

Captain Pluto and the Desolation Caves

by

Edward S. Daschle

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Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Edward S. Daschle has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in English.

Scott Elliott

Whitman College
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Chapter One: The Daughter of Heroes

Ruby Roscoe had never lived anywhere for long and now she was moving to Pluto. Since they didn't want to beat the moving truck to their new house, she, her cousin, and her grandmother had decided to take a break from driving at a beach. It was a beach with yellow sand. Above, the sun was yellow as well and the water was gray, but mellow and mostly still. There were no real waves; it was as though the ocean was snoring gently. Ruby Roscoe, the only Roscoe and the youngest amongst the three at 12-years-old, sat and burrowed her black toes and fingers in this yellow sand, silently wishing she was back at her old house watching T.V. She didn't know exactly what time it was, but her favorite show on the history channel about the first superheroes, Captain Pluto, Icarusman, and all the rest, would be on just about now.

Next to her, Ruby's cousin Lola Quince lay stretched out, relaxing after driving all morning. Though they were only cousins, they looked a lot alike. They both had very dark skin, bright brown eyes, and lots of pretty black hair, though Lola always seemed to know exactly what to do with her hair while Ruby mostly just kept hers loose and large. Lola was probably the smartest person Ruby knew, and it was Lola's fault they were moving because she had gotten into the best college in the country, Asphodel University in Pluto.

And beside Lola was Ruby and Lola's grandmother Tithonia Quince. Old Mrs. Quince was the only parent Ruby and Lola had. Though the three of them moved about all the time, never living in one place for long at all, she always managed to set up a plant nursery wherever they went. Despite her love of plants, Tithonia Quince didn't

like being in the sun. So there she was, sitting under a large umbrella, reading the book she had been reading in the car as Lola drove.

It was such a calm and peaceful beach and the three of them were so quiet that Ruby could never have expected anything remarkable to happen. Definitely nothing as interesting as superheroes.

“Hey Lola?” Ruby asked sitting up on her elbows.

Lola didn't seem to notice.

“Hey Lola?” Ruby asked again after a moment.

“What?” Lola muttered.

“Do you have a favorite superhero?”

“You're the one who's obsessed with them, I mean it's great that superheroes help people out but I have some problems with how—“

“Do you hear that?” Ruby interrupted her cousin, sitting up and listening as hard as she could. She thought she heard something rumbling and distant, like a thunderstorm on the other side of mountains.

Ruby turned around and her eyes became just about the size of soup spoons.

“Watch out!” she shouted.

Just as Ruby yelled, an enormous aircraft rumbled heavily, spewing smoke as it rushed towards the ocean. Looking like the belly of a whale as it passed over their heads, the aircraft whipped up the beach into a miniature sandstorm. Lola held onto her sun hat. Grandma Quince held onto her book and umbrella. And Ruby pressed her palms over her ears. The sound was immense—Ruby was almost certain that it would

make her go deaf! And then, with a great eruption of white and foaming water, the silver aircraft crashed into the gray ocean.

It was like someone had thrown a hammer at a mirror. The aircraft made terrible screeching, exploding sounds and the water that had been calm a moment before rose up in vast swells.

“Ahhhhhck!” Lola yelled as the first wave towered over them then crashed, drenching the three women in freezing cold ocean water.

Ruby wiped the water out of her eyes as best she could. “Are you okay grandma?” Ruby asked, going over to help her grandmother stand up.

“I’m fine,” Grandma Quince said through a frown, “but whoever it was who piloted that *thing* out there is going to buy me a new book! *The Chiromancer’s Red Hand* is completely drenched—look at this! The pages are falling out, now I’ll never find out what’s gonna happen to Theodosia and Rook...”

Obviously Grandma Quince was fine if soggy and Lola looked okay too. Ruby looked back out to the aircraft. *What was it?* she wondered. *Why had it crashed?* And somewhere between those questions, Ruby thought, *this is much better! Finally something actually exciting!*

“We have to see if we can help!” Ruby cried and began to run towards the ocean before Lola caught her arm.

“Oh no you don’t!” Lola yelled over the continuing screeches and gurgling of the slowly sinking airship. “That thing’s way too far out and there’s no way I’m going in to rescue you when you drown! And really, what do you think you’re going to do?”

“I don’t know, but *something!*” Ruby said, writhing and twisting, working to loose her arm. But as the tip of the airship’s last wing slipped under the gray water, Ruby stopped.

“I hope everyone got off okay,” Ruby said quietly.

Lola looked down at her cousin, who she usually thought of as a little sister and said, “I hope so too. You know, maybe they had parachutes or something, maybe they jumped out like ages ago.”

“Maybe,” Ruby said.

Grandma Quince came to stand with her granddaughters as they watched the last swirling waves and white water bubble over the sinking aircraft. She wrapped her arms around Ruby.

“You two had better get changed,” Grandma Quince said, “It’s nice out, but there’s no sense in standing around in wet clothes.”

Both girls nodded.

Ruby changed into a shirt and shorts, but she couldn’t keep her eyes off the water. She kept expecting for something—the airship, people, anything really, she didn’t exactly know what—to burst out of the water, but it seemed as though everything was calm again. The gray water gave no indication at all that just a moment before something had smashed through it.

“We should go,” Grandma Quince said, “We got pretty far ahead of the movers, but they’ll be at our new house soon, and I don’t want to keep them waiting.”

“Alright, Ruby come on,” Lola said to her cousin who was still staring out at the water.

“Wait a second,” Ruby said, “Let me at least find a shell, I want to remember this beach. And we should really tell someone, don’t you think?”

“I was going to,” Lola replied. Then she sighed and rolled her eyes, “But this stupid beach has no phone reception at all, like I didn’t even think that was possible.”

“As soon as we get to Pluto we can call the Council of Masks,” Grandma Quince said. She opened her door and then frowned, “But you know, I’m surprised that they didn’t already know about this—that was a pretty large aircraft you’d think...” But Grandma Quince trailed off when she noticed that Ruby wasn’t paying any attention to her at all. “Ruby honeypot, we really do have to go now, come on.”

But Ruby was watching the water, because there was something happening again. The water had begun to bubble like a pot of boiling pasta. As the bubbles grew more furious, the water pushed up as though trying to get away from something. And then, the foaming water began to glow red.

Ruby hopped back from the waves afraid that the boiling water would burn her bare feet as it lapped up on the sand.

Slowly, a head began to emerge from the water.

It was a woman. Her bright red hair swirled about her in the water like a miniature whirlpool and on her face she wore a golden half-mask. She continued to rise until it seemed she was standing on the surface of the water.

Ruby recognized her! It was the superhero *Purgatory*!

How many times had she seen her on the television? So many times! She knew all about Purgatory's history, about her powers, and about her arch-nemeses; Purgatory had the power to create and control fire so that she could punch harder than a rhinoceros and fly as fast as a hawk. She knew all the people who had been the superhero Purgatory before the current Purgatory. Purgatory wasn't her favorite superhero, but since she was one of the few living ones, Ruby couldn't be happier to see her outside of the T.V.

Purgatory walked out through the still boiling waves towards Ruby. And then she collapsed onto her hands and knees into the wet sand.

"You're Purgatory, right?" Ruby asked, taking tentative steps closer.

"Ruby!" Grandma Quince shouted, "Come back here!"

"Ruby!" Lola yelled as she ran forward to grab her cousin's arm.

Purgatory pulled off her mask, still crouched over on the sand, breathing heavily. Her body shook as she coughed up water. She wiped her mouth with one arm and then looked up. She was much younger than Ruby had expected. In fact, she looked like she could be younger than Lola. She had bright red hair, her ears stuck out, and she had pretty brown eyes. She was *definitely* not what Ruby expected.

"Hello," Purgatory said with a wide smile, "I'm glad you're here, would you mind giving me a lift back to Pluto? You see I'm a little bit tired."

Ruby, Lola, and Grandma Quince just stared.

With all their things crammed even tighter in the back of Lola's small red car (boxes of books, a potted plant—a cactus that they carefully wedged between a box of plates and

a tiny footstool—and three small suitcases of clothes and one clock ticking somewhere back there), they managed to clear a space for Purgatory next to Ruby. Grandma Quince had insisted that Purgatory take her seat in the front, but Purgatory told her she preferred the back.

For far too long, Ruby was too star-struck and amazed to talk. Finally, though, she found that her tongue could, in fact, move, and she finally asked Purgatory a question as Lola flipped the turn signal and merged back onto the highway towards Pluto.

“If it’s alright, wh-what’s your name?” Ruby asked.

“Since you’re all helping me out, I guess I can tell you, but you have to promise not to tell anyone else, Malik, I mean *Icarusman*, says I shouldn’t reveal my secret identity until I’m at least 18,” Purgatory said very quickly. “My name’s Jenny, glad to meet you. And I just realized that I don’t know yours.”

“I’m Ruby,” Ruby said, “and that’s my cousin Lola and our Grandma Quince, I mean—“

“Tithonia,” Grandma Quince added, “Pleasure to meet you. Would you mind telling us what all that was with the spaceship?”

Purgatory, or *Jenny*, as Ruby had to remind herself (it was so weird to think of talking to a superhero like a normal person), nodded. “Actually, it wasn’t a spaceship. I’m not really allowed to tell you too much more until I get back to Pluto and talk to the Council of Masks, but what I can say is that I was the only one on board when it crashed. It was remote controlled. Maybe I shouldn’t have even told you that much, but I guess you are allowed to know that it was up to no good.”

Grandma Quince nodded as though that was enough of an explanation for her. Ruby, however, frowned slightly; she wanted to know more about the airship.

But then she noticed Jenny looking at her so she quickly asked, “How did you become Purgatory?”

Jenny nodded again, “Yeah, well, you learned about the Nameless Desolation in school, right?” Jenny’s voice slowed and her eyes darkened just slightly. Ruby could tell that both Lola and Grandma Quince were listening closely.

Ruby nodded. The Nameless Desolation was what everybody called the destruction of Pluto city when the villainous organization O.R.B.I.T. and the superheroes of the Council of Masks came head to head in a deadly showdown. There were some who called it the Violet End for the horrible and beautiful flash of violet light that shot up into the air like an erupting volcano just as the city was destroyed. But most people called it The Nameless Desolation.

“Well, I’m the fourth Purgatory. It was the third Purgatory who fought in the Nameless Desolation twelve years ago,” Jenny went on. Ruby had known that much from her obsession with the superheroes. “I was only a little kid, but I was living in Pluto back then, so I still have some memories of what happened. Not a lot, it’s mostly just...anyways, the third Purgatory died in the Nameless Desolation and the council of Masks thought that his mask was lost,” and here Jenny held up her golden half-mask, “but then one day, a few years ago, I was exploring the Desolation Ruins with some friends and I saw this shining thing so I picked it up and it was the *mask*. Of course I put it on, which was kind of stupid you know, masks can be dangerous things, and then *blam!* I became Purgatory.”

Ruby noticed that her mouth was slightly open and her lips were dry. “That’s amazing!” Ruby exclaimed, “And now you’re like one of the most powerful superheroes in the world!”

Jenny smiled. “I don’t know, but it’s been exciting. Still, since your grandma’s here, I think I should tell you not to do dangerous things like I did. I set a very bad example. Don’t follow my example, promise?”

Ruby nodded slowly and Jenny smiled again.

“So why are you moving to Pluto?” Jenny asked.

Lola responded this time, “I’m going to school in Pluto, Asphodel University.”

“I didn’t want to split up the family,” Grandma Quince added, “The three of us is all we have, so you could say we’re following her around.”

“Asphodel University?” Jenny said, “I’m starting there in the fall as well, that’s great, meeting fellow classmates already!”

Lola turned around to glance at Jenny and the car swerved almost into the other lane. A couple cars honked and Lola turned back around and adjusted her hands on the wheel.

“Watch the road, cinnamon stick!” Grandma Quince cried. And then she turned to Jenny. “Well that will be great, I hope you two can get along. Oh! A superhero friend, how exciting!”

“Yeah, Grandma, I suppose it will be exciting,” Lola said, watching the road carefully, “Maybe we can get stuff for our dorm rooms together.”

Jenny nodded and smiled. Ruby was once again struck by how weird it was that this teenager was a superhero.

Jenny turned to Ruby and asked, “Where will you be going to school?”

“Thistle Academy,” Ruby replied shortly. She wasn’t especially excited to start at Thistle Academy. When she applied to start 7th grade at Thistle Academy she had to do an interview over the phone and everyone seemed very stuffy and old. They talked as though they were the best there was and that no one from anywhere else could be even close to as good. They had asked her questions she didn’t really know the answer to, such as, “Why did you switch schools so often? What do you want to do after you graduate? Where do you see yourself being in ten years? In twenty?” And on top of all that she would have to wear a uniform.

But Jenny only smiled again. “That’s a good school! My...well, I mean *I* went there too. I’m sure you’ll have a good time.”

By now they had reached the outskirts of Pluto and taller and taller buildings were beginning to replace the trees and houses. The highway took them down a hill, and so Ruby could see Pluto all laid out like a three dimensional map with moving parts. The city was much darker than Ruby had imagined. She had always thought cities were all shining glass and metal, but Pluto was dark; even the glass shone darkly and black in the distance, the metal giving off a dark grey sheen. And beside the city, the ocean was gray with sharp and frothing white points.

Next to Ruby, Purgatory placed her mask back on her face.

“Thank you, Tithonia, Lola, and Ruby, for driving me all this way, but I think it’s time for me to go—I have lots to report to the Council of Masks,” Purgatory said. Then, giving a small wave and a smile, she opened the door of the still moving car and

jumped out into the air. The door closed behind her and she shot through the air trailing bright orange fire.

“Wow,” Ruby gasped, face pressed to the window to watch Purgatory fly away.

The movers’ truck had already arrived at the new house and since the movers had a key, most of Ruby, Lola, and Grandma Quince’s things were already inside, ready to be moved about as much as Grandma Quince liked. She was almost never perfectly satisfied with how the furniture was arranged.

“Wait a moment, gentlemen,” Grandma Quince said to the movers. “I’ll need most of these things upstairs—I’m turning the ground floor into a flower shop.”

Ruby and Lola climbed the narrow staircase to investigate Ruby’s room. Lola would share Ruby’s room, but since she would be off at college soon she wouldn’t be staying there long. The room was nice with a medium-sized window looking out over the street. However, it was smaller than Ruby’s old bedroom. This house was probably half the size of their old house, narrow and tall, with three floors. It sat towards the edge of the city on a row of nearly identical houses that looked as though they had been produced on a conveyor belt by a large machine.

“This’ll be nice,” Lola said, looking at Ruby, “It’s, you know, smaller than our last house, but when I move out to college, you’ll have practically the whole place to yourself.”

Ruby looked up at Lola. “I’m going to miss you when you leave,” Ruby said.

“I’m going to miss you too,” Lola said. Then, with no warning, she wrapped her arms around Ruby and hugged her. “But I won’t be too far,” Lola said into Ruby’s hair, “You can visit me sometimes, if you want to.”

Ruby nodded.

Lola let her cousin go. “Hey, you know what? You still need your uniform. Why don’t we go shopping now while Grandma gets everything set up downstairs?”

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to get though,” Ruby said.

“Grandma does,” Lola replied, already turning to the door of Ruby’s room. “Let’s go!”

The shopping mall in the center of Pluto, Elysian Mall, looked to be about the same size as the third town in which Ruby had lived. Ruby, Lola, and Grandma Quince had only lived in that quaint town for a short time when Ruby was in 4th grade, but she remembered it fondly. Now though, she was a city girl where she would see more people in ten minutes than she might see in that small town in a day or even a week!

“We really should get your things first,” Lola was saying as she looked at the Elysian Mall map.

“Lola?” Ruby asked. “What do you think Purgatory is doing right now? I mean there was that big ship—I really wanted to know what that was all about.”

“I have no idea, but I guess she’s probably talking to the Council of Masks. And besides, she said that everything we would need to know about the ship would appear in the news later anyways,” Lola replied.

“Still,” Ruby said as they began to walk towards the shop, “I wish I had been able to learn more.” What she didn’t say, though what Lola might have guessed she was thinking, was that she would be watching the news on T.V. everyday to learn as much as she could about the airship.

Right in the middle of the mall there was a skylight and a large open space so that the light could filter down through all the nine floors. However, the most remarkable thing about the center of Elysian Mall was not the astounding skylight. There, at the very lowest floor and rising up so that it nearly reached the skylight almost two hundred feet up, was a blank, dark purple stone obelisk.

Ruby and Lola, at the railing of the third floor, craned their necks to look down and then up.

“That must be The Nameless Desolation Monument,” Ruby gasped. “It’s so much bigger than I expected it to be...and it’s in a mall. I thought it would be, I don’t know, somewhere without shops and things.”

“I wrote a paper about it,” Lola said, “The artist wanted it to be in the middle of Elysian Mall so that even while people were buying clothes and video games and whatever they couldn’t forget the great sacrifice so many superheroes made that day when they fought against O.R.B.I.T.”

Ruby nodded slowly. “I guess that makes sense. I don’t know how anyone could forget though. It was so terrible.”

“It was,” Lola said. And then she looked down at her younger cousin’s upturned face. “I don’t really remember much about it. I was in second grade I think, or

maybe only first grade. Grandma took you and me with her up to Seaside, Washington, when your parents told us we had to get out of Pluto—it was getting dangerous. But even from there we could see the sky turn bright purple. When we turned on the T.V. and learned what had happened I just remember grandma saying again and again that she couldn't believe what had happened. It was awful. I didn't really understand, but now that I think about it, it was probably one of the worst things I experienced.”

“And that's when my parents died, right?” Ruby asked quietly.

“Yeah,” Lola replied just as softly. She hugged Ruby gently and rocked from side-to-side with her for a moment. “They died as heroes, protecting you...me and everyone.”

“Do you think their names are on the monument?” Ruby asked.

“They should be,” Lola replied, “Why don't we go down and take a look—we can always get your school uniform later if right now we just want to spend some time here.”

Ruby and Lola went around and around down the escalators. Ruby was once more surprised at just how many people they passed in mere moments. And all of them wouldn't be alive right now if it weren't for the heroes who gave their lives during The Nameless Desolation.

Ruby's favorite story about her parents was the one Grandma Quince had told her over and over when she was younger and one she told herself when she was feeling tired or scared.

Liana Quince Roscoe and Ari Roscoe had been scientists who had helped people evacuate the city despite the dangers to their own lives. They worked closely

with the superheroes, helping to develop the tools and suits the superheroes needed to save the world time and time again. And the way Grandma Quince told it, because they worked so much with the superheroes, they began to act more heroically themselves. Grandma Quince had always been so scared for them, but always so proud as well.

When they reached the ground floor the monument looked even larger than it had from the third floor. As Ruby craned her neck back, it seemed as though the great, violet stone would crash down on top of her, all those piled up memories of heroes like an enormous and impenetrable thundercloud. Lola didn't at first notice that Ruby wasn't following her as she walked over to the obelisk.

"Ruby?" Lola asked. "Come here, the names of all the superheroes are carved into the base of the monument."

Wrapping around the base upon which the obelisk stood was gold metal and as Lola had said there were the names of all those who had died in the Nameless Desolation. *There are too many names*, Ruby thought wildly, *how could there be so many?* But she looked closer—she wanted to find her parents' names. She wanted the final proof that the stories Grandma Quince told her about them were true, that they were heroes.

Many of the names were those of superheroes who had both their civilian and hero names inscribed side-by-side, but there were other names that had no hero names inscribed beside them, names that proclaimed these people to be heroes without any superpowers at all.

"I found them," Lola said softly. She was sitting on her heels, with her finger pressed to the plaque.

And there they were, *Liana Quince Roscoe* and *Ari Roscoe*, Ruby's parents. They hadn't been superheroes, they never had any powers at all, but they had died heroes all the same.

Chapter Two: The Sidekick Kids

As it turned out, the uniform was not only disappointing, but also uncomfortable.

It had been two weeks since they moved in to their new and narrow house in Pluto, a week since Lola left to live across the city in her dormitory at Asphodel University, and now it was time for Ruby to start school as well.

Ruby tugged at the brown skirt and scuffed her brown shoes against each other. She didn't mind wearing skirts, in fact some of her favorite clothes were skirts, but she did like to decide how she dressed. Accompanying the brown skirt and shoes, the uniform consisted of white tights, a white blouse with a blue and red tie, and a brown jacket that she fortunately did not have to wear in the early September heat. In addition to the uniform, Grandma Quince had insisted on doing Ruby's hair in braids, which took almost half-an-hour with all the combing and then all the pulling. Ruby liked her hair looser. She had been begging Grandma Quince to let her cut it short and fuzzy on her head like the Superhero Princess Pow, a popular superhero with strength, speed, and super durability who also used many gadgets to fight crime.

She had been so excited and nervous to start her new school that now the uniform and her hair just seemed like a bigger deal than they would be on another day. Ruby thought that after moving around so much she would be used to being the new kid, but it was never something that she could really get used to. It was always a whirlwind of an experience. But at least this time she had had something to distract her while she waited for school to start up. The Council of Masks had slowly been

releasing information in the news about the giant silver ship that Ruby, Lola, and Grandma Quince had seen crash just two weeks ago.

The silver ship had first been on the news the night that they moved into Pluto, but the reporters had not been able to say much more than what Ruby had already seen. Over the next couple weeks not much more had come out about the airship besides that there had been nobody aboard; that it had been remotely controlled; and that the Council of Masks had retrieved it from the ocean so that it didn't end up polluting the coast.

“Good morning, Grandma,” Ruby said as she climbed down the stairs from her room to the kitchen on the second floor.

“Hello honeypot,” Grandma Quince said. She was standing before the stove and Ruby could smell French toast. The cinnamon and syrup suffused the air like fog. “I thought you deserved a treat on your first day. You just have to make sure you don't spill any of this syrup on your uniform, you hear? I'm not doing any last minute washing.”

“I promise, Grandma,” Ruby replied a little bit sarcastically. Then she quickly asked, “Can I watch the news? I want to see if there's any more about the airship.”

“A girl your age watching the news,” Grandma Quince said, shaking her head as she turned away from the stove holding a high-stacked plate of French toast.

“I'll be a teenager next June,” Ruby said, “I'm not going to be a kid that much longer.”

“Oh!” Grandma Quince cried, clutching at her heart, pretending to have a heart attack, “Don't tell me that my little girl is growing up! Well, eat your breakfast and I'll

let you watch the T.V. I can't complain too much if you care about what's happening in the world."

Just then a bell rang from downstairs, signaling that a customer had just shown up in Grandma Quince's plant nursery.

"Well you eat up, I have to get this one," Grandma Quince said, bustling down the stairs. "Be right with you!" she called as she went.

Ruby clicked on the small television that sat on the kitchen counter next to the microwave and poured too much syrup on her breakfast.

"—pulled out from the ocean just last week," the reporter in the nice suit was saying, "As of yet, we have little information—wait! This just in from the Council of Masks: we now have a suspect, the criminal organization O.R.B.I.T.. O.R.B.I.T., the organization that had a large, though still mysterious role in The Nameless Desolation over a decade ago, has mostly been underground since that time, working to fund black market and other criminal activities. But now it appears they are coming back out of hiding. This is bad news indeed, but the hero Purgatory managed to bring down the aircraft and it is the Council of Masks' hope that by analyzing the craft and the contents, they can figure out what O.R.B.I.T. intends to plan next. Whatever it is, it can't be good, but we at Arum News Networks will keep you updated as the story progresses, this is Oona Swensen, signing off."

Ruby turned off the television and thought about what the reporter had said as she finished her breakfast. If it really was O.R.B.I.T. then this was just the beginning of things. O.R.B.I.T.'s plans, from what little Ruby knew about the criminal organization, always had secret twists and turns like a complicated labyrinth.

“Ruby dear! You done eating? Because it’s time to go!” Grandma Quince called up the stairs. Ruby hopped her backpack onto her back and quickly dashed her plate to the sink then galloped down the stairs.

“Good morning,” said the big-eyed girl at the bus stop. She had long, straight brown hair and she was as pale as a vampire in a movie, but her smile looked a lot kinder and she didn’t have the fangs.

“Good morning,” Ruby said back.

The girl just stared at Ruby and didn’t say anything for what felt like far too long. Finally she said, “My name is Ivana, what’s yours?”

“Ruby Roscoe,” Ruby said.

“Do you have two first names?” Ivana asked, blinking her large eyes.

“What?” Ruby asked, “No, my first name’s Ruby, Roscoe’s my last name. That’s a weird question.”

“Not really,” she replied, “A lot of people I know have two first names—it’s not so weird.”

For a long while both girls were silent during which time more people in brown uniforms showed up at the bus stop. A boy walked up to Ivana. He had the same big eyes, but his hair was dirty blond. He whispered something in her ear and she rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. Then she turned to look at Ruby and smiled.

“This is my brother, Frey,” Ivana said.

“Frey Stryzgonov,” Frey said, extending a hand. Ruby shook it, though it seemed a bit too formal.

“Ruby Roscoe.”

“Frey’s my younger brother,” Ivana said with another wide smile.

“Don’t say it like that,” Frey said exasperatedly as he ran a hand through his hair, “I’m older than you.”

“But Hector’s a lot older than you, so you’re my younger brother,” Ivana replied, then she smiled at Ruby again.

Frey shook his head.

It was then that the bright and yellow school bus arrived. Frey jumped up the steps and Ivana smiled then followed her brother.

Ivana took an empty seat across the aisle from two other girls. “Ruby,” Ivana said sweetly, “Why don’t you sit next to me? I can introduce you to my friends.”

Ruby sat and the girls across the aisle leaned forward to introduce themselves.

“My name’s Hana Yamaguchi,” a bubbly girl with long, straight black hair, olive skin, and almond-shaped eyes said, “and this is Mabel Swensen, her aunt’s a news reporter on T.V.” The curly-haired blond girl with the green eyes smiled gently and nodded. It seemed that Mabel didn’t mind at all that Hana had introduced her.

“The three of us can show you around the school and introduce you to all the things you should do—you know, the clubs you should join, the coolest people to be friends with, and the best places to sit at lunch,” Ivana explained, “and what you shouldn’t do, or I guess the people it would be better to avoid.”

The bus pulled to a stop and a few more brown-uniformed students stepped up. Then with a whining mechanical sound, the lift by the stairs lowered and a boy with reddish-brown hair sitting in a wheelchair rolled onto the bus.

“Like him,” Ivana whispered conspiratorially to Ruby. Across the aisle Hana and Mabel leaned in as well. “I bet you feel a little sorry for him because he’s in a wheelchair, but don’t let it fool you, he and his friends aren’t nice at all. They have a little club and keep everyone out.”

“Oh,” Ruby said. When the boy in the wheelchair passed them he glanced at Ruby and she was startled at just how blue his eyes were. And then he continued to the middle of the bus where there was a special place for his wheelchair and where a few other kids greeted him. “He doesn’t look so bad.”

Ivana shrugged, “Well, you could make those kind of mistakes for yourself, or you could let us help you out.”

Soon the bus reached the tallest buildings of the city with dark glass and metal imposing as they loomed over the school bus.

“What do you like to do?” Ivana asked suddenly, turning to Ruby again. She had been talking to Mabel and Hana and so Ruby was surprised; she had been looking out the window, wondering just how many superheroes had flown by these same windows and sidewalks!

“I—“ Ruby began, but then she stopped. This was always a tricky question. It wasn’t tricky because she didn’t know what she liked. No, it was tricky because whatever she said would tell people what to think about her. What she said would create the first impression people had of her. And since she was always the new kid in school, sometimes a first impression was all she ever got. But she didn’t want to start with a lie either and so she said boldly, “I’m interested in superheroes.”

Ivana's face fell for a second. It was as though her smile was trying to stay on her face, but was being pulled off by hooks. "Oh," Ivana said.

"I also like to read...pretty much everything actually," Ruby said quickly. Reading was geeky, but not nearly as weird as being interested in superheroes. People who were interested in superheroes tended to be criminals, danger-seekers, or wanna-be-heroes. Or at least that's what Ruby had been told a few times in the past.

Ivana's smile returned at half strength. "We're almost at school. I have Mrs. Yamaguchi for homeroom. Who do you have?"

"I don't know yet," Ruby replied, "I have to go to the office to find out."

"Well then, I hope I'll see you again," Ivana said with a smile and a wave. Just then they pulled up to the school and Ivana stood and walked off the bus with Mabel and Hana.

Thistle Academy was the most beautiful school Ruby had ever attended. Mostly she went to schools in rectangular block buildings. A couple had been brick, but most had been ugly, painted concrete structures. But now here was Thistle Academy. The school had a wide front garden with a straight cobblestone path leading to the front entrance lined by small, dark green hedges and thin, white-trunked trees. There were already many small groups of students huddled and talking up and down the path, though most were streaming through the front doors already. The doors themselves were old-looking and dark wood and tall with black, iron hinges and fastenings. Strangely, however, the doors were the only old-looking part of the building. The rest was all dark glass and crisscrossing black iron beams so that the school looked very much like the dark office buildings back in the center of the city. In that way, the

school, though beautiful, was also somewhat terrifying and Ruby hesitated before she walked between the black iron gates.

“Excuse me,” a voice said.

“Oh,” she said turning. The boy in the wheelchair was right behind her.

“It’s just you’re blocking the path,” he said.

Ruby stepped out of his way and he wheeled his chair up the path to the school.

In the front office, the secretary, a neat looking man with a sharp part in his gray hair, told Ruby that she would be in Mrs. Yamaguchi’s homeroom class. There was also a boy sitting in the office. He had messy black hair, dark eyes, and a bored look on his face.

“Mr. Merlo?” the secretary said, “You may lead Ms. Roscoe here to homeroom.”

The boy stood slowly and glanced at Ruby. “Come on,” he said lazily and slouched out of the door.

The boy led Ruby past glass hallways. Even the classrooms had dark glass walls, though the floors were dark wood like the front doors. The boy looked as though he fit right in here and Ruby felt that she was an outsider these walls would soon reject. She imagined herself as the superhero Captain Pluto infiltrating the evil lair of Sister Rusalka or Lady Grendel of the Lake. Their evil headquarters had been by far the scariest that the team on Ruby’s second favorite television show, “Spelunking the Superlair” had explored.

“Um,” she said, quickening her pace to catch up, “What’s your name? I don’t have to call everyone here by their last names do I?”

“No,” he said. They walked by a third classroom before he continued, “Felix, that’s my name.”

“Ruby,” Ruby said. She was getting the weirdest feeling about this boy. She didn’t know whether she thought he was supposed to be a cool kid here or just the most annoying person she had ever met.

“This is us,” he said, “Classroom 204.” So saying, he pushed open the doors and entered, Ruby trailing behind him. He hadn’t really needed to tell her, because the classroom number was printed in bold, white lettering on the dark glass door.

Every single student, all in the brown school uniforms, turned to look at Ruby. She held her head up, miming confidence she didn’t actually have.

“Welcome,” Mrs. Yamaguchi said from the front of the room, “You must be Ruby Roscoe, our newest student.” Mrs. Yamaguchi had a movie-star voice, all silky syllables and deep, pleasant tones. She had black hair pulled up in a bun at the back of her neck and amber, almond-shaped eyes and olive skin. Overall, she looked far too pretty to be a teacher, Ruby thought. At least from her experience of teachers.

“Yes,” Ruby replied, hoping her voice didn’t waver as she stood unsurely in the doorway, holding her bag tightly. “Wait, are you related to Hana Yamaguchi?”

Mrs. Yamaguchi smiled and walked through the desks to greet Ruby properly. “She’s my daughter. I’m glad you’ve already begun to meet the other students. Now,” she said, gesturing for Ruby to follow her to the front of the room, “Why don’t we have proper introductions? Class will be starting in just a moment.”

And in fact, right as Mrs. Yamaguchi finished speaking, the school bell rang, a classic bell-sound that felt out of place amongst all the glass and dark wood of the school.

“Good morning class,” Mrs. Yamaguchi said as everyone took their seats. Ruby stood next to her, forcing herself not to look at the ground. In one corner of the room, Ivana smiled at her. Ruby smiled weakly back. “We have a new student in our school—we don’t get many of those, so I’m going to have Ruby introduce herself.” Mrs. Yamaguchi nodded for Ruby to speak.

“Hi,” Ruby said cautiously, “My name’s Ruby Roscoe. I moved to Pluto just a couple weeks ago and I really like the city so far...” she wondered if she should say that she had seen the plane crash into the ocean. It might make her popular, but it would also make people notice her way too much, and she wasn’t sure if that was what she wanted.

“Who’s your favorite superhero?” someone called. It was Felix. Ruby frowned; she wouldn’t have expected him to speak up like that. He was leaning back in his chair, looking as though he wished he could put his feet up on his desk.

Ruby replied confidently, “Captain Pluto. She has everything—super-strength, she’s practically untouchable, and she has some magical powers. Basically, she’s the best. Who do *you* like then?”

The class was remarkably silent and Ruby suddenly realized that maybe the question had not been one she was supposed to respond to.

Felix only smirked and shook his head.

After homeroom, Ruby had English with Hana who was happy that Ruby had her mother for homeroom class. Next was Painting class with both Hana and Mabel who told Ruby to meet them at lunch, and then there was Geometry where Ruby recognized the boy in the wheelchair, though he didn't seem to notice her, and finally it was time for lunch.

Ruby had a map of the school that the secretary had given her, but she just followed the stream of brown-uniformed students to the lunch hall. Once again Thistle Academy was different. The food in the cafeteria looked better and the tables were dark wood squares with black iron edges and the whole cafeteria was mostly divided into many different sections by glass partitions.

As soon as Ruby had her food, a steaming square plate of pesto and chicken pasta parmesan, she went to look for Hana and Mabel. The duo, Calder and Caroline Roade, on "Spelunking the Superlair" never seemed to have so much trouble finding what they were looking for.

She meandered between the tables, seeing both much young kids in miniature uniforms and older kids, maybe even 12th graders. But where were Mabel and Hana?

Finally, she decided to look outside, it was definitely warm enough to sit out on the small patio across from the large purple play structure that the younger kids got to play on at recess. There were only a few tables outside and most of them already had students sitting around them talking and eating. But one table was still free and there they all were, all four of them; Mabel, Hana, Ivana, and Ivana's brother Frey. But wait, there were actually five of them, the boy in the wheelchair sat between them. That was

surprising, Ruby had been certain that Ivana said she didn't like him and he didn't like them. But she walked over to join them.

"You shouldn't be here, Walter," Ivana was saying, "We got here first. Your friends might have had it last year, but you don't get it this year."

Frey nodded, "There's four of us and only three of you, we outnumber you now that the twins moved away. So we get the patio."

Hana and Mabel both nodded.

The boy, who Ruby supposed was called Walter, said something, but Ruby couldn't hear him. Whatever it was, it made Ivana stamp her feet. Then she pushed Walter. She rolled back a bit and then said something else Ruby didn't hear. Ivana pushed him harder and this time and he fell out of his chair.

"What's happening?" Ruby called, putting down her plate. She began to run towards the small group, "What *ARE* you doing?"

Ivana turned and now her face really did look like a vampire, no kind smile at all. Frey frowned at Ruby, but Mabel and Hana only stared at their shoes. Almost as soon as Ruby saw her, Ivana's face dropped into a pleasant smile once again, but Ruby could not forget the expression she had seen on Ivana's face.

"Ruby," Ivana said with sweetness dripping from her lips as though she had just bitten into an apple, "We were just telling Walter here that he and his friends aren't allowed to invade our lunch space. We got here first, but they want to kick us out, which isn't fair at all, I'm sure you see."

Ruby frowned, "That's not what it looked like. It *looks* like you just pushed him for no good reason at all. It's not like we have to eat here."

“We?” Ivana spat, “You know what, new girl? I really don’t think I like you after all. I’ve completely changed my mind about you. Why don’t you see if Walter and his reject friends will eat with you instead?”

Ruby tried to meet Mabel and Hana’s eyes, but they only looked down at their shoes. Frey glared at Ruby while he stood next to his sister.

“Back off Ivana, this is our table, you know that,” a drawling voice said.

Ruby turned and saw Felix walking towards them across the patio beside a tall girl with short black hair.

Ivana’s scowl deepened, but, surprisingly, she turned and walked back towards the inside of the cafeteria followed by Frey, Mabel, and Hana. Hana looked back at Ruby and shot her what Ruby thought was an apologetic look.

Felix put his plate on the table while the tall girl sat down and then he bent over to help Walter back into his chair.

“Thanks Felix,” Walter said. Felix just shrugged and sat down.

Ruby stayed standing, not sure what she should do now. Had she already managed to lose the only friends she had made so far?

“You’re Ruby, right?” Walter asked.

“Yeah, that’s me, the new kid who probably has no friends now.”

Walter shook his head, “I think you could be our friend. I mean you stood up to Ivana, which is definitely something.”

Felix looked like he wanted to say something, but then he glanced at Walter. It seemed as though looking at Walter made him change his mind, because he didn’t say

anything, only shrugged and began to eat. The tall, black-haired girl looked up at Ruby impassively and nodded.

Ruby sat next on the bench next to where Walter was sitting in his chair.

“Thanks,” she said, “I’ve been the ‘new kid’ a lot so…”

“So I bet you were really worried about making friends,” Walter said astutely, “Well you’ve got us now, right Felix.”

Felix looked at Walter, but couldn’t hold his stare, only blushing and looking back down at his plate, “Yeah.”

It was as though his earlier cool-guy vibe had just vanished, Ruby thought, but then he looked back up at her and his eyes were steady and confident again.

“Yeah, you can join our group,” Felix said in his slow voice, “We call ourselves the Sidekick Kids because all of us had superheroes for parents.”

Ruby’s eyes widened; she almost couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She knew that many superheroes had lived in Pluto before The Nameless Desolation, but she hadn’t ever thought of superheroes having kids—it was just too weird to think about.

“Wait,” Ruby said, “all of you have superheroes for parents?”

“Only my mom,” Walter said, “she was Captain Pluto.”

Ruby’s jaw dropped. She thought her jaw might have fallen off and she couldn’t say a word, she was so shocked. Here he was, the son of her favorite superhero ever.

“She died in The Nameless Desolation along with Jin’s mom,” Walter said. He gestured to the tall girl: “Oh, I forgot we hadn’t really introduced ourselves. This is Jin

and this is Felix and I'm Walter. Nice to meet you." Walter held out his hand to shake, but Ruby was still too surprised about Walter's mom to do anything.

Felix smirked. "Ruby's in my homeroom. Her favorite hero's your mom, Walter."

Walter smiled and then laughed, but it was a kind laugh. He wasn't laughing at Ruby. "That's really cool! A lot of people don't even know about Captain Pluto."

"But how's that even possible?" Ruby said shocked. She sometimes forgot that not everyone was as obsessed with superheroes as she was. "Captain Pluto was like the coolest hero ever! She had all the coolest powers!"

Walter smiled wider. "You know, I think she scared some people. Being able to talk to the dead and stuff like she could is a scary sort of power."

"I mean I guess so, but also the coolest!" Ruby cried, almost shouting. She had completely forgotten about her food.

"You're going to want to eat that before it gets cold," the tall girl named Jin said.

Ruby looked down at her plate and then back up at Jin. "Who was your mom?" Ruby asked, "I mean what was her superhero name?"

"Good Witch," Jin said shortly. Ruby got the impression that Jin really didn't like to talk much.

"What about your parents, Felix?" Ruby said cautiously. She still wasn't sure how Felix would respond.

"I never knew them, they're both dead," Felix said coldly. Ruby saw him glance at Walter and then he sighed in exasperation. "But if you really needed to know,

my dad was Icarusman before Malik Samar, who's Icarusman now, though I bet *you* already knew that, and my mom was Purgatory before this new girl."

Ruby's eyes glinted, but she managed to keep her mouth from falling open this time, "You're practically superhero royalty, I mean Icarusman!?! That's so..." Ruby realized that she probably looked way too excited and so stopped just short of saying "cool" and instead ate a big forkful of pesto chicken pasta and chewed voraciously.

Icarusman was one of the very first superheroes. Actually, he was the *second* superhero that the world learned about almost a century ago. He had all the typical powers: flight, super-strength, super-speed, and he was very durable. But, he also had the power to heal and get back up again even when it seemed he was defeated; this always made his fights exceptionally exciting. And now, Malik Samar as Icarusman was the public face of the Council of Masks and the premiere superhero in the whole world.

Felix smirked, but it seemed like a nicer, prouder smirk than before, and he said, "Yeah, I guess you could say that."

Walter rolled his eyes and they all finished their lunches, Ruby more excited than ever about her new school, about living in Pluto, and about the superheroes in her life.

Chapter Three: Purple Crystals and Golden Masks

Ruby sat with the Sidekick Kids every day on the bus in the morning on the way to school. She had gotten used to Ivana's glowering dagger eyes and the way Hana and Mabel avoided looking at her. And she had gotten used to the way Jin hardly ever said anything and the way Felix almost always seemed too cool to care (except when Walter was around) and she had especially gotten used to talking to Walter. She had never made such good friends so fast at any school she had attended before.

Towards the end of September Ruby came home from school with a permission slip for her grandmother to sign. Along with the rest of the 7th grade class, Ruby would be visiting the Desolation Caves. These caves were at the very center of the city and the very center of The Nameless Desolation that killed so many superheroes and others eleven years ago, a year after Ruby was born. And classes of 7th graders could visit them.

"Did you ever visit the Desolation Caves?" Ruby asked Lola over the phone. Though Lola was only across the city, sometimes it felt like she was all the way across the country. Lola said that she was enjoying her classes, *really* enjoying her classes, and her roommate turned out to be the superhero Purgatory whom they had met on the beach. That was the sort of coincidence that made Ruby especially jealous of Lola.

"I haven't been back to Pluto City since before The Nameless Desolation—there's no way I could have seen them. Take pictures for me," Lola replied.

Ruby was about to say that she would and ask Lola about college, but then a special news bulletin flared across the T.V. screen.

"Wait a sec Lola," Ruby said, "I'll call you back."

“Ruby—“ was all Ruby heard from Lola before she put the phone down.

“Welcome viewers to a special announcement on ANN,” the newscaster, Mabel’s aunt Oona Swensen said on the television, “We’ve recently received exclusive footage of the inside of the Council of Masks’ headquarters and as you will see in a moment the inside of the ship that the council recovered a month ago.”

The footage began to play. It looked as though the camera crew were carrying the camera because everything was unsteady. There was the silver side of the aircraft that looked like the belly of a whale, which Ruby remembered from when it flew right over her head and then the camera crew stepped through a doorway. Everything was dark, but then a light came on and Ruby could see glints of metal as well as a few stacks of boxes in the interior of the craft.

“As you can see there are boxes and a number of unidentified machines; however, and this was shocking to us, there is also—“ and here the camera moved deeper into the aircraft showing what looked like a large metal circle, “what appears to be some sort of containment device. We believe that this ship, whatever else it was carrying, was also transporting a prisoner.”

The footage of the inside of the aircraft stopped, freezing on the last image of the metal circle. Oona Swensen reappeared on the screen as the image of the metal circle shrunk and moved to the right side of the screen.

“But now we have to ask, just who would O.R.B.I.T. consider dangerous enough to transport in this way? Who would a criminal organization want to keep locked up? Here at ANN we intend to find out. This is Oona Swensen, signing off.”

Ruby was still holding the phone, but she had completely forgotten about it. This was huge news and also terrifying. She, Lola, and Grandma Quince had been so close to the plane when it crashed into the ocean. What if instead of the superhero Purgatory it had been the captive who had emerged from the ocean? Ruby was half excited by the thought, but also half terrified and she shivered.

Grandma Quince came up the stairs at that moment.

“I’ve just closed up the flower shop for the night,” she said as she entered the kitchen. “We nearly cleaned shop! You wouldn’t believe how much these Plutonians love my flowers! We should have moved here ages ago, you mark me!”

“Did you hear the news Grandma?”

“What news honeysuckle?” Grandma Quince asked.

“They had a prisoner on the plane we saw,” Ruby explained. “Remember?”

“Well that is exciting, but it doesn’t matter much to us, I don’t think,” Grandma Quince said, bustling about the kitchen pulling out dinner things, “The superheroes will clean this all up.”

Ruby nodded. Then she remembered her form, “Grandma can you sign this for me?”

The next day the whole 7th grade class boarded a yellow school bus headed for the Desolation Caves. There were two homeroom classes for the 7th grade. One was Mrs. Yamaguchi’s class that Ruby and Felix were in and the other was Mr. Hickory’s class that Walter and Jin were in along with Ivana, Mabel, and Hana. Frey was an 8th grader.

As they were getting on the bus, Ruby asked Walter, “Why does Frey hang out with Ivana?”

“I heard she does his math homework,” Walter said with a shrug, “He’s not stupid, but Ivana’s really smart, so maybe that’s true.”

Ruby, Felix, and Jin had waited to board the bus so that they could go on last with Walter who had to wait for the lift to come down for his wheelchair. Mrs. Yamaguchi and Mr. Hickory sat at the front of the bus, just behind the driver, passing out instructions detailing the day’s plans as each student passed. It wouldn’t be a long trip, only about fifteen minutes to the center of the city with traffic getting in the way and then they would follow the guided tour through the city. When they got on, Ivana made a point of ignoring them. Ruby looked at Ivana and her friends, still hoping that there was some way they didn’t have to hate each other. A lunch table really didn’t seem like a big deal.

“Alright,” Mr. Hickory shouted to the 50 gathered 7th graders as they stepped off the bus. He had a big deep voice and a big gray beard and he looked as though he could have been an extra in a gladiator movie when he was younger. “We will be going through the Desolation Caves in groups of 10—your group assignments are marked on your sheets. I will be in the first group; Mrs. Yamaguchi will be in the last group. Clear? Good. Now line up.”

Ruby was disappointed to find that she wasn’t in the same group as any of her friends. Ruby was in group 2 while the others were right behind her in group 3. “See

you on the other side then,” Ruby said. Even so, she was excited and nervous about the trip through the caves wondering what she might see and learn.

The entrance to the caves was at the bottom of a large crater. There was a new bridge being built, but for now they had to go down by elevators. Crowded into the elevator with nine other brown-clad 7th graders and her tour guide, Ruby had to stand on the tips of her toes to see out the glass sides.

The whole crater was spread out before her, the dead gray earth a great circle at the bottom of sheer crater walls. At the very center there was a mound, more of a small mountain, Ruby decided, of dark gray rock studded with purple crystals. At the very peak of the mound an enormous purple crystal that almost reached as high as the crater walls pointed straight up. With the sun shining through it, parts of the crater were bathed in purple light.

Finally, the elevator reached the bottom.

“Good morning all!” Group 2’s tour guide said. She had a smile brighter than a chipmunk with a pile of peanuts. “I’ll be your tour guide as we explore the Desolation Caves. The ground zero that eleven years ago was the thriving center of Pluto.”

Before Ruby could follow her group however, someone grabbed her arm. She spun around—it was Felix.

“What?” Ruby said.

“We’re going to explore,” Felix said coolly, running his other hand through his hair.

“Wait, what? Explore?” Ruby asked.

Jin nodded and Felix added, “Yeah. We’ve been here before and our tour guide’s a complete dud. So we’re going to go on our own tour.”

“No, wait a second, we’d get in so much trouble!” Ruby said, “And won’t they notice you’re gone?”

“Like Felix said, our tour guide’s kinda half asleep and I doubt yours would notice just one missing kid,” Walter replied. Then he sighed. “I have to stay here though,” he said gesturing at his chair, “Even someone stupid would notice if a kid in a wheelchair went missing and besides, I’d just slow you down.”

Ruby still wasn’t convinced and Felix could tell.

“I have a map,” Felix said, opening his brown jacket and showing Ruby a folded piece of paper. “We miss all the interesting things on the tour. So come on already.”

Ruby nodded and even smiled.

“Take pictures for me,” Walter said smiling, and rolled off in his wheelchair.

Felix smiled at Walter’s back, “No problem, I’ll even bring you back a souvenir.”

Ruby, Felix, and Jin waited until they were inside the caves before they made their escape. The caves were well lit, the sides shining purple with the same strange crystals that studded the outside. Running along the center of the cave was a metal walkway that echoed with loud plunks as the 7th graders walked. Off to the sides of the walkway there were smaller caves that led deeper into the mound.

Pretending to be very interested in a wall, Ruby waited until her group got far ahead of her and then clambered over the railing and landed softly on the other side. A moment later, Jin and Felix joined her.

“So here we are,” Ruby said. She still didn’t trust their plan; it didn’t seem worth the risk, but Ruby wasn’t one to chicken out of a challenge, especially if it involved superheroes in any way.

Felix took out his map then pulled out flashlights from his backpack. All three of them clicked on their flashlights. Felix shined his on the map and said, “If we go along this way, we should get to the ruins of the old Pluto Cathedral.”

“Hold on. I thought these caves weren’t very old,” Ruby said.

Felix rolled his eyes, but Jin said, “They are. The cathedral is older.”

“The Desolation Caves are made out of destroyed buildings and stuff, I don’t *really* know how it happened, but…” Felix said with a shrug. “Come on.”

The tunnel the three of them followed was narrower than the main tunnel they had left behind, and like that tunnel, this one was also studded with purple crystals. But when Ruby looked closer, she saw that the walls were not only studded with crystal, but also with what appeared to be fragments of glass windows, bits of wood, and even what looked like coins, painted porcelain bowls, and a whole mirror. The mirror was warped, making Ruby’s head appear to be the shape of a peanut.

“Weird,” Ruby said as they continued down the tunnel.

“Wait,” Jin said. She raised her flashlight so that it illuminated cobwebs and flicked purple off the crystals. The beam of the flashlight also revealed a door. It was a

wooden door and Ruby was surprised to see it looked a lot like the doors of Thistle Academy. However, these doors were beautifully carved with chipped angels and splintering saints. Ruby imagined that before The Nameless Desolation these doors would have been the centerpiece of the city. And around the doors Ruby could see bits of pale red stone and glittering bits of stained glass windows.

“The cathedral doors, right where my map said they would be...” Felix whispered as though he hadn’t actually expected to find them.

“So this is what you wanted to find?” Ruby asked.

“Obviously,” Felix replied. He reached out to push open the door, but then the ground seemed to growl and tremor. It was like ogres were having a wrestling match just behind the cathedral doors. Ruby, Felix, and Jin stumbled about as the ground shook.

“An earthquake!” Felix shouted.

“Watch out!” Ruby cried, grabbing Jin and Felix, pulling them back as the wooden cathedral doors imbedded in the walls began to shake and crack with a crash that echoed about the tunnel walls so that it sounded like a thousand doors had just crashed to the dark ground.

As the dust and the wooden splinters in the air settled, Ruby, Jin, and Felix coughed, rubbing their eyes.

“Are you both okay?” Ruby asked as she stood.

“I’m fine,” Felix responded as he and Jin stood up as well, “You saved us.”

Jin nodded.

“Do you think everyone is alright?” Ruby asked. “That seemed like a pretty bad quake. We should go back and make sure everyone’s okay.”

Where once there had been an open tunnel behind them, there was now only a pile of dark gray rock, purple crystal, and all manner of glass and wooden debris.

“We’re trapped,” Jin said without emotion.

Behind them the Cathedral doorway loomed large and black. They might not have been able to go back, but they would be able to go forward. The deep unknown of the cave seemed to be calling them, and Ruby thought she felt a rush of wind, pulling them in. But that was impossible with the tunnel blocked behind them.

“Then let’s go in,” Ruby said, taking a step forward.

Felix brushed his hand through his hair and Jin shrugged her backpack higher on her shoulders and stepped through the doors beside Ruby. They shone their flashlights into the gloom of the cathedral, not sure what they would find. Surprisingly, they found that most of the cathedral was intact—columns lined both sides of a long nave filled with rows and rows of wooden pews in many states of disrepair. Some of the pews were as shattered as the doors outside, others were tipped over either in the earthquake or at some other time, but many were remarkably intact. With cobwebs covering everything like gray lace, the cathedral looked as though it might blow away in the three thin beams of their flashlights. Everything was cracked and crumbling. For a moment, Ruby was reminded of this box she had once found in one attic of a house she had lived in filled with broken or cracked, but still pretty decorative planters. She had wondered what happened to them, but Grandma Quince just said they were junk and weren’t worth taking in the move.

“How do you think we’re going to get out?” Ruby asked tentatively. She didn’t want to seem scared when Felix and Jin didn’t seem to care at all.

“We should look for a door,” Jin said, but Felix shook his head.

“No, I want to explore a bit, then we can go,” Felix replied and began to walk down the aisle of the cathedral.

Now Ruby couldn’t help herself, “Felix, I don’t think you’re getting it. We’re trapped. As in we can’t get out. As in we need to find a way out or we will die in here. So we should look for some other way out like Jin said or we should start digging.”

“Fine, you two can do that, but I want to look around a bit more,” Felix replied.

Ruby couldn’t believe him! How thick was he? They really were trapped and the more Ruby thought about it the more panicked she became. What if they really couldn’t get out? What if they tried to dig out and the cave just collapsed on them? What if—

“I found another door,” Jin said from the right nave arcade on the other side of the columns. Ruby followed Jin. Beyond the door there was a corridor. It looked promising, like an escape route. She could do escape route, that was exactly what she wanted to find.

“Felix!” Ruby called, “We found something interesting over here, come on!”

Ruby thought she could hear Felix’s sigh from across the cathedral, “What?”

“It might be a way out and it is also something new to explore, good for all of us! So let’s go!”

Felix joined the girls and they shone their flashlights down this new hallway. Like the main nave of the cathedral, this hallway stretched into the blackness further

than their flashlights could shine. It made Ruby think there could be endless monsters or super-villains waiting just out of reach, ready to hurt them. They entered the hall and walked slowly. If anything, it seemed that there were even more cobwebs in here.

“This is really strange,” Ruby said, “And freaking awesome—we’re in a cathedral buried in the side of cave! And we’re trapped...”

“Look over here,” Jin said, directing her flashlight to a small alcove in one wall. Something glinted in the beam. And there also seemed to be someone standing in the alcove, waiting for them like a shadow on a sunny day under a tree; always ready to hop out, but not at first visible.

Ruby jumped, but then a moment later she realized that it wasn’t someone, but a statue. Actually, it was a headless statue as though this statue had died in the French Revolution. And balancing on the statue’s outstretched and frankly enormous hands were two golden masks. They glinted pale yellow and bronze in the flashlights’ beams.

“Are those...?” Ruby whispered.

“That’s what they look like,” Felix replied just as softly.

“Masks of superheroes,” Jin said quietly.

At first, no one moved to touch them. They all just stared and let the gold of the masks wash in through their eyeballs. Then Ruby stepped forward, reaching her hand out tentatively as though this were a museum and she expected an alarm to go off, calling museum security to remove her. But just before she touched the mask, Felix stopped her.

“Wait,” Felix said, “Don’t you know masks can be dangerous? I mean yeah, superheroes wear them, but so do supervillains—they can curse you or something...”

“Well we won’t know until we try—“ Ruby began.

Jin interrupted her by reaching out and grabbing the mask on the left. They waited, but nothing happened, and Jin shrugged. Felix shrugged as well.

“I did promise Walter I’d bring him back a souvenir,” Felix said, smiling his half-mouthed smile. Jin handed him the mask and again nothing happened, so Felix put the mask into his backpack, and then zipped it up again.

As Ruby reached for the second mask, the ground shook again.

The ground swayed the way a snake slithers. The walls shook off their cobwebs. The headless statue wobbled as though it had come to life. Ruby, Felix, and Jin shouted and fell to the ground. The marble flooring cracked. The golden mask Ruby had been reaching for fell from the statue’s hands. Just in time, Ruby lunged forward and dove. She caught the mask just before it hit the still rocking floor. But just as it seemed that the shaking was about to stop, the statue teetered and tipped forward.

A light streamed from Ruby’s hand. A golden light. The mask was glowing! But Ruby didn’t even have time to register how amazing this was as her hand acted on its own and slid the mask onto her face.

Ruby felt an amazing, rushing surge of strength and reaching forward she caught the falling statue. The statue shattered and Ruby stood. It was as though she had become a planet and all the power of gravity was her strength. She felt that she could lift up the sky and then fly through the clouds.

Though it should seem warm, this strength filled Ruby coldly.

“Ruby?” Felix asked. His voice had lost all semblance of its usual cool. Even Jin seemed quieter than usual.

“Ruby?” Felix asked again and Ruby turned to look at him, not quite feeling like herself.

“Yeah?” she replied. She looked down at her hands. Despite the glow that now emanated from her face, she didn’t look any different than she had before. That was a relief. No, she thought, that was much better than a relief! This was amazing! She was wearing a superhero mask, wasn’t she? Did this mean? Could it mean?

“We have to go,” Jin said. Ruby thought she could hear a bit of shakiness in Jin’s voice.

Felix seemed to be regaining his usual coolness, “Do you have any plans, now that you’re wearing that mask?”

“I don’t really...” Ruby began, but then something strange happened: the broken statue on the floor, which looked more like wood chips than statue, began to rebuild itself. But now it glowed white like a movie ghost. “What!!” Ruby shouted.

“What?” Felix asked.

“The statue!” Ruby said, “It’s moving, it’s—!” Then she realized it was not just the statue, but in fact large portions of the whole building. It was as though the cathedral was attempting to stand up again after being knocked over by the earthquake. And everything glowed brightly.

Now this was not something Ruby had ever seen. Not on any of the superhero television shows, not in her favorite comic books, or anywhere else. This seemed more like magic.

“What?” Felix asked again, this time impatiently. She realized he was jealous. He was jealous she had the mask and he didn’t.

“Can’t you see?” she asked, “Everything’s glowing...the cathedral! It’s putting itself back together again!”

Jin and Felix looked around, but either they didn’t think a giant building inside a tunnel putting itself back together again was interesting or they couldn’t see what Ruby could.

“Wait,” she said, “You can’t see it, right? Try putting on the other mask, maybe then...”

Felix unzipped his backpack and slowly, with slightly trembling hands, he put the mask to his face. But nothing happened. The mask didn’t glow and a second later, Felix took it off, frowning deeply. “It’s not working. Why isn’t it working? Why did it only work for you?”

Felix had almost shouted that last part.

“Felix,” Jin said, “We have to get out of here.”

“Yeah, follow me,” Ruby said cautiously, glancing at Felix who wouldn’t meet her eyes. As the cathedral rebuilt itself, it also seemed to be beckoning to Ruby, as though telling her how she could guide her friends out. As Ruby looked about the pew-filled space, the tall, stained glass windows at the very back of the Cathedral seemed to glow brighter than anything. She could even see a hint of pale color.

“There,” Ruby said pointing. “We can get out through the windows.”

“I don’t think they’ll open,” Felix said.

“We can break them,” Jin said.

Another small tremor shook the building and the three of them wobbled about. This tremor was not nearly as violent as the first two and after a few seconds it stopped. “Let’s go,” Ruby called, “before there’s another one!”

Standing before the windows that glowed bright and white for Ruby, the three of them looked up. Jin and Felix couldn’t see what Ruby was seeing through her mask, and they shone their flashlights at the windows.

“These windows don’t look like a way out,” Felix said, “There should be light coming through, these are windows after all.”

“Just trust me,” Ruby said, “and stand back.” Jin and Felix took a few steps back. Ruby felt her new strength flooding through her body. She leapt and crashed into the middle window, fists first. The window shattered with a squeal as sharp as the shards of glass and rock that rained down around Ruby. Behind the window, the thin layer of the tunnel rock cracked and exploded out with a deep growl.

Light flooded through the new-formed hole, and Jin and Felix squinted.

In that moment, Ruby felt all the strength drain out of her. The mask, it seemed, had fulfilled its purpose in getting them out and now it went back to being a simple gold face.

Ruby took off the mask and followed Jin and Felix through the hole, careful not to bump up against the sharp edges of stained glass.

“There you three are!” Mr. Hickory boomed.

Ruby, Jin, and Felix had snuck into the group of 7th graders waiting at the end of the tunnels. It seemed that no one had been hurt by the earthquake, but everyone was

talking boisterously. There was a palpable static feel in the air of both excitement and fear.

“I was worried you had died back there,” Walter whispered to Felix. “But you’re all okay?”

Felix nodded and was about to say more when Mr. Hickory strode over to them.

“Are any of you hurt?” he said, his voice unnecessarily loud for how close he was standing to them.

“We’re fine,” Ruby said. Her voice was shaking, but Ruby had never felt so excited! Or rather excited and scared. She hadn’t really decided yet which was worse; getting in trouble for sneaking away from the group or the fact that she had almost died.

“Yeah,” Felix agreed, “We got cut off from the group when the earthquake happened, but we found our way out.”

Everyone was listening in, and Ruby saw quite a few people turn to each other, either coming up with their own ideas of what had happened or talking about just how cool Felix seemed right now. His voice didn’t shake at all. He seemed perfectly calm as though getting trapped in a cathedral buried in rock during an earthquake was no big deal at all.

“Well if you’re sure you’re okay, we’ll still need to inform your parents,” Mr. Hickory said. Then he turned to the group at large, “Many parents have called in, but we will have pick up back at school as planned. No need to make things complicated.”

As the 7th graders split up into their homeroom class groups and followed their teachers back to the buses, Walter smiled at Felix and shook his head, impressed, Ruby

thought, that they had all managed to get away with sneaking off. Ruby wondered if Felix really would give Walter the mask. She wasn't sure he would. Inside her own backpack, Ruby felt the solid weight of her own mask, wondering just what she would do with it and excited by all the possibilities.

Ivana Stryzgonov glared at Ruby and the Sidekick Kids as they returned to the bus single file with the other 7th graders. It was clear that she didn't believe Felix's story and was angry they had gotten away with breaking the rules.

Chapter Four: The Unlucky 13th Birthday Party

On Monday, Ruby's class was still talking about the fieldtrip to the Desolation Caves and the earthquake that nearly brought the caves crashing down on top of them. The school hadn't suffered any damage at all, or at least, if it had, it had all been cleaned up by the time class began. Instead, everyone just wanted to talk to Ruby and ask her how she, Jin, and Felix had made it out, what they had seen in the tunnels, how they had managed to escape getting in trouble for it all. Lola had called on Friday as soon as Ruby had gotten home, making sure that Ruby was alright. Ruby had told Lola all about the field trip, so naturally Lola had been worried about the caves. She even came home for a day that weekend just to help clean up the shop—some of the pots and plants had fallen and spilled their dirt all across the floor. Ruby was glad to see Lola, even though it had taken an earthquake.

But back at school, Ruby felt overwhelmed by all the attention, and that was when Ivana stomped over to her.

"I think we both know that you and your friends are not telling the truth," she said, her voice dripping rattlesnake venom. Her arms were crossed. "What actually happened?"

A couple weeks ago, Ruby might actually have told Ivana what exactly had happened, but now she knew that she couldn't trust her. At lunch everyday Ivana glared at Ruby and her friends, completely ignored them, or, worst of all, smiled as though she held their fates in her two hands.

"If you tell me why you hate us so much," Ruby replied.

Ivana's frown deepened. And then, sharply, the frown became a sickeningly sweet smile and Ivana said, "Well, I'm sure you had your reasons for breaking the rules. You were probably just feeling lonely. New kids always do. But Ruby, you have to remember, you don't have to break the rules to make friends here. Only the worst sort of people would do that." Ivana spun Ruby one final, wide smile and sauntered back to her seat before Mrs. Yamaguchi arrived and class began.

At lunch, it was beginning to get cold, but Ruby and the Sidekick Kids still sat at the table on the outside patio.

As they explained to Walter everything that actually happened in the caves, including finding the superhero masks and Ruby's remarkable newfound powers ("But," Ruby said, "They went away really fast"), Walter's jaw stayed open as though he was about to take a bite of a very large sandwich. Felix only mentioned Ruby's mask; for some reason he didn't say that they had actually found *two* masks. He even cut Ruby off when she tried to say so.

"...and," Felix concluded, "no one even found out that we had snuck off at all!"

"Ivana was so mad this morning in homeroom!" Ruby said beaming.

Walter just shook his head, his wide-open mouth morphing into a wide, toothy smile.

Later, when Ruby was back home from school and her grandma was tending the flowers in the shop downstairs, the phone rang.

“Hello,” Ruby said, “If you’re trying to reach Quince Nursery you should call—“

“Ruby?” Walter’s voice said on the phone.

“Walter? Yep it’s me,” Ruby replied. “What’re you calling for?”

“Well I meant to ask when we were still at school, but then I completely forgot after hearing that you got SUPERPOWERS! But what I wanted to ask was; do you want to come to my birthday party this Friday? I’m turning 13.”

“Of course I want to go!”

“Awesome! Come to my house 6 o’clock on Friday—I’ll give you the really official invitation in school tomorrow.”

“To tell you the truth,” Ruby said softly, “I’ve never actually been to a birthday party. I mean besides mine and Lola’s—she’s my cousin and basically my sister.”

“Really?” Walter asked.

“Yeah, I always moved a lot, so I never really got to know people really well.”

“That’s too bad...Hey, can you tell me more about what it was like to have superpowers? I’ve wanted to be a superhero for as long as I can remember so...”

“Uh-huh,” Ruby said, “it was really strange. When I was wearing the mask, it felt like I could pick up the whole world if I *really* tried to. And it was like my body was filled with hot lava, but like in a good way? I don’t think it’s possible to *actually* describe it if you haven’t, y’know, felt it yourself.”

“Okay,” Walter said, “Maybe the mask might work for me?”

“Maybe,” Ruby said. “But you know the weirdest part wasn’t that super-strength, it was later. The whole church was glowing—everything turned bright white.

It was like the whole building was talking to me, telling me, I don't know, but sort of what it was supposed to be before it was in the tunnel. I *know*, it sounds weird..."

"That *is* weird, but so cool! I wonder which superhero's mask you found."

"Yeah," Ruby said, "I don't remember any superheroes who can talk to buildings."

"Me neither," Walter replied. "Well, I'll see you tomorrow and at my party!"

Ruby was so excited about Walter's birthday party on Friday, she didn't notice the new neighbor moving in next door.

"I want you to go greet her," Grandma Quince said, "I've got a shop to manage and you've finished all your homework. You *have* finished all your homework haven't you?"

"Yes grandma," Ruby said. "But I wanted to watch *Spelunking the Superlair*."

"Later," Grandma Quince said, "Just go say hi, it won't take you more than a second." Ruby sighed, but there was no saying no to Grandma Quince.

At first Ruby didn't see the new neighbor, but then she spotted what seemed to be a large box on legs.

"Hello?" Ruby said to the walking box.

"Oh!" a woman's voice said. The woman holding the box set it down on the ground and leaned back, stretching. She was tall and tan with black hair up in a messy bun on top of her head and slightly frowning eyes so dark blue they looked violet. Somehow, even though she was moving into the small house next to Ruby's, this woman looked wealthy.

“I live next door, just above the flower shop,” Ruby said for her introduction.

The woman put her hand out to shake, “I’ve really got to get all my *junk* moved in, so maybe I’ll meet you later?”

“Sure, I guess,” Ruby said. She wasn’t sure if the woman was rude or just really concerned about getting her small mountain of boxes moved inside. It did look as though it was about to rain, Ruby thought. “You know, if you wanted, I could help you move your stuff in.”

The woman’s slightly frowning face softened a bit, like ice cream in summer. “That’s sweet of you, but there’s some...well, some delicate things in these boxes. I study masks and a lot of my instruments are delicate”

“You study masks!” Ruby practically shouted, “But that’s so cool!”

“I guess so, I’m not a superhero though, so it’s really not all *that* exciting,” the woman replied. “Now I really should get going—it looks like it might rain and I still have a lot of boxes to move.”

Ruby nodded. “Oh, I never told you my name. I’m Ruby Roscoe, and I guess I’ll be seeing you around since we’re neighbors and all.”

“Sounds like it, my name’s Ophelia—“ she grunted as she lifted the box again, “Ophelia Thistle.”

Ruby said as she watched Ms. Thistle walk up the path to her house. Then Ruby frowned. “Hey! Wait a second! Your last name—I go to Thistle Academy!”

“Yeah,” Ophelia Thistle called back, “my grandfather started the academy *ages* ago. Be seeing you.” And then Ophelia Thistle closed the door behind her. Ruby shrugged still not sure whether this Ophelia Thistle was rude or just busy.

Ruby learned from calling Felix that what Walter really wanted was a new deck of *The Masked Duels*, the most popular trading card game based on real life superheroes. So that Friday, after school, Ruby went with Grandma Quince to the mall and bought a deck and wrapped it up with some blue and red striped wrapping paper. Ruby, though obsessed with superheroes, had never really been interested in *The Masked Duels* card game. You had to have a good friend to play the card game with.

Grandma Quince drove Ruby over to Walter's house, which was just far enough so that it wouldn't have been comfortable to walk.

"Hello!" Ruby said when the door opened. She was holding up Walter's present so that whoever opened the door would definitely see it and know that she was there for the birthday party.

"Hello, I'm Walter's father. The name's Maxwell, you can just call me Max or Mr. Hart if you want. Why don't you come in?" Walter's father stepped back and held the door open so that Ruby and Grandma Quince could enter. He was a tall man, big, but not fat, so that he seemed to take up the whole doorway without really filling it. He had reddish-brown, fox-colored hair like his son and wore round glasses and a gray tweed suit jacket over a black t-shirt. "Just head straight back down the hall and you'll find everyone in the living room."

"Bye sweet pea," Grandma Quince said, "I'll pick you up at 9."

When Ruby entered the living room, she saw Jin, Felix, and Walter already there. Though Ruby had changed out of her school clothes and was wearing her favorite shirt—a blue and white shirt that had Captain Pluto's black star in the

middle—and blue jeans, she was a bit surprised to see everyone else also not wearing their normal, brown school uniforms.

There was Jin, wearing pants and looking a lot less rigid than normal, and Felix and of course Walter, but Ruby also noticed Mabel and Hana. She was seriously surprised to see those two—she was so certain that they hated Walter and the rest of them. But Mabel and Hana just waved at Ruby and smiled. Ruby looked to Walter and then to Felix.

“Walter’s dad makes him invite all the old superheroes’ kids in our grade,” Felix explained caustically. He was wearing black jeans and a black shirt with a round and balloon-like cartoon skull on it and a silver necklace.

“Wait a second!” Ruby cried. “Are you saying that they—I mean,” Ruby stuttered, turning to Mabel and Hana, “that *you* have superhero parents too?”

“Yep!” Hana said brightly. Mabel just smiled gently and looked. “My dad was the Phantom Crescent.”

“That’s so cool!” Ruby almost shouted. She threw her hands over her mouth in embarrassment, “I mean, I’m sorry—I lost my parents in the Nameless Desolation too.”

“My parents weren’t heroes,” Mabel said. Everyone looked at her, surprised. Ruby got the feeling that Mabel talked even less than Jin. “I don’t know what happened to them during The Nameless Desolation.”

“But they were heroes, Mabel!” Hana said. “Even if they didn’t have masks and superpowers, they were still heroes!”

Ruby nodded, but Mabel only shrugged. An awkward silence that filled the room like spilled milk.

“I’m glad you got here,” Walter said, waiting maybe just a bit too long to say something. “Now we can really start the party. My dad ordered pizza.”

“Where should I put your present?” Ruby asked.

Walter was about to answer when someone else walked into the room. It was a teenaged girl with bright orange hair and bright brown eyes. For a moment Ruby couldn’t place where she had seen her before and then it clicked and the memory came back like a waterslide. It was the superhero Purgatory! But what was she doing here in Walter’s house?

Purgatory’s eyes widened upon seeing Ruby. “Um,” she said.

“This is my big sister,” Walter said. “Jenny? Can you show Ruby where the presents are?”

“Uh yeah, sure,” Jenny said.

“Wait a second,” Ruby said, but Jenny grabbed Ruby’s shoulder and marched her out of the room before Ruby could say anything.

As soon as Jenny had closed the door to the present room, which looked like it must be Walter’s bedroom, Jenny said, “You can’t say anything.”

“What?”

“I mean, you can’t tell Walter I’m Purgatory,” Jenny said, “Or my dad. I know you recognize me from when we met on the beach, you know, but you can’t say anything. They don’t know I’m Purgatory and my dad would be *so* angry if he found

out. He's like totally paranoid about anything superhero related since my mom died because she was a superhero and because of Walter's accident—“

“I promise I won't say anything!” Ruby said, interrupting what seemed like an endless flow of words coming from Jenny.

“Great!” Jenny said smiling. “Sorry about that, but yeah, it would be really bad if they found out. It might even put them in danger you know.”

Jenny took the present from Ruby and put it on the small pile on the bed.

“What did you mean about Walter's accident?” Ruby asked.

“Oh,” Jenny said, “I think he should probably be the one to tell you about it, but well...obviously you've noticed he's in a wheelchair, right?” Ruby nodded. “It happened when he was six. He pretended he was a superhero, actually I think he was pretending to be Captain Pluto like our mom, and somehow he managed to get onto the roof. I have *no* idea how he did that at all. He's never even been tall for his age. But what he told us afterwards was that he was trying to fly. He really hurt his back and hasn't been able to walk ever since.”

“Oh,” Ruby said, looking at the ground. She suddenly realized that she had never even considered how Walter had ended up needing the wheelchair. “I'm sorry.”

“No, it's okay. I mean, I think Walter's gotten used to being in the wheelchair, I mean now that he's turning 13—I can't even believe that my *baby* brother is a teenager—he's been in the chair more than half his life,” Jenny said.

“Pizza's here!” Walter's dad called from the dining room.

Jenny smiled her wide smile at Ruby. “Let’s go—I’m not really part of the party, but I *do* like pizza. Oh, and Ruby? Your sister and I are like totally besties at college.”

“She’s my cousin,” Ruby replied and Jenny just smiled and shrugged.

Walter opened his presents after pizza and cake. “Wow, Ruby—I’ve been wanting to get the *Princess Pow Theme Deck* for ages!”

Walter opened the other presents from Mabel, Hana, and Jin, and then he got to Felix, but Felix only gave him a gift card. Hana scoffed and Ruby was confused. She thought Walter and Felix were best friends. A gift card is not a best friend gift. But then she saw Felix give Walter a very meaningful look.

“Hey Ruby? Do you think you can sleep over?” Walter asked after Mrs. Yamaguchi came to pick up Hana and Mabel.

“I don’t know, I’ll call my grandma,” Ruby replied. “She doesn’t let me have my own phone, so can I borrow yours?”

“Sure, it’s in the kitchen. It’s really old, but it works.”

Ruby wrapped the spiral cord around her fingers as she talked. “Grandma, Walter wants to have a sleepover, can I stay?”

“I don’t know about that,” Grandma Quince said.

Ruby sensed what Grandma Quince was worried about. “I won’t be the only girl here. Jin’s staying and Walter’s sister Jenny is here.” Ruby almost told her grandma that Jenny was the superhero Purgatory, but then remembered her promise not

to tell anyone. Still, it was hard. It wasn't as though Grandma Quince would tell Walter.

“Well, alright. But you better be good for Mr. Hart.”

“Oh, and Grandma, could you bring my toothbrush and stuff...oh, and my backpack, I have something in it I wanted to show Walter.”

“Okay Walter,” Felix said. They were all sitting in Walter's room in between the sleeping bags and Walter's bed. “Now I'm going to give your *real* present.”

“Why didn't you just give it to me before?”

“Because of Mabel and Hana,” Felix said with a small scowl. He was in all-black pajamas with little cartoon skulls on the pants, but he still somehow managed to look vaguely dangerous. “They were acting all nice now, but I know they'd tell Ivana in a second...also I don't know if Maxwell would approve. Your dad really doesn't like superhero stuff.”

“Just show me already,” Walter said.

Jin nodded, but Ruby could tell that she already knew what the present was. Ruby had her own guess.

Felix pulled out a box from his backpack wrapped in dark purple wrapping paper and handed it to Walter. “The maid wrapped it,” Felix explained.

“I thought so,” Walter said as he carefully removed the purple paper as though it was gold leaf, “it's too pretty.”

Felix rolled his eyes.

Walter opened the box and his eyes and mouth went wide. He made a few croaking sounds like a small chorus of frogs.

“What is it?” Ruby asked excitedly, but judging by Walter’s expression, she already knew.

Slowly, Walter lifted from the box the second golden mask that Felix, Jin, and Ruby had found in the Desolation Caves. It glimmered in the lamplight as Walter held it before his face, looking through the eyeholes.

“I thought Ruby had the mask...” Walter said quietly.

“I do,” Ruby said, “wait a second.” She rummaged through her bright red backpack that Grandma Quince had brought for her and pulled out her own golden mask.

“Wait, you found two!?” Walter shouted.

“We did but—” Felix began.

“And you didn’t tell me!”

“I said I’d bring you a souvenir and since your birthday was coming up...” Felix said with a shrug, “I thought it would be a good gift.”

“It’s perfect!”

“And,” Felix said, with a bit of a begrudging tone, “I guess it’s sort of from all of us, since we all went together.”

“It is,” Jin said, crossing her legs as she changed her position on the floor and leaning forward. “You should try it on.”

Ruby nodded, “The mask worked for me back in the cave, but it hasn’t worked since and that one never worked for any of us.”

Walter nodded slowly and held the mask in two hands. He raised it to his face. Ruby noticed the mask glowing slightly, new lines forming in the smooth golden surface. These lines were forming a new pattern. Ruby gasped.

Walter set the mask on his face and the room went dark.

“What’s happening?” Felix whispered.

“Power outage?” Jin ventured to say.

“I don’t know,” Ruby whispered back. She gripped her gold mask tighter in her hand.

“Walter?” Felix asked.

In the dark, the golden mask that Walter wore glowed. It looked terribly like a skull when everything else was completely leeched of color and light. Like a detailed constellation that ancient people might have used to tell the future, this evil-looking golden face seemed to be predicting something bad.

“Felix?” Walter replied softly, “Jin...Ruby? Are you there? I can’t see anything in this mask.”

Ruby felt the darkness swirling as though brewing a miniature and sluggish but powerful tornado. She could feel the darkness tugging at her.

“Th-the mask!” Ruby said. “It must have been what made everything dark!”

“Walter!” Felix shouted. “Take it off!”

The silhouette of hands appeared, blocking the golden light of the mask. “I can’t take the mask off!” Walter cried.

An eerie, soft howling began to fill the room. It sounded like wind rushing between trees, or wolves at night, or maybe even a chorus of children. Ruby shivered.

She hoped she would never find out just what howling was, because whatever it was sounded as though it wished them all ill.

From the blackness that surrounded them, Ruby began to see what appeared to be emaciated—terribly thin—faces staring at her and pale, grasping fingers.

“I don’t like this,” Jin said softly.

“Walter...” Felix said again. Ruby heard him moving about, trying to reach his friend.

“I think—“ Ruby began, but she was cut off as her own mask began to glow golden. The mask rose out of her hands, the only other light in the blackness. And then it moved forward to rest on her face. Just as before, the mask fit perfectly as though it had been made specifically for her.

And as before, Ruby felt strength flow through her body, more strength than she thought should ever be possible. Her whole body began to glow slightly with a soft, dark gold light like a campfire. Jin and Felix’s faces appeared, both looked scared, but while Jin was looking towards Ruby, Felix was staring at the brighter golden mask still on Walter’s face. And Ruby could see why. Spewing from the eyeholes, like much too large tears, were small white faces, all howling, adding to the rustling sound that filled the space.

Felix reached forward and brushed at the ghost tears, but then he flinched back as though struck by an electric shock, “Ow!”

“Felix?” Walter said. His voice wavered and echoed hollowly. “What’s happening? I feel cold...”

“Ruby!” Felix said, his voice desperate, “do something!”

“I’m not sure wha...” she began, but trailed off when the faces that dripped down Walter’s mask and the faces that swirled hideously about them began to glow brighter and look less ghostly and more human and even alive. “Oh!” Ruby gasped, “What?”

The faces turned towards her as one.

The Ferryman has called us, a chorus of voices said in Ruby’s head, but now you have called us. What is it you want?

“The Ferryman? What do you mean ‘called you?’ I haven’t done anything like that,” Ruby said. “Wait, do you mean putting on the mask?”

There was no reply.

“Okay then,” Ruby said.

“Who are you talking to?” Jin asked.

“Stop talking to yourself and do something! You have the mask!” Felix cried.

“I’m *trying* to concentrate,” Ruby said, “I think I’m talking to the faces. Okay, *faces*, or whatever you are, if you want to know what I want then...I want you to go away, stop what you’re doing!”

Yes, Captain, we will leave you.

One by one the faces winked out like candles.

“They’re leaving,” Ruby said calmly.

“Good job,” Felix said. “Then maybe we can get the mask off of Walt—“

I will not.

“What?” Ruby said.

“I said—“ Felix began.

“No,” Ruby said, “It was one of the faces it said—“

I will not! I am the Ferryman! No child will claim my mantle, especially not the son of Captain Pluto!

“What was that?!” Felix shouted.

“You heard it too this time?” Ruby asked. In the dim glow of her mask and Walter’s, she could just make out Jin nod. Felix was looking about wildly, trying to find the source of the voice.

But he didn’t need to.

Out of the blackness, which was even darker now the other pallid faces had vanished, a face that looked far crueler and far less human than the others appeared. It looked stretched and sharp, all the angles accentuated.

You have no power over me, young Captain! You are unskilled and weak. I will devour you all and then maybe I shall return to the world of the living.

An enormous, pale hand with fingernails like daggers swung out of the darkness and knocked Walter out of his wheelchair to the ground. Walter cried out in pain and Felix shouted in anger and shock. Jin flinched, but glared steadily at the face.

“Stop!” Ruby shouted. “Don’t you dare touch him!”

She felt the strength surge through her. She rocketed off from the floor, using her legs like tightly coiled springs. With one fist forward, she collided with the pallid face.

For a moment, Ruby seemed to hang in the dark and swirling air. But then, with a sound like a car crash, the face began to splinter. The face growled, and then

shattered, the pieces shooting away until they were nothing but pinprick glimmering specks and then they were gone.

But the voice echoed one final time. *Perhaps you do have power, little girl. But you cannot destroy me. But I, I can destroy this boy.*

The lamp flickered twice and then turned on with a blinding flash after the darkness. Jin and Felix threw their arms over their eyes. With a clatter, the mask fell from Walter's face to the floor. Ruby reached up slowly and took her own mask off. It had stopped glowing and only glinted gently in the lamplight.

"Is everyone okay?" Ruby asked looking around. Her eyes had somehow managed to adjust in no time at all.

Jin nodded, but on the floor Walter was shaking and his face was the same color as the ghostly faces had been.

"Walter," Felix said softly. He put his hand on Walter's shoulder.

"That mask belonged to Ferryman," he said softly. "Ferryman was my mom's arch-nemesis. He was the most dangerous villain my mom ever fought and she never defeated him—he was just too dangerous and now...and now I have his mask and...and it turned me into him..."

"No!" Felix insisted, "no, it didn't. We saw him, he tried to kill us, that wasn't you. Walter, that wasn't you."

"But the mask worked for me when it didn't work for any of you," Walter explained, looking Felix right in the eyes. "It turned me into the new Ferryman! So that means I am him!" Walter began to cry in earnest. Great big tears dripping down his face.

Felix held both Walter's shoulders and pressed his forehead to Walter's. "No," he said again. "I think what actually happened is Ferryman wants revenge. But I won't let him hurt you. You're my best friend, Walter. I won't let an evil ghost do anything to you."

"Ruby is the new Captain Pluto," Jin pointed out, her voice calm, but sounding somewhat strained, like she had to force her words between her teeth.

"And I'm your friend too," Ruby said. "I've only known you for a month, but you are one of the best friends I've ever had. And anyways, that's what superheroes do, right? They protect people!"

Walter smiled thinly at Ruby as tears still spilled down his face. "I think you'll be a good Captain Pluto, Ruby." And then he laughed in a way that was half choking and bitter. "I always thought I would be Captain Pluto when I grew up, but now I'm the worst villain Captain Pluto ever fought."

"Maybe you are Ferryman then," Felix said, leaning back, but still holding Walter's shoulders. Walter looked at Felix, hurt. "But maybe that means you can make Ferryman into something else. Maybe you can be a superhero Ferryman."

"Yeah!" Ruby said. "Like Phantom Crescent, Hana's dad! He was a thief, but then he changed and became a superhero and helped save the city."

Jin nodded and reached out to touch Walter on the shoulder as well.

Walter was silent for a moment and then he laughed again. "Maybe you are right! But we're too young to be superheroes anyways. We can only be innocent bystanders in danger. Help me back into my wheelchair."

Felix helped Walter back up.

“I’m never putting that mask on again,” Walter said bitterly, staring at the mask on the floor. “I should lock it away and put it somewhere no one can ever get it.”

They all looked at the mask and with its blank eyes in the gold face it seemed as though the mask was staring back at them. Ruby stared at her own mask in her hands. Somehow, she knew she would wear the mask again, even if it were dangerous.

“Hey, Walter,” Ruby said, looking up from her mask. “Do you want to hear something funny that happened this week? I forgot to tell you at school.” Walter only shrugged, but Ruby took that for a signal that she could go on if she wanted. “I got a new neighbor.”

“And?” Felix asked. He glanced at Walter.

“*And,*” Ruby said, “Her name is Ophelia Thistle. *Thistle*, like our school. She even said that her grandpa was the one who started it! And even better than that, she studies masks!”

“That’s weird,” Walter said, but his voice sounded a little less sharp. “Do you really think she was telling the truth about her grandpa?”

“I don’t know, I only talked to her for a second,” Ruby explained, “but wouldn’t that be cool?”

Jin nodded. “We should find out for sure.”

“Yeah,” Felix agreed, “I don’t know if I can believe this story unless I hear it for myself.”

Ruby could tell Walter knew they were just trying to distract him from the mask, but he wiped his eyes and smiled. “Yeah, maybe we should do that sometime. I’ll make up a plan. I’ll come up with questions to ask and everything and I’ll look up

her grandpa at school.” They could all tell Walter was just saying this, but it was good that he was smiling again.

Everyone nodded. Gingerly, Felix picked up mask and put it back into its box.

“I’m really glad you’re all here,” Walter said.

“Happy birthday!” Ruby said and they all laughed, doing their best to forget the horrible ghost faces they had seen so that they might be able to get to sleep. Ruby was glad she didn’t have to sleep in the room alone.

Chapter Five: Adam Atom

Ruby was the new Captain Pluto.

What Jin had said at Walter's birthday party last Friday was true, but it hadn't really sunk in at the time; not with the ghostly faces and the one ghost who called himself Ferryman. It was almost too much to take in. Ruby had wanted to be a superhero practically since she could first speak or dream. She had seen every season of *Spelunking the Superlair* as well as every episode of *Lord Lion*, even the secret episodes. She knew all about the current superheroes—all the top ones like Icarusman, Purgatory, and Princess Pow and many of the others as well.

And she knew all about Captain Pluto of course.

Captain Pluto who fought at the very heart of the city during The Nameless Desolation. Captain Pluto whose arch-nemesis was Ferryman. Like Captain Pluto, Ferryman could see and control the dead. But unlike Captain Pluto, no one ever knew who Ferryman was under the mask. It was the sort of mystery that many people as obsessed with heroes as Ruby were always trying to find out. There were some theories, but Ruby didn't so much care about that. She was more interested in why he did what he did while he was alive. Maybe if she knew that she would be able to control his ghost.

She looked at the golden mask of Captain Pluto that lay shining on the re wooden desk of her bedroom. For almost a month, there had been stacks of cardboard boxes taking up space, but now she had moved in completely. There was hardly any way to tell at all that she had ever lived anywhere else. Ruby began to smile and even giggle a little bit. Even as scary as Walter's birthday had been, Ruby could not deny

how excited she was about becoming a real superhero. *Now*, Ruby thought, *if I could just make this work when I'm not in deadly danger...*

“Hey, honeysuckle?” Grandma Quince called up the stairs. Her voice broke Ruby out of what was essentially a trance.

“Yeah?” Ruby called back. “I don’t have to leave for school yet, do I?”

“No, but there’s something on the television, that you’ll want to see!” Grandma Quince called up. “Superheroes, and they’re fighting—how exciting!”

Ruby ran down the steps so fast that if she had been just a little bit clumsier, she would have fallen and broken her neck. She skidded into the kitchen, just in time to see the superhero Purgatory loom large on the screen before rocketing away through the sky with a trail of orange fire.

“What’s happening? What did I miss?” Ruby asked.

“Well, it was just the news and then they said ‘news flash’ and now here we are, something exciting for once—I swear! I could just fall asleep, and I do, when the news is on,” Grandma Quince said. “Don’t you believe that grownup things are for grownups.”

Ruby was only half listening, most of her attention focused on the television screen and on Purgatory. It looked as though Purgatory was fighting a man, but strangely, he didn’t seem to have any mask. Ruby squinted her eyes and looked closer. What could that mean? Could she just not see the mask? But then the man turned towards the camera and it became obvious that the man truly was not wearing a mask. And yet he was flying and fighting against Purgatory. And neither she, nor this maskless man were backing off.

The blows were almost too fast and certainly too fast to count even though Ruby didn't blink for a second. She watched Purgatory and it was hard to believe that this fiery superhero was Walter's talkative older sister Jenny. They seemed like totally separate people as Purgatory rolled and rocketed about in the air, crashing into the maskless man and speeding away. Where, Ruby wondered, had Jenny learned to fight like this? Did the mask instantly make her a good fighter? Ruby would love to have known, now that she had a mask of her own.

The man and Purgatory exchanged another series of flashing, fiery blows before he again turned to the camera. This time, Ruby could see his eyes clearly.

Ruby gasped. This man did not have human eyes. Or at least he didn't have eyes like the eyes of anyone she had ever seen before: his eyes glowed an awful winter sky blue. It was as though he had light bulbs in his eye sockets, and, what was more, his skin shone metallic and silver.

"We believe, though we can't confirm," the newscaster, Oona Swensen said into the camera, "that this man is a robot controlled by O.R.B.I.T. As you can see—" and here the camera swung out and zoomed in to show Purgatory throwing up crossed arms to block another flashing punch from the robot man, "—he has no mask, but he seems to be holding his ground against Purgatory, a remarkable feat despite Purgatory's inexperience."

Purgatory sent a bolt of fire at the robot man who shifted sideways in the air to dodge the attack. Using his momentum, he twirled in the air and then rocketed towards Ruby as fast as a fighter jet. She again threw up her crossed arms. The force of the

impact sent her speeding across the sky, trailing fire like a robin attacked by a hawk loses feathers.

Ruby put her hands over her mouth.

The robot man glared after the falling superhero. Purgatory righted herself and began to fly back at him. She had one fist forward and she was blazing orange. She was like a songbird seeking revenge on the hawk.

In a white flash, Icarusman appeared between Purgatory and the robot man.

“It’s Icarusman!” Oona Swensen said unnecessarily into the camera. “Here’s hoping we can get an interview. My money’s on a fast fight!”

Purgatory seemed surprised and slowed, skidding to a stop like a skater might on concrete. As surprised as Purgatory seemed, the robot man looked even more shocked. Though his eyes remained the same iceberg blue and his face didn’t show any emotion at all, he began to spin and wheel back in the air before turning and rocketing as fast as he could away from Pluto and out towards the ocean.

Purgatory and Icarusman watched him go.

Icarusman turned to face the Oona Swensen and the camera. He gracefully descended from the sky like an ice-skater might land a jump. Purgatory remained in the air above, watching the ocean. She never talked to news crews—Ruby knew this was because she didn’t want to risk her dad or brother realizing she was a superhero, but the media just thought she was an arrogant and aloof teenager.

Icarusman removed his mask before he spoke to the camera. He always spoke to the media as Malik Samar and not Icarusman. This was because, as Ruby remembered hearing in one interview, he thought people should know that their

superheroes were just as human as anyone else. Superheroes could make the same mistakes as anyone else and they were no better than anyone else even if they did have superpowers.

“The man you just witnessed fighting Purgatory is, as I am sure you realize, not human,” Malik Samar said in his voice that was as clean and precise as his white-toothed celebrity smile. “He is an artificial life-form, part living and part robot, created by O.R.B.I.T. sent to capture their escaped prisoner.”

Oona Swensen held up the mic for Malik, but returned it to herself so that she could ask him a question: “We have seen similar creations from O.R.B.I.T. in the past, but this one seems far more advanced, even when O.R.B.I.T. was at its peak. Is there anything else you can tell us about this artificial life-form?”

Malik nodded. “Yes. He calls himself Adam Atom—we are not sure if this is a name he chose for himself or one given to him by O.R.B.I.T.” Malik said calmly with a reassuring smile at the camera, “and we have yet to determine who he’s after.”

“So nothing new about the escaped prisoner?”

“While it is true that we haven’t yet determined the identity of the prisoner,” Malik began, “I think it’s fair to say that anyone who O.R.B.I.T. would want to keep as a prisoner is their enemy, and you know how the saying goes—the enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

“A very positive outlook,” Oona Swensen said into the mic, “but do you think it’s possible that this enemy is in fact someone that O.R.B.I.T. simply considered too dangerous, their enemy as well as yours?”

“Well, whoever this captive is has yet to act, so I’m sticking with my original theory,” Malik said with another flashing, confident smile, sending a twinkle into his eyes. Malik set his gold mask back over his face once again becoming Icarusman.

In a gold and white flash that resembled an autumn sun travelling much too fast, Icarusman shot up into the sky to meet with Purgatory. The two golden masked superheroes conversed for a moment before they rocketed off in opposite directions. The news cameraman seemed unsure as to who to follow, but then swiveled the camera quickly to find Icarusman flying out over the ocean, potentially in pursuit of the robot man, Adam Atom.

That morning in school, all anybody wanted to talk about was the fight between Adam Atom and the superheroes. There were a few students (Ruby still couldn’t remember everyone’s names, but she thought they were Davie, Joe, and Alexis) in Mrs. Yamaguchi’s homeroom class whose parents didn’t let them watch violent television, and so they were desperately asking everybody else for the details of just what happened so that they wouldn’t be left behind.

Ivana, however, sat in one corner of the classroom, reading a book and ignoring everyone else. Ever since Walter’s birthday, she had been rather distant from Hana and Mabel and so now she was mostly alone. At first, Ruby had felt bad for her and had tried to talk to Ivana, but Ivana only sneered at her and turned away. Ruby often liked to be alone, but Ivana wasn’t like that. Ivana was more the sort of person who liked to be at the center of attention. What could make Ivana want to be alone in the midst of so

much excitement? Maybe Ivana just didn't care about superheroes, or maybe she didn't watch the news.

The bell rang interrupting Ruby's thoughts and Mrs. Yamaguchi began class.

At lunch, Ruby found that Ivana was not the only one who didn't want to talk about superheroes. Walter, usually almost as excited to talk about superheroes as Ruby, was quiet. He ate his food slowly and didn't look anyone in the eye. Felix and Jin exchanged a look.

"Walter," Ruby asked, "are you okay?"

Walter shrugged. "I'm fine."

Ruby turned to Felix and Jin. "Did either of you see the fight between Purgatory and Adam Atom on the news this morning?"

No one spoke and Ruby took another bite of her grilled cheese sandwich.

"I did," Jin said finally.

"I was surprised when Icarusman said they hadn't found the escaped O.R.B.I.T. criminal," Felix said. "I mean the fight was pretty cool, but he didn't really explain anything."

"Well," Ruby said, "I think what he said made sense. I mean how evil can a prisoner of O.R.B.I.T. be? Maybe it's even a long lost hero. Like Gatekeeper."

"I doubt it," Felix replied, "it's probably someone so dangerous that even O.R.B.I.T. is scared of them."

"Well, if that's true, then I'd really better start learning how to use my powers!" Ruby exclaimed.

“You’re not still trying to be a superhero, are you Ruby?” Walter asked. Ruby turned to him and was about to reply that *of course she was*, when Walter continued. “It’s too dangerous. Ferryman will just come back—I think we must have been pretty lucky last time.”

Felix nodded, but frowned slightly at Walter and Jin just glanced between Walter and Ruby, coolly assessing the situation.

“I know it’s dangerous,” Ruby replied, “but I think the mask must have chosen me for a reason. I mean it *did* choose me, so maybe I am meant to become a superhero and deal with danger.”

Walter shook his head. “You don’t get it. You weren’t the one who put on Ferryman’s mask only to have ghosts appear and try to kill you. Everything was so cold and it felt as though I would never be able to see again...” Walter shivered.

“Oh,” Ruby said, “I knew it was awful, but I didn’t realize...that’s why I think I should be a superhero though, so I can protect people from villains like Ferryman.”

“No!” Walter said, gripping the handles of his wheelchair hard enough to whiten his knuckles. “You still don’t get it! My mother died as Captain Pluto, and I don’t want the same thing to happen to yo—to anyone else!”

“Wal—“ Ruby began.

Walter rolled back from the table with a trembling jaw. Felix stood, glancing back with an expression that Ruby thought might have been apologetic. She wondered if Felix might actually be on her side. Jin watched Felix run to catch up with Walter, but she just turned back to her food.

“Jin,” Ruby asked, “what do you think? I mean I’m sure you know as well as Walter that being a superhero is dangerous, but someone has to save people, right?”

Jin nodded. “I agree with you.”

The bell rang signaling the end of lunch and Jin stood with her tray. “See you later,” she said. Ruby only nodded.

Ruby was almost back to her house when she caught sight of her new neighbor lying in a lounge chair out on her porch. Ms. Thistle had a glass of something in one hand and a book open on top of her face. Though she looked, Ruby never had found anything to either confirm or deny Ms. Thistle’s story about her grandfather founding Thistle Academy. But right now, she wasn’t thinking about her school. No, Ruby wondered if Ms. Thistle might have something to say about superheroes. Maybe she could even explain how masks chose people.

At first, Ruby had thought to ask Lola about it. She didn’t think Lola herself would know anything about masks, but at Asphodel University she would probably be able to find a professor who knew *something* about masks. However, Ruby was worried that Lola would ask her questions she didn’t want to have to answer. Grandma Quince would certainly not approve of Ruby running about in a gold mask and colorful costume.

Ruby thought about walking up to Ms. Thistle and boldly asking her about masks. She would *demand* answers, but then she thought about how rude that would be. And she remembered how intense that woman’s violet eyes were.

The wind picked up, clinging at Ruby's brown school blazer. Ruby adjusted her backpack and walked past Ms. Thistle's house and entered Quince Nursery where Grandma Quince was waiting for her with a bored smile that told Ruby it had been a slow day.

"Did you sell *any* plants today Grandma?" Ruby asked, setting her backpack between a potted fern and a ficus in an ornate pink planter.

"Not today, but there's a wedding—you know how October's coming up—and they put in an *enormous* order for 'Pumpkin Bouquets,'" Grandma Quince replied, fluffing a small bunch of Queen Anne's lace.

"That's good I suppose," Ruby sighed, resting her crossed arms on the desk and her chin on her arms.

"Oh, what's this?" Grandma Quince asked. "Did school not go well today?"

Ruby shrugged.

Grandma Quince put her hands on her hips and frowned. "Okay, I know something's up. Here's what we're going to do; I'm going to close up early and then we're going to watch *Spelunking the Superlair* and you're going to tell me about your day."

Ruby looked up at her grandmother, who smiled back at her granddaughter.

"So, Ruby, before the show starts, tell me about your day," Grandma Quince said, seating herself next to her granddaughter on the overstuffed teal couch in the middle of the living room.

“I sort of got into a fight with my friends,” Ruby sighed, shuffling her toes about in her socks.

“Ruby!” Grandma Quince said, putting a hand on her chest. “Well, did you win?”

Ruby didn’t laugh, only shook her head. “It wasn’t *that* kind of fight. Actually, I guess it was more of an argument. Walter and I disagreed about something. And even though the other two actually agreed with me (I think) they took Walter’s side instead, and now I’m even doubting my side too.”

“Oh, rosebush, don’t doubt yourself, if it was something important enough to get into an argument over, then it was probably something you should believe in,” Grandma Quince said. “I’m only saying this because it’s you. You’ve always had good sense.”

Ruby felt a bit better, like she could smell hot chocolate, but hadn’t yet taken the first sip. “Thanks Grandma.”

“Well, why don’t you think about it, it’s almost time for the show,” Grandma Quince said. “Do you remember how the remote works? You know I never got a hang of all those buttons—why the T.V. doesn’t just have an on switch *I’ll* never know.”

Ruby clicked on the T.V. and the two women settled into the couch.

“Today on *Spelunking the Superlair*,” Calder Roade, the host of *Spelunking the Superlair*, said on the T.V. screen, “we will be diving into the underwater hideout of the supervillain Salt Lantern. Now, what you’re probably thinking is, ‘what kind of name is that, Calder?’ and I’m here to provide the answers...”

Calder Roade flashed a white-toothed smile any dentist would love to claim, and then he went over all the gear he and his crew had assembled. There were the practical things like flashlights, ropes, harnesses, and scuba gear, and there were impractical things that might be useful only in very specific circumstances like a signed copy of *Icarusman's* autobiography, a key that didn't fit any lock as far as anyone knew, and, especially odd, a vial with a single slug. Somehow, on each episode of *Spelunking the Superlair*, Calder Roade managed to use more of his impractical items than the viewer might expect, but today's collection seemed even more unlikely than ever.

"Do you think there's any way I could make it better with Walter?" Ruby asked. "I mean I think I'm cool with Jin and Felix is always kind of rude anyways..."

"That's a hard question," Grandma Quince replied, watching as Calder Roade gave the thumbs up to his cohost, camerawoman and sister, Caroline Roade, before flipping over the side of the boat, scuba gear in place. "It all depends on what your fight was about."

"Oh," Ruby said, "It's kind of a secret. Walter wouldn't want me to say, but I guess I can tell you that I think I should do one thing and he thinks I shouldn't do it. It's only because he's scared."

"I see," Grandma Quince replied. "Or maybe I don't see, not if you're going to keep secrets from me!"

Ruby frowned as Grandma Quince cackled.

"Well anyways," Grandma Quince said, "if he's scared for you, then it means he cares about you."

“I guess so,” Ruby said. She slouched lower on the couch as the commercials ran, selling raincoats, Halloween costumes, and rock climbing gear; she understood why Walter was so scared, but it wasn’t as though he was going to be the one in the mask. She would never force him to put on the Ferryman mask again if he didn’t want to. And maybe he shouldn’t. Maybe so long as he kept the mask off Ferryman wouldn’t show up again.

“And that means he still wants to be your friend,” Grandma Quince continued, “so don’t back down. Do what you think is right for you. He didn’t become friends with someone else, so don’t become someone other than who you are if you want him to be your friend again.”

“But what if…” Ruby began.

Grandma Quince shook her head. “I know what you’re going to say. But you’re going to have to trust me on this one. Talk with him about whatever it is he’s scared of. If you help him confront it, then maybe you can help him get over it—just don’t let it get in the way of your friendship. Nothing kills friendship faster than those big secrets that people don’t want to talk about.”

On the T.V., Calder Roade shone his waterproof lamp at a sunken 20-foot tall statue of the supervillain Salt Lantern. “Now that’s what I call an egomaniac!”

Afterword

What you have just read are the first five chapters of my middle grade novel, *Captain Pluto and the Desolation Caves*. By this point, you've already met most of the main players. You've met the superheroes Purgatory, Icarusman, and Captain Pluto. You've met villains like the ghost of Ferryman and Adam Atom, and you've been briefly introduced to the shadowy villainous organization O.R.B.I.T. And of course you've met Ruby's friends, family, and classmates. However, there are still a few more characters that will play a big part in this novel and many mysteries and histories to unfold.

As it stands now, I plan for the novel to be a total of 17 chapters and around 80,000 words long, placing it firmly in the length range of other popular middle grade and young adult fantasy and science fiction novels. This is not to say my novel is strictly fantasy or science fiction. Instead, it plays on the genre of the American superhero, a genre that often transcends the boundaries, however compromised those boundaries may already be.

Take, for example, the popular *X-Men* franchise. *X-Men* takes on the wobbly, but still basically science-originated idea of a mutant-gene giving rise to superpowers. At the same time, many of these powers manifest as magic and a great many more break boundaries of physics. However, the most interesting aspect of *X-Men* is not the deconstruction of the boundaries between fantasy and science fiction, but instead the social commentary. Where the *X-Men* franchise discusses themes of discrimination based on fear and lack of knowledge, I intend for my novel to discuss ideas of celebrity, responsibility, and inheritance, both exciting and tragic—all of which revolve

around death to some extent. Felix, the son of famous superheroes, becomes jealous when it is Ruby, the daughter of ordinary (if heroic) parents, who gains the powers of Captain Pluto while Felix is left without powers. In his mind, it is as though the inheritance he deserves has been stripped from him. In another case of tragic inheritance, Walter, the son of Captain Pluto, gains the powers of his mother's arch-nemesis, Ferryman, despite an ingrained fear of dangerous hero work.

The juxtaposition of celebrity and hero in each masked individual is also an important part of this novel. As Adam Atom flees in Chapter Five, instead of pursuing him, Icarusman removes his mask and gives a T.V. interview as his unmasked identity, Malik Samar. In another example, Purgatory, Jenny Hart, doesn't want to reveal her identity to her family even as she is famous for fighting crime. This sets up a rather humorous dichotomy, questioning exactly what role these masked superheroes are supposed to fill. There is something illegitimate about these heroes as there is with all celebrities. And there is also something tragic and deathly, a minute fixation by an audience that often destroys the individual of the celebrity for the idea of the celebrity. Even as the superheroes die, they do not ever entirely disappear, new individuals taking up old superhero names and powers. As Ruby and the Sidekick Kids learned with the ghost of Ferryman, death is not simple nor is it necessarily final.

Death is an important theme in many children's books. In interviews, J.K. Rowling has stated that the main theme of Harry Potter, alongside love, is death. The series begins with the death of the protagonist's parents and throughout the series his other parental figures die around him no matter how hard he tries to hold onto them. Even in a world where magic exists, death is an unconquerable force. Attempts to

reclaim life from death are viewed as unnatural, bound to failure and corruption. The sociopathic mass murderer antagonist of the series, Voldemort, gives up any semblance of humanity in his quest for immortality. The dead in *Harry Potter*, when they do return, are at best faded images of their living selves.

Writing on the topic of death in children's books may also be seen as a way to help children accept deaths they might experience as they grow up. The deaths of a pet, of a family member, or of a best friend, as in *Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson, are experiences that many children might have difficulty understanding. In this capacity, children's books act as devices for empathy and as mentors to help children move beyond the tragedy.

However, stories relating to death can also be purely entertaining or humorous, the depiction of ghosts as horrific or comical always maintains a sense of loss or tragedy. Tim Burton often approaches death with dark humor in his films and in Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book* death is terrifying and violent, while at the same time humorous and exciting. And of course, the journey to the world of the dead and the return of ghosts to the world of the living, an invasion that can go either way, is an ancient tradition; many of the greatest Greek heroes of mythology encountered ghosts and entered into Hades' domain in the course of their questing (Greek mythology a tradition I play on in this novel with superhero names and their golden masks reminiscent of Greek or Egyptian death masks).

Death, in fact, has been central in much of the writing I have been doing at Whitman College. Beginning with Professor Scott Elliott's Writers of Place class, I was drawn to places of death or places where people felt closer to death, in both fearful

and reflective ways. Places like the death camps of World War II Europe and Aokigahara forest in Japan. This idea of death-filled spaces seeped into my novel as a monument in a mall and the titular Desolation Caves. These are charged spaces, impossible to entirely overcome—they give birth to extremes of emotion and memory, and, in my novel, superheroes like Ruby Roscoe as Captain Pluto. I continued to build on these themes in Professor Elliott’s Advanced Fiction writing class the following semester, focusing on death as performance and ritual. As I continued my creative writing education in Professor Kisha Schlegel’s Intermediate and Advanced Creative Nonfiction writing classes and Professor Katrina Roberts’ Advanced Poetry writing class, I experimented with form and with new ways of telling stories. The influence from these classes is subtler, but certainly important in the work I have done on my novel.

Death is not necessarily synonymous with finality. Instead, it is a place of increasing strangeness and a place where things otherwise forgotten might exist and even thrive. In essence, death and the afterlife act as communities of mythology and the impossible. It is likely that this is what attracts me so much to the concept of death. As is mantra in *The Old Kingdom Series* by Garth Nix (a series that depicts death as a vast river flowing through nine gates, neither friendly nor safe, but at the same time inescapably beautiful), “Does the walker choose the path, or the path the walker?”

It is my goal to finish this novel and see exactly where the path takes me. In the meantime, I hope you have enjoyed these first five chapters!