue trying to not yell, and I did lose my balance, but there was a wall right there to lean on. Charlotte struggled, but I held on while the guys walked right where we had been about to run. One was complaining (with a lot of cussing) about having to stay and mind the store, the other was more of a career cultist, OK with

not being picked for the risky project (not in those words, and they didn't say anything about being cultists, they could have been any 2 grad students).

When I couldn't hear them very well, I let go of Charlotte, who shoved me hard. I let myself sit down on the grass to hug my poor foot. "What is *wrong* with you, Nelson?! You can't just grab people and shove them around just because you have superpowers! It's people like you that make Reverend Godawful so popular!"

I didn't recognize the name, but I could guess they were the black equivalent of Earth Communion. But that wasn't the point! "Those guys were with the gang that kidnapped Jonah and Pamela! But if you want to go ask them to give them back, they'll probably be behind the music building."

"So? It's not like they know *us*. We could have walked right past them instead of you being a buttface."

Crap, she was right! Nyaaa! "Sorry," I muttered. I could feel myself blushing, or maybe that was just from the pain in my foot. Ow, ow, ow! But there was no time for whimpering, the phone had gone quiet, because Pamela was already underground! I jumped back up. "Stay here and let X-Wave and Ironstar know about the guys behind the music building, OK?"

"Because I don't have powers, so I can't do anything to help Jonah?" She swore at me. "I'm going to help Jonah, and you can't stop me."

Oh, Bast, was she trying to get herself killed? I didn't like getting blown up by a mine, but she'd *die*! And that was better than what William would do to her! "Charlotte, no! It's too dangerous! I'm just going so I can help lead heroes to them."

I was so surprised when she took a small taser out of her purse and aimed at me that she

probably could have shot me. “Stop arguing and start helping Jonah! You know where they’re going, lead the way!” When I stared at the yellow plastic weapon instead of going anywhere, she added, “I’ve lived in Rhodes my whole life, as a trans black girl. I know how to take care of myself.”

“OK, OK!” I had no idea what a taser would do to a ghoul, or a minotaur, but it would probably work just fine on a cultist, so she was doing better than me, at least that way.

We weren’t the only students headed for the furniture storage. Ten or a dozen were wandering toward it, not sneaking around the edges of the lawns like us or marching like Charlotte wanted to, but like they didn’t have anywhere much to go, or didn’t know where they were going. There was Lucy W and some of the cheerleaders, strolling along but not chattering, and from the same direction, but not trying to catch up or call to them, a couple of athletes. The one nearest us, a Latino boy who looked like he’d had to skip some grades to make it to 6th, smelled dazed, but not hurt or unhappy, and even waved at Charlotte.

She waved back, but when we passed him, whispered to me, “This is weird. They all look like they’re high, but I know Benny doesn’t do that.” They didn’t smell high, or drunk, or sick, or anything that I could tell, but with my nose stuffed up, I couldn’t be sure!

“I told you this wasn’t the sort of thing you wanted to get mixed up in. Can you stay here and keep these people from getting hurt? Get some help for them?” I didn’t know what kind of help they needed, but they definitely needed it!

“Will it help Jonah?”

I said, “Yes!” immediately, but she didn’t believe me, even though it was true! If whatever heroes came didn’t have to waste time rounding up confused middle-schoolers, they

could get to Jonah faster! Nyaaa!

We weren't wandering in a daze, so we got to the door first, but it was already unlocked. I couldn't remember if we'd locked it after pretending to discover the crystals, maybe because I could smell that Alice had been here (her friends too, but it was the scent of persimmon and aloofness that made my face warm). I made sure to lock it now, though!

Going into a building that was supposed to be locked didn't bother Charlotte, but she carried a taser at school! The glowing crystals on the floor of the furniture room did stop her, though.

"Really, Charlotte. Go back," I urged her as she stared at them. "This is serious stuff. Get adults to help."

She glared at me, face more poisonous than the crystals. "*You're going!*"

I flicked my ears at her until she looked at them. "This stuff doesn't bother me as much as it does you. And it only gets worse from here."

"How did you get mixed up in this? You're all—" she waved at me from ears to digitigrade feet "but you're an 8th-grader too!"

I thought about everything that had happened over the past weekend, and how many secrets were involved, and all I could say was, "Bad luck. Terrible luck. *Appalling* luck."

"Oh." I was depressed enough about it that she was starting to take it seriously, but she put one hand in her purse (where the taser was) and lifted her chin. "Well, Jonah is having bad luck too, so I'm going to help him. It's what friends do."

"I know you want to help, but you're just going to—" Someone opened the door. Didn't I lock it?! I put my finger to my own lips, and Charlotte shut up instantly. Two people, walking

slowly down the hall. I could only smell one of them, but it was Jacob, who could get through the door. Of course he was here to help his brother, and unlike Charlotte, he had powers and had been in the labyrinth before! I leaned my head out the door to call him over, but the words stuck in my throat.

His hair was a huge mess and he had the same spaced-out expression and walk as Charlotte's friend Benny, and behind him, just as out of it, was Alice. Worse, Benny was peeking through the door behind them!

I dashed (ow, my foot!) past Jacob and Alice, who barely seemed to notice me, and slammed the door in Benny's face and locked it again. He rattled the doorknob, and I could hear him muttering to himself outside, but he didn't seem to be able to pick the lock.

"Jonah? Alice ? What's wrong with you?" Charlotte was standing in front of them, blocking them from the patch of crystals.

"Um..." Jacob was confused. "Nothing?" Alice, just behind him, looked as cool as always, but she wasn't make any snarky comments, which was probably her way of being confused. When I came back in, she glanced at me with even less interest than usual.

"Cooke, this isn't who I expected to find you here with." She sounded almost normal, but she wasn't giving me a look or even saying it in a sly manner like she usually did to make me blush, and that was kind of scary. She edged around Charlotte one way, while Jonah went the other, and even though they were still out of it, I thought they might be trying to catch her between them and I jumped to help.

I grabbed for Alice's arm just as she turned to see what I was doing, and my hand landed right on her chest.

It's not like I don't have my own chest, even if it's not as spectacular as Alice's, and I've spend my whole life around my mom, so I shouldn't have freaked out, but this was Alice, and all I could think was "soft" and "warm" and there were only a couple of layers of thin cloth between my hand and really touching her and she wouldn't let me live this down for 100 years! I yanked my hand back like she was really hot instead of metaphorically, as hot as my face!

Charlotte, looking completely disgusted at my lameness, stepped right in front of Alice and shoved her by the shoulders. Alice should have been be able to dodge, or at least keep her balance, she had as much superagility as me, but with whatever was going on, she just looked surprised and toppled over backwards, right toward the crystals! I had to jump again to catch her before she fell, wrapping my arms around her tiny waist (her belly was flat, not squishy like mine). This time it hurt most when I put my bad foot back to take our combined weight (Alice might be slender, but she's a full-sized person). "Nyow! Charlotte!"

I'd never seen someone bite their fingertips in horror before. "Sorry! I didn't think she'd —! Sorry!"

Alice let her head lean way back, showing the lines of her throat and the soft skin under her chin, right where a claw would go in to let all her blood and life out— "Nyaaaa!" I almost dropped her, but managed to hold on even though my heart was pounding. Stupid catgirl, I wasn't going to hurt Alice!

Charlotte was back to looking disgusted. "Grow up, Nelson!" But then she heard Jacob climbing across the desks we'd put in front of the door to the tunnel. I was afraid she was going to tase him, but she climbed up after him and grabbed him by the hand. "Jacob, wait!"

"Were you going to let go, Nelson?" Alice sounded even more languid, but there was

something about her scent (besides *Alice*) that wasn't sleepy or apathetic at all. I almost let go from embarrassment, but managed not to.

“Are you going to stop acting weird?” She tried to elbow me, but I was suspicious enough to twist out of the way, and she hit my chest (ow!) instead of the pit of my stomach. I did have to let go, though. “Alice! What is *wrong* with you?”

Charlotte screamed, which made both of us look. She was trying to pull Jacob back, but his hair was crawling into her face, probably into her nose and mouth. I didn't smell blood, so he probably wasn't pulling out her eyes (ewwww!), but if he could extract bullets, he could do a lot of damage anyway. Whatever was wrong with him, it was serious if he was using his powers! I had to let go of Alice to help Charlotte, and she leapt onto the desks and went right for the door, but that would have to wait!

I didn't want to hurt Jacob, even if he was a jerk sometimes, but when I pulled him off Charlotte he just switched his hair attack to me. His hair slithering over my skin wasn't silky, it was like 1000000 stinging bugs! I had to squeeze my eyes and mouth shut, and flatten my ears, and the tiny tendrils still slid up my nose and pried at my lips. He was punching and kicking me too, but even though he was bigger than me, he only had human muscles, and I could hold him off with one hand, but my other hand wasn't enough to stop the hair: every time I grabbed a handful, it slithered right out again! I couldn't even open my mouth to yell for Charlotte to help!

Jacob went “Glack!” and his arms and legs and hair flailed once before he collapsed. I caught him before he could fall and crack his head, but while I was doing that there was a BOMF noise and the sound of a body collapsing. Then the body slid, and I dropped Jacob to try to grab Alice before she fell off the desks and got hurt. I collided with Charlotte, who was trying to do

the same thing, and Alice slipped under a desk and her head thunked on the floor. “Nyaaaa!” If Alice got brain damage, she’d never forgive me! I’d never forgive myself!

I’m strong enough to lift Alice on my own, but it took Charlotte’s help to get her back up without banging anything worse than her knees and elbows, or seeing or feeling (much) more than we should (and it was a good thing Jacob was still unconscious). I got embarrassed, but Charlotte was angry and sad, and I couldn’t blame her. Even girls who were born with the right kind of body envy Alice, so it must be terrible for Charlotte. By the time we got Alice laid out in the recovery position and her skirt back down, Jacob was starting to come around, so we used Charlotte’s mini-duct tape to tie them both up. (That was handy stuff, I need to get some for my purse!)

Jacob groaned and turned over. He could probably get loose with his hair in seconds, but before he could start, Charlotte leaned over him. “Jacob, are you listening?”

He groaned. “What? What happened? Did someone tase me?”

“Jacob, if you don’t stop being charmed or possessed or nerve-stapled or whatever the hell is wrong with you, I’m going to tell every girl in school that you still wet your bed.”

“WHAT?! Why would you say that?!” He was mad and scared, he must have thought she’d really do it! “What do you mean nerve-stapled?”

She glared at him. “I don’t know, but you were fighting me to get to that door back there, whatever’s behind it.” She glared at me, too, since I hadn’t told her anything about the labyrinth or William or Mina Tauros or even the geology cultists, but that was because she wasn’t going down there with me!

“It was quieter back there. Down in the—” I clapped my hand over his mouth, and they

both glared at me.

“Don’t get Charlotte any more involved, Jacob. She doesn’t need that.”

“You still think I’m not going to help Jonah?” She fished the taser out of her bag, which made Jacob’s eyes bug out, and started reloading the cartridge (it looked like it had only one set of darts, but could still shock people if you hit them with it after that, which is how she took down a Changed and a super (he was 11, but that hair was a legit power) in like 5 seconds).

“Jonah’s in trouble?! What happened?”

“That’s a really good question. Nelson said to send help here, so I guess she meant wherever that door leads—” she waved at the door, which Alice had started prying open before she got shot (she had nails, not claws like me, but they were long as a drag queen’s and sharp as daggers) “—which must be where Jonah is.”

Jacob turned to me. “I go off to think for 5 minutes and you lost Jonah and Pamela?”

“Hey! It was at least half an hour!” Wait, that wasn’t the point! Anyway, he stomped off in a huff! “The geologist, the one who was being all coded with Pamela, kidnapped her to show him the way through, um, what’s back there, and took Jonah as leverage.” I didn’t mention whatever they did to Jonah, I didn’t want him to freak out.

“So what is back there, anyway? Other than whatever you really did instead of getting mugged.”

I jumped when Alice spoke, I thought she was still unconscious! “You lied to me, Nelson?”

Did she actually sound hurt? Or was it just because she was literally hurt? Either way, I felt like a terrible person! “I didn’t want to! There was a lot of stuff we couldn’t tell anyone!”

“Like Armstrong here having carnivorous hair?” She sat up, not minding that she was tied hand and foot, and twisted and stretched, probably to work out muscle cramps from being shocked but it made her body stand out under the dress in a way I couldn’t look away from. Oh, Bast!

Charlotte elbowed me and hissed, “Drool quieter!” She was quiet, but not quiet enough.

“Nyaaah! She can hear you!” But she could smell me, and Jacob too! I covered my burning face with my hands, for all the good it did. This was as bad as being in the labyrinth with Jonah! Worse!

Jacob pulled his tongue back in (well, he was the one who thought Alice wasn’t that great!) and said, “Yah, like that.” He didn’t go on to give away any of my or Pamela’s secrets; maybe he had been thinking about how to behave after all! “Seriously, you don’t want to go down there, it’s full of horrible stuff.”

“And someone took Jonah down there, and I’m going to get him back.” I was having trouble arguing with her, she’d done better against Alice and Jacob than I had, but Jacob was Jacob.

“It’s OK, Lottie, we can get him. You stay here.”

Good thing I already had my face in my palms!

“You can go get adult supervision if you want. I’m going to help Jonah. And don’t call me Lottie.”

“Charlotte, why are you so determined to do this? You have to know it’s stupid! I’m a lot tougher than you and I still got hurt, and it could have been worse! A *lot* worse!” William would probably only want to kill her, not keep her!

“What, like I’m going to let you go, with your, your curves, and your *tail*, and your cute little purry voice, and your *superpowers*!” She got louder and louder, until she was almost yelling. “If you can do it, I can do it!”

How could she not see this was more important than being jealous over a boy?! “I DON’T WANT JONAH! Not like that! I want to help him, and I don’t want anyone else to get hurt!”

“I don’t want Jonah to get hurt! I don’t want to get hurt either, but I’m willing to risk it to help him!”

Something went “zrrrip” and Alice said, “Thanks, Armstrong.” Well, they weren’t fighting us anymore, we should have untied them. And tied up Charlotte!

“Me too,” said Jacob. Nyaaa, we should have left him tied up! OK, not really, he had a power and resisted emanations, so he was better than Charlotte, but he was only 11! “He’s my *brother*!”

I looked away from Charlotte’s glare to Alice. “You don’t want to do this, right?” Then I looked away again, blushing, because getting the duct tape off her ankles involved bending way forward in that low-cut dress, nyaaa!

She wadded up the tape and threw at me (I caught it, but then didn’t have anything to do with it). “You haven’t told us what ‘this’ is. Why do geologists want to go back there? What’s so terrible about it?”

“They aren’t geologists, Pamela said they were cultists. OK, they might be geologists too, but that’s not why they kidnapped her! I don’t know what they want, she wasn’t able to say that before they went underground and she didn’t have any bars.” Everyone looked confused, so I

fished out my phone, which had hung up sometime. “She managed to dial me without them noticing, so I overheard some.”

Alice nodded. I guess Pamela’s word that someone was a cultist was good enough for her. Charlotte too, even though I’d never noticed that she liked Pamela at all. (I already knew about Jacob. Why did everyone trust Pamela so much? I’d have to find her and ask her!) “What’s back there besides cultists, Nelson?”

I knew it would just raise questions I couldn’t answer, but I couldn’t stop Charlotte (unless I wanted to beat the snot out of her) and I couldn’t not tell her what she was facing. “Nyaaa! It’s a labyrinth where people get trapped forever! Full of landmines! And ghouls! And a minotaur!”

Alice nodded again. “Mina Tauros? How did you get her mad at you?”

“Jacob was staring at her chest.” It wasn’t true, but it was the lie we’d talked about before, and I’m sure he would have if I hadn’t distracted him by trying to escape.

“HEY!” But he was embarrassed as much as mad, so hopefully Alice would buy it.

I couldn’t tell if she did or not (because I could never tell anything about what she was feeling!), but she didn’t call us on it. “You have a long way to go before you’re as smooth as your big brother, Armstrong.” He pouted, but shut up.

Charlotte was scared, but still determined. “Then we better get Jonah and Pamela out of there fast.”

“Nyaaa! You can’t fight Mina Tauros with a taser!”

“You can’t fight her with claws and a bad foot, either. We don’t want to fight her at all, we just want to get our friend out.” She stood up. “Are you coming, or not?”

“NYAAAA—” My wail of frustration was interrupted by a crash from outside, and the sound of running feet. I leapt to slam the door and lock it, but the students who had been outside started beating on it, and it couldn’t hold up forever.

For a human, Charlotte didn’t waste any time freaking out. “Jacob! Alice! What was making you come here? How can we stop them?”

“Um,” said Jacob. “The whispers were louder out there?”

“Yes,” said Alice. “It was whispering to me, I couldn’t tell what it was saying, but it was louder when I didn’t move this way, like I wasn’t listening...” She trailed off, spooked. “The taser worked, but I don’t think you can zap everyone out there without someone getting hurt.”

“Can we just tase Lucy W?” Jacob asked.

Charlotte snorted. “Tempting, but no, it’s not actually safe. I really shouldn’t have used it on you guys, but you scared me the way you were surrounding me.”

The door went BANG as someone kicked it, and we all jumped. The lock held, but it rattled a lot. When the kids outside got in here, they would all go right into the labyrinth and get lost forever, probably in William’s stomach!

“Let’s block the door,” Charlotte and Alice and Jacob all said at the same time. I felt stupid, but at least someone had an idea!

Jacob and Charlotte had to stay out of the way because we were crushing the crystals and kicking the dust all over, but with 2 Changed (even a shrimpy one like me and a slender one like Alice), we could stack the heavy desks and bedframes pretty quickly. There was enough furniture that we could make a barricade all the way to the back wall, so no one could open the door without breaking a bunch of heavy old wood, or pushing it through the back wall. They’d have to

break the door (especially after Jacob mangled the lock's innards) and even then there wasn't room for a person to crawl through, so they'd have to break the first desk or two. It still wouldn't keep them out forever, especially if they found tools (or a Changed, but I hadn't seen any except Alice coming this way), but it was the best we could do with what we had.

The banging on the door was less. Maybe whatever was pulling people toward the labyrinth wasn't strong enough to keep them trying when it didn't work right away? Or maybe it wasn't trying, since the 4 of us were now stuck going that way and that was all it needed. But there was still banging, so we weren't going to unblock the door.

Moving furniture around, fast, got me breathing hard enough (Alice had nothing to do with it!) that I sucked in some of the dust and had a coughing fit, splattering the floor with glowing blue mucus. "That's the other terrible thing down there," I said when I could breathe again. "I don't know what it is, I'm waiting for the doctor to text me the test results." Epsilon had said she wasn't a doctor, but it wasn't worth explaining.

Alice eyed the glowing guck from a safe distance. "It only affects Changed?"

"For all I know, it only affects me!" And we were going underground, where I couldn't get Epsilon's text even if she sent it.

"Are you guys coming?" Jacob had pried open the door to the tunnels with his hair and Charlotte was covering it with her taser.

#

When I'd put stuff in a spare bookbag to make my new purse, I'd made sure to include a flashlight. The only one I had (since I was at school with my luggage for a stay of a few days, not at home with everything we had) should have good battery life, but wasn't bright enough for the

humans, so we used Charlotte's. She followed Pamela's views on what should be in a purse: everything! (Jacob didn't have a purse, but did have a keyring flashlight that was barely brighter than mine. Alice didn't have her purse at all, it was wherever she'd left it when she'd been lured by the whispers.)

My nose was full of gunk, but there were more tracks in the dust in the tunnel, and Alice said she could smell Jonah and a bunch of people going that way, so we went back the way we'd come just a few hours before. I left big signs carved into the wall at every turn: THIS WAY TO RESCUE PAMELA + JONAH, and arrows for when superheroes showed up, which I hoped they would soon! I'd even be OK with my parents showing up, even though it meant the mugging story would be blown apart and I'd be grounded forever. I'd rather move to another city and leave Pamela and Jonah alive than stay here with them dead!

All the junk along the way was where we left it, from what had been piled in front of the door (not worth putting back, the door opened the other way) to the motorcycle frame by the side passage to the ghoulish tunnel. We didn't talk more than we had to, but I could smell Jacob getting unhappier with every step forward. By the time we were back in the room with the hole down to the labyrinth, I was surprised he wasn't running away, but he stuck with it. He might be a doofus, but he was brave for his brother. Just like Mason, and look where that got him.

Maybe they'd be better off if I weren't here. I hadn't been able to do much against William before, he'd backed off because Pamela was the "handmaiden of Hades". Did that mean she was a cultist too? Had I been hanging out with a cultist all this time? Well, I'd almost dated Peter, so I wasn't a good judge of friends! I could feel myself shrinking in again, like I had when Pamela and everyone had ditched me back in the hall, leaving a space between me and

everything else. I stopped walking, and no one even noticed. That was fine, Jacob and Charlotte could rescue Jonah, who they loved, and Alice could rescue Pamela and get set up with Chathi.

Alice, a few steps ahead, stopped and turned around. “Nelson? Where are you?” I was standing right in the middle of the room, but she didn’t see me in the darkness (Charlotte’s light was aimed the other way).

But then Charlotte turned around. “What?” Her light waved across my side of the room, even flashing right in my eyes, but Alice called again, “Nelson? Are you all right? Where did you go?”

I was standing right here! Then my brain finally clicked. Seriously? My special power is to get so depressed people think I don’t exist? *Seriously?!*

My superpower?!

I have a *superpower?!*

I almost threw my arms around Alice, but stopped myself just in time. This was not the kind of power to tell people about! Especially not Jacob the Blabbermouth, and I didn’t know if I could trust Charlotte (OK, I knew I couldn’t, she still hated me because she thought Jonah liked me) or Alice (???). But even as I was thinking that, my move to hug Alice bridged the gap between me and the world.

She didn’t freak out when I appeared, though, and I thought not even because she was so cool. She just said, “Oh, there you are. Don’t wander off, we need you to guide us past the crocodiles.”

I blinked. “Crocodiles?”

“Ghouls, land mines, whatever the dangers are that we need a local guide for.” She

added, so quietly that even with Changed ears I was mostly lip-reading it, “Blood. Jonah?”

I gave a tiny nod, I already knew Jonah was hurt. Alice didn’t make any move to tell Jacob and Charlotte, probably because they’d freak out if they knew. That’s why I hadn’t told them, but I felt better knowing Alice agreed with me.

Alice agreed with me?! And she’d been the first one to notice I was “gone”! That made me way happier than it should, and that made me embarrassed, on top of being flabbergasted that I have a *superpower*! It wasn’t like I didn’t have superpowers already, but those were the normal Changed ones that all my friends I’d grown up with had. This was my very own, that no one else had! And it was a great power, if I wanted to follow in my mom’s footsteps.

Alice was looking at me with those green eyes that shone even in just reflected flashlight, cool as always. Could she smell me freaking out about getting a superpower? Hopefully she thought it was just because she was paying attention to me, even though that made me look like even more of an idiot! Nyaaa!

Whatever she thought, she didn’t say anything, just took my hand (her hand wasn’t as soft as Kiri’s, but a lot stronger, and I could feel the edges of her nails and my face was on fire) and pulled me back to the others. Her skin was a lot warmer without a dress and bra— Oh, Bast, did she realize this was the hand I’d groped her with? Nyaaaaa! “Um, sorry about before,” I said, quietly enough that the humans wouldn’t hear.

She looked at me from the corner of her beautiful eye. “You mean when you felt me up?” Nyaaaa! She didn’t have to put it like that! “You really should ask first.”

My 1st, stupid, thought was that she meant I *should* ask, but what she really meant was consent. “Nyaaaa! I didn’t mean to!” But then we were at the edge of the hole and had to drop it.

I was sure Jacob and Charlotte could see my face glowing in the dark, though. I really wanted to use my new power!

I had a *superpower*!

It didn't seem like it would help with dark, creepy holes, though. Even when Charlotte shone the light straight down it, all I could see was a hot pink climbing rope (the kind bigger around than my thumb) going down a narrow, rough burrow forever. The wind coming up out of it carried the smell of people, Jonah (bleeding) and Pamela and Dr. Thomas, along with wet concrete and stone, toxic crystals, and a faint whiff of ghoul. Alice, who could smell way better than I, wrinkled her nose a little. "What is that stench?"

"The one like a bunch of zombies molesting a Changed? Ghoul."

Alice actually shuddered. It was the most upset she'd shown in the whole time I'd known her, even counting when she'd realized she'd been mind-controlled. But then, she'd never smelled a ghoul before.

The smell of ghoul was as strong as the smell of like 8 humans, which couldn't be good. I didn't smell any blood except a little bit of Jonah's, though, so William wasn't eating them. Yet.

We all looked at each other. Nobody wanted Jonah eaten by monsters (I wasn't sure what everyone thought of Pamela, but *I* was going to save her!), but nobody wanted to go down that hole that stank like a ghoul's underpants. The wind coming up from it got stronger and stronger, until it made Alice's and Charlotte's skirts flutter wildly and a tortured moaning sound came up with it. We all backed away nervously, but it was just the wind and not a monster. (Not a monster that was coming out of the hole, at least!) Then the wind slowly faded away. The labyrinth was *breathing*. "It didn't do that last time," Jacob said.

Finally I had to be the brave one. “I’ll go first, the ghoul didn’t eat me last time.”

“Me next, I have the taser,” said Charlotte. Then she glared at me. “You better keep your eyes on the climb!” Even though she was wearing leggings under her uniform skirt!

I was getting pretty tired of her attitude, but I wasn’t mean enough to say she was too ugly for that, so I just hissed quietly at her (she scowled even more) and concentrated on my flashlight. I didn’t want to climb down in the dark, but I needed my hands free. Finally I just dropped it down my shirt and let it glow through the white fabric over my belly. It was bright enough for me, and I couldn’t drop it unless I lost my shirt.

Going down took less muscle than coming up, but I had to be careful not to slide too much or I’d bang my foot, or kick rocks loose, or do something else to make noise and let the villains know I was coming, so I wouldn’t have had time to look up Charlotte’s skirt anyway.

Could I use my power while climbing? I tried to pull myself in without being depressed, but it didn’t work. Maybe I really did have to be depressed, or maybe I just couldn’t concentrate on it while climbing down into a ghoul-infested labyrinth.

Coming up had seemed to take forever in the darkness and disorientation, but going down only took 2½ breaths, even holding still and clinging to the wall when the wind peaked and the anguished moan was deafening. It definitely hadn’t been doing this before!

Because of the wind, I didn’t realize it until I was twisting around to crawl headfirst out the horizontal part of the burrow (I just barely made it, I wasn’t sure any of the others would be able to), but there wasn’t any waterfall roar at the end of the tunnel. There was no noise at all in that room, in fact, and when I stuck my head out and shone the light around, it was empty. The walls and floor glistened with damp, but the waterfall was gone, just a jagged crack in the floor

and another way up the wall where it turned into the ceiling. I could smell blood (not just Jonah's) where people had banged themselves up getting out of the tunnel, but the cultists were long gone. Not too long, I hoped!

“Nelson, get out of the way,” growled Charlotte from behind me. Didn't she ever let up?! I showed off a little by doing a somersault out of the mouth of the burrow, but she didn't seem impressed, and she didn't appreciate the hand down I gave her. I really needed to get her hooked up with Jonah so we didn't have to be enemies!

Alice came out next, and I gave her a hand too, so she didn't have to do a somersault in a skirt. “Thanks, Nelson.” She looked around at the huge shiny cave. “This isn't what I pictured when you said ‘labyrinth’.”

“Whoa,” said Jacob. “Where's the waterfall?”

“There used to be a waterfall? I thought you were here just this morning!” Charlotte shone her flashlight all over the place, making sure everyone with eyes knew we were here.

“Nyow!” I said as she bounced it off the wet wall right into my eyes. “Charlotte, quit it!” She didn't apologize but she did stop flashing the flashlight everywhere. “My— I mean, I heard the labyrinth changes, I just didn't know how fast. I don't think it matters, anyway, since we can follow them by scent.” The humid air made the inside of my nose and throat feel better, but I still couldn't smell much.

I knew where the exit was hiding behind a bulge in the wall at the end of the old waterfall, but Alice was the one with a working nose, so she led the way after that. She didn't have to, it wasn't like she was sniffing the floor before we walked on it or anything, but I wasn't going to complain! She wasn't doing the sultry, tail-swishing sway she usually did, she was

hunting, leaning a little forward as she stalked along with her tailtip twitching. (I don't know if real foxes do that, but foxgirls are based on catgirls, who aren't even that much like cats.) It didn't make me think about what she was like under that dress, but it was hypnotic anyway.

While we were going through the junction room, Charlotte jabbed me with her sharp elbow. "Nelson, keep your eyes open for... stuff!" She meant ghouls, and she was right, and I tried, but Alice was *amazing*. I'd much rather look at her than the mosaics of people doing stuff on the walls of the Aphrodite tunnel. (Charlotte and Jacob both goggled at them, but I couldn't smell if Alice even noticed.)

Bad attitude aside, Charlotte and Jacob were both pretty scared, and I didn't blame them. I wasn't happy about coming back either! I let Jacob hold my hand, even though he's an obnoxious boy, but when I reached out to Charlotte, she yanked her hand away and used it to carry her taser ready instead. It didn't seem to make her feel better, but whatever.

After finding the waterfall gone, I was afraid everything was going to be changed around, but it seemed the same until we got out of the marble mosaic zone and back onto the balcony around the giant shaft with the cold wind.

The metal handrails were overgrown with crystals, small bunches of long sharp spikes poking out from the cover of rounder shapes (icosahedrons? trapezohedrons?) like clawed hands reaching through from beyond.

"Shar, turn off the light," said Jacob.

"Don't call me Shar." But she turned off her flashlight, and we could see the crystals glowing green-purple in patchy lines around the huge shaft at each floor, up and down until they blurred together and we couldn't count how many levels. Charlotte swore. "This place is

enormous. How are we going to find anyone?”

“This way,” said Alice, already following the scent. Charlotte made a frustrated squawk, and said, “Oh, right, *superpowers*,” like that was another swear word, but hurried to catch up.

I remembered staying on pretty much the same level going through the mines and to the shaft, but Alice led us to a flight of stairs going down. These ones didn’t have nonskid tape, but they were grooved in a diamond pattern that didn’t look like any of the stairs I’d seen before.

“Alice, are you sure this is the right way? It doesn’t look like I remember.”

“Yes, it’s a strong trail. They’re sweating and scared. Maybe they aren’t going the way you came out?”

“Then why did they bother with Pamela and Jonah?” Something was going on, and I didn’t understand it, which made me like the maze full of monsters and boobytraps even less, which I wouldn’t have thought could happen!

“I don’t know, Nelson, but they definitely went this way.” Now that I’d broken her out of her hunting trance or whatever, she hugged herself and shivered a little. The wind from the shaft was gustier than the breathing from the ghoulish burrow, but colder. (I was tempted to put my arms around her, but remembering the last time I’d tried to hold onto her made me shrivel with embarrassment.) “We can follow them, we can go back, or we can leave the trail and get lost forever. I know which one Cooke and Armstrong choose, and I wouldn’t mind giving whatever was luring me down here a piece of my mind, so let’s go.”

We went.

The ceiling over the stairs stayed at the same height, so it was like we were descending into a trench with walls that towered over us. I don’t know how far down we went, 5 or 6 stories

or maybe even more, to a flat concrete floor that was turned into a maze by building-sized concrete blocks set on it. Crystals grew in the grooves where the blocks met the floor, outlining the path, so we didn't really need a flashlight to find our way, but I couldn't blame Charlotte and Jacob for not wanting to walk in the dark. I just hoped we wouldn't need that battery power later.

Alice was still leading us by scent, but I thought the layout looked familiar, like the part where we turned right, passed two branches on the right, and then turned right again. I'm sure Pamela or Jonah had the whole thing memorized, but that wouldn't help until we had them rescued. However we were going to do that! The cultists were mostly guys, maybe we could have Alice distract them by taking off her dress— No! Bad catgirl! And Charlotte was tugging on my elbow, glaring at me. "Pretend you aren't in heat for 30 seconds, and use those murder talons of yours to take the route," she hissed.

Murder talons? Did she know about Mason?! Had Jonah told her? I didn't think he'd ever said he'd keep my secret!

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