

Did you all know that the Los Angeles Main Branch Public Library has a necromancy collection? I sure didn't.

I stood at the end of the big white checkout room, staring into the blue painted children's room and the young adult room with the little wooden bookshelves after it. There wasn't anything unusual about them, except... "Lordy. Ah reckon you could fit Lexington's whole library into those two rooms."

Locking my jaws shut, I kept my eyes closed until the blush faded. I hate my accent, but I just can't seem to shift it. Bad enough to have the thickest accent back in Kentucky. On my first day in LA...

But there was nothing for it. I might sound like a hick, but I read a little above high school sophomore level, thanks. Looking around, I spotted an old woman with a grey bun, lumpy blouse and dress, spectacles on a chain, arm full of books, and most importantly of all an ID tag confirming she didn't just look like a librarian. It said 'The Librarian'.

Easing over to her, trying not to look like I felt like a fool, I asked, "Where kin ah find regular non-kids fiction?"

She looked at me, and she had those eyes you get from old people who have seen too much and can read all the tiny print on your soul. Her eyes were as gray as her hair, too. She didn't so much as crack a smile at my goofy voice, just asked, "Your name?"

"Avery Special, ma'am," I answered dutifully. Don't ever disrespect a librarian.

The old woman had a pocket protector on her blouse full of pens and with little bits of card and a short ruler sticking out. From that pocket she pulled a red and blue plastic card, handing it to me. It had 'Los Angeles Public Library' printed on the front, and a bar code and blurb saying Avery Special was on the hook for all fines and destruction and whatnot. Pointing down the hall past the young adult area, she said, "Third floor."

Now it was my turn to try not to grin. Folks had told me super powers are everywhere in LA. That was one big reason my parents figured I'd be happier here. Other folks with powers like mine.

Okay, not quite like mine. Imagine instantly printing library cards as your super power!

My feet moved automatically as I thought, heading down the broad hallway and past the big star-themed room, and I was so busy being amused that I almost walked into the pit.

A pit. No fooling. Okay, not straight down, more like someone dug a pyramid down. A huge open space loomed over it, with glass walls allowing me to see into multiple floors of library surrounding it on every side.

I felt faint. So many books! And the pit was the same thing, descending ranks of libraries stacked on libraries. Oh, yeah, I was never going back to Kentucky again.

Escalators lurked off to the side, and I ran up them three steps at a time to the third floor, bursting through a glass door into the fiction section. Mmm. Traditional library shabby. Crushed red carpets, ugly, minimalist metal bookshelves, and so many of those piled so heavily with books you could barely see the carpet anyway. Seems like they kept mystery books near the door, so I kept moving. A sign across a catwalk pointed to fantasy.

Walking a glass-walled catwalk over that pit was kind of creepy. It was the kind of place you fight duels in movies, you know? But on the other side I found the little round paperback book carousels that are the hallmark of all fantasy and science fiction libraries, and tables and chairs I could lounge in while picking a few that would keep me busy until wi-fi got hooked up back home. Then with any luck, keep keeping me busy.

What I sure did not expect was that same librarian woman from downstairs to walk up with an armful of books, say, "Here you are," drop them on the table next to me, and walk away again.

"Uh," I tried to say, but she just ignored me. LA was friendly, but not necessarily polite.

Like I said, never disrespect a librarian. I took a peek at the books she'd given me, taking them out of their pile and spreading them out on the table. Weird, weird stuff. The only one in English wasn't really a book at all, just a binder of notes stuck together, with the title 'Annotations On The Mystery Of

Artificial Immortality.'

"Ain't that a thing?" I snickered. That name, though. I knew what it meant. The binder was attached with a string to a cloth bound book with no title on the cover, presumably *The Mystery Of Artificial Immortality*. I flipped that open and saw a whole mess of Latin, a language I don't read.

But you know... there are times when you can almost read a foreign language, right? Like, 'mort' was everywhere, and so that's talking about death, and 'incantatio' was pretty obvious, and 'mandatum' would be something about a command. Plus, this book wasn't printed. It had been hand written. By someone with a nice, readable hand, sure, but this was a manuscript, and probably hundreds of years old.

I flipped through a few pages, and my eyes stopped on a tiny paragraph separated from the rest. Unable to help myself, I read, "Ego sum dominus mortis. Audierit a me constituta sunt corpora. Surge. Oboedite praepositis vestris dominus. Vocationem hercle!"

The words flowed. I knew the rhythm to recite them in. I knew the pronunciation. A chilly wind blew around and through me, stirring my hair and overalls and nothing else.

That had been a magic spell. Not just messing around with a ouija board or yelling at a haunt to clear out. I'd just cast an actual spell. What had it done?

I found out when fingers scrawny but as strong as steel locked around the top of my head from behind. They lifted me up a couple of inches onto my tiptoes, and a voice like a sick toad toad said, "I obey no one."

That grip hurt. It was hard to stay balanced on my feet like this. I lashed out, not with a fist or foot, but with that chilly wind that lurks inside me.

Mistake! Big mistake! It turned backwards, cold flooding into me, numbing my shoulders and creeping down my arms and body, turning everything limp inch by inch. People had said this is what having my power used on them felt like. I struggled to shove it all back into the hand holding me, and at least slowed things down.

"Who are you? What are y'all doing?!" I squeaked, barely louder than a mouse.

The hand holding me and the arm it was attached to swiveled, turning my dangling body to face the sorriest sight I'd ever seen. A woman held me, but no regular woman. That wasted yellow face could only be a zombie's, and she wore white leather with lots of extra straps like a mummy's wrapping. She had the longest hair, too, waist length, limp, and pure white. Mismatched eyes, brown and amber, glared balefully down into mine.

"You did not mean any harm," she croaked. It was a statement, not a suggestion.

"Shoot, ah didn't even know what ah was readin'!" I babbled.

She let me go. I staggered, pushing the numbness out of me so that I wouldn't fall over. Black smoke like snakes slithered away from me, which is not how my power usually works.

My sense of smell came back, and I wished it hadn't, because hoo whee, the zombie woman smelled like embalming fluid. She stood straight like a puppet hanging from strings does, and gurgled, "Do not practice that art in the library again."

That black stuff burst out of her, and when it faded, she was gone.

Holy moly and cats on a belfry beam! My trembling hands groped for the manuscript, hugging it to my chest. This was a necromancy grimoire. I'd wanted, been looking for, needed one of these for eight years, and only that little because I learned to read late. I'd been a stubborn little girl.

Hee. Hee hee hee. I'd just gotten to LA. My parents were back home right now unpacking in our scrubby little new house in a scrubby little lot on a scrubby little edge of Glendale. My first day, and the superheroes of LA had already noticed me and were helping me learn to use my powers. I loved this city so much.

Scooping up the stack, I wobbled my way back around the catwalk. By the time I got to the escalators I could walk steadily again, and I practically bounced with impatience in the line to the row of check-out tellers. Stacking the grimoires in front of a woman with brown hair, brown skin, brown

clothing, brown eyes, and a fantastically perky smile, I asked, “Am ah allowed ta check these out?”

The answer was going to be 'no'. These books were blatantly not part of the regular collection. I would have to figure out ways to study them here without getting on the nerves of the guard zombie.

Perky woman flipped through the books one at a time with perky energy, and corrected me in a perky tone, “These aren't our books. No labels, see? Did you want to donate them?”

Don't question your fortune, Avery. “Prolly some future day,” I said, grabbed the books, and scurried out past the theft detectors at the doors. No beeps. These spellbooks were mine now. All I had to do was get them home.

Speaking of which, making sure I had all the books in a solid hold in one arm, I fished out my not-very-smart-phone and pushed a couple of buttons. One ring, and my dad picked up. “Avery! How's the library? Did they give you problems with ID or anything?”

“Nope, got a library card right instantaneous, and some great books ah cain't wait ta show you'n'Mom. Y'all's little city girl is on her way home to do some serious readin'.” I practically danced down the sidewalk, too happy to care what strangers thought of my accent.

“Want me to pick you up?” Dad offered.

I shook my head, although he couldn't see if, of course. “Ah'll take the subway. Gives me an hour'r two more to read.”

“You sure you feel safe?” he pressed.

I gave the phone a skeptical look. “Dad, ah kin kill folk with a touch. Unless ah get kidnapped by a supervillain, I reckon I'm in no danger.”

“Well, alright. We'll see you then.”

Clicking my phone off, I tucked it into the pocket of my overall shorts, and sure as dawn follows evening, a woman shouted at me, “You, young lady! Can we talk for a minute?”

Before it occurred to me not to look at her, I had. She wasn't what I would have expected. She looked rich, in a sleek grey business suit of the kind with a form-fitting skirt, hair in precisely sculpted waves, and had just gotten out of the back seat of a limousine.

Which meant this was about money, which was ridiculous. I was the polar opposite of this woman. With my bushy, untidy, shiny red hair, galaxy map of freckles, flannel shirt, overalls, and sneakers, I looked like a penniless farm girl, which was too close to accurate for my comfort. If we weren't opposite enough, I knew I was also all athletic muscle where she was serpentine grace.

“Sorry, lady, ain't interested,” I shouted, looked firmly away from her, and kept walking.

She sounded sly and pleased. “*And* you have a great sarcastic voice. Young lady, you have a future in television. Come on, let's talk.”

Television. She might mean it. She was rich enough. And it was a crazy day. Arrived in Los Angeles at dawn, and now it was barely after lunch and I had spellbooks and someone offering to sign me up for TV.

Nope. There was such a thing as too good to be true, and quitting while you were ahead by a pile of grimoires, and most of all something about this woman seemed slimy to me.

I said nothing, just walked away from her.

She sighed loudly. “Every time.”

And then it all went black.

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I woke up in a transparent cage with four other teens, in the middle of a huge, dull grey room. The cage seemed to be made of plastic, cylindrical but a little narrower at the top, and it looked a lot like we were bugs someone had put a cup over to catch. The room was nearly two stories high, and its only other decoration I could see was a regular looking door near one corner.

The other captives were teenagers I didn't know. Not that I knew anybody in LA yet, but I would

have remembered these. One was a girl with glossy brown hair styled in a bob that curved in around her neck. She wore a classic school uniform, with a white silk blouse, a dark blue tank top pretending to be a sweater over that, and a knee length unexciting grey plaid pleated skirt. She sat with her knees curled up leaning against the side of the cage.

The next two had to be brother and sister. In fact, they had to be twins. They were exactly the same height, with the same scarlet red skin and glossy black hair, although hers was much longer and rippled around her shoulders. They both had little horns poking out of their foreheads, and long, thin, spade-tipped tails. They even wore the same clothing, black knee-length shorts and white short-sleeved button up shirts, although her little black boots had higher heels than his. You could not possibly mistake them for each other, however. She had curves under that outfit and he had lean, straight muscle. Her face was perfectly delicate and his had unusually hard, masculine lines for a teenager. They were beyond beautiful. Even without the devil traits, they looked like sin in human shape. They also had their backs propped against the wall, but with their shoulders and heads leaning against each other.

The last girl looked drab and ordinary compared to the others, even compared to me. Her jeans and t-shirt were brown, with a lot of fraying around the hems. She wore flip-flops instead of shoes. Her neck-length sandy brown hair wasn't styled, and even looked hand-cut. She'd been lying on her side, curled up.

Everyone had their eyes open wide, like we'd all woken up at once.

They all had to be thinking the same thing I was. What was going on here?

The girl in the school uniform partly answered that unspoken question. Quiet and businesslike, with an equally flat scowl, she said, "Sleep ray. Probably in the floor."

With a certain amount of wriggling, the twins pushed themselves up straighter, hands settling on the floor. I pushed myself up to a sitting position, too. The drab girl rolled up, stretching out her arms and legs, and yawned. Everything about her looked ruffled, and after that first bit of watchfulness she now looked drowsy and ready to go back to sleep.

That wasn't enough to disguise a faint crackling from nearby. "Not anymore," said the devil girl, with a higher, squeakier voice than I'd expected.

Heh. Yes, of course she had super powers. And her twin would have super powers. And I had super powers, although... augh! My spellbooks! I'd hardly gotten a chance to look at them, and they were gone! I patted down my pockets, and my wallet, keys, and phone were gone, too. Everybody else did the same thing, with the same disappointed scowl. I expect only fools would kidnap us and not take our stuff.

I scowled. Something smelled... odd. And the grey floor, which already felt like odd tile, was starting to feel odder. Maybe a touch warmer and softer than it should?

Uniform girl took a look up at devil girl, and warned, "I think you should stop now."

She shook her head, black hair rippling and waving photogenically. "I can only start fires."

"Something must have caught. Something serious," said her brother. Shoot. I shouldn't have been surprised by his perfectly normal teenage boy voice with a hint of crack and squeak, but somehow I'd expected vocal chocolate syrup.

Grimacing, I lifted a hand and said something I hoped was true. "Ah kin put out fires, but ah have to touch 'em."

Uniform girl nodded, completely serious. "I can do that, but you'll have to be fast or the fumes will kill us. Ready?"

I put both hands on the floor near the middle of the cage, and lied, "Ready."

A hole opened up in the floor, maybe three inches deep and two feet wide, ringed by gooey black on the sides. It revealed a small compartment underlaid with cement, with pipes and wires running through it. There wasn't nearly enough room for a human, but enough for a device like stacked dishes with wires running through them. Those wires and something ring-shaped in the center of the dishes

were on fire. The heat that rushed up out of the hole was severe, and the smell sinus-burning and awful.

Cold. Think cold. Fire is alive, right? Sort of. Alive enough. I'd done this before on a smaller scale. Reach in, wrap my arms in the cold, and take that almost-life away from the fire. Yank it free. Make it mine, and smother the embers in the cold that isn't life or death.

Oh lordy loo. I had to pour on the cold, and the fire didn't go out immediately. It changed, turned blue and began to screech, but I pulled it in, turned it into a cold fire, and sucked it into my arms. Now, that was no fun at all. It felt like having a squirrel with ice cube paws running up and down the inside of my body.

But the fire was out, and I yanked my hands back, letting the hole disappear. Plus, the smell had gone way down. My shoulders and legs twitched something terrible as the power ran around inside me, though.

Everyone was looking at me, but the devil twins were particularly leaning forward with concerned frowns on their perfect scarlet faces. The boy asked gently, "Are you okay?"

My shoulders shivered again. "I spec. That just ain't what mah power's meant to do, and truth told, ah ain't super sure what I did."

Oh, heavens. My own stupid voice registered in my ears, and I sounded dumber even than usual.

Nobody commented. Nobody smirked. Nobody seemed to notice. Oh, I love you, LA. Except for the part where I got kidnapped.

On. My. First. Day.

Anyhow, none of the others could see my embarrassed thoughts – hopefully – and the boy asked, still all gentle, "What is your power meant to do?"

The drab girl flashed a suddenly coy and round-cheeked grin. "We'll tell you ours if you tell us yours." Challenge delivered, that grin settled back into a mild and curious smile.

Everyone else was watching me, too. Trying not to wilt under all that attention, I brushed back my hedge of hair with my fingers, and looked down at my sneakers. "Well, I reckon I'm a necromancer."

The rich school girl raised her eyebrows, showing some emotion, if only curiosity. "Like, zombies?"

I shrugged. "Never have raised a human zombie. Never tried. Ah've gotten roadkill to move, and I got a dead gerbil up'n about again once. Mah folks wouldn't let me keep it, but that didn't matter on account it dropped dead again in a couple of hours. I don't have much control over my powers yet."

Drab girl nodded in slow but deep sympathy.

The girl in the expensive uniform sat up straighter, sighed with raspy irritation, and brushed out her dress as she announced, "I'm Susan Perrier. Call me Sue. I have shadow powers."

Oops. I'd forgotten to introduce myself! "Ah'm Avery Special."

Sue scrunched up her nose in disgust. "It's not nice to meet you, but it's not your fault that it's not nice to meet you. I assume everyone here was kidnapped?"

We all nodded.

Devil boy put his hand around the devil girl's wrist, and held it up. She gave him a quick, shocked, open-mouthed look, then pouted, looked at her knees, and mumbled stiffly, "Annie Domingo. I'm a pyrokinetic, and no, it's not cool. Is there anything in this room you want set on fire?"

It took me a second to get her point, but... no. My clothing, my hair, people, I was surrounded by things I wanted to not be on fire.

Devil boy put his sister's hand down, and raised his own. He grinned, and it was, yes sir, devilishly sharp and roguish and charming, all the more so because it was a touch self-deprecating and wry. "Chris Domingo. Mind control, and it's worse than starting fires."

I frowned, thinking about that. "Really? That?"

"Kiss me," he said, black eyes looking straight into mine.

And didn't that sound like a perfect idea! I rolled forward, lunging across the cage to take his

lapels in both my fists. My eyes were all on his perfect red mouth, where my mouth was-

He recoiled, shoving a hand over my lips, pushing me away with the other arm and squealing, "You are released! I let you go! You don't have to!"

I blinked, sitting back on my heels, and shivered in a way that had nothing to do with the cold fire still flickering through my nerves.

Chris pulled his hand away from my mouth very slowly, hesitating and on guard inch by inch. Now he really did squeak as he apologized, "I'm sorry, and please believe I would never take advantage of you or anyone, but it's the fastest way to make people understand what a mess mind control is. And if that's not bad enough-" He rolled his eyes up, leaning back to thump his head against the plastic cage wall. "-it's unreliable."

The disturbing part was, kissing Chris still sounded appealing, and I wasn't totally, completely sure whether that was because he looked good or his power hadn't one hundred percent let go.

While I turned that over in my head, I looked at the drab girl. So did everyone else.

She shrugged at us. Her tone and expression draped across the line between depressed and amused. "Peggie Pendleton. No offense, but I'm going to enjoy that you don't know what my power is for as long as I can. That won't be long, assuming we stay alive."

Hardly fair from the girl who offered in the first place, but I had bigger fish to fry anyhow. I looked around at the cage, and the blank room outside it. "Well, folks, all our super powers might be creepy, but ah won't feel guilty usin' 'em on whoever locked us up here. Y'all get taken by the same woman? Fancy sandy brown color hair, limo, thin, maybe our parents' age?"

Everyone's face hardened. They recognized her, yes ma'am.

"She was trying to get me to sign a contract," related Peggie, eyes distant as she examined the memory.

Sue scowled harder. "She's legitimately rich. I can tell. If she's a supervillain, she's an obscure one."

Rising to my feet, I suggested, "Well, I think it'd be a dandy idea to get out of here afore she comes back."

"Especially since she must know we destroyed the sleep ray," agreed Sue, rising beside me.

"Can you make a hole in this so we can escape?" I asked her.

She scowled hard, crossing her arms under her chest. "No. You, like, can't cast a shadow on a transparent surface, and a hole has to connect to something on either end. The only open space big enough to matter underneath us held the sleep ray. I've been checking. What about you, Annie? Can you melt it?"

The devil girl squirmed, staring at her fingers as she twisted them together. "Probably not. Destroying electrical wiring is easy, but my fire is-" She hesitated, and finished glumly, "No. The answer is no."

Her brother put his arms around Annie's shoulders and gave her an encouraging hug.

Sue and I glanced at Peggie. She shook her head.

We looked at Chris. From where he was holding Annie, he shrugged, and said apologetically, "Even if someone is listening, my power doesn't work through microphones and speakers."

Susan looked at me. Glared at me, really, like as the last person asked I had to have a useful power. I glared back at her, hands on my hips. "Less'n somebody's dead..." I started to say, and trailed off. The hard truth was, folks die everywhere. I sighed. "Okay, I reckon we'll try it. Y'all stand up, hold hands in a circle." That got a snarky raised eyebrow from Sue, so I glared back. "Yes, the séance stuff is necessary. Close your eyes, and try to feel all mystic like."

Everyone shuffled to their feet. Sue took my left hand, and Peggie my right. We spread out in a circle. Chris smirked, but in a wry, friendly way, like he was the butt of the joke, not me. Sue's disgusted sneer didn't budge. Peggie looked completely serene, eyes immediately closing in peaceful meditation.

And that was the last I saw before I closed my own eyes.

Alright, Avery. Relax. Be still. Cold. Detached. Hard to do, but this wasn't my first séance. When I was cold enough, I asked, "Is anyone there?"

Silence. Except... not quite. I heard just the faintest, muffled scratching.

Wrapping myself in the cold, I declared, "I know you're there. Wake up. Talk to us. Who were you? Why are you bound here?"

The scratching got louder, turned to faint, unintelligible mumbling, and, well, I lost my temper. I took all of that extra power from the fire and threw it at the sound, shouting, "Awake! Speak to me! Obey she who has raised you!"

Blue fire blasted into shape in the air above us. It formed a woman in a robe with a long, pointy nose. It was a good thing the blue fire obscured her features, because a lot of what we could see blurred together like melting wax. Poor Annie turned her head away and couldn't even look at the ghost.

In a screechy, demented, angry voice the ghost babbled, "Five dollars a day! Five dollars a day! He made millions, they made millions! He said if I walked off, he would ruin me. This is what I died for!"

Chris, Peggie, and Sue stared up at the apparition in horror. Yeah, ghosts could be sad and awful things, and we'd juiced up something best left asleep this time.

The faster I took care of this, the better for us and it. "Do you know this place?" I demanded, loud and firm.

The burning blue spirit wriggled, and croaked, "Yes. Yes, I know it. This is where I—"

I talked over it. "Who kidnapped us?"

"-worked and I died, where I told them that the fire would—" it kept on complaining.

Okay, it didn't know the answer to that question, so I tried, "Is there a place where the controls to this cage are kept?"

That got it. The ghost thrashed, acidly sarcastic as she laughed, "Oh, yes. I know where all the props and the special effects are kept. Especially the dangerous ones."

"Then go. Release us. I bind you to this task!" I ordered the ghost, before she distracted herself again.

Shrieking in agony, it spun around and flew away into a wall, where it disappeared in a flash of blue fire. It left a smudge of ash behind like a flower, and a gross meaty smell different from the gross chemical smell we already had to deal with.

Sue's jaw tightened, her face already returning to a sour, businesslike glare. She pulled her hands free from mine and Chris's, and folded her arms again. "Well, that was unpleasant."

Everybody nodded, including me.

With a faint pop, the cage lifted off the floor around us, wobbling and rising into the air. Was it dangling on a string I hadn't seen?

Sue didn't get distracted. She waved a hand sharply at us all. "Out, fast!"

We did. The cylinder wasn't rising fast, and we all ducked low, and in Peggie's case dropped to the ground and rolled out from under. Sue beckoned again, and we all scurried over to the one door in the wall, much too far away for the cage to fall and trap us again.

It was a pretty normal door. It had a stick handle instead of a knob, but that's not weird. You could find a hundred million like it in a million office buildings. Cheap brown wood door, dull grey metal handle.

I reached for that handle, but stopped halfway, glancing at Sue. She shook her head, and pointed at the middle of the door. We all crowded around and watched, and sure enough, one of those black-edged holes opened up in the wood.

It revealed a straight hallway, in plain white tile, that ran maybe thirty feet or so to the base of an upward stairway. The hallway was so featureless and white that even a few bugs on the floor stood out.

The only other things it contained were the backs of two guards in lumpy black police style armor, including face-hiding visored helmets. They stood right in front of the door holding funny looking guns that looked sort of like submachine guns except they clearly had shiny metal popgun corks in the barrels.

We must have made a noise. The guards spun around. Before they could finish turning, the hole snapped shut, but we still heard thumps and sizzles against the frame.

I flattened myself against the wall by the door where it would open up, one hand raised to grab whoever did the opening. Chris stepped way back out on the other side, watching like a hawk. Sue took the spot opposite me, where she would be behind the opening door. Annie hid behind Chris, and Peggie stood behind me, back against the wall and hands in her pockets.

And we waited.

And nothing happened.

And we waited.

They were only seconds, but those seconds dragged when we watched, hyper-alert for the handle to jiggle and straining for the sound of voices on the other side.

After about twelve eternities of that, I whispered to Sue, "They ain't comin'."

"They're waiting for us," she whispered back.

I considered that, then grinned bleakly. "Well, we do got us someone with a combat power."

I didn't even have to look at Annie. She knew what I meant, and took a step back, waving her arms in desperate negation. "No! Burning people – burning people is *horrible*."

...yuck. She was right. Sue and I shared a grim nod. Using Annie's power on people was O-U-T out, now and forever. At least regular human type people.

Chris murmured, "I can probably make them surrender, but the problem is 'probably'. My power works maybe three times out of four."

"Which is bad odds when you're facing guns," Sue supplied. "I can get their guns pointed the wrong direction."

"Ah kin take 'em down iff'n I kin touch 'em," I whispered, wincing as my accent got thicker than ever. Forcing myself to calm down a little, I explained, "Ah got lousy control over how much I'll hurt 'em, but ain't nobody died yet, and we're short of options. Hopefully, Chris's power will do the job."

"Don't bother. It's starting," said Peggie.

Everyone looked at her. "What?" I asked.

Her expression gave us no clue. She stood with her hands still in her pockets, no longer relaxed, just resigned and a little disgusted and in waiting mode. "You'll know when it's time to open the door," she promised.

Sue scowled, and when she was actually mad, she had one awfully baleful face. "I don't like secrets. We're a team, whether we asked to be or not," she hissed.

Me, I tilted my head towards her and said more gently, "We're about to find out anyhow. No need ta push."

Sue transferred her glare to me, but it softened in practical acceptance, and she gave me a slow, reluctant nod.

Leaning out from behind Chris, Annie looked between Sue and me and squeaked, "I'd just... just like to say that you... that I am so grateful you two are here. I'd be curled up sobbing if you two weren't here and in control."

Peggie, who'd looked implacably laid back up until now, suddenly shivered and wrapped her arms around herself. "Yeah. Me, too," she whispered, a bit hoarse.

Chris's devilishly handsome red face turned nearly blank with shock, and he whispered slowly, "I... don't... know what shape I'd be in, but she's right. Thank you both." His focus returned, dark eyes settling directly on me, and he added, "I can't believe you're as brave as you are beautiful."

Peggie snorted loudly in laughter. Sue groaned, dragging her hand down her face, and complained

to the ceiling, "Why are boys like this?" Glaring in exasperation at Chris, she followed up with, "Tell the stunning redhead how you feel later, okay?"

I already felt completely adrift at this strange turn in the conversation, but the strangest thing by far was how Sue put that, as if she agreed with Chris's assessment.

Chris, hands raised guiltily, whispered to Sue, "I had to say it now, because I'm not sure what kind of 'later' we'll have."

Sue's scowl turned reluctantly accepting. "Point." Then her face turned ferocious again and her eyes focused with furious intensity on Chris as she hissed, "But if I see you using your power on Avery--"

Chris waved his hands, visibly horrified. "I would never!"

Behind him, Annie leaned out and shook her head so hard her raven-black hair fluttered. "He would never!"

Peggie snorted again, then lost control and started laughing out loud, arms clutched over her middle. Annie caught it next, in bursts of awkward giggles. I gave up and let out a series of embarrassed, "Heh heh heh" chuckles that were a lot like Chris's. Sue had a snigger, but it was great to see an honest grin on her face, even a wicked one.

When the laughter ran down, I had a feeling that we all felt a lot better, as a group.

"But the guards are still waiting for us," I whispered, pointing at the door. Because sad to say, they were. We were still very much in the woods.

"Not for much longer," said Peggie, back to her bland, even jaded tone. She was staring down at the floor, so I followed her gaze down to an ant that had managed to crawl through the tight gap at the base of the door.

Banging and sizzling started on the other side of the door. Men yelled. Perfectly calm, Peggie told the ant, "Cover them, but don't attack yet."

The yelling picked up. Peggie stood with her hands in her pockets looking patient for several more seconds, then turned the handle of the door, which turned out to be unlocked. Cracking it open just enough to peek through, she said, "Stand very still and they won't bite."

The yells turned into whimpers. I took the door handle and had a look through, myself. The two guards stood, arms raised in awkward positions, shivering and trying to be still. A line of ants thicker than rope followed the corners on both sides of the hallway down from the stairs to them, and ran up their shoes and under their pants.

Sue appeared beside us. She gave Peggie a respectful nod. "Bug control."

Peggie nodded back, going back to her look of bland, barely concerned patience.

"Stay where y'all are iff'n you know what's good fer you," I warned the guards. Closing the door again, I stepped well away from it, and beckoned to my teammates and maybe new friends.

They all looked at me curiously. Still keeping my voice low, I said, "This is too easy."

Chris gaped. "You think this was easy?"

Sue's jaw tightened as understanding hit her, and she explained to Chris sourly, "No, she's right. This isn't a prison, it's a trap. If our captor had meant for us to stay in that cage, something would have happened by now. We're being herded."

"We have to break out of the funnel," I murmured.

"Yes," Sue agreed. She looked up at the ceiling, way too far above us to reach. Dismissing it, she looked around at the walls. Her shadow writhed and stretched on the floor, flowing out over those walls.

It stopped, and Sue grinned in a fierce triumph. "Got it!"

She hurried towards a spot on the wall, and we followed. When we arrived we found a pinprick hole that as we watched widened, to just barely big enough for us to crawl through. The tunnel it formed went deeply through the wall, a real tunnel rather than just a hole, and came out in what looked like a bathroom from here.

It was mighty long, and Sue had a distinctly stiff expression. Worried about what she might be doing to herself for us, I asked, "Are you sure you can hold this?"

"I'd better, I'm going through last," she snapped back.

Well, the girl was determined. I went through first, in case anyone was scared, and the edge of reality or whatever the black shadow stuff lining the tunnel was felt like the chalkier kind of rubber. It held just fine, and I climbed out into a perfectly ordinary public bathroom with three stalls.

Chris, then Annie, then Peggie, and finally Sue herself followed. She did let out a sigh when the tunnel winked shut and dingy tile wall returned. Cautiously, I turned the handle on the bathroom door and peeked out.

This was another hallway, but completely different from the one we'd refused. It looked used, maybe a little seedy. Stains of old footprints marred a cement floor. The light came from clearly visible fluorescent tube lights in the ceiling, and until now I hadn't noticed I never saw what the light was coming from in the prison room. This bathroom was right at one end of the hall, with half a dozen doors lining it, four open and two closed, but no one visible. A wide elevator door, of the kind used for freight as well as people, sat at the far end of the hall.

"Look at the dirt. People use this place," Annie whispered. She was right. Not that I'd call this place filthy, but it was real in a way the prison and other hallway weren't.

I opened the door as quietly as possible, and we all snuck out. Chris in particular could walk crouched low, sneaking in almost perfect silence despite his hard-soled shoes. When he did, his tail hiked into the air and wriggled like an eager scorpion stinger. He went ahead, peeking into every room as we passed, but we never saw anyone.

The rooms themselves were somewhere between 'cluttered' and 'packed' with clothing in boxes and racks, a wild array of furniture, and one messy, ugly steel kitchen.

At the end, we reached the elevator, and its call button. I gave it a blank look, and asked the others, "Y'all think it's safe?"

"Safer than wasting time," answered Sue. Not angry, just making a very good point. I pushed the button, and the elevator dinged and opened immediately. The interior had scarred walls and clearly saw a lot of use, but again, was absolutely ordinary.

After being in one cage, being in a small, closed room was not comfortable, and everyone looked alert as the elevator door shut. The panel had only three buttons, B2, B1, and 1. A readout said we were on B2.

I hit 1. The elevator lifted. Nervousness crawled up and down my spine, and I found myself backing into a huddle with my teammates.

No. Swinging around, I looked at them all, and held out my hand, palm up. Sue laid hers in it. Chris followed next, then Annie, and then Peggie. We all squeezed, hard, then broke the grip and spun around to watch the walls again. Now we were ready, not afraid.

But there was nothing to be ready for. The readout switched to B1, then to 1. The doors opened, onto a big, comfortable lounge with potted plants, couches, and people sitting on those couches toying with phones and laptops, or eating doughnuts. Nobody moved violently when they saw us although several did stare. I took a step out of the elevator, my friends close behind me.

The room had a set of huge double doors on each side, with signs over them, 'Stage 66' and 'Stage 67'. The 'Stage 66' doors opened, and the woman who had kidnapped me stepped through, looking straight at us.

I gathered cold into my arms.

She clapped her hands. Not once. Actual applause.

The people in the room who hadn't noticed us yet all looked up. The ones who already had broke into grins, and began clapping, too. Over in Stage 66, a whole lot of people clapped, and some of them shouted approval.

"Run?" I whispered to Sue.

“Lots of witnesses,” she whispered back. “We're safe and I want to find out what's going on.”

Okay, I had a hankering for that myself. When our kidnapper stepped forward with her arms held out, I took one of her hands and did not suck her soul out through it.

Chris had her other hand, and with Sue, Peggie, and Annie crowded close, we let her pull us into Stage 1. It was a big, big room, with stadium seating full of regular looking people curved around to watch a small and empty wooden stage. Camera men turned cameras towards us as we entered, and our kidnapper announced to the crowd, “That's it, ladies and gentlemen! Our budding supervillains have escaped, and they bypassed half the challenges to do it. Greta will give them their prize money. Thank you all for watching our special youth episode of Real Dark Power, and let's give these incredible teenagers another round of applause.”

We stood on the wooden stage, cameras pointed at our faces, as the audience went crazy cheering.