Body Issues

by RedgrenGrumboldt

Summary

They're home, but their troubles are just starting. Helga, Rhonda and Phoebe are three teenage mutants with a lot to deal with.

Notes

This is my first fic for AO3, but I've got a bunch more on Fanfiction.net under the pen name Kryten. Unfortunately, except for this fic, those are all abandoned, but anything within them is open to the public to be used or continued. I just want to be contacted first.

Thanks to Craig Bartlett for creating these characters, and to Francesca Smith and Olivia Hack for bringing them to life.

See the end of the work for more notes.
FRENEMY MINE

Prologue

Six months ago

The jungles of San Lorenzo

HELGA

I guess I had only myself to blame, really.

So, here we were, on this big class trip to San Lorenzo. This was supposed to be my shot. Arnold was supposed to find his long lost parents, I was supposed to finally confess my undying love to him, for real this time, and we would fall in love, get married, travel the world together, invent my own personal perfume named after us, the whole nine yards…

…only it didn’t work out quite like that.

Oh, sure, I tried, up there in the crow’s nest, I poured out my feelings, but he was all “MY ISSUES”, and I guess I probably should have paid more attention because love is about being attentive to his needs or some crap like that, and I may have freaked him out a bit by throwing myself at him like I did.

And then the pirates attacked, and then the boat exploded, and now we’re all on this death march to Eduardo’s village through the jungle, and I don’t even have my locket to comfort me because I chucked it in the river. I kinda think in the moment.

We’re all dealing, or not. Pinkboy’s whining about going half an hour without food, Nature Girl’s in hog heaven over all the rare bugs, Kid Psycho’s gone native, and Princess is screwing around with her useless phone.

“Status update: on nature walk from hell. No luggage…because it exploded… no reception… so why I’m doing this I don’t even know except it’s the one thing keeping me sane…”

“Hey, Princess, lookin’ good. And how is Mr. Frankenstein doing these days?” Goofing on people who annoy me was my coping mechanism.

“NOT in the mood, Helga”, Her Royal Highness Rhonda Wellington Lloyd spat back at me. “This trip has been a TOTAL disaster. All my stuff exploded, my hair has straight up BETRAYED me, I’m being eaten alive by bugs they don’t even have names for, and I can’t even vent because we’re in the middle of freaking NOWHERE! AGGH! I hate this jungle, I hate this country, I hate… OWWW!!” She picked up a round rock that was sitting in her path. “And I hate this STUPID ROCK I just stubbed my toe on!”

‘Ughh… why don’t you whine more about it. That’s a really attractive character trait there. You’ll go far in the world, let me tell you.

“Lousy… stupid rock!” She flung it aside, where it cracked open, releasing a cloud of dust right in our faces.
Next to them, Phoebe had picked up the rock. “It’s a geode. Curious… this doesn’t seem to be geologically related to the indigenous strata…”

“So it’s a special rock,” Rhonda coughed. “It’s still useless.”

“One shouldn’t dismiss an object based on a drab or displeasing exterior. You may miss the true value,” she continued, showing off the shimmering crystals on the inside, “lurking just beneath the surface.”

“I probably could make a pretty cool bracelet out of those,” admitted Rhonda, her throat still a bit rough from all the dust.

“Right… are you done with your tantrum, Rondaloid?” I growled. My own throat was almost as irritated as I was “‘Cause we’re falling behind, and unless you wanna make friends with the local wildlife’s insides, we really should catch up.”

“Yeah, I’m coming,” Richie Richette replied, half walking, half hopping along.

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Six months later

Hillwood

Big Bob’s Beeper Emporium

I groaned as I woke up in my “room”, actually a storage closet in the all-but defunct Emporium. It wasn’t the most comfortable place, and I usually had my share of aches whenever I woke up in that cramped space, but today, it felt worse than normal. My blood felt hot, my joints were stiff, and there were some really unusual pains… in my shoulder blades, my sides, the base of my spine, and my forehead.

Great, just what I need. To get sick, just as our health insurance lapsed.

I dressed in my usual pink jumper and bow and headed upstairs to the main level. The break room was now our makeshift kitchen. I rummaged around to see if anyone had bothered to pick up anything edible. Ha. Fat chance of that. Miriam was dozing, her head on the break room table. She had a good drool going on, so it had probably been a while. Probably sleeping off last night’s hangover. This would be starting early even for her.

I finally did manage to find a Belveeta packet, which would have to do. I stuffed it into my backpack and made a break for the door before…

“HEY, MISSY! WHERE DO YOU THINK YOU’RE GOING?”

…Big Bob spotted me.

I sighed. “School, Bob. You know… that place I go every single weekday of every single week of every single year.”

“Don’t get wise with me, Olga. You know we do inventory every single morning.”

“It’s… Helga. And let me save you the trouble. The inventory is exactly the same as it was yesterday. Because you didn’t sell anything. Because you will never sell anything. Because nobody… buys… beepers anymore. This store is the appendix of the retail world. Except, not really,
“That’s quitter talk, girlie. This is just a slump. Soon, people will realize smartphones are a fad, and I’ll be on top again!”

“Oh, silly me. Who am I to doubt you? Why, I bet soon we’ll be able to expand into other high-demand merchandise! Like BUGGY WHIPS and POWDERED WIGS!”

“Don’t talk back to me! I didn’t take that talk from Lloyd when he tried to buy me out, and I’m not taking it from you!”

“You don’t have to. I’m LEAVING” I said, stomping out and slamming the door for good measure.

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I’d been there last night when Rhonda’s dad had come by. I hadn’t been there for the entire conversation, but enough to get the gist.

“Look, Mr.Pataki… you’ll find that this is a more than reasonable offer. This is a prime location, the building is in good condition, I can liquidate your remaining inventory…”

“Not interested.”

“Mr.Pataki… Bob…you’re not going to get a better offer, You’ll be able to get a real place to live, start fresh in a new business… I can help financially there too..”

“I’m not about to throw away twenty years of work just because a bunch of hipsters decided that beepers aren’t ‘cool’ anymore. You’ll see, Buckminster. It’s people like you who don’t know what it means to build something. You had everything handed to you. Trust fund, supermodel wife, family name. I MADE this. Myself. No help.”

“You’re right, Bob. Maybe I don’t know about starting from scratch. But I DO know what it’s like to lose everything. If you keep going this way, you WILL lose everything.”

Bob glared at the wealthy investor. “Get off my property, Lloyd.”

So that was it. Bob had been handed a golden ticket back to, if not the top, at east back to a fighting chance. And he’d turned it down out of sheer stubbornness.

Although that would mean that I’d owe salvation to Princess’s dad, and I’m not sure that it’d be worth it. She’d probably lord it over me.

“Hey, Helga” came a familiar voice. Ah, my light, my life, he of the flaxen, unruly tresses and verdant orbs, come to repel the wretched shadows from choking my heart. Would I could but express to all the sheer joy you bring to my life, but alas, my insecurities are like a chain upon my throat, choking the words from escaping…

“What’s up, football head?” I say. What was once a scornful insult was now almost a term of endearment between the two of us. “We gotta stop meeting like this. People might talk.”

“Yeah,” Arnold agreed. “They might think we’re a couple or something.”

“A couple of what?” I replied. Arnold laughed. We’d had this exact exchange a dozen times in the last few weeks.

We weren’t sure what this was, exactly. I liked him. He liked me. He knew I liked him. I knew he
liked me. We had stolen moments, here and there, but I insisted we keep everything on the down-
low. Gerald knew, of course; he’d been there at the start. Phoebe, naturally, had picked up on it right
away. I was fairly sure it stopped there. If it had gotten any further Princess would’ve spread it all
over the school and Harold would be sneering at the two of us at every opportunity.

He looked me over.” Are you okay, Helga? You look… flushed.”

“It’s nothing, Arnoldo. Just… just some weird new flu bug or something.” I dismissed his concern,
but the truth was, I was starting to feel worse. Hotter, more pained…it felt like something was trying
to bore through my skull.

It only got worse as we got to school. My insides felt like they were churning. I felt dizzy,
nauseous…did I mention dizzy? Also dizzy…

Arnold had noticed as well, especially when I stumbled on the school steps. “Okay, that’s it, I’m
taking you to the nurse.”

“If it’ll make you sleep better at night, football-head,” I grumbled. Oh, Arnold… so gallant, so
selfless, so attentive to my needs!

Nurse Shelly sat me down on the examination table (Arnold had reluctantly gone to class after I
shoed him off, insisting I’d be fine (I was pretty sure). “You definitely look like you might me
feverish”, she said to me, preparing a thermometer. “It could be something going around. Another
sixth-grader has been out for the last two days.”

Right, I thought as she popped the thing in my mouth. Lloyd’s probably nursing a broken nail or
something. The only thing Rhonda ever suffered from was drama.

“Right, well, let’s have a look at that,” the nurse said, removing the thermometer. Her eyes popped
wide open. “Oh, dear… that… that can’t be right. This says… 120. It… it must be defective…” she
said, hurriedly shoving a second one in my mouth, all the while the pain was getting even worse in
my back, like something was trying to push its way out.

“120 again…something is most definitely wrong h-“ I cut her off with a scream as the pain got so
intense I couldn’t hold it in anymore. Her attention was drawn back to me, and the thermometer
dropped from her fingers as she stared in dull shock. “….no…that is most definitely not right. I’ve…
NEVER seen that before…”

I probed the area with my fingers, the pain having peaked and now dropped to a dull ache. Two
growths of flesh and bone had forced their way through the back of my dress. “What the…” I felt
them flinch as I touched them. “No shinola that’s not right! What the heck are these things?”

“I… this is way beyond my school nurse training, dear. I have to call this in.” She hurriedly dialed.
“CDC? Yes, I have a… I don’t know what it is. Extremely high temperature, deeply flushed
complexion and… growths on the back! No… they’re too even and symmetrical to be tumors… if I
didn’t know better I’d say they were… new limbs? What? Twenty minutes? Oh, thank you. We
don’t want anyone else exposed to this.”

“What? What is it? What do I have?” I was frantic. You would be too if new body parts were
popping out of you. I mean, I’m that age, there are supposed to be changes coming, but I’m pretty
sure back-knob-things aren’t one of them!

“They’ll be here soon, just try to relax,” the nurse said, obviously unable to take her own advice,
backing away from this unfamiliar sight.

Twenty minutes later. Nurse Shelley had backed as far away as she could while still keeping an eye on me, a surgical mask covering her mouth and nose. By now I could feel other things changing inside me. My second and third fingers were having trouble separating, as were my fourth and fifth. The spurs on my back were getting longer, and I could bend them in the middle by thinking about it. Even my hair seemed a little longer.

Masked and uniformed people burst in through the door at precisely twenty minutes. “CDC, ma’am, we’ll take it from here,” the one in charge said, ushering me out of the room.

“Careful with the merchandise, bucko,” I grumbled, as they rushed me down the empty hall (probably blocked off my more of the goons) and into a waiting van. As they threw me into the back, I yelled "Crminy, you gorillas better watch where you—“

My last thought as one of them jammed the taser into my side was You know, I don’t think these guys are CDC, before tens of thousands of volts put an end to it.


Ch-ch-ch-changes

Chapter Summary

Rhonda's side of the story.

Chapter 2

Ch-ch-ch-changes

Lloyd Mansion

-RHONDA-

Upper West Side of Hillwood

Yesterday

I awoke to heat and pain. Just great, I thought. Today was the tryouts for the play. We were doing "Into the Woods" and I had my eye on the Baker's Wife. It would be typical for the flu to nip that in the bud. Why does everything happen to ME?

I tried to roll out of bed, but sharp pains all over my body got in my way. They were particularly bad just under my arms, in my back, in my butt, and in the middle of my head. Even my insides felt like they were in turmoil.

There was a knock at the door. "Honey, it's 7:30. You really should get started, it's a big day today."

"I… don't think I'm going to make it today. I feel awful." I was surprised at how weak my voice sounded.

"Are you sure it isn't just-"

"…no, mom… that's not due for another two and a half weeks."

"Because the Midol's in the medicine cabinet-"

"It's not that!"

"Okay, okay. We'll call you in sick today and I'll make an appointment with Dr. Steiglitz immediately. Can I have Elena bring you anything for breakfast?"

My stomach lurched at the thought. "No… no food… "

"Is it okay if I come in?" she asked, already opening the door "Oh, my stars. You DO look rather under the weather." She felt my forehead." Oh dear… I've never felt a fever like that. You're burning up. I'll get you a cooling pad. Or three. And maybe it's time to see if Dr. Steiglitz makes house calls."

Even three cooling pads weren't helping much. The heat and pain were still building, and I was starting to feel an odd stiffness in my hands and feet, almost like the bones were moving. Even my skin was starting to look wrong, taking on a slight purplish tint.
This clearly wasn't just some flu. I wasn't coughing or sneezing, and my eyes weren't watery at all… in fact, my vision felt unusually clear. I usually wore contacts, but today, I could see pretty clearly when my headache wasn't making me dizzy.

Mom came back around noon to tell me that Dr. Steiglitz would be able to come by tomorrow morning. She had to run out now, but Elena would be here if I needed anything. I groaned an acknowledgement and tried to get back to sleep.

At around 1:30 the pain in my back surged again and something ripped through the back of my nightgown. My hand probed the area and found a jointed spur and its matching mate on the other side. Numb shock set in.

No, this wasn't the flu. It was something far worse. I was changing in ways that no twelve-year-old had before.

3:00 now. The growths on my back were getting larger and starting to branch, with skin-webbing starting to form. And just a little while ago, two new growths had forced themselves out of my sides, strange twitching things that almost felt like the start of a new pair of arms.

On top of that, my fingers were starting to melt together. My feet were changing too, the big toe receding and the foot itself starting to divide down the middle, the toes on either side beginning to meld together.

My skin's purple hue was getting more pronounced now. Even my hair seemed to be getting longer; I usually wore it short but now it was getting in my eyes and brushing my shoulders.

6:00.

It was official. My normal life was over.

My back-growths were clearly proto-wings now. My side-growths were now a set of infant arms, complete with tiny hands with three stubby fingers each. And now, I had the stub of a tail.

To put it mildly, I was a freak.

I didn't even want to think of looking in a mirror at this point, since for all I knew, I had a beard, pig snout, and rhino horn.

Mom came by and knocked. "Sweetie? How are you feeling?"

Oh, lord. I couldn't let her see me like this. "I'm okay," I said, lying. "You don't have to come in…"

"Nonsense, dear," she said as she opened the door. I hurriedly buried myself under the covers, ignoring how hot it was.

"Oh, honestly, my darling, it can't possibly be worse than that bout with the chicken pox in second grade. Now that was unsightly." She reached for my blanket, her hand briefly jolting back when rushing against it. "Ugh, static. I simply must talk to Elena about being more careful with the laundry." She yanked the covers back, her eyes instantly going wide.

"…oh dear." She dropped the covers, backing up a bit, her hands covering her mouth

"Please, just.. go away. I… I didn't want you to see this."
"It's...it's not the flu, is it." She gingerly reached over to touch my mini-arms, which were a half-inch longer now than they'd been just a few minutes ago. "I'm no doctor, but the flu doesn't do this. Nothing does this. I... I don't think Dr. Steiglitz is the person to call. I don't know who I would call. Who do you call when your daughter turns purple and sprouts wings? An exorcist? Do I call an exorcist? Have you been messing around with the occult, dear? I know those Dusk books are very popular..."

"No, I didn't mess around with the occult! I don't know what I did! I just started changing! Do you think I'd make myself ugly like this on PURPOSE?"

"Ugly? Honey, you're not ugly. You're just... different. Very very different. Very very very different. I'm spiraling. I'm simply spiraling. I have no idea how to handle this, it's just so beyond the purple-the pale! Beyond the pale! Does it hurt? Hurt is something I understand, please tell me."

"It does.... Not as much as before. Feels like the worst is over. Like... stuff's... pushing into place."

"Darling... listen. I may seem like I'm losing it, but the one thing I will never lose is my love for you." Mom smiled weakly at me. "No matter what you become, you'll always be my little good lord, is that a tail?"

She stayed with me for the next hour as I changed further. My tail and new arms continued to develop and my wings grew larger, while my feet now sported two forward-facing and one rear-facing toes. All the while she tried distracting me with talk about school and fashion and other things, but it was really hard to concentrate. It felt like even my brain was changing shape.

At around 7:15, the doorbell rang. "Elena will get that. Don't worr-" A scream that was unmistakably Elena's was heard. "What in the world?" Mom rushed out to see what was going on.

I cautiously got up and peeked out my door. Downstairs, Elena lay unconscious (please, let it just be unconscious), and uniformed, masked men were holding guns on my mother.

Panic welled up. This couldn't be a coincidence. These guys were here for me, they had to be here for me, and they were willing to go through anyone to get to me.

"It's not her," one said. "Her and the Mexican are both negative."

"She's Dominican," my mother said, "and I have no idea what you're looking for, but you won't find it here."

"Our instruments say you're wrong," another, maybe the leader, said. "There's a very particular energy signature here, and we'd like to take possession of it. Now... believe me, we'd prefer it if you cooperated. Things tend to get messy when bodies get involved. But if you don't cooperate... well. It's just as easy if we kill you and take what we want anyway"

Mom glared at him. "I have absolutely no intention of making this easy for you."

"Well... I tried. I really did. You all saw I tried, right?" he asked the others. "But since you insist on
being difficult-

"Stop!" I heard myself say.

I walked out the door and down the stairs, hands up (the lower pair as high as I could lift them.) "I'm what you want, right? Just take me, okay? Leave everyone else alone. I probably belong wherever you're taking me anyway."

"Well, this is a surprise. Looks like you're pretty far along there," he said, eyeing me.

"Rhonda, darling, whatever intentions these people have for you can't be good. You should have stayed-"

"Mom… they would have found me no matter what. This way nobody else gets hurt on account of a monster."

Mom smiled at me. "A monster would never do what you just did. I may have spoiled you rotten, but… I guess you turned out a pretty good daughter."

"This is touching, really," the leader (I assume; he'd been doing all the talking) said, as two others restrained me. "Looks like you get to live. Of course, we can't have you calling the cops until we're gone…" he said, immediately knocking Mom out.

"You said you wouldn't hurt her!" I yelled, instinctively wrenching myself free, barely registering that I flung one so hard he left a dent in the opposite wall.

"I didn't. You did," the leader said, bringing up a taser and jamming it into me. The other remaining goons jammed theirs into me as well. "Give her a real good dose, she's already resistant." As they all activated, I felt my entire nervous system light up like Downtown before I finally went limp, body and mind.
Subterranean Homesick Blues

Chapter Summary

Helga finds herself an unwilling guest, and she doesn't know what's worse, the accommodations or her new neighbor. Or the several new body parts she's acquired.

Chapter 3

Subterranean Homesick Blues

God Only Knows Where

-HELGA-

When I finally came to, who knows how long later, I was being schlepped down some sort of hallway by two of the gorillas. My eyes were having trouble focusing and I couldn't make my body work, but I could make out large transparent enclosures with big metal doors.

“Careful. We don’t wanna wake this one up,” Gorilla One was saying.

“She don’t look so tough,” Gorilla Two replied.

“Did you SEE what the other one did to Johnson? Threw him into a wall, broke half his bones. And this one’s farther along than she was at the time. I’m just saying, hope that she doesn’t come to before we get ‘er secured.”

Other one? What was going on here? I had just registered that when they opened one of the other enclosures and tossed me in, quickly sealing the door.

I lay there a while, while by vision began to get steady again and I slowly became aware of my body. And things definitely did not feel the same. Besides the growths on my back, which were now significantly longer, there where what felt like a new, underdeveloped pair of arms beneath the regular ones, and something long and flexible hanging just over my butt.

When I finally could sorta-move, I managed to roll myself over and drag myself into a sitting position and rubbed my eyes, and realized just why I had had so much trouble seeing straight; I now had three. The two regular ones, and a third located in the middle a bit higher up. In addition, my captors had removed my regular clothing and dressed me in a pair of nondescript gray coveralls with holes for the appropriate limbs. The skin that was visible was now rose-pink, and my hair was down to my waist. My hands and feet had three digits each including an opposable thumb, each tipped by a black claw.

And I wasn’t alone. Through the transparent panel, I could see the cell across the hallway. Inside there was someone who could be my mirror image, except with violet skin and long black hair. They had their wings, which were batlike and far larger and more developed than mine – apparently they were further along than I was – wrapped around their body almost like a cocoon, making their features impossible to make out.

“Hey!” I shouted across the hall. “Can you hear me? You with us?”
The figure perked up, unfolding their wings slightly. “Helga?”

It was definitely a girl. And definitely the one I least expected to see. Or wanted.

“RHONDA?” She was the other one? She broke Johnson’s bones?

“Is… is this your fault?”

I snorted. “Sure, Princess. You caught me. This was all my nefarious scheme to turn myself into a freak and get myself locked in here,” I made sure to infuse every word with as much sarcasm as I could. “Criminy knows you’re the type of person I’d subject myself to by choice.”

“Yeah, like you’re sunshine and rainbows to be around,” Rhonda spat back. “I would literally choose anyone else. I would rather be locked in a room with Curly than be stuck with you.”

“Well, fine!”

“Fine!”

“FINE!” I said louder, determined to get the last word.

“FINE FINE!” Rhonda retorted nonsensically, determined to one up me.

I waited about two minutes while Rhonda simmered down a bit, then threw back one last “FINE!” just to piss her off.

We sat there for a while, determinedly ignoring each other. Finally, Rhonda sighed, unfolding her wings. I could see they’d put her in the same grey jumpsuit I was wearing, and that her lower pair of arms had fully grown out, so I guess I could look forward to that in the future. I could see her face more clearly now; large pointy ears were sticking out of her mane of black hair, small fangs poked over her lower lip, and her three eyes were a pale glowing yellow and lined with black markings, as if someone had gone crazy on her with Goth eyeliner.

“Look,” she said, “You don’t like me, I don’t like you, but… I will literally go insane if I don’t have someone to talk to.”

“That might be worth it,” I shot back, smirking.

“I’m trying to be the bigger person here. The fact is, we’re stuck with each other, and we could either sit here glaring at each other—“

“Sounds fine.”

“—or we could talk.”

“It’s a free country. You can talk all you want, it doesn’t mean I’ll talk back.”

“Well, then, if I’m going to be the one talking, I get to choose the topic! So… let’s talk De Verento’s winter line. Have you seen what she’s doing with collars? Oh my god, it’s such brilliant work. Some people say they’re too similar to Caprini, but I say they just don’t see the potential. And the colors! Ruby truly is the new scarlet. Crimson, pfft, so five milliseconds ag-“

“AGGGHHH!! FINE! WE CAN TALK! Just… never, ever do that again!”

“Well, okay.”
“Jebus crackers, I have never heard someone use so many words to say nothing.” I exhaled. “So… how’d you wind up in this mess, anyway?”

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“And then I woke up here, this morning. Or maybe it was the afternoon. It’s impossible to know. There’s no natural light anywhere near here.”

I took in her story. If Rhonda hadn’t been embellishing her story to make herself look good (but something told her she wasn’t), then she’d given herself up to protect her family. It really was the last thing I would have expecting someone that selfish to do.

But then again… would I have done the same for Big Bob or Miriam? Or Olga? It was one thing to chase off some chiseling fiancé. I took no real risk there. It really wouldn’t have mattered one way or the other for me.

This was different. If Rhonda had been telling the truth, she’d be throwing herself into the unknown for someone else.

Would I have done it?

I’d like to think I would.

I would, right?

“And they dressed me up in this tacky little number, and trust me when I say I don’t want to think about how creepy it is that these guys were dressing my 12-year-old body. Anyway,” Rhonda finished up, “that’s my story. How’d they get you?”

“My wings popped at the nurse’s office. Sheena’s aunt called in the CDC, ‘cause, y’know, that’s not a thing that happens, and these goons showed up, tazed me, and dragged me off in a van. Not much else to tell, really. So I take it you’re the finished model?”

“If you mean I’m done changing, then yes. I haven’t felt anything in a while.”

I slumped back. My stomach was starting to remember that it had never received the breakfast biscuits it was promised, or anything else for that matter. “So… they feed us in this joint?”

“Something kind of like food came out a slot in the wall earlier. Like, a compressed bar of sawdust. So I guess they want to keep us alive, at least until they figure out what to do with us.” She sighed “Probably cut us open and see what makes us tick.”

“Oh, that sounds just lovely,” I said. “We clearly can’t stay here.”

“Good luck with that. You get anywhere near anything they don’t want you to get near, they flood the chamber with knockout gas. I tried to get near the vent earlier, and boom, out I go. I tried to get a look at the camera in the corner, boom. Out.”

“Well, wonderful.” I sagged, my hand instinctively going for the reassuring heart shape of my—

My locket. I didn’t have it.

“Your locket? What locket?” Rhonda asked, puzzled.

“I… didn’t say anything!”
“B-but I heard…” –did she? I could have sworn–

“How are you doing that? How are you talking without using…” How are you hearing things I-

“…didn’t say… Oh…my god…. We’re hearing each others’ thoughts.”

“…UH uh. No. No to any of that. You are absolutely the LAST person I want in my head.”

“Hey, this isn’t exactly something I want either.”

“Pssht, what’re you worried about? Your head’s emptier than the beeper emporium!”

“Are you calling me stupid?”

“I’m calling you vapid! Shallow! Superficial! You have absolutely nothing going on under the surface! You have all the substance of warm jello!”

She glared. “You don’t know a damn thing about me, Helga Pataki.”

“I know there’s nothing to know. And I know I’d rather be unconscious than have to deal with you!”

I lunged for the vent.

“Helga, no! The gas floods all the rooms!”

“I don’t care!” I tried prying it open and got a full dose of it in the face. The room started to swim as I keeled over…

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I awoke some time later. The first thing I noticed was that the pain I’d been feeling until now had vanished. I’d clearly been out for a while, because while I’d been unconscious, my metamorphosis had finished up. My wings, tail, and lower arms were all fully developed now.

-Helga.- A voice poked at my thoughts. I looked across the hall. Rhonda was crouched there, staring at me. I tried to ignore her. “Helga.” Criminy, if there was anything more annoying than hearing her voice, it was hearing her voice inside my skull. “WHAT.” I hissed. “This better be important.”

-Good, it works,- she thought at me. -Being in each others’ heads might suck, but it also gives us a way to talk that they can’t overhear.-

I sighed. She was right, and that was really irritating. “Fine.” -Testing, testing… can you hear this?-

-Yes, Helga. You’re coming in clear.-

-Good. Okay. Just don’t go poking around my melon, Princess. My thoughts are private.-

-Trust me, Helga. I have no interest in anything inside your brain. Anyway, I need to tell you something, and I don’t need anyone else knowing this.-

-Spit it out, then. What’s so important?-

-That last time we got gassed? It didn’t do anything to me. I think I’ve become immune.-

My eyebrow went up.

-Princess… I think we just got our first break.-
It's prison break time! The girls begin to unlock their true potential, and the agenda behind their capture is revealed.

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 4

We Gotta Get Outta This Place

Stupid Cliché Villain Compound

-I shimmied my way up the wall toward the vent (apparently, one of our new powers was doing a fairly passable Spider-Man imitation).

-Well, Lloyd?- Helga’s voice sounded in my head. Telepathy. Now there was something that was going to both make things easier and more complicated at the same time. Sure, being able to keep secrets from our captors was useful, but there were definitely some things I didn’t want Helga to have access to. And judging by her reaction, there were definitely things she wanted to hide on her end as well.

And let’s face it, I don’t exactly have the best record at not spreading gossip around.

-Looks like the vent cover’s sealed tight. Not that I think we could fit through here anyway. We’re kinda… bigger than we were.-

-Hell yeah, we are, Helga thought back at me. I’ve got abs. Bis, tris, lats, glutes… they’re all like rocks. My tail’s like a length of steel cable.-

Yeah, I’d noticed that too. Whatever freaky virus had done this to us had also Rousey’d the heck out of our bodies. I had muscles I never even knew existed.

-You almost sound like you’re enjoying this, Helga.-

-Oh, don’t get me wrong, Princess, I’m not okay with this. But there are some things I could get used to. Like being ripped.-

-Well, that’s cool for you. But being a bodybuilder wasn’t really on my bucket list. Oh, by the way, here comes the gas again.-

-Wha-- she managed to get out as the gas flooded the room again. By this time I was completely immune to the stuff, but Helga wasn’t quite there yet.

“I hate you so much,” she muttered before she hit the floor.
-Sorry about that-, I thought when she came to – it was a lot faster this time – -but next time you should be able to handle it.-

-Oh, baloney, Princess. You’re not sorry at all.-

-It was a little funny,- I admitted, -but for real, we kind of need each other right now, if we want to have any hope of getting home.-

-Then kindly refrain from pissing me off any further. Savvy?- -Fine. So… I’m willing to hear whatever ideas you have.-

-Let me think okay? It’s really hard to with all the heat in here!-

Heat? Ever since my transformation had completed, my body temperature had felt perfectly normal. It was actually a little chilly in the enclosure. “You sure you’re okay?”

“I’m FINE, Princess, I’m just peachy! I’m ENTIRELY COMFORTABLE with this WHOLE SITUATION!”

“Helga… “

“What?”

“Your hand is on fire!”

“What are you OH MY GOD MY HAND IS ON FIRE!” Helga started waving around the hand which had, indeed, burst into flame. “PUT IT OUT PUT IT OUT PUT IT OUT PUT IT OUT PUT IT OUT!...”

“How is this happening?” I screamed as well, caught up in the moment.

“I DON’T KNOW? I WAS JUST REALLY ANGRY AND oh, thank god… I think it’s going out…”

“Wow, that must really hurt… “

“Actually, it doesn’t. At all. This is so weird… in fact… I think I might be able to control it.”

She looked at her still burning hand, and closed her eyes. The flames slowly died down. “Am I out? I feel like I’m out.”

“You’re out.”

Helga opened her eyes. “Okay, this… this is cool. This is REALLY cool. Abs are one thing, but we can burn stuff now.”

“I’m really glad for you, but let’s focus on anything that can actually get us out.”

“Stuff like… burning through the wall, maybe?”

Wow. I’m stupid. Of COURSE this was useful. Right…. How did she do it? Get mad? Right… I’m locked up. I’m a freak. My entire wardrobe is now worthless. I’m probably super ugly and no one will ever want to date me. I’ll never see the people I care about again. Get mad. Get mad.

I looked at my hands. Nothing.
“What’s amatter, can’t get it up? It’s easy. See?” Helga made all four of her hands light up. “I ain’t even mad now. It’s just like turning on a switch. Fire…” They went out. “No fire. Fire… no fire. Just the right hands. Just the lower left hand. See? Super easy,”


“I guess I’m just advanced,” smirked Helga. “And now… I’m getting out of here.” She unleashed a stream of flame at the window, leaving… a slight scorch mark.

“You were saying?” I said, returning the smirk.

“Just getting warmed up. Literally.” Helga began spewing fire at the window, the door, the walls, the ceiling, everything, but only succeeded in finally setting off an alarm and the cell’s fire suppression systems, leading to her getting doused in flame-retardant foam. I tried to suppress a giggle, and failed. Miserably. Because it was hilarious.

“Yeah, yeah, laugh it up, Grimace.”

“Why, thank you for your kind permission, I do believe I shall.” I replied, giving in to the silly bug. Helga’s ears twitched. “Shhh, someone’s coming I think we got someone’s attention..” She waved silence. Maybe we can goad them into opening the door, she added telepathically. I gave her a nod, signifying I was in sync with her.

The guards came into view around a corner. -Just play along, Helga thought.-

As soon as the guards came into view, Helga immediately keeled over, clutching her stomach with her lower arms and reaching out with the upper left. “What’s… happening….” she croaked.

“Oh Em Gee…” I said, realizing what she was doing. “She looks really sick.”

“The foam… it burns…” groaned Helga, “I… I think it’s killing me…”

“What in…” one of the guards muttered.

“It must be like our Kryptonite or something!” I said. “She’s dying! You have to save her!”

“Oh, jeez” the guard said. “The Old Man’ll have our nards if we let one of them die!” He reached for a control panel next to the door and keyed in a sequence while the door swung open. “Quick, get her out of there and clean her up while we-"

Helga was up off the floor and on the guard so fast that even my new improved set of eyes had trouble following it. Her fists quickly made short work of him and she was on the next before he could bring up his weapon, kneeling him in the solar plexus and clocking him over the head with a lower fist. A third guard managed to bring up his weapon, but her tail whipped out and snagged it, yanking it from his hands and hitting him upside the head with it, knocking him cold.

“That was so wicked awesome,” I found myself whispering. UGH. I swore I would never say that again. That was so early 4th grade.

She advanced on the fourth. “I don’t get paid enough for this,” he muttered.

“Oh, pal…” She said, grabbing the paid goon by the collar. “Now, here’s what you’re going to do.”
This was it. She was going to get him to release me and point the way to the way out.

She pulled him close. “I had a bunch of stuff with me when I was captured. You’re going to take me to it.”

“Wait, what?” I gasped.

“Anything!” the guard begged. “Just don’t hurt me! I am done with all of this, I swear!”

“Good,” Helga said. “Remember, you screw me, and there’ll be Helga to pay.”

“Helga, what are you doing? Aren’t you gonna let me out?” I demanded.

-I’ll come back for you, I promise! I just… I gotta do this on my own!- She ushered the guard off.

I pounded on the glass. “What the hell are you doing? Don’t leave me here, you witch! How DARE you! You wouldn’t have gotten out without me! You do NOT cross Rhonda Wellington Lloyd, you-“

And as my rage built up to critical, I felt something unleash.

It wasn’t fire, though.

Rather, it was a massive discharge of electricity that blew out every light in the hallway and fried the door locks. It also knocked me back on my butt.

I sat there for a bit, wiggling my fingers, watching tiny arcs of electricity play between them. So this was my special thing. It wasn’t fire, but… I could live with lightning.

When I finally got back to my feet, I was able to wrench open the door. I was free… in a mazelike bunker who knows where.

All I did know is that Helga had BETTER have a really good excuse for ditching me.

--

INTERLUDE

Because there’s some stuff that neither of us was there for, but is super important. From what we were able to piece together, it probably went a little something like this.

“Subject 2 has escaped, sir,” the tech on the detention monitor reported. “She tricked the guards and incapacitated most of them. She has a hostage.”

“That is unfortunate… but also worth observing,” came the weak, raspy voice from the oxygen tent in the middle of the room. The Old Man rubbed his wizened chin with a shriveled, clawlike hand. “I want to know exactly what these girls are capable of. If the Green Eyes’ legend is indeed true, they have great potential.”

“Legend?” the tech inquired, a puzzled look on her face.

“You’re new here”, the Old Man wheezed. “So, I suppose I’ll have to explain all this. You see, there are legends of geodes that fell from the stars. They have been known to grant vast power and immortality. It’s believed that one fell in India millennia ago and gave rise to the legends of beings such as Brahma and Shiva. My contact, La Sombra, claimed he believed another was located in San Lorenzo, but he met a rather unfortunate end before he could acquire it. I thought it was lost, until my agents located an energy signature consistent with the geodes in, of all places, the hipster Mecca Hillwood.” He sounded almost nostalgic about that name. “We didn’t find the stone, but we did find two children who came in contact with it. If they can be relieved of their secrets…” He coughed “As
you can tell, my time is rather short. Immortality… appeals to me.”

Suddenly, several of the monitors went out. “Sir,” the tech warned, “The entire prisoner wing just went dark.”

“That… is not good,” the Old Man said.

Chapter End Notes

Well, with this chapter, we’ve officially caught up to ff.net. Updates’ll slow down now since I have to actually write them instead of copy/paste them.

Also, I’d like to point you to a bit of fan art that metalheadrailfan did for this story on DeviantArt.com. While not quite story-accurate (Helga is pink, it’s Rhonda who’s mauve), it’s a really nice piece of work and I always appreciate when fans get inspired by my nonsense.

https://www.deviantart.com/art/Mutant-Helga-732831623
I Wrestle With My Conscience

Chapter Summary

Helga and Rhonda make their escape, but even if they get out, what can they expect to face out in the open?

Meanwhile at home, Arnold and Gerald have figured out that something strange is going on.

Chapter Notes

I haven't figured out how to format stuff on this site (the editor is kinda bare-bones). In any case, since I don't know how to use italics, telepathic communication is represented by hyphen-brackets, while the voices in Helga's head are represented by tilde (~)-brackets.

Chapter 5

I Wrestle With My Conscience

A Villain Lair. Probably underground. Aren't they usually?

-HELGA-

So, now I'm dragging this gorilla through the complex after I broke out of my cell.

~And left Rhonda in there.~

Of course my conscience sounds exactly like Arnold. Doesn't everybody's?

"And then you make a left turn here-" the goon began

"You know what? I don't have time for this." I hefted Grodd (who easily weighed well over two hundred pounds plus a ton of heavy equipment; these new muscles of mine are pretty bitchin') and slung him over my shoulder. "I'm just gonna run ahead and you're gonna shout me directions and try not to barf." I got started, accelerating into a sprint.

"Uh… right! Left! Now straight ahead two intersections then take a left! Now left again, now right, n- why did you tell me not to barf, now that's all I can think of!"

"Oh, brother," I groaned, stopping and putting him down for a moment. "Are we at least close?"

"There's a series of lockers two corridors down from here. Whatever you two had with you is in one of them. Now if you'll excuse me… "He gagged, about to expel whatever his last meal was all over the wall. I backed off, because the last thing I needed to cap off the worst day imaginable was to get puked on.
"Eh, whatever, I don't really need you anymore anyway. Get out of here. And you better not go and get your buddies, 'cause Ol' Betsy here's really been achin' for some love."

I left him there in the corridor and followed his instructions to the locker bank. For such a high tech place, these lockers were actually pretty run of the mill affairs that wouldn't've been too out-of-place at PS 118. Standard metal manufacture, combination locks…

…dammit, I should've kept that guy around to give me the combination!

I could have gone back and found him, but the guy was probably long gone by now if he had any sense whatsoever. Frustrated, I slammed my fists into the nearest locker, mashing a deep dent in the metal.

Of course. I had the combination all along… mindless vandalism!

One by one, I wrenched the locker doors off their hinges, until I found what I was looking for.

The dress was a total write-off, ripped to shreds by my transformation. At least I could still use my bow to tie all this stupid hair back and out of my face. Of course, all that was worthless compared to-

It wasn't here.

My locket wasn't here.

My muse, my inspiration, my guiding light wasn't here.

~So it's not even here, is it.~, Arnold's voice sounded in my head.

"…no," I said.

~You ditched someone who was depending on you for something that wasn't even there to begin with.~

"Look. I was gonna go back for her, okay? I just didn't want her with me when I found my locket! You know how gooey I can get! The last thing I need is for Princess to see me waxing all lyrical over a hunk of gold-plated bronze!"

~Would that have really been so bad?~

"Uh-DOI, Football-Head! Rhonda Lloyd is the biggest gossip in PS 118… heck, the Pacific Northwest in general! If she knows it, EVERYONE knows it! If word gets out about me, about us, so long, toughest girl in Hillwood, hello, gushy lovey-dovey marshmallow girl!"

~And just why are you so concerned with your reputation? Are you this committed to living a lie just because Harold made fun of you in preschool?~

"Oh, what the hell do you know, Hair Boy? You're not even real! You're just the part of me that knows what I did was wrong and is trying to convince the rest of me!"

~…~ - What exactly would a really smug expression sound like? Because that was the sound Arnold was making in my head right now.

I sagged against the locker. "Criminy. I'm actually having a knock-down drag-out argument with the voices in my head. And the worst part? I'm losing. *sigh* I'm not just a basket case. I am the QUEEN of basket cases."
And then the lights went out, as if the very electricity wanted to mirror my mood. Oh, hello there, Pathetic Fallacy, come to keep me company at my most pathetic.

"Guess someone forgot to pay the evil electric bill" I quipped to no one in particular.

Okay, fine, conscience. I'm going back to spring Rondaloid. You happy?

I started to retrace my steps. Finding my way back to the pile of puke that marked where I left the goon wasn't that hard, but we'd taken a pretty convoluted route to get to that point, and I wasn't sure if I remembered it fully.

…doi. Use our mental link. Of course. Much as it sucks that the two of us are joined at the lobe, it's actually kind of convenient in this one specific case.

But then again she's really pissed off at me.

~Rightfully so~ said Arnold/Helga's smug-ass conscience/my growing delusional state.

"I thought I told you to shut up." Oh yeah. That's telling me.

Welp, guess I was better off just ripping off the band-aid and getting it over with. I pushed out with my mind, and-

When I get my hands on Helga, I am gonna TAKE HER APART!

"…actually, she sounds like she's just fine on her own. I should probably go make myself useful finding the way out of this place!" I turned around and started in the other direction, only to run into guards. LOTS of guards. Lots of well-armed guards.

"Oh, heeeeeey… just… looking for the bathroom…" I tried to pass off the most innocent smile I had. Hey, I can be charming if I want!

Oh boy, that's a lot of guns pointed at me.

"So, if I could just…"

"Uh uh. No funny stuff, Pinky. You're turning around and going back to your cell."

Okay. This was bad. Taking out four guys that I had the drop on was one thing, but this was a LOT more than four guys and these had guns aimed right at me.

Maybe if I had a distraction or something…

"THERE YOU ARE!"

"Ohhhh… hey, Rhonda."

"Don't play cute with me, Helga. I do NOT appreciate being ditched and oh boy that's a lot of people pointing guns at us isn't it."

"Yes. Yes it is." -So… you got out on your own, huh…-

-I did, yes. You're not the only one who has a little hidden something.-

-Well, hey! That's good! You didn't need me to come back for you after all, which, by the way, I was just about to do…-
"Right," the lead guard said. "Turn around. Back to your cells."

"Seriously, you got a can around this joint?" I said. "Those cells ain't exactly equipped with all the amenities, if you know what I me-"

"Listen," the guy said "I'm really getting tired of your lip, freak," he spat, shoving his gun into my gut.

"ExCUSE me? I never asked for ANY of this crap. You palookas grabbed me out of school, and while that's NOT my favorite place, I'll take it over the Fortress of Doom here! So you get that gun OUT of my face or-"

"Uh, Helga, could we not antagonize the-"

"Shut it!" Another guard smacked Rhonda across the face with the butt of his weapon.

Rhonda's eyes suddenly flared from yellow to bright red. "Oh, that is IT." She unleashed a massive jolt of electricity into the guard, blowing him backward. "Don't think I didn't recognize your voice. THAT is for taserling me."

Okay, THAT was cool. "Lightning, huh?"

"Some of us are just advanced, I suppose," she replied in that irritatingly smug manner of hers. "Too bad they're probably gonna shoot us now."

"Well, Princess, I can't say it's been fun…. So I HA FIREBALL!" Hoping I'd caught them off-guard I unleashed a wide blast of fire. Or tried to. What actually came out of my hands was a blast of intense cold air. "Oh, snap, I get ice too? Christmas came early!"

Unfortunately, while the cold slowed them down, it didn't stop them. "Sh-shoot to wound," the leader yelled. "They're useless dead."

The gun muzzles flashed as bullets thudded into our legs and arms. We braced ourselves for pain. And pain there was, but… surprisingly not that much of it.

"Hey, Helga," Rhonda asked, "I've never been shot before, but… don't bullet wounds usually bleed?"

She was right. There were holes in our coveralls where the bullets had hit, and bruises underneath… but the bullets hadn't actually penetrated our skin.

"Well, this changes everything, donnit." I replied, smirking. "You wanna take out some justified anger on these guys?"

"You're really lucky I'm more pissed off at them than I am at you."

And so, the next few minutes were a blur of our fists vs their useless guns. The Princess was surprisingly holding her own, despite having jack and all in the way of fighting skills. I don't mean to humblebrag, but I've got a solid eight years of bullying experience on her (and a year of ballet for added grace and poise, but there's no way in hell I'm ever gonna let her know about that). Rhonda has nothing but brute force and a built-in taser; she wasn't even using her lower fists, they just sorta hung at her side as if she didn't want to acknowledge they were there.
"All right, that's enough of that," wheezed a voice over the intercom (at some point they must have gotten the power back up in this part of the bunker). "I think it's time these two were free to go."

"Just like that, huh," I wasn't buying it. Why would this guy go through all the trouble of capturing us (and, probably, infecting us in the first place), just to let us go now.

"It has become obvious that the two of you are too strong to contain at this moment. I'm better off letting you out, while we analyze the data we've gleaned and come up with better ways of controlling you."

"And what's to stop us from telling everyone about this place? Or coming for you?" I leaned on the wall, upper arms crossed in front, lower fists on hips. I probably looked super badass. I hope he saw it. I hope he was focused on that and not the way I was crossing my legs.

"I just want him to fix whatever it is he did to us," Rhonda demanded, carelessly flinging aside the goon she was wrestling with. The loser crumpled against the wall, unmoving. "Wait," she said, concern clouding her face. "Did I just kill that guy?"

"He's not dead," the voice responded indignantly. "He's just bleeding internally and being a total baby about it. And in any case, I and my organization have nothing to do with your condition. The two of you are part of something far older. You have no conception of what you have become."

"So you're really just… letting us go. Let me repeat myself… you know we're just gonna come after you."

"How? You don't even know where I am. I'm nowhere near this facility."

"That still doesn't stop us from blowing this wide open." Rhonda remarked.

"To who, exactly? Look at yourselves. Do you think you have any place in society? I may be letting you go, but you're still prisoners of your own freakishness, things to be feared and hated. No human will accept you. Frankly, you'd be better off as my guests. But you've proven too difficult."

By now some of the goons were starting to stir. "Gentlemen, ladies… do take these two girls to the exit. Show them every courtesy. It's likely the last they'll ever see."

"Ladies?" questioned Rhonda.

"The Old Man's an equal-opportunity employer," a feminine-voiced goon answered. "Name's Sally. I was the one in charge of changing your clothing. Grown men undressing preteen girls would've just been… wrong."

"Oh," Rhonda said, blushing a deep eggplant.

"Okay… so… I guess we're escorting you two out…" Those goons that were conscious shied away, wary of another severe thrashing.

"Yeah, you'd better keep your distance. Ol' Betsy and the five- the THREE Avengers aren't done with their exercise." I looked down at my newer pair of fists. "I should probably name the new girls, too, since it looks like they'll be sticking around a while…"

"Punchy McPunchface?" suggested Rhonda.

"Princess… there is no way I am naming one of my fists Punchy McPunchface."
I can't believe I'm naming one of my fists Punchy McPunchface. Damn it, it's the best name I've ever heard, and she's the one who came up with it, and I don't want to but it's just too good.

"Name it, don't name it… could we just go already?"

"Actually, funny story… " I said, my legs crossed even tighter, "it turns out I really do need to use the bathroom."

Thankfully there was a unisex bathroom not far from where we were, actually. Once I was done, I decided it was time to rip the band-aid off.

Time to see what my face looked like.

I took a deep breath and glanced in the mirror.

Okay so… most of my features were more-or-less recognizable. Nose, lips, chin, cheeks, basic face shape… all pretty much the same. Hair, still blonde, just lots more of it… and tiny horns poking out the top of my head. Eyes, still blue. Solid blue with oval pupils, and they had that same weird eyeliner thing going that Rhonda's do. Oddly enough, what I thought of as my two least favorite features had been fixed by the change. The billy-goat ears (thanks, dad) where now more elf ears, and while my eyebrows were still thick and bushy, the third eye broke them up into three separate segments. I pulled my lip up to get a better look at my fangs. Stuck out my blue, forked tongue. Okay, that was weird. Who am I kidding? It's all weird. I should be much more freaked out than I am. Why am I so calm about what's happened? Am I that in denial? Lloyd would be SCREAMING if she saw what she looked like, and the true injustice is even after the mutation she's still prettier than me.

Rhonda was waiting outside when I was done.

"You sure took your time in there," she groused.

"Yeah, well, it took a while to get a hang of using the tentacles, but I eventually got there."

Her eyes bulged out of her head. "Using the WHAT?!"

"Oh, relax, Princess, I'm just messin' with ya. Everything's pretty much where, what, and as many as it's supposed to be. No nasty surprises."

"Oh," Rhonda said, releasing a breath she didn't know she was holding. "That was cruel. Don't do that."

"Oh, I'm sorry… " I said, holding out a hand. "Have we met? Helga G. Pataki, fan of messing with people."

"Let's just get OUT of here and go HOME so we don't have to be around each other any more."

Right, home. I DID want to go home.

No, not to that closet in the Beeper Emporium. Not to Bob and Miriam and OLLLLLga. None of that is home for me.

Home is where the Arnold is.

I just hope he can get used to the new me.

The massive steel door slammed behind the two of them. They stood on a ledge now, high in what were probably the Rocky mountains.
"Okay, Helga." Rhonda said. "Let's sum up. We're alone. We're in the middle of nowhere. We're stuck in these mutated bodies. And we have nothing but the clothes on our backs and whatever you have in your wallet."

"Which is $7.96, a school ID, and a Bartlett County library card," I supplied.

"So..." she continued, "Where do we go from here?"

INTERLUDE

PS 118 Entrance

Yesterday

Arnold waited by the entrance. Nobody had seen Helga since her trip to the nurse's office that morning. It was assumed that she'd been sent home sick, but nobody'd seen her leave either. Frankly, there was something odd about the whole thing.

"Hey, Arnold," Gerald called as he exited, holding out his hand for their secret handshake.

"Hey, Gerald", Arnold said returning it. "

"Guess it's just the two of us," he remarked. "Seeing as Phoebe got sent home sick. Probably caught whatever Helga and Rhonda have. Man, I hope I don't get it."

"You have been spending a LOT of time together," Arnold smirked. "Maybe it's mono."

"Nah, man. My kisses are the cure, not the disease."

They approached the bus stop. Arnold sensed there was something wrong as soon as they approached. Sheena and Lila were talking to a shellshocked-looking Nadine.

"Something wrong, ladies?" asked Gerald, his usual charm turning on.

"Didn't you hear?" Sheena answered. "There was a break-in at the Lloyds' last night. Rhonda's been kidnapped!"

"What?" Sure, Rhonda'd never been one of Arnold's favorite people, but he knew that somewhere under that snooty façade there was a genuinely good person that would occasionally show herself. In any case, he considered her a friend, maybe not top tier but certainly on the second, and now she was gone. This on top of Helga just... vanishing.

"Don't worry, Nadine," Lila assured the dark-skinned blonde, "I'm sure the Lord will look after her, I have just ever-so-much faith that He will."

"I guess so," mumbled Nadine.

Lila had gotten really Christian in the last year or so. Annoyingly so. She meant well, Arnold was sure, but he wasn't sure that religious platitudes were what Nadine needed right now. "I think what Lila means to say is that we're all here for you if you need us."

"Thanks... really, Arnold." Nadine replied, smiling weakly.

"We'll take care of her from here," Sheena added. "You guys go on home."

"If you're sure," Arnold said....
"If we need anything, I promise we'll call" assured Sheena.

"Mmmm, mmm, mmm. You hear about things like this happening, but you're never ready when it actually happens to someone you know."

"I know, Gerald. Everything just feels sort of… off. Like something's going on that we-" He stopped, spotting a glittering object lying in the gutter. "Wait… that's…"

Arnold picked up the small heart-shaped artifact.

"Helga's locket. She'd never just… leave this somewhere."

"Rhonda gets sick… she gets kidnapped." Gerald muses. "Helga gets sick… she vanishes, and it looks like it wasn't on purpose."

They both came to the same realization.

"PHOEBE!"
Rocky Mountain High

Chapter Summary

Helga makes Rhonda take a leap of faith. Arnold and Gerald put two and two together.

Chapter 6

Rocky Mountain High

Far too high up

-RHONDA-

This is where my life has led me.

Here, on this cliffside in the mountains, the cold wind in my face reminding me that it was early December. Stuck in this body that was mine, yet not mine. Far away from everything and everyone I knew.

"C'mon, Princess, ya gotta try this!"

Almost everyone.

Helga was hanging there in front of me, staying aloft by slowly flapping her wings. "Do you see this?" she said. "Do you see how much not falling I'm doing?"

"That's… cool, Helga," I managed. Out here, in the open, reality was starting to set in.

Ever since waking up in that cell, everything had had an odd, dreamlike quality. Like it wasn't really happening to me. That disconnect and a healthy dose of adrenaline [Phoebe's Note: Quite understandable when you possess four kidneys and, consequently, four adrenal glands] had carried me up to this point. I had been shot today, and now even the bruises were gone, healed so completely there was no sign they had been there in the first place. It was all so unreal.

Now, though, the cold air was like a slap in my face. And in other parts, some that shouldn't have even existed. I felt the cold in my wings, in my tail, in my extra arms. Each one reminding me that any hope I had for any sort of normal life was gone.

And here Helga was, rubbing it in. She'd gotten the hang of flight almost instinctively, like everything else. She moved in her new body as if she'd been born with it, whereas I was slow and clumsy, fumbling with control of my new limbs. I couldn't even think of relying on wings I barely knew how to use, but Helga had taken to flight like it was second nature and in this light she's kinda… no, I really didn't wanna deal with that right now, that was for later.

"C'mon, Lloyd… jump in. The air's fine." She held out a hand to me. "Probably the fastest way of getting down anyway. You know, besides falling. And I don't think you wanna do that."

"It'd be over, wouldn't it?" I found myself saying.
There was a surprising look of real concern rolling over Helga's face. She dropped down and landed next to me. "You don't really think that, do you?"

"…no," I admitted. "It's just that... we're focused on going home. Like that's a solution. But… what are we going home to? We'll still be refugees from a freak show. Going home won't fix… this."

"It's a goal, Rhondaloid. You gotta have a goal to focus on, or you're gonna go crazy. Right now, getting home is the best goal I can think of. Once we do that, we can focus on the next thing.

I sighed. "I had plans, you know. There were things I was going to do with my life. I was going to design my own clothing line. I was going to be in a big Broadway musical. I was going to draw an autobiographical manga. I was going to play bass in a Bangles/Go-Go's cover band called 'The Baubles'. I was… I was going to learn to play bass. None of that is happening now. Or college. Or dating. Or… even going outside." Tears were welling up in my eyes now (all of them; as if I didn't know what a freak I was, feeling a teardrop drip from my upper eye and roll down my nose was yet another reminder). "So maybe sitting here on this ledge for the rest of my life is the best thing for me."

Helga sat down beside me. "Y'know, a lot of that stuff sounds pretty interesting, actually. I had no idea you could draw."

"I'm not exactly good yet, but I've been at it for a while."

"Well... are you suddenly not able to draw?"

"Huh?"

"What I'm saying is... is there any reason you can't do all those things? You can still draw that manga. You can still learn an instrument… maybe you can learn to play one of those guitars that are, like, double guitars. And hey… directors LOVE unconventional casting. You could be the first four-armed purple Eliza Doolittle."

"That... seems unlikely..."

"The point is... this isn't the end of our lives, Princess. It's our origin story. Our radioactive spider. Our blue midget with a magic ring. Our weird old wizard in a subway tunnel. Point is I read a lot of comic books." She laid a hand on my shoulder. "We draw our own stories. We've just been given a whole new set of pencils to do it with."

I smiled in spite of myself. "If I get up, will you stop assaulting me with mixed metaphors?"

"I promise nothing." She stood up, offering me a hand. "Up and at them, Rhondaloid."

I got to my feet, looking over the vista of the mountains. "We really are awfully high up," I said unnecessarily.

"We sure are. Climbing down would take forever. Time to pop the ol' wing-cherry." She prodded me. "C'mon, you know you wanna."

"I... I'm not sure I can." My wings had completely locked up once I'd gotten a look at the altitude.

"Sure you can. It's instinct. Your body's MADE for flying."

"That sounds easy to say for you. You're an instant expert! But I'm not sure I can let instinct take over."
"Of course you can. See?" she said as she shoved me over the edge.

The wind rushed by and the ground rushed up at me and oh crap oh crap I wanted to LIVE! I beat my wings as furiously as I could and my descent started to slow and finally stopped.

There I hung, wings holding me aloft in the midst of nothingness. This… was amazing.

"See, what did I tell you? Instinct!" Helga was bobbing there right beside me, a shit-eating grin on her face."

"What… the hell… is WRONG with you?!" I gasped out, having not quite caught my breath (there may have been a lot of screaming). "You literally just… pushed me… off a MOUNTAIN!"

"I was gonna catch you!" she protested. "You know, if you hadn't saved yourself. Which I knew you'd do."

"You… you are… UNBELIEVABLE."

"Hey. You were frozen. You needed to be pushed out of your comfort zone or you were never going to move. Really, you should be thanking me."

"Oh, yes. Absolutely." I said, my hands reaching for her. "Let me THANK you."

"…actually, now that I think about it, thanking me really isn't that necessary..." she said, backing away.

"No, no, I insist," I growled. "Let me give your throat a BIG HUG."

--

INTERLUDE

Heyerdahl Residence

"Gerald, Arnold, how y'all doin'" Reba said upon opening the door. "I take it you're here to visit Phoebe?"

"That's right, ma'am." Gerald said.

"Phoebe, sug', your friends are here," Reba called.

"Did they bring my homework?" Phoebe shouted back. Even sick, Phoebe's priority was clear.

"You KNOW we wouldn't show up here without it." Gerald called back to her.

"Very well, come in!"

"And Mrs. Heyerdahl," Arnold warned, "Careful who you talk to or let in. Two other girls got sick almost at the same time Phoebe did. One was kidnapped and one just… disappeared. I think there's something deeper happening here."

"Surely it's a coincidence?" Reba asked. "The most reasonable explanation is usually the simplest."

"One of the missing girls is Helga Pataki," Arnold continued, his hand unconsciously clutching the object in his pocket.

"Phoebe's friend? Are you sure she isn't just in one of her moods? Phoebe tells me that Helga's always having these moody spells, usually resolved by taking these long walks, usually for ice
As the two made their way to Phoebe's room, Gerald suggested "Y'know, Arnold, she might be right. Maybe Helga's just… doin' her Helga thing. Maybe she'll just show up at home on her own."

"Maybe… we'll go there next, see if she did. But I have this sinking feeling about this whole situation.


Phoebe poked her head out from the mound of blankets on the bed. Her hair, usually in a pompadour and ponytail, now lay limp over her pale, sweaty face. Oddest of all, though, was her lack of glasses. Her face looked practically naked without them.

"I am most gratified, Gerald." She said weakly.

"Whoa, you don't look so hot," Gerald said. "This flu's really doing a number on you."

"I'm fairly certain this ailment does not correspond to any known strain of the influenza virus."

"Nor any other known to modern medicine."

"What do you mean?" Arnold asked. Things were definitely starting to click together in his mind.

"Well… the first thing I did upon arriving home was to research my symptoms on NetDr. While the fever and pains were reminiscent of influenza, I lacked any of the other typical symptoms of such a condition. But even the existing symptoms seemed… unusual. The fever, for example, did not seem to be affecting my cognitive skills, and the pain was concentrated in specific areas rather than generalized.

"It only got odder from there. I began to develop severe headaches, but they cleared up when I removed my glasses… and for good reason. My nearsightedness seems to have corrected itself on its own."

"You're saying you don't need glasses anymore?" Gerald questioned. "Man, what kind of disease actually makes your eyesight better?"

"The same responsible for these," Phoebe replied, dropping her blanket, revealing the protrusions on her back.

"Holy crap" was all Gerald could get out.

"These… growths, for lack of a more precise term, formed mere minutes before your arrival. And I fear they are not the last ones."

Arnold nodded. "This isn't a disease at all, is it."

"No. It is clearly some matter of metamorphosis. And I'm not certain what the end result will be. If I will retain my identity. Though… there is a certain… scientific curiosity to be had…" She shook her head. "No, no. That's just rationalization!"

"Relax, baby," Gerald. "We'll be here for you. Even if we have to-"
"No," Phoebe said firmly. "I appreciate the sentiment… it's quite sweet actually… but there is no way you will skip school on my behalf! Promise me!"

"But-"

"PROMISE ME!"

"…promise."

"Thank you, Gerald. I'm sorry I yelled at you. I just feel very strongly about it."

"It's making more sense now," Arnold said. "If this is what's happening to you, I bet it's also happening to Helga and Rhonda. Which means that whoever grabbed Rhonda probably also has Helga, and I wouldn't be surprised if you're a target too."

"Wait… did you say someone grabbed Helga?"

"There's no way to know. Maybe they did… maybe she managed to get away. All I have to go on is this." He produced the locket.

"Oh dear… Helga would never willingly abandon her most precious memento. I fear you are correct about her likely abduction."

"I promise, we're not giving up on her… but right now, I don't know how we can help her. The best we can do is get you to someone who can help you, somewhere safe and protected. Fortunately… I happen to know an expert in exotic biology…"

--

-OKAY, BACK TO ME NOW-

No, I didn't murder her.

I'm not just gonna forgive her – bitch pushed me off a goddamned mountain – but in the end, I don't really have it in me to do that kind of thing.

And besides… I kind of need her. I will never, ever admit it, but Helga's smarter than I am. Probably second in the school behind Phoebe, actually. I'm better off with her than without her.

She did kind of pull me out of my misery spiral.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not happy about this, not by a long shot. I doubt I'll ever be happy with this. But at least I feel a little more comfortable in my new skin. I have better control over all my new body parts.

"You're gonna have to talk to me eventually, you know." We were flying now, along the valley between the mountains. "You said it yourself, talking to each other is gonna help us stay sane."

"Fine," I said. "You wanna talk, you can tell me what was so important earlier that you had to ditch me over it."

"Oh, right… that… happened. Look… it's… really not something I'm comfortable talking about. Not yet. And you're not the best there is at keeping secrets."

She had me there. "Devastating stuff, huh. I… actually have my share of that. Tell you what… you show me yours… I'll show you mine."

"Hmm… mind-blowing dirt on Princess Rhonda Lloyd, huh… It might actually be worth it. Okay…"
I'm not ready to talk right now, but... I'll think about it."

"Right. So... uh... what do we do now?"

"Our priorities right now are finding out where exactly we are and how to get home from there, putting distance between us and this place, and..." I could hear her stomach growling. "Finding food and water, because I'm pretty sure those are things we still need." I was reminded that I, too, hadn't had anything in the last day or so besides one of those compressed "food" bars, which was now sitting in her gut attempting to be digested.

"That sounds reasonable."

"Then get a move on, Princess. I ain't missin' Christmas."
Chapter Summary

The girls make a pit stop, but can they stop sniping at each other? And will someone else get into the act?

Chapter 7
Too Far From Home, Too Close To Home

Lost

-HELGA-

This one time, I was having a moral crisis, and Arnold came to me in my dreams as an angel. This actually happens a lot.

Anyway, as he was leaving, I asked him "What's it like to fly?"

He said "Eh. It's okay."

Liar. Flying is AMAZING. Gravity has its grip on everyone and everything, and here I am flipping it the metaphorical finger (I actually don't have that particular finger anymore).

The thing about wings, though, is they get tired. Especially when you've had nothing to eat or drink in at least 36 hours (my pack of biscuits had not been in the locker, and was likely digesting in the belly of one of the goons back in the bunker, and I didn't trust those "food" bars). My stomach (stomachs? I feel like I might have more than one) were starting to get insistent.

"Helga, slow down! I can't keep up with you!"

Not to mention the mauve anchor tied to my ankles.

Miss Rhonda Wellington Lloyd was not a natural born flyer. Even after getting over herself long enough to take to the air, she was still not comfortable using her wings and was spending a lot of energy just keeping herself aloft.

"Well, excuuuuuuuse me, Princess, [A.N: Sorry, I had to] it's hard to hold myself back for you."

"Can we just stop for a few minutes? My lungs are kind of tired from screaming after you pushed me off that mountain."

Right. I did do that. A little bit.

"Ugh, whatever. It's not like we know where we're going, anyway."

We set down in the canyon. "Thanks," she said. "I'm getting better at this, I really am, but it's not easy for me."
"I thought you were advanced, Lloyd."

"Well, CLEARLY, I'm trying to talk a good game." She sighed. "Story of my life, really."

I sniffed. "So. You're admitting you're full of hot air."

"I'm admitting I'm not the poised, confident person I appear to be."

"Oh. Really. So you're NOT pretty, rich, and popular?"

"Oh, no, I'm all those things. But a lot of who I am is a front. Things are… expected of me, you know? I… kinda envy you, actually…"

"…you envy ME."

"You just… get to be YOU, you know? You are what you are. You do what you want. It's all there on the surface. What you see is what you get."

"Yeah. That's me all right. I'm all there, right in the open, bucko. In your face. I'm raw. I'm real. I'm genuine."

"…so what was that huge secret, then?"

"Oh, that? I made that up. I just wanted to see if you would spill anything. Like you said, what you see is what you get, baby."

"Figures." Phew. Secret's safe another day. Good going, Helga. Why thank you, 't mention it, Helga. "I think we should go that way," she suddenly said, pointing off toward the distance.

"Just… like that, huh? What, you suddenly get future vision in your third eye or something?"

"I love that cartoon, but no. I just… have a feeling."

"…whatever. It's not like we can get any more lost."

--

Interlude

"Nyet, sir. I heve not located the mutant cheeldren yet."

Svetlana Kalashnikov (not her real name) idled by the side of the road. Her tech had not yet located the children's energy signatures. Of course, one could not entirely rely on technology. The Russian mercenary knew this from experience.

The children, despite their abnormal appearance, would instinctively seek out a sign of civilization. And so, Svetlana had chosen the closest outpost, a small truckstop in the middle of nowhere. There she waited, watching from concealment with her binoculars.

"Remember," the Old Man advised her over her earpiece, "We only have one 'magic bullet', so I would advise you make it count. If I can't have them both, I'll at least take one."

"Da, do not worry. I am best sniper in business." She shouldered the rifle as she waited.

Her instincts had not failed her yet. They would come.

--
I stared at the pair of buildings off in the distance. Son of a gun, she'd actually been on the money.

"Okay… HOW did you know."

"Felt it. I think my electrical powers give me a natural compass or something. Like they point me to other strong electrical sources."

Hm. Made about as much sense as anything else that had happened in the last couple of days.

It turned out to be a small truckstop, just a mechanic next to a small diner. Both were closed now, since it was well past midnight. Bad news for wayward truckers, good news for a couple of tired, starving super-powered preteens.

"Are we going to break in?" Rhonda questioned.

"If it makes you feel bad, you can have your folks send them a check. Right now, we're hungry, we're thirsty, we're tired, and we're, above all, more or less broke." I wrenched the door open.

Huh. Something about the place was strangely familiar.

"Oh, crap, oh crap, we're felons," Rhonda whined.

"Suck it up, Princess. We do what we gotta do. I'm gonna go see what's in the kitchen.

"Guess this is our life now…" She strolled off to explore the rest of the diner while I went to work figuring out the kitchen. Of course, with a mom like Miriam, I knew my way around cooking. It was either learn to cook for myself or starve to death.

I got the grill going, and a few minutes later the cheeseburgers I'd formed out of the leftover meat from today's dinner rush were sizzling on its top.

"This place is nuts," came Rhonda's voice from the main area. "It's like every redneck diner from every road trip movie ever. There's even one of those mechanical bull-thingies."

"Mechanical bull, huh… I haven't seen one of those since…" And it finally hit me why this place was so familiar. I knew exactly where we were.

I ran out to the main area, where Rhonda was examining a framed photo of a blonde woman with glasses in a cowboy hat. The plaque below acknowledged that she was the current record holder in the bull-riding contest.

"That's your mom, isn't it." Rhonda said unnecessarily.


"It's not like we're going anywhere for a while. Might as well tell it,"

"Eh, why not. Over dinner. For now, I can tell you that we're about fifty miles from the Wyoming/Idaho border, which finally gives me some idea of which way we're going. You want bacon on your cheeseburger?"

"Cheeseburgers?" She shuddered. "Isn't there a salad bar or something?"

"The kitchen ain't takin' requests. Besides, I think saturated fats are the least of our worries right now."
"…fine, cheeseburger. But no bacon."

"There's a pie, too. If I remember right, the pie was amazing here."

Rhonda shrugged. "Sure, fine. What's one more criminal act at this point?"

"Technically, I'm the one who broke in. So you're not the criminal You're… more of an accessory. You fashionistas like accessories, right? Oh… and you're getting bacon. I already took it out."

"…but I hear this cheering coming from inside, so I go back in thinking I missed the most epic of fails, and there she is, still holding on. She lasted twenty-three seconds, which doesn't sound long, but I guess it was enough that she still holds the record. Anyway, long story short, we won five hundred bucks and free food for life."

Rhonda choked on her mouthful of pie. "…you mean you had free meals coming and we had to break in here?"

"Well, I don't exactly look like is used to, do I?" I pointed out, taking another bite. "Oh yeah, this pie is amazing."

"Best strawberry pie I've ever tasted," admitted Rhonda.

I spat out the pie. "Did you say strawberry? Criminy, no wonder I didn't recognize the taste! Great, now I'm gonna die for breaking and entering!"

"You sure about that?" Rhonda asked. "You've already had like, two pieces. Wouldn't you be feeling something by now?"

"First come the hives, then the swelling, then my throat closes up, then-"

"Helga…"

"This is it. I'm bringing down the curtain. Putting the down-payment down on the farm. Signing up for the Choir Invisible. Picking out a halo that fits over my horns-"

"Helga!"

"What? Make it quick, I'm dying."

"No, you're not. You're fine. No hives. No swelling. The only thing you're suffering from is an excess of drama."

I took a deep breath. She was right. I was on my third slice and I was fine. I mentally added "Not allergic to strawberries anymore" to the "Pros of being a mutant" column.

"…right, so where was I…."

"Your mom won the mechanical bull contest."

"Right…. Turns out she was some kind of big rodeo star back in South Dakota back before she met Bob and chucked her dreams down the ol' crapper."

"Guess sometimes parents can surprise you, huh."

"Guess sometimes they can. I just wish it made up for the vast majority of time they don't." I slumped in my seat. "Yo, turn on the tube. I wanna distract myself." When she didn't move, I added. "C'mon.
"I made dinner."

"...I guess that's fair," she said, getting up, but it turned out to be unnecessary; the TV snapped on
before she even got halfway to it.

"Talk about service," I remarked.

"...I just... thought about it coming on, and it came on."

"Guess there's more to your power than just tazing people."

"Yeah, guess so," she said, sitting down.

A Diet Yahoo commercial (promoting the new "millennial-friendly" kumquat, papaya, and acai berry flavors) gave way to a reporter. "The search continues for the missing Hillwood heiress Rhonda Wellington Lloyd." Rhonda's most recent file photo, an Instagram glamour shot showcasing her finally-regrown hair from some months ago, flashed up on the screen. "She was kidnapped during a break-in at the Lloyd residence three days ago. Her mother, former supermodel Brooke Wellington, and housekeeper Elena Rodriguez both suffered injuries in the attack. Both have made full recoveries."

"Oh, thank god," Rhonda whispered.

"The girl's father is hedge-fund and real-estate magnate Buckley Lloyd, who is offering $250,000.00 for any information leading to her safe recovery."

"You'll notice who they're not offering a quarter-mill bounty for." I remarked.

"They're getting to it."

They never got to it.

"I wonder if they even notice I've been gone." I found myself saying. Too much time around her. My defenses are dropping. I'm getting soft.

"Somebody has to. Your folks are probably frantic."

"Ha! My folks wouldn't notice if I started speaking in tongues and puking gummi bears. Bob is too focused on steering the SS Beeper straight into an iceberg and Miriam's in a permanent smoothie coma, with a little help from old Uncle Absolut. I'm literally the last thing either'd ever think about." I sighed. "Now if OLGA was missing, they'd go apepoopy. They'd wallpaper the whole town in posters, they'd hire detectives, the whole nine yards."

"...hey, what about your sister? I'm sure she must miss you."

"Sure, she probably would... for like a minute... then she'd get distracted. Though I guess it's a step up that she thinks of me 1% of the time."

"That doesn't sound like the Olga that was practically catatonic over worry for you in San Lorenzo."

"No, no, I can picture it, Much weeping. Very cry. A whole lot of 'BABY THITHHHHTER!' I do a pretty good Olga, if I do say so myself. "And then along comes a cute guy or a lost puppy and she forgets all about me, and she's back to being a sponge for Bob and Miriam's affection. Face it, girl, you're lucky you don't have anyone to compete with for your parents' attention."

"...I don't know..." Rhonda said, looking wistful. "Having a sister would've been nice. Someone to
look up to and learn from and steal cute sweaters from…"

"You really don't know what it's like, do you. She's like there's a black hole in my life sucking everything away from me."

"No, I really don't know what it's like. I can't. I've never had that experience. And it really sucks that your parents treat you the way that they do, and honestly, I don't know what to tell you about that. I could pat you on the shoulder and give you an empty 'that's rough, buddy', but we both know that would be hollow and meaningless. And I know that I haven't spent nearly enough time with your sister to know what she's really like, but what little time I did showed me that she cares for you a lot. And it sucks that she gets all your parents' attention, but it also sucks that you're turning it around and making it her problem."

"Just shut it, Princess! You don't know what you're talking about!" Criminy, who did she think she was? Just trying to get in my head like some amateur Dr. Bliss? Telling me I'M the problem? "You don't get to judge me! You have EVERYTHING! I have NOTHING! I don't have to sit here and listen to your bargain-basement psychology!" It always happens. Every time I let a little of myself out there, people try getting all touchy feely with me. There is only ONE PERSON who gets to do that with me.

"You know what, whatever. It was obviously a mistake to try having a real conversation with you. I was starting to think that maybe there's a human being in there that I can actually get along with, but if you wanna keep doing the angry loner thing, fine. I'm done wasting my time." She took a deep breath. "I'm going outside to get some fresh air. When you wanna come out, come out, and we can keep going home, or you can stay here, I can move on, and we won't have to waste each others' time anymore." She stood up, doing her Rhonda hair-flip thing, and walked out.

"Sounds fine to me, Rondaloid. Frankly, I think I can go the rest of my life without ever seeing you again." I said as she slammed the door.

~You know she was only trying to help you, Helga~ echoed Arnold's voice in the back of my head.

"Oh, look who's piping up now. Listen up, Arnoldo. Only you get to see my true heart. Not her, not Olga, not anyone else. Besides…. She's probably gonna come crawling back on her own. Little miss sheltered rich girl probably can't handle things without someone to take charge."

The door opened again. "See, Football-Head, what'd I tell y-"

It was her. But she was stumbling, clutching her side with her lower-left hand. I could see a greenish-blue stain spreading across her jumpsuit top.

"I… I think there's someone out there…" she said, collapsing.

I rushed to her. "Who's out there? What happened?" But she was already passing out.

It was pretty clear what had happened. Though. The Old Man had been keeping tabs on us. And he'd found a way to hurt us, faster that expected.
Chapter Summary

Seemingly cured of her mutation, Rhonda finds herself stuck in an eerily familiar town, but all is not what it seems.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 8

It's Time… for BIZARRO!

Haze

-RHONDA-

The last thing I remember was the bullet hitting my side.

This would be bad for most people, but I happen to be one of the two people on Earth that this shouldn't have been a problem for. My recent encounters with bullets had them unable to get through my new purple skin, leaving nothing more than a superficial bruise that would fade within a few minutes.

This particular bullet, however, wasn't getting with the program. This one punched right through my skin and buried itself deep in my side, spreading an unnatural heat that penetrated all the way to my brain.

I have vague memories of stumbling back into the diner, of Helga rushing over to me, and of darkness overtaking me.

I swam through the darkness for a while, my movements feeling unnatural. I heard a voice saying "…up" over and over. I swam toward it, my limbs heavy and struggling to respond. I felt myself sinking, yet curiously the voice was getting louder and more distinct. "…ake up" it said. I tried to fight the current, but it just pulled me down, down, down…

And then something slapped me in the face,

"I sad WAKE UP, Lloyd! Sheesh! I don't feel like carrying you anymore!"

My eyes snapped open to see Helga's pink, scowling, three-eyed face looking down at me. "Criminy. I thought you were gonna sleep forever."

I looked around. We were at the side of a road, a vast cornfield behind us.

"W-what happened? I got… " My hand went to my side, to find undamaged skin. "…shot…"

"Yeah, you got shot. I was gonna fly you to a hospital, but it turns out I didn't need to bother. Whatever it was they shot you with turns out to have been the best thing for you."
"What are you talking ab-" My hand moved further up my side. The extra arm that should have been there was gone. I looked back at the hand. Pale pink, the full five fingers. My tail was gone. My wings, gone. Horns, third eye, everything, gone.

I was normal again. The only signs that anything had happened were my overgrown hair and ratty, hole-filled jumpsuit.

"I'm… me again!" I shouted to no one.

"Yeah, you're you again. You can go back to your old life. Be rich and pampered, become head cheerleader, win prom queen, go to some expensive college to get your MRS, marry one of your dad's rich friends' kids and have a bunch of spoiled entitled children. The world is your imported smoked oyster. Which means we're done."

"What do you mean we're done? We're nowhere near home yet!"

"Look, Princess, you don't need my help anymore. You're perfectly normal now. You can walk into anyplace, make a phone call, and your dad'll probably send a limo around to get you. I can get home way faster on my own. You'd be holding me back."

"…so you're just abandoning me here?"

"Relax. There's a town a half mile up the road. You can get help there. And here's half the cash stash." She handed me four bucks. "Should be enough for the phone. Don't say I never did ya any favors, bucko." With that, she flew off into the horizon, leaving me to walk the rest of the way towards town.

The "town" was the very definition of one-horse, if the horse had died of hoof-in-mouth disease twenty years ago. A run-down movie-theater, a general store that looked like something out of the turn of the century, and a few other meager establishments made up what passed for a Main Street. I figured that the store would be the best bet for a phone, so I took a deep breath and hoped there was no no-shoes-no-service policy. The past half-mile had been a stern reminder to never go barefoot again. Once I got home I was going to soak my bad girls for a week.

I entered, and did a double-take.

Over by the candy barrels, a tough-looking girl with long brown hair, wearing a black shirt with a skull emblem, torn jeans, steel-toed boots and spiked bracelets, was shaking down a scrawny-looking nerd with a blond mullet.

"I swear, that's all I've got, Shanna!" the nerd whined, adjusting his glasses.

"Fine, but if I find out you're holding out on me, Johann…" The bully let go of Johann, who scurried off and out of the store. She glared at me. "And just what are YOU looking at, Rhoda?"

"N-nothing, you just looked like…" Rhoda? How does she almost know my name?

"I must say, Rhoda," came a haughty but familiar voice from over by the soda fountain. A well-dressed dark-skinned blond sat next to an emo-looking kid with droopy red hair. "You've managed to outdo yourself today. You look even more awful than usual. I swear, Eustace, look at her! She couldn't even be bothered to wear shoes today! And just what IS that stain? That color simply does NOT exist in nature!"

The redhead kid sighed heavily. "I can't blame her for giving up, Noreen. Life is just a crushing parade of endless, mind-numbing misery until the final moment of blessed release from existence."

I stood there, trying to process the scene. Here in the middle of nowhere, I had somehow stumbled into the Bizarro World. Here were these weird broken-mirror clones of my friends, similar in looks (though each was just a bit off) but completely opposite in personality.

"...right," I finally managed. "I really just came in here to use the phone, so, if I could-"

"Phone?" Noreen said, looking confused. "You know HE doesn't allow communication with the outside world."

...what. The hell. Have I stumbled into.

...you know, I'll just look somewhere else. I said, turning around and bumping into... myself.

Well, not quite myself. This was a me who had never heard of couture. Or, apparently, soap.

My clone ("Rhoda", I presume), wore a ratty red sweatshirt and loose grey patched sweatpants (Eustace had not been far off on her giving up on life) held up by a single suspender and the collective will of everyone watching. Her hair was messily tied up in a topknot and her lips were stained with chocolate. One finger was exploring the interior of her nose because of course, why wouldn't it.

"Who the hell are YOU supposed to be," she growled, extracting golden treasure and rubbing it on her pants. I fought the urge to gag. No. This could NOT be my double. I would never let myself go this badly.

"Rhonda Lloyd, Hillwood Lloyds... this is all a crazy misunderstanding and if I could just get to a phone or... you guys probably still use telegraphs, actually..."

By now, others had gathered. There was slim, dapper Harold, a twitchy long-nosed Gerald, a suave, cool Sid, a small, intelligent-looking Stinky, and a gangly, dimwitted Phoebe. There was also a bland-looking dark-haired kid with glasses that I couldn't quite place...

"Reckon I know what she is," the Bizarro Phoebe mused. "We was warned this day was comin'"

"That's right, Fifi!" the not-Gerald exclaimed. "She must be... a doppelganger!"

"I'm NOT a doppelganger! There's no such thing as doppelgangers!"

"Save it for Queen Doppel-poppoulis!" Bizarro Sid said, glaring.

"You're all crazy! None of this is making sense!"

I felt a sharp, blunt pain as Shanna whacked me in the back of the head with a wrench.

"Sweet dreams, doppelganger," she quipped as I faded out.

--

(wake up... wake up...)

"WAKE UP!" A deep clear voice shouted as I was shaken from my stupor. I opened my eyes to see a big, muscular boy with a flattop buzzcut.
"That'll do, Brawny. *snort*" a bland voice said. "We can start now that she's awake."

We were in an old barn that had been turned into a makeshift courtroom. The Bizarro Gerald stood as clerk, 'Brawny' as bailiff, the Bizarro Sid was prosecutor, the Bizarro Stinky as stenographer, and the other kids sat in the jury box alongside what I assumed were versions of the other kids in our school. And presiding was actually a familiar face. It was Arnold's weird cousin, Arnie, who had once spent a month in our class (was that even a thing? Visiting for a whole month during the school year?). Only, he'd shaved his head and was wearing a crown with a propeller on it.

To his right was the Bizarro Lila. Unlike the others, who all had some sort of tell, a different nose or physique or pair of ears, this version of Lila was a nearly-perfect double. The difference was entirely in the way she carried herself. While the real Lila seemed blissfully unaware of the beauty and charm that had made all the boys (and one particular girl) fall for her, this Lila seemed fully cognizant of her allure and was clearly experienced in using it, as I could tell from the languid, studiedly bored expression she regarded the crowd with as she lounged at the side of Arnie's throne.

"We will now *snort* begin the proceedings," Arnie spoke. "Where's the defense?"

"R-right here, your judgeship, sir!"

"Helga?" No… of course not, Helga had ditched me… again. This was the Bizarro Helga, of course. Like the Lila clone, her features were virtually identical to the Helga I knew, and yet, somehow, she was much prettier. I'd always suspected, since that sleepover I threw in fourth grade, that Helga had all the raw ingredients of prettiness, she just needed to take some pride in her appearance.

"No, my name's Hilda. Hilda F. Spitzer. I'm gonna be representing you, though I have to tell you, it doesn't look good for you. Arnie pretty much runs this town, and if he decides you need to be sacrificed so the Lintening can begin, you're probably gonna be sacrificed so the Lintening can begin. Them's the breaks, ya know?"

"Lintening? What are you talking about? What the hell kind of place is this?"

Arnie banged his gavel. "Silence. Now, if everyone's here, we can get started. *snort* The prosecution will present its case."

The Bizarro Gerald cleared his throat. "The legend of the Doppelgangers has been passed down from kid generation to kid generation since time immemorial… which I think was around mid-November. And our very own Kydd is keeper of the tale. Take it away, Kydd."

"Thank you, Gerard." Kydd began, thumbs in the suspenders he'd worn for just this occasion. "Doppelgangers. Their name is whispered in the darkest echoes of our collective fears. Doppelgangers. To the naked eye, they appear just as plain and unassuming as our own Shemp."

"I like my white bread plain, as butter is far too spicy for me," the bland-looking kid from before commented from the jury box.

"But do not be deceived! For beneath the surface lies a creature as horrifying as any from the most fearsome of nightmares. A creature with the wings of a bat, the tail of a lion, the horns of a goat, and the tongue of a serpent. They lure you in with the false appearance of a friend, then consume your soul to sustain their unnatural lives.

"Now, I draw your attention to our defendant, who has taken on a familiar form. Oh, there are some differences, but no disguise can truly be perfect. The defendant clearly sought to kill and replace our own Rhoda Boyd. But she couldn't quite pull it off, could she. Your honor, and gentlemen and ladies
of the jury, you must find this doppelganger guilty!"

Cheers and catcalls erupted. "Order!" demanded Arnie. "Defense, your statement?"

"Y-your majesty," Hilda stammered, "the defense would like to propose that maybe the defendant, is, maybe, uh… not a doppelganger?"

I groaned. "Can I be my own lawyer? Please?"

"No," Arnie answered. "The defendant will speak when spoken to."

"Uggggh… Arnie, we've met. Remember, you came to Hillwood? You offered to show me your… lint ball?"

"I meet lots of people. *snort* Now be quiet or you'll be held in contempt of court. Defense, please continue."

"…uh, that w-was all I had, your lordship." I facepalmed, hard. I was utterly, utterly screwed here. Hilda may have been more pleasant than Helga, but she had none of the latter's fire, and was it me, or did she have a thing for the guy?

"All right. *snort* Prosecution, present your witness."

"We call Rhoda Boyd to the stand."

My opposite number dug her face out of the blueberry pie she was eating and strolled to the stand. Oh, god, was she gross.

"Miss Boyd, is that you?"

"Nope," Rhoda said, belching loudly.

"No further questions," Kydd said. "Now, we have proved beyond a reasonable doubt that this is NOT Rhoda, and if she looks like Rhoda, but isn't Rhoda, then ipso facto, she's a doppelganger!"

"All right. *snort* Does the defense have anything to say?"

"Uh… I… disagree?"

"You are so fired, Hilda." I said. "Okay. For the last time. We. Have. Met. Each. Other. I am NOT a doppelganger. I am Rhonda Lloyd of Hillwood, Washington, and I am my own person that just happens to bear a disturbing resemblance to one of your friends, just like your friends bear a really disturbing resemblance to mine. This is all one big, stupid coincidence."

Arnie took a long, penetrating look at me. "If you're not a doppelganger, what are you?"

"…a… human being?"

"Are you an assassin?"

"I'm a sixth-grader."

"You're neither. You're an errand girl sent by grocery clerks to pick up the check."

"…no, I'm pretty sure I'm a sixth-grader. Look, is this a movie reference? It feels like it's a movie reference. If it is, I don't think I've seen the movie."
"Well, you should, it's a pretty good movie. *snort* Okay. I don't think there's anything left to do, so we're gonna take a short recess, and then the jury's gonna decide. Any of you in the jury have any questions? Field? Lemmy? Little Pammy? Cornhusk Dude? No? Okay. Recess time."

"Recess?" the Phoebe clone wondered. "Dang, I didn't know we was in school."

"By 'recess', Fifi, the Leader is referring to a cessation in the court's activities," the Bizarro Stinky replied.

"Oh," Fifi answered, still clearly confused.

As the other kids filed out of the courtroom, the Bizarro Lila hung back. "I'll be right with you, dear Arnie," she said.


"Oh, yes. I'm oh so certain there's nothing I would like better than to fetch you gum," Lulu rejoined with barely-suppressed sarcasm.

She slowly sauntered over to me, hips swaying. "It's becoming a chore, just such a chore to keep up appearances."

"What, you don't really like him? But he's just so…" I forced the words out, "charming."

"I suppose at some point I saw something in him, but he's just… dull, just oh-so-dull. Not really my type at all." She leaned in closer. "If you know what I mean."

"I'm… not sure I do know what you mean," I lied. I absolutely did know exactly what she meant. The way my heart had started to beat faster the closer she came, the sweat that had broken out as she drew near… oh yes, I most definitely knew what she meant.

'Fact is, I couldn't help but notice the way you were looking at me earlier." She gently stroked my cheek. "And I think you and I could have ever-so-much fun together, don't you agree?"

Hooooly crap, she's feeling me up. Not that I have a ton to feel up yet. I tried to mentally force back the red that was creeping into my cheeks. It's not actually Lila, I told myself. Jusr some weird identical double who acts the exact opposite of her and is somehow way more developed than a twelve-year-old should be. "We shouldn't do this. You're still Arnie's girlfriend! And we're twelve! And I'm TIED UP!"

"…yes, I guess I should do something about that. Although it would make things more fun… no, you're right, just ever-so-right." She began to untie me. "Funny thing though… You know what I don't hear you saying? 'But we're both girls!' Now… why is that, I wonder? Let me guess… I'm not that kind of girl? What kind of girl are you, Rhonda Lloyd?" She somehow pulled herself even closer. "Or is there someone back home? Someone who looks a lot… like… me?"

Her face was literally an inch from mine now and I was asking myself what exactly was holding me back? Was it some misguided sense of loyalty? It wasn't as though Lila even knew how I felt. Or that I was even capable of feeling it. Or that there was any chance she felt the same way. You had to fall for her right before she took that trip to Bible Camp, Rhonda. You just had to.

But… there was something off about this whole situation. Something subtly wrong that had been nagging at me since I'd woken up.

(wake up, wake up)
Things that were just out of my mental reach.

And then Lulu's lips were on mine and I said "screw it." I felt the heat of her embrace as or lips opened and her tongue found mine.

And then she suddenly pulled away, horror in her eyes.

"What ARE you?" she gasped.

"What's wrong? I thought I was doing pretty good for my first girl-on-girl kiss…"

"Don't talk to me! You freak!"

What was going on? She was all over me until the second our… tongues met.

The second her tongue met my blue, forked tongue.

In all the madness, I had never noticed that my tongue had never changed back with the rest of me. I was still a freak, just not to the naked eye.

"What's going on?" The other kids where now returning, Arnie in the lead. "Why is the doppelganger untied?"

"She, uh… she took control of my mind." Lulu said, "I was ever-so-helpless before her doppelganger mental powers. You know I would never betray you, my darling Arnie." She fluttered her eyelashes coquettishly at the wide-headed boy.

"You're lying," Arnie said dully. "I can see it in your eyes. You're a traitor, and traitors get sacrificed to the Almighty Lint. Bring in the Lint, my followers."

Shanna and Brawny wheeled in a large vat filled with boiling lint at Arnie's command. "Okay," I said. "I have had just about enough crazy for today. All right, so Lulu may have made out with me behind Arnie's back, and she may have stabbed me in the back the second you showed up, but this… this is just insane. We are civilized people, and we do not throw our friends into red-hot dryer fluff!"

"Restrain the doppelganger." Shanna and Brawny lunged at me, but I was easily able to fling them off. Apparently, I was still super-strong. I probably could have broken out of the ropes at any point during this whole thing, but something had mentally blocked me.

Did I have any of my other powers?

Had I even really changed back?

Why did all the flags in this barn have a triangle with a single eye instead of a starfield?

What was any of this? Why didn't any of this make a lick of sense?

"All right, Arnie…" I said, cracking knuckles. "You're in charge here. You know what's going on, don't you."

"Lintsquatch!" he shouted. "Seize the monster!"

A huge creature rose up out of the vat. Had it been alive the whole time? None of this followed any kind of logic, it was all like some kind of…

The creature lunged for me, and suddenly Hilda was yanking me aside. "Come with me," she said.
"I can fix all this. You just have to trust me."

"I don't seem to have much of a choice here," I said.

"I'm your only hope, Silver Spoon." She offered me her hand. "All we need to do is shake on it, and I can make all of this go away."

"Shake on-" …I paused. Hilda had been useless this whole time. Why was she suddenly the one who could fix this entire situation? Literally none of this made any reasonable sense unless…

"…just DO it, girl, we DON'T have much time…" Her voice was getting louder, shriller, more manic… almost inhuman, really…

"I never woke up," I said.

"What?"

"I never woke up after I got shot. This is all a fever dream from whatever that bullet's doing to me. And you… you're some kind of manifestation of all my fears and insecurities, aren't you!"

Hilda retracted her hand and smiled evilly. The barn, the kids, the monster, it was all fading now. It had never been, really. "GOOD EFFORT, SILVER SPOON." Her voice was now loud, harsh and alien. "I GIVE YOU AN A-MINUS. SEE, YOU'RE NOT QUITE RIGHT ON ALL COUNTS. IF I WAS THE MANIFESTATION OF ALL YOUR FEARS AND INSECURITIES I'D BE THIS HANDSOME FELLA!" She briefly turned into a clown-headed spider wielding a pair of machetes. "HOW 'BOUT A LITTLE OFF THE TOP, RHONDIE? HEE HEE HOO HA HA HOO HEE!"

She then changed back, only now her eyes had melted into one and she wore a top hat. "I HAPPEN TO BE VERY, VERY REAL. YOU WERE GONNA BE MY TICKET BACK INTO REALITY. MIND LIKE MINE, BODY LIKE YOURS… OH, THE CHAOS I COULD UNLEASH! IT WOULD'VE BEEN AMAZING, LET ME TELL YOU! HONESTLY, YOUR FRIEND WOULD'VE BEEN EVEN BETTER, BUT YOUR MIND IS A LOT WEAKER THAN HERS. AT LEAST IT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE. REALLY, WELL DONE, I NEVER WOULD'VE EXPECTED SOMEONE LIKE YOU TO FIGURE IT OUT!"

I seethed inwardly. "Why does everyone take me for some sort of shallow idiot? I am NOT some fashion-obsessed bimbo! I'm deep! I'm complex! I am NOT your plaything!"

Hey, brain? You know those great anime transformation sequences? Let's have one of those. Make me all glowy as my clothing shifts to something more fashionable.

"I am Rhonda Wellington Llloyd!"

My wings burst from my back.

"Queen of Sixth Grade!"

My lower arms and tail emerged.

"Heir to the Lloyd empire!"

My horns sprouted. My third eye snapped open.

"And I want you… whatever you are… out of my HEAD!"
I held my four hands forward. A massive ball of electricity began to build. "In the name of… uh… friendship and magic or something… I PUNISH YOU!"

"YOU CAN'T GET RID OF ME THIS EASILY, SILVER SPOON! I'LL COME FOR YOU, HEART OF GOLD, EVERYONE YOU'VE EVER CARED ABOUT, AND NO ONE CAN STOP ME!"

"Hey. Shut up." I fired, blasting 'Hilda' out of existence. With 'her' gone, the world began to lose what little cohesion it had left. I pumped my wings as the ground fell from under me, as the very air itself seemed to thicken.

And then, through it all, a pink, three-fingered hand pushed itself through.

"You didn't ditch me after all," I said.

I grabbed hold as everything faded to white.

Chapter End Notes

A.N: Wow, this chapter. Let me tell you, this chapter.

First off, it's my longest one yet, beating Chapter 5 by several hundred words at least.

Second: Passover happened right in the middle of writing it. I was away from my computer and unable to work on it at all. The whole story was sitting in my head and I was unable to get any of it down, which is kind of like torture.

Third: This was originally supposed to be a non-canon, stand-alone April Fools' Day episode. I've always wanted to do something with the Bizarro Hillwood Kids from "Arnold Visits Arnie" and April Fools' Day would've been perfect. But it was running late and then I realized I could tie the story in to the actual plot, and well, here we are, possibly the strangest chapter this story will have.

Fourth: Yep. Rhonda's bisexual in this story. I've seen her portrayed that way in a few stories (though I actually had the idea before actually reading them). But I've actually never seen Rhila as a pairing. Or, well, Rhulu in this chapter's case. I hope I handled it well.

Fifth: Thanks to Alex Hirsch for creating our guest villain. I'm sure you've all guessed who it is.

Sixth: The title and the "doppelgangers" bit are tributes to Sealab 2021. There's also a blink-and-you'll-miss-it not to Don't Hug Me I'm Scared.
While You Were Sleeping

Chapter Summary

In which Helga fights an assassin and makes a lot of Rocky and Bullwinkle references.

Chapter 9

While you were Sleeping

Floyd's Diner, some fifty-odd miles from the Idaho border

-HELGA-

I expected more blood, honestly.

Rhonda's wound wasn't healing properly, and her color was getting pale, but the blood was coming out very slowly. It was a dark greenish-blue, almost syrupy in consistency.

Dammit, why am I so focused on watching her bleed? I need to be doing something!

I tried to recall that first aid class they made us take back in fifth grade. I needed to stop the bleeding, first and foremost.

Okay, this is a diner, and moreso, it's a diner with a mechanical bull. There would have to be a first-aid kit somewhere in here. I figured under the counter would be the best bet and sure enough, that's where it was. I dug out the peroxide and gave the bullet hole a good scrubbing. Whether it would actually do anything was another question. We knew so little about how our new bodies worked. Infection was probably the least of our worries, but better safe than sorry.

Disinfection done, I grabbed some gauze pads and tape and dressed the wound as best I could. It would have to do until I could…

…what, exactly? Could we really walk into an emergency room looking the way we did? "Oh, hi, can I get some medical help? We totally used to be human, so there's no reason to be afraid!" I'm sure that'd fly.

There really wasn't much more I could do for Rhonda at this point, at any rate. I wasn't a surgeon, so digging the bullet out of her might do more harm than good, and honestly, I didn't particularly want to get intimately acquainted with whatever passed for her new organs.

I didn't like the black veiny patterns starting to spread across the skin surrounding the wound, though. Those could not be good. And it looked like she was getting febrile. I cooled the air around us, hoping that would help a little, at least. Criminy, look at me, just casually talking about chilling the air with my freakin' thoughts, like it was just something anybody could do. How did this become normal for me? Four days ago, the only thing on my mind was what Arnold and I were gonna do for our six-month anniversary. Now I'm stuck in a diner in the middle of frickin' nowhere trying to keep a girl alive who ordinarily I'd never have anything to do with. Oh, and we're both a completely different species now.
And then there was the fact that someone had to have done this, and that someone was still out there, and probably hadn't just done it for shits and giggles, but to grab one of us for the Old Man. Which meant odds were they were coming to finish the job. And who's to say they didn't have another of whatever they'd hit Rhonda with. Given what it was doing to her, I definitely didn't want to be on the receiving end of one.

And so, when the door started to open, I tensed, ready to unleash Helga (yes, fine, I admit I'm workshopping catch phrases for a possible superhero career).

"Now who in tarnation wrecked the do-" The intruder (okay, technically I was the intruder) was a man in his fifties with a cowboy hat and a short grey beard. I recognized him as the cook (and possibly the eponymous Floyd) from my first visit a couple of years back. Of course… it was close to sunrise. A place like this probably opened early to serve hungry truckers after all-night driving shifts.

"Now, what in the devil are you?" If the tone of voice hadn't already meant business, the rifle he was holding on us sure did. Rhonda'd just proven we weren't entirely bulletproof, and I wasn't about to push my already fragile luck.

"Easy, Floyd," the middle-aged blond woman behind him advised. "They're just kids."

"They don't look like no kids I've ever seen, Barb," Floyd answered. "They're like… devil kids."

"No they ain't." Barb, who I recognized as the waitress that had been on duty that night with my mom a year and a half ago, gave my face a scan. "I never forget a face, Floyd, even if it changes a bit. And I know that face. Now, what happened here?"

"It's… kind of a lot to go into. We have some kind of… I dunno, mutation virus or something, and these goons are looking for us, and she got shot, and it's led to some kind of poisoning, and you're both probably in danger even as we speak! So you might want to give us space until we blow out of here, because this place is one of the few happy memories I have with my mom and I don't want it wrecked!"

"Hon, your friend there clearly needs a doctor. I'm gonna give Doc Barnes a call. He's only an hour out."

"We don't HAVE an hour! Whoever shot Rhonda is still out there, and they're not going away because their goal is to get us. And you guys are in the way."

"They ain't getting' to you girls on my watch."

"Trust me, Barb… I can handle myself." I ignited my finger for emphasis.

"Yeah, that's… somethin'," the waitress acknowledged.

"Look, just get out of here before they do-"

A small object crashed through the window.

"…that," I said as the gas grenade went off. I spread my wings out to full span to block as much of it as I could, but there was no way I was blocking all of it. The stuff was spreading fast, and I was definitely not invulnerable to all aspects of it. Especially the stink.

Eyes closed to ward off the gas's sting, I could only hear as footsteps came through the door.
"Do not be offering resistance, child," The voice was muffled, as if coming through a gas mask.

I wanted to say "Are you KIDDING me with that accent?" but all I could manage was a coughing fit.

"It will be far easier on you both if you are simply surrendering, yes?"

Seriously, what was with her? That had to be the phoniest Russian accent I'd ever heard. "Sorry. Wrong diner. " I managed to squeak out Oh yeah, there's an intimidating voice. "'Moose and squirrel' are a mile down the road."

"You are funny girl. I am smiling under mask, da? But I am not being paid to laugh at jokes. I am being paid to take you back to old man."

My eyes were beginning to clear up. I could make out that my assailant was big, dressed in body armor, and carrying several weapons. "I'm not really feeling all that compliant, Natasha," I said, voice a little stronger now. "Must be all the shooting and gassing. You really should learn to lead with the carrot, not the stick."

"Eh, I was wrong. You are less funny girl than I first thought."

"Aw, shoot. I was really looking to try out my material on open mic night."

"You keep on with jokes. But as you joke, poison continues to spread through purple girl. Can you be so callous with purple girl's life?"

That was a good question. If I surrendered, the Old Man's people would probably get that bullet out of Rhonda. And she'd be fine up until the point they figured out how to extract our uniqueness, at which point they'd dispose of us. Or worse, brainwash us. No, surrendering was not a good option.

"Hard pass on that," I said. "If it comes down to it, I think I'm better off shoving my arm up the hole and digging the bullet out with my fingers than taking you and the Old Man up on your infinite kindness."

"Very well. If I cannot get cooperation… I will go through you." She pulled out a… gun of some kind (I'm eleven. I'm not up on my military hardware.) and fired it at me. It hit a lot harder than the guns back at the bunker. Actually knocked me back a bit. She fired again and again, but this time I dodged to the side.

"You are persistant little monster, I will give you that." She flung a few spheres that burst in front of me, blinding me. I was really getting sick of not being able to see. The high-calliber shells thudded into me again, really starting to hurt now.

This was getting annoying. I was blind, bruised, and pinned down. If I had any hope of getting anywhere, I would have to start getting offensive. Luckily, Helga Pataki is no stranger to offending.

"You can stay down now, da?"

My ears focused on the location of the voice and my legs kicked into action. I lunged as fast as I could for its source and smiled as I collided with something solid, but yielding. "Gotcha." A pained grunt told me I had struck pay dirt. I put all my weight into knocking Natasha Fatale over, pinning her down. She squirmed, but I had super-strength and several extra limbs on my side. She wasn't going anywhere. I gave her some time to tire herself out while my vision returned.

After a bit, I was up to dark, blurry shapes. Close enough. I held her neck with my hand and said "Let's talk. First… how did you find us?"
"You weel get notheenk out of me, Peenk Geerl!"

Was her accent actually getting worse? Okay, it was time to turn up the intimidation.

"Let me explain this situation. I've got you completely helpless right now. There is absolutely nothing you can do to me in your position. I'm stronger than you, faster than you, and have I mentioned that I can make the air so hot it burns?

"So. Let me give you an idea of the sort of things that could happen to you if I don't get my way. I could start breaking your bones. Or I could chill your blood until it freezes solid." I grasped her head gently with a free hand. "Maybe I could bake your brain inside your skull. Or…" I squeezed, just a little, "I could just pop your head like a grape. Wouldn't even be hard. Just… squish." Right. Like I'd actually do that. I'm just a kid. Punching is one thing, but… I just hoped she didn't call my bluff.

"All right, I'll talk!" There. Her accent slipped. I knew it. Totally fake. "I was… I have been trackeenk you seence your escape. This was closest food source. It was only matter of…"

"…Okay, stop. Stop. We both know that accent's never existed outside of a Rocky & Bullwinkle cartoon. Are you even Russian?"

"…no," the woman admitted, dropping the accent at last. "My grandfather was with the KGB, though. I've been using it to make myself sound scarier."

"Riiiiight. Now, kindly tell me what you shot my friend with."

"Some kind of experimental alloy. I only had one bullet, so I had to make it count. She should make a full recovery once you remove it."

"Thank you for your honesty. So, good news. I'm NOT gonna kill you. Bad news… you're almost definitely going to jail."

"Are you gonna call the sheriff on me, you little freak?"

"…y'know, you really shouldn't insult people who just spared your life. Bad form. Anyway, no, I won't be calling the cops. But they will." Barb and Floyd had both more or less recovered by now.

"Well… that was… somethin'" Barb said, rubbing her raw eyes.

Rhonda's moan from the corner brought me back to the reality of the situation. "You should probably call that doctor. Then help me tie this chick up and call the sheriff."

--

The sheriff was first to arrive. I hid behind the counter with Rhonda and tried to keep her as quiet as possible while Barb spun a fable about the woman (real name: Betty Lawry) being some survivalist nut. Betty wasn't too inclined to fight it since she'd probably have an easier time in county lock-up than she would coming back to the Old Man as a failure.

Dr. Barnes showed up a little while after the sheriff left with Betty. He was an African-American man in his early sixties, as far as I could tell. Well, he was about to have a patient to tell the grandkids about.

"What in God's name…" he started, looking from me to Rhonda and back.

"She's got a bullet in her," I said. "It's poisoning her and you need to get it out or this is just gonna get worse."
"...right," the doctor said, reaching into his bag.

"You can do it, right?"

"It ain't the first time he's been called here for a gunshot." Geez, and Miriam brought a nine-year-old here?

"I assume this is the entry wound over here," the doctor said, reaching for my makeshift bandage… and pulling back suddenly after coming in contact with an electric barrier. "What the—"

"I probably should have warned you. She's got electric powers."

"...of course she has."

"She's probably protecting herself subconsciously. She doesn't know anyone's trying to help her."

"I felt that THROUGH my gloves. I'm not sure I can operate on her."

I… didn't want to do this, but… "Look… maybe I can calm her down somehow. I have sort of a mental link with her. Maybe… maybe I can bring her out of her delirium."

The doctor muttered to himself. "Sure. Whatever you can do. Mental links. Electric powers. Wings. They're never going to believe this back home."

I lowered a hand to her face, Spock-style, wincing as I hit the electrical barrier. I pushed through, and my mind suddenly flooded with mangled, disjointed images. Funhouse mirror versions of me, her, our friends… lint. Cracker barrels. Hay bales. Triangles everywhere for some reason. At one point, I thought I saw her making out with someone, though I couldn't quite see who. And at one point, the Sailor Moon theme started playing for some reason. I mentally shoved as hard as I could and then I felt an overwhelming sensation of someone grabbing on to me for dear life. Startled by the sheer intensity, I quickly pulled back.

I found myself in the same position I had when I made contact. Only this time, Rhonda's eyes were slowly fluttering open.

"Hey," she said. I just had the weirdest dream. And you were there, and y- no. Just you. I don't know any of these other people."

"Welcome back, Princess. Now, could you kindly try NOT to electrocute the man who's going to save your life?"

"Electro-oh. Right. Right. Sorry. I'm really out of it. Nice hair, by the way."

"What are you talking ab-" I caught my reflection in the mirror behind the bar. Thanks to Rhonda's electricity, my hair was standing up in sharp spikes. I looked like I'd just come back from Goku's barber. "Hey, this one's on you, fashion plate."

Rhonda giggled. "Sorry, it's just… really funny-looking."

"Oh, screw you, Rondaloid."

"Admit it, Helga. I'm growing on you."

"Could I knock her out again?"

--

For about the tenth time, Dr. Barnes said "Fascinating. I have never seen anything like this in my
This time, he was describing the site of Rhonda's injury. One hour after removing the bullet, there was absolutely no sign it had ever been there. Not even a scar.

"Yeah, it's… weird." Rhonda rubbed the regenerated skin. "I'm not even sore. I nearly died and it might as well have not happened at all."

"You okay, hon?" Barb asked.

"Just having another of those 'this is my life now' moments. Not the first. Won't be the last." Rhonda smiled weakly. "You're taking all this really calmly."

"Seen a lot," Barb said sagely. "You ain't the first runaway kids I've seen. Granted… you are the first to be running away from an evil science lab towards home… but I get it. I just finished binging Odder Occurences."

"Yeah, just call us 'Uno' and 'Dos'." I said. "Better yet… forget any of this ever happened."

"Nobody'd believe us if we said anything," Floyd said. "I ain't sure I believe it."

"Hey, uh… can we use your phone?" asked Rhonda suddenly. "I just realized our folks are probably worried to death about us."

"This is the first time we've been anywhere near a phone."

"Oh, sure hon. It's in back."

Rhonda hopped off the barstool and went back to make her call. I stayed in the main area, pondering whether to even bother calling home. I was really in no emotional state to deal with Miriam or especially Big Bob right now. Then again… I could always call Phoebe and let her know. And of course, the boarding house. I'd been there a lot the last six months. Everyone knew me there. Heck, when I thought of family, Miles and Stella were as likely to pop into my head as anyone I was actually related to. Why couldn't they be my parents? Wait, strike that. Then Arnold would be my brother. And that would be weird.

After a few minutes, Rhonda returned, looking more centered. "Okay. You should be getting a check in the next few days that should cover all the damage we did."

"Hon, you don't have—"

"Yes I do. I don't feel right owing anyone anything. A Lloyd always pays her debts."

Realization kicked in for Barb. "I knew I'd seen your face before. You're that missing girl. That's what happened, isn't it. They kidnapped you girls and experimented on you."

"They did kidnap us but… we were already changing when it happened. Fact is, we don't know how this happened or what we're supposed to be."

While they were talking I made my way to the back. I first tried Phoebe's apartment, but nobody was picking up at all. Strange. It was really early in the day, someone should have been home.

Next, I dialed the boarding house. This time someone actually picked up! I was so excited that everything suddenly started spilling out of me. "Arnold, it's me, Helga! I got some kind of mutation virus and turned into this… gargoyle thing and we got kidnapped by these evil goons and some crazy old man but we escaped and we're on our way back and there was this lady with a fake
Russian accent and-

"Daaaa, I don't have time for this! Stupid kids and your prank calls! *click*"

Okay. Wrong number. I dialed more carefully this time.

"Western front, General Pershing speaking!" It was Arnold's grandma. "If you're trying to reach the colonel, I'm afraid he's out." She whispered. "He's on a mission to rescue the POWs."

He's out there looking for me! my heart screamed. Okay, technically, that's not what she'd said but… what else could it mean? "Gertie, it's me. Eleanor."

Lucidity crept back into her voice. "Are you all right, dear?" she asked.

"It's been really stressful but… yes. I'm free, and I'm safe for now. I have, uh… Jackie Kennedy with me. Make sure the Colonel knows that we're all right. We're coming home."

I could picture Gertie saluting. "Message received. Semper Fi, Madame First Lady."


--

We finally left around 6:30 AM, after the breakfast Barb had insisted on giving us. Not that I was about to turn down free grub, but the Princess was not used to greasy diner food. It took a lot of prodding to get her started after being told no, the sausage was not locally sourced and no, she couldn't get egg whites only. Frankly, I didn't know what Rhonda was so worried about. She had inherited her mom's rail-thin model body. No, I wasn't jealous.

"Feeling up to flying, Pri-" I felt the breath forced out of me as Rhonda suddenly enveloped me in a hug.

"Thank you," she said.

"Jeez," I gasped. Girl was using all of her arms. Not a lot of oxygen getting through. "No big. Don't read anything into it."

"Don't give me that. I know what you did for me. Going into my head. That couldn't've been easy for you."

"Yeah, well, I couldn't let you die, could I? You're worth a quarter mill to me."

She let go. "Ugh, are you even serious right now?"

"…and maybe…" I continued, "you might not be the worst person to be stuck with."

She smiled. "Told you I was growing on you."

"Like toe fungus," I said, but smiling while I did.
In which Nadine ponders her feelings for Rhonda, Arnold and Olga seek out unlikely allies, and Phoebe faces an uncertain future.

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter 10

Those Left Behind

Somewhere around the Wyoming/Idaho border

-RHONDA-

The wind whipped through my hair as the two of us sailed through the skies. After my near-brush with death and that bizarre fever dream, I was unsure just what I should tell Helga about. That whole thing with the one-eyed demon version of her seemed like something that my fevered mind produced entirely on my own, but there was something nagging me about it. Something just… off. Like how my dream had references to a movie I’d never actually seen.

If that other entity was real, had it inserted the reference into my mind? If it could… what else could it have done to me? Am I fully in control?

I resolved, then, that the next time we stopped to rest our wings, I'd share the full story with her.

Well, mostly. Helga didn't have to know about Lulu. Not until we were more comfortable around each other. We were out of the enemies phase, but nowhere near the "come out for the first time" phase.

That settled, my thoughts began to drift to home.

What was that going to be like? How would people react? Could we even begin to have a semblance of a normal life in these bodies?

And did our absence really make a difference?

--

Hillwood, WA

Apartment of Michael and Katherine Robinson

-NADINE-

It's been three days now since the break-in had been reported.

I've been keeping myself busy with schoolwork and taking care of my pets. And thinking.

From the outside, you'd think our relationship had been Queen Bee/flunky. Rhonda can definitely
come off as the Queen Bee type, all flash and drama and dominance, while I'm just sort of tagging along. People don't really get to see the real Rhonda. Sure, she can be vain, and self absorbed, and petty, and – and okay, she is not coming off good here. Sometimes I kinda do wonder why we're best friends.

And then I remember why. Because…

Wait, let me give you an example.

--

A week or so before San Lorenzo

The two of us sat in Rhonda's cavernous "media room" as the credits began to roll. I'd made her binge the entire previous four seasons prior to today's season-opening marathon. Fair was fair. She owed me for her latest attempt to set me up. There'd been many over the years… Robert, Sid, Peapod Kid, even her bowling coach's kid. The latest had been Park, who it turns out was her second cousin. I'd only agreed to it on the condition that she marathon the series of my choice.

So, here we were with her finally caught up. She turns to me and says "But… what am I supposed to do now? I'm INVESTED!"

"Now you wait for the next episode. And curse the executives in charge of scheduling." I answered, putting on my most innocent look.

"You knew. You KNEW this would happen!" She glared at me in mock outrage. "You knew I would love this show and now I am cursed to descend down the rabbit hole of… FANDOM."

I took a spoonful of the dairy-free ice cream she always kept in the freezer for me. See… it's things like that. She's always thinking of me, even when it seems like she's not. "You've already drawn a Gemsona, haven't you. Mine's an Aquamarine. Because of the wings."

Rhonda sighed. "Purple Pearl. A renegade inspired by tales of Rose Quartz's Pearl. Her weapon's a boomerang." She flipped to it on the sketch pad she had lying around.

"You're actually starting to get pretty good, you know that?" Her linework wasn't quite there, but she had gotten pretty good at anatomy and perspective, two of her early hangups. "Don't worry," I reassured her. "You'll only be truly hopeless once you start on fanfic. Self-insert fanfic where your OC saves the Earth thanks to her ability to communicate with grasshoppers."

She got a mischievous look in her eyes. "Show me," she said gleefully.

"Uh uh. That's going to be buried with me. No one will ever see it."

"Awww…" She looked legitimately disappointed.

"Just… a little warning. Fandom can be really, stupid. Friendships have died over shipping wars. Great battles have been fought over Lapidot vs. Perithyst."

"It's okay. I've seen it before. Phoebe got me hooked on Avatar."

"Wait… when did you start hanging out with Phoebe?"

"Remember when you went to your grandparents in Kingston last summer? Helga was also away, and Phoebe and I just sorta started hanging out by default."

"Was she also the one who got you into manga?"
"No, that was Patty. You know, she's pretty cool. We should all three hang out sometime… what were we talking about again?"

"Bad fandom experiences. I've been ripped into for supporting the 'wrong' ship, or questioning some of the more out-there theories, or just suggesting that the 'Townie' episodes aren't completely without merit…"

"That's ridiculous! The townie episodes are clearly there to demonstrate how Steven's dual nature grounds him in both worlds! Removing them completely would run counter to the entire theme of the show!"

"THANK YOU! You get it! Why is that so hard for so many people?"

"They just don't see how awesome you are. Even if your passion is my phobia."

"That reminds me… the penalty next time you set me up? Beard of bees."

"Oh, come on… Park's nice."

"He's not my type, Rhonda."

"Fine, darling. Message received. No more set ups."

See, she and I…. we get each other. Okay, we mostly get each other.

She doesn't get that none of the boys she picked was ever going to be my type. Because, well… they're boys.

I really should tell her. Mom and dad already know, and she'd be the next on the list. But I'm nervous. I just don't know how she'll react. Especially to a certain particular bombshell…

Rhonda would do just about anything for me. If I told her I was into girls, she'd probably take it upon herself to find a match for me. Except…. The girl I'm into… is her. How do you tell your best friend you have a crush on her?

And would I ever get a chance?

Hillwood Docks

-ARNOLD-

The salty tang in the air was beginning to get overwhelming.

"…and I've been trying to talk to her, but she won't. Is she scared of me? Does she think I'm going to reject her?"

The two of us had been waiting here at the docks for hours. We'd both told our parents we were sleeping over at each others' houses, figuring it was probably better to ask for forgiveness than permission. We were trying to get a lead… any lead… on Helga and Rhonda's disappearance, but Gerald was too focused on Phoebe to really be there with him. Granted, this particular gambit was probably more out of desperation than anything.

"She's probably just really self-conscious about the whole thing, Gerald. Mom says the change has been really hard on her." Phoebe had been quickly whisked off to the former FTI building, now under the ownership of Sammy Redmond's Million Dollar Industries. Mom had been consulting for
their disease research division for the last couple of months, ever since deciding that it was time she and dad returned to the workforce. I’d immediately thought of her when Phoebe developed her… condition. They’d been secluded at MDI ever since, with mom keeping me updated via FaceTime (“I can't believe phones can just… do this kind of thing now,” she’d said, marveling at the advances of the last decade). "I'm sure you'll be able to see her soon."

"She was in a LOT of pain, Arnold. I can't stand not knowing how she is."

"At least you know where she is, Gerald. At least you know she's in good hands. Helga could be anywhere. With anyone. They could be doing… anything to her." My hand drifted to the heart-shaped lump under my shirt. I’d taken to wearing Helga's locket around my neck, just as she did. My way of keeping her heart close to mine, I guess. That's how she'd put it, right? All poetic like that.

Gerald sighed. "I feel you, m'man. I may not be her biggest fan, but I get that she's important to you, and to Pheobe. But I gotta say, there's desperate, and there's desperate. And going to this guy, man…"

"I don't know where else to turn to. The cops aren't getting anywhere, Bridget keeps moving her base so I have no idea how to get in contact with her… this was the last thing I could think of."

"Yeah, but… him? Really?"

"He's sworn to help the downtrodden. Even if he has gotten a bit more… eccentric."

A shadow suddenly fell over the two of us. A gravelly voice came out from the darkness.

"Urban journal. December 7, 2017. Rotten banana in alley this morning. Tire tread on burst peel. This city is afraid of me. I have seen its true face. The streets are extended produce bins and the produce bins are full of overripe fruit. When the bins spill over, all the vermin will slip on the peels. The accumulated pulp of all their refuse will reek and ferment. The bullies and the criminals will look up and shout 'save us!' And I will look down and whisper… Monkeym-" the voice suddenly erupted in a paroxysm of coughing. "Boy!" the figure said in his more natural voice. "This grimdark stuff is hard on the ol' pipes!"

Monkeyman, stepped out of the shadows, still looking mostly the same, though he’d traded his white T-shirt for a black one. "Arnold! Thanks again for my new floating –Monkeyman- lair. The mobility's come in really handy for covering more ground."

"Um, it wasn't originally supposed to float, but, um, thanks? Actually, we were wondering if you could help us…" I took out a couple of photos. "These two girls are missing. They… might not look like this anymore."

Monkeyman studied the two photos. "Helga and Rhonda?"

"You know their names?"

"A good hero knows the faces of those he protects." He whispered, his voice drifting back into raspy grimdark mode."

"You, uh, know you don't have to do that," Gerald commented.

"People take their heroes more seriously if they're dark and brooding."

"You're wearing monkey slippers," I pointed out.

"Edgy monkey slippers."
"Well, that was a bust," Gerald groused as we made our way back to the boarding house.

"At least we have one more guy looking," I reasoned. "Anyway, we should be in the clear as long as we don't attract-" As I opened the door, the usual horde of animals spilled out, led by Abner. "-attention," I sighed.

"Every time," grumbled Gerald. "When did you even get a bat?"

"Oh, that's Stinky's. The ostrich is new, though." He checked inside. "Coast looks clear. As far as anyone here knows, I was at your house, so we just have to act like we came from there and stopped her because I forgot something for sch-

"Attention!"

And suddenly, Grandma was there, wearing a general's uniform and carrying a riding crop. Where did she get all these costumes?

"Busted," whispered Gerald.

"It's like this, Grandma…" I began.

"At ease, Colonel. We have new intel."

"New intel?"

"We've made contact with FLOTUS. You know…" She broke character for a moment. "Helga."

"Helga called? How is she? Did she say where she is?"

"She didn't talk for too long. All she said was that she's currently free and safe, and she has the other girl with her, and that they're on their way back home."

"That's great news!" I shouldn't've been surprised. If anyone was going to get out of a situation like that, it would've been Helga. Although… if what'd happened to Helga and Rhonda was anything like what Mom told me had happened to Phoebe, they wasn't out of the woods yet.

I squeezed the locket under my shirt, as if the contact would somehow bring Helga closer.

"It's cool, man. I'm sure she knows you want to be with her." Gerald said. "C'mon. We gotta… *sigh* go get ready for school." He yawned. "I am NOT feeling up to that."

"Maybe we'll get lucky, and this'll be one of those days when Mr. Frank just gives us a free period so he can take a nap in the teachers' lounge."

"That man is not suited for his profession."

"I miss Mr. Simmons."

"Me too, buddy. Me too."

--

Big Bob's Beeper Emporium (ALL SALES FINAL, EVERYTHING MUST GO)

-OLGA-

Everybody's always looking up to me. There goes Olga Pataki, they say. Child prodigy. Played
Purdy Hall when she was 15. Class Valedictorian. Dean's List at Bennington. Graduated Magna Cum Laude. Winner of nearly every trophy conceivable.

So why do I always feel so empty?

It's because I don't do it for me. I do it because it's what's expected.

Everybody looks up to me. But I look up to her. She is everything I wish I was. I perform. She… creates.

It was during Christmas Break last year that I found her unattended journal. Curiosity overcoming respect for privacy, I opened the little pink book and the beauty that infused my sister's soul burst from the pages. The kind of beauty that I could never create.

I'm not entirely in denial, you know. I know our family is less than ideal. I can see mother wasting away, father stubbornly clinging to failure, baby sis drowning in neglect. And I'm as trapped as any of them. I've forced myself into this cheerful marionette act in some misguided attempt to keep this family going all by myself. As if my achievements really mean anything in the long run. I'm not this family's hope. She is. And now she's gone.

And all I can do is curse myself for not being a better sister while I could, for constantly pushing myself to be the center of attention because my father conflated success with affection, for denying to myself just how bad mom was getting, for widening the rift between myself and Helga, for not letting her know in no uncertain terms that I knew that someday, she would become something amazing.

I'm here at the store now. Daddy is complaining that there's nobody here to sell the beepers that nobody wants. Mummy… she just sits there, holding an old photo of the four of us, nursing her drink. She isn't even bothering with fruit and yogurt anymore, that's how far down the hole she's vanished.

And now someone is yelling at Daddy, and I vaguely realize it's me. Because I can't stand it anymore.

And now I've left the store and slammed the door behind me while I'm having this weird out-of-body experience, both doing these things and watching, detached in my own mind, as they unfold, as I run from the store, my legs carrying me to someplace I don't know. At this point, I should be on my way to PS 118. My third-graders are expecting me. But my body isn't complying. It just wants to keep going.

And so, I find myself in this alley behind the old Circle Theater, staring at an old moldering Dino Spumoni poster. Or rather, a Dino Spumoni poster that should be old and moldering but is instead as pristine as it would have been the day it would have been posted in 1966.

I feel myself reaching out to touch it and meeting no resistance as my fingers push through, finding nothing behind. I step through the illusion and find myself tumbling down a ramp into a room filled with hi-tech equipment and a single woman with long auburn hair and a blue uniform.

"Crap," she mutters. "Compromised again. I thought for sure the holographic poster would work. Now I gotta wipe the intruders' memory, and move again, it's always work, work wo-" She paused. "Olga?"

"…do I know you?" I asked.

"You did. I'm Bridget, and… we used to be partners."
The results of three days of observation and tests were spread before me. Bloodwork, MRI, X-Rays, biopsy (finding a way to get samples of the girl's near-invulnerable skin and hair had been a chore in and of itself), none of it even close to human anymore. Attempts to isolate the source of the change had yielded nothing concrete, but the theory was that she'd been exposed to an agent of some sort that had incubated for some time before becoming active and merging with her DNA to form something new and distinct, restructuring every cell in her body in the process. No system had been left untouched. Every organ in her body had been changed in some way, some of them duplicated, others merged, a few completely new, all of them structurally altered in some way.

There was one positive thing I had determined, though.

"Latest results, subject 1758-A, Heyerdahl, Phoebe S., age 11. Attending physician, Dr. Stella Shortman. All research suggests that subject's condition is not contagious through casual contact. Recommending immediate end to quarantine, as I believe continued isolation of the patient would be detrimental to her mental health." This had been the most important determination to make, more important than finding a cause or even a cure. My own memories of a nearly friendless childhood spent moving from place to place thanks to my father's military career had impressed on me the toll isolation could take.

I left my office and took the elevator to the isolation ward. An effort had been made to keep Phoebe's room as comfortable as possible, but there was only so much you could do while maintaining sterility. Even after her metamorphosis had completed, the girl had remained withdrawn and uncommunicative throughout the quarantine period. Meals had been fed through the slot and returned, uneaten. I was getting very worried that she would be unreachable.

When I reached the room, I could see that Phoebe was where I'd last left her, curled up on her bed, pale blue wings wrapped tightly around her as a shield against the world. She still wore the remains of the hospital gown that had seen her through her changes. I hoped that the gift I'd brought would help.

I activated the intercom. "Phoebe? Are you awake? It's me, Doctor Shortman. Arnold's mom. Do you remember me?"

Phoebe's wings unfolded slightly. Her three emerald eyes slowly opened as she looked up.

"Good news," I assured. "You're not contagious by any normal means. You can leave quarantine."

"Can I be normal again?" the girl whispered, her voice weak from disuse.

"I'm… sorry," I said. "We haven't found a way to reverse the change." If there even is one, I thought to myself. From all the tests I'd performed, Phoebe's new metabolism actively resisted any attempts to alter it. It nullified any poison, pathogen, or drug it was exposed to. In addition, one of the new organs in her body was designed to produce stem cells that would rapidly repair any injury she would receive to the point that even lost limbs would eventually grow back fully. I wondered if, eventually, even aging would cease to have a hold on her.

"Then perhaps it's best if I remain in here," the small girl said, resigned, seemingly.

"Is that really what you want? To stay locked in here, away from the world? To never see your
friends and family again, to never grow, to never learn…” Her pointed ears twitched a bit at that last one. I’d spoken to her parents and they’d both confirmed that Phoebe, above all, valued learning. "I bet a part of you wants to understand everything that’s happened to you. Doesn’t it."

"…I… admit a certain curiosity."

"Well, you can’t do that in here. Here… I think I have something that may make you feel a bit more like yourself again."

--

-PHOEBE-

I tossed the tattered remains of my hospital gown into the disposal chute. It would be incinerated, as per procedure.

I had forgotten the simple pleasure that clean, fresh undergarments brought. Just the feel of them brought an immediate improvement in my dolorous mood.

The rest of the garments were designed to hey closely to my established sartorial taste while still remaining suited to my changed body. A dark blue, four-sleeved cardigan, complimentary yet contrasting to my light-azure complexion. There were notches in the back for my wing joints and fasteners that closed above them. A matching skirt, with a small slit I could feed my tail through. Black leggings, and black "shoes" that were more like a thick pair of gloves for my newly prehensile feet.

I found myself nibbling on, then wolfing down, the latest meal they’d given me (poached fish, mashed potatoes, mixed vegetables) while changing. My appetite had abandoned me in my despair (what point was there in maintaining a body that had turned traitor?) but it had come roaring back. Logical; my body had added a plethora of new structures and desperately needed to replenish itself.

Finally, fed and dressed, I regarded myself.

Dr. Shortman was right. I did feel a great deal more like Phoebe Heyerdahl. Absentmindedly, I reached for the glasses that I no longer needed. Even days of perfect (more than perfect; I found I could even see into the ultraviolet and infrared range if I tried) vision later, my face still felt naked without them. Then there was the matter of added mass. I was several inches taller now, and my frame significantly more muscular than it was. Though I was no contender in Helga’s beloved MMA ring, I was not exactly the petite thing I was a week earlier. I felt like Phoebe Heyerdahl. But a new model.

I took a deep breath. "I'm ready, Dr. Shortman. I want to understand what I am."

As I stepped out of the quarantine room, I did not know what the future would hold. But maybe… I was ready to face it now.

--

[Rhonda: Aw, man, I got screwed out of most of my chapter!]

[Helga: This stuff has to go somewhere. It puts a lot of future developments in context.]

[Rhonda: I guess, but did it have to go in one of my chapters?]

[Helga: Who’s the writer here?]

[Rhonda: I thought we both were.]

[Helga: Who’s the published writer?]
[Rhonda: Does the school literary journal really count?]

[Helga: Criminy, cut down on the salt intake, Princess. You'll get your time back in the spotlight, but it was really important that everyone else got to tell their part of the story, okay?]

[Rhonda: …fine.]

[Helga: …not like a lot of stuff happens until we get to Oregon, anyway. Idaho is really boring.]

[Rhonda: There was the giant radioactive potato bug.]

[Helga: Nobody wants to know about that.]

Chapter End Notes

A.N. And that's Chapter 10! I wanted to touch in on the other characters, and didn't really have much planned for Rhonda and Helga anyway in this chapter, so I figured why not do multiple perspectives? We'll get back to our heroines next chapter. I may also do some interstitials with Phoebe and Stella to hash out some of the more technical details of the girls' transformation.
In which the girls enjoy the wilderness, Olga catches up with an old friend, and a character from another Nick show makes a cameo.

Chapter 11
Roughin' It Redux
A National Forest, somewhere in Idaho

-HELGA-
I've always thought of nature as something that was okay in theory, as long as it kept to itself and didn't try getting all up in my face. I'm a city girl, always have been, always will be. The one camping trip I ever went on was mostly spent in a tricked-out RV. Roughin' it was for chumps.

Well, fate just intervened and said "Hey, you. Your name is now Chump."

So, here we were taking in America's Splendor™ which is nice for those who are into that kinda thing. Me, I'd've been pretty good with a cheap motel room, but the two of us are too broke to even afford that, not to mention the whole "mutant" thing. The great outdoors it was.

I took a bit of comfort in knowing that as uncomfortable as I was, Princess was even more miserable. Used to the best of everything, she was visibly distressed by raw nature, with all its dirt and bugs and smells. I had to give her credit though, she was complaining a lot less than I expected. She was mostly just stewing silently.

"So… this looks like as good a place as any to get some sleep," I said of the clearing we'd found. There was a small lake here, and the ground was soft enough that sleeping wouldn't be too uncomfortable. I really hadn't gotten a lot of sleep in the last few days, and all the fighting and flying hadn't helped much.

"I suppose we're not going to do much better," muttered Rhonda as she slid down against a tree. "What I wouldn't give for a real bed. And a shower. And some clothing that isn't disgusting. I swear, when we get home I am burning this abortion of a jumpsuit. I will burn it, and I will film it so I can watch it burn over and over."

"Jeez, Princess, you sound almost more offended over the outfit than you are over getting mutated."

"It's a violation of everything I believe in. Fashion is a means of self-expression. It's our way, as human beings, of shaping who we are. To reduce it to this… uniformity… It does offend me. That, and it's itchy and it's starting to reek."

"…I can't argue with you there. This thing's really uncomfortable. If it wasn't December, I'd just say 'screw it' and go native."

"Oh, sure, I could totally see you running around in your underwear like Curly."
"It's funny how you thought 'underwear' and your mind went right to him."

"Oh, don't you DARE go there. I have no interest in dating my stalker."

"C'mon, there must be someone. Harold? That's it isn't it. You're a chubby-chaser. Admit it. Everyone saw you guys at the Cheese Festival back in fourth grade."

"That was a lactose-induced bout of madness and we will never speak of it again." She huffed audibly. ".and even if I was into him at some point, I'd never step on Patty's toes. She's too good of a friend to do that to. Sisters before Misters."

"Plus she'd pound you."

"Plus she'd pound me, yes."

"So, who is it, then? C'mon, Lloyd, I'm so desperate for human interaction I'm actually girl-talking with you. You gotta throw me a bone here."

"...yeah, about that, I gotta say that it seems like only one of us is being encouraged to share. If I do it, you gotta do it."

"Quid pro quo, Clarice?"

"Who's Clarice?"

"Wow, you really need to watch more movies, Rondoloid."

"Yeah, I know... seems like everyone's making references to stuff I've never seen. Including me. I really have to tell you about this dream I had..."

The next few minutes were spent setting up a fire while Rhonda went on and on about her weird dream. I found myself zoning in and out while she droned, just nodding and going "uh huh", though I snapped back whenever she got to anything particularly bizarre. Like the lint monster. And the stiff "I" was involved in.

"...so, what you're saying is, I was the bad guy." I said, lighting the fire.

"I... guess you could interpret it that way, but remember, everybody was backwards, So, I guess you could say that, subconsciously, I see you as a good guy?"

"Well, it's all fascinating, really, you should absolutely sell the movie rights. Maybe Cameron'd be interested. But I don't see what's got you this agitated."

"Because I don't think my subconscious was driving. I think something else was wearing your double as an avatar, trying to influence me somehow."

"Wow. Do you realize that that sounds completely crazy?"

"Is it really any crazier than anything that has happened to us over... oh, I dunno, the last SIX MONTHS? Pirates, ancient lost civilizations, mutation, assassins... face it, life is a lot less normal than we believe. Evil dream entities kind of feel like a lateral move from there."

"So, like, you think you picked up Freddy Kreuger as a passenger?"

"Maybe? The whole thing felt very real and I'm not sure I've seen the last of this guy. I'm used to people wanting my bod, but not this way!"
"Ugh, you do not make this easy, Lloyd."

"What? People find me attractive, and I'm aware of the fact. I'm not going to apologize for it. At least they did. Maybe not so much anymore."

"Well, welcome to the ugly club, sister."

"Geez, Helga. You're not ugly."

"...excuse me."

"You're actually probably better looking than I am now."

Did I hear this correctly? Or have I lost it? "Me. Helga G. Pataki. You, the self-proclaimed queen of fashion and beauty, miss 'Look how many followers my blog has' think I'M prettier than you."

"What can I say, you are owning your mutation. That's... kinda what it's all about, isn't it. Feeling right in your skin. Right now, I don't. You seem like you do. And that's a pretty attractive thing."

"This conversation's getting weird."

"...yeah, maybe things are getting a little too real. We keep this kinda thing going, we might wind up friends or something."

"Pfft, could you imagine? Sleepovers, doing each others' hair, talking about boys..."

"Hee hee, yeah... 'cause that's what we'd talk about... boys..."

"There's a bullet we need to dodge, am I right?"

"You said it. Can't wait 'til this whole thing is over and we don't have to talk to each other ever again."

A long pause hung in the air.

"Maybe, like... one sleepover," I found myself suggesting.

"Sure, just to get it out of our system."

"I mean, you have a heated pool. I'd be an idiot to pass up the opportunity to use it."

"Yeah! And daddy just upgraded to 4K, we've gotta break that baby in!"

"Darn right, Princess. I've got the entire Evil Twin series on DVD, including both franchise reboots, and we gotta watch 'em in style!"

"Oh, that sounds horrible. Not my type of film at all. Which... means we have to watch them! Just to prove we can't stand each other!"

Well, then, it's settled, isn't it! One last sleepover and we're done! Unless it doesn't take."

"Well, that's a possibility, right? We might have to do two! Just in case the first one doesn't take."

"Absolutely. We have to be sure."

We looked at each other across the fire.
"We are starting to like each other, aren't we," I admitted.

"I know. I'm just as scared as you are."

There was other, more superficial conversation (school projects, goofing on classmates, the like), a failed attempt at fishing, a slightly more successful attempt at foraging (the "red and sweet, good to eat" berries were available here, if a bit out of season), and at last, we were ready to bed down for the night.

Rhonda attempted to make herself comfortable on the pile of old leaves she'd collected. "Y'know," she said as she wrapped her wings around herself, "these would probably make a good blanket if they weren't every bit as capable of feeling the cold and damp as the rest of me."

"G'night, Princess," I said. "Sleep tight. Don't let the hundreds of bugs bite."

"...hundreds?"

Sure, we were starting to get along, but that didn't mean I couldn't have some fun, right?

---

President Helga Pataki swooped onto the roof of the White House. The action against Wolfgang's mercenary forces in the eye of the Triangle had gone smoothly, in no small thanks to her own efforts in the operation. Hey, it was no fun being a president with superpowers if you couldn't get in on the action yourself once in a while, right?

She descended through the roof hatch that had been installed just for her use, which led directly into the Oval Office. Chief of Staff Phoebe Johansen waited with the daily briefing.

"Ms. President, excellent news. Your approval rating has risen to an unprecedented 107%!"

"Knock of the 'stuff, Pheebs. I think we've known each other long enough that you can call me Helga."

"Of, course, Ms. P- Helga. First-name basis-ing! Anyway, your energy initiative is a tremendous success. Who knew hamster-wheel-power was such an efficient source? In a single stroke, you've solved America's energy problem and its rodent problem!"

"Of course I did. I'm just that great."

"And of course, it's all been a tremendous boon to the economy. As was your edict banning beepers for all eternity throughout the ends of the universe."

"Well, it turns out they cause fatal stubbornness, and we can't have that, can we? What else you got for me?"

"You have a message from your parents, of course. The usual gushing about how much more proud of you they are than of your no-account sister Olga."

"File that with the others."

"And there's a congratulations on your recent successes from the governor of Mars."

"Oh, yes, how IS Lila these days?"

"Distant and out of your way, Ma'am."
"Perfect."

"My DARLING!" Arnold, Helga's V. P. and First Gentlemen, had suddenly burst into the office. "I have the most wonderful news!"

"And what is it, my love?"

"I'm… PREGNANT!"

"That's wonderful! So wonderful, I won't even question how such a thing is possible! Come here, my darling, and let us celebrate our becoming three!"

As the two embraced, Abner Jr. bounded up onto the desk and began licking her face.

"Criminy! Down, boy!" But he just continued, even more insistent.

"…down… I don't have any bacon for you…"

…wait… where was I…

I slowly opened my eyes. The Oval Office was gone, Phoebe was, gone, Arnold, my ovate Casanova, was gone, but Abner remained.

Wait, what would Abner be doing here?

And why was Abner much larger, covered in brown hair, and a grizzly bear?

I screamed.

--

Interlude

Old Circle Theater

"Wait," Olga said… "We were partners? But… I think I'd remember being married to a woman…"

Bridget rolled her eyes. For being so smart, Olga could be amazingly dim at times. "Not that kind of partners. You and I were recruited by the Agency out of our first year at Benington and paired up for training. Only, you washed out after a few missions. You were just really, really bad at what we do. No aptitude at all."

"I was… bad at something?" Weird. Olga sounded almost happy about it.

"Oh, yeah. No instinct, no tactical skill, no stealth ability. They never saw a recruit more unsuited for the job than you."

"I was bad at something," Olga repeated, smiling, seemingly at peace. "Wait, so… why don't I remember any of this?"

"It's 'cause they wiped your memory using one of these babies..." She presented a small stick with an LED at the end of it. It resembled the laser pointer Olga used on the job at PS118. "It's been refined a lot from McGuckett's original prototype, and it's supposed to be almost foolproof. You had a lot of secrets in your head, and they couldn't let you run around all willy-nilly with them."

"So, I guess you and I weren't… friends, or anything…"

"No, of course we were. I wanted them to give you more time. I thought maybe you just needed to
get more adjusted to the way we did things, but back then I wasn't in charge of the Hillwood branch. And the boss wanted you out. My hands were tied. Ironic, since you tended to get tied up a lot. So… how'd you wind up here, anyway?"

"I… honestly don't know. I was really, upset, and I sort of… zoned out and found myself here."

"Really? Huh, sounds like some kind of Jason Bourne fugue dealie. Could be a side effect from the memory ray. I need to let R&D know about that. So. C'mon." She indicated a seat next to her. I missed dishing. What's wrong?"

"My sister's been missing for almost four days. I'm worried that she's run away to who knows where and had who knows what happen to her and…" Olga dissolved into squeaky weeping. Oh, yes, Bridget remembered this part. Olga tended to dissolve into crying jags when adversity hit. It was one more reason why the higher-ups had deemed her unsuitable for continued training.

"It's okay… let it out… you won't remember this conversation anyway…" Bridget gave Olga the most reassuring pat on the back she could.

"I'm sorry to fall apart like this," Olga said between sobs, dabbing at her running mascara with an offered tissue. "I just… I'm so worried! Especially with all the other strange things going on! The kidnapping and the mystery illness…" She erupted in another round of messy weeping.

Bridget had contacts everywhere. She knew the truth about Phoebe Heyerdahl's condition and its likely connection to the disappearances, but wasn't yet in the position where she could act on it. In any case, without any real evidence on Helga Pataki's condition or location, she didn't want to get Olga's hopes up without cause. And so, she kept silent, waiting until Olga cried herself out and hoping that mascara stains were easy to get out.

They were finally interrupted when one of Bridget's new interns, an attractive young woman with shoulder-length, poofy blond hair and blue eyes, clad in the lilac uniform of subordinate officers, entered the room with a small paper box. "Sorry, boss, Dolly was literally out of crullers. I think I managed to get something you might like- oh, I can see you're busy."

"No, no, it's all right, Lori."

Olga looked up at the newcomer. "I was just leaving anyway. I've wasted enough of your time so, if you could just give me a quick memory wipe I'll be on my way and you don't have to worry about my missing sister."

"Hold on," Lori said. "Her sister's missing? This is serious. You were just going to let her go on her way?"

"Well, there isn't really much we can do about."

"All I know is, if any of my sisters was missing, I'd be doing anything I can to find her! You can't just turn her away!"

"…" Lori had been here less than a week, so for her to steamroll over Bridget like this meant that she felt really strongly about it. "You make a good point. Okay, Olga… I guess we really don't need to blank your memory if you promise not to give away our location. Here." Bridget pressed a small device into Olga's hands. "So we can keep in touch."

'All right… thank you." Olga glanced at Lori, then back at Bridget. "Uh… it's a coincidence she looks just like me, right?"
"As if," huffed Lori. "We are literally nothing alike."

"Of course it's a coincidence. I have no idea why you're so hung up on the two of us being an item. Honestly, I hadn't even noticed the resemblance until you brought it up!" Not that it would ever have worked out between the two of us anyway, thought Bridget. Olga was way too much of a Daddy's Girl to pursue those feelings.

"Oh, okay. Honestly, I don't know why I'd even be thinking about it. I'm not like that. Not that it's bad, I'm just, not."

"I never said anything."

Ugh, there is just so obviously something here, thought Lori. Just start making out already.

--

-HELGA-

So… logically, I should have easily been able to handle a bear. Unfortunately, logic tends to nope on outta there when a 600-pound forest predator has crawled on top of you and is tasting your face to see if it wants to eat it. And then there's the smell. Most of us have never met a bear in person, but bears smell. And close-up bears smell close-up BAD.

So I'm lying here under this monster that's sniffing and pawing at me and wondering if I'm some new breed of salmon that has wings and lives on land, and I am literally frozen with fear, because A BEAR. IT'S A BEAR. Fire would probably scare it off but again, frozen with fear. And the shriek had probably made it worse.

So, eventually he was going to get tired of pawing at her and try to figure out if he could eat her, and get discouraged when his claws and teeth couldn't penetrate her skin, and just go away – is what my brain should be thinking, but it's still stuck on THERE'S A BEAR ON TOP OF ME. So I almost didn't register it when the bear stopped suddenly and yelped.

"That's right, Yogi, Over here." Princess? What the-

I looked over to my left. Rhonda stood there, wings flared to maximum to make herself look as big as possible. Electricity was arcing between her two upper hands. The bear regarded her, trying to process what this newcomer was and what it could do. "You didn't like that, did you. I've got more. You want more?" She fired a tiny stream off from her lower right hand that came close to hitting the bear but curved to the side and struck a tree, slightly scorching it.

That did it. Though this was clearly a bear of very little brain, he made the connection that Rhonda was a threat to him. Quickly, he got off of me and hauled his bulk back into the forest as fast as he could.

Clearly, I had just had a psychotic break. It had been a long time coming.

"I can not leave you alone for a minute, apparently," she said, a smug expression on her face. "We should probably get a move on before we meet any more unwanted neighbors."

"What in—" I managed, scrambling to my feet, both ashamed at being bailed out of a situation by someone else and grateful that I'd maintained control of my bladder so I'd be spared at least that humiliation.

"I got up a little while ago to do what our new friend there does in the woods, and when I came back Baloo was getting intimate with you, so I snuck up on him and scared him off. No big, really."
"B-but…"

"Really. No big. He was just a bear. I can handle a bear."

"B-but…"

"Just a bear. C'mon." She lifted up and took off.

"WHAT THE HECK JUST HAPPENED?!"
Bonus Chapter: Phoebe's Science Corner

Chapter Summary

A brief look at mutant physiology with Pheobe.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bonus Chapter

Phoebe's Science Corner

Greetings! My name is Phoebe Heyerdahl. I am currently a sixth-grade student at PS 118. I am also one of the first three reported cases of Shortman-Heyerdahl Xenogenomorphosis Syndrome.

[Rhonda: I can't believe they named it after you.]

[Phoebe: Mine was the first case to be officially recorded. It is traditional to name the "disease" after the first known case and the physician who discovered it.]

[Helga: Let her have this, Princess. Look at her. Can you say no to that face?]

[Rhonda: …no… of course not.]

[Phoebe: Yes! I am part of scientific history! Anyway…]

As both an aficionado of the sciences and a direct participant in the research into this syndrome, I have had a vested interest in cataloguing the various changes caused by it. In the coming chapters I hope to explore the effects of SHXS on human physiology, as well as discuss both the common abilities shared by all those who have contracted it, and the more unique mutations manifesting in individuals.

[An excerpt from Phoebe's notes follows]

On the Circulatory System

The most distinctive feature of the SHXS-infectee's circulatory system is its dual-cardial structure. The system has a primary six-chambered heart and a smaller, four-chambered secondary heart. Both hearts have a complex system of valves in place maintaining single-direction bloodflow.

It is my belief that the dual hearts are required as subjects' blood is significantly thicker than the average human, with a higher solid-to-plasma ratio. Four different types of blood cells have been catalogued in subjects' bloodstream; for convenience's sake, these shall be referred to as "blue", "green", "white", and "black" cells. The blue and white cells appear to serve the same function as red and white cells in ordinary humans, the transport of oxygen and repelling of infection, respectively. Subjects' white cells appear to be far stronger than ordinary white cells, and can handle multiple encounters with bodily intrusions without dying.

The green cells' function was unclear at first, but further examination revealed the presence of a
chemical not unlike chlorophyll. I have come to the conclusion that these cells are designed to absorb and transfer pure energy through the body, similarly to how a plant's chloroplasts absorb sunlight, and are related to the manifestation and use of unique so-called "powers" in the subjects.

The black cells are the true enigma. They do not seem to serve any function related to the subjects metabolic processes. I can only speculate as to their actual purpose. I do have a theory, but we (Dr. Shortman and myself) would have to study a metamorphosis in progress to confirm it, and that situation would be less than ideal, as I can attest from personal experience that the process of undergoing said metamorphosis is both painful and traumatic.

Moving on, let us discuss the interaction of the circulatory and respiratory systems…

[Helga: OK, Pheebs, I love ya, but we're gonna have to stop for now. I'm sure the pointdexter crowd finds this stuff absolutely, fascinating, but we're gonna have to break it up if we don't want to bore the audience to death.]

[Rhonda: Actually, it's kind of interesting. I had no idea some of this stuff was going on inside my body.]

[Phoebe: Why, thank you, it's refreshing to know someone appreciates my notes.]

[Helga: Aw, Phoebe, don't be like that!]

[Phoebe: As your best friend, I am of course obligated to forgive you. But further mockery of science shall NOT be tolerated!]

[Rhonda: Yikes. Remind me not to piss her off.]

Chapter End Notes

Trying something a little different. This is a short chapter designed to add a little more background to the story. Let me know if you want to see more of this kind of thing!
Chapter Summary

In which the gang back home ponders the girls' fate, while our heroines try to find something fun to do in Boise, Idaho.

Chapter Notes

As always, text bracketed in hyphens represents telepathic communication.

Chapter 12

Urban Legends

Approaching Boise, ID

-RHONDA-

We're actually making pretty good time. We're already to West Idaho. It's only been about five days at this point, so I'd say we're on track.

I'm really getting the hang of flying now. At full speed, we can do about 80MPH (though sometimes the wind slows us down). I've really just been feeling more confident in general ever since my brush with death. Once you've gotten past that, a lot of stuff seems trivial. Like a bear. What can a plain ol' bear do to me that a toxic bullet couldn't?

Seeing the look on Helga's face was an unexpected bonus, of course. We may be getting along, but that doesn't mean I can't have some fun.

Point is, in the last few days, I'd handled paramilitary goons, falling off a mountain, toxic blood poisoning, a possible dream demon, and wilderness survival. I was starting to feel less like a sheltered rich kid and more like I could handle just about anything.

Not that I wouldn't chuck it all for a hot shower and my own bed. Oh yes, that was on my mind at all times. One of the games we played when we stopped to rest our wings every couple of hours was "What are you most looking forward to when we get home?" We'd say stuff like "the Gutbuster at Slausen's" and "full-service mani-pedi" and usually end with "and never talk to you again!" though we really didn't mean it any more at this point. At least, I didn't. We'd been good on our promise to keep out of each others' minds barring emergencies, so there was no way for me to know the truth without breaking my word, but she definitely was feeling less guarded and more natural around me. She'd even slipped and called me by my actual name a couple of times, instead of "Lloyd" or "Princess" or whatever other nickname she could come up with. She was even starting to smile more. She has a nice smile.

…I may be just a little bit attracted to her.
No, not a full blown crush, no, but I have found myself checking her out a bit. Maybe it was all the time we were spending together, maybe it was the fact that we were the only two members of our species and there were some kind of mutant pheromones involved. Maybe the result of budding puberty and the hormonal changes it brought, which remained seemingly unaffected by every other change that had been wrought on my body. Apparently, this was a constant. At least I wasn't breaking out. Actually, how would it work now? Could I still expect my… monthly guest? Would it be better? Worse? There were so many questions.

It was approaching nightfall when we started, at last, drawing close to civilization. Okay, so it was Boise, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

"Finally," Helga sighed. "I was getting tired of forests and potato fields. Hello, asphalt and car fumes!"

"And thousands of people that can potentially see us and freak out," I reminded her.

"We'll probably be fine if we stick to alleys and rooftops. And we've got you."

"Me? What do I have to do with-" I snapped my fingers. "Duh. I can shut off streetlights as we pass them."

"Bingo. You're starting to get the hang of this freaks-on-the-road life," she said, giving me a friendly elbow-in-the side.

We waited until nightfall, then made our dash into the city proper, with me briefly shutting down lights to mask our passage. "This shouldn't be too much of a problem, right?" asked Helga. "It's not like Boise has much of a nightlife."

"Actually, I've heard there's a surprisingly active indie music scene here," I answered.

"Well, whoop-de-do for Boise. I still don't wanna spend any more time than I need to here. Not much we could do if we did, anyway. Even if we were human, we don't have the cash to do anything."

"Doesn't mean we can't have fun, y'know? First to that rooftop over there wins! No wings! Parkour only!"

"You continue to surprise me, All right… on three. OneTHREE!" Helga was already wall-jumping her way up the tight alley.

"Damnit!" I scrambled my way up behind her and somehow managed to almost close the gap. "That was really cheap and you know it!"

"We only established one rule. No wings."

"I guess I'll just have to beat you legit, then." I hoisted myself onto the roof and began the dash across. My longer legs soon made up the difference between the two of us and I was only seconds behind when we made the first jump. This rooftop was a bit lower, but the next was significantly higher, and we'd have to climb. I managed to pull ahead of her by then, but she was sticking close. I decided that I had earned myself one dirty trick thanks to her head start, so I reached out with my tail and started tickling her nose with the furry bit at the end.

"What do you think you're- ACHOOO!" Distracted by her sneezing fit, Helga lost her grip on the building and fell half its height before managing to catch herself. "That… was a really rotten stunt you pulled!"
"So was snagging a head start. We’re even now." I replied smugly.

"Touché, Princess. Clearly, I underestimated you, something I’ll not do again. Enjoy your lead… for the brief time it lasts!"

For the rest of the race, we kept it clean. Sometimes she’d pull ahead, sometimes I would. By the time we finally reached the last rooftop, the two of us were laughing so hard we’d forgotten to even pay attention to who landed first.

"Let’s… call it a tie?" I gasped.

"Rematch." She wheezed. "When I can breathe again."

"God, that was the most fun I’ve had since… I don’t know when."

"Yeah. Kinda almost felt like we’re plain old kids screwing around again for a while there."

"I don’t let myself go like this nearly enough lately. Remember the old days? Stickball in the vacant lot, that football game against Wolfgang’s team…"

"I remember. You were practically the MVP in that game."

"Maybe I’ve been letting myself grow up too fast. Puberty hit me, and suddenly it all felt childish. But I guess it doesn’t have to be."

"Ugh, don’t remind me about puberty. I live in dread of the day it creeps up on me. First it got Lila over the summer, then Sheena, then you, then Nadine… it’s a voracious beast that stalks us all, ready to inflict its crimson curse. So far, I remain unafflicted, but alas… time makes fools of us all."

"Oddly poetic way of putting it."

"What, a girl can’t have a way with words? English has always been my favorite subject."

"Second behind history for me. I used to like when Mr. Simmons would read those anonymous poems..."

"Pffft, I mean, sure…. If you like that mushy lovey dovey crap…"

"I know, doesn’t seem like your kind of thing."

"Not even close." Helga got up and started stretching her hamstrings. "You ready for round 2, Princess?"

"I’m ready to school you like Frank, Hellcat."

She raised an eyebrow. "Nicknames. Good nicknames. I really am rubbin’ off on ya."

--

INTERLUDE

PS118 Schoolyard

Earlier in the day

"Here’s what I think," Sid said, leaning back against the jungle gym bars. "Helga and Rhonda were captured and forced to participate in a deadly battle royale on a remote island, where the world’s 1%ers wager their vast fortunes on the outcome. And the winner gets to join their elite ranks."
Stinky scoffed. "I reckon you seen one too many o' them post-apocalyptic YA films. While they's fansinin' yarns, they're downright implausible in the current socioeconomic climate."

"Well, I don't see you coming with any theories, Stinky," Sid huffed. "It's real easy to pick things apart, but try coming up with something yourself!"

"Well, now that you mention it, there's a more likely explanation. Aliens."

"Oh, come on," Harold said. "Aliens? Seriously?"

"I'm tellin' ya, they's out there! My second-cousin Stinky saw 'em. They got four legs, a flat nose, a curly ta." He stopped for a minute. "Come to think of it, he mighta been describin' a pig. It's possible he mighta been partakin' of the 'Peterson family crop', if ya catch my drift."

The gang nodded. Ever since a certain crop had been legalized in the state, Stinky's family's economic position had improved quite a bit, due to their property's soil being perfect for growing a particularly potent version of said crop.

"Bwah ha ha! I told ya it was a stupid idea!" Harold said through a mouthful of Mr. Nutty. "I mean, aliens? That's the most ridiculous thing I ever heard! What really happened… *burp* …is they were taken by a mad scientist trying to create a new breed of monster people. I betcha they're being cut up and sewn together in some kinda Frankenstein factory now! The pool's as good as mine!"

Sid raised an eyebrow. "There… isn't a pool, Harold."

"Really? Then why'd I give Big Gino five bucks?"

"Well, you wanna know what I think….

Sid sighed. "Not the robot theory again, Iggy…"

"Well… it could be…"

"Gosh, everyone," Eugene said. I'm sure it's nothing horrible like that. I bet this is what happened…”

"Golly, Rhonda, the two of us sure have our work cut out for us, don't we?" Helga asked, as the two took in their surroundings.

The two of them had been in the park making daisy chains when Helga had sighted a beautiful pink unicorn. While this, in itself, would have been an unusual sight, what came next would defy expectation even more.

"My realm is in danger. The fiendish wizard, Lord Varglazon, has spread his evil curse across the land and only two pure of heart maidens such as youselves can help us!"

"But we're only children," Rhonda protested. "What can two ordinary beings such as us do to stop a wizard?"

"Fear not, brave maidens, for in the magical realm of Fantaxius, you will posses all the power you need! Grab hold of my tail, now, and I shall transport you beyond the rainbow!"

No sooner had they done so, than they were whisked away to a strange new land with talking trees and giant mushrooms and cute little baby dragons. Only, now a dark gloom hung over the world.

Helga, now clad in shining armor and wielding a sword and shield, beheld their new surroundings.
"What must we do?" she asked.

"You must find and reassemble the Seven Shards of the Heart of Fantaxius, scattered across the realm. Only then will the two of you have the means to banish Varglazon back to the Pit of Desolation from whence he spawned.

"That sounds a difficult task," the leather-clad Rhonda commented, examining the shining bow she now held in her hands.

"Fear not, for you have been gifted with the power for your quest. Helga the Bold, you have been granted great strength, invincible armor, and enchanted sword and shield. Rhonda the Cunning, yours is the gift of speed, stealth, and unerring aim. Together, you will bring light to the darkness anew!"

And so, the two companions set off on an epic quest, full of danger and monsters and-

"Whillickers!" Stinky interrupted. "I thought Sid's story was farfetched, but you done spun us a literal fairy tale!"

"Ha ha, Yeah! You should sell that story to Disney, it's so ridiculous!" Harold added his laughter braying like a hyena's.

"I mean… two pure of heart maidens, and the unicorn chooses Rhonda and Helga? Talk about a bad judge of character!" Sid continued, snickering,

"People, people, you're all missing the obvious," cut in Curly. "To make two people vanish without a trace would take a conspiracy so dark, so twisted, so far reaching, that it would make the Illuminati look like the Dollar Shave Club. I'm talking… the Campfire Lasses."

The gang collectively stared. "The Campfire Lasses?" Harold questioned. "But… there's no way they could be evil. How could something as wonderful as Chocolate Turtles come from a place of evil?"

"That's what they want you to believe, fools! They've been putting mind control chemicals in their candy for YEARS! WAKE UP, SHEEPLE!"

"Good morrow, lads!" the unsespecting Campfire Lass herself said, walking up. "And how does this bonny day find ye? Can I be interestin' ye in-"

"I'M ON TO YOU!" Curly shouted, chasing her off with a stick.

The gang then turned to the back of the jungle gym, deciding that what just happened was better left alone. "So… what do you fellers think?" Stinky asked.

Gerald raised an eyebrow nonchalantly. "What makes you think I know anything?" he asked, even-voiced.

"You always know something," Sid replied. "You're the keeper of the legends! You have Fuzzy Slippers' ear! You're our go-to!"

"Well… sorry to disappoint you guys, but we're as stumped as you. No clue whatsoever," Arnold responded. The two walked off.

"Whillickers," Stinky commented. "Never thought I'd see the day Gerald didn't have answers."

--
"Man, I hate holdin' back a juicy story!" Gerald huffed.

"Yeah, well… it's up to Phoebe if she's ready to go public. The good news is… I spoke to Mom, and we can come see her tomorrow! It's Saturday, so we can pretty much hang out with her the whole day!"

"'Bout time! I've been going crazy here! We need to do this right, Arnold. We'll bring her all her favorite stuff, do all her favorite things…"

"She'll probably just be happy to see you at all, Gerald. But yeah… we should do something special for her. Actually, I think someone else should also come…"

--

-RHONDA-

"And… Victory!" I shouted, touching down on the final rooftop.

"Aw, c'mon, that was wind-assisted!" Helga groused, touching down seconds behind me.

"Don't look at me," I said. "I don't control the wind. I don't think I do, anyway. Anyway. That's one you, one me, and one tie. Should we do a tie-breaker?"

"You know we have-" Something had caught Helga's eye below. "Never mind. I think I just thought of something even more fun."

"Really, what?"

"Wanna foil some street crime?"

--

The mugger had been pretty sure he had an easy mark this time. The target was a petite, unassuming, well-dressed woman with an easy to grab purse. This was going to go off without a hitch.

Then the street light went out.

When he awoke two hours later, the lady was gone and all he could remember was a pair of strange winged figures converging on him in the darkness. When the cops picked him up minutes later, he would repeat that story, hoping it sounded crazy enough that he'd get off the rap, but they'd steadfastly refused to believe it. The lady who'd reported him claimed that she'd managed to overpower him when the lights went out, but the mugger knew it hadn't been him. They were….

"So… that'll be the story," Helga said. "The lights went out, and you used the distraction to get the drop on him. So, you'll run to the cops, and you'll bring them here to pick this loser up."

The woman blinked at her two unusual saviors. "Thank you. Um… just… how old are you girls?"

"Old enough to make a difference," I said, hoping I sounded heroic enough.

"Ugh, criminy, I can't take her anywhere…" Helga groaned.

The woman was rummaging around in her purse. "I don't have much in here, but you and your sister deserve something…"

"Oh, we're not sisters," Helga corrected. "We're just, uh…"

"Cosplayers who parkour," I added, improvising. What? mouthed Helga. "And we're very good at
makeup. You'd never guess this eye was fake!"

"...right," the woman answered, clearly not convinced, but unwilling to push things with the two girls who had saved her expensive Prodo purse and who knows what else, as there was no way of knowing whether the mugger had wanted more than money. "Here... I can spare a hundred. Thank you again." She pressed a C-note into my hand, smiling.

"Oh, we can't-

Helga discreetly jabbed an elbow into my side, "-thank you enough!" –Need I remind you how broke we are, Princess? We still have two states to cross, and we can't just keep relying on luck!-

"Yes, thank you." As a Lloyd, I didn't like handouts, but when Helga was right, she was right. We still had a ways to go and eventually, we would need money.

"You're right," I said as she left. "That was more fun than racing."
Weekend with Phoebe

Chapter Summary

In which we check in with Phoebe and the author fails at parodying Hamilton.

Chapter 12
Weekend with Phoebe

Grandpa's Packard, somewhere in Downtown Hillwood

-ARNOLD-

So, there we were, all piled into Grandpa's car, my dad riding shotgun while Grandpa drove, and Gerald next to me in the back seat. As the Packard made its way, I found my mind starting to wander, as it often does. The streets became a dusty frontier trail, the car a stagecoach, the pigeons roadrunners…

"Arnold…. Arnold…Hey Arnold!"

"Huh?" This was a bad habit. I didn't do it as often as I used to, but it still happened sometimes. "Uh, Sorry."

"Off in Arnold-land again, huh. What was it this time, deep-sea expedition?"

"Old West, actually."

"Right, buddy. So, you never told me who we were picking up…"

"Well… I figured we should bring Nadine along. Her best friend's mixed up in all of this, so it's only right that she's in the loop."

"Oh, right, Nadine, which one is she again?" asked Grandpa. "The hippie? The smart one? Or that really annoyingly nice one that's probably hiding something?"

"She's the one that's really into… uh… zoology."

"Of course she is. All girls love cute little critters. Anyway, this is the address!"

The building was a bit run-down but better kept than most in this neighborhood. I hadn't been here since he'd been paired up with Rhonda and Nadine on that "insect fashion show" project that had almost torpedoed their friendship. The contrast between their living conditions had always been striking, and I'd always wondered what it was that had brought together the daughter of a middle-school science teacher and a hairdresser with that of a multimillionaire investor and an ex-supermodel. He'd have to ask one day.

Upon Grandpa honking the Packard's horn, Nadine came bounding down the tenement's stairs, a small box in her hand. She hopped in the back next to me and Gerald.

"So, you're Nadine, I guess. The short man here tells me you're into animals."
"Actually, I hope you don't mind. I brought Harpo with me. She loves car rides," Nadine said, opening the box.

"Of course not, let's have a look at the little JUMPIN' JEHOSAPHAT KILL IT KILL IT KILL IT!"

"It's okay, Mr. Shortman. Harpo wouldn't hurt a fly. Well, she's a tarantula, so, yeah, she would hurt a fly, but… you know what I'm saying."

"Relax, dad, I've seen things in the jungle that make her look like a cocker spaniel." Dad added to Nadine's reassurance.

"Just… keep that thing in the box and we're square." Grandpa said, starting up the car again.

"So… what's with all the secrecy, guys? You said this has something to do with Rhonda?" She suddenly looked nervous. "Did they find her? Is she okay? She's not… oh god…. Do they need me to identify remains?"

"No! No, of course not! Actually… we heard from Helga a couple of days ago. Well, Grandma did. She said that she had Rhonda with her and they're on their way back."

"Oh… that's good news." Nadine visibly relaxed. "So where are we going?"

"To see Pheobe," answered Gerald.

"Oh? I heard she was really sick, and she couldn't have visitors."

"That's the cover story. She's not really sick. What happened to her is way stranger than you could possibly believe."

"Try me. We spent our summer fighting pirates in the jungle, remember? Plus, we live in a city where, well, that happens." She gestured out the window, where Curly was fleeing a mob of Campfire Lasses. "YOU CAN KILL ME, BUT YOU CAN'T KILL THE TRUTH!" he shouted.

"Don't say I didn't warn you. Pheobe… is a mutant."

"Like… X-Men?"

"Well… we haven't exactly seen her yet, but my Mom's been working on her case, and… she says there have been a LOT of changes."

"Well… how bad could it be?"

--

Million Dollar Industries, upper floors

-PHOEBE-

My parents had relocated all my furniture into my quarters here at MDI on the hopes that waking up in familiar surroundings would improve my emotional state.

I suppose it did, a bit. While the familiar furnishings and décor were indeed welcome, there was still the matter of the different dimensions, the industrial white walls, the incessant hum of fluorescent lighting and the building's ventilation system, and the knowledge that my parents were not just down the hall, but holed up in a motel a few blocks away. No matter their efforts, I could not feel as if I was at home.

Even the simple act of dressing in the morning served as a constant reminder of the changes my
condition had brought. Sliding my extra arms into extra sleeves, closing the fasteners of my shirt and sweater above my wings, threading my tail through the slit in my skirt, these were all factors that had to be considered now. And I was unsure if the thought that I would eventually get used to it was reassuring or depressing. Because that would mean that I would be in this condition for the long term. Stuck in this alien body, sequestered from society, separated from Ge- from my friends. Missing school. I shuddered inwardly at this last thought. I had the longest-running attendance record in PS118 history! That was, to use the vernacular, up in smoke.

Dressed now, I exited the room. With quarantine lifted, I now had the run of the upper five floors of the building, as well as the roof. That mostly meant labs, examination rooms, and rooms with equipment designed to measure my new physical abilities. My day was mostly spent in such rooms, with my evenings reserved for keeping current with schoolwork and family time. My parents came with dinner every night, making sure to bring my favorites (breakfast and lunch were sent up from the MDI commissary on the second floor, and were… adequate. Michelin would not be awarding them a star any time soon). There was a lounge on the 36th floor where I could watch TV or make use of a couple of gaming consoles if I so chose. I had not done so yet, but the possibility was there if I craved distraction. Father had also presented me with a modified version of my fencing uniform last night, and suggested we resume practice that weekend. I had been gratified by the prospect, but suggested that competition might be inequitable given the vast increase in my physical prowess. He suggested that I should not be too presumptuous over my victory.

My day was set to start with a standard physical, so I headed to the elevator to take it down to the main exam room on the 37th floor. However, Dr. Shortman was already waiting at the elevator bank, a curious smile on her lips.

"Change of plans today, Phoebe. All work and no play is a poor way to spend a weekend."

Oh, right. It's Saturday. My life had been so disrupted that I had actually forgotten what day of the week it was. Sloppy, Heyerdahl.

"Then, what is on the agenda, Dr. Shortman?"

"Stella, dear. And I think you'll like this. You have some friends waiting for you downstairs."


"Phoebe, dear… it's all right. Besides, Gerald's been begging Arnold to get him in to see you ever since you were admitted. It'd be rude to send him home now."

Gerald was here? That just made me doubly nervous! How could I let him see me like this? I could almost picture the revulsion on his face, awaiting the moment he would lay eyes on me. I couldn't take that. It would be the last, crushing blow to my already fragile self-esteem, barely starting to knit together after its nosedive earlier in the week.

"Sweetie, calm down" I suddenly realized that I'd been hyperventilating. "I told Arnold exactly what to expect. Your friends know what they're going to see. Don't worry."

Her reassurances notwithstanding, I still felt as though I was being led to my emotional execution. Still… I am nothing if not a slave to my own polite nature. Reluctantly, I followed Dr. Shortman to my fateful rendezvous.

--

We approached the reception area. I could see Arnold's father and grandfather talking to the security guard, while behind them, I spotted Arnold and Gerald… and Nadine? Seemed an odd choice, as she wasn't a usual member of our particular clique.
Of course. She was connected through Rhonda. I kept forgetting that it wasn't just me going through this. I cursed myself for my self-absorption. Here I was in relative safety and comfort, while my best friend, and another who, while not as close, was still someone I had regard for, were suffering the same condition in far less ideal circumstances.

Gerald turned toward me, and I could feel my hearts skip several beats as I held my breath, waiting to register his reaction. Fear, revulsion, shock…

I admit I was quite surprised when he immediately broke into a smile.

"Hey, boo," he said, smile as casual as always. "You always did look good in blue."

My cheeks flushed. "H-hi, Gerald," I managed to stammer. "I-I'm… I'm glad to see you too."

"So, this is where you work," Arnold's grandfather commented. "Looks sciencey."

"It is, dad," Dr. Shortman answered. "That is the technical term, by the way. Sciencey."

"Heh heh, look at me, usin' technical jargon!" He whispered to Miles. "That girl's got four arms and three eyes, right? I'm not just seeing that, right?"

The other Dr. Shortman chuckled. "Afraid you're seeing things, pop?"

"You know how it is at this age. The ol' noggin' starts playin' tricks on you."

"In any case," continued the first Dr. Shortman - to avoid confusion, I shall from this point simply refer to them as "Stella" and "Miles" - "science is not on the agenda for today. Today is about Phoebe having fun with her friends."

I pride myself on being an observant person. A few minutes ago, when Stella had brought me to reception, I had instantly mentally recorded everyone's observation. The elder Mr. Shortman's had been a combination of confusion and disbelief, Nadine's surprise and intrigue, Arnold and Gerald's simple relief. It had been Miles' that was the oddest one. It was a look of uncertain recognition. Did I perhaps resemble something he'd encountered in his travels? Were the three of us possibly not the first of our kind? It was so maddening knowing so little about what I was or how I'd come to be. My mind craved answers.

But my soul, at the moment, craved the companionship I'd been denied. I suppose answers could wait a few hours.

"So… this is the lounge," Stella said. "I've arranged for it to be all yours today, so make yourselves at home."

"Aw, sweet, is that a Swap? I've been buggin' dad for one of those for Christmas!" Gerald rushed over to the system. "Lessee… we got Gasp of the Untamed… FISTS… Glop Stars…"

I sighed. "Boys and their toys, am I right, Nadine?"

"I could go for some FISTS, actually," Nadine said, grinning. "Dibs on Chu-Chu."

Well, that was quick. Apparently I can't live up to a shiny electronic distraction.

As if sensing my disappointment, Gerald backed off. "Maybe we can do it later. This should be about Phoebe. And I have just the thing." He reached into the bag he brought and pulled out a blu-ray. "I present… Jay."
My eyes widened. "Not the red-hot historical hip-hopera featuring the first Supreme Court Justice-slash-Governor of New York? Starring Smith 'Pop Daddy' Williams?"

"You know it. I figured since you love American history and hip-hop musicals…"

"I am extremely fond of both things!" He really does know me! "I know what we're doing for the next four hours!"

"…this thing is four hours?" Arnold said, suddenly not all that enthusiastic.

"I heard it's supposed to be good." Nadine reassured. "Rhonda's parents took her to a Broadway showing last year. She asked if I could go, too, but my folks had other plans…" She looked pensive. Missing her best friend…. No, something else was at work here. There was something in her expression I recognized, I just didn't know from where.

"Looks like we're set. Yo, Dr. S… can we get some pizzas delivered here?"

"I think that could be arranged," Stella said, smiling. "Anyway, how about we adults get out of your way. You don't need us 'getting all up in your biz'."

Arnold rolled his eyes. "Mom, don't try to talk cool. I have to go to school with these people."

"To hell with political pandering!"

I will not endorse gerrymandering!"

"This actually is pretty good," Nadine commented between bites of her pepperoni bread (her lactose intolerance precluded indulging in pizza, so we'd made certain to have an alternative available).

"Tell that to Arnold," Gerald remarked, prodding the sleeping boy.

"Wha- Is it over?"

"Just about," I said. "He retires from politics soon after this."

"Oh. Uh… sorry. I, uh, really haven't been getting a lot of sleep."

"I can most certainly relate," I said. "I am worried about them too."

"Yeah," Nadine said. There it was, that look again.

"To absent friends," Gerald said, raising his Yahoo. "May they find their way home soon."

"To absent friends," we all answered.

My thoughts drifted to Helga, and I remembered exactly where I'd seen that expression before. It was on her face, whenever I caught her eyes drifting toward "ice cream", that is to say, Arnold… that quiet longing. Unspoken devotion.

Perhaps she did not devote her time to composing longform poetry or constructing elaborate shrines, but there was no doubt in my mind; Nadine was in love with Rhonda.

Of course, my experience with Helga had made it clear to me that feelings unexpressed were not to be commented on in public. The best I could do was give her what I could only hope was a reassuring nod. However, I hoped I would have the opportunity to talk one-on-one with her. I knew firsthand the toll silence could take. Helga had been so much happier since she'd finally stopped
represing herself around Arnold.

Then again, Arnold had returned her feelings. There was certainly no guarantee Rhonda would return Nadine's. The same-sex factor alone made it a toss-up. And yet… there would at least be a definitive answer.

On the third hand…

"Phoebe? You've been staring off into space for a while. That's usually MY job," Arnold commented.

"Oh. Just… thinking."

"Well, the FISTS tourney's about to start. There's a 2-on-2 option if you want to join.

"Oh… no, electronic gaming is not really my milieu. I'm content to watch Gerald school Nadine."

"Uh, guys…" Nadine interrupted, "we may have to put a pin in that." She held up an empty box.

"Harpo got out."

--

Luckily, the tarantula had only crawled under the couch, and afforded me the opportunity to, for once impress people with my physical rather than mental prowess, by manner of hoisting said object over my head.

"That… is so cool," marveled Gerald. "I'm dating the smartest AND strongest girl in school."

"Y-yes," I stammered. "I… I suppose it is impressive. Though… given that Helga and Rhonda both possess athletic prowess superior to mine, they're likely-"

"…just take the compliment, Pheeb."

"C'mere, honey, Nadine said, scooping up her spider. "Good… looks like you haven't given birth yet."

"You brought a pregnant tarantula here?" Arnold asked, disbelieving. "You didn't exactly think this through, did you?"

"She's not like Chico and Zeppo. She doesn't like being left alone. But… yeah, I can see where this would seem like a really bad idea."

I put down the couch. "Well, shall we resume-"

"So what else can you do now?" Nadine asked.

I suppose this had been inevitable. Up until now, I'd been distracted from my condition. I had almost started to feel… dare I say it… normal? But I'd once again called attention to myself, and naturally, they were curious about the extent of my change. I suppose curiosity was a step up from fear or revulsion.

"Oh, uh… well… we… haven't really gauged the full extent yet. As you have seen, my physical strength is greatly enhanced. I am also possessed of extremely durable dermal and tonsorial tissues…. Sorry. Skin and hair."

"You can fly, right?" asked Nadine.

"I… I suppose so. I've… not really tried to yet. This facility doesn't exactly, uh, facilitate winged
travel."

Nadine frowned. "It seems like kind of a waste to have wings and not try them out."

"I don't know. I... I'm still hoping this is only a temporary condition. I feel like... like embracing my abilities will be like closing the books on the original Phoebe Heyerdahl."

Gerald smiled. "Phoebe... you're still the smartest person I know, you still have the most adorable little stammer when you get nervous, you still use a ton of difficult words to say simple things, and you still have the sweetest smile I've ever seen, even with the fangs. I think it's safe to say you're still the original and best Phoebe Heyerdahl."

I felt my cheeks flush. Gerald always did know just the right things to say. "Th-thank you, Gerald."

"See? Right there."

I rapidly changed the subject, as the urge to engage in public affection was becoming overwhelming, and I didn't want to make Arnold or Nadine uncomfortable, especially given the absence of their objects of affection. "Ah, well... it seems the roof would be the proper venue in which to test my new appendages..."

"Sounds like a plan."

--

An elevator ride later, the four of us stood on the roof. It was a clear, chilly day. I felt oddly energized as the sun beamed down on us. Possible photosynthetic capabilities? It would not surprise me at this point.

But that was something to explore later. We had come here for a single purpose.

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and unfolded my wings. I began flapping them, slowly at first, then faster and faster. Their cadence was almost hypnotic.

Scratch that, actually hypnotic. I didn't snap out of my fugue state until I became aware that my feet had not been touching the roof for some time. I could hear my friends calling distantly, as if they were far below.

I risked a look. It turned out I had attained an altitude of at least one hundred feet. Thanks to the illusion of perspective (not to mention the added depth of field that came with having an extra eye), my friends seemed tiny and distant. I had never intended to reach such a height on my first try.

And then I fell.

The three tried to catch me, a mistake as they soon found out.

"I'm sorry," I said, from atop the pile.

"You're a lot heavier than you look," Nadine groaned.

"Yes, well... my muscle and bone tissue have greatly increased in density. It's actually rather surprising I can get off the ground at all." I pulled myself to my feet. I felt sore, but nothing seemed broken. I surmised it would take far more of an impact to cause even a microfracture. "Are you injured?"

"Just my pride," Gerald said, slowly getting up himself. "Good first effort. You beat the Wright Brothers."
"Yes, well, the aircraft is melded to my body…" Still, it had been an experience. Even if at the end it had been less "flying" and more "falling without style".

"Are you ready to try again?" Arnold asked.

"I'm not certain the three of you would survive a second attempt." I said. "In any case, I have had my fill of falling for the day. Perhaps we should resume our previous recreative activities?"

"Is that what you want?" Arnold asked.

"As I said before… I was enjoying just… goofing off with you three. Can we just go back to that?"

"I…. don't get what's going on here." I was confused at the activity on the screen, a chaotic cacophony of elastic-limbed misfits.

"This is Chu-Chu." Nadine said. "She's a Japanese train conductor, with trains for arms." Upon my blank stare, she said "It makes sense in context. And Gerald's character is Don Fusilli, an opera singer who wields the power of corkscrew pasta."

"Right, that clears everything up," I replied with unaccustomed sarcasm. Maybe I was just subconsciously trying to fill in for Helga's gift for snark. And then Rhonda would make some comment about the poor color choices for Don Fusilli's tux, and Helga's eyes would roll and she'd make some withering comment about her intelligence, and all would be well in the world.

Why us? I wondered. Why only us? What did we three have in common? While I spent a great deal of time around Helga, she tended not to cross paths with Rhonda unless it was out of her control. In fact, I couldn't recall a time the three of us were in close proximity with no others present, not since San Lorenzo…

That was it, There WAS something unusual that had happened to just the three of us in San Lorenzo, but it had gotten lost in all the other strange and dangerous things that had happened.

"Excuse me… I have to go find Dr. Shortman," I said, getting up.

"What's wrong?" Gerald inquired, hitting "pause" on the game.

"Nothing really, just playing a hunch," I said.

"Sounds like something important. And it's probably gonna be more interesting than the game."

"You're just saying that 'cause you're losing," Nadine said, dropping her own controller.

"Well… I think I may have a theory on just how this all began."

"Okay, yeah, he's right, that is definitely way more interesting than the one-sided thrashing I'm giving Gerald. I'm in."

"So, it cracked open, and the three of us were caught in the dust cloud that was released."

"And… you had this geode with you?"

"I took half of it home with me. Rhonda took the other half. I don't know what she did with hers, though…"

"The Lloyds might know," Stella mused. "Actually, this'll work out nicely. They're one of the few
parents I haven't met yet. In the meantime, I at least have this have to study. Thank you, Phoebe. This might just be the key to this puzzle."

I glanced at the clock. It was nearly 9PM now. Having my parents locate my half of the geode back home in my closet and bring it over (taking necessary safety precautions so as not to infect themselves, of course) had taken quite a bit of time. Now, it was getting late, and I'd squandered a great deal of our "normal" time together.

"I'm sorry, everyone. I had not anticipated the amount of time this would take. I've monopolized our recreation time, and for that, I deeply apologize."

"Are you kiddin'?" Gerald brushed off my apology. "You got nothin' to be sorry for. The whole point of this was to make YOU happy, and I've never seen you happier than when you've got something for that big ol' brain to chew on."

"I guess we should be getting ready to go home," Arnold suggested, noting the late hour."

"Now, hold on," my mom said. "It's not like it's a school night or nothin'. I think what's in order here is a slumber party."

Stella nodded. "I don't see a problem with that, actually."

"An eminently reasonable suggestion," agreed my father. "As long as Gerald and Nadine's parents give their consent, of course."

"I think it's up to Phoebe," Arnold said."

"I think that would be acceptable to... oh, who am I kidding?" I enveloped my parents in a hug. "Oh, THANKYOUTHANKYOUTHANKYOU!"

"Easy there, my cherry blossom," Father gasped. "Your hugs are significantly more crushing than they once were."

"Oh, hush up, Kyo. You can handle it" my mom admonished.

This day had been exactly what I had needed. I had found the first piece of the puzzle, to be sure, but I had found something, perhaps, even more important. I had found that I had my friends' unwavering support.

Perhaps someday soon, there would be a cure. I could return to my ordinary life. Perhaps there never would be one, and this was how I would spend my future.

I had my family. I had my friends. And for now... that would be okay.
Chapter Summary

In which gnomes are real, the girls reach a new understanding, and a dream demon comes a-calling.

Chapter 14

Somewhere in the Woods…

-HELGA-

The forests were getting thicker the further we got into Oregon. Makes sense, this was lumber country after all.

Something about this particular forest seemed kind of… off, though.

It all started when the two of us were getting some firewood together. We were getting to be old hands at this forest stuff now, especially since wither of us was capable of lighting a fire with our powers. Foraging had been a bit more of a challenge since neither of us really knew what was edible around here beyond what kind of berries to avoid (thanks, Arnold's grandpa). Hunting was a problem since Rhonda refused to harm any cute woodland creatures (I assumed she was fine with killing the ugly ones; say, if a mole rat or a blobfish showed up, she'd be all for killing it). Fishing was slightly better, ever since we figured out that our tails made pretty decent makeshift tackle. I must admit a certain immature joy in watching Princess have to gut and scale fish with her claws, muttering "Ew ew ew ew ew" all the while.

Establishing a campsite and a fire was always the first thing we did, especially since it was starting to get colder. I could have surrounded us in a bubble of warmth, but that would take too much concentration and I wanted my mind free in case something else happened.

And so, I have set the scene for the first, shall we say, incident.

"Hey," Rhonda said. "I… think I saw something."

"What?"

"Okay… you're gonna call me crazy, but I think I saw… a gnome."

I blinked.

"A gnome," I repeated.

"Yeah."

"Like… with the beard and the pointy hat."

"Exactly."

"…yeah, I'm gonna call you crazy."
"See, I told you."

"You're clearly going through withdrawal from... what is it you'd be going through withdrawal from? Selfies? Probably selfies."

"Hey, I'm not sure I didn't imagine it myself. This whole area has this... whimsical quality to it."

"I kinda know what you mean. Those big mushrooms over there, for instance. I keep expecting Smurfs to pop out of them. But it's the isolation messing with us. Nobody to talk to but each other for days on end. It's bound to drive someone a little crazy, you know?"

--

We soon had the fire going. It was my turn to fish, so I made my way to the creek and waited for a nibble. It was a few minutes before a fish of some kind latched on. I pulled it out, and could swear it was actually looking at me. It was quite unsettling.

So you could imagine how it was when it started talking.

"Hey," it said. "Let me go and I'll grant you a wish."

"...hoooooooly crap," I muttered. "I really am starting to lose it."

"Hey!" it said. "Talking fish here! You want wishes, I got 'em! All you gotta do is let me go!"

It wasn't as if I'd eaten any of those weird giant mushrooms or inhaled next to the funny-looking flowers, no. This couldn't have been caused by any sort of outside influence. No, this was clearly creeping insanity.

In any case, when the fish start talking to you, you throw 'em back. As I did, I imagined (for that had to be it) that it yelled "So long, sucker!" as it swam away,

Well, I was no longer in the mood for seafood, so I wandered off hoping to find some wild flora suitable for eating (my gut craved street tacos, the pulled pork sandwich at Chubby's 'Cue, a pastrami club from Green's, or pretty much anything else that had once had a face, but wild dandelion greens and the like would have to do to stifle my complaining stomach).

It was a disappointing search. Frustrated, I slumped against a tree, and pulled out my "locket" for a dose of much-needed inspiration.

I'd found the fist-sized, flat, vaguely heart-shaped stone on a previous foraging expedition. As it was clearly a sign of some greater providence, I scratched a crude sketch of Arnold's face into it with my claw. It wouldn't win any art contests, but this blessed placebo had been there to boost my spirits in my weaker moments (when Rhonda was otherwise occupied, of course).

"Oh, my oblong-skulled muse," I whispered, "I fear the worst may be happening. My sanity seems to be abandoning me. The stress of my metamorphosis, the fear of capture, the isolation, the incessant nattering of Princess Rhonda... and the thought that I'm actually starting to like her, if you can imagine... All of it is taking its toll. I strive to return to you, my beloved, but in what state will it be? Is it right to subject you to my madness? If I go crazy, will you still call me Supergirl?"

*wheeze, wheeze*

...yep. I had gone crazy. Because there was no way he could be here, here in this Oregon forest. Slowly I turned, wondering if my mind truly had failed me.

What I came face to face with was not Brian "Brainy" Bartlett, admirer, secret confidant, let's face it,
stalker, but a tiny bearded man in medieval dress and conical hat.

"...what the hell..." I stammered.

"SHMEBULOK," it answered nonsensically.

"Yep," I said to no one in particular. "I'm officially insane now. Welp, might as well enjoy it."

"Shmebulok?" the gnome/figment of my imagination answered. I answered with a punt, sending the tiny figure deep into the brush.

I actually felt that, I thought. My toes had definitely connected with something solid and yielding.

So either I was further around the bend than I thought, or Rhonda had been right, and gnomes were real. I wasn't sure which was the more disturbing of the two thoughts.

--

"Any luck?" Rhonda asked as I finally returned. "Or is it time to see if we can digest tree bark?"

"Not unless you want to give the big weird mushrooms a try. They probably can't make us any crazier than we already are." I leaned in. "I saw your gnome."

"You did?"

"Among other things. So, clearly, we've both lost it."

"Or gnomes are real."

"Possible, but... no. That would be as ridiculous as..."

"...preteen monster girls with elemental powers?"

"That's different!"

"Is it? Occam's Razor says that the simplest explanation is the most likely one. If we both, independently, saw the same thing, the simplest explanation is the thing we saw exists."

"I know what Occam's Razor is, Princess. I'm actually kind of surprised you know."

"Then you really don't get me yet, do you? I'm shallow, Helga. That's something I know about myself, something I am actively trying to change, even if I'm not there yet. What I am not, however, is stupid."

She was right, of course. I really should know better at this point. For all the crap I give Rhonda about how superficial and obsessed with appearances she is, I've been doing the same thing myself. I'm always judging everyone I come across, reducing them to cute little nicknames, because, let's face it, they do the same to me. I am the brute, the bully, the ugly duckling, Queen of the Harpies. And in turn, I take it out on everyone else, Tall Hair Boy, Pinkboy, Dicknose, Jethro, the names keep on coming.

And it would be so easy to change. All I would have to do is let some of the real me show through. And in turn see their other sides. But it was just so much more easy to not make any effort at all, to let this state of affairs persist.

But it was just us. And I was so tired of acting.

"...you're right," I said. "We don't get each other. But you've been trying and I really haven't. And
I'm sorry about that. It's… not easy for me to open up to people."

Well, if anything, the fact that my actually apologizing had struck Rhonda completely speechless made it all worth it.

"Anyway, how about tonight we get personal. And, since I won the tie-breaker in Boise, you're gonna start by finally telling me who you're into. Is it Sid?"

"No."

"Stinky?"

"No."

"Lorenzo?"

"No."

"Park?"

"Ew! God no! He's a blood relative!"

"…really? Park's related to you?"

"Yeah. We share great-grandparents. I'm an eighth Korean on my dad's side. I thought that was common knowledge. We did our genealogy report back in fifth grade together."

"Yeah, I tend to not pay attention to boring stuff."

"Anyway… It's not one of the boys in our class. I don't think I've ever felt seriously about any of them, except maybe Arnold…"

Okay, so I wait 'til her back is turned, grab one of those big rocks, and wham. We're all alone, nobody's ever gonna know. I'll bury her out here, tell everyone she died heroically, and nobody'll know any different. All I need to do is wait…

"But that was back in second grade. I was over that pretty quickly."

"Oh." Okay, murder's off. For now. "So, it's someone in another class? A seventh-grader? Ugh, please don't tell me it's (shudder) Wolfgang."

"No way! I've got self-respect. Anyway, it is someone in our class."

"But you just said it wasn't one of the boys in our cl-" And then the realization dawned. I'd been guilty of two-dimensional thinking regarding her once again. "It's a girl, isn't it."

Rhonda's cheeks darkened. "You are literally the only person on Earth who knows anything about this. I haven't told my parents about this. I haven't told my best friend. Do you understand the significance here? Do you understand the level of trust I have just put in you?"

"Hey, it's not like I asked you to come out to me!" I protested. "…okay, that's not true. I've been pestering you about it constantly. And… I do understand how personal this has to be. If you wanna stop at this point, we can."

"No, I… guess I needed to vent to someone at some point. I never thought you'd be the one, but here we are."
"Here we are. And… you're gay."

"Not exclusively. I like guys, just… lately, not as much as I like girls. Anyway, remember that stupid origami marriage predictor thing I made in fourth grade?"

"Oh, yeah, you made a whole bunch of stupid pairings, then you came back the next day and said the thing was flawed and all the predictions were null and void. You broke Peapod Kid's heart, Rhonda. He was never the same."

"Yeah, well, the pairings made no sense. I mean, we both know Sheena and Eugene isn't gonna happen."

"Nooooo, it is not," I agreed. "Anyway, I figure you tested it on yourself and got Curly or Harold or someone else that disgusted you."

"Nothing like that," she answered, sighing. "I got Lila. Which shouldn't have been possible. Turns out I put her name on the wrong side of the paper. Probably subconsciously, so I had a chance. Anyway… I wasn't ready to deal with those feelings yet, so I just decided to declare the whole thing null and void."

"So, that's it, huh. You're head over heels for Saint Lila like 95% of the boys in the fifth and sixth grades."

"Yeah, that's about the size of it. And it's hopeless, because my competition isn't any of them, it's Jesus. And there's no way I'm beating Him."

"I don't see why not. You can't walk on water, but you could probably hover a little above it. And you could probably revive the dead with a little defibrillator action."

"It's kinda, and I can't believe this, sweet of you to encourage me like this, but we should face the facts. Lila Sawyer, the most religious girl in school, isn't going to start dating girls any time soon. It's just as stupid as any of the other pairings to come out of my marriage predictor."

"Not all of them," I took a deep breath. It would have been unthinkable to do what I was about to do a week ago. But fair was fair. Rhonda had shared something deeply personal, and it was only right.

"Truth is… I've been dating Arnold in secret for six months."

Rhonda just stared. "Well, if you're not going to take this seriously, I don't know why I'm even talking to you."

"I am being serious! The fact is… I have been crazy, doo-dah, head-over-heels in love with the football-head since I was four! I have been obsessively stalking him, writing sonnets, building shrines to his glorious ovoid-skulled splendor, dabbling in voodoo, constructing elaborate romantic fantasies in my mind… always under that veneer of hostility, so that no one would ever suspect that I, Helga G. Pataki, baddest bitch in PS118, had a heart of marshmallow so sweet it would give Chocolate Boy diabetes. And for seven long years, I maintained that façade, until finally, in San Lorenzo, he saw through the veil, and I learned that love can, indeed, bloom deep in the jungle. If you don't believe me, here!" I took out my rock and handed it to her.

"…a picture of a taco with eyes scratched on a rock?"

"It's his face, ya yutz! Drawing with a fingernail is hard!" I groaned. "Anyway, the point is, I know a thing or two about hopeless, desperate love, and sometimes it does work out."

"I guess…" she mused. "It's nice to know I got one right, at least."
"Yeah, so don't give up hope. Even if she is a Jesus nut and you're not only the same gender, but look like the love child of Satan and the Grimace."

"Thanks," she said sarcastically.

"Don't mention it, Princess. Oh, and if you tell anyone about this conversation, I'll kill you."

"Sure, Helga."

"I'm serious. I will flay the skin off your flesh, tear off each of your limbs, one by one, rip out your guts and strangle you with them, and just as you are about to feel the blessed release of death, I shall tear your very soul asunder and devour the agonized shreds, trapping you within me in a state of eternal torment, for so righteous is my fury that the gods themselves tremble."

"...Jesus, Hellcat. I said I'm not telling anyone. No need to get all biblical."

"I'm just telling it like it is. I would expect no less from you if I betrayed your trust."

"I'm not sure I would even know how to eat a soul."

"Hopefully it doesn't come to that."

"...seriously, you are scary. That was some crazy dark stuff. Trust me, I don't plan on ever crossing you."

"Just so we're clear on that. Now if you don't mind, I think it's time we got some shuteye."

--

Captain Arnold Shortman of the Queen's Navy stood aforedecks of the HRMS Rugbyballhead."

"First mate Geraldo, report," he shouted.

"Steady as she goes, Captain. No sign of the Dread Pirate Rosewing."

"Belay such talk, man," the captain responded. "Rosewing is but a myth."

"A myth, am I?" a voice called from overhead. A figure, borne on leathery rose-colored wings, descended from the skies. Golden hair cascaded over a willow, yet athletic body. Three intense blue eyes regarded her quarry. She wielded cutlasses in two of her hands, a pistol in the third, and a whip in the fourth, while her tail curled around the hilt of a dagger.

"So... the legends were true," the captain said. "A pirate without a ship, sailing the skies instead of the seas."

"I see my reputation precedes me," the pirate spoke haughtily, her lips parting in a wide grin. "The legends mentioned all of that, but what they did not speak of was your beauty."

"...I think I like where this is going," Helga said, breaking character for a moment. She'd had the pirate dream a bunch of times before, but that was pre-mutation. It was actually kind of fun this way.

"Flattery will get you nowhere, Captain." Rosewing said, resuming the storyline. "Hand over your treasure."

"I hate to disappoint you, m'lady," the captain said. "This is a ship of the line, in service of Her Majesty. You'll find no gold, silks, and spices here."

"Silly captain," Rosewing said, drawing closer. "That is not the treasure I seek." She dropped one of
her weapons and gently caressed his cheek with her free hand. "For you see, your heart is much more precious to me than all the gold and gems in the Commonwealth."

"OHHH, BROTHER!"

The shrill voice brought a sudden halt to the dream. The orchestral soundtrack in the background came to a sudden stop as all the color seemed to wash out of the scene.

"Do you mind?" I shouted to my rude intruder. "I'm trying to have an erotic pirate dream here!"

"I KNOW, AND IT'S JUST A COMPLETE MESS! THIS WHOLE SETUP IS CORNIER THAN A TORTILLA FACTORY! I EXPECTED BETTER THAN THIS PILE OF CLICHES FROM YOU, HEART OF GOLD!"

A figure began to assemble itself from objects in the background. It took the form of a brick-patterned triangle with a single eye, spindly limbs, top hat and cane. It was as if someone had forcibly mated the pyramid from the back of the 1$ bill with famed nut spokesperson Mr. Peanut.

"HOWDY DO," the figure shouted. "NAME'S BILL. I'M KIND OF A GENIE. I GRANT WISHES. I JUST… LOVE… GRANTING WISHES."

"Yeah, lot of that going around lately," I muttered. "Last guy who made that offer was full of crap, and I'm kind of betting you are too."

"HEY HEY, COOL IT, TOOTS. I DON'T WANNA GET OFF ON THE WRONG FOOT" He turned into a huge foot for emphasis. "HERE, I'M JUST TRYING TO GET MY ME IN THE DOOR, YOU GET ME?"

I smirked as he reverted to his previous appearance. "For some reason I ain't buyin' what you're sellin'. It's my experience that people don't just give you what you want without expecting something in return." Well, most didn't. There were a few welcome football-headed exceptions.

"YOU KNOW, I LIKE YOU, KID. YOU'VE GOT WAY MORE ON THE BALL THAN SILVER SPOON. HERE, HAVE A PORTAL TO A DIMENSION OF ENDLESS CRUSHING DESPAIR. ON THE HOUSE." A swirling vortex opened, releasing tortured, inhuman wails of agony.

Something clicked in my head. "...you're the guy, aren't you."

"BEG PARDON?"

"The thing from Rhonda's dream. Freddy Kreuger."

"YOU THINK I'M ANYTHING LIKE HIM?" Bill shrieked, turning an angry red. "THAT PUN- SPEWING HACK? I WAS HAUNTING DREAMS BEFORE THAT MELTY-FACED BUFFOON CRAWLED OUT OF- WHOA, WHOA... GOT A LITTLE HEATED THERE. WHERE WERE WE? I WAS OFFERING YOU A DEAL, RIGHT? HOW'S ABOUT WE REVERSE THIS LITTLE MAKEOVER YOU'VE BEEN SUBJECT TO? GET YOU BACK IN A STANDARD MODEL INSTEAD OF K- WHOOPS, SPOILER ALERT, WE'RE NOT READY FOR THAT YET, ARE WE? YOU'RE NOT DUE TO MEET THEM FOR A LONG TIME!"

I regarded him. "You know exactly what we are, don't you."

"BINGO, HEART OF GOLD. HEY, IF THAT'S WHAT YOU WANT, LET'S PUT IT ON THE
NEGOTIATION TABLE. I'LL TELL YOU EVERYTHING YOU WANT TO KNOW, AND IN EXCHANGE… YOU HELP ME FIND A NEW HOME.' He held out his hand.

It seemed reasonable. Seemed. But something about this whole setup was fishier than a hundred sushi buffets. Something was most definitely rotten in the state of Oregon.

"You know what… I'm thinking I'm gonna pass. Better luck with some other sucker."

Bill, who had faded back to his original yellow, started turning again, though so far just orangish-yellow. "HEH, I DON'T THINK YOU'RE PAYING ATTENTION, PINKY. I'M OFFERING YOU EVERYTHING YOU WANT."

"And I'm saying I smell a load of bull. My dad's in retail, and I know someone trying to talk up dead cat like it's filet mignon when I see it. Fact is, I'm guessing the real price is something I don't wanna pay. So… no deal, isosce-loser. How about you hit the road and let me get back to some hot pirate nookie."

Bill flared red once again and grew larger, filling my vision. "YOU DON'T FEEL LIKE DEALING, HUH, HEART OF GOLD? WELL, MAYBE I DON'T FEEL LIKE TAKING NO FOR AN ANSWER ANYMORE!" The apparition raised his fist, ready to strike.

"I wouldn't," I said, smirking. "You see, I've been subjected to a lot of stress and really weird stuff lately, and my sanity is really starting to fray around the edges. My brain's on a one-way trip to kooko-town."

"I KNOW, IT'S PRETTY FUN, WHAT'S YOUR POINT?"

"The point is… I'm crazy. And you should never hit a crazy person." And with that, I hit "play" on the 80s-era boom box that conveniently appeared on deck.

"UPTEMPO 60S R&B? WHAT IS THIS?"

"A callback," I said, cracking my knuckles. "Now… get out of my head." I swung Old Betsy directly into his big eye, following up with a spinning back-knuckle from my lower-left fist, which I had decided to dub "The Enforcer." For now, I wasn't married to it. Then a flying kick, followed by an uppercut from Punchy McPunchface and a roundhouse from the Three Avengers. And I still had my haymaker to deliver.

"HOW ARE YOU HURTING ME? I'M BEYOND YOUR PRIMITIVE VIOLENCE!"

"Not in my brain, you're not." I declared, delivering both lefts smack into his face with every bit of strength I had, sending him hurtling into the stratosphere of my mind before vanishing in a twinkle of light."

"Looks like Triangle Guy's blasting off again," I said to Arnold. "Now what say we get this dream back on tr-" The dreamscape started to shake apart as I heard Rhonda's distant voice. "*sigh* Or not. Farewell, brave Captain. We'll meet again real soon, 'cause these dreams are happening a LOT lately. I think puberty's finally creeping up on me."
--
"You know I hate you, right?" I muttered as my eyes fluttered back open.

"Oh, you do not," Rhonda replied with a slight smile that quickly faded. "So, hey…. About that gnome you saw… you didn't do anything to piss him off, did you?"

"I may have kicked him into the forest… why? He's a frickin' gnome, what's he gonna do to a couple
of super-powered types like us?"

"Yeah, about that…" She guided my attention to the horizon, where a massive figure loomed. "He kind of brought a few hundred of his closest friends."

"Hollly crap," I marveled. "He formed Gnometron."
Chapter Summary

In which Helga gets a marriage proposal, misogynist minotaurs are reckoned with, and Rhonda makes a huge mistake.

Chapter 15
Gnome on the Range

Somewhere in the woods…

-RHONDA-

So, yeah, gnomes are real.

That’s right. Gnomes. Those little bearded guys in pointy hats that you see decorating tacky peoples’ lawns. They exist. And apparently they can unite to form giant mechs.

Such a mech was now lumbering toward the two of us, looking like nothing so much as a giant rabid rampaging Santa Claus (twas the season, after all).

"Is there a plan here?" Helga asked. "'Cause don't look at me, I just woke up."

"I'm thinking fly for it," I suggested. "I seriously doubt they can get airborne."

"Ugh, are you kidding me? My wings are still getting their feeling back from sleeping on 'em."

"Well, it's that or… whatever it is gnomes do. Do gnomes eat people?"

"No, gnomes don't eat people."

"How do you know? We didn't even know they existed until a few hours ago!"

"Why would people collect statues of them if they ate people? They're harmless."

"Helga. Does THAT look harmless to you?"

She looked up. "I see your point."

The figure, dubbed "Gnometron" by Helga, raised its arm and fired off a round of what looked like missiles, cutting off our exit route. When they hit, it became clear that it was actually firing its own constituent gnomes at us. And it soon became clear that those pointy hats weren’t just for show, because they were embedding themselves into the ground on impact.

Now, our skin was pretty tough. It had resisted bullets pretty well. But those hats looked really sharp, and those gnomes were coming fast, and it didn't take a degree in physics to know that sharp plus fast equaled holes in things. And people.

The gnomes quickly recovered and scurried back to Gnometron as fast as their tiny legs could carry
them, as Gnoemtron. Thinking fast, I grabbed one. Helga immediately picked up on my plan and grabbed a pair of her own. "Hey!" She shouted. "We've got hostages! Call off the attack!"

"Nice try!" came a voice from within the mass. "That's Todd, Devin and Cayden! Nobody likes them!"

"He's right." my gnome said. "We have a lot of really unpleasant qualities. That's why they use us as ammo."

"Look," Helga asked, "is this because I kicked your friend? I'm really sorry about that! I have issues with people sneaking up behind me! This one guy does it all the time!"

"What? Hey, shouting across this distance is really tough on the throat! I'm comin' down there!"

A form detached itself from Gnometron and scurried its way down to us.

"Okay," he said. "My name's Jeff. I'll be speaking on behalf of my community."

"Right, so, if this is about kicking your friend…"

"Nah, that's not a problem. We kick each other all the time. There's not a lot to do out here, ya know? Nah, we're here because we need a queen."

"A queen?" I asked, confused.

"You two are girls, right? The last candidate got us really confused. Anyway, what we need is someone to lounge around, look pretty…"

"Looks like you're getting a job offer, Princess," Helga remarked with a smirk.

"Oh good. Hey, guys, the purple one's already royalty! We might have a shot at political power here!"

"Wha- no! I'm not a real princess!"

"Look, we're not exactly picky. We just need one of you girls to be our queen. The other… I guess we'll eat?"

"Told you," I whispered.

"Forget it," Helga said. "I happen to be in a committed relationship back home."

"And I'm gay," I said. Not quite accurate, but close enough.

"I don't know what either of those is, but I'm pretty sure it won't interfere with you laying hundreds of our eggs."

"What?! We don't lay eggs!" Did we? All the relevant parts seemed the same. I didn't have a pouch or a cloaca or anything weird like that. Lizard tongue aside, I'm still a mammal… right?

"The details aren't important. Honestly, it's been so long since we had a queen we're a little fuzzy on what they do. We just know we need one for some reason, and one of you should fit the bill. Probably the pink one. She looks sturdy."

"Sturdy?" whispered Helga. "Is that another way of saying I look like a dude?"
"Shhh," I cautioned. "Look, we're... flattered by the attention..."

"I am in no way flattered by the attention," interrupted Helga.

"...but we're going to decline. But I'm sure Ms. Right is just around the corner. Plenty of other fish in the sea. You don't want us anyway. Corrupted DNA, tragic story. Our flesh is probably toxic. So sorry. We'll be on our way now."

Gnometron quickly disassembled and surrounded us on all sides. For creatures with such tiny legs, these things moved fast. "You're not going anywhere," Jeff declared.

"Actually," Helga said, igniting her free hands, "I think we will."

"Jeff," one of the gnomes said, poking his chief, "I'm not sure we need a flammable queen."

"Are you kidding? Barry, this is the best thing that could happen! The Manotaurs'll finally leave us alone if we have a queen that can set them on fire! No more will they shove us head first into the ground and use us as golf tees!"

"Manotaurs?" I repeated disbelievingly. What kind of place was this?

As if in answer to my confusion, loud stumpy footsteps began approaching from the deeper woods.

"Hey, you up for a round, bro?" a deep gravelly voice bellowed.

"You know it, bro!" a matching voice answered.

"Ohhh, crap, they're coming, I can't deal with this!" a gnome panicked, curling into a ball and rocking back and forth, whimpering.

"Snap out of it, Terrence!" another gnome said, slapping him. "If we all just throw each other under the bus, a few of us can scurry to freedom!"

"Good strategy, Bryce!" said Jeff. "Everybody for themselves!"

"Criminy, can't you guys just Voltron up and squash whatever things are?"

"You don't understand, giant pink monster lady! The manotaurs have been bullying us for centuries! We can't fight them! We don't stand a chance!"

"Yeesh, you guys are wusses. You're totally ready to take on a pair of, and I quote, giant monster ladies, but a bunch of whatever-they-ares has your panties in a bunch?"

"Manotaurs. They're everything we're not. Huge, strong, aggressive. They literally sweat Club body spray. We're naturally afraid of them as a species. We just go completely into panic mode around them!"

The creatures in question came crashing into the clearing, two of them, roughly twice as tall as either of us (and both of us were already tall for our age before changing, and had added a few inches since), over-muscled, hairy, smelly, and loud. They were half-bull, half-frat boy.

"Everybody run!" shouted Jeff as the gnomes scattered, pushing each other aside. The two "manotaurs", as the gnomes had called them, began scooping up stragglers and stuffing them in their sacks.

"Good," Helga whispered, elbowing me. "We can ditch these weirdos and get on with our lives."
"I don't know." I replied, hesitating. "can we really leave them to this?"

"They were gonna forcibly marry themselves to me and eat you."

"...good point, but still..."

"Ugh... looks like Arnold's do-gooder virus is spreading. He's always putting himself on the line to help rubes who don't deserve it. And it's really, really hot," she said, grinning. "But really, really naïve too. And you've already decided to do it, haven't you."

"I'm already walking over."

"Okay, fine. I have your back, Rondaloid, but for the record, this is really stupid."

"Hey," I said. "You should really let the gnomes go."

The Manotaurs stopped what they were doing and looked down at the source of the voice.

"Dude," the blond one said, elbowing the brown-haired one. "Check it out. Some tiny purple chick thinks she can tell us what to do."

"Dude, that's priceless, brah." The other said, snickering.

"Listen, little, lady," the blond one said leaning down condescendingly, "Men are doing stuff, so why don't you and your friend go and make yourselves useful and get us some sandwiches."

"Did- did they just give us the 'make me a sandwich, woman'? " Helga asked. "Could this be any more of a cliché'd toxic masculinity moment?"

"Shhh," I whispered. "We can defuse this without resorting to violence." I addressed the Manotaurs again. "Look, I think we can resolve this if we just talk about it. Perhaps if we go around and introduce ourselves." I held out a hand. "My name's Rhonda. What's yours?"

"You still here?" the dark-haired one said, picking me up by the wings.

"Let the record show I tried," I asserted, flinging a jolt of electricity at the Manotaur's face. Startled, he dropped me. "Little bitch," he grumbled.

"I take it violence is back on the table?" Helga asked, grinning. "Cause I have four ladies I want to introduce these meatheads to, starting with Betsy here."

"Violence is the table," I replied, cracking my own four sets of knuckles. "I don't take kindly to being called a bitch. You take blondie."

I flung myself at the brown-haired Manotaur and threw all my weight into a punch to his solar plexus. It clearly got his attention, knocking him back and into a tree, which cracked in half on impact. I looked over at Helga, who had set Blondie's beard on fire. She gave me a thumbs up.

"The hell," Brownie muttered. "What kinda freak jobs are you frails?"

"Frail?" I irritatedly responded. "I just decked you and you're twice my size. I am most assuredly not frail in any sort of way."

"Chicks need to learn to respect their betters," Brownie growled, picking up the fallen tree and swinging it in my face. I was knocked back quite a ways, but managed to rebound off another tree and launched myself at his jaw. My fist connected with a satisfying crack. And pain. Turns out
punching a guy in the face hurts you, too. The damage had been done, however, as Brownie was clutching a broken jaw, in obvious pain.

I checked over on the opposite side of the clearing. Helga had managed to thoroughly dominate her opponent, and now had him in a headlock. "Who's your better?" She demanded.

"You!"

"Who do you respect?"

"YOU! I give up!"

"Damn right you do. Gonna let the gnomes go?"

"Anything, just don't burn off any more of my hair! Hair is very important to us Manotaurs!"

"In a way deodorant is not, apparently." She commented, waving a hand in front of her nose. "I think this one's learned to respect women, what about yours?"

"I don't know yet," I responded, rubbing my sore fist, "but if not, I'm pretty good with teaching him a few more lessons."

"Look at you. Miss aggressive. I'm clearly a good influence. Next you know, you'll drop those 80s girl bands you're obsessed with for death metal."

"Still unlikely." I was waiting to see if Brownie was going to make another move. He didn't appear to be making a move, but he was still in an aggressive stance, as if waiting for a show of weakness.

Our stand-off was at last interrupted by the roar of a motorcycle and a siren. A figure rode up on a heavily-modded chopper. They removed their helmet to reveal a young, very attractive woman with long red hair and freckles. She wore a green plaid shirt, jeans, heavy boots, and a fleece-lined bomber jacket. A patch with a question mark adorned the jacket's sleeve.

"Okay, can someone tell me what's going on here?" she asked. "We've got a gnome stampede, the unicorns are agitated, there's a ten-pixie pileup in the enchanted grotto, and now I find you two causing trouble?"

"'Ey stah-ed ih!" Brownie tried to say through a broken jaw.

The newcomer took the two of us in for the first time. "Never seen you guys before. Name's Wendy Corduroy. Official Weirdness Warden of Gravity Falls." She indicated her jacket patch.

So that's where we were. I'd been to the Falls once before, the summer after fourth grade. It'd been shortly after the FTI incident, and my parents had dragged me along to this dreadfully dull party at the mansion of the local bigshot, Preston Northwest, during which I was forced to spend several hours enduring the excruciating company of his spoiled daughter, Pacifica. I know, I know, I'm one to call someone spoiled, but this girl was on a whole other level. Sure, I have a pony, but she had ponies, multiple. My family has a butler. She had her own individual butler and one for her teacup poodle. I have a pretty extensive wardrobe. She had a suite of rooms just to house hers. And oh, did she make sure you knew how much better she was than you. It was like staring into the abyss. It was meeting her that made me resolve to be better to people. I kind of hope I've been succeeding.

We'd been invited back the past summer, but mom and dad decided to blow it off; I was still mentally recovering from San Lorenzo and apparently they'd found the Northwests just as irritating as I'd found their offspring. Peapod Kid'd gone with his folks; I asked him about it later but he refused to
talk about it.

"Rhonda Lloyd," I replied, voice a little higher and more childish than I'd hoped to sound. The fact that Wendy resembled an older, more tomboyish Lila was most definitely not lost on me.

Wendy raised an eyebrow at the name. Oh, right… I remembered, I'm a missing Rich (mostly) White Girl. Everyone knows about me.

"And I'm Helga. I'm the one nobody cares about," Helga added with a smirk.

"Lemme guess… mad scientist grabbed you, tinkered with your DNA, you escaped, and you're now on the run?"

"That's… pretty close, actually," I said. Jeez, was it hot in here? I definitely felt the sweats.

"This actually started happening before we got grabbed," Helga continued. "They wanna suck out our mutant mojo to give some shriveled old geezer immortality or something. It's this whole crazy thing and frankly I just wanna go home."

"I feel that. You're from Hillwood, right? They have that awesome music festival in August. Humdinga. I reeeeeally wanna go to that. Sure, we've got Woodstick, but that's amateur hour compared to your thing."

"Hey! Stah ih-naw-eeg uff!" Brownie yelled, still nursing his broken jaw.

"Oh, knock it off, Dudely. This isn't the first time I've caught you and Broseph causing trouble out here. Even the other Manotaurs can't stand you! Now this better be the last I hear about any of this, or I'm telling all your pals a couple of girls beat you up."

"…we'll be good," Broseph sheepishly replied, and the two slunk back off into the woods.

"Well, that's over with," Wendy remarked. "I have one thing I need to check on, and then we can head back into town. You guys could probably use food and *sniff* a shower or ten."

"You had me at shower," I said. "I haven't been clean in a week."

"Easy," she said. "All I need to do is check on the bunker."

"What bunker?" asked Helga.

--

It was located under a seemingly ordinary tree. "That limb up there triggers the entrance. Let me just get up th-"

"I'll do it," I interrupted, flapping my way up, hoping it would impress Wendy. Stop it, Rhonda, she is clearly too old and too awesome for you, you are nowhere near her league, best just give it up now because it's not gonna happen.

Shut up, I told my common sense, and hit the switch. A spiral staircase began to descend, leading to a door. Behind the door, there was a fallout shelter, clearly designed to survive several apocalypses.

"I come by here every other week to make sure everything's in order. There are experiments in here that could be really dangerous if the failsafes ever… well… failed. Normally, I wouldn't take civilians in here, but you two seem pretty capable."

"I don't wanna brag, but I've helped bring down a corporate raider and a river pirate in my day,"
Helga replied nonchalantly. "And that was before getting superpowers,"

"Bitchin'" was Wendy's reply. "What about you, Rhonda? Crush any international cartels?"

I felt my cheeks getting warm from her attention. "Uh, well... there was this counterfeit penny scam I had a hand in thwarting..." Come to think of it, we've led surprisingly eventful lives. Except for fifth grade. That felt like it took fourteen years.

Wendy led us through a passage hidden behind a wall map, and we found ourselves in the bunker proper. There were a ton of provisions, likely enough to last for decades. Scientific equipment of every type imaginable littered the room.

"Phoebe'd be in hog heaven here," commented Helga.

"This all belonged to probably the smartest dude who ever lived," noted Wendy. "My old boss's twin brother. Knew everything about everything."

My attention was caught by a set of tubes in the corner. "What are those things?"

"Trust me, you don't wanna mess with what's in there." Wendy warned.

"What could possibly-" I did a double take. There was a kid in one of them! A boy roughly our age. And from the looks of the expression of gut-wrenching horror eternally frozen on his face, he hadn't gone willingly.

Realization dawned. "Oh, you're good. You almost had us fooled."

"Huh?" Wendy asked.

"Pretend to be all cool, lure us down here, then the minute our guard is down, you shove us in the freezy-tubes and ship us to the Old Man."

Concern spread over Helga's features. "Princess, you didn't eat the funny mushrooms after all, did you?"

"What's wrong with the kid, huh?" I asked. "Does he have the early stages of what we have?"

"Holy crap, she's right, there is a kid in there." Helga turned on Wendy. "You got an explanation for this one, Freckles?"

"Listen, it's not what it looks like-"

"Why don't we ask him," I said, shutting off power to the tube.

"No!" Wendy yelled. "That's NOT just a kid! That's..."

She was interrupted by the noise of the tube opening. The boy, having thawed surprisingly fast, stumbled out.

"...damn it..." muttered Wendy.

"Are you okay?" I asked the boy.

"I am now," he said, smirking. And then a second set of vertical eyelids blinked over his eyes.

"...what in..." I stammered. The boy's body seemed to liquefy, rearranging itself until I was staring
"Superhuman strength, extra limbs, flight-capable… Oh yeah," "I" said. "I can definitely work with this." She shoved me back and fled the chamber.

"...see, this is why you listen to people," Wendy scolded. "So you don't let evil alien shapeshifters out of cryonic containment."

Damn. I have really screwed up this time.

--

PHOEBE'S SCIENCE CORNER

So. Let's talk about the geode.

The Lloyd's butler, Carson, delivered her half of the geode the Sunday morning after the sleepover. Analysis of both halves began immediately. Testing indicated that the crystals lining the interior were composed of materials not only not native to the Central American region, but not native to the Earth at all. The geode was in fact a tiny meteorite.

Further analysis detected traces of spore-like structures clinging to the crystals. An examination of the spores yielded fragments of a material similar to, yet distinct from, DNA. A comparison of this material to samples taken from my own body shows the presence of similar genetic sequences.

The timeline is clear now. When Rhonda cracked open the geode in San Lorenzo, the three of us inhaled the cloud of extraterrestrial spores within. The spores then incubated within our bodies over the next six months, combining with our DNA and preparing us for our metamorphoses.

It should be known that I was, and will be, unable to examine the geodes personally. The crystals, though seemingly harmless to humans, are potentially toxic to my mutated form.

[Helga: Literally Kryptonite.]

[Rhonda: Oh, god, I almost had mine made into jewelry. I would've been wearing my own death.]

From what you both have told me, it seems that the bullet Rhonda was hit with was likely fashioned from similar crystal, leading to the conclusion that ours is not the only geode. I am curious as to why the Old Man would need ours, and you, if he possessed one of his own. Perhaps the spores in his are no longer viable? Further speculation is required.

[end excerpt]
Hey, everyone, before we start, go check out metalheadrailfan's DA page for three brand-new fan-arts. It's full-body shots of Rhonda, Helga and Pheobe as mutants, and they look amazing. In fact, they look so good that I'm retconning the girls to have four fingers per hand and two toes per foot. So I say so mote it be.

Also, there's a bit of body horror in this one.

Chapter 16

The Shapeshift of Things to Come

Stanford Pines' Bunker

-HELGA-

"I've made a huge mistake."

So, let me sum up. We're in a forest near the small town of Gravity Falls in Oregon. I've read a few things on the Internet about weird stuff going on around here, but it couldn't prepare me for the reality. Gnomes, "Manotoaurs", and apparently now alien shapeshifters all called this place home. Rhonda'd just been tricked into letting the latter out of cold storage and was in the process of beating herself up over it.

"Dude. Not your fault. There was no way you could have known." That's Wendy, local "weirdness warden", whatever that is. She's about seventeen, very tall, and I've only known her for about an hour but I think she might be everything I want to grow up to be. What I do know is she rides a motorcycle, she's apparently badass enough that monsters respect her, and she's pretty chill upon meeting up with two severely mutated, super-powered preteens. All pretty great qualities.

"To be honest", she continued, "I probably should have led with 'There's an alien shapeshifter in the cryonic pod. Don't let it out.' In a way, this is really all my bad. "

"No… I can fix this. I can fix this." Rhonda repeated. "It changed into one of us, so I can track it."

"Track it?"

"Mental link," I explained. "The two of us can communicate telepathically. We don't really use it a lot, but even so, I sorta still always feel a background buzz from her."

"So you guys are mindreaders?"

"Just each other's. Anyone else is completely closed off. Like you. You're a big blank to me."

"Should I be insulted?" Wendy's sardonic grin indicated she was anything but.
"Shhh," interrupted Rhonda. "I'm trying… I'm not getting anything except you." She sighed. "I failed. I'm the one who let the monster go, and now I've lost it."

"Jeez, Princess, can we get 'stuck-up queen bee Rhonda' back? Because I'm really not liking 'self-pitying doormat' Rhonda." I gave her a pat on the back. "We'll figure this out. Like we've figured everything else out so far."

"…thanks, Hellcat. I don't deal with failure well."

"Maybe not at first, but you do always bounce back and move forward. It's one of the actual cool things about you. Like… you haven't angsted about being a mutant in days. You dealt, and you moved forward."

"Or I didn't deal, I just pushed it all off 'til later."

"If you say so, Princess. But I don't think you're giving yourself enough credit. I can see it in the way you've been moving, carrying yourself… you used to barely keep up with me. Now you seem really comfortable with yourself."

"Huh… yeah… I guess I have gotten more used to myself. " She suddenly perked up. "Splashing. It's distant."

"These tunnels go all the way to Frolicking Beaver Island," Wendy commented. "They get a little flooded at high tide."

"I'm guessing we don't want that thing reaching open air," I conjectured.

"Then I can still fix this!" Rhonda declared, racing ahead as fast as her feet could carry her, as the tunnel was too cramped for flying.

"I wish she didn't do that," Wendy said. "The last thing we need is to get separated and catch up with them wrestling with each other and have to play 'Which Spock is the real one?"

"The one that says 'Shoot us both, Jim,' doi." I reminded her. "You get motion sick?"

"Not really, wh-" I grabbed her and rushed ahead as she yelped in surprise.

"Last guy I did this to did, and I don't have a change of clothes! I don't need vomit all over these!"

We caught up in a cavern. The water in here was ankle-deep, and the cuffs of my pants were soaked. A pair of boots like Wendy's would've been really welcome. The walls were coated with some kind of luminescent fungus, so the visibility in here was decent. The two Princesses were grappling in the middle, neither seeming to have the upper hand.

"Stay back!" one shouted. "This is my fight and I'm gonna finish it!"

"That's not me!" the other one yelled. "I'd be totally cool with some help!"

"No!" the original contradicted. "If you get close it'll just copy you too!"

"Oh, crap, I never thought of that! Yeah, you should probably stay back!" the other admitted.

"Just the thing I was worried about. Okay, Helga… you know her. Which Spock's the real one."

The two were really close. Too close to figure out which one I was getting the telepathic buzz from.
"Hey. Princess," I asked. "What happened to Eugene at Sheena's Bat Mitzvah?"

"Trick question," the second one answered. "Eugene missed the Bat Mitzvah due to a broken tailbone."

"That one's the real one." I said. I reached out at lowered the temperature around "her" feet as low as I could. The water began to freeze, but not fast enough. The fake Rhonda shoved the real one towards us and morphed into a giant pillbug-like creature, rolling off down another tunnel at high speed.

"Okay," I said. "We can still catch up. Let's all stick together this time."

"Cool," Wendy said. "Which of you do I get to ride this time?" I couldn't help notice Rhonda's cheeks go a darker purple at the thought of being "ridden" by the older girl, especially knowing what I now did about her.


"Um… sure," Rhonda said, still blushing. "Just jump on my back I guess."

"Just tell me if this starts getting weird," Wendy commented, piggybacking on the purple girl. Rhonda's expression screamed yes, this is weird, this is very very weird, but she took it well and began dashing forward. I couldn't help but notice her lower arms were in the "ninja run" position, confirming my theory that secretly, the girl was a colossal dork in spite of herself.

The tunnel finally led to the mouth of a cave on an island populated with happily frolicking beavers. There was no sign of a giant pillbug, a double of Rhonda, or anything out of the ordinary.

"Damn it," Wendy muttered. "We lost it. It could be anywhere or anything right now."

"What did it want?" asked Rhonda.

"If I had to guess, revenge on Dr. Pines… Which means it'd probably be heading back to the other place he called home, the Mystery Shack. He doesn't live there any more, but I have friends there who are now in huge trouble, and we'd really better get over there."

"Okay," Rhonda said, spreading her wings. "Do you have a problem with heights?"

"Only from passing out from lack of oxygen from too much screaming in delight! Light 'em up, babe!" she shouted, holding on tight.

Rhonda's I can't believe this is happening but I'm so glad it is face was definitely worth it.

-- Interlude

Lloyd Mansion

Carson strode to answer the doorbell, moving at precisely the proper speed, not too slow, not too fast. Carson was, naturally, proper in all things, having been classically trained and employed by the Lloyd family for some thirty years now, originally by the master's parents, Brandon and Su-Jin (Americanized to "Susie") Lloyd. The two had long since retired to California and left their business interests to Buckley (his sister Beatrice had opted to live off a trust fund and pursue a more Bohemian lifestyle…. literally, as she'd relocated to Prague). The noble profession was all about maintaining propriety, even in the face of hardship.
This had been one of the more difficult weeks. Carson had been dealing with personal matters during the young mistress's abduction, but the aftermath had been all his to deal with. Master Buckley was devoting all his time to meeting with those claiming to have information, the majority of whom inevitably turned out to be charlatans (though some, particularly a certain fellow of Central European origins, were at least creative), and Mistress Brooke was in a rather unique situation, having been given, on the day after young Mistress Rhonda's taking, a surprising bit of good news.

He opened the door. Speak of the devil, and up he pops. A bearded, balding man in a shabby suit stood there holding what was clearly a ventiloquist's dummy dressed as Rhonda had been in her photos.

"Hello, I have found your daughter, give me the reward. Eh heh heh heh," he said.

"Mr. Kokoshka, you clearly have a very low opinion of my intelligence," Carson replied evenly, concealing his amusement.

"No, really, Mister Butler, sir, this is Wanda-"

"Rhonda."

"-Randy, see, watch, she'll talk while I drink this bottle of water, eh heh heh heh." He began to sip and immediately began to choke.

"Good day, Mr. Kokoshka," Carson said, beginning to close the door in the man's face.

"No, please! You have to give me the money! Suzie started dating again, and I have to have something to offer if I want her ba-"

"That's it, I'm getting a restraining order," Brooke said. "Really, Carson, you shouldn't be wasting time with that awful, awful man."

"One takes ones amusement where one can in hard times, Madame. May I inquire as to how you are feeling this morning?"

"Better… after I stopped throwing up, of course. I'd forgotten about that part." She looked up. "Carson, it's so strange. I'm devastated that Rhonda's missing… but overjoyed at the same time. It's very disorienting."

"One cannot fully control one's feelings, madame,"

"For the last time," Buckley shouted into his phone earpiece as he wandered into the parlor, "my daughter is NOT being held captive by the Campfire Lasses! I don't care if you received an anonymous tip, your common sense should have told you what an absurd notion that is!" He disconnected. "Vultures. All of them." The master had clearly been neglecting his grooming; his mustache was untrimmed, and four days' stubble decorated his chin.

"Torturing yourself like this won't bring her home any faster, you know," Brooke commented.

"I did get one somewhat reliable tip, at least. On Friday, early in the morning, there was a mugging in Boise. The perpetrator claimed to have been captured by a pair of, I quote, 'four-armed, three-eyed gargoyles girls.'"

"That's consistent with the changes she was already showing last Sunday. So she does have the same condition as Reba's girl," Brooke replied. "You know what this means, don't you."
"I'm afraid I don't."

"It means our girl is strong and capable and is finding her way home." She patted her midsection. "Hear that? Your big sister is on her way."

--

"Are you sure we can just set down right here?" Rhonda asked.

"Folks here are pretty used to weird," Wendy replied. "You'll blend in."

We stood before the Mystery Shack… or "MYSTERY HACK" if you believed the sign. Shack certainly described it, if only because "hovel" would have been too kind.

"It could be anyone. Or anything. It could be the sign, the goat, a chunk of the ground, that old, moldy piece of junk mail…” warned Wendy climbing down from Rhonda's back. "Thanks for the ride, Rhon. You should totally sign on with Uber. You're the best driver I've ever had."

"Heh, well… I'm, um…” Rhonda trailed off. If her cheeks got any more purple, they'd go ultraviolet at this point.

I elbowed her. "Give 'em a few volts and maybe it'll be shocked back into its regular shape."

"That seems like it'd work, but… I don't wanna piss off the goat in case I'm wrong."

"You scared off a bear, but you're scared of a goat?"

"…fair point. Right, this may sting a bit…" I felt a prickle as the tiniest electric jolt hit me and everything in the immediate area. Other than our hair and a slightly disgruntled goat, there were no signs of anything unusual.

"That was weird," commented Wendy, smoothing her hair back down. "So, just how high can you crank the juice."

"Well… I haven't really tried to push it…” Rhonda replied, rubbing the back of her head bashfully. Criminy, the girl had it bad.

"Looks like it's not out here, at any rate. We're going in. Everyone ready?"

"We're fine… you?" I asked.

"Well, the sherrif didn't actually give me a weapon," she said. She slipped a mini-crossbow out of her sleeve. "So I had to make my own.

"You are officially the coolest person I will ever know," I whispered. Okay, clearly, I couldn't blame Rhonda when I was developing a bit of a hetero girl crush myself.

We entered the building and wow, where has this place been all my life? The place was cluttered with every possible brand of kitsch you could imagine, from a unicorn made out of corn to a giant stuffed albino gorilla in a rainbow clown wig. It was so tacky it was magnificent.

"Check it out, Princess," I said, gesturing at a taxidermied pig with a Dracula cape and plastic fangs. "It's a HAMpire." She snickered a little. "Wow, a week ago you would've been all 'Ew ew ew gross gross gross.'"

"Yeah… I guess I kind of had to get over myself to survive, didn't I."

"I'm kinda worried," Wendy interrupted. "It's the off-season, but usually there's at least someone here
on weekends. But I don't even see the staff-

As if on cue, a large, pudgy man wearing an ill-fitting suit, fez, and eyepatch entered. If I had to guess, he was mid-20s, with large buck teeth, a cherubic face, and an expression that said "I am doing the thing I have always wanted to do."

"Hey, Wendy." He tipped his fez at the two of us. "Pastel-colored demon girls. Welcome to the Mystery Shack, the Mystery-est Place on Earth. The wonder is free, admission is not."

"Soos. M'man." Wendy fist-bumped the big guy. "I was getting worried when I didn't see anyone here. Where's Melody? And my replacement?"

"Oh, them? They went into town to do towny-stuff. You know how it is. Slow day, so I didn't need them."

"That's not good," Wendy said. "The shapeshifter got out and we're pretty much all in danger."

"Zounds and forsooth. We should call Stanford and get 'im back here. He'd know what to do."

My ears were twitching slightly. Something was amiss. A sound.

-You hear it too, don't you- came Rhonda's thoughts. –It sounds like it's from upstairs.-

-One of us needs to get up there.- I sent back. "Yo, …Soos, was it? Been a long day and I gotta use it. Where's the can?"

"Heh heh, sorry, dude, but it's out of order. We've all been going in a hole in the back."

"Out of order, hmm…. We'll I've got a little experience with fixing the toilet back home, so why don't I take a look at it," I said, pushing past him.

"You, uh, you don't really wanna go up there, it's kind of a-

*CRASH*

"Oops!" Rhonda squeaked. "Clumsy me! I knocked over this big jar of fake eyeballs! Now I wonder how that could have happened!" Her tail knocked over a porcelain jackalope statue, which hit the floor and smashed into a bajillion pieces. "Gosh, I sure am hopeless today!"

I took advantage of the distraction Rhonda had provided and dashed upstairs. I could definitely make out muffled noises coming from a locked room on the second floor. I kicked down the door to find four people bound and gagged in the bathroom; an old lady, a young brown-haired woman, a blonde girl of about our age, and the very person we had been talking to downstairs.

"Oh, thank goodness, dude," the real Soos said when I ungagged him. "That shapeshifter jerk stuck us all in here and took my place. Really grateful for the rescue. Not so much expecting a pink monster girl. No offense."

"None taken. It's as good a description of me as any." I said, cutting open his ropes.

"Uh. Mysterious helpful monster dude? Don't look now, but…"

A shadow loomed over us. "I told you you didn't want to come up here, " the fake Soos said, before his entire torso split open revealing a huge fanged maw.

"Sorry," Rhonda said, coming up the stairs behind him with Wendy. "I ran out of things to knock over."

"I didn't," I said, rushing the Soos-monster. I plowed into it, knocking it over the railing. I followed, driving it into the ground.

"Thanks for that," it growled, vertical eyelids sliding over its eyes. It morphed into a copy of me and threw me off. "Now I come in two designer colors! Ooh, you're the one who can do the freezy thing, right? I wanna do the freezy thing." It held out its arms. "Why am I not doing the freezy thing?"

"You mean this?" I hit it with a blast of arctic cold.

"Whoo. Bracing," it said. "But not quite enough to stop me."

"Then how about this," Rhonda interjected, unleashing a burst of electricity at him.

"Ow!" it said. "THAT actually hurt. Maybe I should add you to the mix too."

The creature began to change again, turning purple on its right side. A third set of arms grew from its sides, and a second pair of wings from its back. Its lower torso lengthened, sprouting an additional pair of legs. Finally the "Helga-taur" grew a duplicate of Rhonda's face on its chest.

"Well, it's been a while since I've seen something that'll eternally haunt my nightmares, so, thanks for that," Wendy deadpanned.

"WELL? WHAT DO YOU THINK?" It growled in a monstrous vice from its two mouths. "AM I PRETTY NOW?"

"I dunno, dude, beauty standards are so subjective," Soos commented. "The important thing is you feel pretty,"

"You know, I think I'll enjoy killing you the most, doughboy," the creature growled.

"Hey, just because I giggle uncontrollably when you poke my tummy…"

"GRRARRRH!" The monstrous thing lunged for Soos. I tackled him out of the way as he crashed into a two-headed moose statue.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered. "I really love all this ridiculous crap."

"Thanks. Means a lot, dude."

"I mean it. I think I wanna have my wedding here someday."

The shapeshifter had turned around again (in its bulky condition, it took much longer) and once again had us in its sights.

"Okay," I said, igniting my hands. "I didn't wanna do this indoors, but…"

"Ha!" Rhonda yelled, suddenly jumping on the thing's back.

My eyebrow went up. "Rhonda, what do you think you're accomplishing?"

"Seeing just how much juice I can put out. Did that sound cool? I really wanna sound cool."

She planted all four hands on the shapeshifter's back and unleashed what I assumed was every
megavolt inside her. The shapeshifter convulsed, going through multiple previous forms as it did before finally reverting to what I guess was its true form, a pale, misshapen insect-like thing, and collapsing in a twitching pile."

Rhonda was sitting atop the thing, looking dazed. "Yo, Rhon," I said, nudging her. "Y'allright there?"

"D'eyyyyyyy…." she slurred, a dimwitted expression on her face, drooling a bit, giving four thumbs up. So much for sounding cool…

[A. N. Why yes, I am familiar with My Hero Academia, why do you ask?]

So, it turns out, whenever Rhonda expends all her electricity at once, she temporarily short-circuits her brain and turns into a drooling simpleton. Kinda funny for a minute or two, but pretty monotonous for the rest of the twenty minutes it took to wear off.

With the shapeshifter unconscious, I had enough time to freeze the sucker solid enough that we had time to get it back to the bunker and back in the cryonic chamber, then retrieve Wendy's bike and return. Rhonda was just about returning to her senses by the time we made it back.

"Ugghhh…" she groaned. "'Zis what being hungover feels like? I don' like it. Don' like it a'all."

"Welcome back, Princess. You actually managed to save the day."

"I did? Was it… cool?"

"Hell yeah, it was cool!" Wendy reassured with a friendly punch in the shoulder. "You deep-fried that sucka, girl!"

"Cool," she said.

"So, you know everybody yet? That's the real and still best Soos, Melody Sanchez, Soos's grandma Rosa Ramirez…"

"I sweep up the spilled eyeballs now," the older woman said.

"And the girl who took my old job-"

"…Pacifica…" Rhonda whispered, eyes narrowing.

"Do I know you?" the young blonde asked, rearranging some knocked-over merch?

"Ha ha, cute," Rhonda responded.

"Seriously. I'm not being snootily dismissive. I legitimately have no idea who you are."

"…oh, right… my mutation. I'm Rhonda Lloyd. I was at the Northwest Gala two summers ago."

"Dark hair, red dress? Yeah, you're coming back now You were a lot less… not human then."

"Long story. I'm kinda surprised you're working here. I'm kinda surprised you're working."

"It's temporary, I assure you. The Northwests are kind of… flat broke at the moment."

"Really? What happened?"
"Oh, you know, same old story. There was a war between sanity and madness and my folks backed the wrong side. Sanity won, by the way. You can tell because we're all breathing air and not gummi worms.

"Wow, now I feel sorry for hating you."

"You hated me? I thought we were getting along great."

"Oh, honey, no… we really weren't…"

"I kinda wanna hear more about this whole 'war of sanity and madness,'" I said. "That sounds interesting."

"Ohh, talk about crazy times, dude," Soos responded. "There was this evil triangle guy-"

"Okay, stop. Did you say 'evil triangle?"

"Yeah. It was a real messed-up scene, dawg."

"I had a dream about an evil triangle."

Everybody suddenly got an 'ohhhh, crap' look on their face,

"When did you have this dream," Wendy prodded.

"Just this morning. I was having this dream about… stuff, and then this triangle guy interrupts it and offers me a deal. Said his name was Bill…"

"Oh, shit, oh shit…" Wendy muttered. "You didn't agree to anything, did you?"

"Oh, hell no. That guy was sketchier than Da Vinci's studio. I kicked his sorry vertices out of my dream but good."

Wendy sighed in relief. "Well, that's good, at least. But I doubt he'll give up easy. He'll probably go after your friend if he can't get to you."

"Actually," Rhonda said, "He came to me first. He wasn't a triangle that time, but I was able to reject him too."

"Still," Wendy said. "You two better stay on your guard. If he's interested in you, there's a reason."

"Really?" I asked. "This guy's that bad?"

"You have no idea."

--

"So. We're superpowered mutants, some crimelord or terrorist or whatever wants us, and to top it all off, we've attracted the attention of some sort of ancient otherdimensional entity who could potentially unravel all of reality? Am I fully on the same page here?"

"That's about the size of it, sister." I replied, toweling off my hair. You never really know how good a shower feels until you've gone without one for a week. Rhonda had already had hers, and had now finally dumped her jumpsuit for a pair of Wendy's old jeans and a T-shirt that read "I LOST MY GRIP ON REALITY AT THE MYSTERY SHACK."

"Tres chic on-somb, Princess… How'd you actually get it on over the wings?"
"Soos modified the T-shirt so it opens and closes in the back... he's quite handy with a needle and thread and a pair of scissors. Not my usual level of couture, but I've learned beggars can hardly be choosers. You have no idea how good it feels just to have clean underwear..."

"Will wonders never cease."

"Here, there's a change of clothing for you too. And then we can burn our jumpsuits."

"You're really itching to see those things burn, aren't you." (Oh, yeah. She was right about the clean underwear.)

"Emphasis on itching. I'm pretty sure they soaked that thing in mosquito spit."

My T-shirt said "WHY IS... THE MYSTERY SHACK?!" I pulled it on and closed it up in back, wondering if my chest had actually gotten any more developed over the week or whether I was just imagining it. "It does feel nice to be wearing actual clothing."

"Doesn't it? I actually feel like a person instead of an experiment."

They sent us on our way with a messenger bag full of Soos's grandma's tamales and a demand to keep in touch. Pacifica let slip an admission that she followed Princess's fashion blog, and the two parted as, maybe not friends, but two girls who were at least not mutually hostile.

"I haven't managed to contact Dr. Pines yet, but I'm gonna keep trying. He's going to want to know Cipher's back, and if anyone can come up with a defense against him, he can."

"Thanks, Wendy. For everything," Rhonda said, then impulsively hugged her.

"Good luck." she replied. "And you're gonna make some girl very happy someday."

Rhonda blinked. "Uh... how'd you know?" she asked, cheeks going darker purple.

Wendy smiled. "You're not exactly subtle. Trust me... I know the signs. But I am waaaaay too old for you. And straight."

"Well, uh... thanks for letting me down easy."

"It's not the first time I've had to. I'll tell you what I told him; there's someone out there that's perfect for you. Even if neither of you knows yet."

"C'mon, heartbreak kid," I said, tugging at Rhonda's arm. "It's only a few hundred more miles. If we leave now, we can be back home by tomorrow morning."

"We're THAT close?" she answered, shocked.

"Barring unforeseen cock-ups, yeah. We're in the home stretch, baby."
Chapter Summary

In which ghost hobos are a thing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 17

Strangeness on a Train

The railyard outside Gravity Falls, Oregon

-RHONDA-

"Why, exactly, are we doing this again when we have two perfectly good pairs of wings?" I shouldered our messenger back as we ran alongside the freight train.

"Because, Princess, all my life, I've dreamed of one day experiencing life as a hobo. Now jump for it."

The two of us launched ourselves into the open train car."

"It's kind of weird that we actually found an open train car filled with hay bales."

"I know, right? Just like old-timey cartoons. I'm just disappointed we forgot to make ourselves some proper hobo bindles."

"Are hobos even a thing any more?" I inquired. "Seems like the kind of thing that would've gone out with spats and milkmen."

"Sure hobos are a thing. Remember that time the Three Stooges thought they blew up the police department? They told me later that they ran into a couple of honest-to-god genuine hobos."

"Why is everyone we know so weird?"

"Admit it… life would be boring if they weren't."

"…yeah…" I leaned back. "You know, hay's a lot less comfortable than it looks… and it doesn't look comfortable at all."

"You'll get used to it," Helga retorted, sliding down to a sitting position. "Now we're riding in style. Just a straight shot to Hillwood from here."

"I can't believe this whole trip is almost over. I mean… we're still mutants, but we'll at least be mutants with friends and families."

"…yeah… families…"
Right… I forgot. Helga wasn't exactly up on her family. I didn't really know them, but had met them briefly in San Lorenzo. Her dad was this big bull of a man. Everything about him was big, loud, and pushy. Her mom had seemed pleasant enough, but very passive, kind of out of it. Helga had suggested she had a drinking problem, and I guess I could see it. Olga, though… from everything I'd seen, she was a sweet, pleasant, genuinely nice person. A little overly sunny, sure, and I could see how that could grate a bit, but according to Gerald's sister, she was kind and patient and one of the best teachers she'd ever had. In any case, nothing I'd seen seemed to merit Helga's deep-seated resentment of her.

"You know," I said, "if you're not quite ready to go back to them, you can crash with me for a while."

"Thanks. I actually kinda… have a place I can go. But I…" she gritted her teeth; apparently it was taking a lot out of her to say this, "…appreciate the thought. Uggggh, this is so weird! When did you and I start actually liking each other?"

"I guess for me it was when you saved my life in the diner."

"Oh, right… I did do that. That seems like it was such a long time ago."

"Yeah… You know, as long as we're admitting hard-to admit things… Helga, you... are cooler than I am."

Helga looked back in mock shock. "Wow. This is truly a red-letter day. Let me mark it on my calendar." She mimed tapping away at a nonexistent phone.

"I mean it. You're totally unconcerned with what people think of you, while I am utterly obsessed with it. Every day, I'm putting on this huge act, because that's who I'm supposed to be. Rhonda Lloyd, the aristocrat, Rhonda Lloyd, the fashionista. Rhonda Lloyd, possibly a minor member of Welsh royalty. I'm this carefully constructed thing. I'm not real. Not like you."

"You think I'm real? Sister… I can't even put my name on my own poetry."

"S-so…"

"Yep. I'm 'Anonymous'. Surprise."

"But your work is beautiful. You should be proud of it."

"Are you kidding me? Have you seen our class's reaction? I'd never hear the end of it if those yahoos knew I was…" *shudder* "…sensitive!"

"If they're yahoos, why do you even care about their approval?"

"Why do you?"

"Touché, Helga." I sighed. "I guess we have to both live with being complex, multilayered people."

"How awful. Clearly being shallow one-dimensional stereotypes is the way to go. Tamale me."

I tossed Helga one of the foil-wrapped edibles and a can of something called Pitt Cola (must be a local brand). "Oh yeah, that's the stuff," she said biting into the corn-dough delicacy. "Now I know where I'm getting married and who's catering."

"Is Arnold aware you're already planning your wedding?"
"Seriously, Princess, keep a lid on it for your sake. Remember, I know your deepest, darkest secret: that you're secretly… a gigantic dork."

I blanched in spite of myself. "I am NOT!"

"Save it for someone who hasn't heard your twenty-minute rant on why Bakugo is the worst My Hero Academia character ever."

"HOW DOES HE KEEP WINNING POPULARITY POLLS?" I found myself involuntarily shouting. "HE'S NOTHING MORE THAN THE KIND OF ONE-DIMENSIONAL BULLY YOU SEE IN EVERY LAME SCHOOL-FOCUSED CARTOON! HE'S JUST ANOTHER JIMBO OR WOLFG-" I collected myself. "I am not a dork, I have very mild dork tendencies. There's a difference."

[A. N. Rhonda here is referring to Wolfgram, the one-dimensional bully character from the popular cartoon "Yo, Ernest". Who did you think she meant?]

"Whatever helps you sleep at night, Princess," smirked Helga.

--

The ride dragged on. We had exhausted topics for conversation and were now just eager for it to be over, but this stretch of farmland seemed to never end.

"So," I said. "Almost home, huh."

"Yyyyyup." Helga replied, clearly bored out of her skull. "Almost… home."

"The nightmare is almost over."

"That it is."

"But it hasn't been all bad, has it?" I said, leading in. "In fact..." I took a deep breath, "It's been crazy and weird, but it's also been fun, just the two of us freaks, all alone on the run..."

"Rhonda... I'm gonna stop you right there. We're not doing a musical number."

"Aw, c'mon... I thought you wanted the hobo experience. We've gotta do a travelling song."

"Traveling s- what do you think this is, the Muppet Movie?"

"...kinda?"

"Well, it's not. Besides, believe me, you do not want to hear me sing."

"Oh, you can't be worse than me. It's not physically possible."

"Well, you're not winning Idol anytime soon, but you're not terrible. You have a steady voice and decent pitch. I'm not running away screaming, at any rate. Now, me... trust me. Yu don't want to hear it."

I was relieved, actually; I hadn't had more than the two lines. Improvising a song out of nothing was hard.

--

"Uggghh, how long has it been..." groaned Helga. "It feels like we've been on this stupid train forever."

"You wanted the hobo experience, need I once again remind you."
"But there's nothing to do! Just watch the same stupid scenery go past us for hours! I swear I've seen that same stupid silo a million times!"

"You would think this cornfield would end at some point," I agreed.

"You'd also think it'd start getting darker at some point."

I nodded. Barn… two cows… silo… barn… two cows… silo… barn… two… cows…

The scenery just kept repeating.

"Something's very wrong here." I whispered to Helga. "Look closely, The scenery's on a loop."

She did. "Oh yeah. That definitely ain't right."

"I think it's about time we got off the train," I said, starting to get to my feet.

"Hee hee hee! There ain't no getting' off this train we're on!" The cackling came from an old, scraggly-bearded hobo perched on the bales of hay in the corner. A hobo who, mind you, had not been there a moment before. "You ladies are on the TRAAAAAIN OF THE DAMNED! BWAH HAH HAH HAH!"

"It's a ghost hobo," whispered Helga. "A ghobo."

…

"Nope." I got up. "I have dealt with a lot of insane crap on this trip, but there is no way I am getting stuck on a train with a hobo ghost. I'm out. Peace."

I spread my wings and flung myself out the open side of the car, only to hit a seemingly solid barrier. I was flung back against the hay bales.

I can't believe I'm stuck on a train with a hobo ghost.

"Toldja!" the ghobo cackled. "There's ain't no escape, not no how. You're stuck here with me, forever!"

"Listen here, you-" Helga grabbed for the ghost, but he vanished, leaving disembodied laughter behind. "Get back here!" she demanded.

"Sorry, Pinky, but Ol' Boxcar McGucket's makin' the rules now!"

"Old Betsy and the Four Avengers beg to differ," Helga replied, cracking her knuckles.

"I reckon you're welcome to debate!" Boxcar suddenly appeared directly in front of Helha, as if tempting fate. Helga obliged by taking a swing, only to have her fist go right through the phantom. "Hee hee! Cain't punch a ghost, li'l lady!"

"Excuse me," I said, "but we have better things to do than hang out with some dead geezer. You will find us very uncooperative guests."

"It's been eighty-five years since I seen anyone. I'll take what I c'n get. Even escaped circus freaks."

"I beg your pardon? I DO NOT ASSOCIATE WITH CLOWNS!"

"Whoa… easy there, Rondaloid. Jeez, that crack touched a nerve."
"I… had a traumatic experience at a circus when I was four. I don't like talking about it."

"Message received. Some things don't need to be dragged into the open."

We sat there, steadfastly ignoring the ghost's presence as he rambled on and on about whatever.

-I can't take much more of this- I sent.

-If you acknowledge him you'll give him satisfaction. Just keep ignoring him.-

-We've been ignoring him for hours and it's getting us nowhere. Maybe we can appease him somehow.- Out loud I said "Look, is there something we can do for you so you can let us go?"

"Mmmm… I dunno… I do like having an audience for my hobo tales."

"Oh, yes," Helga deadpanned. "The story of who stole the beans from Soupcan Jones' bindle was absolutely riveting."

"Exactly!"

-Apparently, sarcasm wasn't invented until the late thirties- Helga thoughtcasted.

"Surely, you've noticed that we're unresponsive… unengaged… unenthusiastic…. Just 'un' in general." I continued, using what I knew of my dad's "reasonable negotiation" voice. "There must be something we could actually provide you beyond 'inanimate sounding board'."

"We-ellll…” The ghost sat there pondering, stroking his beard, "There is one thing I've been wantin' since the start o' my ghostly torment."

"Oh?" Now we were getting somewhere. "What is it?"

"What I want… is to hear me a rousin' hobo travellin' song."

"Welp, I'm up for an eternity of ghostly servitude, how 'bout you?" Helga interjected.

"Shh!" I whispered. "If one stupid song is all it takes to get us out of this situation, then we're gonna give him a song!"

"I don't know any hobo songs!" she answered. "Nobody our age knows any hobo songs!"

"Then we'll sing something else and tell him it's a hobo song! He's been stuck in this train car for almost a century, you think he'll know any different?"

"That… is so stupid, it just might work."

--

After much telepathic planning, we finally approached McGucket.

"We've decided on a modern hobo classic." I began.

"It's by the famed railrider Trainyard Hendrix." Helga continued, trying to stifle a grin. "Once, long ago, a band of hobos used it to find their way to the promised land." –Battlestar Galactica,-, she informed me mentally. –Four seasons. Two and a half good ones.-

"Well, lay to it, young'uns! I'm all ghostly ears!"

I began humming the introductory bars to the classic, while Helga cleared her throat and began."
"There must be some kind of way outta here
Said the joker to the thief.
There's too much confusion.
I can't get no relief."

What the hell was she talking about? Her voice is fantastic, I thought, almost missing my cue.

"Business men, they drink my wine
Plowman dig my earth
None were level on the mind
Nobody up at his word
Hey, hey"

We continued the rest of the song together I have to say… we were actually not that bad.

"No reason to get excited
The thief he kindly spoke
There are many here among us
Who feel that life is but a joke
But, uh, but you and I, we've been through that
And this is not our fate
So let us stop talkin' falsely now
The hour's getting late, hey
All along the watchtower
Princes kept the view
While all the women came and went
Barefoot servants, too
Outside in the cold distance
A wildcat did growl
Two riders were approaching
And the wind began to howl
There must be some kind of way outta here
Said the joker to the thief.
There's too much confusion.
I can't get no relief."


"There," I said. "You got your song. Let us off the train."

"Not so fast!" the ghost demanded. "Now I want you to sing it… on one foot!"

"Oh, COME ON!" I replied angrily. "Now you're just making stuff up!"

"We did what you asked," Helga added, upper arms crossed in irritation, lower hands balled into frustrated fists. "I thought hobos were all about honor."

"Wha… where'd you here that?" the old hobo spirit asked.

"Wait, no, no…. I was thinking of Klingons. In any case, we're done. We're not going to be your meat toys anymore."

"But I…" The ghost hung his head. "I'm just so lonely… Ever since I died on this train, I been bound to it, no one to keep me company. Separated from my one true love."

"You were in love?" This was it. I'd read plenty of ghost stories over the years and most of them suggested that it was always some kind of unfinished business keeping them anchored to the mortal plane. Maybe if we were able to get to the bottom of this ghost's issues, we could get him to move on.

"Yep. Her name was Mandy. She was the loveliest lady you ever did see." He fished an old faded photo out of his sewn-on pocket.

Mandy was… something. Specifically, she was a dried-up old hag dressed in what looked like a dress/robe/shroud, with a deranged look in her bulging eyes and her nearly-toothless mouth in a crazed rictus grin. She sat on what appeared to be a throne made of mummified human hands.

"She's… lovely," I said with a forced grin.

"Yep," he said. "Met 'er at a circus sideshow. Handy Mandy. She had a rare condition where her feet was hands. I'm sure you ladies can relate."

"Look, I'm sure your relationship was one for the ages, the stuff of both Shakespearean sonnets and epic longform prose. But I'm sure she would've wanted you to move on, knowing that you could no longer be with her."

"Actually, she always said 'If you die before I do, I want your ghost to endlessly pine for me, forever anchored to the spot where you died, in solitary agony for all eternity! Hee hee!'"

"This dame sounds like a real piece of work," Helga mused.

"She's right," I said. "That level of possessiveness is unhealthy. You deserve better."

"But how will I ever find someone as wonderful as she was? I can see her now… cackling insanely, usin' magic spells to steal hands…"

"She does what now? Look… I really think you can do better. You're, uh… well travelled… you
have some of your own teeth…"

"Nope!" he said. "These ain't mine! Hee hee!"

"…you have a good sense of humor…" I was reaching at this point, but building up the self-esteem of a ghost isn't an easy task.

"Point is," Helga picked up, 'you ain't exactly… who would be the old-timey equivalent of Brad Pitt?"

"Uh, Clark Gable?" I supplied.

"Him," she continued, "but you could do better than some crazy-old hand-stealing nutcase. You're dead. That means you have your pick of everyone who's ever died. You could get with Cleopatra if you wanted."

"Let's be realistic, Helga…"

"You could get with one of Cleopatra's washerwomen."

"Y-you really think so?"

"Sure, why not."

"Hot diggety! I'm-a-comin', great beyond!"

And with that, the ghost of Boxcar McGuckett vanished.

And so did the boxcar.

We were unceremoniously dumped on the train tracks as the haunted train disintegrated into the ether around us, as if it had never been there in the first place. In fact… we were deposited in view of the very same farm we'd been near when jumping on in the first place, and it seemed like no time had passed.

"Looks like we'll be flying after all," I said.

"Just as well," Helga answered. "I think I've about had my fill of weirdness for a long time."

I shouldered our messenger bag. "So, why did you tell me you couldn't sing? You're pretty amazing."

"Because if anyone knew I had any sort of talent, I'd have to perform all the time. Like, after that stupid fourth grade play. Every year, Simmons keeps begging me to try out for whatever dog-and-pony show he's putting together, just because my special performance was just so good it moved him to tears."

"But you were good. You were… and it absolutely kills me to say this… better than I would have been."

"Point is… I don't wanna be another Olga. Some little wind-up doll performing on cue. One is more than enough."

"I… guess I could see that. Personally, I love being the center of attention."

"Really. Hadn't noticed." She sighed. "You know, I kinda get the feeling sometimes that Olga
doesn't even want to be Olga."

"Maybe you guys should talk about that."

"Maybe. And maybe beepers'll come back into style and we'll all start crapping soft-serve ice
cream."

"Stranger things have happened. Mostly to us."

The two of us gazed out at the setting sun.

Our journey was ending. Our troubles, of course, would be far from over. We were stuck in these
mutated bodies, and that wouldn't be changing any time soon. The Old Man hadn't made any
attempts since the diner, but I seriously doubted he'd given up. When he struck, it would be with
something far stronger. And then there was the mysterious Bill. What part would he play?

Still… it would be nice to be back in familiar surroundings, with familiar people. The future was
uncertain, but we would have friends. We would have family.

And we would have each other.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter, the title will be changing to "Body Issues", so be ready for that.
...,And it Feels So Good

Chapter Summary

In which: The sweet, sweet Shortaki reunion you've been waiting for.

Chapter 18

"...And it Feels So Good"

PS118, Monday Afternoon

-ARNOLD-

As another day with Mr. Frank droned to a close, I realized that, for the life of me, I couldn't remember learning anything today.

Okay, so Mr. Frank was hardly the best teacher, or even adequate; It was clear that he was burnt out and basically running out the clock until retirement. In fact, he had said, on the first day, "I'm burnt out and I'm basically running out the clock until retirement." Refreshingly honest, really. But today, my failure was at least partially on me; after spending Saturday afternoon, Saturday night, and most of Sunday with Phoebe, Nadine and Gerald, returning to plain, old, regular classes felt depressing, the three empty seats just a reminder of what was missing. Especially the seat behind me.

If you asked me two years ago if I'd miss being hit in the back of the head constantly by spitballs, I'd've asked you if you'd completely lost your mind. Back then, when I looked back, Helga would just scowl and whisper "What?!" through clenched teeth. Okay, she still did that, but then she'd flash a quick wink and smile. And when I unraveled the spitball, I'd find little love notes. Helga was a romantic, after all, in her own unique way.

"Can't believe it's been a whole week," Gerald mused as we began the walk home. "These walks are getting' kinda lonely."

"What," I said, smirking. "Am I not good enough company?"

"Phoebe's a heck of a lot prettier than you are, for one thing."

"I'm hurt, Gerald. Really." I kicked a rock out of the way. "Admit it… you even miss Helga."

"Pfft, no way, man. I will never, EVER miss Helga G. Pataki."

I gave him a "bull" look.

He sighed. "I miss Helga G. Pataki. When did that happen? When did I start liking Helga?"

"It was probably around the time you started having to spend time with her and realized she wasn't all sarcasm and Old Betsy."

"Yeah, just the outer 95% of her. And I guess if Phoebe likes her there must be a reason, right?"

"You know… I feel like, one of these days, I'm gonna come home, and she'll just be lounging there
on my couch, like she never left, and she'll look up and say 'Missed me, Football Head?''

"Always lookin' on the bright side, aren't you?"

"Someone has to."

We parted about a block from my house. I entered, dodging the usual stream of animals (the ostrich was gone, but now there was a kangaroo). Grandma was busy, dressed in a black cat costume and hanging Halloween decorations for Christmas.

Grandpa exited the bathroom, newspaper in hand. "Ah, there ya are, Short Man, back from another day of fulfilling educational activity and socialization with your schoolyard chums. How's every little thing on this fine Monday?"

"I'm kinda starting to guess why that cat hates them," I grumbled.

"Missin' your lady friend with the one eyebrow, eh? Wonder how that works if she's anything like the smart blue girl. Does the eyebrow go over the extra eye, or through it? That'd be really gross, actually. Just a big hairy eyelid."

"Grandpa…" I scolded.

"Anyway, be careful going upstairs. I heard some noises. I think we might have the start of a rat problem."

"Why not, we've had every other animal," I grumbled.

"Someone's developing a real sarcastic streak in his old age." Grandpa commented impishly. "Anyway, dinner's gonna be a little late. Your dad's over at the University getting moved into his new office. He's not supposed to start 'til the spring semester, but he likes to get things squared away before the holidays, you understand."

"Sure, Grandpa," I said, heading up to my room. I had a ton of homework to do anyway, so a late dinner wouldn't bother me, and it would keep my mind off of…

I opened the door, and there she was, lounging on my couch as if she'd never left.

She looked up, a lazy grin on her rosy face, her three sapphire eyes twinkling.

"Missed me, Football Head?"

---

Earlier

-HELGA-

We touched down on the outskirts of town. "Guess this is where we part ways," I said. "For now anyway."

"Yeah, for now. But I expect you at the mansion as soon as you can make it, okay?" Rhonda replied.

"Right, I promised you a sleepover didn't I?"

"Well, there's that, and my parents owe you a quarter million dollars."
"I blinked. "…say what now?"

"There was a big reward for my return, remember? I figure if anyone deserves it, you do. You're the one who brought me home, after all."

"A quarter million…" I tried to process it. Probably chump change for her folks, but for someone of my age, in my position, a huge amount of money. I was set for pretty much any college I wanted with that kind of moolah. "I… I can't…"

"Hellcat, I quite literally owe you my life. I am not exaggerating, I would, in fact, be dead right now if it wasn't for you. Let me at least give you that much in return, okay?"

"Fine, fine, I'll do you a favor and take your ridiculously huge amount of money, just don't-"

"Thank you!" she interrupted, hugging me.

"…do that…. damn it, Princess, I am not a hugger…"

"Too bad," she said, grinning. "I am." Oh, lord, was she. I could barely breathe. It was like Olga times four.

"Just… hurry up and get it out of your system," I gasped.

"Sorry," she said. "It's just how I express gratitude."

"You and anacondas." I took a deep breath, freed from her embrace. "Now go on. You've got a family to get back to." At least someone did.

We went our separate ways, her towards the posh end of the city, me towards the more… eclectic environs of Vine Street. Familiar sights began to come into view. There was Mrs. Vitello's shop, now doing brisk business in holly wreaths. Here was Green's Meats; it was a Monday, so Harold would be here later after school. I could usually get him to comp me a piece of Mr. Green's homemade jerky. Just a few doors over was Sheena's mom's shop, specializing in hippie stuff like crystals and incense and, if you were old enough and knew how to ask for it, "edibles". Slausen's, still the place for the perfect greasy diner burger and banana split. Chubby's 'Cue, its traitorous swine of a mascot smiling at the public while grilling the dismembered corpses of his former brethren. Starland Arcade, one of the last in an America that had for the most part moved on to consoles and apps, and which would have probably shut down long ago had its owner not been an idle trust fund kid with a lot of money to waste and an overwhelming amount of nostalgia for the 80s.

…you know, I think I've lurked behind every garbage can in this neighborhood at some point. They certainly provided excellent cover for a mutant who didn't want to be detected by prying eyes, and who, in the past week, had gotten very good at moving swiftly and silently.

I am Helga Pataki, and I am a flippin' ninja.

It didn't take long at all to cross the neighborhood, and now I was in the alley next to a certain ramshackle boarding house that had somehow become a home away from home in the six months since returning from San Lorenzo. A mere wall separated me from him.

A mere wall and the fact that school wouldn't be out for another hour.

"Alas," I said, "it seems our reunion will be delayed. O, a pox on our misaligned schedules! How I yearn to finally draw you near, to embrace, to press my lips against thine. To, for just the merest of moments, unite in heart and soul, all barriers between us, gone."
"And yet…"

"I cannot deny that so much about me has changed. I am not the girl I was… I am not even the human I was. Can I truly subject you to my feelings when we no longer even share a species? When there isn't even a name for what I have become? Do I dare demand that you love this?"

*wheeze* "…go to him…"

I froze.

"How."

*wheeze*

I whirled to face my eternal stalker. "I haven't even been back in the city for an hour yet. How, in the name of God, Buddha, Cthulhu, Xenu, and David Bowie did you FIND me? Do you have a chip planted in my brain? Did you hack a spy satellite? Are you Batman? Is that it, Brainy? Are you, in fact, Batman? And for the luvva Mike, shouldn't you be in school?"

"uhhhhh… I dunno…"

"Lovely," I said. "Look, it's been a long and strange week, and I'm just not in the mood for your particular brand of creepiness when I've had so many other flavors of it to deal with. No offense or anything."

"Uhhhh… none taken." A beat. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

"Oh, right," I said, giving him a light punch in the face. "Same time next week?" He responded with a thumbs-up.

I shimmied up the wall and onto the roof. I'd gotten in through Arnold's skylight before, and he probably hadn't installed any sort of elaborate security system since then, so entry wouldn't be too difficult.

What I wasn't ready for was how much heavier I'd gotten since changing. I landed with more of a heavy thud than I'd expected to. And Arnold's grandpa must've been either right outside the room or not too far, because upon hearing the noise he burst into the room, grabbing the bat by the door. Guy moved fast for an oldster.

"All right, intruder, prepare for a sound thrashing! I may be no spring chicken, but I can still peck yer eyes out with the best of 'em."

"Whoa! Calm down, Methuselah!" I interrupted. "It's just me! Not like this is the first time you caught me breaking in."

"Yeesh! Jumpin' Jehosephat, kid, I ain't ready for the grave yet, and a few more surprises like that'll put me there!"

"I wasn't looking to surprise you, just Arnold. So, if you could just not say anything, that'd be great."

"Heh heh, I getcha, kiddo. Ah, to be young again, and also a mutant." He exited, smiling.

Funny, he didn't seem surprised at all by how I looked. What was the deal with that? Did he just figure it was his mind going? That didn't sound like Phil at all. No, Phil was a wily old coot.

In any case, there was nothing to do but wait. There wasn't much to do here besides see if the room
had changed at all from the dozens of times I'd been here (even before we'd become like-like
friends). It hadn't, really. Couple of new posters, a few new books… aw, he had a photo of me on
his desk! Well, actually, it was the group photo from after the trip, but I was, technically, in a photo
on his desk! And Lila wasn't! 'Cause she didn't go on the trip!

…criminy, why am I still hung up on Lila? It's not like she's competition any more. Rhonda's more
into her than Arnold these days. She shouldn't be irritating me as much as she does. I guess old habits
are hard to break.

Eventually, I heard Arnold's voice downstairs. At last! I hurried to get into a position that looked like
I'd just been casually waiting there as if nothing had happened. The look on his face was going to be
so worth it.

--

Now

-ARNOLD-

I stood, slack-jawed. The impulse to run up and hug her was at war with the urge to just take her all
in. At the moment, they had fought each other to a bloodied impase and the only urge left was the
one to just stand there gaping like a moron.

"What's the matter, Arnoldo?" She asked impishly. "Cat got your tongue? Or are you" she struck
a dramatic pose "so captivated by my ethereal beauty that you are simply struck speechless?"

She was so…. pink. All of her, pink as her bow had been that day. The golden hair now reached
down to her waist. The blue eyes were somehow even more intense. And… she'd grown. Not just in
height (though the few additional inches certainly added to the effect), but maturity as well. She had
actual curves now, not just the suggestion (though maybe that was the tight T-shirt talking. Just what
was a "mystery shack", anyway?).

"Hello?" she said, snapping her fingers in front of my eyes. "Are you with me? Ground control to
Major Arnold. Can you hear me, Major Arnold?"

"…wow" I managed.

"Amazing." she said, smirking. "I surprised you so hard your brain broke."

"I just..." I composed myself. "I was just talking to Gerald about this exact thing happening, and it's
happening. I'm kinda trying to figure out if this is- OW!"

She had pinched me. "That real enough for ya, Football Head?"

"A little warning next time! Wow… you're… you're really back."

"I'm really back," Her impish smirk softened into a genuine smile.

"So… what exactly happened to you?"

"Sit your ass down, hair boy," she said, patting the spot next to her. "We've got a lot of material to
cover."

--

-HELGA-
"Oh, and you're gonna love this next part. We got stuck on an honest-to-god haunted train."

"You're kidding."

"Hand to god, Football Head. There was even a ghobo."

"A ghobo?"

"Ghost hobo. Try to keep up."

"Wow. That's... some week you had."

"Well, I'm sure plenty of exciting stuff happened around here."

"Not really. It's kinda been dull without you. Well, Curly got beaten up by the Campfire Lasses..."

"Oh, man, I missed that? I've been away way too long."

"And, uh..." He fuzzed out again on me.

"Oh, come on, don't leave me now, we were just getting comfortable again!"

"I'm sorry, he said. "I just... I can't get over how amazing you look."

"...what, seriously?" I felt my cheeks warming.

"Yeah, I mean, it's strange, and it's different, but... you've always been strange and different."

"Gee, thanks, Arnold," I replied sarcastically.

"No, that's good. You're the most unique person I've ever known. This... it kinda suits you." He rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. "Um... I'm not sure that came out right..."

"No, no," I said. "I think I get what you mean. Ever since I changed, I've been wondering why I haven't been as freaked out about it as I should be. Sure, it's been hectic, I've had to learn my body on the fly, no pun intended... but I've taken to it way easier that I should have. And I think you just stumbled onto why. I've never felt normal. Guess... the outside finally matches the inside, right?"

"Well, yeah. Because the inside was unique and beautiful."

"Sheesh, taco face-"

"That's a new one."

"Someone pointed out the resemblance. Anyway, corny lines aside, I know you're just trying to make me feel better." I was very suddenly aware that our faces had moved in very close together, his twin emeralds locked with my trio of sapphires. "It's okay, really. You don't have to pretend I'm-"

And then he kissed me.

Time seemed to freeze as our lips met. I have no idea just how long our faces connected, our breath mingling, his tongue brushing against my strange forked model and not recoiling, you wonderful, wonderful person you....

At last we separated, still processing the moment.

"That... wasn't terrible," I began, trying to resume my usual irreverent persona.
"It was amazing," he said, eyes wide. "So, you were saying something about pretending?"

"Well, either you're a much better actor than I thought, or this is real. And we can make it work. You, a human, me, whatever the hell I am…"

"Oh. You're an alien hybrid."

I blinked. "Say what now?"

"Yeah, my mom found these spores that you got exposed to back in the-"

"Hold up. Just what have you been up to?"

"Ohhh…” He slapped his huge forehead. "I got so excited just seeing you again that I forgot everything. Helga… you weren't the only one who got mutated."

"Well, doi. I just spent a whole week with the only other person who-"

"No, besides Rhonda. Phoebe got exposed to the same spores."

I grabbed him, a little roughly, by the shoulders. "What? Is she okay? Did anyone try and grab her?"

"Relax, Helga. She's fine. My mom's been taking care of her at the old FTI building."

"We have to go see her right now!"

"Helga, calm down. She's not in any danger, and you just got back."

"I can't calm down! My best friend's a target! There are powerful people after me! Powerful THINGS! And if she's like me, they'll be after her too!" I picked him up, amazed at how light he felt now.

"Whoa. You got strong." he said, marveling.

"New workout regimen," I deadpanned. "I hope you're not afraid of heights, or the next part's gonna get a bit dicey."

"Um… before we go, I… uh… I have something for you." He fished something out from under his shirt.

My locket. He'd had it all along. He'd been wearing it the whole time. I felt that familiar sigh of love escape my throat.

"Th-thanks," I stammered, accepting it. "I… guess I won't be needing this any more." I fished my heart-shaped rock out of my pocket.

Arnold grinned. "Is that supposed to be me?"

"I'm a poet, not an artist. Not a lot of experience in the medium of scratching rocks with my claw. Anyway, try not to squirm too much. I don't have a lot of experience with passengers." I opened the skylight with a free hand.

"I really should tell someone where we're going," Arnold said. "Hey, Grandpa!" he yelled out the door. "Helga's flying me to MDI to see Phoebe!"

"Okay, Shortman!" he yelled back. "Don't stay out too late, it's a school night!"
"Yeesh, he sure is taking the weirdness in stride," I commented.

"Grandpa's been around the block a couple of times," he replied.

"Around the circumference of the county border, more like. You ready?"

"This is gonna be amazing," he said as we lifted off. "Uh… can I ask what's in the bag?"

"Tameles," I replied.

"Of course." He said. "I'm not sure what I was expecting."
I'm Okay

Chapter Summary

In which people are okay.

Chapter 19

I'm Okay

Tina Park, late afternoon

-RHONDA-

Until now, I'd been driven by the need, the overwhelming compulsion, to get home, but for some reason, I found myself dawdling now.

I'd split with Helga around 2, and it really should have taken no time to get to the North Side given my speed and my ability to fly. But whether it was cold feet or a sudden sense of nostalgia, I felt the need to just take it slow and soak up the surroundings. The stores, the landmarks, the restaurants… the stores… oh, that skirt would look amazing on me… ahem.

I even found myself doing things I would ordinarily never dream of doing. Like putting the fear of God into the Jolly Olly Man.

I spotted him near the school, ready for his after-school run (even in the very late fall/early winter, he could at least count on six Mr. Fudgys sold to Harold). Some weird impulse seized me and I landed on his roof, heavily. When he stuck his head out to investigate I met it, upside-down, and shouted "HOWDY DO, WLLIE! WELCOME TO HELL! AH HA HA HA HA!" before flying off.

What possessed me to do that? I have no idea. It was really, really out-of-character for someone like me. Maybe Helga really is a bad influence on me. Or Curly. Could be Curly.

Or maybe, just maybe a week of traversing the wilderness and building my self-reliance had changed me more than I know. Maybe I wasn't quite ready to go back to being the old, pompous, stuck-up Rhonda.

Nah, that can't be right. Must be the first thing.

At any rate, by around 5 I had made my ay to Tina Park. My house wasn't too far past it. At this time of year, there weren't too many casual strollers; the increasingly cold weather kept them away. The trees had already lost most of their leaves save a few stubborn clingers-on. So I decided to just set down and take myself a leisurely stroll.

I soon caught a familiar high-pitched, likely to break into a show tune at any moment, voice coming from a nearby cherry tree.

"Eugene?" I called, looking around. I spotted him, his head stuck in the branches of the tree, which still somehow had enough of its leaves left to block his vision. "What are you doing up there?" Concern over being spotted had been subsumed by an impulse to do good.
Maybe Helga was right. Maybe this was a super-hero origin.

"Oh, you know… hanging around," Eugene replied, in the firm belief that that joke would never get old. "Long story. Wait… Rhonda? You're back?"

"Yep. Even longer story. Hey, why don't we get you out of that tree."

"Oh, you don't have to trouble yourself. Someone's usually along pretty quickly."

"Usually? This has happened bef- oh, what am I saying, it's you, of course it's happened before. How'd you manage to get yourself up there this time?"

"Well, you know, I decided to ride home through the park, and while going down that really big hill, my bike's brakes failed, and I hit a rock and got flung off my bike and well, here I am! So, I guess you're gonna go get a ladder?"

"Not quite," I said, flapping up to the tree's upper branches.

"Maybe you should hurry. It could be the oxygen getting cut off to my brain, but I think I hear the flapping of giant bat wings."

"Yeah, those are mine." I held Eugene around the waist with my lower hands and used my uppers to pry the branches open, freeing his head. We dropped back down to the ground.

"Wow," he marveled.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

He gave a thumbs up. "It's me. I'm always okay. But… what happened to you? Was it really a Frankenstein factory like Harold said?"

"Frankenstein factory? What's a… no, nothing like that. This actually happened on its own. Look, I… probably should get home, my family's probably worried to death over me. Are you okay getting home on your own?"

"Oh, yeah, sure," he said. "I can just take my-" We both looked over at the mangled vehicle.

"I guess I'm giving you a ride home, then." I said, sighing. --

I set down in front of Eugene's house, him in one pair of arms, the wreckage of his bike in another.

"…and that's basically what happened," I finished, having told him an abridged version of my week, leaving out some of the stranger events. He didn't have to know about ghosts or demons or shapeshifters.

"Wow, I was way off," he said cheerfully.

"Sorry about your bike, by the way," I said.

"Oh, that's okay. Arnold's fixed it before. This isn't too bad. So… are you and Helga coming back to school?" he asked hopefully. "Everybody's really missed you guys."

"I'm not sure," I said. "There's this…" I indicated my appearance "…whole issue right here."

"Oh, I'm sure nobody'll care. We're all changing, right? Look! I have facial hair now!" He indicated a tiny red sprout on his upper lip. "You guys just changed more than the rest of us."
"You can say that again," I sighed. "Look, Eugene, you and I don't really move in the same social circles, but I'm actually really glad I ran into you."

"Me too. Most people who run into me break one of my bones. You were really gentle."

"...right... anyway, I've been worried about the reaction I'd get, but you haven't freaked out at all. Maybe I won't have to hide."

"Well, mauve is my favorite color. And my mom always said you should always be proud of who you are. Never be ashamed to be yourself. I like to think I've always taken that to heart."

"Your mom sounds like a very wise woman." And you and I probably have more in common than you think, Eugene. But that's for both of us to admit when we're ready. "Anyway, I should get home. I've been stalling long enough."

"Right, I can take it from here," Eugene said, immediately slipping on a stray banana peel. "I'm okay!" he said from the ground.

I think I'm going to be, too.

--

Well. Here I was. Standing. In front of my house. The door had been replaced after the break-in, as if it had never been broken down by armed mercenaries.

I took a deep breath and rang the doorbell. After a suitable interval, Carson opened the door, his usual unflappable veneer briefly slipping at my sudden appearance.

"Mistress Rhonda," He said, recovering quickly. "Welcome home."

"Is that her?" I heard my mother's voice call. "Is she really here?"

"Madame Lloyd, you will be pleased to know that your daughter has" I could already hear hurried footsteps approaching the door, "indeed returned."

"Carson," my mom said, "you know I value your years of service but if you don't get out of my way quickly I'm likely to steamroll you." Carson quickly vacated the doorway and I found myself face to face with mom.

"Oh my," she whispered. "I thought I was prepared. But look at you."

Oh, no. Here it came. Rejection. I was clearly no longer a proper Lloyd.

"You've become a young woman," she continued, embracing me.

Or not.

"I simply can't get over it," my mom said. "I knew you were changing, but seeing the end result... this is the end result, right? You're not going to grow another head or anything? Not that I would love you any less, of course, it would just be really confusing which head to address when I was speaking to you."

"No, mom, just the one head for me. I think I have more than enough extras."

"Well, that's certainly a relief. But... really, dear, you've turned out quite lovely. I can't say I'm thrilled with the wardrobe, though. Old jeans and a novelty tee?"
"There isn't much choice of couture when you're on the road running for your life, mom. Although…” I struck a model's pose, "I like to think I can still pull it off."

She smiled. "I suppose you do elevate it by your sheer beauty, dear."

I felt myself blushing. "So, where's Daddy?"

"The sleepless nights finally caught up with him, darling. It's been very stressful for him. You're probably tired too, aren't you. And hungry, I'm sure."

"Actually, I filled up on tamales on the way here."

"Really?" She raised an eyebrow.

"It's a very long story."

"Well, I'm hungry, so why don't we go to the kitchen and you can catch me up on your adventures."

We retired to the kitchen, and I began my story. I noticed that mom was getting out the ice cream. Strange, she didn't really eat the stuff except on very special occasions… well, maybe this counted.

"…so, anyway, I overloaded the cell with my powers and the door opened… mom, that's not strawberry syrup, that's sriracha sauce."

"Oh, I know." She reached back into the fridge and pulled out the jar of cornichons. "Ah, the perfect topping."

"You're having ice cream with hot sauce and pickles? That's kinda weird. It's the kind of thing…"

"…you're almost there, sweetie."

"…mom?"

"I was trying to think of the right way to tell you. Rhonda, dear… I'm pregnant. Eight months from now, you are going to have a new brother or sister."

"EEEEEEEEEEE!" I'm pretty sure I woke some dogs a few blocks over. I didn't care. I'd bugged Santa for a sibling every year until I outgrew such childish nonsense. Well, looks like the jolly old imaginary elf had finally come through this year.

"Now, don't take this to mean that we're trying to replace you. I'm pretty sure the baby was already in the works before your… ah… "

"Epic odyssey?"

"Seems a good enough way to put it."

"Mom, I'm not worried. I've been wanting a sister-"

"-or brother-" reminded mom.

"-forever!"

"Well, that's a relief. I don't know if you've noticed, but you can be a little… high-maintenance. I was afraid you wouldn't take having our attention divided."

"Mom, I'm not the same girl I was a week ago. I'd like to think I've gotten stronger, and not just in
the sense that I can lift a car."

"...of course you are. I heard you stopped a mugging in Boise."

"Well, not by myself. Actually, I kind of want to talk to you about-

We were interrupted by a yawn. Daddy, looking like he was still recovering from a severe case of zombie-ism, wandered in, rubbing five days' worth of beard.

"Hi, daddy," I said.

"Brooke, it's no use, I'm never going to get back to sleep until our darling makes it." He stopped. "Pumpkin! You're back!"

I beckoned. "Bring it in, daddy! Group hug! You, me, mom, and To Be Determined!"

"Oh... you told her, dear? I was going to butter her up with a new tablet..."

"I'll still take it!"

"...I suppose I opened myself up to that. Well, you got home on your own, so I guess that reward we were offering won't be necessary."

"Actually, I was just about to talk to mom about that. Daddy... I think Helga Pataki deserves the reward."

"Bob's girl?"

"She was with me the entire time and, frankly, I would probably have fallen apart completely without her. And I would have definitely died. If anyone deserves the credit for bringing me home safely, she does."

"Well, that does seem reasonable. We do certainly owe this Helga a great deal."

"Thank you!" I hugged them both.

"Easy dear. I'm in a delicate condition."

"Oh sorry. I don't want to hurt my little sister."

"Or brother," corrected mom. "Though it seems you've already decided a preference."

"And don't worry, my little angel," daddy continued, "I promise I'll have the best doctors in the world finding a way to restore you to normal."

Normal. I realized that I hadn't even really thought of that possibility in a while. All this time, most of it with only Helga for companionship... at some point, my own normality compass had shifted, grown to encompass my current state.

If a "cure" (and could it really be called such, when if successful, I would be significantly weaker and more vulnerable?) was never found, I think... I would be okay with that.

So I smiled. "Thank you, daddy. But even if you don't, I'm okay."

"Dear, are you saying you're actually comfortable like... this?"
"Buckley, dear…"

"It's okay. If a cure is found, it would be nice, but… if it never is, that's okay too. I'll be okay. Okay?"

"She's so grown up, Buckley. Isn't she?"

"That she is, dear, that she is."

--

My room was as if I'd never left it. The linens I'd shredded during my fevered metamorphosis had been replaced. Everything felt smaller… of course, I was taller and took up more space now.

Of course, there was one person I had to call immediately.

"Kat'y Robinson here, how can I be helpin' you?" Mrs. Robinson's lilting Jamaican accent was a welcome sound.

"It's me, Rhonda… is Nadine there?"

"Well. It's about time you're getting' back, girl," Nadine's mom mock-scolded me. "And I assume in one piece?"

"Oh, I've got more pieces than ever, Mrs. Robinson."

"Nadine!" she yelled. "It's Rhon-"

"I got it!" Nadine yelled on the other line. "Oh, my god, you're back! You have to tell me EVERYTHING, Rhonda!"

And tell her I did. Everything. Literally every last thing. Even the thing I had been holding back.

"…and that's it," I said.

"Um… wow," Nadine finally commented. "That's a lot to unload. Especially the part about Lila."

"I know, I should have told you earlier," I said, "and definitely before Helga. It was… kind of an unplanned thing. Really… I'm only now starting to understand these feelings myself. Still… you should have been the first to know."

"Yeah," Nadine agreed, her voice sounding a little shaky, "Friends should… tell their friends about that kind of thing."

"I know! I feel so bad about sitting on it for so long!"

--

-NADINE-

Are you f***ing kidding me?

Lila? LILA?!

--

-RHONDA-

"But it feels really good to finally get it off my chest."
"Yeah…" She trailed off. "Look, speaking of getting things off our chest… I uh…

"Nadine, dear, you know you can tell me anything."

"I know, I know, 'official gossip immunity'. Um, the thing is, I, uh… feel… really… glad that you were able to come to terms with your feelings."

--

-NADINE-

AGGGH! Stupid, stupid, stupid! If she did it, why can't I?

--

-RHONDA-

"Thanks, Nadine. That means everything coming from you. So… you have to come over as soon as possible! Catching up over the phone is just so… inadequate! And as we don't have access to FaceToFace yet… oops, I may have given away what someone is getting for Christmas…"

"...Rhonda, you really don't have to…"

"Oh yes I do. You deserve the best for putting up with me for eight years. I know I can be simply the worst sometimes."

"You've been a lot better lately. I think you've really been trying."

"It's sweet of you to say that, but you and I both know I have a log way to go. I know a lot of people see me as this… shallow, one-dimensional mean girl stereotype, and I've probably done a lot to deserve that. But I don't want that to be me anymore. And I think if not for you being my conscience all these years, I would be."  

"Aww…"

"Seriously. I've always wanted a sister, but I think I've already had one and never realized it."

--

-NADINE-

Great. I've been sister-zoned. No wonder she never thought about me that way…

--

-RHONDA-

I checked the clock. "Wow. Have we seriously been on the phone for two hours?"

"We have? I didn't even realize it! And there's so much more…"

"Well, that's just more incentive to come over. We have so much to catch up on. I missed a whole week of gossip!"

"And we have to plan your Holiday pa- no, that's probably off this year, isn't it?"

I hesitated. "No, you know what? The holiday party is on. And the whole gang is invited, and it's going to be the best one ever. And we will all wear the ugliest sweaters and drink eggnog and eat those greasy fried potato things that Harold's mom makes around this time of year because I am inclusive, damn it, and there will be vegan options because Rani and Sheena are attending and see
last item, and Brainy will DJ because he is surprisingly good at it, and as god is my witness, there will. Be. Karaoke."

"Gosh, Rhonda, you sound positively inspired!"

"Yeah, Nadine." I took a deep breath. "I'm thinking I'm back."
--

-NADINE-

Well, way to go, Nadine. It turns out Rhonda is actually capable of returning your romantic feelings, and not only do you blow a prime chance to confess your love, but it turns out she already has a crush, and it's on LILA, of all people. She knows that's never going to go anywhere! Lila has her pick of boys, AND she's a born-again Christian! It's doomed from the start!

Oh well, a selfish part of me said, you might have a shot at picking up the pieces after she gets her heart smashed against the wall. No… that was terrible. I am her best friend. I am obligated to have her back. Even if I do fail sometimes. The incident with Curly in the fourth grade, for instance. I should have had her back then, but when I saw her cruelly dump the boy and watched his heart break, all I could think was That could have been me. I finally gave her a chance to tell her side much later, and we agreed that we would pretend that it had never happened, but it was a blemish on my record and even if it had been forgiven I would never forget it.

So, yeah, if Lila is what Rhonda wants… then who am I to tell her she's wrong? After all, I know what it's like to pine after what you think is unattainable.

…oh, crap. I forgot to tell her about Phoebe.
--

-RHONDA-

I'll call Patty tomorrow, I thought to myself, I've probably tied the phone up enough today. And then get to work on the invitations…

Right now, though, inspiration had struck and had to be put down on paper. I got out my pad (the fashion design pad, not the amateurish anime-inspired sketching pad) and began working.

I had just about finished my initial designs when the phone rang once again. Probably not for me. Only three of my friends really know I'm back. I'd just talked to one, and there really was no reason for either of the other two to call me…

"Rhonda, darling… it's that Pataki girl," my mother called. "She says it's important."

Then again…

"What's up, Hellcat?" I asked, picking up.

"What's up is you need to get your purple tuckus over to the old FTI building."

"It's kinda late, Helga" I complained. "And why there?"

"What, nobody told you about Phoebe?"

"…what about Phoebe?"

"It wasn't just us, Princess. It was Phoebe too. And they found out how we changed."
Chapter Summary

In which Helga, Phoebe and Rhonda reunite and Helga is shocked to learn Phoebe has a foul, foul mouth.

Chapter 20

Getting On the Same Page

Hillwood. Actually, Above it.

-ARNOLD-

Can you read my mind?

Do you know what it is you do to me?

Don't know who you are

Just a friend from another star

"Hey, wake up, Football Head. You're missing a freakin' amazing view."

"Huh?"

"Oh, and no I can't. Just Rhonda's and presumably Phoebe's."

"Oh… wait, if you can't read my mind, then how did you know what I was thinking?"

"Because I know you, and I knew the moment I whisked you up here, the first thing that would pop into that bizarrely-shaped brain of yours was that sappy love theme from Superman."

"Oh…"

"…and because it's the first thing that popped into my head, too. That and Aladdin."

"So I'm the sappy one?"

"It's a looooonng way down, Arnoldo. If I were you, I'd be going out of my way not to antagonize me." The grin had never left Helga's face; I knew she would never drop me, but edgy jokes had always been part of her repertoire. The kind of thing that I'd never really found funny… unless it was coming from her. Helga's often dark and cynical humor was like the sharp bite of wasabi that accompanied an exquisitely arranged Japanese banquet, a necessary bit of bitterness and spice that brought out the true flavor within.

"So, uh… I can't help but notice something."

"Yeah?"
"We're well over a hundred feet up, and it's the middle of December. Right?"

"So, what's your point."

"Shouldn't it be, I dunno… cold?"

"Oh, that. I'm using my powers to generate a pocket of warmth around us. Can't have my boy freezing."

"I guess you've gotten pretty good with your powers over the week."

"A lot of it's just instinct and the rest of it is practice. I've mostly been learning fine control, how to make tiny changes in temperature instead of just burning things right away. It's all about control, really. Controlling my strength so I don't accidentally break everything I touch, controlling my flight speed so I don't constantly overshoot and have to correct my course… controlling my libido so I don't simply ravish you in midair like an eagle causing us to both plummet to our death…"

"Helga!"

"Seriously. There's a species of eagle that does that. They just start doing it right there in midair and if they don't finish in time, splat."

"I'm gonna look that up when I get a chance. It seems like you're making it up."

"Swear to god, Eff Aitch, it's totally a thing. I'll sho- Oh. Oh wow."

"What?"

"Just look, Arnold, just look."

And there it was, Midtown Hillwood lit up for Christmas, a symphony in sparkling lights, spread out before us, up here, looking down on the shimmering glory.

Helga slowed up and we just took it in.

"It's beautiful," I said.

"You have no idea how much I've wanted to share this with you, ever since my first flight. I'm glad I finally got to."

"It's almost more beautiful than you," I replied. "Almost."

"Ugggggh", she groaned, swatting my face lightly with the furry end of her tail. "Way to ruin the moment, Hair Boy. I've had mozzarella sticks less cheesy than that line."

"What're you gonna do, Helga?" I said teasingly. "Drop me?"

"Don't tempt me. Street sweepers have it tough enough, I don't wanna make their day worse."

"Of course. You're just thinking of the street sweepers."

"I mean, it's not like I like you or anything. It's not like you set my hearts afire or inspire me to weave words into art or whatever. *snicker* Oh, man… can you imagine if I was still pulling that tsundere act with you? In private, I mean. I'm still not ready. Although I think I'm getting close. I mean, if I can spill to a blabbermouth like Rhonda and she hasn't betrayed my trust yet, maybe… agggh…"
"Helga… when I said we can keep it down-low until you're ready, I mean. It. Even if we're, like, eighty and we've been married for sixty years at that point."

Helga shook her head. "You are such a Football Head. But you're my Football Head." Her wings snapped back into active position from hover mode. "Okay, sap time over, we're burning moonlight. Let's get moving again."

"Whatever you say, Helga,"

"Damn right whatever I say."

--

It took about half an hour to get all the way out to the MDI building. Helga set us down on the roof. "Well, here we are."

"Yeah." I rubbed the back of my head. "Kinda weird being back up here after all this time, isn't it."

"Yeah." Helga scuffed her foot. "That was… kind of a crazy night, wasn't it."

"Yeah. Things got pretty intense."

"Yeah… so intense that some of us were really confused."

"And some of us were desperate to walk things back because at least they understood the status quo."

"And some of us picked up on that desperation and gave some others of us an easy out."

"And some of us were desperate enough to grab on to that easy out."

"Some of us have been kind of wondering how it could've gone if we'd…"

Helga leaned in. "Just given into that crazy moment?"

"Yeah…"

We stood there for a moment, just gazing into each others' eyes.

"Nothing's stopping some of us now, is it." She suggested.

"No." I said. "Nothing's stopping some of us now."

She leaned in closer, eyes closing, lips puckering. I rose up on my toes to meet them (there'd always been a height gap, but it was actually significant now). She was mere inches away when she suddenly paused, eyes snapping open. "Ugggh… my head's buzzing…"

"Mine too, my love," I whispered.

"No, not in a hot way," she said. "It's like the buzz I feel in my head when Rhonda's near me, but at a slightly different pitch… and it's getting louder."

The door to the building interior suddenly burst open revealing a pale blue Scotch-Japanese-unidentified alien girl barreling down on them.

"Ugh, Phoebe, I'm really happy to see you but your timing sucks." grumbled Helga.

--

A bit earlier
MDI building, utility room on 39th floor

-PHOEBE-

"It appears… I have you at a disadvantage."

This room wasn't really used. Father suggested that we repurpose it as a makeshift fencing studio. It hadn't taken much. All that was truly required was adequate space and lighting, a proper fencing matt, and our equipment.

It had been over two weeks and one metamorphosis since our last bout, but even with my hands lacking a finger each, the hilt's grip felt as though it was an extension of my own upper left arm. I parried each of his thrusts expertly, if I must say so myself. "It seems even in this new body, my technique remains flawless."

"Do not grow overconfident, my little sakura… while you have indeed proven your skills have not waned, it is you who are at a great disadvantage."

"And what might that be, papa-san?" I asked, foil at ready.

"That you your body has acquired two new, and rather large targets." He quickly shifted his strike to the right, attempting to score a touché on my exposed wing. I narrowly dodged, now realizing that my newly-acquired limbs were indeed a liability in enclosed spaces.

I chuckled. "It does appear that you have found a weakness, papa-san." I said, parrying his new strikes.

"Then why are you laughing?"

"Because I know something you do not."

"And what is that?"

"I—" I quickly flipped my foil to my upper-right hand, "am now ambidextrous!"

"Oh my," he said as I took advantage and scored.

[A. N. I had to have Kyo say it at some point.

Also, yes, The Princess Bride is my favorite movie of all time, why do you ask?]

"And I believe that is match point," I said, lowering my foil and bowing.

"Well done, my daughter," father said returning it. "We shall adjourn to dinner, then?"

"Yes, I believe we have worked up a sufficient appe-" I stopped. Suddenly I felt a slight buzz in the back of my head. Almost a presence. And there was a familiarity to the tone…

"She's back," I said simply.

"Who?" Papa asked.

"Helga! I feel her! I don't know how, but I can feel her presence close by!" I tried to focus on the source of the sensation. "The roof! I apologize, papa-san, but dinner will have to wait."

"Understood, dear. This is indeed a matter of importance," is what I assume he said, or something
along those lines, but I was already out the door and halfway down the hall. I'm not certain I've ever moved quite as fast as I did in the minute it took me to reach the roof.

And there she was, and far pinker than I had expected and my mind registered that she was not alone but the Newton's laws of motion were a harsh mistress.

"Ugh, Phoebe, I'm really happy to see you but your timing sucks." grumbled Helga.

"Too bad. Glomping!" I shouted, tackling Helga.

She groaned from the floor that I had knocked us onto, struggling to pry herself from my grip. "Why is everybody hugging me today? Did I upset some cosmic force and suddenly become irresistible – don't you dare answer that, Arnoldo -? Is "Mystery Shack" Japanese for 'Hug me! I'm not uncomfortable with human contact at all!''"

"You seem upset… is it perhaps because I caught the two of you in mid-canoodle?" I asked teasingly.

"Uggghhh.. don't say that word, Phoebe, it sounds so wrong coming from you . The only thing worse would be Lila suddenly breaking into a George Carlin routine."

I giggled at the mental picture. "Sorry for the ambush. I had no idea you would be a la mode."

"Wha?" Arnold asked.

"Private joke," Helga said. "Before we get started, I have one very important question for you. Have you had any weird dreams since changing?"

"Well… last night I dreamt that I was conducting a symphony, but someone had replaced my baton with a dried herring, and the sheet music was Beethoven but no matter what I did the orchestra would only play the Yahoo Soda jingle, and for some reason we were on the deck of the Hindenburg and the audience was composed entirely of labradoodles wearing bowler hats…"

"No, nothing like that. I'm looking for dreams involving a one-eyed triangular guy in a top hat trying to make a deal with you. Has there been anything like that?"

"Why… no. I think I would remember such a thing. That's… a rather oddly specific thing to dream about."

"This is really serious, Phoebe. Princess had a dream about this guy and I figured it was just her being weird, but then *I* had a dream about him and still later, we found out he's some kind of… eldritch abomination that led some kind of war against reality and was thought destroyed, but it seems like something of him survived and is trying to get a toehold back into our universe."

I stared at her. I knew Helga well and she was clearly deadly serious, and yet… this talk of dream entities and wars on reality was so alien to my thought process that I simply could not get my head around. I was raised to deal in logic and reason and Helga sounded like she'd gone insane. And yet, her tone of voice was perfectly rational.

"We should go inside," I said. "It seems like we have a great deal to talk about."

--

-INTERLUDE-

Unknown location
He had long ago mastered lucid dreaming. He'd had a lot of time to practice, after all. Especially these days, when even remaining conscious was a difficult task.

By all rights, he should have been dead decades ago. The majority of his remaining fortune, that which was not tied up in maintaining his criminal empire, was dedicated to finding new ways to preserve and extend his life. And now, here he was in an unprecedented thirteenth decade.

And yet, he wanted more. For what use was it to extend the existence of this withering, deteriorating shell of a body? These girls, if the legends of the Godstones were true, would remain eternally young, eternally vital, eternally powerful. If the process that had changed them could be repeated on him, what a difference that would make. To be young again, forever, with a strong, virtually invulnerable body. The world would be his. The influence he already had, combined with power, and unlimited time to accrue more. Instead of the inevitable sentence hanging above his head, and the certainty that, if there indeed was a Hell, he would most definitely be headed there.

Here though, in his dreams, he stood on his own, strong, intimidating, as he was back in his prime, back in the days when his name was whispered in fear in the dark alleys of Hillwood. Back when he'd first accumulated his fortune. The rumors of his death and his lost treasure had been planted while he faded into the shadows to grow his empire and his influence. In time, he had risen above all his enemies, except for the one no man could conquer, time itself.

But then he'd learned of the Godstones. Mystic orbs from the depths of space that had, in the past, gifted a select few power and longevity. Those marked had been, of course, worshipped as gods by those who didn't know better. He'd dismissed the stories as absurd fantasy until his men had actually obtained a fragment of one in India. Whatever transformative gifts it had had long since expired, but what they could learn from it convinced him of the truth of the legend. As age continued to gnaw at him, he became obsessed with finding another at all costs. Rumors led him to San Lorenzo, where he entered into a deal with the ill-fated La Sombra. Yet, it seems that the alliance had yielded fruit after all, as, seemingly by sheer coincidence, two of the children involved in the capture of his men and his own demise had somehow actually managed to locate the stone and gain its gifts.

He thought he was finally saved when he managed to capture the girls, but hopes were dashed when they grew even stronger than he expected, too strong to be contained without great cost. Research continued on ways to counter them, some were even promising, but he was growing increasingly desperate.

And so, to escape the coming flames, he had made a deal with a literal devil.

He now spoke the incantation again, noting that several of the words were just "backward message" backward, repeatedly, no doubt a manifestation of the mad entity's twisted sense of humor.

He appeared now in a flash, striking a pose with a flourish. "HOWDY DO, HIP FLASK, WHAT'S SHAKIN' BESIDES YOU?" he greeted in his manic, unworldly voice.

"I was promised that you would bring me one of the children by now. Why have you failed me?"

"PATIENCE, FLASKY, THESE THINGS TAKE TIME IS ALL."

"Time is a luxury that is in very short supply for me, Cipher. I have weeks, possibly days."

"RIGHT, RIGHT… IT'S SO EASY TO FORGET YOU CARBON-Y TYPES COME WITH AN EXPIRATION DATE, AND YOU ARE SERIOUSLY PAST YOURS, AREN'T YOU?"

"Do not toy with me, Cipher…"
He suddenly grew large and red, the whole of the dreamscape taking on an angry, bloody tinge. "TOY WITH YOU? DON'T FLATTER YOURSELF, HIP FLASK. IF I WAS AT THE PEAK OF MY POWER, YOU'D BARELY BE WORTH PLAYING WITH."

"But you're not, are you," he said, knowing this was all bluster. "You're weak, weaker than you've ever been. You're barely holding yourself together. Why else would you have agreed to be my errand boy?"

He shrank, knowing I had seen through his bluff. "LOOK, THESE KIDS ARE SHARPER THAN THEY LOOK. I THOUGHT I HAD A GOOD SHOT WITH SILVER SPOON, BUT SHE ISN'T THE DUMB TRUST FUND BABY SHE ACTS LIKE. AND HEART OF GOLD IS ONE OF THE MOST CUNNING LITTLE MINDS I'VE TANGLED WITH SINCE SIXER'S BRO. THEY SAW RIGHT THROUGH ME. I'M NOT SURE I'LL EVER BE ABLE TO GET THROUGH TO THEM. I MIGHT HAVE A SHOT WITH NUMBER THREE, BUT IF THAT DOESN'T WORK, I'M SCREWED UNTIL THE NEXT WINDOW."

"Wait… what number three?"

"OH, YOU ARE REALLY OUT OF THE LOOP, AREN'T YOU, HIP FLASK? JUST RELAX, LEAVE EVERYTHING TO ME. I GOT THIS. PROBABLY." And he vanished, as suddenly as he appeared,

He woke, back in his shriveled, useless husk of a body, the monitors' constant beeping reminding the world that he still lived, for now.

He summoned his current chief aide. "Please, tell me we have made some progress."

His aide cleared his throat. "Actually, we have regained tabs on the two subjects. They have returned to Hillwood.

"And do we have anything we can use against them."

"Not yet. The mini-railgun project is promising, though."

"And that is…"

"It's a hand-held weapon that uses magnetic propulsion to fire metallic shards with enough speed and force to penetrate even their hide, sir."

"Excellent. How soon can that be ready?"

"We'll have a working prototype in…. two weeks?"

"Work faster."

"We could just… target their friends and family, sir…"

"No," the old man wheezed. "If things go south, we just wind up with a pair of angry, vengeful children. We don't need to go creating a pair of vigilantes with the drive of a Batman and the power of a Superman. That's just bad business sense. No… we strike when we're ready for them, not before. But we need to be ready for them faster. Am I understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Take me to the hyberbaric sleep chamber, then. When you're ready, wake me." The chamber was
designed to keep his life support needs as minimal as possible. It was his best hope of surviving long enough, in enough of one piece, to be saved. But it was not foolproof. There was a chance he would die before he woke. But that was life, wasn't it. One risk after another.

They put him under, and he dreamed again, of his prime, and of once again regaining it, and so much more. He dreamt of godhood.

--

HELGA-

Stella was the exception to my "no hugs" rule.

She wrapped me in an embrace the second she saw me, professionality be damned. "Oh, Helga, it's so good to see you safe and healthy again," she whispered.

"It's really not a big deal, Dr. Sh- Stella," I replied. It felt weird calling her by her first name. I'd been calling my own parents by their first names for years, mostly because that's just how little respect I had for them. Stella… Stella felt like a mom. In the six months since they'd returned, Stella and Miles had grown to be more like real parents than, well, my real parents. Case in point, I was looking forward to this moment, but I still felt no real urge to see any member of my own family, though I knew intellectually that I would eventually have to. "I just, y'know… broke out of a secure facility, crossed three states, tangled with things both mundane and supernatural… okay, maybe it is a big deal…"

"That sounds like quite a story. I'd love to hear it over some mediocre lab coffee. You had another girl with you, didn't you?"

"Yeah, P- uh, Rhonda Lloyd."

"Oh, I think I met her. Tall girl, dark hair, very self-conscious about her appearance…"

"That's Rhonda, all right. I heard the first thing she did after the pirates got rounded up was steal one of their hats so she could cover her ruined hair."

"Well, I'd like her here too. I really need to examine all of you, and you should all know everything we know."

"Oh, I was kinda giving her some time with her family," since she, y'know, actually likes hers, "but I guess I should let her know what's going on here…"

The three of us kids went back up on the roof to wait for her. Apparently she passed up sightseeing because it only took her about fifteen minutes to reach our location.

"I didn't keep you guys waiting too long, did I? I had to change. I couldn't really be seen in my road trip clothes, could I?" She had indeed discarded her T-shirt and jeans (which, truth told, didn't really hang right on her) for a hastily-modified red tank top and her usual black slacks. "Phoebe! That is a bold look!"

"She means you look like you raided Errol Flynn's garage sale," I supplied, smirking.

"Oh!" Phoebe said a bit self-consciously, realizing she was still wearing her fencing outfit. "I was in the midst of a practice session with Papa-san. It's not really a standard fencing uniform, but we prefer the added flair."

"I never said it was bad, darling, It definitely suits you. Oh, Arnold's here too!"
"Yes!" interrupted Phoebe. "He dropped by to visit his mother! By sheer coincidence, at the same time Helga-

"It's okay." I assured. "She knows. And she won't tell anyone because I know a big secret of hers.

"Oh, for…" Rhonda interjected, exasperated. "Let's just get this over with. I'm bisexual. There. It's out in the open, nobody's holding anything over anyone, we're all friends here."

Arnold and Phoebe stared for a minute.

"I don't think any of us expected her to say that," Arnold eventually said.

"Yes," Phoebe added. "Quite unpredicted."

[Phoebe's Inner Shipper (jumping on her metaphorical bed): RHONDINE IS CANON! RHONDINE IS CANON! RHONDINE IS CANON!]

"So," Arnold continued, "I can see that you're on friendlier terms…"

"You kidding?" responded Helga. "I owe this girl my sanity!"

"I owe Helga my life and my sanity!"

"I mean, I crap on her, but it turns out she is really cool…"

"Toughest, fiercest girl I ever met…"

"Under all that fancy material there's core of solid steel…"

"She's loyal, independent…"

"…resourceful, brave…"

"Girls," interrupted Phoebe, "I'm very happy you two are getting along now, but try not to sprain your wrists getting each other off."

I felt my jaw go slack at the unexpected vulgarity from the tiny, unassuming girl. A quick glance at Arnold and Rhonda showed similar expressions of utter shock.

"Sorry," Phoebe said. "You were stuck in a loop and it was getting monotonous."

The tension broken, I just gave in and burst into laughter. The others joined in and we just stood there laughing it all off for a while.

"Criminy, Pheebs," I finally said. "You kiss Gerald with that mouth?"

"I think I like Savage Phoebe," Rhonda said. "She can totally stick around if she wants."

Phoebe blushed a royal blue, her momentary boldness fading. "I'm not sure what came over me there."

"C'mon, Princess," I prodded. "We've got a long, boring infodump to get done with."
Chapter Summary

In which Helga catches up with an old friend.

[A.N. Before you start this chapter, there's a brand new fan art on Jose Ramiro's DA page! It's a nightmare-fuel-riffic take on the Shapeshifter's conjoined Helga-Rhonda form from Chapter 17, so go check it out right now!]

Also, I don't know if there's an agreed-upon fan first name for Dr. Bliss, so I'm going with my own choice.]

Chapter 21

Helga on the Couch Redux

Dr. Bliss's office, Hillwood Medical Professionals' Building

The Thursday after the girls returned to Hillwood

-KATE-

"I'm really glad you could see me on such short notice, Doc."

She came in much as she had the first day, concealing her identity in a huge overcoat and hat. I wondered why; she'd been here at least twice a month since that first visit and had clearly gotten comfortable, so to suddenly revert to early behavior was curious. She was clearly nervous about something, if her unusually flushed complexion had anything to say about it.

"Okay, brace yourself… this might be a little shocking," Helga said.

"It's all right, Helga. This is always a no-judgement zone, remember."

"All right," she said, shedding her outer garments.

Oh.

That's why.

--

Of course, I'd been one of the first to hear about Helga's disappearance. Her former teacher and current vice-principal, Robert Simmons, had called to ask if she'd show up at my office since I was one of her known confidants. I'd even received a visit from the fabled Olga Pataki a few days ago seeking "baby sister". Now there was someone who could probably use some help; she was clearly repressing some deep-seated negative emotions in some misguided attempt to force herself to be positive at all times. When she broke down, she broke down hard (as I'd learned when Helga had brought up the grade-changing incident).

It had been difficult to maintain my schedule the following days, as my concern for her continued to gnaw at me. I'm ashamed to admit it adversely affected my attention to my other patients during those
days. Professionalism aside, Helga had become very special to me as I'd watched her grow and blossom emotionally. She reminded me of myself at that age, I suppose… I'd also had a sometimes tumultuous relationship with my family and had been something of an ugly-duckling loner through my childhood.

So you can imagine my relief when she called earlier that day.

My cel went off as I was waiting for my latte in the café downstairs from my office. When I saw an unfamiliar number, I fully expected it would be some recorded voice trying to sell me a time share that I had no way of affording.

"Uh… hey, doc."

"Helga?" I suddenly snapped to attention. "Where are you? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I might not be later, but right now, I am. Look, I… I really need to talk to you as soon as possible. It's been a crazy, crazy couple of weeks, and I need to vent really, really bad. How soon can you see me?"

"Helga, you have no idea how worried I've been about you. if necessary I'll make the time. We can do this whenever you need to."

"How about 7? It's easier for me to get around at night."

"Are you sure that's safe? The streets can get dangerous after dark."

"Oh, believe me, doc, muggers are the least of my worries these days. Now… I have to warn you. I've changed a lot since the last time you saw me."

"That's understandable, Helga. It'd be surprising if the kind of ordeal you've been through didn't take some kind of emotional toll on you…"

"I'm not talking emotional. I'm talking in the literal sense. I've physically changed a lot. It's kind of hard to explain over the phone, but be prepared. It's pretty drastic."

"I'm a professional. I'm sure it's nothing I won't be able to handle."

--

There are, however, limits to professionalism. I'm not sure what I had expected…. A scar, perhaps, a reminder of traumas experienced, perhaps a cathartic haircut, a change in attire as a result of her experiences. She had done the latter, having exchanged her trademark white shirt and pink dress for jeans and a light grey Bennington College sweatshirt. This was the least of her changes. My eyes didn't know what to register first… the rose-colored skin, the extra arms, the tail, the horns, the third eye, the enormous leather wings… even the trademark twin pigtails were gone, replaced with a single waist-length ponytail tied back with the pink ribbon that once comprised her ever-present bow.

I took a deep breath. "I-I'm sorry, Helga, it's just…"

"It's all right, doc. I don't blame you. This isn't anything anyone would be expecting." She took her place on the couch, attempting to arrange herself as comfortably as she could.

I composed myself. "So, I assume there's a story behind your new… look, Helga?"

"You got that right. Where do even I start?"

"You can start wherever you feel most comfortable, but I find that the beginning is usually the best
"The beginning… well, I guess that would be San Lorenzo. It's funny… San Lorenzo already changed a lot for me. I guess it wasn't done."

She went on to tell me, at great length, about her metamorphosis, her capture, captivity, escape, journey, and struggles to return home. Some of the tales seemed somewhat exaggerated, especially the talk of shapeshifters and dream demons, but given her appearance, skepticism seemed arbitrary.

"That's quite a story," I said. "I'm still not certain how San Lorenzo ties in…"

"I'm getting to that," she interrupted. "So, we're finally all there at MDI…"

We were in a conference room located on the 36th floor. Arnold, Rhonda and I had taken seats around the table. Stella and Phoebe stood at the font of the room, in front of a screen displaying a slide featuring a map of San Lorenzo.

"Six months ago, your class went on a trip to San Lorenzo. I think we're all well aware of the events of that trip," began Phoebe.

The slide changed to a more detailed map of the jungle region we'd travelled through to reach La Sombra's compound.

"Right now, we're more concerned with a seemingly insignificant event that permanently changed the course of our lives. Specifically, I refer to the incident that occurred in roughly this location," she indicated a point on the map, "where Rhonda stubbed her toe on a stray rock."

The slide changed again, now displaying crude stick figures of Rhonda, Helga and Phoebe (identifiable by frizzy hair, pigtails, and glasses respectively), the former kicking a small circle as lightning bolts indicating pain radiated from her foot.

"I, uh, thought an artist's recreation would help our recollection of the event," supplied Phoebe sheepishly, clearly embarrassed by her lack of drawing talent.

"You definitely got Princess's Frankenstein 'do right," Helga commented. Rhonda blushed.

The slide changed again, now a close-up of the two halves of the geode, revealing its glittering crystalline interior. "The seemingly ordinary rock proved to be a geode, most likely the result of a meteorite impact."

"Wait, so like, from space?" asked Rhonda.

"Precisely," continued Phoebe. "When the geode fractured, the three of us breathed in particulates that were released." The slide changed again, revealing a magnified picture of what looked like a spiked ball. "These spores were suspended in the dust. Examinations determined they were unlike any other life discovered on Earth."

"Once the spores were absorbed into our bodies, they injected their genetic material into some of our red blood cells, mutating them into a new type of cell. This process took place over a span of six months. Once it was done, the black cells began producing a mutagenic virus that invaded every cell in our bodies and rebuilt them, as well as forming completely new structures."

"A new slide, showing the human bloodstream. The first diagram showed the spores infiltrating the bloodstream; the second showed some of the red blood cells changed into differently-shaped black ones."

"Wait, so like, from space?" asked Rhonda.

"Precisely," continued Phoebe. "When the geode fractured, the three of us breathed in particulates that were released." The slide changed again, revealing a magnified picture of what looked like a spiked ball. "These spores were suspended in the dust. Examinations determined they were unlike any other life discovered on Earth."
"How many more slides are there?" I complained.

"Not too many more," Phoebe said. "I, uh… like making slide shows…" she added self-consciously before changing slides again.

"I'll be taking over from here," Stella said, accepting the pointer from Phoebe, who joined the rest of us around the table.

The new slide showed two DNA-like models. "Now, the model on the left is typical human DNA. The one on the right is the genetic material found in the spores. The exact chemical composition is different, but the structure is similar." The next slide showed an intricate honeycomb-like structure. "This is a model of your current genetic material. As you can see, it's far more complex."

"What does any of this crap mean?" I asked, impatiently. Science, math… Phoebe ate this stuff up, but I was pretty indifferent to it. Sure, I got good grades… but I didn't really see the need to put in the effort to get great grades. STEM simply held no appeal to me. Give me a subject where I can actually express myself and you have my attention.

Stella must have the patience of a saint, because she didn't react at all to my angry outburst. "What I'm saying is, it's impossible to separate what's human from what's alien. They've integrated seamlessly. There's no point where one ends and another begins." She sighed, clearly weighing the next thing she was going to say. "What that means is… this may not be reversible."

I glanced around the room, looking for reactions. Phoebe had a neutral reaction; she'd probably already been there when Stella had come to the conclusion that our condition might be incurable. Rhonda, on the other hand, looked like someone had just slapped her.

"She said 'may'"", I whispered.

"I know," she replied. "I was starting to feel like I could actually be okay like this for a while, but… to hear that it really might be permanent… I'm not ready for that."

"Criminy, Princess… to think I was actually starting to think you were cool."

She looked up. "ExCUSE me?"

"We spent a week together, I saw you go from a spoiled, whiny nothing into a straight-up badass. Now we're here one day, you get a little bad news, and you go right back to whiny, spoiled nothing? The Rhonda Lloyd I got to know wouldn't just give in like this. The Rhonda Lloyd I know punches Manotaurs and electrocutes shapeshifters. So I guess maybe I didn't really get to know you after all."

She gave me a weak smile. "And I thought Arnold was the motivational speaker here." She took a deep breath. "You're right. I owned being a geek, I owned being puh-…being less well off…" She stood up. "And if Rhonda Lloyd has to be an alien hybrid mutant… then she's gonna own that too."

--

"Hmm… you've mentioned a Rhonda before… As I recall, you didn't seem all that fond of her."

"I didn't mention that I'd actually had a session scheduled once with Rhonda Lloyd, two years ago, after she'd gotten into a fight with an older girl. Her parents had opted to cancel the session and instead enroll her in finishing school, so I'd never really gotten a chance to know the girl at all."

"Yeah… I didn't. But when fate shackles you to someone, you're kinda forced to actually get to know them. And it turns out I actually like her. Weird, huh."

"Not so weird. You're in the habit of closing yourself off to people. In the few cases where you've
actually opened yourself up, you've forged powerful bonds... with Phoebe, with Arnold, and now with Rhonda."

"Yeah, well... I guess it doesn't suck to have someone else I can depend on. Lord knows I don't have much of that."

"Getting back to your story... you haven't said anything about how you reacted to the possibility that your condition might be permanent."

"That's because I haven't really given it a lot of thought. I never really... stopped feeling like me."
She exhaled. "I felt like Helga Pataki before I changed, and I felt like Helga Pataki after." She looked up. "Is that bad? I get the feeling that this should feel wrong."

"Helga, trust me... there is nothing wrong with feeling good about yourself. Unless, of course, you're, say, a cannibal."

"I'm not a cannibal."

"Didn't think so," I said smiling. "So... what happened next?"

--

"Helga... can I speak to you in private for a moment?"

Stella took me aside while Arnold and Phoebe continued to catch Rhonda up on events that had been happening in town.

"Now... I've been in regular contact with the Heyerdahls about Phoebe's condition, and I've had a chance to speak with the Lloyds..."

"Yep, responsible doctor's gotta do that kinda thing..." I said, nonchalantly, already knowing where this was going and not liking it one bit.

"And, of course, I contacted your parents."

There it was.

"I'm sure that was a load of laughs. So, how did that go? I'm guessing that it was something along the lines of running head first into a brick wall. For three hours."

Stella smiled weakly. "Your father can be... difficult."

"Difficult? Bob's like trying to do calculus while pogo-sticking across a minefield in a hailstorm. Difficult doesn't even begin to describe it."

"I tried to talk to him, but I don't think he was really listening. He just kept ratning about his unfaithful business partners and how both his daughters abandoned him and about he was forced to make deals to stay afloat. I couldn't get a word in edgewise." 

Wait... both his daughters? Was she telling me that Olga actually walked out on Daddy Dearest? Just what had been going on while I was on my little mutant trek?

"But... Helga, it's your mother I'm really worried about. She looked really out of it."

"Pfft, she'll be fine. Miriam's been out of it for years. This isn't anything new."

"I'm serious. She's deteriorated badly since the last time I've seen her. I think it was your disappearance that set her off."
"Yeah, right. She's probably pining for Olga." I was flippant, but there was something about her expression that told me that maybe, just maybe, I should listen.

"Fine," I said. "I have some stuff I should probably get anyway."

--

So after I'd taken Arnold home the night before, his folks and grandfolks invited me to dinner and hey, who am I to turn down a free meal? The weirdo boarders were kinda in my face about stuff, and Sketchy East European Guy whose name I can't be bothered to remember kept asking me if I was the rich girl and if he could have 250 thousand dollars. And Arnold's grandma kept calling me Titania, Queen of the Fairies. So, yeah, all in all, typical dinner at Arnold's.

They let me stay over in one of the unused rooms that night, and the next day, after seeing Arnold off (I figured just dropping in at school would cause problems), I decided that it was time I just got it over with.

And then I stalled and watched TV 'til noon.

Okay, I'm not proud of that, but the important thing is, eventually, I did get up off my pink kiester and set out for the Emporium.

It was just as I had left it… deserted. The one thing that surprised me was that I saw an expensive-looking car parked outside. Huh. Maybe Bob had finally attracted one of those "angel investors" you hear about. Eh, whoever invests in this business deserves what they're getting.

I entered, noticing that the place was pretty much deserted. No customers (of course), and Bob and Miriam where nowhere to be seen. The door to Bob's office was closed, so I figured he was in there watching his "stories"; the car parked outside was a mystery but it could have just as easily been someone who couldn't find parking anywhere else. Fine by me. I wasn't really eager to see my folks in the first place, so I figured I'd just go in, grab as much stuff as I could fit in a carry-on, and get out again. I went into my room, grabbed an old shoulder bag that I'd had for a while (this wasn't the first time I'd considered ditching the fam and running away), shoved in some favorite books (including the latest edition of my Little Pink Book), some clothing that could be altered for my current use, and whatever other odd mementoes I could fit it.

On the way out, I passed a rack of remaindered DVDs that Bob had picked up for pennies, figuring they'd make for good impulse buys. Poor sap never realized that the reason he picked them up so cheap is that they were all gigantic critical and box-office flops. Their combined Metacritic barely made double digits. Dr. Forrester would consider these movies too cruel a torture to inflict. But there was one that stood out, mostly due to the name on the cover. Oh yes, Rhonda would HAVE to see this one. I quickly shoved it into my bag; not that anyone would care it was missing.

I was just about to make my escape when I heard something coming from the break room. Curiosity overwhelmed my common sense and I took a peek.

Now… I've seen Miriam silly drunk, sloppy drunk, moepy drunk, or just plain passed-out drunk. This was different somehow. She was just sitting there, sobbing quietly, an empty vodka bottle and almost-empty glass in front of her.

This was had-enough, just-waiting –for-the-end-of-it-all drunk. And for the first time, the mix of pity, embarrassment and disappointment I felt for were washing away and all I felt was legitimate fear that I could lose her.

I quietly came up to her side. "Miriam?" I whispered, but she acted as if she hadn't heard anything.
"Miriam?" I repeated a little louder, lightly putting a hand on her shoulder. "Mom?"

"'lga…" she slurred. Figures. Olga ditches the family and she finally falls apart completely. She probably never even noticed I was gone. Why did I even bother?

"No," I replied, the irritation starting to creep into my voice. "It's Helga."

"No it's not…" she said. "Can't be… you only come when I dream. I'm not dreaming yet. …am I? It's… it's hard to tell anymore… All I do is sleep, or wait to fall asleep. I just… I just want to see you so badly…"

And I realized then, I had it all wrong. It wasn't Olga who sent her down this hole, it was me. She missed me.

And for the first time in a long time, I started crying, because for the first time in a long time I just wanted my mommy.

"I'm here, mom." I said. "I'm back, I'm okay. Everything's going to be fine." Gently, I lifted her head. "Mom, c'mon… just open your eyes…"

And she did, great red bloodshot things. Her glasses were missing, who knows where they were, and she was clearly trying to focus.

"Oh no…" she muttered. "That's it, isn't it. I finally managed to do it, didn't I. I drank myself to death. I died and I went to hell for being a terrible mother, and devils with Helga's face are going to torment me."

"Uh… wow. No. You're not dead, you're just really, really, really, really drunk."

She shook her head. "…wow… I must be really far gone. For a second you looked like you had…"

"Horns," I supplied. "I, uh… actually do have horns."

The shock of this actually seemed to jolt her back up a couple of levels of awareness. She looked at me anew, really seeing me now.

"This is actually happening, isn't it…"

"I think we need to get some coffee into you, mom…"

"I… I'm s'sorry, Helga… y shouldn't be seeing me like this…" She started to gag. "Oh god… oh, this is happening…" I quickly grabbed the wastebasket and held it in one hand, her in another, and her hair with a third while she ejected everything in her stomach."

I got her some paper towels to wipe her mouth. "Better?"

"I think so. My head's starting to clear up."

"So," I said. "You're probably wondering why I have more hands and eyes than normal…"

"I'm just happy to see you at all. But… what did happen to you?"

"Long, long story. The short version is, we brought more back from the jungle than Arnold's parents… a few of us girls got infected by alien spores and turned into, well, we never actually came up with a name. Apparently some bad guy knew about these spores and kidnapped two of us, but we got loose and made our way back here. Real epic story, definite movie potential. I'm thinking
Cameron Dove to play me."

"I'm sorry."

"Huh?"

"I'm sorry I couldn't be there."

"Mom, unless you're hiding wings and a tail under that dress, there wasn't any way you could've been there, and there's no way you could've-"

"No, not then… before then. I'm sorry I haven't been your mom."

"I-it's okay…"

"No. It isn't. It's never been. I can't go on like this anymore. You're going to need me now more than ever, and I can't just… give up anymore."

"It's okay," I assured her half-heartedly. I'd heard this before, a lot, actually. She'd resolve to be there more for me. And then, she'd let me down. Again. Every time. I wanted to believe her, you have no idea how, this time, I WANTED to believe her.

But she's disappointed me so many times.

"Let's get that coffee in you," I said, trying to get her off the subject, hoping that someone had bothered to have some available. "So, uh, slow day, huh." Good, there was just enough left in the can to brew a fresh pot.

"They're all slow days now, Helga," she sighed.

I continued making small talk while the coffee brewed. "So what's ol' Big Bob up to?"

"Honestly, I have no idea. I… think he said something about trying to get a loan… I've just been so out of it so long…"

A loan? What bank – what reputable bank, anyway – would sign off on a loan for a beeper store in this day and age, anyway? Unless Bob had finally gotten it into his thick skull that he needed to change his approach to business, and what were the odds of that happening? Probably the same odds as me winning a Miss Normal Human Girl pageant.

The door to Bob's office opened as I was bringing Miriam her coffee. Right away, I could see that the guy coming out was NOT Big Bob. Oh, he was big. He was a very large man, fat, yet also muscular. He wore an expensive grey pinstriped Italian suit (probably bespoke; I blame Rhonda for me knowing that word) and a dark shirt, with a porkpie hat (the outfit practically screamed "connected", and not in the good sense). He had a jowly face with a pencil-thin mustache and thinning, slicked hair.

I ducked out of sight before the guy turned our way. I didn't need him seeing me. Bob and Miriam were in enough trouble as it is without this guy knowing about my existence; after all, there was only one reason Bob would have dealings with the likes of someone like Little Gino.

I only knew him by reputation. I was more familiar with his nephew, the equally-ironically named Big Gino, who had run the candy rackets in PS118 up until he graduated last year. According to Patty, he was still at it at Vikstein Middle School.
"Pleasure doin' business, Mr. Pataki. We'll be in touch," he said. He tipped his hat at Miriam and strolled out as if he owned the place. Which, at this point, he probably did.

"Did you know about this?" I asked Miriam. "Do you have any idea who that guy is?"

"B doesn't run any of the business decisions by me, dear. You know that. I haven't really been up to it lately."

"Well, you really should start paying attention, because this place just became a money-laundering operation." I know it was harsh, but I was mad. I knew Bob was stubborn and stupid, but I didn't know he was THIS stubborn and stupid.

"What the HELL?" I said, storming out of the break room. "You won't take Buckley Lloyd's offer, but you'll throw in with the MOB?"

"Not now, Olg- GEEZ LOUISE! WHAT THE SAM HILL HAVE YOU DONE TO YOURSELF?!"

Oh, right… I was a mutant. I didn't care. I was pissed. "Never mind that! I can't believe you'd be stupid enough to make a deal with Little Gino! What were you THINKING? Forget unsold beepers… your basement's about to be filled with a shitload of heroin!"

"HEY! Watch your language, missy! I didn't raise a potty mouth!"

"You barely raised me at all! But you know what? Call me crazy, but even after the crap job you've done at parenting, I don't wanna see my dad wind up in jail!" I chuckled mirthlessly. "Weird, huh? Even after everything, I still care about you. And nothing hurts more than seeing people you care about destroy themselves."

"You let ME worry about that. YOU worry about getting yourself fixed."

My eyes narrowed. "What do you mean by that?"

"B, honey…" Miriam began, "We just got her back, we don't need to do this right now…"

"I mean, no daughter of mine is going to be a FREAK! I don't care what it takes, you're going to be normal again or-"

"Or WHAT?! " I said, bringing my fists down on the display case separating the two of us. Too hard. The case shattered, the frame crumpling under the force of the impact.

In that moment, time seemed to slow to a crawl. In that moment, Bob's face was burning its way into my memory. It was something I'd never seen before.

I'd seen him angry. A lot. I'd seen him disappointed. Usually in me. I'd seen him depressed a couple of times. I'd seen him happy, usually when Olga was around.

This was fear. My father was afraid of me.

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"I didn't give him a chance to say anything. I just grabbed my bag and got out of there as fast as my legs could carry me." Helga exhaled, all her tension finally expelled, "So that's it. I haven't been back since. Probably scared Miriam right back into the bottle, too. Some daughter I am."

I looked up from my notes. "You took the initiative to try to help your mother. You made it clear that even as strained as your relationship with your father has gotten, you still care deeply for his well-
"I don't feel like one," she said. "You know how I said I never stopped feeling like me? That's a lie. When I smashed that display case… when I saw that fear in my father's eyes… at that moment, I really did feel like a monster."

"You're not a monster, Helga. You had one moment where your anger overcame your self-control."

"And if I had another one like it, I might not just break something. I might break someone."

"And you're afraid."

"Of course I'm afraid."

"It's that very fear that's the reason you're not a monster. A monster doesn't care what it breaks or who it hurts. " I lowered my notepad. "You're a strong girl, Helga. Not just in the smashing display cases sense. In the sense that you've been through an ordeal that would destroy most people and came through it intact."

"I did kinda have help. If I hadn't had Rhonda with me I probably would've gone feral."

"There's absolutely nothing wrong with having emotional help. That is why we're here in the first place, right?"

"Yeah… can't argue with that, I guess."

"So… if I can ask… where have you been staying? It's probably a serious breach of professional ethics, but if you need a place…"

"Trust me, that's not a problem. I've got standing offers from Arnold's grandpa, Rhonda, and Phoebe. I'm not hurting for lodgings."

"Well, that's a relief."

Helga yawned. "Oh, wow. I've been talking forever. Sorry to keep you so late."

I checked the clock. The session had been going for well over two hours at this point. "Honestly, I hadn't even noticed. Don't worry about it."

"And there's things I haven't even gotten into yet. But I really should get going. They turn in early at the Sunset Arms."

"Well, you can always come back another time. I'm not going anywhere."

"Thanks, doc… I might just take you up on that. Uh… would it be a serious breach of professional ethics if I, uh… hugged you?"

"I won't tell the medical board if you don't. Are you sure? I know you're not exactly a big fan of physical intimacy…"

"I know. But… I make exceptions." She wrapped both sets of arms around me and squeezed gently, clearly still wary of her strength.

I gave her a pat. "Take care of yourself, Helga. And remember. I'm here for you."
Chapter 22

Her Secret Shame

Lloyd Residence

Wednesday

-RHONDA-

I intercepted Carson before he could answer the doorbell, as my Helga-sense was tingling. "It's all right. I got this one."

"Very good, miss Rhonda," he replied, nodding stiffly. Boy, they train people well wherever he came from. A purple girl with wings drops down from the ceiling right in front of him and he doesn't even react.

She stood there as I answered the door, a large carry-on hanging from her upper shoulder. "Hey," she said. "That sleepover thing still on the table?"

"Sure," I said. "Not like we have a ton else to do. My folks are still debating how to deal with the whole school issue. They're thinking about hiring a tutor." I sighed. "I don't want a tutor. I want to be back in school with my friends."

"Pfft. I can't believe you actually miss school."

I gave her a pointed look.

"Okay, fine, I can't believe I'm saying it, but miss school too. I miss the routine, the crazy teachers, the dimwit classmates, the mediocre lunches, the tinpot dictator principal… I really can't believe I'm saying any of this. I just… I knew what to expect from my day, you know?"

"Not to mention that as sixth graders, we practically ran the place."

"I know, right? Being the top of the food chain is awesome! The lower grades lived in awe of you and in fear of me. I think I miss that most of all."

"It's not fair. We shouldn't be treated differently just because we have a few more limbs than the
average person."

"Damn right. We're the same people we were two weeks ago. Who are they to keep us out of school? Sure, we don't exactly know how the kids are gonna react to us…"

"Actually… I was kinda thinking about that. I'm gonna do the Christmas party this year."

Helga raised an eyebrow. "You… actually want to do that? Wouldn't it be kinda lame with just the few of us who know about the change?"

"Yeah, it would… which is why I'm inviting all of 6A and 6B, and a few choice others. Y'know, Patty, Ruth, whoever else I can think of…"

"You're serious about this, aren't you."

"It'll give the gang a chance to get used to us in a fun setting. Break the ice, as it were."

"You think a Christmas party is going to make everything good?"

"Hey. You have to admit. If there's one thing I do better than anyone, it's parties."

"…yeah, you got me there. That Halloween party a couple months back was pretty amazing. It's a shame we can't just do that again. We'd actually have an excuse to look like this."

"Yeah, we'd actually… wait. Helga, that's absolutely brilliant."

"Wait, what?"

"Halloween… at Christmas. Everyone shows up in costume, 'including us,'" I fingerquoted the last two words. "We all have a great time and do a combination of Halloweeny and Christmassy things, and at the end, we reveal that the three of us aren't wearing costumes."

"That scheme… is so audacious and potentially stupid that it might actually qualify as football-headed. It'll either be a resounding success for fail so spectacularly that our lives will be irreparably destroyed. Either way… I want to be a part of it."

"Cool… we'll run it by Phoebe, see what she thinks. So… uh… how'd it go with your folks yesterday?"

The look Helga gave me made it clear that no, it had not gone well.

"So… uh… wanna… not talk about it at all and let it fester deep inside you until it all spills out in an ill-timed outburst?"

"For someone I barely spoke to until the last couple of weeks, you really got my number. Let's go do literally anything but that."

We stopped off in the kitchen to grab snacks. My mom was there making a sandwich. Deep down, I wondered if this whole pregnancy was just an ex-model's excuse to get away with excessive snacking.

She looked up. "Oh. You must be Helga. Rhonda's told me so much about you."

"Lies, every last word," Helga responded smoothly. "I'm not D. B. Cooper, I never was D. B. Cooper, and I don't know anything about hijacking any plane."
"I think I already like you. This one's a keeper, dear."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Mrs. Lloyd."

"Technically, it's 'Ms. Wellington.' For professional reasons, I never officially took the Lloyd name. Branding is very important. As one ex-model to another."

Helga's cheeks went crimson. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Please. When Rhonda mentioned your name, I knew there was something familiar about it. So, I looked it up online and found an old article about a certain 'It Girl.'"

"That's not me! You can't prove it was me! I really am D. B. Cooper!"

"Oh, hush. It's nothing to be ashamed of."

"Yes it is! I hated modeling! It's just... walking around while people stare at you!"

"Yes, well... I suppose it's not for everyone." She shrugged. "I guess you can take comfort in knowing that Johnny Stitches' career went down the toilet after you quit."

"Couldn't find another sap, huh."

"Well, that and... the incident. I had no idea you could get caught in one of those... and in the middle of a live performance of Aida, no less! There was no coming back from that."

"Caught his what in- you know, forget it. No description could match what my imagination is already creating."

"I think I like your mom," Helga said as we retreated to my room armed with chips and soda. "I think she likes you too."

"Pfft, what gave it away, the part where she said she likes me?" She flopped down on my bed. "So, lemme guess, she's got another Princess in the oven?"

My eyebrow rose. "How did you know? She isn't even close to showing yet."

"She was making a peanut-butter, caviar and kimchi sandwich. Nobody would willingly combine those."

"Observant. So... what's this amazing thing you had to show me?"

"Oh, no, you first. You show me this project you said you were working on, and then I'll show you my surprise."

"Well, all right..." I got out my sketch pad and flipped it to the most recent page. "Oh wait, this is the wrong one, let me-"

"Why, watcha got there?" She quickly yanked it out of my hand and a look of utter delight broke out on her face. "Y'know, puberty's been pretty generous to Lila, but I don't think her boobs are quite this big yet."

"Give me that!" I said, grabbing it back. "That's private!"

"I getcha. For 'private' use, wink wink, nudge nudge, say no more, no more..."
My cheeks got hot. "…anyway… this sketchbook is the one I wanted to show you."

I flipped to the right page, actually paying attention this time, and showed it to her.

"Y'know… I was actually joking about the whole 'superhero' thing. You didn't have to go and design yourself a costume."

"I know, but… the more I think about it, the more it makes sense. It feels like more than just blind fate that we got these powers. We should be doing something with them. Look, I made one for you, too. I haven't made one for Phoebe yet, 'cause I didn't know she changed at the time. In any case, hers would probably be kind of generic because she hasn't manifested a power yet."

Helga flipped the page to check out her own costume. "Huh. I… could actually see myself wearing this. What's with these notes?"

"I was thinking of using a heat-sensitive fabric for yours. I've been doing research on them, and I think if we used the right fabric and dyes, we could make a costume that changed color depending on whether you were using heat or cold."

"Not a bad idea," Helga said, the wheels clearly turning in her head. I had a feeling that despite trying to play it off as a joke, she was actually very interested in this idea. "You, uh, given any thought to what we'd call ourselves?"

"Yeah, actually. I spent yesterday Googling electricity-related words, and I came up with 'Joule'."

"That's a little obscure. Plus it sounds exactly like 'Jewel'. People'll think your powers revolve around gems or bad folk singing."

"All the really good electricity-themed superhero names are already trademarked. That was the best I could do. Couldn't really come up with a good one for you, either. We'd need a punchy, memorable word that encompasses both heat and cold, and again, there were some good ones but they're taken."

"How soon can we have the costumes ready?" Helga said suddenly.

"Um… well, it'd take time. These are just early designs, we'd need color schemes and fabrics that could withstand our powers and someone trustworthy to actually manufacture them, and we'd have to get fitted… why are you suddenly in a hurry, anyway? You were treating this as a joke just a little while ago."

"Let's just say I might have a use for it. I… might be involved in a mob war very soon."

"Helga, wha-"

"Okay, my dad apparently had a big fight with Olga and then made a deal with Little Gino and my mom's drunker than ever and I probably made things worse by losing my temper and I don't know what to do!" …yep, ill-timed outburst, right on schedule. But, like, how do you even respond to that? "My big stupid temper. That should be my super-hero name. Temper. I show up and make everything worse."

"Hey, that's not true… even if it is a really great idea for a name…"

"Huh."

"Well… we learned in science class that tempering is when you expose metal to extreme heat and cold to make it stronger."
"Huh…" She adopted a gravely voice. "Better steel yourselves, 'cause you're about to get Tempered."

"See? You've already got yourself a catch phrase. But seriously… I think we kind of have a long way to go before we can take on organized crime. We've been pretty lucky so far, but we're raw and I have absolutely no fighting skills whatsoever."

"You could always train with Arnold's grandma. And no, I'm not joking. She's the real deal. She's got black belts in six separate fighting disciplines. Trained with actual Shaolin monks."

"Wow, I knew she was cool, but I had no idea she was that cool. Anyway… that's for another day. So… what's your big surprise, Hellcat?"

"Oooh, I almost forgot with all the superhero talk. I brought tonight's entertainment. A little film called "Eternal Romance."

"Really? Isn't that a little 'chick flick' for you?"

"You'd think, yeah, but check out who stars in it."

I took a look at the DVD cover and my felt my eyes practically go cartoonishly huge. "You realize we have to watch this in its entirety right now."

"Criminy, this is awful," Helga commented. The plot was a mess, the leads had absolutely zero chemistry, and the director expected us to sympathize with a male lead who was clearly mentally unstable.

"Hey, you picked it out," I reminded her.

"Hello, girls, I was wondering what you were in the mood for… Oh, my word, WHERE DID YOU FIND THAT? We have to destroy it immediately!"

Busted. Well, I knew we were taking a risk. I hot pause on the movie. "Oh, mom, you're not… that bad in it…"

"You don't have to sugarcoat the truth, dear. I'm awful, I know."

"Mom, seriously, I didn't know you felt so badly about this. I was just really curious. I knew you were a model, but I never knew you were an actress." 

"That's because, as you can see, I am clearly not an actress. *sigh* I was a nineteen-year-old girl putting herself through college by modelling. A movie producer saw one of my shoots and offered me a role. I was young, I was naïve, and I thought to myself, 'Acting. How hard could it be?. Turns out, it's very hard. I'm… very sorry you girls had to see this cinematic abomination."

"Mom… it's not your fault. They didn't exactly give you great material to work with. And it's not like the other lead was any great shakes."

"So… you're not mortified beyond belief? You haven't lost all respect for me?"

"Honestly… it's just kind of cool that my mom's in a movie. Even if it's a bad one."

"I suppose that's the best I can ask for."

I motioned to the seat next to me. "You wanna watch the rest of the movie with us? We've been making hilarious sarcastic comments…"
"What? No. God, no. I may have made my peace with you seeing it, but that doesn't mean I want to. Besides, you don't want your old-but-still-very-youthful-and-vital mother cramping your style, do you? Have fun. And be sure to burn that DVD when you're done."

"We will." –We won't,- I thought at Helga.

"You're so… comfortable with each other," she said after mom left.

"We weren't always," I admitted. "She used to be really stiff and formal with me….. I guess that's what she thought she was supposed to do as a high society woman… and then we got a wakeup call. We saw a family whose relationship was like ours, only worse. And mom really didn't like what she saw. Since then, she's been making an effort to be more herself with me… sometimes she gets a little too inappropriate, but she's learning."

"Sounds great. Yet another mother-child relationship better than mine."

"Hey… look, I'm really not in a position to tell you that things are magically going to get better for you. I just know that giving up probably won't help."

"I haven't… not really… it just feels pretty hopeless right now."

"Hey, best I can do is be a friend at this point."

"It's okay, I kinda have someone I can talk to about this stuff. But… thanks, Joule."

"Anytime, Temper. Anytime."
In which Phoebe faces the prospect of family dinner and contemplates whether life as an urban legend would be preferable.

Chapter 23
Date Night
MDI Building, Friday Evening

-PHOEBE-

I checked my reflection one last time in the mirror. Mother had done quite the job on my coif; the increased length and durability of my tresses had necessitated a new style that involved intricate braiding. Quite the change from my usual topknot.

After donning one of the nicer outfits that had been converted for my current use (a red jacket over a white dress, understated yet bold, as Rhonda might put it), I was ready. I exited my dormitory and proceeded to take my leave of my parents, hoping that this time would go differently and mother would refrain from one of her overblown emotional displays. It wasn't as though this was my first date! I've quite a bit of experience with the subject, thank you very much.

No such luck, of course. Mother ensnared me in a big weepy embrace the moment she laid eyes on me. "My little girl's growing up so fast," she gushed.

"Mother, please… it's not a big deal. It's simply dinner with Gerald's family. For the first time since my metamorphosis. Under their judging eyes." Was I hyperventilating? When did that happen?

"Well. Now who's making a big deal of things? I'm sure there's nothing to worry about. The Johansens adore you. I hear Timberly practically worships you."

I felt my cheeks warming. "That may be overstating it…"

"Trust me, dear, you have nothing to worry about." Father assured. "Your new appearance might be a bit disconcerting at first glance, but they know to look beyond it to your inner light."

"Thank you, papa-san…" He was correct of course, Martin and Sarah had been nothing but welcoming. Timberly, who probably had every reason to be jealous I was siphoning off Gerald's attention, had instead embraced having an older-sister figure. Jamie-O… hmm. I had not had much interaction with him, and he would be home from college for the holidays… Perhaps there would be some unexpected unpleasantness. Leading to strife. And here comes the hyperventilation again.

"Easy hon…" my mother advised.

"What if I say the wrong thing? What if someone else says the wrong thing? What if my power manifests and it turns up it's blowing up happy families?"
"Easy, hon… it's all right… who are you?"

"I am… phbrdl…"

"Say it like you mean it, darlin'."

"I am… Phoebe Heyerdahl."

"Louder…"

"I AM PHOEBE SAKURA HEYERDAHL!"

"That's my girl. You are gonna do great!"

"I AM PHOEBE SAKURA HEYERDAHL AND I AM GONNA DO GREAT!"

Papa smiled. "Are you certain you don't want a ride to the Johansens?"

"Quite positive, papa. I have perfectly good wings and it's time I grew acclimated to using them. Besides, the girls have informed me that the view of the city from above is a sight not to be missed."

My parents escorted me to the building's roof and saw me off as I took my first experimental flaps. As soon as I felt comfortable, I began my ascent.

"Take care, sug'! Try not to hit any birds!"

"I shall endeavor not to, mother!," I shouted, before taking off in the direction of Gerald's Vine Street apartment.

Helga's description of the city lit up for the holiday season had truly not done the actual sight justice. The myriad twinkling points of light painted the cityscape in a dazzling panoply of Yuletide festivity. Truly, to behold this was a privilege. I wondered what the pedestrians below those that chanced to look up, would think of me. Perhaps I appeared as a distant aircraft, or a nocturnal bird that had not elected to migrate. Surely the reaction would be far different in the event that they could see my profile clearly. Mob mentality fears the unknown, and I was as unknown as people came. No, it was best I kept my altitude.

Even as I approached my destination, my apprehension grew. My parents' assurances had bolstered me thus far, but now were starting to slip away. Visions of every way this evening could go wrong were playing out in my mind. I could frighten Timberly with my appearance, or cause damage with my enhanced strength or provide a target for one of the enemies Helga had warned about or for all I know I emit some sort of horrible cancer-causing radiation and-

-oh, what is wrong with me? Logic and reason have been my purview since childhood and now I let myself fall to baseless, idle speculation? Get ahold of yourself, Heyerdahl! These people are like a second family to you! Snap out of your self-doubt spiral. Nut up, as Helga would say!

I rang the doorbell. No going back now.

--

-GERALD-

"She's gonna be here any minute!" I warned. "Now listen… she's probably gonna be very self-conscious, so don't go sayin' anything that'll make her feel bad. Okay? Can you do this one thing for me?"
"What're you sayin', squirt?" Jamie-O said, putting me in a headlock. "You sayin' I can't be discreet? You sayin' I'm not a sensitive, caring person?"

"Dunno what would give him that Idea," Timberly said rolling her eyes. Timberly had discovered sarcasm shortly into third grade and now used it at every opportunity. I can't believe I'm saying this, but I kind of miss her sickeningly cute days.

"James Orville Johansen, you let go of your brother right now." My mother demanded, "I want everyone on their best behavior. Us included."

"Honey, I'm not sure how we-" Dad protested.

"You can come on a little strong. So can I. Let's try to rein it in tonight."

The doorbell rang. "This is it," I said. "For corn sake, try not to overreact."

Mom opened the door. Phoebe stood there, looking, as always, absolutely adorable. "Greetings, Mrs. Johansen," she said, bowing slightly, wings draped around her shoulders, upper hands clasped in front of her. "I am quite grateful for the invitation."

'It's always a pleasure, dear," mom answered graciously. "Why don't you come in and have a seat. Dinner will be ready in-"

"OH EM GEE!" interrupted Timberly. "What the heck happened to YOU?"

Of course she did. Palm, meet face.

"…and that's basically the whole story," concluded Phoebe. "And don't worry. I'm not contagious."

"So you're saying there's absolutely no way this could spread." Dad asked, still a little apprehensive.

"The original spores aren't viable anymore. Apparently they die off very quickly when exposed to the air. So that vector is closed. The virus is active in my bloodstream, but it can't be spread by casual contact." Dad gave me a you better not be engaging in non-casual contact look as Phoebe continued. "To actually infect someone, I would have to bleed directly into their open wound. Which, given my body's durability and rapid healing, is not likely to happen any time soon. You really have nothing to fear from my presence."

Mom gave dad a See, this was what I'm talking about look. "You must be glad to have your friends safely back in town," she prompted, veering the conversation away from the topic of whether Phoebe was a ticking genetic time bomb.

"Oh, yes, very much so. In a way, I was the lucky one. I was never in any real danger. MDI was perfectly secure and I was under very good care. This is…" she blushed a bit. "…actually my first night away since I changed. It's… actually rather nice to be in normal surroundings for a change."

"Why?" asked Timberly. "Normal people suck."

"Timberly!" scolded mom.

"I'm just sayin' if I had superpowers I'd be out usin' them and not hangin' around boring regular people."

Inwardly, I groaned. Trust little sisters to mess things up. At least Jamie-O had been relatively well-behaved…
"Actually, Timberly, I prefer to think of myself as one of those 'boring, regular people'. Only my physical self was changed. In regards to my personality, I am the same as I've always been."

On the other hand, Phoebe was handling herself really well. A lot better than I'd given her credit for. I was worried that she'd be fragile, but she was giving as good as she got.

Dinner was meatloaf, mac n' cheese and my mom's famous Caesar salad (the secret ingredient is capers, but don't tell anyone). The conversation turned to more normal topics; maybe my parents sensed that Phoebe was getting uncomfortable with all the talk revolving around her.

"So, how was school today, Timberly?" asked dad.

"Boring. We still have a substitute. Miss Pataki still hasn't showed up."

"Odd," Phoebe said. "I conjectured that she was absent because she was distraught over Helga's abduction, but Helga's been back for several days at this point. I can't imagine where she could be."

"That IS weird. You don't think she went on some crazy mission to find her sister, did you?"

"Are you suggesting Olga Pataki… the Olga Pataki we are familiar with… is on some sort of undercover espionage endeavor? Doesn't that strike you as… rather preposterous?"

"True… the chick barely kept it together in San Lorenzo. She's probably on some sort of cryin' jag or somethin'…"

"So, how much you bench?" asked Jamie-O suddenly. There it is, the other shoe dropping.

"I beg your pardon?" asked Phoebe.

"Like… you're supposed to be strong, right? I mean, you're tiny, but the squirt here says you're like a blue Supergirl. So what are we talking about? Five hundred pounds? Seven-fifty?"

I squeezed Phoebe's hand. "You don't have to answer that if you don't want…"

"…actually, it's far in excess of that. My upper limit has been measured at roughly nine tons. It's likely I will grow even stronger as I mature. Basically…" Phoebe gave Jamie-O a pointed look. "…if I were you, I'd be treating Gerald a lot better than I was." Yes! My girl. I gotta stop worrying. She's clearly got this.

--

-PHOEBE-

The rest of dinner proceeded fairly normally. Timberly, of course, was very inquisitive about my many mutations, but there's nothing wrong with curiosity, and I endeavored to answer all her questions to the fullest of my abilities.

"Two hearts, three lungs, four kidneys, three stomachs, and I have two of an organ that's sort of a fused liver and pancreas. It's actually packed pretty tight in here." I patted my abdomen for emphasis.

"Well, three stomachs certainly explains your healthy appetite," Mrs. Johansen commented.

"Flying cconsumes a lot of energy. Thankfully, you excellent culinary creations shall no doubt provide more than adequate fuel for the trip."

"Oh, I hope you're not leaving so soon," she replied. "It's family game night and, well, you're practically family…"
"Oooh!" Timberly demanded. "My turn to pick the game! I wanna play 'Evidence!' And Phoebe's on my team! No offense, guys, but she's way cooler than either of you."

"I graciously accept your invitation." I replied.

"Hey wait... does this mean I'm stuck stuck with Jamie-O? Man, this reeks!"

"Uh uh. No way, dweeb. I'm way too old for board games. I got places to be."

"House rules, James," Mr. Johanssen said. "One game. Then you're free for the night."

"Pfft. Fine. It'll be over fast anyway. Gerald's girlfriend'll probably cheat with her X-Ray vision."

"I assure you, that's not an ability I possess." Of course, I probably could achieve some sort of advantage with my existing infra-red vision, but that would be underhanded!

"'Sides, we don't need to cheat to take you boys to school, do we?" Timberly held up a hand for a hi-five, and I returned it with both left hands in succession; after all, to leave her hanging would be a faux pas of the highest magnitude.

"Absolutely. No offense, Gerald, but it is my solemn duty at this moment to utterly destroy you."

"Ahem," Timberly cleared her throat. "After a thorough examination of the clues, we've come to a conclusion. The perse... the propa... the guy who did it was Lady Crimson, in the Solarium, with the short length of hose!"

The other players checked their cards to confirm that yes, our guess was the correct one.

"Fine, they won," Jamie-O said. "Now can I leave?"

"Yes! Run!" Timberly declared. "Run and wallow in the shame of defeat! Go and tell the world of your failure, for you have fallen to the might of... the... Timberly Wolves!"

"I love it. Any other takers, or do we retire undefeated?"


"I know when I'm beaten," Mr. Johansen admitted.

"Yes," Mrs. Johansen continued. "You know us old folks, we just don't have the stamina for all-nighters anymore. Why don't we just knock off for the night."

"Now, honey, I didn't..."

"We don't want to be in the way, do we," she said pointedly, dragging him off.

Timberly smirked. "So... what'll you give me to leave."

Gerald glared. "You see? That whole cute act? It's a front and you buy right into it."

"You're just mad I like her more than you," Timberly retorted, the smirk not moving. "I'm thinkin'... five bucks."

"Grrr... you little extortionist..." He rummaged in his wallet. "Four. And that's all you're getting."

"Fine. But only because I'm a sucker for romance. Have a pleasant evening, you two, and it was a
pleasure doing business with you, big bro." She skipped off happily to her room. "Told you it would work, Phoebe!"

"…wait what? You knew about this? You conspired against me, your boyfriend, with my own sister?"

"I got us some alone time, didn't I?" I said, inching closer to him on the couch.

"I notice you didn't put your money on the line…"

"You got off easy and you know it," I said, wrapping my right arms around his shoulder and waist.

"Hey… did it, get, ah, warmer in here?" He stammered, his voice cracking a bit. He tugged his hoodie's collar.

"My body temperature is several degrees above the human norm, but I suspect that's not what you're referring to," I said, smiling and leaning my head against his shoulder.

"…y'know," he said, regaining his composure, "I probably shouldn't have been… I mean, I clearly should have given you more credit… but I was worried about how you'd handle this night. But you were a total pro. You probably weren't scared one bit!"

"Oh, no. Actually, I was quite terrified."

"…seriously?"

"Oh, yes. Absolutely petrified. At one point, I was seriously considering boling. I would've made a beeline for Elk Island, and lived the rest of my days as a cryptid hermit."

"No way."

"I think I would have made an excellent urban legend. I'm certain you would have woven a narrative fully capable of doing me justice."

He assumed his Keeper of the Legends voice. "Legend has it, to this day, the elusive Phoebe survives on wild berries and stolen Wi-Fi. If you listen closely on moonlit nights, you can hear her correcting scientific inaccuracies."

I giggled. "What a strange creature."

"I hear she's cute though. And smart. And funny. I sure would like to meet her some-MMMPH!"
That shut him up.

"You were saying?" I said when my lips released his.

"…I forgot."

"That's what I thought," I said, cuddling back up.

All in all, I would have to say the Date Night Experiment has proved a resounding success.
Ozymandias

Chapter Summary

In which Bob wallows, Miriam resolves, and the author gets pretentious and starts things off by quoting a poem.

Chapter 24

Ozymandias

I met a traveller from an antique land,

Who said—"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,

Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,

And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,

Tell that its sculptor well those passions read

Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,

The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;

And on the pedestal, these words appear:

My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;

Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay

Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare

The lone and level sands stretch far away."

-Percy Bysshe Shelley, Ozymandias

--

Bob's Beeper Emporium, Wednesday morning

-BOB-

I stared at the wreckage of the shattered display case. I'm not sure exactly why I expected it to be any different… in the good old days I would've had people to clean this up.

But then, in the good old days, this would've never happened, would it? In the good old days, this place would be full of people, I'd be the King, everyone would be loyal. Now, this display case was
the perfect, whaddayacallit, metaphor for my life. My business was a wreck. My family was a wreck. Everything was falling apart around me. Miriam had been growing more useless by the day, and now both of my daughters had abandoned me. The other one I might've expected. That girl never had her head screwed on right. But Olga… OLGA… Olga had never talked back to me, except for that one time when she was engaged to that Doug LeShamme guy. Whatever happened to that guy, anyway? He was one heck of a catch.

But even then, she'd never just flat-out laid into me the way she did that day. And why? All I did was call Helga an ungrateful moody brat. It's the truth! I work my fingers to the bone for her, for this family, and she never ever thanks me. Am I wrong to expect a little gratitude from the people I clothe and feed?

I started sweeping up the broken glass. Some of the devices were probably okay, but the case, that was done. I was gonna have to take it apart and throw it out. Last thing I need.

She'd done it. It. That… thing wearing my girl's face. It had dared to come in here, pretending to be her, acting like it had any right to be here, daring to criticize my decisions, destroying my property. And then Miriam had taken ITS side. As if I was wrong.

I had come that close to doing the one thing I swore I would never do.

"I'm leaving, B."

I'd barely registered it at first. "Uh huh." The Enginola 370 was a loss, but I would probably be able to get something for that Nikoa with a couple of scratches. The Palmbuddies were in good condition; people still used those, right?

"I said, I'm leaving."

She was firmer this time. In fact, firmer than I'd heard her in ages.

"I heard you. Bring back coffee. How long you gonna be out?"

"I don't think you get what's going on here, B."

"Whaddaya talking about?" I said, finally turning around. "All I wanna know is-"

She looked alert, more alert than she'd been since I have no idea when. And she'd packed a bag.

"Oh, so you're going to walk out on me too?"

"I'm going to find our girls."

"We don't have girls, Miriam. We have one traitor and one… thing."

"A THING? Bob, h-how could you call our daughter that?"

"THAT wasn't our daughter, Miriam. Maybe it took you in, but there is no way I'm accepting that monster is my girl! I don't know what its game is, but Big Bob Pataki ain't gettin' played for no sucker!"

"Are you saying I don't know my own daughter?" There was a cold fury in her voice, and I knew I had crossed a line there.

"Look, I-" She cut me off.
"I'm leaving, Bob. And, honestly… I'm not sure I'll be back. All I know is… this… can't continue. Not the way it is."

"Look, I," I tried again. "Maybe things aren't great right now, but we've stuck together until now."

"Our daughters… one of whom, need I remind you, is eleven… have run away. Your business is approaching bankruptcy. And your bright idea to get us out of the hole is to turn the store into a money-laundering operation for the mob. Do you know what rock bottom is?"

"Honey-"

"Rock bottom is when you're so far gone that can't see the world crumbling around you. Alcohol was my excuse, B. What's yours?"

"I-"

"You need to decide, Bob. What's more important to you? Your family? Or keeping this place on life-support?"

"Honey, you're asking me to give up on my dream!"

"Dreams end, Bob. They're very nice while they last, but they end. And then you have to face reality."

She was right, of course. I'd gone over the numbers in my head over and over and in the end, this business was simply unsustainable. But it had been drilled into me from a young age; Patakis don't lose. Big Franz Pataki had made that crystal clear every time I brought back a C, with his belt, or when that wasn't available, his fists. Nothing quite drove a lesson home like that.

(At least I've never done that, right? I can honestly say, at least I've never laid a hand on anyone I've loved. That makes me better than him, right?)

I could salvage this right now. I could admit I was wrong, beg for forgiveness,

But Patakis don't beg. That's another thing that's been beaten into me.

"Fine. Get out. I don't need you." The anger, which had faded, was starting to build again. How dare she accuse me of putting my business before my family? Who was she? I'm the man here! She should be listening to me!

"I guess you don't." She shouldered her back and walked out. "Good luck with your business, Bob. Oh, wait… that's kind of not yours anymore either, is it?" And with that, she exited my life, maybe for good.

It didn't matter anymore. Nothing mattered.

I dragged myself to my chair, the one piece of furniture left from our old place. I'd be damned if I ever sold my chair. I sagged into my throne, a king with no crown, no court, no kingdom. No queen.

The door opened again, and Little Gino entered with several of his boys. "Whoa, what happened here?" he commented, taking a drag off a cheap cigar. "Looks like a B&E, some theft…" he nodded at his associates, who started collecting the scattered electronics. "Yep, you should put in a claim for all that stolen merch." He nodded at them again; they smashed open another display case.

"My insurance isn't exactly paid up," I protested.
"Don't worry about that. We've taken the liberty of taking out a policy on you. You'll get what's comin'… after we get our cut, of course."

"Of course." It was already starting. My stupidity and stubbornness had cost me my business and my family, but at least someone was making bank, right?

"Oh, and an associate of mine will be dropping by soon. We're gonna need storage space for some… special merchandise of ours."

"Special" probably meaning "very illegal." Whatever.

Not like it's my place.

--
-MIRIAM-

Well, that was a pretty speech, wasn't it? If only I knew where I was going from here. It had taken every erg of motivation in me to do what I had just done. Motivation was just not something that came easy to me. Depression tended to be like that. A lot of people simply dismiss depression as being sad. It's not that at all, though. It was more like… if I had to give it a description… a weight. It dragged you down. It sapped your will. You can't just "get happy"… that was simply not how it works. Depression was a constant companion. Even when I was feeling good, it was there, lurking in the background.

Just as it was now, when the thrill of walking out on Bob was starting to wear off and I found myself now walking aimlessly, no idea where to go or what to do with myself. Where would I even start? This was a pretty sizeable city, how was I supposed to find two individual people in this city of hundreds of thousands, one of whom was capable of flying? I needed to think. I needed to clear my mind. A drink would clear my mind. I should get a drink. I'll go get one now.

I was actually a quarter of the way to the bar before I came to my senses. That's how insidious the need was. It had me doing things before I even was aware of it. I needed to deal with that. That was step two. Step one was finding my babies. And I had nowhere to begin. More aimless wandering, I guess. A drink will he-

See? It just keeps sneaking back into your head, telling you it'll solve all your problems, conveniently neglecting to mention it's the thing actually causing the problems. I did need to clear my head. Coffee. Coffee would help.

Bigal's café wasn't too far, and would serve as an immediate goal until I could plan better. The coffee there wasn't too great but it also was pretty cheap, and considering I probably didn't have much in my purse… how much did I have?

I checked. $108.00? When did I get that? I don't remember getting it. Am I that out of it? Well, it'll keep me going for a little while. I need a job, too, if I really plan on leaving B behind, even on a temporary basis. That's step 3. Or maybe 2. Step 3 is getting help for my drinking problem. All this is overwhelming. I should get a drink.

GAH.

I took a look in the window, spotting a familiar face. Of course, this was a popular neighborhood eatery, so the odds of seeing someone I knew was pretty high.

I'd gotten to know this particular person during a summer beach trip about a year and a half ago. We'd taken dance classes together and the experience had greatly lightened up what I expected to be
a dreary trip (I do not tan well and I'm not a fan of sand. It's coarse and it gets everywhere). On the whole, it was just nice to actually make a friend.

Suzie and I had stayed in contact for a little while after the trip, but as usual I vanished back down the hole again and we lost touch. So it was a pretty odd coincidence that here she was again now that I was dragging myself back out of it. She was in one of the booths in the back, talking to some guy. Smiling. Girlishly giggling?

Was this a date? I remember she was married seemingly not particularly happily, to a rather sketchy East-European guy. This guy was a rather pleasant-looking redhead guy with a bushy mustache. He looked vaguely familiar… maybe from one of the parent-teacher gatherings I'd actually managed to drag myself to? Maybe he was one of Helga's friends' fathers…

In any case, this was none of my business. I went in, ordered a coffee and took a table at the opposite end. I sat there nursing my coffee and wondering just what I was going to do now.

I was still lost in my thoughts when she came over. "Miriam?" I looked up. "I haven't seen you around in ages! What have you been doing with yourself? Why didn't you come up and say hi?"

"Oh, uh… well… you know… you looked busy, and I didn't want to interrupt you."

"Oh, nonsense, you wouldn't have been an interruption. In any case, Larry had to run back to work, so I'm free now."

I gave her a conspiratorial look. "So… who is this 'Larry'? You looked pretty friendly. Weren't you married to that Oswald guy?"

"Oskar, and, actually… today's my ten month divorce-aversary! I was just celebrating."

"You're divorced?"

"I know… I was married to Oskar for fourteen years, but… sometimes you have to make a change. I kept thinking, 'Oh, maybe he'll get better, maybe he'll finally quit gambling, maybe he'll finally get a real job and I won't have to work myself into an early grave to pay off his rapidly accumulating debts, maybe he'll actually start showing me some actual consideration on a regular basis and not only when I'm on the verge of walking out on him', but you know? It wasn't going to happen, and I guess I finally accepted that."

"You seem really happy."

"I am, actually. I got a big promotion at work, I'm seeing a much nicer guy… it's been as if I've gotten rid of this huge weight that's been holding me down."

"Really. So. Tell me about this Larry."

"Oh, well, he used to be a farmer over in Kansas until he lost his wife a few years back. He hit some financial difficulties after that, the bank foreclosed on his farm, and he had to move over here with his daughter – I simply adore her, by the way, she's the sweetest thing; hopefully she'll warm up to me eventually – and since then he's been working as the produce department manager over at the Alvinsons' on Pine Street. Actually… I'm the first woman he's been out with in five years."

"It must have been difficult for him." Good, keep her talking about herself, we don't need to get into me…

"He likes to focus on going forward, not dwelling on the past. We're a lot alike like that. Anyway, I
"think we've talked about me enough. What have you been up to?" Well, there goes that strategy.

"Oh, you know… nothing really big…"

"It kind of looks like you're going somewhere." Damn it, why do you have to be so perceptive.

"I, um… well… uh… " I hung my head. There was no getting around this. "I left Bob."

She leaned forward. "What happened."

"A lot of things. I don't know if it's permanent, I just know I can't be with him right now."

"It sounds like you really need to talk about it. It's a really good thing you ran into me."

"Don't you have to be getting back to work too?"

"Pfft. I'm the day manager at Budnicks. I'm basically the boss. What am I gonna do, fire me for being a little late? Now, come on. Dish."

"I… I don't know where to begin, really. Do I start with the collapse of the beeper market, or… well… it goes back further than that, really…"

"If you need a moment to gather your thoughts, we can always order more coffee."

"No… actually, this goes back much farther. B and I got married very young. Just out of high school, really. He worked in his dad's import-export business while I was training… I made the US Olympic swim team, you know… but then I got pregnant and that was pretty much it for that. When I had Olga, the post-partum depression hit really bad, and I started to develop a bit of a drinking problem, but I was able to keep it under control for the most part. Some time after that, B lost his father and took over the business. He had this idea that beepers would be the future, really threw himself into it. I was left alone a lot. And depression and drinking are a dangerous combination. It's like a dark hole and the sides are slippery, so it's really hard to climb out." I took a breath. None of this was more than window dressing for why I ultimately walked out, but once I started, it was hard to stop. "I did when I got pregnant a second time, but after I gave birth to Helga, it started getting even worse.

"Now, Olga was a very talented girl, very outgoing. Bob used to lavish attention on her. I think… maybe too much. Helga was different, introverted, solitary. She just sort of fell into the shadows naturally while Olga sucked up all our attention, and even when Olga had moved on to college, we were stuck in the habit of ignoring her. I'm not trying to make excuses for it. There are none. We should have never let it get so bad."

Suzie had been sitting there listening patiently as I went on and on, nodding occasionally but otherwise showing no judgement either way. I had no idea what she could possibly thinking during my heartfelt confession of alcoholism and parental neglect.

I decided to cut to the chase. "Anyway, the bottom recently fell out of the beeper market. The signs were there for years, but B was convinced that smartphones were just going to be a fad. People were still buying the flip phones and Loganberries we sold, so we held on for a while, but then that market dried up. The only business we really get right now is people coming in to buy batteries, and even that isn't much considering you can get those anywhere.

"So, the business Bob built so hard is going down the tubes. My drinking is getting worse than ever. Everything around this time gets to be sort of hazy, but at one point, Helga and Olga went down to San Lorenzo and got mixed up in this whole to-do involving river pirates and a lost civilization,
honestly it was like something out of a crazy movie. Bob even dragged me down there to mount a rescue mission, as useless as I was.

"You would think THAT would be the craziest part of the scenario, but this next part… well, I'm not sure how to put it in a way that wouldn't get me dragged off to rehab. Or the nuthouse."

"Try me," Suzie prodded.

"Well… the business, and me, continue to deteriorate. Bob even turns down a very generous offer from Buckley Lloyd to buy the Beeper Emporium and convert it into retail space. And then, right after that, Helga vanishes. That was the last straw. Forget about being down a hole, it was like someone rolled a boulder over it. I was only vaguely aware that B and Olga had a huge fight and she stormed out.

"The next thing I'm aware of, I'm being shaken out of my stupor by Helga. I think this is it, I finally managed to kill myself and wind up in hell, because when I look at her, she has horns and fangs and gigantic bat wings."

"You were probably just seeing things, Miriam."

"That's just it… I wasn't. She really was back, all on her own, and that's really what she looked like. I've never been happier to see anyone in my life, Suzie. Maybe she was different, but my baby was back and in my arms and all was right with the world again for one moment.

"And then it all went to hell again. Just as she got back, Bob was in the middle of making a deal with an underworld figure to clean up his debts. That's how out of it I was. Bob was throwing in with the mob, and I just let it slip by me. Well, when Helga finds out, she gets right in his face and lets him have it, and of course B does NOT take backtalk well, so he gets in HER face, and in the middle of their fight he calls my girl a freak. Well. Helga loses it, smashes a display case… with her bare fists, mind you… and storms out of there.

"And that was when I realized that things had to change. I simply couldn't let Bob drive away everything I cared about with his stubborn refusal to face reality. And so, this morning, I told him in no uncertain terms that he had to decide what was important in his life. Then I walked out."

I took a deep breath, having finally come to the end of my screed, "So… that's where I am right now. I'm going to find my girls, and I'm going to get my life together. I have no idea how I'm going to do either of those things, but at least I have a goal in mind, right?"

"It's always good to start so- did you say she had wings?"

I nodded. "Wings, a tail, two sets of arms… she said she was mutated by alien spores, and that she'd been on some sort of fantastic journey across the Northwest… honestly, if I hadn't seen it with my own two eyes, I'd lock me up in the loony bin too."

"Well… if she looks like that, she'll be easy to find, won't she." Suzie remarked. "Can't be many people like that in Hillwood."

"I guess, but Helga can be very good at not being found when she doesn't want to be. And I'm not sure she wants to be."

"It doesn't seem like she's mad at you specifically…"

"Of course she is. I've always taken his side in the past. She has no reason to think any different this time."
"Well.. at least let me help you out. If you need a place to stay, I have room in my apartment, and there might be an opening at the store. I'll have to check."

"Thanks, but you've done more than enough just hearing me out. Especially since the ending sounds a lot like a madman's diary."

"That's what friends are for, Miriam." She paused. "Alien spores?"

"Tell you what, if I do find her, she can tell you herself."

"When," Suzie corrected, putting a reassuring hand on mind. "When you find her."
You are Cordially Invited...

Chapter Summary

In which invitations are handed out and Lila's dark side emerges.

Chapter 25

You Are Cordially Invited

PS 118 Lunchroom

The Monday after Helga and Rhonda returned to Hillwood

-ARNOLD-

"Ah reckon today's the day, fellers," Stinky drawled, his eyes gazing at the target of his affections. "Ah'm gonna go over there and declare mah intentions to one Rani Patel."

Arnold glanced over at the table Stinky was staring at. Rani was a recent arrival from Portland, daughter of a wealthy cardiologist and a restaurant owner. She was new to PS118, but in the time she'd been here, she'd pretty much become the Rhonda Lloyd of Class 6B. The petite dark-skinned girl was sitting at her accustomed table, holding court to Gloria, Katrinka and Mary, her fellow 6B girls.

"Yeah, right. You said that last week, and the week before, and the week before that," scoffed Sid. "Face it, you're never ever gonna do it."

"Even if he does, it's not like anything's gonna happen." added Harold, halfway through an Italian hoagie. "She's way outta your league. She's like… Indian Rhonda."

I sort of half-listened to their conversation, since it was pretty much the same conversation they'd been having nearly every lunch period. Stinky would eventually give in to their discouragement, and the conversation would move on to whichever sports team won last night or a recent TV show or something.

Speculation on the missing Helga, Phoebe and Rhonda still came up on occasion. Last Wednesday, Principal Wartz had informed the student body of the missing girls' return in what might have been the most awkward way possible.

The previous Wednesday, first period

--

"BZZZT – Attention, students. I am pleased to inform you that Rhonda Lloyd and Helga Pataki are no longer missing and have returned home safely. Due to circumstances that I am legally not allowed to discuss, but which certainly have nothing to do with any bizarre physical condition they've been affected by, they will remain absent until the end of the semester. Again, the reasons behind this absence are not in any way unusual and let's all not speculate on what they may be. That will be all."

"Aw, c'mon!" Harold complained. "That just makes me wanna talk about it more!"
I glanced at Gerald and Nadine. The three of us knew everything, but the girls had sworn us to secrecy about their condition for the time being. They'd let slip that Brainy and Eugene knew and that Rhonda had spoken to Patty yesterday, but everyone else was still in the dark and they wanted to avoid too many people finding out before the right time. Helga had especially insisted on not telling Harold, Sid or Stinky. "If Moe, Larry and Shemp find out before we're ready for it, it's all over," she'd said. I couldn't exactly blame her for that, especially since two out of three had been to blame for the whole "bunny pajamas" incident. I still hated Easter.

--

I had thought last week was bad…. Helga being absent, not knowing where she was… but this wasn't much better. I knew she was home now, but she still wasn't with me (okay, to be fair, she was mostly living at the boarding house now, so I still got to see plenty of her). It was so stupid… she shouldn't have to hide just because of some random genetic infection. She was still the same Helga she'd always been, under the half-alien body. She deserved to be right here with everyone. They all did.

But Helga was right too… a lot of their classmates were a bit… maturity-challenged? Harold, for example, mercilessly jumped on any chance to make fun of anyone, while Sid's paranoia constantly got the better of him, and Stinky would pretty much fall in line with whichever one was acting out at the time. Their reaction to literal human-alien hybrid versions of their friends couldn't be predicted.

The half-paid-attention-to conversation had moved on to the upcoming (for most; Harold was already in the midst of Chanukah) holiday and plans thereto. I smiled to myself; this would be our first Christmas together as a couple and I was looking forward to us doing all the traditional things together: bobbing for apples, watching horror movies… okay, so they weren't the right traditional things, but they were fun and that's what mattered. There'd be plenty of time for Christmas on the Fourth of July, anyway.

My reverie was interrupted by Nadine placing an envelope with a black-and-orange Christmas tree design on it in front of me. "Hey guys," she said. "Rhonda wanted me to make sure everyone got these. Party's on, and it's gonna be the best ever."

I opened the envelope.

Miss Rhonda Wellington Lloyd
cordially invites all members
of the PS118 6th Grade Class
to the Event of the Season

Tuesday, December 26, 2017
4:00-9:00 PM

HALLOWEENSMAS

Costumes are encouraged but not mandatory
A buffet dinner will be served
Live DJ, dancing, and karaoke contest

DON'T MISS IT

So they really were going through with this.

"Wait I don't get it," Harold pondered. "Is this a Christmas party or Halloween invitations that got delayed? Awww, this is so confusing!"
"I reckon this is some sorta trendy thing. Rhonda's all about trends. It's like that fusion cuisine, but with holidays or somethin'."

Sid looked around the table. "Don't you think there's something weird about this? I mean… supposedly she's too traumatized to go to school, but not so traumatized that she'll host some huge Christmas party? Boy howdy, something's really off here."

I was a little worried about this sort of thing. Kids were already getting suspicious. Okay, so right now, it was just Sid, and he was suspicious of everything, but he had a habit of getting into peoples' heads and convincing them of his paranoid delusions. He even had me seriously entertaining, for the briefest of moments, the ridiculous idea that Stinky was a vampire. Of course, since Helga had confirmed the existence of gnomes, ghosts, and other supernatural creatures, it was entirely possible that vampires did exist… but there was no way Stinky was one, right?

In any case, it was probably better to nip the idle speculation in the bud. "Well… you know what Rhonda's like, right? Maybe what she needs is to be the center of attention again. That'll make her feel more like she used to, and she'll be able to get back to being her usual self."

"Sure, that makes sense, I guess" Gerald added, playing along. "Rhonda's all about parties."

"Who am I to question the whims of my beloved?" said a voice from under the table.

"Pretty sure the Campfire Lasses have stopped lookin' for you, Curly," Gerald replied.

"That's what they want you to think. Fools! I'm one step ahead of them!"

Gerald gave me a "How do you deal with this?" look. I returned a "Forget it, Gerald, it's Curly" look.

"All I know is she had me at 'buffet,'" Harold commented.

"Well, I'm going, but only so I can say 'I told you so,’” Sid added. "And 'cause if I'm wrong it's still a cool party."

It looked like the crisis was averted, at least temporarily. I got up from the table, only to bump into Lila.

"Arnold! I'm ever-so-glad to bump into you!” she said. There was a time when I would've been overjoyed to hear those words from her. Back in fourth grade, I had a huge crush on the girl, thanks to her sweet nature, intelligence, wit, and down-home good looks. She still had all these things, but I'd gotten over her a long time ago. There was a lot of sweetness, sure, but there was no spice in the mix. Cotton candy was okay, but I needed the mouth-searing habanero that was Helga Pataki in my life.

"What's wrong?” I asked. Lila wasn't one of the people who usually came to me for help. I wondered what the problem could possibly be.

"Um, well… this is probably ever-so-presumptuous of me, but, I'm just not sure who to go to."

"Go on…” I used to find those ever-sos just "ever-so" charming, but these days, they felt "ever-so" annoying and I just wished "oh-so-much” that she would get to her point.

"Well… it's just been me and my dad for a long time, but… lately he's been seeing someone…” Her foot scuffed back and forth on the lunchroom tile.
"That's great!" I said.

"No, it's terrible, it's just oh-so-terrible! He's not ready to be with anyone else!"

"Um… he's a grown man, I'm pretty sure he knows what he's doing. Anyway, why would you even come to me? It's none of my business if your father's dating."

"I'm certain it's because the woman," she said this with obvious disgust, "is someone you know. Her name's Suzie. She said she used to live at your grandparents' place."

"Suzie?" I found myself chuckling. "Lila, you have nothing to worry about. Suzie's one of the nicest people I know. I'm sure she'd never do anything to hurt your dad."

"Yes, well, I'm ever-so-certain her ex-husband thought the same thing. I haven't gone into this blind, Arnold. I've done my homework. I know she's already broken one heart. What makes you think she wouldn't wreck one more?"

"Lila… I think you're being ridiculous."

"And I think you're being naïve, just ever-so-naïve. You think the best of everyone, but only the Lord is perfect. People have wicked intentions. And if you won't do anything, I'll be forced to do this on my own." She stormed off, fuming. I'd never seen her this upset, not since that first week when the girls had gotten jealous of her instant popularity and nearly bullied her out of the school. Even then, she was just sad, not actively angry. I wondered if she'd always had this dark side to her personality and I'd just never seen it before, whether her worry for her father was just now pushing it to the surface. Either way, I should probably warn Suzie.

--

After school, I hurried back home. Mondays were usually baseball day at Gerald Field, but with the weather getting colder and colder, we weren't likely to get enough people. In any case, I needed my Helga fix.

After opening the door and avoiding the stampede, I entered the boarding house common room to find Ernie and Mr. Huynh engaged in a heated game of checkers.

"Up there," Ernie simply stated.

"Up wh-" I was cut off by a bit of fluffy yellow hair tickling my nose, attached to a cord of rosy flesh.

"Hey, football head, nice day at the salt mines?"

I looked up. Helga had attached herself to the ceiling. "What are you doing up there?" I said, knowing that Helga was just as likely to just do it for kicks.

"Well, your grandpa has this notion that if I'm gonna be mooching free room and board offa him, I should at least do some chores around the house. So right now, he's got me fixing the cracks in the ceiling, since it's so easy for me to get up here."

"I'll talk to him. You kinda have enough to worry about without having house maintenance on your plate."

"Nah, it's cool. Lord knows I've done enough damage to this place over the years, I might as well fix something for a change, right?"

She dropped off the ceiling, landing neatly, wings spread to slow her drop, before snapping them
back to their resting position. "And Pataki nails the dismount!" she declared.

"Thank god," Ernie grumbled. "I'm more or less used to her by now, but that crawling on the ceiling... now that is freaky. It's like that baby scene in Trainspotting."

"Yes!" added Mr. Huynh, shuddering. "I see that movie with Ernie last week! Very, very creepy scene! Babies still freak me out!"


"You actually miss everyone, don't you?" I said smugly.

"OH MY GOD I'M GOING CRAZY! I just want my life to be freakin' normal again! Not me... I like being the way I am... just my life! I'm sick of hiding! I wanna just be able to go out and do stuff again, and not have to wear a huge overcoat and hat like a stack of kids pretending to be an adult! Is that too much to ask, Arnold? IS IT?"

"No, of course not. I promise, somehow we're gonna find a way for you to get back out there and still be yourself. I have no idea how..."

"Aw, when's that ever stopped you? Do we have to go into your list of accomplishments?"

"That's really not necessary-"

"You saved the Circle Theater, ended the teachers' strike, cured Stoop Kid's fear of leaving his stoop, saved the Jolly Olly Man from an underage lynch mob..."

"That was actually the weather..."

"...foiled a penny counterfeiting scheme purely by accident, got Torvald to finally pass fourth grade, got Eugene out of a false accusation, got us in the book of world records, reunited Mr. Huynh with his daughter..."

"...I think we both know that one wasn't me..."

"...saved us all from dying horribly in a parade float accident, saved Mighty Pete, reconciled Rhonda and Nadine, led us to victory in the Mud Bowl, ended the Curly standoff, brought Agatha Caulfield out of retirement, stopped Big Patty from murdering me, restarted Dino Spumoni's career, helped Harold lose all that weight, won Mr. Green a city council seat, took down Sheck..."

"A lot of that one was you."

"...got that sketchy East European guy a job, helped him learn to read, AND helped him pass the citizenship test, brought an end to Trash Can Day, reunited Mr. Green with his estranged son, caught the Hillwood Strangler..."

"...okay, THAT I had nothing to do with..."

"...sorry, got carried away... oh and there was that time you SAVED AN ANCIENT CIVILIZATION..."

"Once again, you played a pretty big part in that one."

"You know what I mean! Even counting the stuff I did, you've got a pretty crazy resume. So I
actually believe that you have what it takes to make it so one day I'll be able to walk down the street in broad daylight again."

"Well… there's at least Rhonda's party, right? You'll see everyone there."

"Yeah… Princess is convinced this whole 'Halloween on Christmas' scheme'll pay off. Personally, I think it'll be a disaster, but I'm going along because I'm sure it'll be a hilarious disaster."

"Hey, they might just surprise you."

Helga raised her left eyebrow in a "you're kidding, right? You know who we're dealing with." smirk. "If it works, more power to her. I just don't wanna get my hopes up too far."

"Nadine passed out the invitations today. Looks like everybody's going, so I'm actually feeling kinda good about it."

"Everyone, hm? No protests? No I'm oh-so-certain we shouldn't be trivializing the birth of Our Lord by combining it with frivolous celebrations based around a pagan holiday’?"

"Lila's kind of focused on her own troubles. She's all bent out of shape because her dad's dating again."

"So, Ms. Perfect is capable of negative feelings. Will wonders never cease."

"I tried to tell her she should be happy for her dad, but she tried to rope me into some kind of scheme to break him up with his new girlfriend, who happens to be a friend of mine, so you can see why I don't want to get involved with-"

"Oh, man! Lila is plotting actual schemes? I really have been away from school too long!"

"This is serious. It's really out-of-character for her."

"Oh, I dunno… you know what they say. Beware the nice ones. They could snap like *snap* that. I knew there was a dark side lurking under that sugary exterior, just waiting to come out… like… those gross candies that're black licorice inside." She shuddered. "Never again, Good & Plenty. Never again."

"She's probably just venting. I doubt she's actually going to do anything."

"Never say never, Arnoldo. We live in strange times. " There was a thump upstairs. "Case in point. Princess is up there getting kung-fu lessons from your grandma. If I know my thumps right, she just got herself flipped again."

"I hope she doesn't hurt herself."

"Ah, Pookie's a tough old bird, I'm sure she can take it."

"I meant Rhonda. She's way out of her league."

The door to the zen garden room (I was never sure just how we had room for it in the house) opened and, speaking of the devil, Grandma exited, followed by a sore-looking Rhonda. "Don't get discouraged, Silkworm," Grandma advised. "Despite appearances, you did make quite a bit of progress today."

"I know what not to do, you mean," Rhonda answered. I briefly wondered where Grandma had gotten a four-sleeved gi, but figured it was better to not question it. "Oh, hey, Arnold," she said when
she spotted me. "Remind me to kill Helga for suggesting this."

"Oh, you know you don't stand a chance against me, Rondaloid," Helga answered good-naturedly. "You gonna stay for dinner? Gertie usually makes Kung Pao chicken when she gets into this character."

"No, I really should get going. Nadine and I were gonna run menus for the party tonight. Also… I really should get cracking on the two weeks of schoolwork I'm behind. Wings or no, I'm gonna graduate with the rest of you guys."

Hearing her determination to rejoin the world on her own terms doubled my own determination to make it somehow happen. "We'll all walk down that aisle together, Rhonda, I promise."

"Oh, Arnold, you really are the best," Rhonda said, enveloping me in an unexpected hug, I looked apologetically at Helga, who shrugged.

"Okay, break it up," she finally said. "We don't wanna rekindle any crushes that should stay dead and buried."

"Excuse me?" I said.

"Princess here had a crush on you in second grade," Helga said.

"Second… through fourth, actually," Rhonda corrected a bit nervously.

"…what." Helga said, glaring.

"B-but that's in the past! I've moved on! To a completely new gender, actually! N-nobody has to murder anybody!"

"They'd never find the body, you know. Not all of it, anyway."

"Well, it was nice seeing you, Arnold! I must bid you adieu!" Rhonda bolted out of the house as fast as she could.

"Ah, she knows I wouldn't do it, right?"

"You were pretty convincing, Helga."

"I don't mean any of it. I just got her as a friend, I don't wanna lose her over some stupid joke.

"I know."

"And if you tell anyone else I'm really all soft…"

"We find out just where my head can fit, I know."

She hugged me. "You really are the best, Football Head."
Mistakes of the Past

Chapter Summary

In which Olga makes a new friend.

A. N. I'm so, so sorry for what I'm about to do.

Chapter 26

Mistakes of the Past

World Organization of Human Protection, Hillwood Branch

The Thursday before Helga and Rhonda returned to Hillwood

-OLGA-

I'd forgotten just how... clingy these outfits were.

Oh. Doi. Of course I'd forgotten. My memory was wiped. It was only now starting to trickle back in drips and drops. Like just how form-fitting the WOOHP uniforms were.

"You think these are bad, you should see the ones from the L. A. branch," Bridget said, as if reading my mind.

"There are other branches?" I asked.

"You really have forgotten just about everything, haven't you?" Bridget answered, smiling. "WOOHP is a global organization with headquarters in dozens of cities on six continents. The Pacific Northwest branch is relatively new. I've been given a lot of leeway with how I run the place."

"So... was it you who picked out lilac as the uniform color?" I teased.

"What's wrong with lilac? It's a lovely color."

"It's not exactly what you think of when super-spy comes to mind, is it? You'd think something more like-"

Bridget tapped a control on my belt buckle and the uniform turned black. "Stealth mode. There's also polar mode, jungle camo mode, and a few others. Lilac's just the default color."

"Oh." I stood corrected.

"You sure you want to go through with this?" she asked me, looking concerned. "Field work, this soon after rejoining?"

"I passed the test, didn't I?" Surprisingly. It'd been years and a mindwipe since my brief WOOHP career, but the moves and procedures all came back as if they were second nature. Bridget had jokingly called me "Jason Bourne" when I finished. "Look... this isn't a permanent thing. Teaching is still my life's work. Or maybe acting? But I want to find my sister and sticking with you is my best
"As long as you know what you're getting into. This is a dangerous job."

"I know the risks, Bridge. It's worth it."

"Good, because we've got intel on a lead. A criminal in a West Montana prison let slip that she tangled with an individual matching what we believe is your sister's current appearance.

"Well, then, let's get – wait, 'current appearance'?"

"Oh, right… you haven't seen the file yet." She handed me a dossier. "There are things you should probably know about what's happened to your sister."

I thumbed through the file, which didn't actually seem to be about Baby Sis at all. Upon second glance, though, I realized that it did concern a familiar face. "This… this is B- this is my sister's best friend… Fifi? I want to say Fifi…"

"It's Phoebe, actually." Of course. What kind of person doesn't know her own sister's best friend's name? The Award-Winning Olga Pataki, that's who. I should get a "worst sister" award.

"Oh my… did she disappear too?"

"No, no… she's safe and healthy, but, well, see for yourself."

I turned the page and gasped. "What in the world?" The "before" picture on the left was a class photo of Phoebe as she had been, a petite, bespectacled, cute-but-unassuming Eurasian girl. The "after" photo on the right was a drastic contrast. Taller, more athletically built, with light blue skin, three green eyes, large wings, two sets of arms, pointed ears, small horns, and a prehensile fluff-tipped tail. I looked at Phoebe's expression in the second picture, nervous, unsure. It spoke of a painful experience.

"A few days ago, Phoebe went through an extensive physical transformation. The cause hasn't been determined yet. She was traumatized, but otherwise it looks like she'll be all right. Shelly Kacjynszki, the nurse at your sister's school and the last person to see her, claimed that she was showing unusual physical symptoms that match the earliest stages of Phoebe's change. The other missing girls' mother also mentioned her daughter was suffering very unusual symptoms before she was taken, though she wasn't forthcoming with details. So… it's probably likely that when we find your sister, she'll look a lot like this."

"Oh no… baby sister…" I involuntarily squeaked. Well, that'll do wonders for my credibility as a secret agent. I didn't care She was out there, probably weak, scared, alone, needing me.

"In any case, we'll be dispatching you to Montana tomorrow as soon as we can clear up the red tape. Your assigned partner will be…" She checked her tablet. "Deb," she confirmed, clearly suppressing a groan.

"Um… you sound a little unsure," I responded, hoping she'd volunteer more information about my prospective companion.

"Deb is… how shall I put this… a challenge." She replied. "Don't get me wrong. She's a good agent. She's just… well… I'm not sure what the word is. Eccentric? Unconventional? She doesn't really like working with others. Hey, maybe you'll be the exception, you never know, right?"

"Deb" turned out to be a woman in her mid-20's, curvy, with full lips and wavy blonde hair that
hung over her left eye. She wore an old army jacket over her WOOHP uniform, clearly not regulation, but it was clear she didn't particularly care whether she conformed or not, as evidenced further by the fact that a small brown squirrel was perched on her shoulder.

She gave me a look-over. "Jesus, Bridge, what is it with you and blondes? I figured you had a type, but I didn't think you were this fixated."

"Cute, Deb. Speaking of, what did I tell you about bringing animals in here?"

The squirrel chittered something. "Yeah, with a capital B," I heard Deb mutter under her breath. Was… was she convinced the squirrel had said something? Did she actually think she was having a conversation with it? What kind of crazy person was I getting involved with?

Bridget rubbed the bridge of her nose…. she was clearly used to dealing with Deb and not particularly fond of it. "You know, if you weren't really good at what you do, I'd have you shipped to the Antarctica branch in a heartbeat."

"There is no Antarctica branch," commented Deb.

"I know. Anyway, this is Olga Pataki. She'll be partnered with you on the Montana mission."

"Lovely. Babysitting duty. You know, if it wasn't so much fun pissing you off, I'd stop. It's almost not w- wait, did you say Pataki?"

"As in one of the missing girls' sister, yes."

"This is a bad idea," Deb protested.

"She's too close to the mission. She could compromise the whole operation!"

"That's why I want you along. You'll keep an eye on her. Make sure she doesn't go overboard. After all, you understand more than anyone how you can lose perspective."

Deb glared. "That was different. You KNOW what Biederman took from me. And anyway. I'm not the one who killed him. That was all gravity."

"We're not having this conversation again, Deb. It was me who chose to look the other way back then, because in the long run, it doesn't really matter whether he fell or was pushed." Deb bristled a bit at that last; I wasn't sure whether that was irritation at the accusation, or unease that Bridget knew the truth and continued to hold it over her. "The point is, you understand what she's going through better than any other agent here. I trust you to keep her in line. Am I understood?"

"Crystal clear, boss-lady." Deb mock-saluted. I could swear her squirrel was giggling. Maybe I'm the one that was losing it. "I'll be back in time, I promise. I gotta go do something."

"Say hi to her from me, okay?" Bridget had dropped the hard-nosed act and was now speaking to Deb as a friend.

"Yeah, I'll do that." A slight smile, and Deb departed, squirrel in tow.

"Seriously, though, no more animals in HQ!" Deb responded with a good-natured middle finger as she exited. "She's a character, isn't she."

"She seems… troubled," I said.

"It's really not up to me to talk about her issues. If she chooses to open up to you, she will. But she'll
"No, you KNOW you can't come in there with me!"

chee chee chee

"I know she's your friend too, but they're gonna go ballistic if I bring in a – no offense – filthy rodent."

chit chit chee?

"Of course I'll tell you if anything happens."

The squirrel hopped off my shoulder and decided to stake out a nearby tree. She'd known her sister back when she'd been attending college here. She'd always been the brainy one in the family, both starting and graduating early. She could have pretty much written her own ticket, but she'd chosen to get a job on a wildlife preserve in Africa. She'd always had a deep connection with animals, but nobody knew how deep.

Nobody except me, that is.

It was a year ago when she'd run into a pair of rhino poachers. It hadn't been the first time. When the two of us were kids, we'd traveled the world with our parents and apparently, she'd crossed paths with these two a bunch of times. But while they were skittish about harming a twelve-year-old girl, they were a lot less so when it came to a twenty-year-old wildlife warden.

The others had gotten to her in time to save her life, but she'd been in a coma ever since then. I'd had her shipped back here to Hillwood so I could keep tabs on her.

The hospital had become as familiar to me as HQ or my apartment. Mrs. Horowitz, the nurse on duty, admitted me upstairs.

"Hey, Eliza," I said. "How are things going?"

She lay there, as silent as always, the only sounds the incessant beeping of various monitors. She was fully capable of breathing on her own… she was just asleep. Possibly forever.

"So, uh… Don tells me there was a brief jump in brain activity a couple of days ago. Good for you!"

The fam came by when they can, my mom, my dad, my adopted brother… they even managed to sneak the chimp in occasionally. "Seriously. Good for you. You're still fighting." I squeezed her hand, the one without the IV in it. "Don't give up. Come back to me. I have something of yours and you need to take it back."

--

One year ago

Tanzania

"…do not be discouraged, Ms. Thornberry," the doctor assured me. "Where there's life, there's hope. Your sister is in excellent condition…"

"Minus the whole 'bullet in the head' thing, right?"
"The removal operation was successful. The damage to her brain was minimal. But... she shows no sign of recovering from her coma."

"Who did it?"

"We cannot discuss this at the moment-"

"WHO."

"Debbie." Don squeezed my hand. "Getting angry isn't going to help anyone."

"It's helping me just fine." I pushed him away. Man, for the days where he couldn't speak English. I did NOT need anyone giving me common sense right now.

And now here's the monkey to give me his stupid puppy dog eyes. Yeah, yeah, I know you were her best friend, but I don't need any more guilt than I already feel.

I'm her big sister. I was supposed to protect her.

I stormed out of the tiny makeshift hospital. The hot savannah winds assaulted me, but I didn't feel them. They were nothing compared to the burning anger that kept pushing me mindlessly forward.

I'm not sure how long I walked, ignoring the heat, the wind, my growing dehydration, anything but the empty feeling in my heart. I just kept going until I collapsed.

Well. Wouldn't this be a way to go out. Official cause of death: Stupidity.

The last thing I saw before I passed out was an approaching warthog. At least someone would get to eat, right?

Wait, did warthogs eat people?

Wait, are warthogs even

--

I awoke to water dribbling down my throat. I coughed, the shock bringing me fully back to consciousness.

"What-?!"

"Drink," a gentle voice advised. "You are extremely dehydrated."

It was a shaman of some kind. He'd dragged me into the shade and was refreshing me with a skin of water.

"Thanks," I managed, hoarse from the dehydration. "Where'd you come from?"

"You've kept your sister's secret well, Deborah," he said. What was he talking ab- ohhhh... it was starting to make sense now.

"Yeah, well, it was either that or turn into a baboon, you know..."

He laughed, loudly, heartily. "You actually believed I was going to do that? I can't turn people into baboons! I was just messing around!"

"Well... how the hell was *I* supposed to know that? They don't exactly have online courses in shamanistic magic! I have no idea what powers you should or shouldn't have!"
"Yes, but… honestly! Baboons! You are so gullible!"

"Yeah, yeah, laugh it up…"

"Seriously, though… I have heard what happened to Eliza. You should know… in the event something happened to her…"

"She's NOT dead."

"…in the event something happened to her… she wanted you to have her gift."

He raised his staff, there was a light show, and then…

"I… don't feel any different."

"You shouldn't. The camp is back that way," he indicated. "It's actually not very far. You got very off track."

"Figures. I guess I better get back there. I have things I need to do… like getting Eliza into a better hospital." And finding the bastards that did it and making them pay. That too.

"Do not let hatred consume your heart," the shaman warned, before vanishing. Huh. Maybe he'd never been there to begin with. Maybe it was a Yoda thing or something.

…no, wait, then where'd the water come from?

"Magic is weird," I muttered to myself before making my way back.

--

When I finally got back to camp, a search party had just been mobilizing. Needless to say, I got an earful from those in charge about my stupidity. Especially from the chimp.

"Bloody hell! Leaving camp without any sort of preparations or equipment? Wandering off who knows where in the state you're in? Are you daft, woman? Did you give any consideration to your health or safety? Have you any – oh, what's the use, you don't understand a word I'm saying."

"Sheez, keep your tank-top on, fleabag. I know what I did was stupid. You don't need to go rubbing it in."

"Well, then, I suppose as long as you're aware what you have done is wrong – wait, what? You can understand me now?"

"Yeah… apparently, I'm temporary custodian of Eliza's Dr. Doolittle powers. Until she's back."

"My dear, I admire your positive attitude, but the odds are-"

"She WILL BE BACK." I calmed myself. "She's tough."

--

Friday morning, 6AM

-OLGA-

I took my seat next to Deb as the van pulled away from HQ. "This seems… a bit low-rent for a high-tech global peace-keeping organization," I commented.

"This branch's profile's a lot lower than L. A.s. So's our budget. No hoverjets for us. Don't let the humble appearance fool you, though. This baby's loaded. Anti-detection equipment, every
surveillance gadget you could ever need, a few nifty defensive tricks…"

"I'm more concerned that it's gonna take hours to drive to Montana."

"…we have a radio…"

Which was fine for a couple of hours, but radio stations get a bit sparse in the space between urban areas. We were left with long periods of silence.

"So," I prompted. "Do you have a family?"

"Sure. My folks are naturalists. They travel a lot, so I don't really get to see them these days. I have one sister who's 21, and one brother who's fifteen, he's in a boarding school in England."

"Oh, how nice! I spent a year studying in England. And what does your sister do?"

"She w- she's a warden at a wildlife preserve. She… look, it's kind of hard to talk about her."

"It's… not like we're going anywhere…"

"*sigh* Fine. You wanna know what my deal is…"

--DEB--

I gave her the abridged version of the story, leaving out the stuff about shamans and magic powers. That stuff was still verbatim, even in a world with mad scientists and mutant tweens.

"So, after that, I signed on with the organization in hopes of using its resources to track down the goon that did it. I finally did, about a month ago. We fought on a mountain, and, well… it turns out he was high on something, and he lost his balance and went over the edge."

"So, you didn't do it?"

"No. I thought about it. I almost did do it, in the heat of the moment. But something held me back. The way he died was his own damn fault." I took a deep breath. "I don't feel good about it. I don't feel bad, either. I don't feel anything. It just… was. But… look at me. Sitting here, like I have it so bad. At least I know my sister's being taken care of. The uncertainty… I can't imagine what that feeling's like. I assume you two are really close."

"That's just it… we weren't. The two of us were just too far apart, too different… and to be perfectly honest, I think she resented me. I tended to absorb all of my parents' attention and, I, uh… I didn't exactly discourage it."

"Yikes."

"I… still feel like there's some way I can fix things… like, if I could make clear how much I love her…"

"Whoa, look… love is great and all, but that's, like, the baseline. What's really important is that you understand her. Talk to her. Listen to her. Learn why she is the way she is. That's what she really needs from you." I yawned. "I think I'm starting to nod off. Think you can take over?"

"Sure. They gave me a crash course on this thing. It's not really much different from a regular car."

"Great." I pulled over and we swapped seats. "Wake me up when we get there."
The rest of the trip was silent as Deb dozed in the passenger seat and I couldn't find a decent radio station.

What did I really know about Helga? I knew she was creative, but that was from snooping in her belongings. Had I ever really sat down with her, listen to her talk about her hopes and dreams? Did I know her favorite movie, her favorite food, her favorite color?

Did I know anything?

I would resolve to be a better sister... but how many times had I done that, and how many had I botched it? Resolve is cheap.

Of course, none of it would matter if I never found her again.

We finally arrived at the prison late that night. Deb flashed a (probably fake) badge to the guards and we were admitted to the facility.

"Okay," whispered Deb. "Bridget used her connections to get us about twenty minutes with her. I'll take the lead. I'm more suited to Bad Cop."

Betty Lawry was brought to an interrogation room on the second floor. She was a husky woman, with short-cropped light brown hair and a perpetual smirk.

"Nice uniforms," she commented. "Were they out of the pink ones?"

"We'll be asking the questions," Deb responded, cutting her off. "Now... you're going to tell us about your meeting with Helga Pataki."

"Huh... Helga Pataki... which one was that..."

"Memory trouble, huh?" Deb cracked her knuckles. "Funny. I know a great way to get rid of pesky amnesia. It involves repeated blows to the head."

The smirk remained unmoved. "Is that a threat? You don't scare me, Barbie. I know my rights."

"See, if I actually was the law, I'd be bound by those rights." She leaned in close. "I'm not. I'm just a concerned citizen."

"Well, I'd like to help you. Really, I would... it's just... I kill so many people... they all just sorta blend together."

Something was starting to go cold inside me.

"What kind of person was she? Was she the kind who screams? The screamers are so much easier to remember..."

"YOU BITCH!" My knuckles had connected with her jaw before I even was aware of moving. Big mistake. Punching someone in the face hurts. Especially if you're not used to any sort of violence. But at that moment, the pain in my knuckles was being numbed by the cold fury in my heart. I grabbed her by the collar with my good hand and pulled her so our faces were inches apart. "She was my sister, you animal. So god help me, you are going to tell me what you did to her because I will see to it that you will suffer tenfold. In the end, you will BEG me to kill you."

"Holy shit," Deb marveled. "Dial it down, Jack Bauer. We can't get information out of her if she's
dead."

"Deb, stay out of this. You do not want to be in my way right now. I am a live grenade and anything in my blast radius is fair game right now. Now… you. Are going. To talk. What did you do to my sister?"

"I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING!" That was genuine fear. I guess even a pathological liar has a breaking point. "Look… I was hired to bring her and her friend in by some anonymous client. I wouldn't have killed her anyway, that wasn't in the contract. Nonlethal means only. They gave me one toxic bullet, but that was only designed to temporarily cripple her. Anything else I had could barely even slow her down."

"So you didn't hurt her?"

"Hurt her? I'm lucky she didn't break every bone in my body! That kid is a force of nature! I don't ever want to be near anything like her again!"

Of course. Stupid Olga. Helga's always been stronger than I'll ever be. How could I doubt her?

"So do you have any idea where she could have gone after the encounter?"

"Not a clue. They tied me up and fobbed me off on the sherrif, and then I got transferred here when they got a look at my rap sheet. They could be anywhere right now."

So that was it. We'd hit a dead end.

"…so, yeah, we should probably get out of here quickly before they figure out you punched her, and that we really shouldn't even be here."

"Yeah, that seems fair…"

"You okay? You really lost it in there."

I smiled. "And the Tony goes to…"

"No way. You were faking that? I was totally fooled!"

"I took three semesters of drama at Bennington. My Auntie Mame was, to quote the college newspaper, 'a tour de force.'"

"Cool. You might actually be cut out for this undercover stuff."

When we got to the van, Deb's phone went off. "Hey, Olga," she said. "There's been another sighting in Boise. You up to keep this road trip going?" She elbowed me, grinning. "We can get greasy roadside diner food… hmm? Hmm?"

"…sure, why not."

As we pulled away from the facility, I reassured myself that Deb didn't need to know the whole truth. That for a minute there, I really was completely ready to beat Lawry within an inch of her life, and quite possibly past that if she pushed me.

I guess the Pataki temper never skipped me after all. It just needed the right motivation to come out.
Loose Ends

Chapter Summary

In which Stanford Pines is on the case and Phoebe wins ALL the Nobels.

Chapter 27
Loose Ends

27A: Back to the Falls

Somewhere in the Outback

Shortly after Helga and Rhonda left Gravity Falls

-FORD-

The truck lumbered along the dusty outback road. We'd come out here to investigate unusual Cryptid sightings around Ayer's Rock, specifically a desert relative of the mythical Bunyip that was said to dwell in the billabongs.

What we had encountered proved to be a lot more crafty than expected.

"I can't believe that thing stole my wallet!" complained my twin brother, Stan. Ours was a long and complicated story, told by hands more deft than I. Inseparable, in childhood, torn apart first by his jealousy, then my pride, then finally reunited in the face of Armageddon. After surviving the near-end of the world, we'd decided to live out our silver years pursuing our childhood dream of traveling the world in search of adventure.

"Are you sure you didn't leave it back at the lodge?" I asked. It was unlikely; if the was anything Stan kept a tight leash on, it was his money.

"Positive. That thing is a sneaky sonuvabitch. He's like the me of monsters. Right now he's probably running up huge charges on all my phony credit cards!"

"Look on the bright side: we discovered a new species! That means we get to name it!"

"How about the Thieving Bastard? Can we do that? Are the encyclopedias gonna complain?"

"Are you going to be complaining about this all night?"

"Eh, probably."

"We'll try to find it again in the morning. Right now, what we need is a good night's sleep."

--

We arrived back at the lodge. I could smell some kind of stew cooking. Probably lamb. Probably. Might be something with a pouch. I'd eaten far stranger things over the years (and far stranger things had nearly eaten me), so I wasn't going to question it.

"Doctor Pines!" Kevin, the lodge owner called. "Message for ya. Shiela name o' Wendy. Sounded
right agitated, she did."

Wendy? I hadn't had a lot of interaction with her. Apparently, she was now the town's supernatural warden nights and weekends. She'd never contacted me until now; I wondered what she could have possibly encountered that would necessitate my attention. "What was the message?"

"Right odd one. It was just two words, mate… 'Code yellow.'"

Stan, still fuming about his lost wallet, suddenly snapped to attention. "No. No, that's impossible. He can't be back. We put him down for good. Right? We did, didn't we? Most of my memory's back, but that moment… that's gone. I never got it back. But I'm pretty sure it involved taking him out permanently. Maybe… maybe it's a prank, right? You know teenagers,"

"I don't want to believe it either, but Wendy wouldn't just casually send us a Code Yellow."

Code Yellow meant the return of the single most dangerous entity any of us had ever encountered.

In my travels across the Multiverse, I had encountered things beyond comprehension. I had survived an encounter with Ka'Thaari plant-dragons, who were not only powerful and fearsome on their own, but who reproduced in the most horrifying manner, through a cloud of spores that, when inhaled, would consume the host from the inside. I had tangled with disciples of the dark Elder God, V'Hoxynarva, an inconceivable presence that existed only to spread nonexistence. I had visited realms torn from the nightmares of madmen and animation producers. But nothing compared to the twisted being that had almost succeeded in throwing all of reality into a state of chaos.

And now he was seemingly back.

"Trip's on hold, Stan." I said. "We're going home."

--

A week later

Gravity Falls

"Hot Belgian waffles! What have you done with the place, Soos?"

The ex-handyman tugged his collar nervously. "Uh… now, be cool… I assure you, 85% of this damage is not my fault."

Stan's eyes darted around, taking in the door that had been ripped off its hinges, the shattered railing on the upper landing, the wrecked exhibits, the broken furniture, the electrical scorch marks on multiple surfaces. "Isn't this how I left the place?" he asked, confused. "I was talking about these prices. Only a 200% markup? You're bringing shame to the Mystery Shack name!" He took a deep breath. "Sorry Soos… I know, I know, it's your place now, you're running it your way… I shouldn't have flipped out, it's just… you build something, you expect it to stay the same forever… to be reminded it's not yours anymore…"

"Whoa, did he just apologize? Weird." Pacifica Northwest, who had not looked up from her phone since the two of us had arrived, now addressed us. "Hey, Stan. Hey, Hot Stan. You missed some weird stuff."

"We made a couple of new friends," Wendy explained. She had arrived shortly after we did on her motorcycle. "There was an incident with the shapeshifter getting loose, but they helped us get it back on ice. Pacifica, show 'em the picture."

Pacifica pulled out one of those oblong glass devices that passed for phones nowadays. I still found it
hard to believe that such things were commonplace, but we still didn't have flying cars. After a few motions with her thumb, she brought up one of those… "self-ers?" Pacifica was standing at the extreme right of the shot, her lips puckered for some reason. Her arm was around a creature of a kind I'd never seen before… or had I? Something about her was nagging me. The violet-skinned creature, who appeared to be a young female, was smiling and flashing a peace sign to the camera with her upper-right hand. For someone of a completely unknown species, she seemed very accustomed to posing for a camera. Her two left arms were around another young, pink-skinned female of the same species, as if trying to pull her into the shot. The pink one was clearly not as fond of the camera as her purple companion; the scowl on her face suggested she was only barely tolerating being in the shot and wasn't going to be any more cooperative.

"Fascinating," I commented to no one in particular. "Has anyone else seen this?"

"I texted it to Dipper. Y'know, so he could eat his heart out that I met something weird without him."

--

Last week, somewhere in California

Dipper: Oh, hey, a text from Pacifica.

Mabel: Oooh, la la, ze Romeo 'as receive ze love lettair from ze… girl 'e dies tragically wees! *makes kissy noises*

Dipper: Ah, knock it off, Mabel. We're just friends…ish.

Mabel: Friends-ish who smooch-ish?

Dipper: Seriously, Mabel, it's not possible for you to be any more annoying than you are right now.

Mabel: Sure it is! (begins poking him) Poke! Poke! Poke!

Dipper: (sighs, checks text) "New friend selfie, hashtag mutantbesties, hashtag putthisinyourstupidbook… what in the world?"

Dipper: (opens photo attachment)

Dipper: (eye twitch)

Dipper: (begins foaming at the mouth)

Mabel: Oh, hey, I think I follow her fashion blog.

--

"Their social behavior is remarkably human."

"They are human," corrected Wendy. "I mean…. In the mental sense. Something clearly happened to their bodies to make them this way, but they act pretty much like regular preteen girls."

I was intrigued. Nothing I'd ever encountered could possibly have caused mutations on this level. I would give my eye teeth to study them up close… if I hadn't already used them on a planet where teeth were currency. Little known fact: The Tooth Fairy is an alien.

But I digress.

"And what does our triangular friend have to do with this?" I asked.

"They both said they had dreams involving him. Maybe he's somehow stuck in the subconscious
realm? I dunno, just throwing out some ideas here."

"He did first appear to me in my dreams… of course. As an abstract being, Bill cannot be permanently destroyed… only contained." At this point, my mind was racing. "He would be drawn to the strange, the unusual… but to what purpose…"

"Ehhh, he's in the theory zone," Stan said. "I'm gonna go see a guy about fixing a horse race."

"He wants a body," Pacifica said suddenly. "I mean, like, isn't it obvious? If I was stuck in the dreamworld, the first thing I'd want is to get the heck out of it, and when I did I'd need a body to use. And, like, if I had to pick a body… well, I'd pick me, of course, but if I had to make a second choice, a body that was really strong, had wings, and could shoot lightning from its fingers wouldn't be so bad. I mean, like… I think I could rock that look if I had to."

Wendy smirked. "You'd certainly catch Dipper's eye…"

"Wha… that's not what I meant! Why would you even think that? I don't like him like that! *pause* I don't!"

"If you say so," Wendy teased.

"I don't! All I'm saying is I'm hot enough that even a monster bod would look good on me. And the superpowers would be a nice bonus too. Bet Dorito boy's thinking along the same lines."

Wendy nodded. "He probably couldn't cause another Weirdmaggedon, but he could definitely cause his fair share of chaos."

I nodded. "Do you have a way of contacting them?"

"Rhonda… that's the purple one… gave me her phone number." Pacifica answered. "Can you believe we'd actually met before? Turns out she's from this super rich family in Hillwood. Weird, huh?"

Hillwood… Washington? That place was already on my list of places to investigate. Besides the high number of urban legends floating around the place, I'd picked up evidence of a possible time anomaly, a distortion that had disrupted the normal flow of events and led to strange inconsistencies. One of many possible leftovers from the breach in Gravity Falls.

"Let her know I'll be getting in touch with her soon. In the meantime, If anyone needs me, I'll be in my bunker, researching a way to permanently contain Bill. There's no point in going over there if I'm not ready to put an end to him once and for all."

--

27B: Speak of the Devil

"Ladies and Gentlemen, for the first time in history, we've decided to award all the Nobel Prizes to the same recipient!"

A hush came over the crowd gathered in the Stockholm crowd.

"In Physics… for 'A comprehensive Study of Missing Left Sock Syndrome'."

Back in the audience, I, Phoebe Heyerdahl, age 11, wondered just what I was doing here.

"In Chemistry, for 'Why Olicity just doesn't work.'"
Well, that was obvious, the characters were forced together to satisfy a subset of the fandom without really establishing why—wait, that's not the kind of chemistry this award is for!

"In Medicine, for her cure for that thing where you walk into a room but you can't quite remember why you walked in there in the first place. In literature, for her epic Avatar: The Last Airbender fanfic: "Rise of the Void Republic."

I did get quite a few rave reviews on that, I thought. Wait… why would the Academy be honoring fanfic?

"In Peace, for ending the Shipping Wars. And, finally, in Pasta Sauce, for discovering a fat-free Alfredo that actually tastes like the real thing and doesn't cause any sort of intestinal distress!"

"Get ready, Pheebs," Helga prodded me from the seat on my left, smiling. Funny, she looked a lot older. On my right, Gerald, looking about twenty or so and sporting a shaved head and goatee instead of his trademark high-top, squeezed my hand.

It was then I realized I, too, was an adult now. Or had been for some time. Of course. I was being honored for my many accomplishments at last.

"For all these accomplishments, and more, it is our honor to award Doctor Phoebe S. Heyerdahl, MD, PhD, EtcD literally ALL the Nobel Prizes." The top-hatted presenter beckoned me forward.

I walked forward towards the podium. All eyes were on me as I reached my destination.

I cleared my fault. "Thank you, but I'm afraid I must decline."

"What? Why? How could you possibly turn down the honor of a lifetime?"

"Because, Bill Cypher, you have made several mistakes. First, the sixth Nobel Prize is in Economics, not pasta sauce, prestigious field though it is. Second, the peace prize is awarded in Oslo, not Stockholm. And third… this is the part of the dream where I realize I'm wearing a chicken suit."

"HEY, LOOK, EVERYBODY! PHOEBE'S WEARING A CHICKEN SUIT! BWAH-HA-HA-HA-HA!" brayed a voice from the audience, right on cue. You could always count on Harold, or even a dream-avatar, to immediately pounce on any opportunity to mock someone.

"Well-played," the host answered, his voice now shrill and manic. "You always were the sharp one, weren't you, Owl Eyes? Seeing what no one else sees. Maybe you can see what I see… that in the end, you lose. In the long run, you're gonna wanna be on the winning team. I can get you in on the ground floor, baby!"

"Sorry, but once again, I must decline. I have a far higher opinion of my friends than you. I know you've propositioned both, and I know you've failed both times to interest them in your Faustian covenant. You will find me no more willing to engage in diabolic negotiation than they. In the parlance of our national pasttime…"

My fencing foil was instantly in my hand. The host had no time to react as it pierced him.

"…three strikes and you're out. Oh, and I was untruthful… I am not sorry at all!"

He screamed as his form began to fold in on itself, as though the foil was a quantum singularity that only functioned on him. "YOU THINK YOU'VE WON, OWL EYES? JUST WAIT 'TIL YOU SEE MY BACKUP PLAN! IT'S A DOOZY!"
"Best Nobel ceremony ever," Helga commented, munching popcorn.

--

-PHOEBE-

I awoke in my bedroom at MDI in a cold sweat.

So that had been the Bill that Helga and Rhonda had warned me of. Despite my calm bravado in the dream, the truth was, had they not advised me to anticipate his presence, it was quite likely I would have unwittingly accepted his proposal, leading to consequences I could only begin to guess at. My mind was a rational thing; the motives of a mad cosmic abomination were beyond me. He was clearly a persuasive sort, though, and he'd done a skillful job of playing to my vanity and need for approval.

Still… I had been the last of his targets, and I had managed to resist. The danger he posed should be over, leaving us to focus on the threat of the so-called "Old Man" and his organization, itself a major quandary to be sure. And yet… I had a feeling his threat of a backup plan wasn't mere bluster. Just what had the entity up its metaphorical sleeve?

I yawned. There was no use speculating at 3 AM. There would be time to discuss this with the girls the next day. I rolled over, hoping my next attempt at slumber would be more peaceful.
The Mother and Child Reunion

Chapter Summary

In which Helga and Miriam begin to repair their relationship.

Chapter 28
Mother and Child Reunion
Sunset Arms, not long after the end of Chapter 25

-HELGAL

"You could have warned me, Arnoldo." Helga groaned.

"Sorry, Helga," Arnold replied, sheepishly rubbing the back of his head. "Grandma doesn't usually use Ghost Peppers in the Kung Pao."

"Oh, I am dying! I need to write my will, okay!" wailed Oskar from the upstairs bathroom. Gertie's cooking had incapacitated most of the boarders, not for the first time. They were the lucky ones, though; they didn't have more than one stomach. The Kung Pao was hitting my first, and I could look forward to it passing through two more before beginning the march to exit. It was made all the worse by the fact that my mutated tongue was less sensitive to heat than before, so I had eaten a pretty sizeable portion of the nearly-inedible chicken before I'd even realized the consequences.

"I guess even an alien stomach lining has its limits, huh." I clutched my protesting gut. "Who would've thought that after all this, bad Chinese food would be the thing that took me down."

"Oh, Helga…" Arnold assured, giving me a squeeze. "You're way too tough to go down to a near-fatal dose of capsaicin. And hey, I didn't have any, so I'll be free to take care of you."

"Oooh, careful with the ol' breadbasket, Football Head. I'm still in the vomit window. And if I know my sci-fi movies, alien barf tends to melt stuff."

"I'll, uh, take that under consideration. How about we do something to take your mind off your stomach?"

"Like, what are we talking ab-" His lips locked on to mine and suddenly my digestive problems were the absolute last thing on my mind as I closed my eyes and we savored each others' taste.

"…you are getting really good at that, you know that, Hair Boy?"

"I'm just trying to keep up with you, Pink Angel." He replied flashing that half-lidded grin that still after all these years made my girlhood tremble.

"I mean, yeah… well, you know… I've been practicing…" I said, blushing. "On footballs," I added in a quieter voice. "For eight years," I continued nearly inaudibly.

"What was that?"
"Nothing. Let's go back to kissing. I liked that."

"Oh, I dunno… maybe this is all going too fast…"

I blinked. Were we really having this conversation now?

"I mean," he continued, "we're only eleven… don't you think that's a little young to be totally devoted to one person?"

What the heck was going on here? We just got out of a truly epic liplock and now he was giving me the 'maybe we rushed into this' speech? "Criminy, Football Head, what is your deal? You were just tongue-deep in my head and NOW you wanna take it slow? Is my pepper breath THAT bad?"

"Nah… I just think maybe we're closing ourselves off from other options. I mean… if I'd known Rhonda was into me…"

I could not believe I was hearing this. And he has the nerve to have that smirk on his face while saying it…

…wait.

Was he messing with me?

Well, two could play at that game.

"Oh, silly Arnoldo… you think I'm jealous of her?" The smirk on my face mirrored his. "My dear Short Man… she isn't my competition, she's yours."

"…wh-wha?" He stammered, the tables turning on the little game he was playing.

"Well, think about it. We were on the road for a long time, just the two of us." My grin grew wider. "All those cold nights… me and her… huddled together for warmth…" He was started to sweat.

"You, uh… I was just kidding, you know…"

I decided to let him dangle just a bit longer. "We got very close. We shared things you couldn't possibly imagine."

"Uh, well…" Oh, wow, he was really buying this, wasn't he. Well, this should teach him that if he's gonna take a page from my book, he'd better be bringing his A game. "…maybe we can go back to kissing again?"

I smiled and leaned in, whispering in his ear. "That'll teach you to think you could ever out-tease me."

"You are cruel, Helga Pataki."

"I can't help it. It's just so easy to put one over on you, Paste-for-Brains."

"It's not that easy."

"Oh, no?" I brushed my hair over my left and middle eyes. "'Bon joor! My name eez Cecile. Sack-ree blue! Quelle fromage!' Face it, I totally buffalood you, and I did it with a disguise less convincing than Clark Kent's and a French accent so bad they should ban me from the country."

"Okay… granted. That was one of my stupider days…"
"Now how about we get back to what we were doing."

"Okay," He said, a bit uneasy. "You didn't really-"

"No. Oh, god, no. Too high-maintenance. But admit it… you were thinking about it. You may be a saint among men, but you're still a boy at the onset of puberty, and the thought of two girls all over each other drives you crazy," I teased. "Besides, she's into Lila of all people."

"Really?"

"Mmm-hmm."

"Her?"

"Hey, like I told her, if she wants to run head first into that brick wall, that's her deal. The heart wants what it wants, Arnold. We both know what it's like to chase something that we'll never get. Only difference is I got it eventually."

"I kinda did too… I just didn't know I was chasing it." He moved in for another kiss. Unfortunately, that old Pataki luck ran true to form and the doorbell cut us short.

"I suppose there's no chance of just ignoring that, huh…"

"Hopefully it's nothing and we can just pick up where we left off in a couple of minutes."

"Gotcha. I'll go make like ALF and hide in the kitchen. Don't need some travelling salesman having a heart attack."

I retreated, still feeling the aftereffects of dinner, muted though they were thanks to the lingering taste of Arnold. I took up a position in the breakfast nook, thumbing idly through the newspaper while waiting for the go-ahead from Arnold.

After a minute or two, Arnold yelled from the living room "You can come out now!"

I thanked the Fates for his swift dispatch of our interruption and emerged from the kitchen. "Okay, Football Head, rev up those tonsils, 'cause I sure am hungry for one-"

I stopped cold.

"Hi, dear."

"Mom?"

--

She was definitely looking far more together than she had the last time I saw her, dressed in a magenta business suit with her hair pulled back in a bun, looking much as she had that time she'd taken over the Emporium after Bob threw his back out.

"You, uh, you look great," I continued.

"I suppose I do clean up well, sweetheart," she replied. "Of course, I have fierce competition…"

"From who?" I asked. In contrast, I was in old jeans, a hand-me-down sweatshirt of Olga's (cut in the right places to accommodate my extra limbs), and sandals. There really wasn't much of a point in dressing up when you weren't going out in public.

"You, of course. You're growing into a lovely young woman and I've missed way too much of it. "
She came closer, seeking a hug that I wasn't quite sure I was ready for.

"Hold on," I said, holding out an arm to stop her. "Look, I'm really glad to see you up and around and I assume sober, but... we've been here before. How do I know this is the time it's going to stick?"

"I can't promise anything. I know I've screwed up in the past. And... I can't swear I won't in the future. The only thing I can promise is my best effort."

The honesty brought a smile to my face. "I guess that's all I can really ask for, right?" She had earned her hug. I wrapped my arms around her and squeezed.

"Ooh, careful," Miriam warned. "I still need my spine, dear."

"Oh, sorry," I apologized. "I still sometimes forget how strong I am now."

"Well, no harm done." She glanced over at Arnold, who had retreated to an unobtrusive distance. "So... was I interrupting something?"

I blushed. "Kinda... but... I guess it can wait."

--

It was kind of a surreal moment, mom and me, sitting here in this kitchen that wasn't ours, as if this was some sort of polite social visit when we were mother and daughter. Arnold had made us both tea and then politely retreated despite my begging him to stay as a buffer, insisting that we needed private time and he would just be in the way.

"So, how long has that been going on?" Mom prodded, clearly looking for an opportunity to break the ice. "You and Abbot, I mean."

"Arnold," I corrected. Why were my parents incapable of getting names right? "Almost six months now. Ever since we came back from San Lorenzo."

She sighed deeply. "My little girl has a boyfriend and I didn't even notice."

"To be fair, I haven't exactly been broadcasting it."

"Oh, whyever not? He seems like such a nice boy!"

"Well, mostly because my class is full of morons. I have cultivated a very strong reputation as the toughest girl in school, and I'm not about to lose that. If, y'know... I ever go back to school."

"And is that all you want? To be the tough girl?"

"It's not so much what I want... it's that it's what I've been for so long, I'm not sure I can be anything else."

Mom nodded. "That sounds kind of familiar. I've been a drunken, depressed screw-up for a long time. It's a very easy thing to fall back into. Change has to come from a conscious choice." She took a deep breath. "I've left your father, Helga."

I was thankful that I didn't have a mouthful of tea because right now I would be spraying it all over the place and this was not a time for schtick. "What?"

"Frankly... it's been a long time coming. The way he treated you was the last straw, but I've needed to get out of that situation for a while now. "
"It doesn't feel like a long time coming, it feels like it's sudden and you're showing up out of nowhere and springing this on me and I'm not sure I'm ready for it." I shook my head, trying to make sense of it all. "Look… are you sure this is something you want?"

"It's something I need. I can't be with that man right now, not the way he is. I had to get away, find you, find Olga, find myself…"

"Well, you got one down, at least. I know I'm giving you a hard time, but… it really is good to see you up and aware. It's been such a long time. How'd you find me, anyway?"

"Well… remember that time we all went down to the shore and B got that really really bad sunburn?"

Figures that she'd remember that and not that that was the week I won a bit part on the Netflix reboot of Babewatch… no, no, she's making an effort, do not drag up old grudges… "Yeah, I remember."

"Well, there was just nothing for me to do there, so I wound up signing up for dance lessons. While there, I met this very nice woman named Suzie, who it turns out was sharing the beach house with us. We kind of lost touch afterward, but who should I run into the day I walked out?"

"Is that rhetorical, or…"

"So, I'm just sitting there, spilling my whole story, and I'm still kind of shocked that she didn't call the men in white coats when I got to the part about my alien mutant daughter." I snickered a bit at that last one. If someone else came to me with that story a month ago, I'd probably laugh myself into a coma. "Anyway, later I mentioned that you went to PS118, and she tells me the man she's dating has a daughter in the sixth grade too! Then she mentioned your little boyfriend, and that she used to live in the same house as him, and how he was always solving problems in the neighborhood, and I wondered if maybe he might have some idea where you were? So I came over here, and wouldn't you know it, not only does he know where you are but you're literally one room over! Isn't it amazing how sometimes things just work out?"

"Yeah, I guess so…" Except I'm still being hunted and my parents' marriage is falling apart and apparently my sister's missing? Okay, that last one wasn't really at the front of my mind… it's not like I don't care about my sister, I do, theoretically, but she's a big girl. She can theoretically take care of herself. "So, what are you doing now?"

"Well, I've been staying with Suzie at her apartment and I just had an interview at Budnick's. They're mostly hiring holiday help right now, but if all goes well they'll keep me on afterward."

"Well, that's good."

"I'll have to ask Suzie, but… if she says it's okay, I'd like it if you moved in with me."

"Oh. Um… I'm already kind of settled in here."

"Well, you don't have to…"

She's reaching out to me.

"Maybe… you could stay here?" I prompted. "It's not exactly the Ritz… but the rent's pretty low and the residents are mostly harmless."

She smiled. "You know… that sounds like a good idea. I'll let Suzie know and talk to Mr. Shortman about arrangements. Oh, this will be wonderful! We are going to do SO much mother-daughter
bonding!

Oh lord… what have I done?
Fashion: FORWARD!

Chapter Summary

In which plans are made and Phoebe puts Nadine on the spot.

Chapter 29
Fashion, FORWARD!

Lloyd Residence, Wednesday Morning

-RHONDA-

Finally, it was done.

I had, somehow, managed to catch up on all the schoolwork I'd missed since my metamorphosis began. It did help that I only needed a couple of hours of sleep a night, but the workload had been massive. Mr. Frank gave a LOT of homework to compensate for his inattentive performance in class. I wondered, not for the first time, if it would hurt to transfer to Mrs. Skelter's 6th grade. Sure, most of my closest friends were in Mr. Frank's class, but from what Katrinka told me she was a far more lively class presence.

No matter. The deed was done. I was caught up. I was now free to focus on my own affairs.

I donned a pair of capris and an indigo tank top (tank tops had proven practical as they easily accommodated my arms and wings) and drifted downstairs for a late breakfast.

"Rising fashionably late, I see," My mom commented.

"Actually, I've been up since three. I just really wanted to be done with all that homework."

"…all of it?"

"It's all done. I just… powered through. It helps when you barely need to sleep."

"Honey, I'm very proud of your determination, but I don't want it to come at the expense of your health. You may think you can handle this kind of schedule, but you may be setting yourself up for a crash."

"It's okay. It's been two and a half weeks. I'm pretty sure by now what I'm capable of. Like right now I'm capable of demolishing some of those biscuits and some of tht gooseberry jam in the fridge…"

"Carbs, dear? Living on the edge this morning, aren't we."

"I'll burn it off. You have no idea how much energy flying takes."

"I wish I had your comfidence. The model's curse, you know… it's drilled into you that eating is bad. Unless you're Lola Marcelli. She's this plus-size model I knew. Can you believe they actually make her eat. Life is so unfair."
"Mmm-hmm." Normally I loved gossip from Mom's time in the fashion industry, but I had a lot on my mind.

"Oh, by the way," she continued, "You got a package today. From Cosplay-To-Order."

I gasped. "They're here? I didn't expect them to be done this soon!"

"Ah… this is for that 'mysterious project' of yours…"

"No, mystery, mom. I ordered special costumes for myself, Helga and Phoebe. We'll be wearing them for Tuesday's party."

"Right… darling, I know you're a determined girl, and you're very insistent on getting your way, but I'm still not certain this is a great idea."

"Mom. We've been over this. I don't want to spend the rest of my life cooped up in this house with nothing but my parents, the servants, and the occasional friend I can trust. I've accepted that this is what I'm going to be for the foreseeable future, and I'm tired of hiding. And yet, I know I can't just spring myself on the world. Much as I want to post a mutant selfie to Reddigraph, I know I have to ease myself back into public. So… I'm starting with my closest friends. That makes sense, right?"

"Well… I trust you, but I hope you're not setting yourself up for disappointment."

"If I am, that's my mistake to make." I got out my phone and dialed Nadine. Today was the last day of school before winter break, so she'd be getting out early.

"Nadine!" I began after her mom put me through. "They came!"

"Too early in the morning," she yawned. "What came?"

"The costumes for the party. I'm getting the group together after school to try 'em on, make sure they fit."

"Oh, right… that was a thing… you know I'm just gonna wear my butterfly costume from October, right?"

"I, uh… I kinda had one made up for you anyway… like, as a decoy…"

"Rhonda…"

"It basically covers almost all of your body, and then we'd just have to paint your face aqua… I'm sorry, I should've asked you first…"

"Well… it might be fun to try it on…"

"Hey, you don't have to do it for me. I can still send it back."

"No, you went through the trouble, the least I could do is try it."

"Nadine… hon… I know I'm made you go along with what I want to do in the past. It was wrong then, and it's wrong now. Please… if you don't want to do it, just say so."

"It's okay. Really."

"If you're sure…"
"I'll be over after school. Promise. *click*"

Well, she was on board. I'd been a bit worried. She'd seemed a little distant since our talk the day I came home, as if something had come between us. I hoped she didn't feel neglected. I'd gotten close to Helga, but Nadine was always going to be #1 in my heart. Hearts.

She wasn't... freaked out by my appearance, was she? I couldn't really blame her, though... my new look was a hard sell. My reflection still caught me by surprise sometimes. And I'd been living with it the whole time, it was still new to her.

I hoped that wasn't it... after my folks, it was her acceptance that meant the most to me. I couldn't bear it if my surrogate sister found me repulsive.

--

Afternoon

-NADINE-

God, she's gorgeous.

I can tell she doesn't think so, deep down. She isn't quite moving with that superior grace the old Rhonda did. She can't see herself the way I see her. I wish I could make her.

Of course I've always thought she was gorgeous. Even before I knew it was romantic attraction, there was something about that perfect black hair, that flawless peach skin and those deep brown eyes that made me want to be around her, even when she was being selfish and thoughtless. Did that make me shallow? Maybe it did. I can't really defend it.

She has gotten a lot better in the last year and a half, though. She's been so much more open and attentive. Her inner beauty was starting to catch up to her outer beauty.

And the outer beauty was definitely still there. The skin was purple now, the eyes a sparkling amber, and she had all those new limbs, but it was still clearly the Rhonda that I knew, updated but not truly changed.

We were all gathered in her living room now, the members of the party planning committee. Phoebe had commandeered the big armchair. She seemed more fully herself now, cheerful and erudite, quiet, but ready to speak when it counted. Helga sat at the far end of the long sofa, opposite Rhonda's corner. This was my first time seeing her since she'd disappeared. Of all the three mutants, she was the one who seemed most at ease, most confident in her new skin, moving as if she'd been born that way.

I envied them. They shared something with her I probably never would. Briefly, I wondered what it would be like, to be like her, to soar alongside her, to feel out very minds touching, to have her no in no uncertain terms how I felt.

But then there was the fear again, of exposure, of rejection, of knowing that she would never think of me as anything more than what we were now to each other. As long as my desires remained unspoken, there would be hope. As soon as I revealed them, I would either have it realized or dashed completely, and the thought of the latter would be too hard to bear.

...anyway...

Rounding out the crew was Patty Smith. If Rhonda's new friendship with Helga, once her polar opposite, was confounding, her nearly two-year-long friendship with Patty, once the most feared ogress of the sixth grade, was baffling. The two were even more diametrically opposed than Rhonda
and Helga, who at least shared some personality traits. Rhonda was flamboyant, pushy, and confident, always eager to be the center of attention. Patty was quiet, stolid, and intimidating simply by virtue of her size and build, and tended to drift to the periphery. That the two had become close friends was nothing short of astonishing.

The way Rhonda told it, the two had wound up in the same finishing school class together after a lunchtime confrontation. Rhonda's abrasive personality at the time made her a poor student, so she'd sought help from the more polite girl, at the time planning to simply use her until such time as she no longer needed her. And at first, she was fully ready to cut Patty loose once classes were over, but her blossoming conscience would ultimately not let her. The two had remained friends to this day, and Rhonda had discovered that her new friend had a pretty eclectic selection of interests, including sports, sewing, cooking, Eastern spirituality, manga and anime, and role-playing.

I had to admit, Patty's friendship had gone a long way towards smoothing out some of Rhonda's rougher edges. I couldn't remember the last time she'd dismissed any of my pasttimes as "geeky". Sure, she still found bugs icky and she wasn't likely to sign up to my Twi-Week guild any time soon, but she accepted that that was who I was and what made me happy.

So, why had I still not come out to her? Even if I didn't tell her who I specifically loved, I'd at least be being honest?

"All right, everyone settled in?" she began. Everyone affirmed they were. "Okay. So… basically I assured my parents that we could handle everything. I didn't really want to make the help come in for something this self-indulgent, so, essentially, we're the staff for the night. We've all got our assignments for the evening. I'll be in charge of decoration and greeting. Phoebe's working on the schedule of events."

"I've drawn up an itinerary that should prove engaging while still providing the opportunity for spontaneous fun," Phoebe asserted, handing out sheets.

"Nice… the karaoke contest is definitely something we want to make the centerpiece of the night," Rhonda commented, smiling.

"Here's the buffet menu," Patty added, handing it over to our host.

Rhonda's eyes widened. "Are you sure you can handle the catering, Patty? This is a pretty extensive menu, and we're going to have a lot of guests. The sushi alone…"

"It's okay. I've gone on a few jobs with my parents, and I'm pretty sure I know enough to do it on my own." Patty assured. "Besides, I've been wanting to try out some new presentation techniques I've seen on the Cuisine Network."

"Awesome. Helga?"

"Yeah, got the song playlist right here, Princess. Before you ask, no, you've never heard of any of these bands. That's how you know they're good."

"Ignoring your dig at my taste in music, excellent job. I can see I'm going to spend most of my night reviewing these on Sounditude. And Nadine… your job will be the most important of all. You are going to be my moral support. Because I am absolutely terrified that everything's going to go horribly, horribly wrong."

"Um… well, I'll try my best…"

"That's all I can ask, darling." She pulled me in for a hug and I wondered if it was possible that I'd
just liquefy right there in her grasp. Thankfully, I managed to keep my molecular cohesion. Mental, now that was another story. There was something about the way she smelled that was just intoxicating.

"Okay, now the main reason I called you guys here today… I got the costumes!"

"Really?" Helga seemed unusually interested. Other than her brief and seemingly random career as a model in fourth grade, Helga had never been one to show any interest in clothing.

"Yeah, I used Patty's cosplay guy. He does pretty quick work. Didn't even blink when I gave him the specs."

She brought out and passed around several boxes. I opened mine. It contained a metallic purple bodysuit with silver trim, boots, gloves, and belt. The suit had built-in rubber wings lower arms, and a tail. Quality stuff. But then, Rhonda'd always had an eye for quality. There was also a mirrored skier's-type visor included.

"What's this for?" Helga asked. Apparently the visors were in all the packages.

"They're for covering up our eyes. We can pass off our extra limbs as fake by not using them. This," Rhonda indicated the extra eye embedded in her forehead, "is just a bit harder. I figure if one of these babies works for Garnet, it'll do the job for us."

"Sound logic", Phoebe stated.

"Remember," continued Rhonda, "the cover story is we're characters from a sci-fi story that Phoebe's working on."

"Knowing Phoebe, she probably has an elaborate backstory for our characters," Helga commented, smirking.

"I… may have hammered out some details," Phoebe admitted. "Helga, you are Captain Helios, leader of a band of heroic Ka'Thaari space pirates. The rest of us are her loyal crew, Rhodos, Phebrix and Nadiana."

"Shouldn't be too hard to remember," Rhonda said. "Where'd you come up with the name 'Ka'Thaari'?"

"It just sort of… popped into my head. Perhaps from something I've read over the years. It should be fine; it's not as if this will be something I was actually planning to publish."

"Okay, so… we've got our identities straight… how about we all adjourn to try on our costumes. Helga, Phoebe, you can change in the room across the hall from mine. Nadine-"

"Actually," Phoebe interrupted, "I kind of want to talk to Nadine. How about we swap our usual companions, just for this occasion?"

"Uh, sure… I guess that would be okay," answered Rhonda, clearly confused.

Phoebe led me away to the guest room. I wondered what she could possibly have to talk about with me. It wasn't as if the two of us were particularly close or even more than casual acquaintances, so her bizarre insistence on speaking to me in particular was extremely disconcerting to me.

She closed the door behind us. "Okay, look, I wasn't planning on confronting you," she said, "but I think you really need to talk about this to someone," she said, pointedly.
"Talk about what?" I asked, even more confused now.

She smiled. "Your reaction when Rhonda hugged you merely provided confirmation of my suspicion. You, my friend, are, to quote the vernacular, utterly gaga over her."

I felt my cheeks heat up. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Beads of perspiration on your forehead, slight but noticeable stammer when speaking, increased blood flow to the face, resulting the phenomenon called a 'blush'... oh yeah. You've got it bad."

"That's ridiculous!" I denied, perhaps a bit too hastily. "She's my best friend! We're practically sisters!"

"Your behavior indicates otherwise. Trust me... I've seen enough to recognize a raging case of infatuation when I see it."

I remained guard. "You're seeing things."

"I'm also quite familiar with denial. Nadine... if you fear I will excoriate you for your Sapphic tendencies, do not worry. Such prejudices are illogical. Science has long ago proven there is nothing unnatural about having such desires."

Her genuine smile finally penetrated my defenses. "Okay, fine, I admit it. I like-like Rhonda. Are you happy?"

"Actually, yes," she answered. "I believe the two of you would make quite the adorable couple."

"Yeah, well... there's one big problem in the way of that. Her."

"Are you certain of that? She may be more amenable than you imagine. As Erwin Schrodinger would tell you, there is no way of knowing the outcome of an uncertain course of action until you actually put it into practice. Ergo, you won't know until you tell her."

"If you're trying to hint something to me, save it. I know she's bi. She told me. I also know for a fact that there's no way she sees me as anything more than a friend, so there's no point in bringing it up."

"I would not dismiss the possibility so fast, Nadine. For all you know the only reason she's never considered such a prospect was because she assumed you had no feelings for her."

Ugh, I hate it when people make sense when I don't want them to. "I'm... I'm not ready yet."

"Just think about it. At the very least you should come clean to her about your orientation. Does anyone know besides myself?"

"Only my folks. Thankfully they're very open-minded."

"I'm sorry to be this forward. I know it's a very personal subject, but... I know the pain keeping these feelings in can cause, and I know how relieving it can be when you finally allow yourself to admit the truth."

I raised an eyebrow. "How do you know so much, anyway?"

"Sorry, but that's confidential."

---

Even with our lengthy conversation, the two of us were the first to finish changing. Phoebe's outfit was navy blue, with a lemon-yellow collar, belt, gloves, and a wide stripe running down over her left
breast (well, where it would be soon enough) and leg.

My own costume fit pretty well (of course, Rhonda was well-aware of my measurements, since she was constantly dragging me on shopping trips). The fake limbs were less heavy than I expected. The costume had also included, in addition to the visor, a set of fake horns attached to a headband.

"Looking good, Nadiana," Phoebe remarked.

"Thanks, Phebrix," I replied. "You too."

"Indeed. I actually feel rather..." she struck a pose, "badass."

There was a long pause.

"So," Patty interjected, reminding us both that she was still here, "What's taking the others so long?"

-HELGA-

"This whole thing was your idea in the first place!"

I was standing there, out in the hall. My costume, black with hot pink trim and accessories, the pink shoulders/collar and stripe down the center of my costume suggesting the letter T, had fit a little loosely but within acceptable levels. The polarized visor fit nicely over my eyes, obscuring them without impairing my vision.

On the other side of the door, the Princess was getting cold feet. "It's just so much... tighter than I expected."

"Too much rich-people food?" I teased.

"Hardly," she replied, irritated. "I simply didn't expect it to leave so... little to the imagination."

"Look, If I can be out here, looking ridiculous, so can you. So you get those purple buns out here this minute or I'm gonna rip that expensive door right off its expensive hinges and you can explain to your daddy just why I did it."

An intentionally loud theatrical sigh behind the door. "You do know how to play hardball, Hellcat. Fine, I'm coming out."

"I thought you already did that in Oregon."

"Jackass. Just for that, you're going first in karaoke."

Rhonda's outfit was her trademark crimson with navy blue shoulders and a wide navy striperunning down her chest/back and the inside of her legs, navy boots and gloves, and golden lightning-bolt trim with a matching gold sash around her waist.

"There. Was that so hard? Now, c'mon, everybody's waiting to see how huge your ass looks in those tights," I needed, tugging her downstairs.

"Changed my mind! Plan's off! We're not doing this! AWP!" I had by now picked her up bodily and was carrying her downstairs.

"Oh, relax, you know I'm messing with you. They'll be too busy staring at your muffin-top to notice."
"You're a jerk. I just wanted to let you know that."

"Oh, shut up. I'm like your second-favorite person in the world and you know it."

"…yes, you are…" she admitted.

--

My bodily carrying Rondaloid down the stairs was met with a bunch of amused glances.

"Cold feet?" remarked Patty with a smirk.

"No," Rhonda lied. "And put me down."

"If you insist, your majesty," I replied, unceremoniously dumping her on the couch.

"I swear, I will pick out the lamest, cheesiest song I can find for you. I'm talking Captain and Tennile. If I'm feeling nice." She picked herself up, and looked around. "Wow. You guys all look terrific."

"Y-you think so?" Nadine said a little too quickly. What the heck was she so nervous about?

"Really," Rhonda assured her. "I don't say this enough, but you are seriously adorable and you don't even realize it. Uh… how about me? I kind of feel like they got my size wrong."

"Relax, Cleopatra," I relented, giving her a shoulder pat, a rare bit of physical friendly intimacy for me. "I was just messing around. You look fine. It's too late for alterations, anyway."

--

After hammering out more details of the party, most of us got changed back into our regular clothes and said our goodbyes for the night.

Most of us.

"Hey," I said… "would it be okay if I wore this home?"

"Really?" Rhonda said. "You want to go out like that?"

"Yeah, I, uh…" I switched to telepathy. Two out of five of us were still in the dark about my current relationship, and I wanted to keep it that way. –I want to show off to Arnold. –

-Ah, I gotcha-, she thought back. –As long as you're not planning anything else, like, say… crimefighting…–

–No, of course not! We both agreed we're not ready for that! –

–Good, because these costumes are in no way designed for that kind of thing. For one, they're not fireproof, which, need I remind you is a pretty big concern for you…–

–I swear, I am not planning on crimefighting tonight– I mentally assured Rhonda.

Technically, I was being honest.

I wasn't planning on doing any crimefighting.

But, say, if I just happened to stumble onto something…

Ah, what were the odds of that?
Chapter Summary

In which the sisters that kick ass together stay together.

Chapter 30

The Terror that Flaps in the...Late Evening

WOOHP HQ, Hillwood Branch

-OLGA-

For what seemed like the millionth time, I wondered what I was still doing here.

I'm not a secret agent. I'm not a vigilante. I'm a third-grade teacher. I have students who depend on me. The only reason I rejoined WOOHP was to find Helga, and from the intel we'd gotten, she'd safely made it home almost a week and a half ago. Yet, here I am still hiding out instead of finding her and talking to her.

She resents me. I know that. I probably deserve it on some level. All those years of pretending to be Miss Perfect in some misguided belief that if I held my parents' attention, it'd hold the family together. Every trophy, every award, every accolade was a bit of spackle sealing the tiny, spreading cracks beginning to spiderweb the foundation of the Pataki family, Daddy's stubbornness and obsession over a failing business, Mummy's depression and alcoholism, Helga's anger and alienation. I thought in my arrogance I could solve all of it by being the shining beacon of success. More fool I.

God, even my recriminations sound pretentious!

Point is, here I am playing crimefighter to hide from my family, losing myself in this Charlie's Angels fantasy to escape from dealing with my family falling apart. Looking for them was my excuse for doing this in the first place, yet ever since returning from my wild goose chase of a road trip, all I'd done was hang out here and foil the occasional petty crime. I had been monitoring for sightings of winged creatures, but most could easily have been dismissed as birds or bats. There was no record of activity by my sister.

WOOHP HQ's lounge was plain but comfortable. Most of the branch's budget went to equipment and R&D, not creature comforts. There was always fresh coffee, though; as the lowest ranked agent, it was Lori's duty to see to it. She was a nice enough sort once you got past her over-misuse of the word literally and her endless soppy phone conversations with her boyfriend back home. I'm a pretty sugary person myself, most of the time, but even I have my limits.

Now, here I sat, reading a "FOINE" magazine someone had discarded, attempting to sustain interest in the current direction of headlines.

"Attention, available agents." The voice of Renee Tucker, tonight's dispatcher and a recent transfer from Baltimore, came over the P.A. "Who's up for a break-in?"

I looked around. It was a quiet night here. It was pretty much just me here, everyone else was either
off-duty or out on assignment. I sighed and hit the PA. "Pataki here. What are we looking at."

"Jesus, are you still here? I thought you only joined to find your sister."

"Long story, Renee. Let's just say I'm not quite ready to face reality yet."

"Well, all right… this should be easy enough, anyway. It's some local twelve-time loser and his gang. A B&E at H&B Audio-Video. Come up to dispatch and I'll brief you."

Renee was an African-American woman in her early 20s, short but curvy, with a mop of unruly braids. She was a talented technician and hacker, a skill that proved invaluable for the organization. At the moment, however, she was exposition.

"So this is our guy, Frankie G. Couple dozen accounts of larceny, vandalism, fencing, drug-dealing, and general hoodlum-ery. He's usually with his gang, Philly D., Tony C., Joey T., Jimmy E., Lenny B., and Charles Bennington Collingsworth IV."

I raised my eyebrow at the last one. "Seriously?"

"There's always one guy who has to mess up a perfectly good pattern. Anyway, H&B's on the corner of Povenmire and Drymon. Three floors, lots of high-end stuff. Our perp has discriminating tastes. You probably won't need more than the basics for this one. I'm issuing you a grappling hook, taser, some handcuffs, and a couple of flash bombs in case things get dicey and you need to make a quick exit. I'm not seeing any major surprises going down, though. These guys are pretty standard thugs."

I accepted the equipment. "GPS should take me to the coordinates."

"Right. Take Shaft F to the Drymon Ave. subway tunnel and you should be able to take a straight shot there."

Well, I had tonight's distraction. It felt like I was taking any excuse to not face my life.

Little did I know, circumstance had other plans for me tonight.

--

Just a bit earlier, above Hillwood

-HELGA-

It was roughly a ten-minute flight from Rhonda's place to the Sunset Arms at my top speed. But where was the fun in that? The gift of flight was a thing to be savored. Why make a beeline when I could take the scenic route? And if I happened to spot an opportunity to exercise Old Betsy and her three sisters, well, that was just going to be a happy coincidence.

A sweep along the waterfront yielded nothing save for a distant shout of "MONKEYMAN!" I wondered what the weirdo had stumbled into. Should I go check it out? Nah, too early for a crossover.

My flight path eventually brought me to the downtown retail section. My mind drifted to Bob. Mi-Mom had been living with at the boarding house for a couple of nights now. We were sharing one of the single rooms, and it was… weird. We spent a lot of time just… talking. It was like I had somehow acquired both a mom and a sister simultaneously, and we were having some kind of nightly slumber party. I still wasn't sure how I would feel about it once the novelty wore off, but for now, it was… nice.
Bob, though... what was going through his mind right now? In rapid succession he'd lost his business, daughters, and wife. Did he notice? Did he care? Was it tearing him up, or would he just keep going in his Bob way, stupidly stubborn like the bull-man he was, not seeing the toreador coming for him until the sword stabbed down into him.

Wow, what a gruesome metaphor.

I debated peeking in on him. Sure, he'd made it clear in no uncertain terms that he considered me a monster; sure, he refused to acknowledge that something like me could possibly be his daughter.

I am finding it very difficult to remember the point I was making.

Oh, right. I can't make myself stop caring about him no matter how much I want to. Family was like one of those sticky traps, and I was a mouse, struggling to get out, but to no avail; it had me and it would never really let me go. Even if I somehow tried to put it behind me, it'd still be there shaping my actions and attitudes for the rest of my life, shaping them negatively, but shaping them all the same.

I think I perched there on the roof for about fifteen minutes before I ultimately decided to continue my current policy of trying to pretend Bob didn't exist. That last niggling bit of concern aside, he'd actively brought this situation upon himself and I wasn't even close to absolving him. Maybe someday. Maybe when the Mayor gives me the key to the city for stopping the dam from overflowing (Hillwood doesn't have a dam, but why let that get in the way of a good fantasy,), I'll spot him in the audience, we'll briefly make eye contact, he'll turn away in embarrassment, I'll shout "Wait!", the music will swell, I'll swoop down and we'll hug it out...

Criminy, I've seen way too many movies.

Anyway, I'd had enough navel-gazing for the time being. I once again unfurled my wings and lifted up from the roof, and that's when I'd spotted it, two corners over, at H&B Photo, still the place for high-end professional video and audio gear for people who didn't know the Internet was a thing. Seven guys, on the roof, well after store hours. Looks like they were after the ultimate bargain shopping.

I swooped in closer, anchoring myself to the cathedral across the street. Hopefully it was dark enough that nobody would notice an extra gargoyle while I took stock of the situation.

I recognized the leader right away. Frankie G had once "befriended" Arnold solely to use him as a patsy for one of his robberies. Naturally, this action had made me one of his biggest fans. Does the sarcasm come through? It's sometimes hard to discern through the written word, so let me make it clear to you that yes, the preceding statement was meant extremely sarcastically and I was in no way a fan of Frankie G and was in fact very much looking forward to putting his Fonzie-plagiarizing ass away.

"Jeez, look at this guy," I whispered to the gargoyle next to me. "Still thinks the greaser look is cool. I shoulda brought Lloyd along to write him up for grand fashion crimes." No response. "Oh, c'mon. Whattaya, made of rock or somethin'? I'm giving you comedy gold here."

I hung there, listening in.

"All right, boys, we're in."

"All right, Frankie!"

"Way ta go, Frankie!"
"Badda-bing, baddda-boom, Frankie!"

"Capital achievement, old bean!"

"…Chas, I swear to god, you are this close to getting kicked outta the gang. Now, let's get this party goin'. We got about twenty minutes before the security system reboots – nice hackin' job by the way, Tony – so we'd better get grabbin'. Chas, stay here on lookout, 'cuz franly I don't trust you not to screw up."

"Righto, sport!"

Frankie shook his head. Let's get moving.

Well, this was a convenient turn of affairs. I'd wait 'til the greaser gang went inside, take out Mr. Upper-Class-Twit-Of-The-Year-Award here, and then sneak in and Die Hard the others one at a time.

And so, I waited for him to turn his back. When he did I swooped in closer, landing about twenty feet behind him. The thunk of my boots hitting the rooftop made him snap his head around.

"You know, if you wanna shop this late, you're probably better off online," I began. Oooh, first official superhero quip!

The guy smirked. "Aren't you a bit young to be out this late playing fancy-dress?"

Well, he had me there. "Yes. Yes I am."

"Right, then, well, run along. This is no place for childrens' games, little girl."

I was about to reply when I heard a clink behind him. It was the sound of a grappling hook snagging the roof's edge. Chas whirled again to see a figure clad in a pinkish-purple catsuit and beret hoist herself onto the rooftop.

"We can do this the easy way or the hard way," she said in a very familiar high-pitched voice.

"Olga?" I found myself saying involuntarily.

The woman noticed me opposite her for the first time. "Helga?" She said, her voice cracking slightly.

"Oh, splendid, you two know each other," Chas said, starting to inch away. "Well, why don't I be off then, seeing as you two really ought to catch up…"

"SHUT UP!" we both said at the same time. He froze again, clearly not sure what to do now. Olga smoothly walked up to him and handcuffed him to a railing.

She turned her attention back to me. "I've been worried sick about you."

"Geez, Olga… I've been fine. Haven't run into anything I couldn't handle."

"I figured as much," she admitted. "You've always been the stronger of us."

"Yeah, well… I've kinda had to be," I stated.

"I know. But you shouldn't have had to be."

And she wrapped her arms around, not in one of those crushing hugs that I always dreaded but a
sincere embrace of sisterly comfort.

"I'm sorry," she continued.

"It's not your fault, Olga," I answered her. "I mean… I guess I've resented the way our parents fawned over you all these years, and I've kind of blamed you for it. You've always been perfect, and I've always been… well… me. But… that's not really your fault, is it? It's not like you can stop being you. Our parents played favorites, and… I was wrong to make it your problem."

"I could've put up more of a fight," Olga admitted. "I could have stood up to them more, made them give you the attention you deserve."

"It's all right, really," I protested.

"I must say," Chas interrupted wistfully, "this is quite the emotional scene. I do believe it's time I called my dear old mum. I've made so dreadfully many bad decisions…"

"Hey, pipe down! This is our special moment, not yours!" I shot back, irritated at the intrusion. "So… what's the deal with the Secret Agent Barbie getup?"

"Oh, this… I've been working with Bridget's team for the past couple of weeks."

All three of my eyebrows shot up behind my visor. "Really? The Bridget?"

"It turns out we were part of the same training program, but I, uh… washed out."

"You. Washed out. You."

"Frankly, I was as surprised at you, Anyway, when I got kicked out of the program, I got my memory wiped, but I sort of… stumbled back into things. Actually, I've been trying to track you down."

"Well, mission accomplished, I guess…"

"Not quite. I still have six more of these guys to round up."

"Actually, I'm kind of here for the same reason."

"Helga!" she scolded "Crimefighting is a very dangerous job! You're far too-"

"I'm super-strong, bulletproof, and I can fly," I interjected. By way of demonstration, I picked up a stray brick and crushed it in my hand.

"Okay. Point made," Olga responded, smiling. "Not the sisterly bonding I was expecting, but I'll take it where I can get it."

"Bet I drop more than you."

"You're on. Winner picks our next sisterly bonding activity."

--

It turned out they really didn't put up much of a fight. Despite their tough looks, Frankie's gang turned out to be pushovers when it came to an actual rumble. It was like they had no real experience in thugging beyond a DVD of West Side Story.

"I guess that's a tie," I said as the last one hit the floor.
"Not exactly," Olga said with a smirk. "You're forgetting our friend upstairs. That's four for me, three for you."

Gaaahhh. Of course. Even at this, she's better than me. I'm always going to come in second, aren't I. Even at something I've practically been remade for from the ground up.

"...of course, I probably wouldn't've gotten the drop on the guy if you hadn't been there to hold his attention," she continued. "So I guess he's both our collar."

"I guess it is a tie, then," I said, seizing on the out she'd provided. I guess Olga had more empathy than I gave her credit for.

"Well, actually... you're the one who beat Frankie," Olga reminded. "So... you're the winner."

"...Olga, you don't have to-"

"You really did earn it, Ba- no, I promised myself I'm not calling you that anymore... "

Holy crap. She really is learning.

"Well, then... I guess you're getting your first taste of Wrestlemania, Olga."

"It should be fun. Of course, I prefer MMA. It feels more real."

"You like MMA?" I could scarcely believe what I was hearing.

"You don't know everything about me, Helga." Olga replied with a mischievous grin.

No, apparently I didn't. But the first time in forever, I felt like I actually wanted to.

Olga called in our captures, and the two of us retreated to the next rooftop over. We sat down, legs dangling.

"So, this was kinda... nice." I said. "But, I really should be getting back, mom's probably worried."

"She's okay?" Olga replied, looking concerned and more than a little guilty.

I rubbed the back of my head. "Kind of a lot has happened since you've been gone."

I filled her in on everything... Bob selling out to the mob, our fight, Mom's moving out and taking steps to pull her life back together, her moving into the boarding house with me.

"I should have stayed," confessed Olga. "Maybe I could have done something to-"

"Olga." I interrupted. "Stop. This is the same thing you've been doing to yourself all this time. You think you can save this family by being the perfect, all-sacrificing saint. That somehow, you're the linchpin that prevents everything from falling apart. But sometimes, you have to let things fall apart. Because they were never built right in the first place."

"I... I guess I never saw it that way."

"No. You always saw the good side of everything, the beautiful façade over the crumbling foundation. And... I guess it's good that you did. Relentless positivity and optimism can be a beautiful thing. Some folks might even fall in love with it. But you also need people like me who can see the cracks under the surface."
"I know." She gently put an arm around me. "You know… I've always thought you were going to surpass me someday, and this is kind of why. You're so much smarter."

"Someone hasn't seen my last report card," I deadpanned.

"Grades are meaningless!" said the girl who had a breakdown over a B-. "You have everything I have upstairs, but you also have the emotional strength to deal with life. If I had to go through everything you had to… I'd fall apart."

Her admission hung there, and I wasn't sure what to say.

"Come with me," I finally said. "I think mom would really like to see you."

---

And like that, three-quarters of my family had been reunited.

I'd missed the usual communal dinner, so it was just the three of us around the table, all catching each other up on what had been going on in our lives.

When we had all finally filled each other in, mom paused.

"It's… it's just so good to have you both back," she managed, almost on the verge of tears.

"Not the family you expected, huh," I cracked.

"No, I have to honestly say I never expected to be the mother of two superheroes. Although you do look absolutely adorable in that costume, dear," she gushed, ruffling my hair.

"Mom!" I protested. "I'm not supposed to be adorable! I'm supposed to be mysterious and intimidating! I'm supposed to strike fear into the hearts of superstitious, cowardly criminals!"

"Then maybe you should stop being so cute," teased Olga.

"You're one to talk. Lilac is such a badass color."

We all laughed. I couldn't remember the last time we'd done this, the whole family just enjoying each other's company.

Well, most of it. My dad's situation was the proverbial elephant in the room. Nobody wanted to address it, but sooner or later it would make itself known.

But for now, things were pretty good. I just hoped this time, it would last.
Deck the Halls

Chapter Summary

In which the party's just gettin' started.

Chapter 31

Deck the Halls

Lloyd Mansion, Dec. 26

-RHONDA-

I have to say, sometimes I even amaze myself.

Sure, a lot of things have changed for me over the last month, but if there was one thing I knew, it was how to throw a party. Other than that one time in fourth grade that I had gotten even more full of myself than usual and decided to only invite the "cool" kids (really, Rex Smythe –Higgins III? What was I thinking?), but that backfired on me and I learned my lesson.

And, so, the theme. Halloween on Christmas, kinda like that old Burton movie. I'd decorated our big tree in hundreds of gold, orange, and black ornaments, topping the whole thing with a bat. Jack o' Lanterns decorated the main hall, hand-carved with Santa faces, snowmen, and angels. For the décor, I'd found a way to tastefully combine fall and Christmas colors. Black, yellow, and orange streamers, green, red and gold balloons.

Quite well done, if I have to say so myself.

Of course, I wasn't the only one outdoing herself today. Patty had assembled a truly exquisite buffet (my culinary skills had never really progressed past the art of the finger sandwich), with fancy crudités platters, assorted hors d'oeuvres of every type imaginable, tiny cakes, bowls of homemade eggnog and punch (We'd be bobbing for sugarplums in the eggnog later on), and five different kinds of latkes.

"This is fantastic!" I gushed, hugging her.

"It's no big deal, really," she demurred. "You've been a pretty good friend, and your parents have given mine a lot of business, so really, I'm just paying it back."

"Just take the compliment, honey. You went above and beyond and you deserve this."

"Okay, okay, you win, I'm a phenomenal culinary talent. Look, I gotta run home, get changed, and meet Harold, but I'll be back later to make the sushi. Trust me, it'll only be good if it's fresh."

"Ooooh, you're meeting Harold? Is that wedding bells I hear?" I teased.

"Shut up," she responded, cheeks going bright red. "We're just going as friends… who'll probably dance together… and… y'know, stuff…"
"Uh-huh," I said smirking.

"Am I that obvious?"

"Hey, I'm not judging. I, uh, kinda had a bit of a thing for the big guy too, once. We raised a baby together. It was kinda sweet, until he fried and ate it."

"He wh- oh, was that the egg thing? In eighth grade they make you do it with a sack of flour."

"Yeah, the egg thing. It all kind of worked out in the end, so, you know it's whatever."

"Yeah. Good luck with everything. I'll be back as soon as I can."

After seeing Patty off I continued to check off on the various things that needed prepping. I found Helga in the back of the room with Arnold, who was helping Brainy set up his DJ station. Arnold had embraced the spirit (pun intended) of the theme with a Vampire Claus outfit. Brainy had one of those "emoji head" helmets on.

"Way to be on theme, Arnold," I complimented. "Tres original."

"Actually, we've been wearing these since yesterday," Helga admitted, briefly taking her visor off. "Arnold's grandma tends to switch holidays around, so Christmas was Halloween this year. Perfect timing, actually."

"Yeah, so… how'd that go?"

"Actually… it's probably the most fun Christmas I've had in ages. We had a pumpkin smashing contest with Ernie's sledgehammer, Grandma sang some …very creative Christmas carols… Olga of course took over the kitchen and made me her personal assistant, but somehow I minded less this time… maybe because she actually talks to me now…"

"…so what'd you guys do for Halloween, then?"

"Halloween was some kind of mashup of Easter, Secretary Appreciation Day, and a Renaissance fair. Arnold had a joust with Oskar, who played 'Ted from Ye Olde Accounting' and then we threw hard-boiled eggs at each other." She chuckled. "…we have fun."

Phoebe was supposed to show up later; she had a prior commitment but was going to be arriving with Gerald soon after the party started. Nadine was changing into her costume in my room; I still had to do her makeup before the party. Luckily, these days there were online tutorials for pretty much everything. They'd certainly come in handy three Halloweens ago for our alien costumes… you know, except for the part where we all nearly got killed by an angry mob.

I took one last look around. Everything appeared to be in place. "Ok, guys… I'm going to go get ready. Try not to wreck any of my parents' expensive things."

"Dang," Helga smirked. "I was just about to see how far I could throw that Ming vase,"

"And watch out for Wild Curlys. He never RSVPd and I'm worried he's planning on making one of his 'unique' entrances."

"He's been lying low ever since the Campfire Lasses incident, but, just in case, I'll check if anyone broke into the zoo," Arnold acknowledged.

"Thanks… I'll be back as soon as I can."
I hurried upstairs. "Coming in!" I warned as I opened the door.

I had caught Nadine mid-change.

Wow, she is really growing into her body.

The thought had popped into my mind completely unbidden. I had never thought about Nadine in that way. Other girls, yes, but not Nadine.

Must be these crazy alien hormones. Yes, that must be it. A recent checkup with Dr. Shortman had determined that I might be going through whatever version of a period my new body experienced. There had been no blood – I healed too quickly for that – but I had been feeling more antsy and on edge lately. So, yeah. That was it. Just my hormones all out of whack. I wasn't really experiencing any attraction to my best friend. That would be just… messed up.

"Sorry. I thought you'd be further along," I offered by way of apology.

"No, it's okay. I don't know why I'm so jumpy. It's not like we've never seen each other naked before."

"Honey, you don't ever have to apologize to me." Did I just call her honey? Do I call her honey? Gah, what's wrong with me? This whole thing's got my brain turned around.

Just focus on the party. Everyone's going to be here. Lila's going to be here. I am going to be charming and irresistible and she will realize that you can be Christian and like-like a girl, and it will be wonderful.

"Okay, let me just grab my costume, all right? Look, I'm facing the other way. You can get back to changing."

We continued dressing, and I tried to relax. Clearly, it was just a fluke. Surging part-alien hormones. I mean, even if it was real, it's not like she would like me back, right?

"Decent yet?" I asked as I finished.

"I'm dressed, if that's what you mean," Nadine responded.

"Okay, I'm turning around, then…"

She really does look great, my brain farted again. I'm gonna be so glad when this phase is over.

"Okay," I said. "Let's work on your face. We'll do aquamarine because that is SO your color, and I've got some of those rubber ear tips…"

"Are we sure this stuff's safe?" she asked.

"It's the same stuff we used three Halloweens ago."

"…the one where we all almost died."

"Yeah, but that wasn't the makeup's fault. Now hold still." I went to work.

"…and, we're done!" I'd left the area around her eyes undone since latex base can irritate the eyes, and it'd be covered up by the visor anyway. "Perfect!"
"It feels a little weird, but at least this time I don't have a huge fake cranium." She slipped her visor on, and topped it with a long white wig and her horned headband. "How do I look?"

"Just fake enough to cast doubt on the rest of us. Which is exactly what I'm going for,"--

With the both of us ready, we rejoined the others downstairs and waited for the first guests to arrive.

Sid and Stinky were first, dressed as a scarecrow and Joey Ramone, respectively. I took a deep breath. I had to get into character, be the Rhonda Lloyd that I wasn't really sure I was anymore, but the one everyone would be expecting me to be.

"Sidney, Stinky, darlings! How have you been? It's been so dreadfully long!" That's it, lay it on thick. Make it clear that everything's just the same as it always has been.

"Why, Miz Rhonda, I'd heard you were feelin' lower'n tired old snake in dingy ol' mud puddle, but you're lookin' in the pink o' health! And might I say, that's a right original costume you got."

"Oh, this old thing? Just something I whipped together at the last minute…"

"Just whipped together, huh…" Sid commented, eyeing me suspiciously. I held all my extra limbs absolutely still, hoping he'd move on soon, but he remained, scrutinizing every inch of my "costume" for flaws. Yes, this could definitely be a problem. Sid was already paranoid to start with, and here I was actively trying to put one over on him.

'Those are some seriously real-looking arms," he stated matter-of-factly, hoping I'd slip up.

"Well, you know me, I don't skimp on the details. Hey, Nadine!" I called. "You said hi to Sid and Stinky yet?" This was my ace in the hole.

"Oh, hey guys," Nadine greeted, standing beside me in her not-quite-as-authentic alien pirate outfit.

Sid's eyes darted back and forth. "Jeez… I don't know what came over me. That's obviously makeup and latex prosthetics."

"Well, garsh, I coulda told you that. Only not quite in those words on account'o I don't know what a prosthetic is."

"Well, glad that's cleared up. Come on in, have fun, mingle!"

Sid smirked. "I'd definitely like to mingle with that blonde talking to Arnold."

I suppressed a giggle. This was gonna be good.

I watched as Sid strolled up behind Helga, clearly trying to imitate the kind of macho swagger that people who had no idea what "cool" was thought was the epitome of cool. "Hey. Come here often, beautiful?" he half-purred.

"You tell me, Nose Boy," Helga retorted, turning smoothly, a smirk on her lips.

"HOLY CRAP, IT'S HELGA," Sid exclaimed in disbelief. "ABORT, ABORT!" He hastily retreated.

"Dang, what an unexpected turn of events," Stinky remarked.

"I know, right? Since when was that her body? That's some blatant false advertising!"
"I reckon she's been blessed by the magic o' the puberty goddess."

"Gross."

Guests continued to arrive over the next hour. Eugene and Sheena were next, the former in some kind of harlequin outfit, the latter as the Statue of Liberty. Shortly after, Harold and Patty showed up in matching Viking outfits, followed by Phoebe accompanied by Gerald as the classic toilet-paper mummy. Then, one by one, the others, until the place was officially Party Central. I had gotten a ton of compliments on my "costume", and nobody seemed to have any suspicions that it was anything more. It seems I had actually managed to pull it off.

--

INTERLUDE

"Hey, guys!" Harold, now on his own after Patty had retreated to finish kitchen prep, had tracked down his two closest buddies. "Man, have you tried this thing with the bacon and spinach in puff pastry dough? It's awesome! I've had, like, a dozen of 'em." He greedily shoved another two down his gullet. "Did you know Patty made everything here? I mean, I knew she was tough and smart, but it turns out she's also this amazing chef!"

"Whillickers..." commented Stinky, "'t's true what my mama always said... the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. And I reckon in your case it's a multilane highway."

"Yeah, I... wait, is that a fat joke? It better not be or I'm gonna pound ya into the next decade!"

"Aw, I'm jes' ribbin' ya, Harold... it's a fine thing you've found your special someone. I sure as shootin' ain't found mine yet. Guess I'm just destined for a sad, solitary life."

He waited. When no one spoke, he elbowed Sid.

"That there's the part where y'all reassure me that I'm getting' myself all forlorn and miserable over nothin', an' that there's someone out there for me and I should keep my chin up. Ain't you familiar with the whole concept of wingmanin'?"

"You have a chin?" questioned Harold.

"This doesn't add up." Sid said, ignoring him, lost in his own thoughts. His eyes darted from Rhonda, to Helga, to Phoebe. "Why would they all be wearing the same costume? Helga and Phoebe, maybe... Rhonda and Nadine, sure... but Helga and Rhonda? Those two can't stand each other! Why would they work together on anything?"

"Aww, Sid, who cares? It's a party! The food is amazing, the music's great, why can't you just enjoy yourself?"

"I'm telling you, something's not right here! This whole setup reeks, boy howdy! I bet... they all really are weird alien monsters, and they put out all this food to fatten us up for their feast. Then they'll lay thousands of eggs and their brood of alien monster babies will conquer the world!"

His two friends just stood there for a moment, processing his paranoid tirade.

"Sid. Dude." Harold finally started, "No more Z-Files marathons for you."

"Yep. I reckon, as them city folk say it, y'all ackin cray-cray."

"'Fine! Don't believe me! But don't come crying to be when Helga starts sucking the marrow out your bones! You won't be able to! Because she'll have already eaten your eyeballs!" He ran off,
probably to spy more on his hosts and possible eventual devours.

"...yeah, so anyway, weren't you into Indian Rhonda?"

"Her name's Rani, an' I fear she's well outta my league."

"No way, man, go for it! It's a party, she's probably in a real good mood! This is the perfect time!"

"Well, if you reckon so, I suppose I could talk myself into it. Maybe."

--

-HI, ME AGAIN-

Arnold and Brainy had truly gone beyond my wildest expectations. The sound system and lights they'd set up had transformed my parents' parlor into a veritable uber-rave. The music and the flashing lights had wormed their way into me and it was all I could do to not betray myself by throwing myself onto the dance floor and shaking every limb the alien spores had given me.

"Okay, I'll admit it," Helga commented from the sidelines. "When I'm wrong, I'm wrong. This party's not a complete disaster. Yet." She held out a hand to Arnold "So. Wanna dance, Football Head?"

The wide-headed boy mock-gasped. "Really? Here? In public?"

"What the hey. I'm feeling bold." She took Arnold's hand and the two hit the dance floor, just as a new song started. Or possibly the same song. I'm not really a huge fan of dubstep, so as far as I knew, it was all an identical mass of wubs. Catchy, though.

--

Okay, now Sid had seen everything.

Rhonda and Helga getting along was one thing.

But Helga and Arnold? DANCING? This was truly a sign of the alien apocalypse approaching.

--

With the song over and Brainy taking a break to air out that weird emoji screen helmet of his, Arnold, Helga, Gerald, and Phoebe had rejoined me on the sidelines.

"Yo. Rhonda. You're missin' out on the action," the tall-haired boy warned her.

"If you fear exposure, don't." Phoebe assured. "I admit I've slipped up a couple of times, but no one has seemed to notice. The lights and music are proving quite distracting."

"Even if I did risk it, I don't exactly have anyone to dance with."

"Well," Phoebe prodded, "perhaps there's someone you've been thinking about asking, but feared certain... social consequences?"

Gerald raised an eyebrow. "I knew it. There is something going on with you and Curly!"

"Uh uh," I denied. "It is most definitely NOT Curly."

"Then what're you so worried about? You're practically royalty, who's gonna give you trouble over which boy you ask to dance?"

"Because," I took a deep breath, "it's not a boy."

"But how could it not be a..." Gerald took a breath as it sunk in. "Oohhhhhhh..."
"Yeah. 'Ohhhhhhh…' Surprise, Rhonda likes girls. And I'm not quite ready to broadcast it to the world, so keep it under your stack of hair, all right?"

"Don't you worry. I can definitely keep a secret. Once it's in my vault, ain't no one gettin' at it. So, uh… mind me askin' who we're talkin' about?"

"For now, why don't we call her… Mocha latte."

"Well, if you want a mocha latte," Gerald advised, taking the metaphor and running with it, "you ain't gettin' one unless you talk to the barista."

"But… this particular barista is probably going to refuse to serve me," I continued, at this point starting to run the metaphor into the ground.

"I would persist, Rhonda," suggested Phoebe. "You may be pleasantly surprised at the results. Perhaps obtaining a mocha latte will be easier than you can imagine."

"Really?" I asked. "You think the, uh, barista won't reject my, uh, business?" Did Phoebe know something I didn't? Had she spoken with Lila?

Wait, have I even told her about Lila? I know I told Helga… No. I must have. Why else would she know?

"I believe the barista will be more than receptive."

"Ugghh, just talk to her already," groaned Helga. "This metaphor's been dragged out so long it offends me as a writer,"

"You're right," I said, glancing over at Lila, lovely and wholesome in her Red Riding Hood costume, over by the punch talking with Nadine and Sheena. "Worst she can do is say no, right?"

But before I could make my move, all the lights in the house suddenly went out.

For a moment, I wondered if it was the work of the Old Man and his gang. This was the lowest my guard had been since returning. It'd be just like them to strike now.

Somewhere in the darkness, Sid was shouting. "It's happening! None of you believed me, but it's happening! This is the part where they eat our brains! A-and probably the rest of us!"

And then the chandelier's lights flared up to full brightness, and I realized why everything had gone so smoothly. Perched there on the chandelier was the one kid I hadn't seen all night, and yet, it hadn't registered on me. I'd been too distracted by all the other little things going on that required my attention as host.

But now, here he was, cackling and clad in a Phantom of the Opera costume.

"Twisted little freak," muttered Helga.

"Bon soir, all you fine people!" he bellowed, hanging on the chandelier's anchor. "Perhaps you have heard of my recent travails. But not even the dastardly machinations of those fiendish Campfire Lasses could keep me from my lady's presence! I have come today to throw myself into her arms! Catch me, my beloved angel! I-"

"CURLY!" I glared up at him. "What do you think you're doing? That chandelier is probably worth more than my college fund! You get off of there right now!"
"Uh… Rhonda…” Helga attempted to get my attention, but I was on a roll.

"And how the heck did you get up here anyway? And what did you do to the electricity? And just what, in the warped funhouse mirror that passes for your mind, made you think this was a good idea?"

"Rhonda…” she repeated, a bit more insistently.

"Now here's what you're going to do," I stated, looking him directly in the eyes. "You're going to come down from there, you're going to fix whatever you did with the lights, and then you are going to sit down in that chair right over there and you will not move for the rest of the night until your parents come to pick you up. Am I making myself clear?"

He just hung there, quietly, not moving a muscle. In fact… the entire room had gotten deadly silent. Normally, a crazy stunt like this would be provoking whispers, a shout or two, but nothing was being said at all.

And that's when I realized. I was looking Curly directly in the eye. And he was hanging on to the chandelier anchor. Fifteen feet off the ground.

In my irritation, I had unconsciously lifted up, off the ground, and fluttered up to face him. In front of everybody in the room.

"…ohhhhh, crap," I muttered.
In which the crisis is averted, but not by who you expect.

As usual, a carefully-executed plan has been derailed by a single unpredictable element.

The plan: Throw a Christmas/Halloween mashup party. Pass off our mutation as costumes for the night. Get everyone used to the way we look, then let slip at the end that we're not actually wearing costumes and hope to high heaven that our dear friends don't turn into the angry mob from the end of every Frankenstein movie.

The single unpredictable element: Thaddeus Q. "Curly" Gammelthorpe, a deranged little man with a penchant for anarchy and breaking into zoos, and stalker to Rhonda W. Lloyd, my ex arch-rival-turned-friend-by-circumstance and fellow victim of an extraterrestrial mutation virus. For years he lurked behind dumpsters and hid in alleyways, waxing poetic and snatching up little mementos of the subject of his admiration whenever he could find the chance.

I mean… who does that sort of thing?

*cough cough*

Anyway, Curly decided to elaborately crash the party (despite the fact that he was invited) and potentially also crash the Lloyd family's expensive-as-hell cut-crystal chandelier, causing our party's host, the aforementioned Rhonda W. Lloyd, to fly up and shout in his face despite that her wings were supposed to be part of her "costume".

The room had grown deadly silent. Everybody was just standing there, staring.

"This… this is part of the show, everybody!" she stammered nervously, attempting to break the tension "All wires and mirrors! Curly was in on it the whole time!"

"Uh… yeah!" Curly nervously improvised. "Just a dark web app on a jailbroken phone to control the house lights, no big deal… we came up with the whole thing while we were making out in the janitor's closet!"

"What! N-no! We did no such thing! Don't believe a word he says!" She had gotten so flustered, she'd forgotten her lower pair of arms were also supposed to be fake and was waving all four in protest of Curly's claims. Deep in the crowd, my palm met my face. Rhonda was blowing it. Big time.

"I knew it!" Sid suddenly shouted. "It was a trap the whole time! She's been replaced by an alien monster, and she's lured us all here to be fattened up on fancy finger foods so she and her alien
cohorts can devour our flesh, lay their eggs, and conquer the world! It's just like in the Z-Files, Season 7, episode 21, 'Lambs to the Slaughter!' There may be a wide array of sushi, but it's us on the menu."

Murmurings spread through the crowd, Sid's tirade clearly beginning to sway the unsure. Sure, what was coming out of his mouth was complete incoherent nonsense, but the proof was floating right in front of them, wings slowly flapping, lower hands wringing, tail starting to twitch uncontrollably.

"I, for one, would be happy to be devoured as fodder for your reproductive cycle, my love," assured Curly.

"Ugggh… it's not like that," sighed Rhonda, slowly beginning to descend to the ground. The gang backed away, clearly nervous about what this creature claiming to be their friend might do. "Okay, look… it's true. This isn't a costume. I really am like this. I'm a freak, just like Sid said. But I'm not an alien invader and I don't want to eat anyone. I just wanted… I just wanted to feel normal again for a little while."

She sagged into a chair. "I got this weird virus in the jungle and it did this to my body. I've basically been hiding out the whole time, ashamed of how I looked. This whole kidnapping thing was a cover. Arnold's mom was called in to try to find a cure for me because she's an expert in biology, but so far she hasn't been able to find any sort of way to change me back. I was getting really lonely, so Arnold came up with the idea of throwing a Christmas party and having everyone come in costume so I could be around everyone again and feel like a person instead of a circus attraction."

No mention of me, or Phoebe. She was trying to make herself the focus so we wouldn't be drawn into the developing situation. Before this all started, it was the kind of thing I'd never have expected her to do. Draw positive attention to herself, sure, but negative?

"So, that's it," she continued, resigned to the failure of the party. "Sorry I wasted everyone's time with this whole stupid idea. You guys might as well just go home and try to forget I ever existed."

"Gawrsh, Helga," Stinky whispered. "Shore is one heck of a coinky-dink that Rhonda turned out t'be a monster that looks exactly like your costume, ain't it?"

"Stinky, you're an idiot," I muttered. I walked forward out of the crowd. "Look. Rhonda's not the only freak in the group."

"Helga, stop, you don't have to this,"

"I kinda do. I get that you're trying to do this noble self-sacrifice dealie, but I'd be a really shitty friend if I let you." I removed my visor, revealing my alien eyes. "I'm a mutant too."

Gasps all around.

"Yeah, that's right. So whatever you plan on doing to her, you'd better be ready to do to me. Just remember, I like to hit back." I cracked both sets of knuckles for emphasis.

"Excuse me, everyone," Phoebe politely added, "but I cannot let my friends face persecution alone." Phoebe joined the two of us in the center of the crowd. "I, too, am a mutant."

There was silence as the crowd mulled the new information.

"They're all in it together!" shouted Sid. "We gotta get outta here and warn everyone!"

"Yeah!" added Harold. "If we all make for the door they can't stop all of us!"
The crowd began to surge for the door, with the notable exceptions of Arnold, Gerald, Patty, Nadine, Eugene, and Brainy. They all gathered around us protectively.

"Patty, c'mon, we gotta get outta here!" insisted Harold.

"I'm staying," Patty responded. "They're my friends. Yours, too. So get back here, unless you're still busy being stupid."

"Awww, but peer pressure…"

Patty gave him a mom stare.

"Ahhh, I hate it when you make sense," Harold grumbled as he made his way back to us, mumbling "Madame fortress mommy" under his breath. Someday, I should really ask him what that actually means.

"Well… you may have him buffalooed, but the rest of us are leaving." Sid reaffirmed.

Someone cleared his throat,

Now, this is usually the part where Arnold (light in my soul, beacon of my desires) makes some heartfelt, inspiring speech that sways everyone to rethink what they're doing, look into their hearts, and do the right thing.

So imagine my surprise when it was Brainy of all people who had interrupted the moment.

"Friends," he began in a surprisingly clear voice that was nowhere near his low, gravely, wheezy monotone. "As you know, I am not a man of words. Public speaking is far from my forte. Yet… I can no longer remain silently on the sidelines as this injustice unfolds."

The crowd stopped, hushed as much by the very fact that it was Brainy speaking as by the eloquence coming out of him.

"Certainly, our friends have changed in their physical appearance. But is that a crime? Who among us has not undergone some change in recent times? Is that not to be expected at this time in our lives? Sure, their changes have been more extreme than ours, but should that truly matter? In the end, are we not all dealing with change? Is that not the human condition?

"So, I ask you, can we truly abandon them now, when they are reaching out to us for our friendship? When they need it now, more than ever?"

"Stinky! When you were failing science earlier this year, who was it who helped you get your grade all the way up to a b-minus?"

"Why, if it wasn't for Phoebe, I reckon I wouldn't be graduatin' this year."

"And Sid! Last year, when you were up to your eyeballs in debt to Big Gino, who spotted you five premium chocolate bars to pay off your debt?"

"Rhonda… th-they were the good stuff, too… real cacao with no artificial ingredients…"

"And I should hardly have to tell anyone of the role that Helga played in saving our entire neighborhood. None of us would even be here if it wasn't for her. The point is… these are our friends. We've known them all our lives. So they're different now. So what? What really matters is the same."
"So, look into your hearts. Ask yourself: What's the right thing? I think you know."

The group stood in shocked silence.

"Th-that was beautiful," Sid said, eyes tearing up. "I'M SO SORRY!" he bawled.

"Ah reckon I'm feelin' lower'n an old dog dyin' in a ditch on the side of a dusty, forgotten road," Stinky added.

"We were wrong to judge you," continued Lila.

One by one the rest of the group came forward to offer their apologies, though Eugene's call for a group hug was ignored.

"So, uh," Rhonda finally said, when the situation had died down. "I've still got this whole party set up here. Kind of a shame if it all goes to waste, y'know?"

Taking the cue, Brainy, who had made his way back to the DJ table during the many apologies, started up the music again.

"Looks like everything's working out after all," Arnold commented to me.

"Yeah, but… doesn't it feel kind of weird that for once, it wasn't you giving the whole 'deep down, you know the right thing to do' spiel?" I responded.

"Actually… it's kind of nice to have someone else be the class conscience for a change. It's not like I asked for the job, y'know."

"Yeah, but you're just so good at it, with your unerring moral compass and your unwavering optimism and your perfect green eyes…" Ah, screw it. People were gonna find out sooner or later anyway. I leaned in and planted one directly on his lips.

"OOOOOH, LOOK!" Harold shouted on cue. "HELGA'S KISSING AWWWW-NOLD!"

"Yeah, yeah, 'HELGA'S KISSING AWWWW-NOLD!'" I shot back in a mocking tone. "What of it, Pinkboy? You got a problem with public displays of affection? Aren't you a little old for this kinda thing, anyway? What are you, like, 15, now? How are you still throwing around playground insults? Don't you have any shame? Well, not me, pal!" I raised my voice, wrapping my left pair of arms around Arnold. "That's right, everyone! This here is a thing that's happening! Arnold and I are a couple, and if you have a problem with it, you can file your complaints with Old Betsy, the Four Avengers, Punchy McPunchface and The Enforcer!"

"'Bout time," Gerald whispered to a giggling Phoebe.

--

-RHONDA-

It was such a relief to not have to hide anymore. I'd gotten so used to myself that it was becoming a chore to hold all my extra parts still. The arms and wings weren't too bad, but my tail just naturally wanted to swish. Now, it was free to do so.

Of course, with revelation came the questions. Roughly the next hour was spent with the three mutants answering all their classmates' questions regarding their adventures, their powers, and so on.

For example:
Iggy: "So, can you shoot lasers out your extra eye?"

Me: "No, it's exactly the same as the other two eyes. I just have three. Nothing special about the middle one."

Sheena: "Can you change people by biting them, like a werewolf?"

Phoebe: "Most certainly not. The only way the infection spreads is by direct blood contact. I would have to pierce my nearly-invulnerable skin and bleed directly into an open cut somewhere on your body to cause you to change."

Sid: "You… don't eat people. Right? I just wanna make sure."

Helga: "If they annoyed me enough, I might give it a try, so don't tempt me."

And so on. Eventually Helga declared an end to Q&A and demanded we get back to the party.

"Hey. Rhonda?" Nadine asked. "Is it okay if I go scrub this gunk off, now that everything's all in the open?"

"Of course. Frankly, your skin's perfect as is. I wouldn't wanna mess it up."

As she made her exit, I pondered making my own move. Lila was over by the drinks table in heated discussion with Mary, Rani and Sheena, who looked a bit uncomfortable and as if they were trying to find a way to extract themselves from the conversation.

Duh. Superhearing. I can eavesdrop.

"…and it's just ever-so-frustrating. I just know she's terrible for him, but she's got her hooks deep into him with her wicked charms."

"Mmm-hmm." Mary nodded, eyes swiveling, looking for a safe exit. Clearly, this was a very awkward conversation. I wondered what could possibly be this uncomfortable. It sounded like Lila was simply describing some soap opera plot.

Rani, at least, got her out when Stinky made his way over to the quartet, looking intent.

"Excuse me, Miz Rani…" the lanky boy said, "I, was, er… wondrin' if… I mean, we don't really know each other, but I've been admirin' you from afar and… that is, I was…"

"I would love to dance, Stinky," the Indian-American girl said, eagerly grabbing hold of the safety line she'd been thrown.

"Well, hot dog! Let's go cut a rug!" Stinky eagerly suggested, taking hold of Rani's hand and leading her out onto the dance floor.

"We should go too," Sheena suggested, pulling Mary along.

"Yes. For moral support," added Mary as the two made their own exit.

"Well, okay…" Lila responded, a bit subdued now.

"Mmm-mmm-mmm… Country Boy actually went and did it." Gerald marveled, somewhere off to the right of me.

"Yuh-huh." smirked Helga. "And you know what that means."
"What are you talking about?" he asked, confused.

"You remember the bet, Geraldo. If Stinko finally screws up the courage to talk to Princess Patel before the end of the year, you shave your head."

"...wait, you were serious?"

"Serious as a funeral, former Tall Hair Boy."

"But we made that bet months ago! How can you possibly still remember?"

"Oh, I remember all the stuff worth remembering."

"Aw, man... I've had the fade since pre-school! How could you do me like this, Pataki?"

"Well, it just goes to show you; don't make a bet if you're not prepared to lose." She offered a mock-sympathetic look. "Would you... like to take some time to say goodbye?"

"...yeah..."

"Take your time, Geraldo. I know you're attached. Emotionally and physically."

"Thanks."

"But if it's not gone by New Years' I'm coming by with the clippers. Now go. Be with your loved one before the end."

"Jeez," I said as Gerald walked away, stroking his 'do for what may have been the last time. "Remind me to never bet on anything with you."

"Hey, I just called it the way I wanted to see it. Props to Jethro for actually nutting up. Speaking of... She's all alone. Now's your chance."

Oh, right... I did resolve to make my move, didn't I? "I... was kind of hoping you forgot I said anything."

"Like I said, I remember the stuff that matters." She prodded me on. "Go. And remember, the worst thing she could do is say no."

"The worst thing she could do is say no," I echoed.

"And even if she does, at least it's an answer. Better than being in limbo for eight years, lurking in the shadows, pining for something that might never be..."

"...this is still about me, right?"

"Of course it is. Now go! Get that mocha latte!"

"Right! Skim plus! Two shakes of cinnamon!" I marched on, confidence buoyed.

And then there I was in front of her and it completely dissolved.

"So... hey", I finally managed.

"Hello again, Rhonda," Lila said, her usual smile in place. "I'm oh-so-glad you're back with us. It must have been difficult, just ever-so-difficult for you."
"It has been," I agreed. "But I've gotten to the point where I'm okay with what's happened to me. All I'm looking for now is acceptance."

"Oh, Rhonda, of course I accept you! The Lord accepts all people who seek Him. Can I do any less?"

"Thanks. So, uh… what's been going on with you?"

"Oh, well… It's been awful, just oh-so-awful. I fear I'm losing my father."

"Oh my gosh… is he sick?"

"What? Oh, no. It's nothing like that. It's just… he's been seeing this woman lately, and I think she's really wrong for him."

"Well… maybe if you got to know her better?"

"That's what everyone keeps trying to tell me! But they have no idea what I'm going through!"

"…you lost one parent and you feel like you're going through it all over again, don't you. You feel like your dad's trying to replace your mom."

She was silent for a while, just sitting there processing it.

"…It's been so long. I've barely even been thinking about her. But… seeing daddy with her… it feels like I'm four again and I'm watching her waste away. Only this time I don't even have daddy to rely on because-"

"…because he's happy. With her." I supplied.

"Yeah." She took a deep breath. "I guess… I've been just… oh-so-selfish, haven't I."

"I don't know if I'd say that. Believe me, I'm like, the poster girl for selfish. It's really, really easy to not be able to see past your own feelings."

"I should be better than this, though. I'm… always preaching, but I can't live up to it."

"Yeah… it's tough to see our own faults. I'm kind of the poster girl for that, too."

"Yeah, but… you've gotten better. Don't think people haven't noticed, because they have. Whereas I'm afraid I've gone in the opposite direction."

"Oh, no, no…"

"I know you're trying to spare my feelings, but… I'm certain I've become quite self-righteous and judgmental."

"I mean, I wouldn't say-"

"No, no… I know what people have been saying about me. All I really want is to help people, but… I guess I've been coming off as oh-so-holier-than thou."

"For the record, Lila, I never thought of you like that. Sure, maybe you could tone down the preaching a bit, but I know it comes from a place of caring. It's, uh… it's one of the reasons I…"

"…yes?"
…oh wow, am I actually doing this?
"Lila, I like you…"
"Why, I'm certain I like you too, Rhonda!"
"…I… like-you like you, Lila."
"…oh."
"…yeah. I've… I've had a crush on you for a while now."
"Oh," she said again, neutrally, picking it apart in her mind.
"…yeaaahhh…"
"I… didn't know you were… that way."
"I'm, uh… both ways. I think."
"Oh." Again, flat. And, clearly I have made things awkward and uncomfortable.
"I'll, uh… I'll be going now…" I said.
"No, you don't have to," Lila said, grabbing my lower wrist. "Look… I'm sorry about my reaction. I'm certain it took a lot of courage to tell me how you felt, and I'm ever so glad you were able to do that."
"But… you don't feel the same way."
"To be perfectly honest… no."
"It's all right, really… I… really shouldn't have expected you to."
"Don't worry about it, Rhonda! I may not be your oh so special someone, but I'm ever so certain he or she is out there. In the meantime… you'll always have me as your friend."
"Thanks, Lila. I guess that's the best I could have hoped for."
"Well… if you'll excuse me, I'm oh so certain I have certain… needs to attend to."
"Oh, sure. I kind of have some thinking to do anyway," I commented as she walked away.
"She doesn't know what she's missing!"
"AWP!" Somehow, Curly had snuck up right behind me. "Where the hell did you come from?"
"I'm everywhere and nowhere, baby!" he cackled. "Seriously, though… I'm sorry it didn't work out. A high-class lady like you deserves happiness."
"You realize I'm still not into you, right?"
"I know…"
"…but thanks. You're a pretty good guy when you're not Curly-ing it up. And I'm sure there's someone for you out there, too. Just not me."
"Well, that's pretty clear. But you can't just turn off your feelings. I'm always gonna carry a spark for you, see?"

"Yeah, I guess I know exactly what that feels like now."

We just sort of sat there for a minute, musing on loves that would never be.

"Hey, here's a crazy idea," I suggested. "How about we develop a deep mutual friendship instead?"

"I'll give it some thought," he said. "Might not be too bad."

This was proving to be a very cathartic party.

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And so, the rest of the party pretty much passed without incident. A fine time was had by all, and any big revelations (aliens in our midst, Helga and Arnold dating, dogs and cats living together, mass hysteria) were fodder for talk but eventually just accepted as a given.

And so, after Peapod Kid won the karaoke contest with a truly tear-wrenching rendition of "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald", the party began to wind down, and everyone pretended to not notice Harold filching the remaining hors d'oeuvres.

One by one, parents arrived to collect their kids. The pressure to be a charming host fading, I decided to just watch and let it all play out. I plopped myself down next to Helga, who was gorging herself on Patty's homemade petit fours.

"A little frou-frou for you, Hellcat," I commented.

"Fancy cake is still cake, Rondaloid," she responded, mouth full of rosewater-flavored buttercream. So… how’d it go with Our Lady of the Perpetual Superiority?"

"She's not really like that, Helga," I insisted. "Okay, so she's been a little overboard with the religion in the last year, but I think she recognizes that. And, well… she's a lot better than you give her credit for. I came out to her and, well… I have to admit that I really did think I'd get the ‘oh you poor thing, I'll pray for your soul' response, but she was actually understanding and accepting of my feelings, even if she can't return them."

"Princess, don't do this to me, you know I don't like having to rethink things..."

"Part of growing up, Hel." I paused to wave back to Katrinka, running out to meet her dads. "It'll hardly be the last of your ingrained notions to be challenged."

"Stop saying that like it's good! I like being unquestionably right about everything!"

--

Soon, the guests had departed, with a few remaining to help clean up (besides Helga and myself, Arnold, Gerald, Phoebe, Nadine, Lila and Curly had elected to stay).

"You didn't really have to stick around," I told Lila. "I mean, I'm making Curly help out to make up for his earlier shenanigans, but you don't owe me anything.

"Nonsense, it's the least I could do for you," she replied with a warm smile. "I want to make it oh-so-clear that nothing's changed between us."

"Thanks for that." My phone sounded a distinctive tone that I'd had to answer at least a dozen times during the night. "Sorry. I told my folks that I didn't want them to hire any help for tonight, but they did insist on hiring private security. I've had to check in with them every half hour." I answered,
expecting to hear the usual "This is Dave, Miss Lloyd. Reporting condition green, nothing suspicious."

Instead, there was an unfamiliar voice. "Time's up, Miss Lloyd."

"Who is this?" I demanded.

"The Old Man wants to wish you a merry Christmas, and… Season's beatings."

And then, for the second time in a month, armored individuals kicked in the door and stormed the house.

"Sorry," the leader said. "I just can't resist holiday puns."
Chapter Summary

In which one will never be the same.

A.N.: This one gets a bit brutal. Warning for some blood and mild gore.

Chapter 33
Holly Jolly Beatdown
Lloyd Mansion
-HELGA-

You know, it was a pretty good party up until now.

Until recently, Rhonda and I didn't particularly like each other, but the one thing I would admit is that her parties were pretty good. And this one, despite a few early hiccups, had turned out pretty amazing. I'd gotten over my fear of going public with Arnold, I was able to be myself, at least around my friends, and I'd won a bet with Gerald. Plus, free cake. Life was good.

Well, until the party crashers showed up and ruined everything.

Okay, technically the party'd been over for a good half hour and this was just the clean-up. But still, it was the principle of the thing. We had been having a good time, and the last thing we needed was a bunch of the Old Man's paramilitary goons wrecking it,

So, right now, there were about a dozen people standing in Princess's foyer holding guns on us. Big ones, small ones, a few really unusual-looking ones. We were outnumbered, and only three of us were bulletproof. It was definitely not a good situation.

The lead guy strolled forward, shit-eating grin on his face, confident he held all the cards. He kinda looked like a grown-up version of the bully in The Karate Kid (the original, not the remake with Jackie Chan). You know the guy, blonde hair, permanent smirk of unearned privilege.

"So, how's this fine season finding you?" he said, perma-smirk unmoving. "Celebrating with the family? Santa bring you lots of presents? I envy you. Some of us have to work, y'know. I mean, I love my job, wouldn't trade it for anything, but Murphy here's missing his ski trip."

"My hearts bleed for him," I remarked, matching his smirk with my own. "Why, I couldn't imagine suffering on that sort of scale. How truly terrible." I dropped the smirk. "Okay. You're here, you made your cool entrance with all your big scary guns. I guess your bosses didn't bother to tell you that bullets can't hurt us."

"True, true… but I'm pretty sure they can hurt them, kid." He gestured at Arnold, Gerald, and the other very human, very non-bulletproof friends still gathered.

"Excuse me," Phoebe asserted. "But I must emphasize the futility of this endeavor. Though you do
appear to possess the numerical and firepower advantage, the chances are likely that the three of us possess enough strength, speed, and durability to overwhelm you before you could squeeze off a single shot."

"What she said," I echoed, striding up to "Johnny", as I was mentally calling him. "So how about you step off befo- AHHHH! SON OF A BITCH!"

Johnny had fired, but instead of the expected bullet, a sliver of sharp metal had buried itself in my shoulder, bringing searing, agonizing pain of the kind I hadn't felt since transforming nearly a month ago. I staggered back, clutching my wounded shoulder. My entire upper left arm had gone numb, and teal blood was oozing out the wound. Arnold was immediately at my side. "Are you okay?" he asked.

I choked back a sarcastic response involving just how great it felt and how afterwards I was planning to go French-kiss a cactus. He's just being stupid because he cares, I reminded myself. "R-really, really hurts," is what I managed.

"What do you think of our new toys? Courtesy of R&D. Razor-sharp metal and enough force behind it to make a pincushion of any freak stupid enough to give us lip. As you can plainly see."

"Is that a railgun? How on earth were you able to minimize it without compromising on power? How did you compensate for the recoil? How did you find a practical-"

"PHOEBE! Yank this thing out now, geek out later!"

"Sorry, sorry. Yanking!" She grabbed the exposed part of the metal shard and pulled and HOLY F***ING F***ETY F*** F*** F***

That was the worst pain I had ever felt. But at least it was out and my body's healing factor could kick in. My blood was already forming a sticky seal over the wound.

"All right," I said, strained. "So you can hurt us."

"Clearly. So dial down the attitude, Pinky. We're in control here." He kept the gun trained on us, making his way over to the buffet table. "Oooh, is that rumaki? Don't mind if I do!" He took a bite and spat it out. "Ugh, Room-temperature."

"Well, that's just rude," muttered Rhonda.

"Good to see your priorities are straight," I commented. Ow. Shoulder still hurts like the dickens.

"Oh don't get me wrong, I was already pissed off, but that was just mean." She turned her attention to Johnny. "Well, if you're done abusing my hospitality, perhaps you can get to the point?"

"Missy, I think you'd better remember just who's holding the guns in this situation."

"'Missy?' I am a Lloyd, you miserable excuse for a rent-a-thug. You are in my home and you do not tell me how to react. Now, here's what's going to happen. You are going to let everyone else go, and in return, you get me. I'll offer no resistance. Your boss can do what he will to me, but you are not to lay a hand on anyone else. Am I understood?"

I glared at her. "Damn it, Princess, stop trying to sacrifice yourself! We're all in this together!"

"Hey, my house, I get to be the noble one. It's my fault we're all in here anyway. Besides… you'd just do exactly the same thing."
….damn it, she was right. I would. That didn't mean I'd want her to do it. Last thing I need is that kind of guilt.

"So?" she asked again. "Do we have a deal?"

"Let me explain this to you again," Johnny stated, irritation beginning to show on his face. "You are not in any position to make demands here. I can just take you out whenever I feel like."

"Are you sure about that?" I have to admit, when she's in your corner, Rhonda's "Confident Alpha Bitch" persona is a lot more tolerable. "I've seen that weapon in action. I know exactly what to expect, and I'm confident I can dodge it. Can you dodge lightning?" She wiggled her fingers, electricity arcing between them.

"Well. This could be interesting. Bring it on, Grimace." He took aim and fired. Rhonda twisted out of the way and flung a bolt at the smug goon, who simply stood there as it hit."

"Insulated uniform. We knew we'd be dealing with someone with electrical powers. We can also counter your pink friend's temperature manipulation. We came prepared."

"Does it insulate against a punch in the face?"

"Lay a hand on me, my buddies put a bullet in one of your softer friends. Maybe Weird Head, or Weird Hair… or Wendy's Logo Girl, over there… could be anyone. So go ahead. Make a move."

Rhonda sagged, defeated. I knew how she felt. A ton of power, but using it meant someone she cared about died. Frustration boiled within me.

-Helga-

Rhonda's voice suddenly sounded in my head. I restrained myself from reacting; for her to use telepathy meant she absolutely, positively didn't want anyone knowing.

-What?- 

-You're right next to the bar. There's a panic button under there. Daddy had several installed in various parts of the house after the first attack. You should be able to trigger it with your tail.

-Bringing the police in? Won't that just make them desperate?- 

-What other options do we have? We're outnumbered, outgunned, and we've got a bunch of innocent bystanders who our friends are very eager to make into targets. Maybe the fear of capture'll make these guys run off. I honestly don't know what else to do at this point. -

"I thought so," Johnny said meanwhile, noting Rhonda's stand-down. "Now, why don't you go join your friends over there and wait while we get the restraints ready. You're all coming with us, and that includes Smurfette there."

"And you'll let the others go," Rhonda prompted.

"Well, that's another thing. These kids can identify me. It'd really be stupid of me to leave them alive, wouldn't it?"

I felt a chill deep down. This guy wasn't bluffing. He had the eyes of someone with absolutely no conscience. He would waste all our friends without a second thought.

He would waste Arnold.
Swiftly, silently, my tail searched by touch under the bar, finally encountering the sought button. I pushed it in, activating the silent alarm, and hoped that we could stall long enough until the cops made it here. –Mission accomplished, Princess.-

"You're really not giving us a lot of reason to cooperate, then, are you?" Rhonda replied to Johnny, picking up on my mental cue. "I mean, I'm going to kill all your friends anyway? So what exactly is our motivation to go along with your demands?"

"She's right," affirmed Phoebe. "You don't seem to be very good at this."

"Shut it, Tiny," Johnny hissed.

"She was also correct about you being rude," she muttered.

"Look," Rhonda said. "You either let the other kids go, or we're just going to stand here, staring at each other until someone else intervenes, and I doubt that's going to work out in your favor."

"That's okay. It's not like I have anywhere to go. So, how about I offer a counter proposal; Every hour I shoot someone. How about that? You like those terms?"

"You're bluffing. You know the second you kill anyone, your life isn't worth the shit you're full of. Empty threats are all you have. Sure, you had me fooled for a bit, but once I gave it a bit of thought, it occurred to me that your threats are as hollow as any schoolyard bully's. Because deep down, that's what you are, isn't it."

"Shut up…" Johnny said, reddening.

"Maybe you were fat. Maybe your daddy beat you. Maybe you were scared of your latent homosexuality and were trying to overcompensate. Maybe you were just born with a dick two sizes too small. I'm sure none of that mattered to your victims, but whatever, right? It made you feel big again, didn't it. And when you got too big for the schoolyard, you just looked for a new way to make yourself feel like a big man. You just graduated from swirlies and wedgies to professional gooning. But no matter how big you get, deep down, you're still just that kid on the playground with the tiny, tiny penis."

"Sh-shut UP!" Johnny half-stammered, half, bellowed, face now redder than a stop sign. I have to admit, that was a verbal beatdown worthy of me. "Shut up, shut up shut up!" He began waving his gun wildly. "Just for that, one of you dies right now!"

-Oh, shit, I pushed him too far,- Rhonda warned. –I didn't think he'd be this unstable!-

We all tensed, as he drew and began training his gun from Rhonda, to me, to Phoebe, and back to Rhonda, again and again. "Which one… will it be… Eeny…. Meeny… Miney…"

And suddenly shifted to Lila.

"YOU."

The world suddenly seemed to slow to a crawl. I saw Rhonda lunge for the weapon, a moment too late. I felt myself run towards Lila, again, too late, as the metal shard tore through her too-fragile flesh. She collapsed, blood gushing from her wound, Oblivious to the shouts of her friends as shock began to set in.

I could faintly hear sirens, but too far away. Lila would never make it to the hospital at the rate she was bleeding. I had never liked her, I had always seen her as an irritant at best and a bitter rival at
worst, but that was my problem. She didn't deserve to die for it. And there was a chance I could save her.

Oblivious to the chaos starting to unfold around me, I grabbed the shard of metal that had wounded Lila and slashed across my palm. I held it to the wound, letting my alien blood mingle with hers.

God… if you're out there… I prayed, for the first time in… hmmm, maybe it was the first time. I know I'm not exactly your biggest booster, but I know Lila loves you. If you love her back… please, please let this work.

--

-PHOEBE-

As the proverb goes, all hell had broken loose.

When Rhonda had seen the mercenary leader's cowardly attack on Lila, her eyes had gone blood-red (well, human blood-red) and she'd lunged, berserk, at the man, who rolled out of the way of her clumsy attack and fired blindly, hitting her in the thigh. She staggered, but hobbled forward, ignoring the pain in her rage.

"Screw it!" he said, now clearly fully unhinged. "Kill 'em all! Let the docs chop up the bodies, I don't give a shit anymore!" The other goons hesitated, a number likely still shocked that their leader had gone so far as to fatally shoot a harmless girl. "DO IT, DAMN IT, THAT'S AN ORDER!"

His command startled one mercenary into immediately firing their railgun… at me. Still in shock at the events going on, I was too startled to try and dodge. I futilely held my upper hands in front of my face, closed my eyes, and braced for the searing pain of sharp metal tearing my flesh.

It never came.

I opened my eyes to find the shard frozen before me, suspended in mid-air. The moment I registered it, the shard dropped, clattering to the floor.

"Oh, my."

I had done that.

Experimentally, I reached out with my mind, feeling it latch on to the mercenary's gun, yank it from his grasp, and twist the barrel out of shape.

"Shit," he said. "The blue chick's Carrie."

Hardly accurate. Carrie was a telekinetic with supernatural origins, whereas it appeared that my power was strictly magnetic. Still… the distinction was academic. Their weapons were made of metal and metal things were, in layman's terms, my bitch.

I reached out again, seized the weapon of the nearest mercenary, and flung it upward. Unfortunately for him, he chose to hang on and his head was violently introduced to the ceiling. My next victim wisely chose to let go as I disarmed him. The rest decided to drop their weapons themselves, clearly no longer feeling much loyalty to their leader.

Said leader was still facing Rhonda. His weapon had impaled her twice more, in the shoulder and the side. Still, she staggered on toward him, her body moving by sheer force of will. However, it was clear that her will to keep going was fading. The red glow had left her eyes. She was badly injured and could barely move, while he was still in pristine shape and had all the time to line up a shot. I
started to reach again with my powers, but I needn't have bothered.

"A WILD CURLY APPEARS!"

Seemingly from nowhere, the unstable boy dropped onto the leader's head and shoulders, clawing at his eyes and biting his ears. The mercenary flailed helplessly, trying to dislodge the boy to no avail. Rhonda took the opportunity to pull the shards out of her body, gritting against the agonizing pain.

By the time the leader had managed to finally shrug Curly off, he found himself seconds away from Rhonda punching him in the face.

"Unpleasant dreams, assbutt," she spat as the man hit the floor. Suddenly dizzy as the adrenaline rush died down, she sagged against a column. "Is everyone okay?" The realization suddenly hit as her mind cleared. "Lila!"

"I think I think I did it," Helga said. She hadn't stirred from Lila's side since everything had gone to hell.

"Helga, what did you do?" I asked. Lila was pale and her breathing was shallow, but steady.

"She wasn't going to last until an ambulance got here. And then I remembered what you said about bleeding into an open wound." Helga removed her hand from Lila's entry wound, where a sticky teal scab had formed, sealing it shut. Dark veiny lines were staring to spread across her skin away from the scab.

"You infected her," I stated unnecessarily.

"I panicked and it was the only thing I could think of. And it worked. The exit wound is also sealed up, and she's breathing more or less normally and not coughing up blood anymore." She buried her hands in her head. "I've ruined her life."

"No," Rhonda said. "You saved her life after I endangered it. I invited her over. I didn't talk her out of staying to help clean up. I antagonized the guy into shooting her. You were right. This party was a stupid idea."

"H-hello?"

Everyone's attention turned back to Lila. The injured girl was just starting to stir again.

"Easy," Helga said.

"I… is this what being dead feels like? Is this heaven?"

"You're not dead," Arnold assured her. "Helga managed to save your life."

"B-but the Angel said I was dead. And now my blood feels like it's starting to burn." Her eyes widened, yet she seemed to not see anything surrounding her. "Oh no… this is Hell, isn't it? He said I had to be purified before he came for me! That's what this is!"

"Criminy, Lila, look around you!" Helga demanded, exasperated. "We're still in Rhonda's… whatever the heck this room is called! Expensive rich people foyer or whatever!"

"No… no, you're lying. That's what the devil does! He lies and deceives! I can feel you torturing me! It's like every part of my body is on fire!"

"That's just the-" How was I going to break this to her? "Don't worry, you're not dead and being
tortured by the lord of the fiery underworld! You're simply about to undergo an agonizing metamorphosis that will warp your body beyond recognition and irreversibly change the course of the rest of your life! No biggie!" "Look… it's not going to be pleasant, but… we've all gone through what you will and we'll be there for you the whole time. There's no reason to fear." I tried to offer her a sympathetic hand but she slapped it away.

"You're lying. The Angel said you would. He said I would suffer, but he promised he would come for me and set me free. I just have to wait. I just have to endure."

"I'll get her into the back and call Arnold's mom," I advised the gang. "She's seen this before, she'll know how to handle it."

"She'll handle what's happening to her body, sure." Rhonda said skeptically. "That's not the part of her I'm worried about."

"We'll deal with that once she's through the worst of it," Helga advised. "Right now, you and I better figure out how to explain this whole mess to the cops."
The police had finally left, taking with them the last of the goons. Explanations had been offered, and I'm not sure they'd entirely been bought, but my family's an influential one in the city's economy and politics and I'm fairly sure no one wanted to make waves, so they'd left officially buying that this was an attempt to rob the place. Never mind the paramilitary uniforms and exotic weaponry. I guess money talks.

Helga and Phoebe took Lila to MDI, with Arnold and Gerald tagging along. She was still insisting that she was dead and in purgatory up until the moment they left. Curly had disappeared to who knows where, though I was sure he'd pop again at the most annoying possible moment.

So, basically, Nadine (who had planned to sleep over that night anyway) and I were left to clean up the aftermath of the attack. Surprisingly, there hadn't really been much damage apart from the door (I didn't look forward explaining that to dad) and some bloodstains.

Bloodstains…

One of them was Lila's.

It all hit me again. If I hadn't thrown this stupid party, then Lila wouldn't've been her. If I hadn't clumsily confessed my attraction to her, she wouldn't've felt compelled to stick around after the party to help clean up. She wouldn't've been shot, Helga wouldn't've had to to infect her with the mutation virus to save her life, and her sanity wouldn't be dangling by a thread. All of this was my fault.

The very least I could do was clean up her blood. I soaped up a sponge, got on my knees, started to scrub… scrub… scrub…

--

-NADINE-

I found her where I left her, in the foyer, scrubbing the spot where Lila'd been hit.

"Rhonda?"
"I think I've almost got it out, Nadine, just give me a little more time…"

"Rhonda…"

"Just a little more…"

I shook her. "Rhonda!"

She seemed to snap out of the fugue she was in. "Wha…?"

"You've been scrubbing that one spot for an hour now. The stain is gone. It was gone a while ago."

She blinked, staring at the spot she'd been scrubbing. "But… but it was just here…"

"C'mon. Put down the sponge. Take a break." I helped her up off the floor and led her to the parlor. "Sit down. Talk."

"What's there to talk about, Nadine? I put everyone in danger. I nearly got Lila killed. She still might be so messed up in the head that she'll never be all right. And all because I wanted to be the center of attention again."

"Rhonda, no…"

"But it's okay, because once dad finds out what happened, he'll probably ship me off to some secret nunnery where I can be hidden away for the rest of my life and never ruin anything for anyone again with my selfishness. It'll be all for the best."

"Ughh…. Sorry about this, but this is for your own good…" I slapped her in the face.

"Ow! Why'd you do that?"

"Sorry, but I'm really not in the mood to watch you wallow in self-pity right now. Look, there was no way you could have possibly known that the bad guys would strike tonight. And when it did happen, you handled it the best way you could. You tried negotiation, intimidation, bargaining… you were ready to turn yourself over to them to ensure everyone's safety, Rhonda! Does that sound like something a selfish person would do?"

"But if I did everything right, then why did Lila get hurt?"

"Because some things you just can't control, okay? Sometimes you can do everything right, and things'll just go wrong anyway! Nothing is certain, so you just have to do the best you can and hope everything turns out right, and not lose hope if it doesn't." I looked her in those gorgeous golden orbs. "You don't get to give up. I'm not going to let you."

She smiled weakly. "I don't deserve you, Nadine."

"Too bad. You're stuck with me."

"Why? Why do stick by me?"

"Because…” I took a deep breath. "Because of this."

I leaned in….

--

-RHONDA-
Oh shit, what was I doing? I pulled back from the kiss. "S-sorry about that," I stammered.

"N-nadine…" She looked at me as if she couldn't quite figure out who I was anymore.

"M-maybe I should just call my dad and have him pick me up, okay?" I got up and started toward the house phone. "And tomorrow, we can pretend that what just happened never happened, and we can just go back to nor-"

"Wait.

I stopped.

"Please stay. I… I don't want to be alone right now."

"Are you sure? I kinda just made everything really awkward."

"I'm sure." She patted the seat next to her.

"Well, all right…" I took the seat, unsure what would happen.

"How long?" she asked.

"Pardon?"

"Well, you don't just kiss someone out of the blue like that for no reason. How long have you felt like this?"

"Oh, I… well, I guess a little of it was always there, but I think I first realized how I felt around early fifth grade."

"Hm." As noncommittal a sound as could be made. She could tell me to get lost forever, or demand that I ravish her right now, and either would make about as much sense.

"I guess I should've said something earlier," I continued, "but I was afraid it would ruin our friendship."

"Of course not. If our friendship could survive the time your ant farm broke open in my room and the ants got into everything and the ant queen had babies in my show closet, nothing could possibly kill it. Maybe it would've been a little awkward for a while, but we'd get over it."

"I guess. I mean… it's not like you would ever feel the same way."

"I did feel something just now."

"You did?"

"I'm… not entirely sure what it is just yet, but… in the moment, you and me… it felt kind of… right."

"Really?"
"And I never really looked at you that way before. Like… why would I? You were more like family than a friend. But… I don't know. I have to think about this. But right now… right here… just stay with me."

"Of course," I said. "Always."

When the Lloyds returned the following morning, Buckley was rather understandably upset.

"I can't believe this happened again!" he complained. "And under the noses of that so-called security firm! I'll see to it those flim-flam artists never work in this country again! To think I trusted my precious angel to their incompetence…"

"Buckley. Come here." Brooke beckoned her husband in hushed tones.

"What, did those criminals destroy my parlor as well?"

"No, no…. nothing like that. Just come in here. Quietly."

Buckley, unsure of just what to expect, joined his wife in the parlor.

What he found was his daughter, sleeping peacefully, an expression more content than any he'd ever seen decorating her face. Her friend Nadine dozed, equally peacefully, in her arms, Rhonda's wing draped protectively over her.

"What exactly am I seeing here?" he asked.

"Something beautiful, dear, if it's what I think. And I know young love when I see it, so it almost certainly is what I think."

MDI Building

-IILA-

I remember the metal ripping through my flesh. I remembered the pain searing through me, whitening out my world.

I remember finding myself in a field of nothingness.

I remember my mother's voice calling to me. At least, I think it was my mother. It's been so long I don't remember exactly what it sounded like. It was the voice I heard in my dreams, when she's there with me telling me that things are going to be okay.

"Come to me," she says, and I half-walk, half-float forward, towards the reassuring tone. "We'll be together soon," she says. "Together forever."

"STOP" a voice says.

I look up to see a great flaming figure with a single eye floating in front of me. I can't make out the details.

"Who are you?" I ask, but I know the answer already.

"I AM AN ANGEL," the figure confirmed. "YOU ARE NOT READY TO CROSS OVER TO THE GOLDEN LANDS YET."

"But what must I do?" I asked.
"YOU MUST BE PURIFIED BEFORE YOU CAN CROSS," he said. "YOU WILL FIND YOURSELF CAST BACK INTO WHAT LOOKS LIKE YOUR OLD WORLD. BUT DO NOT BE FOOLED… IN TRUTH, YOU WILL BE IN THE NETHER REALMS."

"Hell? But… I have been a good person! I have been ever so faithful to the Lord and his way! Why is He doing this to me?"

"BECAUSE ONE CANNOT PASS INTO HIS REALM WITHOUT FIRST BEING PURGED OF ALL SIN. YOU MUST SUFFER. YOUR BODY WILL BE WRACKED WITH AGONY, YOUR FLESH TWISTED INTO NIGHTMARE, DEMONS WILL COME TO TORMENT YOU WEARING THE FACES OF YOUR FRIENDS, BUT YOU WILL KNOW THEM FOR THE LIARS THEY ARE. AND WHEN YOU ARE READY… WHEN YOU ARE PURE… THEN, I WILL COME FOR YOU. UNTIL THEN… ENDURE. ENDURE THE PAIN, THE LIES, THE TORMENT. KNOW YE THAT YE SHALL NOT BE FORGOTTEN."

I then found myself back where I had been, surrounded by my friends. No, I reminded myself. They only look like your friends. Don't listen to what they say. They are liars. The burning I felt spreading through me, that was the truth. The torture had begun.

So I endured.

I endured as the demons who wore the faces of Helga and Phoebe took me away to a distant building. I endured as they reassured me that everything was going to be all right and the pain would go away and they would be there for me through it all.

I endured as my organs twisted and split inside me. I endured as my skin turned a vivid emerald green. I endured as new limbs forced their way out of my body. I endured as a new eye pushed out through my skull, my vision flooding with impossible new colors. I endured as I felt foreign whispers at the edge of my mind that I couldn't make out.

At last, after what seemed like an eternity, the pain faded.

"See?" the Phoebe-demon said. "You're going to be all right now."

"Yes," I said. "He will come for me."

"Actually, he's been here the whole time… they called him immediately after you were brought here."

She led me out of the bare, padded room where I'd gone through my metamorphosis and into a waiting room where more demons, disguised as my father and Suzie, were waiting. He hugged me and assured me that I would always be his daughter no matter what and that he would always love me and that I shouldn't worry and that he would always be there for me and the Suzie demon told me that she just wanted to be a part of my life and that she knew she could never replace my mom but she hoped that one day she hoped we would be family and it was all so nice and I wanted so much to believe it was real but I knew it wasn't. They brought me to a room and put food in front of me and insisted that I needed to replenish my body's protein and it smelled so good but I knew it would turn to maggots in my mouth so I just politely refused. The demons looked concerned (but I'm pretty sure it was fake, they were demons after all) so they just sort of sat there helplessly.

They led me to a room that had been been furnished for my use and said that if I wanted anything all I had to do was ask. Of course I asked for nothing, there was no end to the possibilities for torture such a request could bring.
It was a hell lined in velvet, but I was in hell nonetheless.

I simply had to endure, until my angel came for me.

Chapter End Notes

Having issues with my laptop, it may be a while before the next update.
In which Rhonda and Nadine make it official, Helga does something very unlikely, and Lila makes the worst mistake she can.

Chapter 35
Foremath
Lloyd Mansion
Morning of the 27th
-NADINE-
I awoke, still wrapped in her embrace and for a moment, I wondered if this was one of those dreams where you think you woke up but it's still the dream. Because, surely, that couldn't have been real, right? I had dreamed the whole thing, telling her my feelings, kissing her, falling asleep on the couch in her arms, the sound of her dual heartbeat lulling me to dreamland.
And yet... I was here, snuggled up against her, her two right arms around me and her wing draped over us like a warm blanket.
She stirred now, perhaps woken by my own waking, her three eyes fluttering open. "Mmmm," she muttered, "Jus' a few more minutes... there'll be all day to ski..."
"Morning, Rhonda," I whispered.
"Huh...?" She blinked, her consciousness fully starting to return. "Nadine? How'd you get he-wait... last night..."
"I'm not sure it was real either... What do you remember?"
"You kissed me... right? And then... I asked you to stay... and we talked... and then I... I think I kissed you back..."
"So I didn't just dream that part, either..."
"No. No, it... was all real. Because I'm starting to remember all the awful stuff that led to it. Lila on the floor dying, Helga bringing her back, and then she was going on about being in Hell..." A haunted look began to creep back in to her eyes. "Because of me... I ruined her life..." She started to suddenly hyperventilate again.
"Rhonda!" I grabbed hold of her shoulders. "Listen to me. Breathe.... Breathe... calm down..." I began to sing softly. "Take a moment, remind yourself, to take a moment and find yourself..."
"Take a moment and ask myself..." She responded, matching my harmony.
"If this is how we fall apart..." we continued together. "But it's not, but it's not, but it's not, but it's not, but it's not... It's okay, It's okay it's okay, it's okay, it's okay..."
"I've got nothing, got nothing, got nothing, got nothing to fear..."
"I'm here..."
"Thank you," she said. "I... I think I'm good now..."
"I'm glad I could help."
"You help just by being here with me." She took another deep breath. "I want to explore this. You and me. I want to give it a shot."
"Rhonda, you don't have to make yourself be my girlfriend out of some misguided sense of obligation because I was here for you..."
"No, it's not like that at all. Look... we're twelve. I'm not sure either of us really knows what love truly is. All I know is, the way I felt just now, in each others' arms, it felt good. It felt right. I want to hold on to that feeling for as long as I can."
Okay, right, now's the part where I wake up in my bed and none of this ever happened. I blinked a bunch of times. Bit my tongue. Pinched myself. No. Still here.

"So… I guess we're a couple now?" I said.

"I think so, yeah."

"Do we… do we have to pick out one of those couple names? Rhondine or something?"

"Hmmm… I was thinking Nadonda but yours is a lot better."

"Then it's settled. Rhondine it is."

"I really, really don't want to get off this couch," Rhonda said, "but I just realized I've spent the entire night in this suit and it doesn't really breathe, y'know?"

"Aww… I guess all good things come to an end."

"I doubt it's the last time we'll be snuggling, Butterfly." OMG, she already has a cute girlfriend nickname for me!

"I guess I should be changing too," I said, when suddenly I noticed Rhonda's ears twitch a little. "My folks are arguing with someone at the door," she said. "He keeps mentioning my name. He kinda sounds like… did you ever see Spider-Man? The older ones. He sounds like the newspaper editor. Gahhh… I really wish I had X-Ray vision at time like these."

"Who do you think it could be?" I asked.

"I have no idea," she said. "How about we find out?"

--

Slightly earlier…

"Look," Buckley Lloyd began upon seeing the newcomer at the door. "We sympathize with our less-priveleged brethren, but the Lloyds simply do not accept door-to-door solicitation. I'll give you the number of our charity fund…"

"Damn it, man, this is serious. All reality is at stake here! I absolutely need to talk to your daughter."

"…or perhaps I can recommend a good mental health professional. Please, wait here…"

"There's no time! Your daughter has attracted the attention of a malevolent entity and we must take steps to protect her and her friends!:"" "Buckley, darling, what seems to be the problem?" Brooke Wellington, on her way to the kitchen to feed the cravings of the future Rhys Owen or Rhiannon Olivia, had stopped to investigate the goings on at the door.

"Nothing dear, this gentleman was about to leave."

"I know what your daughter is," he said.

This gave both pause. "What on earth are you talking about?" Brooke said unconvincingly. There was a reason she'd never had another role after Eternal Romance.

"Your daughter is a superhuman creature with purple skin, three eyes, four arms, and wings. Correct?"

Buckley began to look rather uncomfortable himself. "Sir, I would insist that you leave or I will call the police."

"Mr. Lloyd, I beg you to listen. Your daughter is in serious danger and I need to talk to her!"

"Dear, maybe we should listen to him…"

"No. I have dealt with enough charlatans over the past few weeks and you're jut one more."

"But…"

"No, I've made up my mind. This man is clearly a fraud, and I must insist…"

"OOF!"

Something had fallen off the ceiling. Or rather, someones. Some us.

"Are you okay, Nadine? I really thought that would work," Rhonda asked/apologized. Apparently it
was a lot harder to crawl on the ceiling with a passenger.
"I think so. We really didn't fall too far."
"Rhonda, dear, you know how I feel about you crawling on the ceiling." Brooke scolded.
"Sorry, mom, I just wanted to get a better look without being seen… but I guess it's a bit late for that, isn't it. Besides, I think I know what this is."
We looked past Rhonda's parents at the newcomer. He was a tall, well-built, bespectacled man in what looked to be his sixties, dressed ruggedly and sporting what appeared to be a permanent five-o'clock shadow.
"Rhonda Lloyd, I presume," the newcomer stated.
"The one and only," Rhonda replied with a hair-flip. "Did Wendy send you?"
"Correct," he said. "My name is Stanford Pines, and we need to talk about Bill Cipher."

Sunset Arms
-HELGA-
I awoke to the smell of burning.
After Arnold, Gerald and I had helped Phoebe rush Lila to MDI, the three of us had returned here and pretty much passed out from sheer exhaustion. I hadn't even taken off my superhero suit. I'd just collapsed into my bed and blanked out.
When I awoke, Miriam was gone and something was on fire somewhere. I hurried downstairs just as the smoke alarms went off, following a trail of smoke wafting from the kitchen.
"Morning, dear," Miriam greeted me, in full Suzy Homemaker mode. "I figured that now that 'Halloween' was over, I could, maybe, bake some Christmas cookies. Only I'm afraid I seem to have made Christmas charcoal instead." She looked sadly at the thin festively-shaped briquettes arranged on the singed cookie sheet.
She's trying, I reminded myself. Ever since moving into the Sunset Arms, Miriam had been making a sincere effort to be a "real" mom. And she was getting better. While her attempt at baking had gone badly, she'd been staying clean, pitching in with the household chores, and even made a couple of dinners of varying edibility (but then again, her competition was Grandma, so she didn't look that bad in comparison).
"It's the thought that counts, mom," I replied, giving her a quick hug and wondering just when I had started defaulting to "mom" when addressing her instead of Miriam. "Maybe we can try again together?" I sniffed myself. Yikes, I was rank. "After a shower."
"Oh, that would be wonderful, dear!" She said, hugging me back. "Let's get started!"
Criminy, did I just volunteer to bake cookies with my Mom? What the heck is wrong with me?

"Well, I'd say this is a lot more like it!"
The second batch had turned out a lot less… incinerated. In fact, once they'd been decorated, they actually looked pretty good.
"That was… kind of fun," I admitted. Me. Helga G. Pataki. Badass space mutant and toughest chick in Hillwood. Baking cookies with mom. Who'da thunk it?
"Guess all I needed was an extra couple of pairs of hands, hmm?" Miriam joked,
"Well, enjoy it while it lasts," I said, "Here come the locusts."
The boarders had massed at the kitchen door, drawn by the smell. "Are those fresh Christmas cookies I smell?" Grandpa asked?
"Is it the Fourth of July already?" Grandma asked. "I could've sworn we had a while. I'd better start dyeing the eggs…"
"So, who do we owe thanks for this bit o' holiday cheer – step away from the cookies if ya value your fingers, Kakoshka!"
"What, I'm just doing an inspection. I have to… make sure they're up to the Cookie Code, eh heh heh heh!"
"These are amazing, Helga," Arnold marveled. "Did you make them?"
"Well, they were mom's idea, really. I helped a little… or a lot… I guess…” I said, blushing. What is
"Okay, that's it, everyone out," demanded Grandpa. "There are way too many people in this room, and just one more…"

"Hello, everyone!" Olga from outta freakin' nowhere. She had ditched the secret agent uniform and gone back to her customary preppie look. "In honor of the season, I brought some of my homemade panettone. I hope everyone brought their appetites!" Figures she's gotta upstage me, the insecure part of my brain told me, while the more rational part reminded me that there was no way she could've known mom would suddenly have gotten a cookie-making compulsion or that I would voluntarily go along with it.

"OUT!" Insisted Grandpa. "This is already worse than that scene in A Night at the Opera!"

"Oh, nonsense," Olga said, wedging herself into the packed kitchen. "There's plenty of room. Oh, Baby Sis… did you make Christmas cookies? Those look positively scrumptious!"

"Well, it was me and mom…" I admitted.

"Oh, I can't wait to try them. Honestly, if I'd known, I wouldn't've bothered with the panettone. Between you and me, nobody really likes the stuff. Oh… I have a special surprise for you, Helga… I had Bridget make you up a little something."

That piqued my interest. A "surprise" from Olga usually meant something disgustingly girly, but if Bridget was involved, there was a chance it could actually be cool.

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Meanwhile… outside the kitchen…

"I'm telling you, Stella… I smell cookies. Christmas cookies." Miles insisted.

"You know that's impossible, dear," Stella said, yawning. "Your mother never makes Christmas cookies on Christmas. Although… I bet a few of those might cheer Lila up… she isn't handling the transformation well."

"Maybe she'll be in a better mood when it's actually over…" Miles suggested.

"Maybe I shouldn't have left for the night…" Stella guiltily replied.

"You've been putting in late nights for a month, dear," Miles reassured. "There's no shame in taking a morning off to be with your family. Besides… Her dad's there, right?"

"Her dad, my assistants, Phoebe… she says she might actually be able to psychically help her with the pain."

"There, see? Lila's in good hands."

He hated seeing Stella like this. He wished something would happen to cheer her up…

"Now, let's investigate that smell, shall we?" Miles opened the door…

…and a pile of people spilled out in a heap.

Stella stared at the scene and began to giggle.

"I warned them," Grandpa reminded.

The giggling blossomed into full-blown hearty laughter as, troubles forgotten, Stella gave in to the silliness.

--

"So… what's this surprise you have for me?" I asked once the whole Marx Brothers incident had dispersed.

"Well… I spoke to Bridget about our night out last week, and how you have you heart set on being a crimefighter… and, well, I had her whip up a little something for you."

She opened a large, flat box on her lap, revealing a super-suit similar in design to the one Rhonda had ordered for me, except this one looked a lot more professional. Instead of cheap spandex, it was made of some unknown fabric that was probably exclusively available to Bridget's organization. I took the costume out of the box. "You had her make this for me?"

"It's flexible, breathes easily, is bullet-resistant, and, most importantly, flame-retardant and resistant to extreme temperature changes. It even practically cleans itself. Only the best for my Baby Sis."

"Wow. This is… actually a really thoughtful gift."

"Go… try it on… I'll wait…"

Well, I could hardly leave her hanging after she'd gone to all the trouble, could I? I hurried back to
my room and changed into the new suit, impressed at how comfortable it felt. Once changed, I rejoined my sister.

"Oh, you look darling!" Olga gushed, glomming on in one of her crushing hugs. Just like mom, she's trying, I reminded myself. If she can learn to be a better sister, you can learn to handle her quirks… annoying though they may be.

"Oooh, right, one more surprise," she reminded herself. "Activate your powers. Try… raising the temperature a bit."

I did so, increasing the heat around me by about twenty degrees, wondering what exactly she was getting at. In response, the pink parts of my costume shifted, turning to a red-to-orange gradient and taking on a flame pattern. "Okay… I thought this was cool, but it just got even cooler."

"It works with your cold powers, too," she confirmed. I tried lowering the temperature to test it, and the colored parts of my costume changed again, this time to a blue-white icicle theme.

"Okay, it's official," I said. "You just made up for every lame Christmas present you ever got me. This is straight-up awesome."

"Oh, I'm so glad you like it, b- Helga!" She hugged me again, though I noticed she had made a conscious effort to not crush the oxygen out of my lungs this time. By the Buddha, she legitimately was trying.

"Phone call, Eleanor!" interrupted Grandma. "It's Jackie Kennedy. She says Dr. Strangelove needs to discuss matters of vital importance."

"Jackie Kennedy" was our codename for Rhonda. As for Dr. Strangelove, who knows who that could be? "I'll be right there, Grandma," I said. I turned back to Olga. "So, uh… do you think you can talk Bridget into making a few more of these? I have some friends who also have powers…"

"I think that can be arranged," Olga said, smiling broadly. "Just let me know the specs and she can whip them up in a day or two."

"Thanks!" This time it was my turn to give her a crushing hug. Criminy, if this keeps up, I might actually become comfortable with human contact.

I took the receiver from Grandma. "Princess. Talk to me."

"Hey," she said. "You remember that guy Wendy said she was going to talk to about our… mutual triangular problem? Well… he just showed up on my front door. I think you really need to get down here."

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Lloyd residence

-RHONDA-

"So… you say you were infected by spores. From inside a meteorite."

"Basically, yeah," I confirmed. I had filled in Stanford on the backstory of my transformation while brewing him some tea (he had insisted on his own blend, which he always carried with him. "Rare herbs from Dimension Ten," he'd said. "Helps to protect against the creeping madness." I'd elected not to argue).

We sat now in the parlor, Nadine and I on the couch and him in one of the overstuffed chairs, looking like a hobo Harrison Ford. "Is it okay for her to be here?" he asked.

"I can go," Nadine said, but I squeezed her hand reassuringly. I wanted to make it clear that I was fully on board with this new thing we had

"Anything you say to me, you can say in front of her," I said. Stanford raised an eyebrow but said nothing further.

"Very well," He said. "Now, there are two of you, correct?"

"Actually… there are four. There was one other girl infected at the same time we were but never captured, and just now a friend of ours was… hurt…" I felt Nadine squeeze my own hand back now; it was her turn to be my emotional anchor. "We were forced to spread the virus to her to save her life."

"This is bad," he said. "More infectees means more potential hosts for Cipher."

"What's the deal with this guy?" asked Nadine. That Stanf

"He's the single most dangerous being that has ever existed," Stanford stated. "An entity of pure
madness and chaos, older than our known universe. If he were ever to fully manifest on this plane, the consequences would be disastrous. Even confined to a host body, the damage he could cause would be devastating, especially superhuman host bodies like yours. I'm told you possess electrical abilities. Imagine if a complete madman were to take control of the national electrical grid."
"I… don't think I'm that powerful," I said.
"You don't know what your limits are. Bill doesn't think in terms of limits, only possibilities. If there is a way to wreck the world, he will find it."
He proceeded to give us a crash course in all things Bill, culminating in the event known as Weirdmageddon.
"…luckily, my brother was able to recover his memories. But I don't want to risk using that method again. Anyone else might not have been so lucky."
"What about that Zodiac thing you mentioned?" Nadine asked. "Couldn't you get all of those guys together again to trap him?"
"That was my first thought. But circumstances have changed." He pulled a book out of his backpack, the cover decorated by a six-fingered hand imprinted with the number 3. I noticed now for the first time that Stanford had twelve fingers. Then again, I'm one to talk. I have sixteen.
He opened the book to a double-paged spread near the middle, revealing a silhouette of Bill surrounded by a ring of about fifteen disparate symbols.
"So, each of these symbols represent someone. And you know exactly who they represent, so why can't you get them all over here?" I asked.
"That's the thing," he said. "These aren't the original symbols I recorded. Somehow, they've been changed. For one… there were originally only ten symbols. I don't know who's been tampering with my book or how they did it, but the original zodiac no longer seems to exist. And we have no way of knowing who these new symbols represent."
Nadine prodded me. "Rhon… do some of these look familiar to you?"
"Now that you mention it… that boot looks an awful lot like one of Sid's."
"And the flower is the exact one on that shirt Sheena's always wearing…" Nadine noted.
"Yo. Princess! Nature Girl!" Helga had arrived, bringing Arnold in tow and the distinct smell of cookies.
"Good timing, Helga," I said. "This is Stanford Pines. He might be our one hope of dealing with Bill Cipher. Mr. Pines… this is Helga Pataki, and Arnold Shortman."
"Hmm… I met a Philip Shortman when I was investigating a sasquatch sighting forty years ago. Any relation?"
"He's my grandfather!" confirmed Arnold.
"Interesting. You look absolutely nothing like him."
Arnold ignored his comment, for he had caught sight of the book spread across the table. "Is that the sigil of the Green Eyes?" he inquired, the zodiac wheel.
"Hey, yeah," Helga said, pushing past Stanford. "What's it doing in there?"
"These symbols represent specific individuals, destined to be the ones to defeat Bill once and for all."
"And if it's a Green Eyes sign, that probably means you're one of them, Football Head," Helga smirked, poking him. "Figures you'd be the Chosen One again."
"Not just me, Helga. Look at that heart next to it. Look familiar?"
Quietly, Helga took out a golden, heart-shaped pendant from under her sweatshirt. Its shape was an exact match for the symbol. "Huh," was all she managed to say.
"It's not just you two," I said. "I think these symbols represent all of us. Look at that one," I said, pointing to the spoon. "Bill was always calling me 'Silver Spoon' in my dreams. This one must represent me. And the butterfly has to be Nadine." Nadine blushed slightly at my use of her new pet name.
"So, what's the deal?" Helga said, regaining her usual irreverent nature. "We gather everyone together so we can all hold hands and sing 'Kumbayah'?"
"Actually, that's not far off," Stanford admitted. "We need to determine which symbol represents who, gather everyone together, and link hands exactly in this order once Bill manifests. That should expel him from reality permanently."
"We'd better get started, then," Arnold said. "I bet Bill's just looking for the chance to make his move."

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MDI

That night

-LILA-

They had finally left me alone, the ghouls in her friends' and family's faces, alone to cry myself to sleep.

I dreamed I was back in the haze, walking towards the light, but this time I was in the strange, green-skinned, multilimbed body that Hell had crafted for me.

"Are you there?" I whispered, unused to speaking with fanged teeth and forked tongue. "Am I pure yet?"

"STEP FORWARD, LOST SOUL," it spoke.

"Then… it's time?" I asked.

"YOUR TIME HAS INDEED COME, DEVOTION," the voice said. A hand reached out of the blinding glow. "TAKE MY HAND. YOUR REWARD AWAITS."

At last. I would be free. I would see my mother's face again.

I reached out and took the angel's hand…. And yelped as it suddenly burst into flame.

"SUCKER." He said.
Chapter Summary

In which Lila immediately regrets her decisions

Chapter 36
Losing Myself

A void deep in the realm of the subconscious

-LILA-

"SUCKER!"

My hand had burst into flame the moment I had grasped the angel's hand and in that instant, I knew that everything had gone ever-so-wrong.

I could see clearly now, for the first time since I had awakened (for I knew, now, that I had been awake, that what I took, in my traumatized state, to be Purgatory had simply been a reality that I could not bring myself to accept). My supposed benefactor stood revealed now, a bizarre figure, triangular in shape, yellow in color, with a single eye, stick-figure arms and legs, and ridiculously, a top hat and bow tie.

"Who are you?" I asked, fearing the answer.

"WELL, I GO BY LOTS OF NAMES," he said in a loud, manic, high-pitched voice, "BUT THE ONE PEOPLE'VE BEEN USING LATELY IS BILL CIPHER. ALTHOUGH… MAYBE IT'S TIME FOR A CHANGE. FROM NOW ON, I THINK I'LL CALL MYSELF…” He suddenly turned a infernal red, and his voice became deep and echoing, "LILA SAWYER."

And then I felt myself thrown back as the void dissolved suddenly in a violent flash.

I found myself back in the room I had fallen asleep in, seemingly back in my old body… and yet, staring at myself, in my new body. Its three amber eyes suddenly snapped open, a deranged grin spreading across its face.

"Well, hello, there! Don't worry…. I'm gonna put your body to good use. By which I mean horrifying, nightmarish use." His voice had decreased in volume, but it still had that strange, shrill, unhinged quality."

"You tricked me," I stammered.

"Well, it's not exactly like you made it hard, Hands of Devotion." "I" quipped, grin unchanging. "Honestly, if they hadn't taken the word 'gullible' out of the dictionary, your name would probably be the definition. Oooh! I bet, just now, you thought to yourself just now 'Did they really take 'gullible' out of the dictionary?' and made yourself a mental note to check. Admit it. That's what you did, isn't it. I just… can't get over just how gullible you are! I mean… you actually thought I was an angel! Me!"
I lunged for "me", only to find myself passing right through myself. "Oh, by the way, quick infodump, you're an insubstantial phantom that nobody can see or hear, destined to drift uselessly for all eternity. Good luck with that!" Bill-Lila… Bila, I decided I would dub her, skipped to view herself in my room's mirror. "Oh… My word. I… am… ADORABLE! Are those freckles? They are! And a dimple! I should've been a girl ages ago!"

"They'll figure out you're not me," I said. "There's no way you will be able to fool my friends."

"Oh, I'm ever-so-certain I will," he said, mimicking my voice exactly. "I can be convincing when I put my mind to it, just oh-so-convincing. That's you. That's what you sound like."

Do I really say "ever-so" that much? I'm certain I don't, just ever-so…

…agh. It's probably really annoying, isn't it.

There came a knock at the door. "Lila? It's Phoebe. I just want to see how you're doing."

"Oh, that's ever-so-sweet of you!" Bila answered.

"Goodness," Phoebe stated, opening the door. "You seem to be in far better spirits than you were earlier today. It's quite a relief. I was worried that your downward emotional spiral was irrevocable. It seemed like there was nothing that could pull you out."

"Phoebe!" I shouted, futilely. "That's not me! Some kind of monster is using my body!" I waved my insubstantial arms in front of her face, hoping to garner a reaction. Nothing. I might as well not exist at all.

"Well, gosh… I guess my friends and family have just been oh-so-positive. I couldn't help but pick up on it."

That stung. I had taken them all for granted, locked in the delusional state I was. Helga had bled to save my life, even though I knew she had never liked me. Phoebe had talked me through my metamorphosis every step of the way, even siphoning off some of the pain into her own body. My daddy had been by my side, and even Suzie, who I'd been just ever-so-horrible to. And I had pushed every one of them away… and for what? To believe the promises of some demon who just wanted my body?

...no, it was even worse. I had seen firsthand what wonders Phoebe and the rest were capable of. And now I was like them, or rather, my body was. And he had it. Who knows what kind of havoc he could wreak.

Face, it… I have screwed up royally. And in this substanceless spirit form, there was no way I could ever set things right.

"Well… that's good to hear." Oh, come on, Phoebe! Surely you can't be fooled by this fake? You're supposed to be the smartest of us! "I must say… it's rather nice to have a friend staying here with me."

"Thank you. I'm ever-so-sorry about the way I've been acting. You've been such a good friend, all of you have, and I have just been such a pill to be around. Thank you, just ever-so-much, for your patience." She hugged Phoebe, something I should have done if I wasn't so wrapped up in myself. I could feel my nonexistent blood boiling at the scene, this… sick parody of friendship that I was forced to bear witness to.
"Come on," I said, and I was just now aware that no sound was actually coming out of my mouth, that the words I was "hearing" was simply my mind fooling itself into hearing them because it knew I was saying them. "You have to see through this. Please."

"I'm just pleased that you're in the path to recovery," Phoebe said. "Perhaps now you're more amenable to eating? You have been neglecting sustenance, and I know from experience that after metamorphosis, you will require replenishment of the energies expended, not to mention the proteins consumed in constructing all of your body's new structures."

"Oh, yes… I'm certain I'm just ever-so-hungry." Come on… do I really say it THAT much? Like, in every sentence? Am I that bad?

"Then, I'll go procure some provisions from the building's cafeteria, and then, perhaps… we can consume them on the roof? I find that the moonlight makes for a rather pleasant ambience."

"Oh, yes, a picnic on the roof, under the stars! That sounds just oh-so-delightful!" I was certain, just ev- just oh-… feeling positive that Bila was planning some sort of betrayal, and yet, here I was, handing substancelessly and impotently, forced to watch as the events proceeded.

Phoebe left to get the food, leaving me once again alone with the fiend wearing my body. "So," he taunted, "How am I doing? I think I'm doing just 'ever-so' well, don't you? She doesn't suspect a thing."

"You won't get away with this!"

"You won't get away with this!" he echoed mockingly. "Jeez, with sparkling dialogue like that, no wonder you're the least-popular character! I've already gotten away with it, prayer hands. I've got Owl Eyes fooled, she's gonna get me up to the roof, and then I'm free. And once I hold up my end of my bargain, I'm gonna have me some real fun. And there's nothing you can do to stop it."

"The others'll stop you!"

"Will they? I'm wearing their friend. They could never bring themselves to lay a finger on me. Especially that purple one. You should see some of the thoughts she's had about you. Hm… now there's something I've never tried… that could be fun, couldn't it? And then I could break her hearts… really grind 'em into the ground! And after I do it metaphorically… I'll do it literally! Oh, I really should wear meat more often!"

I hung there listening to him describe the cruelty he would inflict. Perhaps I could keep him talking and he could expose himself to Phoebe… but no, that was not to be. He clammed up, as if he could sense Phoebe's imminent approach. Right… Rhonda had mentioned that they could sense each other's presence as sort of a signal in the back of their minds, within a certain range. But why hadn't Phoebe noticed anything wrong with my own signal?

Phoebe returned two tuna salad sandwiches, two side salads, and two small cartons of milk and led Bila up to the roof. Bila had by now changed into one of the modified outfits they'd had made for my changed body, finally replacing the shredded Red Riding Hood costume I'd been in since the party.

The two emerged onto the roof. "The buildings here are a bit more spaced out, so there's less light pollution, especially up here on the roof. You can actually see the stars."

"Oh my, you're right! Oh, they look oh-so wonderful. Which one is that?"

"Well… You can see Ursa Major over there, more commonly referred to as the Big Dipper…"
"That's ever-so-fascinating… and that one?"

Phoebe turned to look where Lila was pointing, and in that moment, I realized just what was about to happen. Reflexively, I shouted "Phoebe, look out!" but of course she didn't hear me. Bila took advantage of her distraction and brought both his- my – upper fists down on the back of her head, hard. Phoebe barely had time for her expression to shift to one of confused betrayal before her eyes rolled back in her head and she fell to the ground, unconscious, the night's picnic scattered upon the ground.

"Wow," Bila said. "That was fun! Hey, what kind of face did she have, prayer hands? Shocked? Betrayed? Hurt? I didn't get to see. Kind of a shame. I bet it was priceless!"

"Y-you monster…" I felt myself starting to sob, tearlessly (insubstantial phantoms couldn't produce physical tears no matter how much they wanted). He had already begun to hurt the people I cared about, and he was using my body to do it.

"I know I am, but what are you? Oh, that's right. You're nothing." My face was split by a manic, almost inhuman grin. "You're just going to float there, uselessly, until you finally lose the will to continue existing on this plane and fade away forever." His/my (this was so confusing) face snapped back to a more neutral smiling expression, as his/my wings unfolded. "Oh, well… no sense crying over spilt milk! You- you see what I did there? You're crying, and there's literally spilled milk all around us? Isn't it great when things just line up like that?"

He/I lifted up into the night sky, a bit wobbly. "Never had to work to fly before. These'll take a bit to get used to. Oh well, life's the journey, not the destination!" For a moment, I considered staying with Phoebe, but what was the point? There was nothing I could do for her. But I could follow Bila, find out what he/she/I (these confusing pronouns will be the death of me) was up to, until I got the opportunity to report his/my/our/their (argh!) actions back to my friends. Somehow.

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I floated after (I finally decided on) them, staying far back though I wasn't really sure whether distance actually made a difference. It soon became clear that their ultimate destination was Elk Island. I wasn't sure what business they could possibly have there, since the island held little more than wilderness and a few secluded cottages.

I followed them to a series of caves. A placard informed visitors that this was the location of the last known sighting of the notorious Prohibition-era gangster, "Wheezin'" Ed Maldonado. I normally didn't pay attention to tales of the criminal underworld. I find them oh-too gruesome (gahhh… I really do do that, don't I), but I'd heard Gerald tell the tale of Wheezin' Ed in the schoolyard; it was one of his more popular urban legends. Apparently, sometime before I'd arrived in Hillwood, my friends had actually investigated the rumors that he'd left behind some great treasure, only to stumble across a completely unrelated penny-counterfeiting scheme, and the treasure rumor had been officially declared a hoax.

I descended into the cave behind them, following until they came to a seeming dead end. And walked through it. Was that my superpower? Walking through walls?

I followed them, passing through the wall myself. Or rather, the image of a wall. Behind it was some sort of high-tech installation staffed by uniformed people. Had this been here, under Elk Island, even back then?

The arrival of Bila had caused a commotion; it wasn't every day a green-skinned, winged, three-eyed, four-armed girl casually strolled into a room, let alone a secret installation that supposedly no one knew was there. "Hey, everyone!" they called, waving. "What's up? How's of' Hip Flask doing? Still hovering on the brink of death? What a card, am I right, folks?"
"There was another one?" the man seemingly in charge asked, clearly having not expected this turn of events.

"Another two, but who's counting? Point is, I've got what you want right here."

"Yes, yes… quickly, get the restraints."

"Oh, no, hold on there." Bila said. "We won't be doing that. I'm here to hold up my end of the bargain, and I intend to follow through on it, but I think I'll be holding on to this body. I'm not even close to done having fun with it yet."

"But…"

"The deal was that Hip Flask gets what he needs to live. I've got that in these veins. All you have to do is get at it. You're going to need a diamond-tipped, magnetically-driven syringe to get through her skin. Do that, and the precious juice inside is yours."

"You heard her!" the guy in charge shouted.

So that was what was going on here. Somehow, this mysterious dying leader of theirs needed our alien blood to save his life, and had made a literal deal with a devil to get it done. And I knew firsthand what an injection of that blood could do to someone. Which meant, not only was that demon running loose in my own body, but there would soon be a dangerous criminal mastermind on the loose, every bit as powerful as any of us were. Probably more, since he'd be an adult.

"Didja get all that, prayer hands?" Bila said with a smirk. They'd known I was there the entire time, confident that I could do nothing. That I could tell no one.

But no. I couldn't give up. My friends were depending on me.

Somehow… some way… I would find a way to talk to them. I had to.
Gotta Get a Message to You

Chapter Summary

In which Phoebe has a headache, Lila makes a new friend, and Bill is just plain MEAN.

Chapter 37
Gotta Get a Message to You
Roof of MDI, the following morning

-PHOEBE-

The stink of milk starting to curdle in the morning sun woke me. My eyes slowly blinked open as I became gradually aware of the situation… one, that I was lying on the cement-covered roof, two, that I was surrounded by spilled, spoiling food, and three, that my head felt as though someone had taken a wrecking ball to it.

My cranium was wracked with agony. I tried to piece together just how I had found myself in my current position, but my brain simply refused to stop hurting long enough to comply. I attempted to move, but the very act of motion brought on a wave of dizziness so intense and overwhelming that I decided to just continue to lie there until the world stopped spinning.

What had happened last night? What circumstances had led to this condition I found myself in?

And where was I?

Wait… who was I?

The pounding in my head was starting to lessen. I rubbed the back of my head and winced. There was a lump, suggesting that this was the source of the current situation, including what appeared to be a case of traumatic amnesia.

I slowly managed to rearrange myself into a sitting position. It felt like the movements were more elaborate than they should have been. As if there were more parts of me than there should be.

Was my skin supposed to be blue? Did I always have this tail? Was the question not "who was I", but "what was I"?

I shook my head, and another wave of dizziness hit. I groaned. Was my voice supposed to be this high? It sounded almost cartoonish.

I took in my surroundings now. I was on what appeared to be a rooftop. Others were visible in the distance, and a city skyline. I was likely located in some industrial or corporate area outside the main city center. Judging by the position of the sun, likely north-northwest. Three massive letters, MDI, were mounted on the roof, most likely the logo of the corporate owner of the building.

How did I know that? Clearly, my mind was of an analytical bent. If I had gleaned such knowledge from an observation of my surroundings, perhaps a similar observation of myself could yield clues as
to my own identity.

Very well. What do I observe about myself? I am female. I am apparently young, judging my height relative to the door. In addition to blue skin and a tail, I appear to have two more arms and one more eye than normal. In addition, I feel a fourth pair of limbs attached to my back that I can conjecture correspond to a possible set of wings. All of these are things that I would not possess were I an ordinary person.

Was I some sort of genetic experiment, then? The product of some forbidden research? An attempt by scientists to spit in God’s eye? Or perhaps a mutant freak captured by corporate interests and held captive as they attempt to discern my secrets?

But if that were the case, what was I doing out here, out in the open? Surely they wouldn’t let a winged creature like myself have access to the roof, when I could simply fly away?

Then there was the matter of my attire. An experiment or captive would be clad in some utilitarian garment (if they bothered to clothe me at all), but what I wore appeared to be ordinary clothing (though possessing extra sleeves and openings for my other limbs). Why would they bother dressing me like this? Was I a guest? No… not a guest… A patient. I was being cared for because this is not my normal condition.

I searched my clothing, hoping further clues would be yielded. The search produced a wallet containing a school ID. Progress!

I studied it. The photo in the corner was of a young girl who was most decidedly not blue-skinned and three-eyed, and yet… this was me, I knew it.

My name, then, was Phoebe S. Heyerdahl. I was in the sixth grade at PS118 in Hillwood, WA. I was 11 years old. My birthday was September 28. These were facts, anchors in my mind that I could build upon. And the fact was that I had not always been like this. In fact, since this ID had been issued this year, this was a fairly recent development. A result of…

….it was all starting to come back now. San Lorenzo. The geode. The spores. The metamorphosis.

And yet… I still couldn't remember how I wound up unconscious on the roof. It wasn't like my mind to fail me like this. It was more like… something was blocking off the memory.

At least I could walk now, dizzy though I was. I wobbled back downstairs, wondering if anyone had noticed I was absent. It was still the post-holiday week, and the place had been running with a minimal crew. Only a couple of employees were on site at any time.

I looked around for a while, and found no one other than the guard, who waved to me on his round. Even the break room was empty. I found a handwritten message attached to the refrigerator door:

"Feeling so much better! Phoebe has offered to take me flying! We should be gone for at least a day. It should be ever so much fun! – Lila”

Lila.

It was starting to come back now. The party. The wound. The change. Her disconnect with reality. Her sudden, unexplained recovery. I'd been so worried about her that I'd accepted it without question, and then…

Betrayal.
She'd intended to leave me on the roof all along, and had left the message to cover her tracks and prevent anyone from looking for me. Had the trauma of the injury and change unhinged her? No… that made no sense. Her actions suggested premeditation, not the random actions of a madwoman.

A sickening thought came to me. This angel she spoke of… what if it wasn't merely the imaginary product of near death trauma?

What if it was…

No.

Oh, no.

If my theory was correct… Lila was no longer in control of her actions. And a malevolent, psychotic force was.

And judging by the time of day I'd finally woken up, it had had hours to accomplish its goals while I was helpless to stop it.

--

Madame Blanche's Potions & Psychic Readings

-BLANCHE

I gazed into my mystically charged crystal ball (acquired from the Ajax Novelty Co. for $29.95). "I must have complete silence as I attempt to contact the spirits," I spoke, laying on my accent – the fake Romany one, not my natural Bronx accent.

These readings were the bread-and-butter of my business. Some poor bereaved schlub came in and asked me to contact a recently or not-so-recently deceased relative, I'd make with the supernatural razzle-dazzle, then start making vague statements that could apply to anything, and the mark – er, grieving soul – would fill in the banks themselves, so eager to believe that I was really in contact with the beyond.

I liked to believe I was providing a valuable service. I was delivering peace of mind to those in emotional turmoil. And if those poor dears happened to pay $500.00 a pop for those services… well, a gal's gotta eat. And pay rent. And put a down-payment on her new car.

"I am seeing something," I intoned to her client, a middle-aged, thickset woman with curly red hair (probably not her natural color). "I see… a pair of eyes…"

"Yes! Uncle Howard had eyes!"

"He says his name is Howard… and that he had a niece!"

"Yes! That niece is me!" the woman said excitedly, not even registering that I had simply repeated two facts that she had just so conveniently provided. I felt no pangs of conscience for fooling these desperate souls. They practically fooled themselves; I'm just the middleman.

"I am seeing…" I looked around the room for inspiration on her next prompt, when suddenly I caught something out of the corner of my eye. "A young girl with red pigtails in a green dress?"

My client regarded me oddly. "No… I think I can safely say that my Uncle Howard was not a young girl with red pigtails in a green dress. His drag persona was more of a mid-70's Cher."

I blinked. I hadn't imagined it. The girl was still there, floating, transparent, in my window.
I was clearly losing it. Spirits could not be something that actually existed, surely. All of this psychic stuff was pure, unadulterated, extremely profitable hooey. Surely… yes, this was just the result of that Baconator I'd had for dinner last night repeating on me, making me hallucinate the Wendy's mascot. That made sense, right?

"Uh… right… he says he's trying out a new look," I continued, improvising. "Trying to mix things up now that he's moved on to the next plane, you know?"

"Oh… that makes sense…" the woman answered, seemingly unconvinced.

"He says… he's not really feeling it… he says he may try Marilyn Monroe instead…"

"That does sound more his speed…" the client answered, seemingly a bit more reassured now. Confident that I'd once again hooked my pigeon, I risked a look back at the window, certain that the apparition would be gone, proving that it was nothing more than heartburn's last gasp.

The girl was not only still there, it was passing through the window, waving at me.

"You can see me?" she asked. Her voice had made no actual sound, yet I had hear her, clear as a bell.

My breath caught in my throat.

"Can you hear me, too?" the apparition asked.

"Yes," I said, briefly forgetting that I was in the midst of a séance. "Yes, I can hear you." After all… it wasn't every day that an actual spirit contacted you. In fact, it was never.

Because spirits aren't real.

"Oh, thank goodness!" the image said, looking relieved. "I was afraid I would never be able to reach anyone!"

"You're really there," I repeated to myself. "I'm really speaking to a spirit."

"What's he saying? Can you ask him where he hid the deed to the lake cabin?" my client said.

"Could you shut up?" I snapped. "It's not your uncle!"

"But you said…"

"It was never your uncle! Don't you get it? I'm a fraud! This whole thing's nothing but a scam! I'm not a Gypsy! My parents were from Puerto Rico! And I most definitely am not a psychic… at least I thought I wasn't! But… How do you explain that?"

I pointed to where the girl was floating. "There's nothing there," the client said, confused.

"Exactly!" I said. "You can't see her! But I can! Apparently, I actually am psychic… I just can't pick and choose who I see!"

"If you think this means I'm going to pay you, you're crazy," the woman said, grabbing her purse and storming out.

"Well, thanks a lot," I informed the ghost… the ghost. What a turn my life had taken. "That's $500 walking out that door. You happy."
"I'm very sorry. But… isn't it just ever-so-dishonest to fool people like that?"

"You're pretty judgy for an errant spirit, you know that?"

"I know," the girl said. "I'm trying to work on that."

"And now I suppose I'm going to have to solve your murder to lay you to rest," I said. The poor thing. She couldn't have been more than 12 when she died. "I've seen TV shows like this. You won't leave me alone until I do."

"No, it's nothing like that at all!" she said. "I'm not even really dead!"

"Is that so?" I asked. I'd seen this too. A spirit in denial.

"Yes. You see… my body has been possessed by a malevolent entity. A demon of sorts."

"A demon?" Oh, this just got better and better. Now I had to learn how to do an exorcism.

"Oh, yes. And I'm oh-so fearful of what he can do in my body."

"Uh… well, I don't wanna sound dismissive, kid, but you ain't exactly John Cena there.

"It's a very long story, but… this isn't what my body looks like any more. I've become something very, very dangerous."

"What, like, a vampire or a werewolf or something?" Why not? Spirits and demons were real. Everything was on the table at this point.

"More like… an alien. A very strong, very powerful alien."

"Assuming that I believe you and you're not a sign of possible insanity… what do you need me to do?" I asked.

"I need your help to contact my friends. Start with Helga. She lives in a boarding house on Vine Street."

"Helga," I repeated. Was that an actual name someone had? The only Helga I'd ever heard of was that comic strip Viking's wife.

"When you meet her," she said "you'll know that I'm telling the truth."

--

Interlude

PS118 playground

"Okay," Sid said. "This is weird, right? I'm not alone in thinking this is weird."

"Oh, yes," Roderick "Peapod Kid" Peavine agreed. "I can most definitely confirm that this gentleman's behavior is terribly, terribly eccentric."

The gathered children were regarding the actions of an old man who was, even now, drawing some kind of complicated chalk diagram on the blacktop.

"What do you think he's doing?" asked Park.

"I reckon he's preparing for some arcane ritual, the likes of which ordinary souls like us can't
fathom." suggested Stinky.

"Maybe the school hired him to put in some kind of new hopscotch court?" asked Sheena, hopefully.

"I dunno," Eugene replied. "That doesn't look like any variation I've ever seen on Hopscotch-Enthusiast dot com…"

"Really? That's a thing?" asked Katrinka.

"Oh, yes," Eugene replied. "It's the premiere resource for anyone interested in the fast-paced world of hopscotch and hopscotch-derivatives."

"Figures that's the kind of thing a wussy sixth-grader like you would be interested in," Wolfgang sneered, shoving the small boy out of the way to get a better look.

"What are you even doing here?" Harold said. "You don't even go here any more!"

"I heard some freak was doing something weird and I wanted to check it out."

"Yeah!" Edmund echoed. "He wanted to check it out!"

"Shut up! You don't have to repeat everything I say. Jeez. Anyway… it's a free country. I can go where I want. Got a problem with that, porky?"

"Uh, I don't…" Harold replied, his momentary courage failing, "but Sid does."

"He doesn't speak for me," the long-nosed boy replied weakly.

"I didn't think so."

"All right, this has gone far enough." The just-arrived Principal Wartz strode past the children, preparing to confront the stranger. "It's time to put a stop to this transient's flagrant disregard for public property and anti-vandalism laws."

"Please," Vice Principal Simmons suggested. "We need to take into account that this man might have some sort of 'special' condition that is uncontrollably compelling him to act out in this manner. Surely this situation can be more readily solved with compassion."

"Fine," Wartz said grudgingly. "We'll try it your way."

Simmons approached the man, who had just finished drawing the inner of two circles and was now drawing lines separating the resulting ring shape into equal sections. "Uh… excuse me," he began. "I'm not certain if you're aware of this, but you're on school property."

"I know," the man replied. "Now, could you please leave me alone? It's vital that this symbol be drawn to precise specifications."

"Yes, well… I'm aware that you probably have very 'special' and 'unique' reasons to be doing what you're doing. You feel that this is the manner that you have to express yourself in and that's… okay."

"I really don't have time for this," he said. "The fate of everything you know and care about is at stake here and I can't be interrupted."

"Yes, well… I'm certain that you believe that, and I respect that belief, but I'm afraid that you can't do this here."
"Oh, no. It must be here. This spot is the closest nexus of ley lines. Anywhere else and the banishment ritual would fail."

"Okay, that’s… certainly a concern…"

"All, right, Simmons," Wartz interrupted. "We've tried your touchy-feely mumbo-jumbo and it failed." He bustled onto the playground. "You have sixty seconds to leave the premises or I'll be calling the men in white coats to haul you to the funny farm. Capische?"

In response, the man pulled something from his coat pocket. "Oh, lordy, he's got a gun!" Wartz declared, dropping his aggressive stance and dropping to the ground, cowering. "Don't hurt me! I can't die now! I'm too young!"

"It's not a gun," the man said. "It's a force-field projector." He activated it, forming a bubble around his work. "Now you won't bother me."

"Well," Mr. Simmons replied. "Today I learned that… force fields… are… real. And… the important thing is… that I learned something."

"If it's all the same to you, I think I'd prefer to forget this ever happened," Wartz said.

--

Lloyd Mansion

-RHONDA-

"Two sleepovers in a row," Nadine said. "Maybe I should start getting my mail sent here."

"Moving a bit fast there," I addressed my girlfriend. It still felt so strange. Nadine was my girlfriend now. A few days ago, if you'd told me that, I would have called you crazy. But the more I thought about it, the more I wondered why we hadn't made the jump sooner. "We're not even teenagers yet and you're talking about moving in together?"

"I'm kidding," Nadine replied, grinning impishly.

"I know," I said. "But you should probably be careful with the teasing around my dad. I don't think he's quite on board with the whole me-being-into-girls thing."

"I'm sure he'll come around," she reassured me. "Your mom's been pretty great about the whole thing."

"Mom's a romantic at heart," I said. "She's always told me that the heart wants what it wants, and that you should listen to it. Or them, in my case."

"And what are they telling you?" she asked, leaning in.

"That I could be kissing you right now and I have no idea why I'm not."

"And you were worried about moving too fast."

"Right now your lips need to move faster towards mine."

"Well, as long as we're being forward…” She grabbed me by the horns and yanked my head toward hers. The momentary whiplash was well worth it as our lips locked together and I once again pondered why I'd never thought of Nadine as a possible romantic partner before, because she was one hell of a kisser.
"Sorry," she said, after we separated, "but it's just so convenient that your head has handles now."

"I knew they were there for a reason," I said, rubbing the sore scalp around them. "Just warn a girl next time, okay?"

"I promise. Now, I gotta pack my stuff. My dad's gonna be here to pick me up any minute."

"Awww…"

"Hey, I can't stay here forever. Like you said… that'd be moving too fast."

"Well, we wouldn't want that. Just… stay in touch, okay? When Mr. Pines contacts us, we need to have everyone available for the banishment ritual."

"Don't worry. You can reach me any time. You made sure of that, remember?" Nadine answered, referring to the new smartphone I'd gotten her for Christmas with the custom sequined ladybug case.

As she skipped off to pack, I continued to ponder who each symbol could represent. The ham, for example, made me think of Harold because it represented food, but was that too obvious? Besides, the oyster and the pumpkin also could apply if that was the case. The scroll represented knowledge, which could suggest Phoebe, but then so did the owl… and the broken glasses were a total mystery. It was tough to concentrate… my head was buzzing.

Wait, that wasn't my head. It was a feeling that I got when another mutant was near, like Helga. Maybe she was back for a strategy session? Or Phoebe… I hadn't seen her since the party. Truth told, I was afraid of seeing her on the chance that I'd run into Lila. I was still feeling guilty about getting her hurt, not to mention mutated. Honestly, I wasn't sure I could face her. The look in those haunted eyes that night had been seared permanently into my memory. I'd tried to focus on my new feelings for Nadine, but those eyes kept creeping back into my thoughts no matter how much I'd pushed them down. I'd barely even slept last night. Every time I tried, I kept having the same nightmare. I was watching the railgun shard impale Lila again and again, but this time it was me pulling the trigger. I'd kept up appearances that I was all right this morning, but I wasn't sure how much longer I could handle it.

The doorbell rang. Normally, I'd stay out of sight on the grounds that it could be a stranger, but Carson was still on vacation and the buzz in my head was strong enough that it was likely Helga at the door and I needed to let her in since it was just as risky for her to be seen by strangers.

And so, I found myself answering the door, only to find the person I least expected.

"Hello, Rhonda," the newcomer said demurely, a placid smile on her emerald face.

---
-NADINE-

I was packing, humming to myself happily. These last two days had been a roller coaster of emotions, but at this moment, I was feeling nothing but the bliss that came with knowing that Rhonda and I were finally on the same page.

My packing was suddenly interrupted by the opening bars of "Walk Like an Egyptian." Rhonda's cel phone. I knew it was probably not for me, but I risked a glance.

Phoebe! I actually did want to talk to her. She'd been my first (well, only) shipper and I needed to at least tell someone the good news (it had never come up last night with Arnold and Helga).

I tapped the answer button. "Rhonda!" the voice on the other end demanded. "I have vital
information that must be-
"Sorry, this is Nadine. Actually, I was wanting to-
"Well, can you get her? It is of utmost importance that I speak to her-
"Um, sure, but before I do, you'll never guess what happened!
"Nadine, I'm certain that what you have to say is quite important to y-
"I finally confessed to Rhonda, and guess what… she actually has feelings for me! We're officially a couple now! Isn't that amazing?"
A brief pause. "That is indeed a most welcome development, and you can rest assured that at any other time, I would be deafening you right at this moment with a jubilant squee, but right now, I must speak to Rhonda. Please put me on with her!"
"All right," I said. "Just give me a minute."
I picked up the phone and hurried downstairs. This place was huge, and it took several minutes to get from Rhonda's room to the foyer.
What I found there made me drop the phone…
--
Minutes Earlier
-RHONDA-
"Lila?" I said. The last time I'd seen her, she was so in denial of reality that she was practically catatonic. And now, here she was standing on my doorstep looking as carefree and chipper as she did every other day.
"It's just an ever-so-lovely winter morning, isn't it?" she said cheerfully.
"Um, yeah," I replied, feeling uneasy. "It's, uh… it's good to see you up and about."
"Oh, yes," she said. "I'm feeling oh-so-much better. I suppose I reacted just ever-so-badly, but you've all been so patient, just ever-so-patient, I must say. I suppose everybody's relentless positivity just couldn't help but rub off on me."
I suppose something about this sudden, miraculous recovery should have been setting off alarm bells, but I felt just so relieved to have my guilt absolved that I simply accepted it at face value.
"I'm really glad you're okay," I said. "Won't you come in?"
"Oh, yes, I'd like that just ever so much," she said, stepping inside. "Actually… I do have a bit of an ulterior motive for visiting you."
"Really?"
"Oh, yes… see, I've been thinking, and it turns out that I've been in denial all this time. It turns out… I think I might not just like you… I might like-you like you."
Now, three days earlier, I would have jumped for joy to hear that. I had had a raging crush on Lila Sawyer since the fourth grade. That crush had lasted until two nights ago, when she'd told me in no uncertain terms that while she was flattered, she had no attraction to me.
I suppose this should have been a second red light, the sudden declaration of feelings after denying them, but she had been through a traumatic experience, and that kind of thing makes you reconsider beliefs that you once incontrovertibly held, so it was theoretically possible that she could be acknowledging feelings she was in denial of.

In any case, while this was a crushing blow to my self-esteem, it had led to the beginning of something wonderful with Nadine. And so, I found myself delivering words that I'd never thought I would.

"That's flattering," I said, "But… I actually just learned that Nadine has feelings for me too. And, well… I want to pursue a relationship with her."

"Oh," she said, looking disappointed. "Well, I wish you the best of luck."

"Thanks," I said. "I really hope this doesn't affect our friendship."

"Oh, you misunderstand," Lila said. Her grin suddenly turned malicious, as if she'd shifted personalities. "I wish you luck in explaining this to her."

And, suddenly, she jumped me, wrapping both sets of arms around me tightly and pulling our faces together as she pressed her lips against mine, her tongue forcing itself into my mouth like a wriggling invader. Behind me, I heard a gasp and something dropping, then sobbing running footsteps.

Nadine. She'd seen. Lila had done that on purpose.

"That's enough of that," Lila said, letting up on her resistance, finally allowing me to push her off me.

"I'll say! What the hell was that?" I demanded. "What's wrong with you? You're not like this!"

Lila chuckled. "You're not like this!" she repeated mockingly. "Wow… that was fun. Oh, not that whole lip-pressing thing. That's disgusting. I honestly don't know how you meatwads can stand it. But seeing the look on your friend's face as her heart shattered into a million pieces? Priceless. Who knew hurting folks emotionally could be so satisfying?"

And like that, everything clicked.

"It's you."

"In your friend's flesh, Silver Spoon," the thing wearing Lila confirmed, booping my nose.

"What did you do with Lila?" I demanded.

"Oh, I'm sure she's floating around somewhere. In the meantime, I'm just getting started having fun with this body. I'd stay and slap you around a bit, but… I have a feeling nothing I could do to you right now would be as bad as what I already did. Toodles!"

"Hey! We're not done!" I shouted, unfurling my wings to go after them.

"Oh, you could chase me down… but then you'd be leaving poor Butterfly all alone crying. What's it going to be, Silver Spoon?"

The logical thing to do would've been to go after them. But… he was right. My hearts weren't in it. Right now, all I could think about was making things right with Nadine.

Damn it.
"This isn't over," I said.

"Well, duh, it'd be pretty disappointed if it was!" they said, flying off. "We'll meet again…. Don't know where…. Don't know when… but I know we'll meet again, some sunny afternoon! Gosh, I sure do love that song!"

There was no telling what that maniac could do in Lila's body. But I'd made my choice.

I went off to find Nadine.
Chapter Summary

In which Helga finally confronts her Lila problem, and Rhonda and Nadine are frickin' adorable.

Chapter 38

Putting the Pieces Back Together

Sunset Arms

-HELGA-

"K… O…! WINNERS NEVER LOSE!"

"And… that's twelve in a row! I remain undefeated!"

Arnold groaned. "How are you so good at this? I've been playing Fight Fighters my whole life, and I swear you're the only one I can never beat! Maybe if I switch fighters again…"

"Doesn't matter. You've tried Chief Punch-In-Face, Beastor, El Narcistico… Face it, there's always someone better, Football Head. Except for me. Nobody beats me. Now, I believe a dozen victories entitles me to a Dance of Superiority." I got up from the couch and started making circular motions with my arms while shaking my rump in Arnold's face.

"Y'know, this is really poor sportsmanship," he scolded. "Besides, I'm sure there's something wrong with this controller," he groused, eyeing it suspiciously.

"We've switched controllers three times, Arnoldo," I reminded him. I continued to rub my victory, and my tail, in Arnold's face. For where was the fun in victory if you couldn't gloat?

"Well.. at least it's worth it for the view," he commented.

"Gettin' fresh with me?" I asked, swatting him in the face with my tailtip.

"Maybe," he said, grinning. "Is it working?"

"Maybe. Have you tried pinching my butt?"

"Helga!" he reacted, scandalized.

"I am giving you permission. Go on. Pinch my butt."

"I dunno… this… feels like a trap…"

"Jeez, Arnold, you have a long way to go before you master the art of flirting," I huffed.

"I thought I was doing okay…" he said.
"You can let a little bit of Dark Arnold out to play now and then," I suggested. "I know he's in there."

"I thought that you liked how gentle and optimistic I am," he said.

"I do, really. But… it doesn't hurt to mix things up now and then. After all, I'm not always a stone-cold bitch. If I can be nice, you can be nasty."

"I… I'm not sure I can."

"Aw, where's that positive attitude?"

"You want me to be positive… about being negative."

"Now you're gettin' it."

"You're very confusing."

"Welcome to girls."

He sighed and put the controller down. "I feel like we shouldn't be doing this, anyway…"

"…he said, down twelve games…"

"I'm serious. Lila got hurt and she's losing her mind, Bill and the Old Man are still out there…. Should we just be… relaxing and playing video games at a time like this?"

"Actually, Lila called me last night and said that she's feeling a lot better. She mentioned that Phoebe's taking her for some kind of full-day outing. I tried reaching them this morning to talk about the whole Bill plan, but apparently wherever they went has lousy coverage. It doesn't really matter anyway, since we can't really do anything until the Nutty Professor finishes these "preparations" he's making."

"We could at least figure out the symbols…"

"Oh, those? I figured those out already."

"You did?"

"Yeah. The pumpkin is Stinky, 'cause he grew that giant pumpkin once and he's skinny like a scarecrow. The ham is Harold 'cause of that time he stole a ham, which got him that apprenticeship at Mr. Green's. It's kind of a defining moment for him. The scroll is Tall Hair Boy 'cause he's a storyteller. The owl is Phoebe because owls are associated with wisdom and Phoebe's easily the smartest person I know. The horseshoe represents luck, but since it's upside down, it represents bad luck, so its gotta be Eugene."

"You've really thought this out," Arnold marveled.

"Now, the oyster was a bit hard, but then I remembered the pearl inside and I realized that what it represented was a shining jewel hidden within a rough exterior."

"I seem to remember someone telling me that the most beautiful gift can come in the plainest box."

"Cute, but I'm already taken. I'm the heart, remember? Now, who do we know who might not be the best-looking but is a really amazing person when you get to know her?"
"You're right it can't be you, 'cause you are the best looking."

"And you are a big fat liar," I teased, gave his cheek a gentle stroke, "but that's good. We want to work on that dark side. Anyhow, I'm thinking Patty. She may not be in our grade, but she is close to a lot of us, so I can see her being in the circle. And of course, the moon is Curly because he is nuckin' FUTZ." Arnold snickered in spite of himself at that one. Yesss… let the darkness flow within you… "The only ones that I'm having trouble with are the hands and the broken glasses, but I'm sure they'll come to me."

The doorbell rang. "I'd better get that," Arnold said. "Dunno who could be here this early. I wasn't expecting anyone."

"Very well. Into the kitchen I go." I exited, taking up a position where I could see the front door at an angle, but couldn't be clearly seen from it. Arnold opened the door, cuing a swarm of animals charging down the stairs and out into the street, seemingly from nowhere, to nowhere. Where the heck did these things come from, anyway? I never saw them (except for the overgrown ham sandwich Arnold called a pet) anywhere around the house, they just seemed to materialize whenever someone opened the door. Perhaps that Stanford guy would be interested in the phenomenon, when he was done with his transdimensional hoodoo or whatever.

"Holy crackers, what was that?" the newcomer said. I couldn't see her clearly, but the voice was familiar.

"I'm sorry, that just kinda… happens around here. So, what brings you here, Madame Blanche? If you're looking to rent a room, I can go get my grandpa…"

Of course. Madame Blanche. That conniving charlatan who had taken advantage of a young girl's confused emotions to foist off a phony "anti-love" potion that I'd convinced myself, through sheer force of will, actually worked. O, would that I could travel back in time and warn my younger, stupider self of the folly of trying to blunt my passions. That they are what give life meaning and flavor. That everything would ultimately work out for the best. At least in regard to my love life. There are still plenty of other issues. Where was I? Oh yes, the chick who charged me ten bucks for a tiny bottle of grape juice.

"Kid, I make way too much to live in this dump. No offense. How'd that anti-bad-luck package work out, by the way?"

"Not so good," Arnold replied irritatedly.

"Well, you know, magic's a fickle thing. Anyway, I'm actually here to see someone named Helga. She lives here, right?"

"Why do you need to see her?"

"I'm getting to it!" Blanche suddenly snapped to the air next to her. "Look… either I'm going crazy, or I'm being haunted by one of your friends. A girl named Lila."

"But… Lila's not dead," Arnold said, nervously.

"I know, that's what she told me!" Blanche replied. "But whatever's goin' on with her body now, her spirit ain't in it. She's right here with me, and she won't leave me alone until I find Helga Pataki!"

"Then you got her, Bucko," I said, leaving the kitchen.

The medium's eyes widened. "Ay Maria," she said, crossing herself. "She wasn't making it up."
"Yeah, yeah, take it all in," I replied. "I'm well aware that I'm not normal, you don't need to rub it in."

"You sound familiar," she said.

"I should. You sold me a phony anti-love potion two years ago. I still want my ten bucks back, by the way." I scowled at her, arms angrily crossed.

"It, ah… didn't do this to you, did it? 'Cause the last thing I need is a lawsuit."

"No, this wasn't you. Not unless you used alien spores as an ingredient."

"Helga…" Arnold prodded. "That's not important right now. We need to find out what's wrong with Lila."

"Whatever." I said quietly. Even now, even after everything that happened, I still felt a twinge of jealousy hearing that name come out of his mouth. Even after claiming Arnold's affections, even after I gave her my frickin' blood to save her life, that last bit of petty distaste still lingered. Why? I won. And, really… she'd never even been playing. And yet, here I stand clinging to my bitter resentment for someone who had done nothing wrong to me. Why am I so messed up? Why can't I just let go of things?

"Okay. Now… tell us what Lila told you."

"If this isn't just a scam…"

"It's not. Believe me, my time is valuable. I wouldn't just waste it on two kids. She says… she says an evil triangle took control of her body and kicked her out. She says it knocked someone named Feeny – sorry, Phoebe out and took off for Elk Island. She says-"

Suddenly, the spiritualist froze, eyes widening.

"Hello?" I said, waving a hand in front of her eyes. "Earth to con artist…"

She just as suddenly snapped back to life. "Sorry, but it was taking too long the other way. Oh my… this is just ever-so-strange…" She shook her head. "It's like… I'm wearing clothing made of a person…"

"Lila? Is that you?" asked Arnold.

"Either that or Madame Blanche missed her calling as an impressionist," I remarked.

"Yes… it's me," Blanche/Lila answered. "I figured things would be quicker if I cut out the middleman."

She went into the whole story… how Bill Cipher had appeared to her in the form of an angel, convincing her she was dead and in some kind of purgatory, how he'd come to 'take her to heaven', only to steal her body and expel her, how she'd been forced to witness as Bill used her body to assault Phoebe while her back was turned, then made a deal with some guy in the hidden bunker that'd been under their noses all this time.

"I'm sorry," she concluded, "her" eyes tearing up. "Everything that has happened, everything that's going to happen, is all my fault. Bill is going to be hurting a lot of people, and using my body to do it… not to mention whatever they're doing with my blood. They could use it to create an entire army like us. I'm just… ever-so-stupid."
"You're not stupid," said Arnold. "...no, wait. Was that me? Was I the one who just said that? Criminy... I think I was. Me, reassuring LIII-la. We live in wondrous times. "You just got conned by a master. It happens to the smartest of us, sometimes. And this guy's like, billions of years old. He's had a lot of time to perfect his game."

"That's sweet of you to say, just ever-so-sweet..." I cringed inwardly. I'm trying, really I am... she just makes it so hard... "...but we both know that's all it is. I'm just glad I was able to warn all of you before I fade away for good. If you see my dad, please tell him I love him... and goodbye."

"Oh, no." I said, grabbing her/Blanche by the shoulders. "Oh, HELL no. You are NOT fading away on me. I didn't save your life so you could just die all over again."

"But-"

"Stow it, Pippi! Look… I don't like you, okay? And there's no logical reason for it, I know, but I just don't! You're just... everything that I know I can never be! Pretty, charming, nice, feminine... I'm none of those things. I'll never be any of those things."

"Do you… want to be?"

"No! ...maybe... the point is, you are, I'm not, and I resent your for it. It... it all comes so easy to you."

"That's not true at all. Believe me, Helga, there's nothing easy about being 'perfect'. To be honest... I wish I could be more like you. You're so true to yourself. You never have to put up this fake positive persona. Sometimes I just want to lash out, but there's so much pressure to be this 'ever-so-sweet' person that everyone depends on me to be."

I snorted. "'True to yourself'. You have no idea how off-base you are. Maybe we're more alike than we know. In any case... how I feel about you... that's not your fault, that's mine. You don't deserve any of what's happened to you. And we are getting you your body back. You got that? You are NOT quitting on me. You owe me that."

"O-okay," she said, wiping her tears. "For the record... I think you're all of those things."

"Hey, if you wanna be delusional, be my guest," I said.

"So, what now?" Arnold asked.

"I think our free time just ran out," I answered. "Arnold, I'm gonna go suit up. You need to go get the gang together and find Stanford. I'll get the girls and we'll lure Bill to you so we can all do the banishment ritual."

"I... I suppose I'll pray for you..." Lila said, bowing Madame Blanche's head and folding her hands in devotion.

"...of course... that's what the hands are for!" I said. "Lila, stay in Madame Blanche. We're gonna need you. Arnold'll explain on the way!"

"Of course," she said. "I'm glad to do anything that could help."

"Good luck," Arnold said, giving me a peck on the cheek. I ran upstairs to grab my costume, and noticed that I had just missed a call from Phoebe. I immediately redialed.

"Helga!" she said, exasperatedly. "I can't believe I finally got to someone! I tried calling Rhonda, but
I suddenly got cut off, and none of my subsequent calls got through! I need to tell you that-

"Yeah, Lila's body is possessed by Bill Cipher, I know, Lila just told me."

"Lila told you? How?"

"Long story. Suit up. Meet me at Rhonda's. I have a sneaking suspicion that you couldn't get to her because Bill already did. She'll need us."

"Suiting!" She said, hanging up.

--
Lloyd Mansion

-NADINE-

I was sad at first, when I saw Rhonda and Lila locked in their embrace. But as I ran off, crying, the sadness was overcome by anger.

Anger at Rhonda for betraying our fledgling relationship behind my back. Anger at Lila for daring to come between us after rejecting her. But most of all… anger at myself.

Anger at myself for immediately believing the worst.

I wasn't ready for this.

I could hear Rhonda yelling "Nadine, wait!" as I shoved my things angrily into my overnight bag. She came into the room a few moments after. "Wait," she said again.

"What." I said, harsher than I'd intended. I guess I still had plenty of anger at her, even if most of it was at myself.

"She forced herself on me," she said.

"Lila. Forced herself on you." I said skeptically. "You expect me to believe that?" I slapped my forehead. "I can't believe you. To think… I honestly believed that you could have feelings for someone like me. But I'm beneath you, aren't I. I was never really more than your accessory."

"Nadine…"

"And the worst part is I was all ready to listen to you! I was thinking that maybe I jumped to conclusions and I should have at least given you a chance to explain yourself, but you immediately launch into some ridiculous lie…"

"Nadine, please listen to me!"

"No, I'm done listening to you and I'm done being your friend. I thought you were changing, but you're still selfish and thoughtless and you have the nerve to blame this on Lila-"

"Lila isn't Lila." She interrupted.

I stopped short.

"Bill Cipher possessed her body. 'She' *she did finger quotes* came on to me, I told 'her' that I was with you now, 'she' said okay, then waited until you came back into the room and then suddenly jumped me and shoved 'her' tongue down my throat."
I was still mad at her, but I could hear the anger and violation in her voice.

"I believe you," I said.

"I'm sorry," Rhonda said. "This whole 'caring for other people more than myself' thing is new to me, but the fact that he hurt you hurt more than anything he could do to me, and he knew it."

"No, I'm sorry. I immediately thought the worst of you. I should have given you a chance."

"What else were you supposed to think?" she asked. "You can't read my mind. All you had to go on was the evidence before your eyes, and that wasn't exactly ambiguous. I don't blame you at all for getting mad at me."

"It doesn't exactly say a lot of me as girlfriend material," I said.

"Hey, I'm not ready to give up on us yet," Rhonda said, giving me a hug. "At least let's get to our first official date, okay? Otherwise the evil triangle wins."

"I can't argue with th- wait, Bill's in Lila's body and running free? Why the hell are you still here?"

"…admittedly, I have not been thinking straight."

"No, you haven't! We could have saved our relationship later! You need to go after Bill right now!"

"…like this? In broad daylight?"

"So put a bag over your head or something! Maybe you'll start some kind of new bag-head fad… it doesn't matter."

"Right, right…. Wait… where'd this box come from?"

I turned to where she was looking. A large, flat box had been sitting on her bed. I guess it had been here when I came in, I just hadn't registered it. "There's a note on it."

"'With my compliments: Bridget'" she read.

"Isn't she that secret agent that helped save the neighborhood?" I asked.

She opened the box, revealing something made of shimmering red, blue and gold fabric.

"This… could work," Rhonda said.

--

MDI

-PHOEBE-

How had Bridget gotten the box in here? I would have to remember to ask her if I ever got a chance.

Nevertheless, mysterious delivery method aside, the costume inside was far more elaborate in design than the one Rhonda'd ordered me for her party. It seemed to conform to my body like a second skin without feeling like it was too tight. The boots and gauntlets were designed seamlessly for my unique hands and feet, and the color scheme complemented my azure skin impeccably.

I slipped the included visor over my eyes. While the outer surface was opaque, I could see clearly through it from my side. Suddenly, a transparent image of a woman in a blue catsuit with long, auburn hair appeared in it, dead center.
"Hello! My name is Bridget, and I'm here to walk you through some of the functions of your brand new custom WOOHP Action Uniform. You're seeing me on your visor's customizable heads-up display, and hearing my voice on its built-in headphones. Your visor is voice-activated and has internet access compatible with all wireless networks, and its audio system can connect to any cellular carrier, as well as over-air and satellite radio. I've pre-set some of my favorite stations, but you can change them if you want.

"The costume itself is composed of an experimental fabric that's insulated against extreme temperature and electricity, is fire- and bulletproof, and can even repair minor damage to itself. For your specific uniform, Ms. Heyerdahl, I've built in a few extras designed to compliment your unique abilities. Your belt, for example, has detachable metallic discs that you can use as guidable projectile weapons, and the gauntlets house special retractable steel foil strips that can be used to snare opponents. I understand you are also an accomplished fencer. You'll find a collapsible fencing foil in the cuff of your left boot."

Amazing. This Bridget thought of everything.

I'd been unsure of this whole crimefighting endeavor Helga and Rhonda had been planning but, glancing in the mirror, I had to admit I did look the part.

It was time, then. Time for Magnetica's career to begin.

--
-RHONDA-

I had to admit, this fit a lot better than the costume I designed.

"What do you think?" I asked Nadine, briefly posing for effect.

"I'd surrender," she said, giving me a thumbs up.

"Yeah, but you're biased," I said, pecking her cheek. "Wish me luck. I'm about to make my de-"

A sudden crashing noise interrupted us.

"Oh, god, not again," I muttered. "That's the third time someone's broken down the door."

-HELGA-

Admittedly, knocking the door down was probably a rash act, but with Princess not answering her phone, I was afraid the worst had happened.

My fears were confirmed when I spotted her phone lying on the marble floor, its surface covered in cracks. Rhonda Lloyd would never let anything happen to her precious phone if she could help it. This was proof something really bad had happened.

"I'm coming, Rhon," I said more to myself than to anyone. "I swear, if Bill hurt you, I'll… do whatever the hell it is that hurts a geometric object."

"Hey," a voice said. "You ever heard of a doorbell, Hellcat?"

"Shut up, Rondaloid, I'm trying to figure out where Bill would take you."

Wait.

"You're okay?"
"Yeah, I'm fine, Bill decided to go for petty cruelty over bodily harm." She briefly glanced back at Nadine, who looked a bit embarrassed. "Why didn't you call?"

"I did. Unfortunately, I called that phone," I indicated the fallen instrument.

"Sorry," Nadine said. "My fault."

"It's okay, Butterfly," Rhonda said, giving her a hand a gentle squeeze. Oh my god, what was happening here? "It's just a thing. Don't worry about it."

"Jeez, Rhonda. I said. "You're taking the loss of *Gollum voice* your preciousss really well…”

"I've found something a lot more precious to me," she said glancing back at Nadine. Seriously, what was happening here?

"So," I said, trying to get us back on track, "I guess I don't need to tell you that Bill Cipher took over Lila's body."

"No, I am quite aware of the situation, thanks. What's going on with that Pines guy? I thought he was working on the trap."

"He is," I confirmed. "Arnold's with Madame Blanche, who's currently housing Lila's soul. Long story. They're getting the gang together, and bringing them to his location. That'll include you, Nadine, so be ready. Our job is to find Bill-Lila wherever 'she' is and bring 'her' in, so we can expel Bill from this reality and put Lila back in her body."

"Oh. Is that all," Rhonda replied wryly.

"Good luck, Sparks," Nadine said, getting up on her tiptoes to give Rhonda a peck on the cheek.

Seriously, what was happening here?

--

We took off from the mansion's deck, since it was less visible. Rhonda looked me over. "Bridget made you a new suit too?"

"Actually, I got mine yesterday. I asked her to make costumes for you and Phoebe, too, but I had no idea they'd be done this fast." I smirked. "Guess for once you're not the vanguard of fashion."

"I'll survive. This time." She chuckled a bit.

"So what's the deal? What was going on back there?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you and Nadine. You were all hand-squeezy and pet-namey and everything. So are you guys like a thing now or something?"

Rhonda blushed. "I… guess I wasn't exactly subtle about it, was I. Yeah, Nadine and I are together. It happened two nights ago after the party. And it almost ended a few minutes ago no thanks to Triangle Man."

"Ouch. That's rough."

"Yeah, so as you can imagine, I'm feeling really motivated to kick his… where's the ass on a triangle?"
"Wherever you want it. Seriously, though… I'm happy for you. I don't really hang with Nadine much, but I think she'll be good for you. You need someone grounded to keep you from getting too full of yourself."

"Gee, thanks."

"I calls it like I sees it, Princess. Seriously, though… it's not gonna be easy. This is gonna get out, and you're going to get a lot of crap about it, including from people you thought of as friends. Just know something… I got your back on this. Always."

"Gee… thanks," Rhonda repeated, this time heartfelt. "I'd hug you but we're in mid-air and you don't like it."

"I'm… kinda coming around on hugs, actually. If they're from the right people. Consider yourself on the short list."

"I'm honored," she replied half-sarcastically. "How about: I owe you one hug as soon as we finish this."

"Works for me. Now, c'mon. We have a demon to purge."
Chapter Summary

In which Bill is as happy as a tweenage girl, Miriam is goddamn heroic, and I make a cheap Pink & the Brain reference.

Chapter 39

Shop til you Drop Dead

Budnick's Department Store

-GERALD-

If ever there was a day I feared above all… well, there were many contenders.

Once, there had been Trash Can Day, but that was long in our past. It only applied to fourth graders, and in any case, the tradition had been permanently discontinued last year by our class.

[A.N.: Read TheWasp1995's fic Longest Monday: Revenge of the 5th Graders for some idea of how it might have gone down.]

There was also the Worst (i.e. first) day of school, Friday the 13th, and Parent-Teachers' Conference Day. But the worst, the absolute worst, was December 28th… Budnick's annual Post-Christmas Children's Clothing Sale. Truly, there was no worse ordeal than being dragged on a shopping trip by your mom.

"Oh… how about this shirt?" mom asked. "It's an extra 50% off."

"Ma," I complained, "that shirt's not me at all."

"Well, you can't wear that hoodie every day. Speaking of which… put the hood down. We're indoors and you look ridiculous."

"Ma, I can't be seen lookin' like this…"

"Well, then, let it be a lesson to you not to make stupid bets. Hood. Down."

I groaned, then lowered the hood, exposing my newly bald head.

"Took years to grow that do," I muttered to myself. I could hear Timberly giggling behind me. "Why are you even here? This is the boys' department."

"Your pain sustains me," she said, smirking.

"You used to be such a sweet kid…" I said, shaking my head.

"Timberly, that's not nice. Gerald, it'll grow back before you know it."

"It'll never be the same and you know it."
"it was time for a change anyway," Timberly said. "Fades are so twenty years ago."

"Laugh it up, short stuff. It's your turn next."

"It's worth it."

"Timberly, seriously, be nice. Shopping is aggravating enough without you being an instigator. Oh, ma'am?" She tried flagging down a sales associate, a woman with shoulder-length blonde hair. "If I could just-"

"Sarah?" The woman turned and – was that Helga's Mom? It couldn't be. She looks so… awake.

"Miriam? I had no idea you were working here now."

"Oh, yes, I started about a week ago. It's been a really good fit for me."

"Well, it looks like it's done wonders for you."

"Oh, yes. I've been so much more focused. Though I can't pin it all on the new job. Let's just say… I've had to reevaluate a lot of things in my life lately. Make decisions about what was important… and what had to change."

"Oh, right. I'd heard you left Bob."

Mrs. Pataki took a deep breath. "That was hard, but being with that man was slowly killing me. I just… I couldn't do it anymore. I had to get out of that house. The longer I spent there, in that condition, the harder it was to see a way out and… something had to give." She composed herself. "Look at me, yammering on. I'm supposed to be helping you with your shopping experience. What can I help you with today?"

"No, no," I insisted. "You two clearly have a lot to talk about. I'll just be downstairs in the sports department if you need me…"

"Nice try, dear," mom remarked. "We still haven't looked at slacks, and you need a new suit and dress shoes for your cousin's wedding next month. We've got lot of things for you to try on before you even think of sneaking away."

"Aw, moooooom…” Timberly giggling and my pain didn't help any. God, what I wouldn't give for a way out…

It was then I could hear the sound of breaking glass, followed by panicked screaming coming from downstairs. And the sound of large flapping wings. Careful what you wish for...

"Oh dear," Mrs. Pataki said. "That sounds ominous."

Just then, a winged, green-skinned figure launched itself over the railing that looked down on the store's lower level. It landed awkwardly, as if unused to moving that way.

I'd been there at the party, that moment when Lila's been hurt. I knew she'd changed. But I was unprepared to actually see the effects. And there was something very… Off about her.

"Oh, hello!" She said, cheerfully, an unnerving, not-quite natural grin plastered across her face. "I'm looking for the young girls' department! Seeing as that is what I am! A young, human girl!"

Well, it's official. She's gone koo-koo.
Mrs. Pataki, for her part, looked like she was trying to keep calm. "Why… of course, dear. I can help you. Come with me…"

As she led her off, my mom whispered to me, "Gerald, what is going on here? She looks kind of like…"

"It's a long story," I whispered back "You remember what went down at that Christmas Party at Rhonda's?"

"I remember that I was going to rethink you ever going to an unchaperoned party again…"

"Well… when I said Lila was gonna be okay, I wasn't… entirely straightforward. She was actually… a little cracked. Or maybe a lot cracked."

"Is it… safe to be around her?"

"I don't know. Normally, Lila's the nicest girl in the world, but right now… I think the best thing would be for me to borrow your phone and call for help."

"All right, but if she's as strong as Phoebe's supposed to be, I don't think the police'll be much help…"

"I'm not calling them, I'm calling Phoebe."

"Yes!" Timberly cheered. "My girl's gonna kick some butt!"

I just hope she's got her phone with her… " I dialed. "Hey, girl, you got a minute?" I asked when she picked up."

"Gerald? It's a bit of a bad time, I need to locate Lila…"

"Well, then, good news, 'cause she's right here at Budnicks. 'tween you and me, I think she's got more screws loose than Eugene's bike…"

"Oh dear, you didn't engage her, did you?"

"Whoa, no, babe, I'm fine. She went off somewhere with Helga's mom."

"Oh, my, this is not good, not good at all… Gerald, Lila's body is currently an empty shell possessed by an malevolent otherworldly entity!"

"Wait, are you sayin'… Lila's possessed? Like, head-spinnin', pea-soup-pukin' possessed?"

"Precisely! I will be arriving there momentarily. Please, keep watch, do what you can so that she doesn't hurt Mrs. Pataki, but whatever you do… do not provoke her!"

"You don't have to tell me twice. I've seen enough horror movies to know you do not mess with demons."

--

Girls' department

-MIRIAM-

Lord, I needed a smoothie.

The need creeps up on me every once in a while. Alcoholism never truly goes away, it just lurks, like my other constant companion, depression. Both nagging at you, demanding your attention at the least
opportune times, demanding you drink yourself into a stupor or curl up into a ball and try to pretend you don't exist or both.

But I have gotten used to shutting those voices down when I needed to. My life, and my need to rebuild me relationships with my daughters, demanded it. Even the surreal nature of what had happened to Helga had been manageable. But now, here it was intruding into the normal.

But this was just another test. Granted, a stranger test than most, but that's all they ever were, tests of my resolve. Some days, it's long periods of nothing to do, some days, it's… mutated little girls making you show them dresses.

"Here, I believe we have something that might complement your… unique complexion," I handed over a simple Kelly-green skirt. "This should fit very nicely. Now, why don't we see what we can do about a top. Our in-house tailor is out for the day, but we can put your items on layaway and have them altered for you later."

"Perfect!" the girl said, that deranged-looking grin never leaving her face. I could die. I could very possibly die. If she's even close to as strong as my daughter, it wouldn't even be hard for her. She could crush me as easily as she crushed a bug.

Give up, the voice in the deep recesses of my mind said. It's easy. You're used to it. Nobody expects anything of you, after all. You have a long history of being worthless. Why not embrace it?

No. Not today.

"Perhaps something in a tank top? The lack of sleeves should suit your abundance of arms quite well."

"You're the saleshuman! Hey, why don't I try this skirt on right now?" She put it over her head, wearing it on her shoulders like a shawl. "Oh my, this is wonderful! Why, I feel… like SINGING!" She began to skip and pirouette through the store. "I feel pretty, Oh so pretty. I feel pretty and witty and bright! And I pity any girl who isn't me tonight! Hey, I just realized what my look needs… makeup!"

She continued to skip happily towards the cosmetics department, still singing. "I feel charming, oh so charming, it's alarming how charming I feel! And so pretty, that I can hardly believe I'm real!"

She smashed open the counter, grabbing a lipstick, which she began smearing all over her face. "See that pretty girl in the mirror there, who can that attractive girl be? Such a pretty face, such a pretty dress, such a pretty smile, such a pretty me!"

She looked at me for approval. I gave her a pair of thumbs up and a smile. "You look absolutely lovely, dear!"

"I know!" she said, grabbing a scarf off the rack and wrapping it around herself.

--

-PHOEBE-

"What's going on now?"

"It's awful," Gerald reported from his hidden vantage point in the store. "She's… singing show tunes."

"Hang in there, handsome," I said. "I'm almost there."
As I arrived at the department store, I could see the customers and employees alike fleeing the scene. It looked like Mrs. Johanssen and Timberly were among the last.

A number of the escapees spotted me, and a panic began to arise again. "It's all right!" I said, landing. "My name is Magnetica. I'm here to help."

They still hung back, frightened. I couldn't exactly blame them for their trepidatious attitudes. Something exactly like me had just disrupted their normal everyday lives and how were they to know that I was the good guy?

"Well," I said, breaking the silence. "I'll just be going in there now."

"Good luck, Phoe- Fee-ellow who isn't my brother's girlfriend or anything!" commented Timberly.

"Smooth," I whispered as I passed.

"So, can I be your sidekick or-"

"Not a chance, dear," Mrs. Johanssen cut her off.

The huge hole in the main-level window was clearly Bill/Lila's point of entry. The many wrecked displays suggested that she'd had a bit of fun before deciding to play out whatever twisted parody of girlish life she was indulging in now.

I contacted Gerald over my headset. "Where are you?"

"I'm with the store manager in her office. She thinks she might be able to talk Lila down. I think she's dating her dad or something."

"You need to tell her that Lila isn't in control." Flight would likely make too much noise, so I hopped on the escalator, waiting for it to bring me into viewing range of her. "Bill is completely alone in her body right now. He's completely insane. There's no negotiating with him."

Right now, I could see Miriam and Lila in the jewelry department. Bill/Lila was prancing around in front of a mirror, body draped in various piece of mismatched clothing, face smeared in red lipstick, humming "I Feel Pretty" to him/herself. Her back was completely turned to me, but the mirrors were a definite concern. Mrs. Pataki was to the right of her, showing her various pieces, a forced smile on her face. We caught each other's eye. She ever so slightly nodded.

"Now, if you could just take a look over here," she said, luring Bill/Lila away from the mirrors.

I silently thanked her and continued creeping into position. Once there, I activated my gauntlet's grapple- straps and guided them to wrap around Lila's torso, snaring her.

"Mrs. Pataki!" I yelled. "Get out of here now! Gerald and the store manager are on the main floor, get them and get yourselves as far away as possible!"

"A-are you going to be all right, Phoebe?" she asked.

"I'm fairly certain I can at least stall her until the other girls get here, the important thing is that you get everyone to safety!"

Bill/Lila began to laugh. "Oh, Owl Eyes, Owl Eyes… you really think you're in control of this situation…" She (I am using this choice of pronoun for convenience) suddenly yanked with all her might, making me lose my balance and concentration. The strap went slack around her, and she used
the opportunity to utilize her body's strength to start whipping me around at high speed (mental note: remember to inform Bridget of this flaw in the suit).

"AGHH! How do I detach this stupid strap?!" I demanded, actually glad that I'd never gotten to have that picnic with Lila, since it would now be threatening to escape my body right now.

"Detaching this stupid strap," came a calm female voice in my earpiece. My glove jettisoned the metallic ribbon and momentum took over, sending me careening into a rack of remaindered dresses. Yes, there would definitely be a series of bug reports being made to Bridget if I survived this.

"Oh, honey, those don't suit you at all," Bill/Lila taunted.

"Thank you for your concern, Mr. Cipher, but I'm not here to browse. I'm here to coerce you into relinquishing that body. Someone else was putting it to far better use."

"Oh, I doubt that. Is there a nobler cause than plunging the universe into unending madness?"

"Yes, there is… not doing that!" I scrambled back to my feet, but Bill/Lila grabbed me by the shoulders and slammed me against a wall, leaving cracks in the plaster and possibly my ribs. At least it felt like it.

"Ah, physical violence, where were you all my life? Really gets the…. Whattaya call people juice again? …oh, yeah, blood pumping!" the entity jeered.

This wasn't good. I had lost the upper hand badly, and I needed to get it back. The object had been to restrain Bill/Lila without harming Lila's body, but the window was rapidly closing on that outcome as it was clear that Bill/Lila had absolutely no qualms about inflicting mortal harm on my body. Hoping Lila would forgive me, I brought my knees up into her midsection as hard as I could, making her lose her hold on me and giving me some leverage to push her off of me. She came at me again, but this time I was able to take advantage of her momentum and perform a judo flip, sending her crashing through the wall we'd previously weakened and into a storage space. I prayed silently the store's insurance was up to date because there was no way either of our families could afford to pay damages like these.

Unnervingly, like a puppet without strings, Bill/Lila got jerkily back to her feet. "Heh heh… I'd forgotten how funny pain is, Owl Eyes! Thanks for the reminder! Here, let me return the favor!"

She began flinging crates, hardware, and anything else she could find at me at high speed, but this time I was on alert and was able to dodge her projectiles. "Your early advantage has dissipated, Bill. I'm more experienced with physicality and ready for whatever you have to throw at me."

"Everything, huh? Well… how about THIS!"

She flung her hands forward, and I prepared for the worst, but there was no way to anticipate the earsplitting squeal that assailed my eardrums, combined with a wave of intangible force that propelled me back at a high speed… towards the large second story window. The sound waves that were assaulting me were already causing it to shatter. I idly wondered if I would hit before it finished or of I'd simply fly through thousands of shards of already broken glass. It probably wouldn't do much damage to my skin, but it'd probably hurt at this speed.

Either way…. To quote the vernacular, this was going to suck.

Outside, a few minutes earlier

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-HELGA-
"You have arrived at your destination," a calm artificial voice sounded in my ears. The suit's build in GPS had immediately loaded the fastest route (as the mutant flies) to Budnick's. Of course, I was motivated as heck to get there, given that that was where my mom was working. The thought of her stuck with a psychopathic superpowered entity, especially now that we were actually starting to feel like mother and daughter, chilled me to the bone.

"…mmm-hmm" Rhonda was saying, somewhere behind me and to my right. Figured she'd find the "forward cellular calls" option. If she ever learned how to make the suit text and post selfies, she'd be set. "The schoolward? Great. I'll contact Arnold and have him collect everyone. Yes, the kid with the big head. No, we're pretty sure he's human. All right. Hey, Hellcat! Dr. Pines is done with the prep!"

"Well, at least something's going right," I said, looking down. The police had already arrived and cordoned off the block with barriers and police tape, and the local media was here in force. Not to mention a whole gaggle of slack-jawed gawkers. Nothing could ever be easy, could it.

I scanned the crowd for my mom, but came up short. I did spot Gerald's mom and sister off to the side, talking to one of the cops. At least they were out… no sign of Geraldo himself, though.

"Well, Princess, you ready?" I asked.

"That's a lot of reporters," she said unsteadily.

"I thought you liked attention," I reminded her. "Besides, Gerald and my mom are in there and I'm not going to let your sudden case of stage fright hold us back."

"No, you're right," she said, inhaling sharply. "Let's… let's do this."

We set down in the area in front of the store, immediately drawing stares and shouts. I held up my upper hands. "It's all right! We're superheroes. We're here to help."

"Just… laying it all out there like that," Rhonda commented sardonically.

"We don't have time for explanations," I said. "There's something very dangerous in there and we're the ones equipped to handle it."

A tired-looking female cop in one of those hats with the fuzzy earlaps looked at us suspiciously, hand hovering over her sidearm. "Superheroes, huh. We've got enough trouble with that Monkeyman lunatic, last thing we need is more of you freaks running around. Though I give you props for really putting some effort into those costumes. Those extra arms look almost real."

"They are," I said, demonstrating. "Look, I know you have no reason to believe us, but we really do have actual superpowers and we know exactly what we're dealing with in there."

"Really, and what would that be? Because from what the bystanders have been reporting, the problem is a nutcase in a Halloween costume exactly like yours is on a rampage and probably has hostages. We can't just let the Junior Crimebuster Club doing their little LARP cosplay outing in there."

Rhonda responded by casually strolling over to one of the police cars and lifting it over her head before gently putting it down. "Okay, so, that got your attention," she said. "As you can see, we're for real. So is what's in there It's every bit as strong as us, your bullets won't do a thing to it, and it's being controlled by a mind older than time, and so crazy that there aren't enough bats in the world to produce the volume of guano sufficient enough to describe it."

"That's a real vivid metaphor, Miss… purple girl…"
"Joule," she corrected.

"Jewel… kinda weird, I thought with the costume it'd be some kinda electrical-themed name, but you're still civilians and department procedure clearly states-" 

"Someone's coming out!" shouted a voice in the crowd. I whipped around to see Gerald, Suzie and my mom (a huge weight immediately lifting off my hearts on sight) leaving safely through the wrecked front entranceway."

"Mom," I said, relieved, running up to hug the woman, concern for appearances the last thing on my mind.

"Hi, darling. What a day, huh?" she said nonchalantly, as if this had just been a more-hectic-than-normal day instead of a harrowing encounter with a demonic sociopath in a superpowered alien body.

"Excuse me, miss!" a reporter demanded pushing her way forward. "Can you tell us what is going on In there? And… did that pink girl with the wings just call you 'mom'?"

"Um, well, you see…" Miriam said, getting flustered under the attention.

"I'll handle this," Gerald interrupted smoothly. "Friends, reporters, social media influencers… this woman right here is a hero. Not only did she manage to stall a dangerous creature until help arrived, using only her quick wits, but she got all the remaining hostages out of the building safely, with no injuries. We all owe this lovely young lady a deep debt of gratitude."

"Oh, dear," Miriam said blushing. "Well, 'young' is an exaggeration…"

Another reporter, a mustached man in a tie, and rumpled trenchcoat, shoved his way through the crowd. "Douglas Cain, for the Raising Cain Report. I'm here to uncover the real truth." Oh, great. This idiot. A little over two years, his sloppy reporting had turned a simple Halloween prank into a full-scale panic that had nearly gotten most of our grade killed. The incident had pretty much destroyed him as a legitimate reporter, but these days there was a big market for crap, especially on the web. The Raising Cain Report was a clearing house for rumor, innuendo, half-truth, quarter-truth, 1/256th truth, and straight-up bullshit. "These… creatures are the product of a secret government experiment to create a new race to replace humanity. The creature inside is a failed prototype, and these two are the retrieval squad sent to capture it before their plot is exposed. You heard it here, first!"

"Hey," I said. "Dum Dum. If we were part of a secret retrieval squad, why would we be in public?"

"Plausible deniability," he said smoothly. The crowd began to mutter. "The public appears to concur," he whispered to the man filming him. "Lincoln… are you pondering what I'm pondering?"

"I think so, Cain," the dimwitted-looking man said, "but if 'ifs' and 'butts' were candy and nuts, then wouldn't grammar be extremely fattening?"

"No, you simpleton. This could be our ticket back to the big time. This could put Douglas Cain back on the map!"

I rolled my eyes. Morons. Of course, my ears were sensitive enough to pick up their conversation, but they didn't need to know that. I filed them away under "probable future nuisances" and turned my attention back to the officer. "Okay, so the hostages are out. There's no danger to any civilians. Can we go in now? Our friend is still in there and I'm not sure she's enough to handle the situation."
"There's another of you?" the officer said incredulously.

"Yes, and she-"

We were suddenly interrupted by an earsplitting noise. I looked up to see the windows shattering outward, raining shards of glass down on us, as Phoebe was flung backward through the rain into the air.

We sprung to action, as if by reflex we knew exactly who should do what. Rhonda scooped up the officer and Gerald in one pair of hands and Mom and Suzie in the other and flew them out of the glass rain while I flung myself into the air after Phoebe. I caught her on her descent, rolling with the impact while using my own thrust to slow us so that we only lightly thudded against the wall of the Taco Loco across the street instead of crashing through it.

"You okay there, Pheebs?" I asked.

"WHAT?!” she shouted.

"Can you hear me?" She'd gotten an earful of whatever noise that was, it must have messed with her hearing.

"CAN YOU REPEAT THAT?! I CAN'T HEAR YOU!"

"That answers that. Look, just… take five," I said, setting her down gently. "Rhonda and I'll take over for now."

"I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT YOU JUST SAID, BUT I NEED TO TAKE A BREAK! PERHAPS YOU AND RHONDA COULD TAKE OVER!"

"Good idea," I replied. I looked back at Budnicks. The entire crowd was staring up at the shattered window, or rather what had just appeared in it.

Bill/Lila flapped her way through it, a wide, inhuman grin on their red-smeared face (was that blood? No… nobody had been hurt… that I knew of…).

"Well," she spoke, unnaturally loud and shrill. "How thoughtful of you! You brought me an audience! Nothing like lots of innocent bystanders, eh, Heart of Gold?"

This… was not good.
Devil's Trap

Chapter Summary

In which Bill exits stage left. Also: BLONDE SQUAD!

Chapter 40

Devil's Trap

Outside Budnick's Department Store

-RHONDA-

So this was it, the moment where your purpose in life crystalizes and you know exactly who and what you are supposed to be.

When those windows exploded outward into the street, I didn't hesitate, I didn't even think. I just grabbed as many people as I could and got them to safety as best as I could.

"Are you okay?" I asked once I'd reached a safe point (as safe as anyone could be with a crazed triangle guy riding a superpowered preteen in the general area). Helga's mom nodded, the curly-haired woman looked like she was about to throw up, and Gerald gave a shaky thumbs-up.

"This is all real, isn't it," the nervous officer asked.

I nodded. "Me and my friends are just trying to help, officer…"

"Pudney," she replied. "Fran Pudney."

"I'm going to try to move the threat away from the store," I said. "Towards PS118. There's a man over there who's made all the necessary preparations to end this threat. We're going to need that area cleared. Can you get that done?"

She nodded, turning on her personal police radio. "This is Pudney at the Budnick's disturbance. The situation is being handled. Repeat, situation being handled. We have… independent agents assisting. No, not Monkeyman. Now, I'm going to need an area cordoned off around PS118. Yes, the elementary school. It's a very long story and I will explain it in my official report, which I hope to god won't get me laughed off the force. Pudney out."

"You've got your clearance, Jewel. I'm still not entirely on board with this, but it's clear that the force is not adequately equipped to deal with this sort of thing. Don't make me regret depending on you."

"Thanks. I… guess I'm supposed to say something like 'up, up and away' now? Ugh, no, that sounds lame. I'm just gonna go."

I took back to the air. Bill/Lila was just emerging from the building now, and her (everyone else seems to be using this pronoun, I'm just going with it) attention looked like it was entirely on Helga, who'd just managed to catch Phoebe safely.

"Well, how thoughtful of you!" she was saying, her voice having taken on the shrill, unhinged
quality of Bill's. "You brought me an audience! Nothing like lots of innocent bystanders, eh, Heart of Gold?"

-Keep her attention,- I signaled Helga, while I maneuvered myself into striking position as quietly as I could. I scrambled around the side of the building, lifting myself up to roof level.

Helga called out to him. "Ya wanna come over here and say that, bucko? 'Cuz I wanna introduce you to an old human delicacy called a knuckle sandwich!"

"I like you, you're sassy!" she said. "But I kinda like where I am right now. Hey, wanna see a cool thing I learned to do with this body?" She flung a hand forward, unleashing an agonizing squealing noise. Across the street, a mailbox crumpled under the sonic assault. "See? I don't even need to touch anything! Which is cool, because touching you fleshy things is gross. Ugh… I can't believe I actually mashed foodholes with Silver Spoon there. Why do you things even do that? That's not what they're for!"

Well, I was feeling bad for what I was about to do, but bringing that up just made it a lot easier. I jumped off the roof and drop-kicked Bill/Lila into the ground. I hated harming Lila's body, but at least she wasn't around to feel it.

"Oh, Bill," I said, "that lipstick is just not your color."

"Well, well, well… speak of the devil and up she pops! Nice of you to join the party, Spoony!"

"I throw the parties around here," I retorted, hefting Bill/Lila back off the ground and lifting into the air as fast as I could, putting distance between myself and the crowd and moving the fight towards the general direction of PS118 and hopefully, a swift and final end to this whole situation.

When I felt I had flown far enough, I began to spin myself at the highest speed I could muster, and flung Bill/Lila towards PS118 as hard as I could. She managed to finally slow herself after a few hundred feet, only for Helga to tackle her mid-air.

The two of us continued our tag-teaming, slowly steering ourselves closer and closer to the school. Sometimes staying high in the air, sometimes bringing it back down to ground level, switching off when one of us was starting to flag. As the fight wore on, though, it was becoming clear that both of us were starting to tire. We weren't used to fighting someone as strong as we were, and there was also the case that both of us were holding back since we didn't want to do any permanent damage to Lila's body. For this reason, I kept a reign on my lightning; it could potentially mess her up real badly.

Bill/Lila had clearly picked up that we were holding back, and knew that she was under no such obligation. Her strikes were made where they counted, and she wasn't holding back with the sonic bursts either. I knew my ears were definitely starting to ring.

"Y'know, you're really not giving chaos a fair shake, Silver Spoon," she said. "You should join the winning team! We have cookies…"

"One problem. I'm kinda not evil."

"Pfft, good, evil, they're just words. You exist as long as I do, words lose all meaning. Your whole human concept of morality is just a useless social construct you put together to keep people from constantly bashing each other over the head with wooly mammoth bones, which, between you and me, sounds a lot more fun, don't you think?"
"M'not listenin' to you…" I said, dodging another blast of sound.

"It doesn't really matter if you listen to me or not. All that matters is everything you believe is completely meaningless. Ethics, religion, decency, it's all arbitrary nonsense, and deep down, you know it. The only thing that matters is looking out for number 1. So, how about it, kid? Wanna get in on the ground floor?"

"Forget it."

"Aww, you're worried about your friends, aren't you. How cute. Tell ya what, you join me, whoever you want gets protected. You can even have Prayer hands here as your own personal toy once I'm strong enough to manifest fully on this plane. How's about that, huh? You like that."

"Uggh… you're sick! I don't want that! I would never want that!"

"You sure?"

"Yes, I am! That's disgusting! You don't understand people at all!"

"I understand that you like to pretend to be civilized, but deep down you're all still a bunch of glorified monkeys that only stopped flinging your own poo at each other because you somehow got smart enough to learn that it made your hands smell. Your society's one collapse away from going right back to squatting in the mud hooting at each other. I'm saying, why fight it? Let me throw the world into madness. Remember, in the society of the blind, the one-eyed man is king… so tell me, what would the insanely strong, electrically-powered three-eyed girl be? Here's a hint. Starts with G. Rhymes with a kind of fish."

"I don't want to be a god."

"Don't you? It's everything you ever dreamed of, Silver Spoon. You would literally be the idol of millions. People would worship at your feet. You would be the center of attention, forever. Doesn't that sound good?"

Damn it… it did. A part of me still craved, would always crave, the attention of others. It was why I always had to have the most stylish clothes, the fanciest, most expensive jewelry. It's why I threw the most lavish parties, why I auditioned for every local play and commercial, why I had a fashion blog and constantly, obsessively kept my social media up to date (until mutating had put a kibosh on that). Even becoming a superhero was in some way feeding my need for the adulation of others. There was no reason I had to fight evil in public in a flashy costume; it was just yet another way to draw attention to myself.

But there was something that Bill didn't understand about me. These are flaws I know I have. I've accepted them as a part of who I am… but they won't, don't, can't define me. There is more to me than just a shallow diva. I may be the Rhonda Lloyd who throws fancy soirees and flounces about in Caprini originals, but I am also the Rhonda Lloyd who caught three touchdown passes in the Mud Bowl and ventured into the bowls of the Earth to seek Wheezin' Ed's treasure and is not above blowing her Saturday dressing up in an old Colonial Army outfit and chasing a pig across Elk Island or threatening bodily harm to someone mocking a newfound friend. I am vast. I contain multitudes.

(Hey, Helga's not the only one who can quote poetry.)

"That's gonna be a hard pass."

"I know, I just wanted to get in your head a little while I got in position to do this to you!" She had gotten close enough to grab my arms and hold them still, while bringing her knee up as hard as she
could. It collided with the upper half of my lower-right arm, and a sharp, blinding pain shot through
my body as my entire right side seemed to go completely numb.

I was vaguely aware of Helga tackling Bill/Lila from behind, pushing her face down into the
pavement. "I really shouldn't be enjoying this so much," she commented. "It's wrong. Very wrong.
But… I can't say it isn't satisfying." She looked me over. "Jeez, Princess, you're not looking so hot."

"I think she broke my arm," I answered, trying not to sound too whiny and probably failing. I
attempted to move my lower-left and found it refused to let me. "Yeah. I think that's broken."

"You sure?" she said, reaching. "It could just be dislocated, or-"

"Don't touch, it, y- AHHHH!" I yelped in agony as her finger brushed against it.

"No, no, I think you're right, that's definitely a break."

"Well, thank you for the diagnosis, Doctor Pataki," I retorted through gritted teeth. "This isn't good.
I'm down an arm, Phoebe's beat up and deaf, and you're looking pretty shaky yourself."

"Yeah, well, I've had worse, and Bill's contained for now. I also called in some reinforcements
during my last break."

"Reinforcements? We're all the mutants there are!"

"Yeah, but not all the heroes. We just have to keep this guy down until they can back us up."

"Hey, funny story," interrupted Bill/Lila. "There are certain sonic frequencies that really mess up the
inner ear. Wanna see?"

"What a-" A sudden wave of dizziness and nausea overcame me. I started to keel over (at least
having the presence of mind to fall to my left so as not to mess up my arm even more. I could feel my
morning's breakfast rebelling against its confinement. I swallowed hard to force it back down. I could
see Helga struggling to hold it together herself, wavering, finally toppling as Bill/Lila freed herself.

"Well, that was fun," she said. "If you guys are all done trying to be heroes and all, I think I'll start
tearing your limbs off now."

She began to advance, when I heard a thwipping sound. A cable-like-thing weighted at both ends hit
Bill/Lila and wrapped itself around her, followed by a second from another angle, then a third.

"Oh, cute!" she said. "You think these toys of yours are gonna hold me for long, you got another
think co-" She was cut off suddenly as the cables electrified, millions of volts of electricity coursing
through her. Even Lila's alien body couldn't just shake that off. She slumped to the ground,
immoblized for the time being.

"You okay there, sis?" a sweet voice called out. Olga dropped on a wire from the roof of Green
Meats, wearing some kind of lilac-colored uniform and matching beret. I would look so amazing in
that, I thought to myself. Fashionista impulses don't die easy.

"Nothing about three solid hours of vomiting wouldn't fix," remarked Helga, shakily getting to her
feet.

Two more blonde women in matching uniforms approached, one from the alley and one from behind
a dumpster across the streets. "YES!" the younger one, who kind of looked more than a little like a
junior Olga herself, cheered. "Blonde Squad literally rules!"
"We're not calling it that, Lori," the other, a sour-looking woman in her mid-20s with long curly hair that hung over one eye and an army jacket worn over her uniform, answered.

"You're no fun, Deb," huffed Lori. "Olga likes the name, right?"

Olga wasn't listening. She was looking down at their target. "Lila? I... hurt my Little Sis?"

"That's not..." Helga began to protest, "...well, it is, but also not... look, it's complicated. This might sound crazy, but Lila isn't really in her body now."

"Big Sister?" Bill/Lila suddenly said. "What's happening? Why did you hurt me?"

Olga began to tear up. "Oh, darling, I'm so sorry, here, let me-"

"NO!" Helga said, restraining her. "Look, I know you're close to her, sickeningly so, but this is your actual sister talking to you now! I know we've never been all that close and for most of my life I've absolutely despised you, but I... kinda need you to trust me right now. That, right there... that's Lila's body, but that's not Lila. It's an evil being that wants nothing but to make everything in the universe suffer. Don't listen to anything she says, no matter how much like Lila she sounds."

"But..."

"Know that Lila, the real Lila, is safe. What we need to do now is bring her body to PS118 where we're going to do a ritual to exorcize the demon controlling it and put Lila's soul back where it belongs."

"I'm scared, Big Sis," Bill/Lila whimpered. "She's lying to you. She always lies to you. She lied about changing your grade. She lied about Doug leaving. She's lying now."

Olga's eyes narrowed. "I never, ever told anyone about Helga changing my grade. There is no way you could have known about that. As for Doug, well... a month after he left me, I happened to run into one of his exes. Turns out he wasn't the perfect man I thought he was, and I got to thinking about why he suddenly left. And then I took a look at the letter he wrote... and compared it to a sample of Helga's writing that I had."

"You knew?" Helga asked. "You knew all this time?"

"Of course, silly. I assumed you didn't want me to know about it, so I never really felt like I needed to bring it up. I was just happy to know that my sister was looking out for me, even if we didn't get along. Just like I know the real Lila would never try to get between us like this."

Bill/Lila's expression instantly shifted from "little girl lost" to a smug grin. "Can't blame a girl for trying, can ya."

Olga turned away from her, disgusted "Let's move out, Blonde Squad."

"Told ya she liked the name."

--HELGA--

We were now all piled in a van that looked nondescript on the outside but was like something Nick Fury would drive on the inside. Deb was driving, with Lori riding shotgun; Olga, Rhonda (Deb had set her broken arm) and I kept the bound Bill/Lila company in the back, making sure she remained immobilized. For her part, Bill/Lila kept trying to worm her way into our heads, playing on whatever weaknesses she could suss out. I tuned her out as best I could.
A police barricade blocked access to the area, but we were waved through, as the police had been
told exactly who needed to be let into the area. We soon pulled up to PS118. Most of our class
looked to be already there. I could see Harold, Sid, Stinky, Eugene, Curly, Lorenzo, Brainy, Park,
Sheena, Rani, Robert, Mary, Katrinka, Peapod Kid, and a few non-sixth graders like Patty,
Wolfgang, Edmund, Chocolate Boy (well, formerly Chocolate Boy, then Radish Boy, for a while,
then Smoked Almond Boy, and currently just Milton because "Those Little Wasabi-Coated Pea
Snacks Boy" was too much of a mouthful), and Torvald. It looked like they'd all gathered to watch
Stanford pines draw his arcane markings upon the blacktop, certain that something strange was about
to be going down.

Their anticipation was about to pay off big time.

"All right, step aside, everyone," I yelled as we exited the van, lugging the entangled Bill/Lila.
"Show's about to start!"

"Whilickers," marveled Stinky. "Is that Miss Lila?"

"Yes and no," Rhonda answered. "Body's here, soul should be here soon."

We dumped Bill/Lila on the picture of Bill's true form drawn in the center of the circle. She made no
move to resist at all, just grinning up at us unnervingly. "All right, everyone," I said, used to taking
charge. "For this to work we're gonna need a bunch of you to stand on those symbols there. Harold,
on the ham! Sid, the boots! Stinky, the pumpkin. Sheena, the flower. Patty, the oyster. Curly, the
moon. Eugene, the horseshoe! C'mon, people!" Rhonda and I took our own spots on the heart and
spoon, respectively.

"Wait, what's going on? I demand to know!" Sid shouted.

"Yeah! And what've y'all done to poor Miss Lila?"

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. "Okay. Crash course. Lila's soul is not in her body. It's safe, don't
worry. Lila's body, on the other hand, is possessed by an ancient demonic force."

"YOUR MAMA BLOWS GOATS IN HELL!" Bill/Lila interrupted. "Heh, kidding, kidding, I'm
sure your moms are fine, upstanding, socially responsible individuals. I just couldn't resist the
reference. See what I did there?"

I cleared my throat and continued. "We need to get it out of there so Lila can have her body back. To
do that, you yahoos need to do exactly as I tell you. I know you're all crazy about Miss Don't Sell
that Cow, so I don't wanna hear any lip from you, capische?" I shook Old Betsy for emphasis. Their
questions satisfied for now, the gang took their designated spots.

"Um, I don't want to be a bother," commented Sheena, "But it looks like we're missing people."

"I'm sure they'll be here any minute now," Eugene said brightly.

For once, his words were born out without disaster ensuing. Phoebe descended carrying Gerald,
whose hood had been blown off his head by the wind.

"Bwah hah ha! Look everyone! Gerald's BALD!" brayed Harold, as the collective kids laughed.

"Aw, man, eleven years as the definition of cool down the drain."

"I think it looks nice, cutie," Phoebe assured, squeezing him and rubbing his head. The two took
their spots on the zodiac next to me.
The Packard was next to arrive, bearing Arnold, Nadine, and the Lila-possessed Madame Blanche. Nadine immediately began fussing over Rhonda's broken arm, Rhonda assuring her that it wasn't that bad and it only hurt when she breathed or moved in any way.

"Great, just in time." I said. "Lila, take your spot."

"But that's that old Gypsy woman! Lila's lying over there…. Or is she? Aw, you're confusing me!" complained Harold. I rolled my eyes and choked back a snarky response. I just didn't have it in me today.

There's just one symbol unaccounted for, I mused. The broken glasses. Who could those possibly represent? As I pondered the answer, I became aware of a wheezing noise behind me, one I'd heard hundreds of times. My fist began to snap back of its own accord, a reflex action more then anything, as I anticipated the sensation of knuckles hitting nose and the sound of…

…breaking glasses.

Oh. Doi. I willed myself to stop. "Brainy. You're up. Take your spot."

"Uhhhhhh okay," he wheezed, taking a puff off his inhaler for courage.

"Okay, now, we all have to hold hands!"

"What?!" Harold snapped. "I am NOT holding Sid's hand! Who knows where it's been?!"

"Yeah, well, maybe I don't wanna hold YOUR hand!" Sid shot back. "I've seen you eat your own boogers!"

"Aw, that was like three times!"

"Pinkboy… dicknose… don't make me come over there or-" I cut myself off when Bill/Lila suddenly started laughing. "Hey! Idiots! She's about to-"

The cables holding her suddenly snapped. "Ha! Looks like they don't make 'em like they used to!" She slowly, disjointedly got to her feet, most likely just for the Uncanny Valley effect. Boy, was it working.

"Do! It! NOW!" I demanded, grabbing Arnold and Gerald's hands. A weird glow suddenly enveloped us, spreading to Lila/Madame Blanche and Phoebe as they took Arnold and Gerald's respective free hands. The sight of actual magic taking place shut all the naysayers up as they joined the human circle.

"Knew you'd fall for me one day, baby," Curly remarked as Rhonda took his hand.

"Don't read too much into this, Thaddeus," Rhonda dismissed. "This is to save the universe."

"It's a start," he said. Rhonda rolled her eyes.

Heh. He's never gonna give up, is he. Even with Rhonda switching teams.

When the last two hands linked, the glow suddenly brightened tenfold yet, somehow, was not painful to my eyes. Beams shot from each of us towards Lila's body, freezing it in place, her eyes glowing a bright white. An ethereal triangular figure, with a single eye, a top hat, and a cane was forced out of it.

"NO!" the entity shrieked. "I WORKED HARD FOR THAT BODY! I'M NOT
"Don't let go!" I shouted. "We've got him! Now it's all up to Dr. Pines!"

The eccentric scientist strolled forward, a leather bound book in his hands, its cover adorned with a golden six-fingered hand shape marked with the number 4. "Omni Veritas…" he intoned, "Lorem Ipsum… Gibberishus Latinus…" A vortex formed above the entity, beginning to draw it in. "Textus Fillerus… Sdrow Desrever, Sdrow Desrever, Sdrow Desrever, Sdrow Desrever…"

"NOOOOOO! I WAS SO CLOSE!" He was pulled in, shouting "THE MEDIA IS LYING TO YOU! PHYSICS IS A MYTH! INVEST IN coin!"

He vanished into the swirling vortex as it closed behind him, leaving the sky as clear as a chilly late December day could be. Lila's empty body collapsed, puppet strings forever cut.

"Okay," Harold finally said. "Could someone tell me WHAT THE HECK JUST HAPPENED?"

"We won, Tubbo."

"Ah hate to put a damper on things, fellers," Stinky commented. "But Lila don't look so hot. I'm afeared that this here's one of them Pyrrhic victories."

How the heck does he know "Pyrrhic" but not "eccentric?" Stinky truly is a mystery.

Suddenly, Madame Blanche sagged between Brainy and Arnold. "Uggh," she said, righting herself. "I never wanna do that again. And I'm not old!" She slapped Harold and stormed.

"Ow…. Madame fortress mommy…" he muttered.

On the pavement, Lila's body began to stir. Slowly, a lot more naturally than Bill had made it, it began to sit up, groaning.

"Lila?" asked Arnold.

"I feel…. Ever so sore…" she replied weakly.

"Yep. That's Lila."

"Sorry," apologized Rhonda. "We, uh… had to get a little more rough than we wanted."

"That's all right," she admitted. "You did what you had to to save the city. I can't exactly blame you for it."

"Jeez Louise, you don't have to be a saint about it," I retorted. Back in her body one minute and already she was irritating me. But then…. It wasn't her fault, was it. It was mine. "Look…. I'm sorry I snapped at you. I'm gonna try to be more civil with you from now on, okay? And, maybe… like, not right now, but someday, we could be… you know…." "Friends?"

"It hurts hearing it come out of your mouth. But… yeah. I guess friends, kinda… eventually…"

"Oh, that would be ever-so-lovely!" she said, immediately glomping me.

"AWP! Forget it! Forget I said anything! Criminy, why does everyone wanna hug me!"
"Because you're a cutie!" Olga squealed, joining in.

"I'm in hell. I'm in hell. I'm in hell." I repeated to myself. "Jeez, at least clean the lipstick off your face first, Lila!"

"Hmm?" She felt her face. "Oh dear. Does anyone have a makeup wipe?"

"Lila, no one is going to have a-" Lori immediately produced one.

"What?" she asked. "Doesn't everyone carry these?"

Eventually, the gang dispersed, after everyone, especially those idiots from the 7th grade, was sworn to utter secrecy about the events of the day, under pain of my fists. Wolfgang had actually tried to hit on me. Why did everyone suddenly find me attractive now? I am physically a literal alien monster.

Phoebe and Lila had returned to MDI, and Rhonda had gone with them to get her arm more professionally tended to. The rest had gone their own ways, leaving only me and Arnold.

"Well," I said to Stanford, "I guess you'll be hittin' the ol' dusty trail now…"

He regarded me with what were clearly science eyes. "Hmm," he said. "There's something familiar about you four. Is there anyone who's been studying your changes?"

Right up front like that, huh. He wants to know what makes us tick. Well, I do admire bluntness. "The person you want is Dr. Stella Shortman. Arnold can put you in touch with her, seeing as she's his mom."

Stanford's eyebrow raised. "The same Stella Shortman that found the cure to the Green-Eyed Tribe of San Lorenzo's sleeping sickness?"

"Her and her husband, yeah. She's working over at MDI in the Corporate District."

"I'd really like to have a look at her notes. If her findings support my theory, we might be able to collaborate on a way to manage your mutations."

"Manage?" Arnold asked. "Like… a cure?"

"Perhaps… or at least a way to have you blend back into society. It must be rather difficult having to limit your exposure to the public."

"Yeah… It kinda is," I admitted. I'd pretty much put the notion of a possible "cure" for my condition out of my mind. It seemed unlikely, and the fact was, I liked being what I was.

But it wasn't just me, was it. I couldn't speak for my friends. I certainly couldn't speak for Lila, who'd had her new form forced upon her by me.

And… I had to admit it…. I was getting sick of being cooped up in the boarding house, unable to leave without a disguise. If it was a choice between that and losing my powers, well… it had been a good run.

"Good luck," I said. "I hope you find it."

Interlude

By the time they had finally managed to sneak their way through the police barricade, everyone was gone.
"I am starting to think stopping for a soft pretzel was a bad idea, Lincoln," Douglas Cain admitted.

"Gee, Cain, you know how cranky you get on an empty stomach," the slow-witted cameraman reminded.

"That is true. At least we have the footage from the store. That should be enough to start with."

"Oh, yes, I have it right here, Cain." Lincoln folded the camera's viewing screen out and began playback.

"Lincoln?" Douglas asked.

"Yes, Cain?"

"What is that large, pink, blurry, hand-shaped thing filling the entire screen?"

"Why, I believe that would be my hand, Cain."

"And is it there for the entirety of the footage, Lincoln?"

"I…. I think so, Cain."

Douglas buried his face in his hands. "I suppose it was my fault for expecting you not to disappoint me… No matter. I will find out who those creatures are, and I will expose them to the general public."

"Yes! Wait, no, no…. aren't they underage?"

"Metaphorically, you imbecile. Now, come, Lincoln, we must prepare for tomorrow night."

"Why, Cain, what are we going to do tomorrow night?"

"The same thing we do every night, Lincoln… try to take over the world… of Internet journalism!"
Rhonda on the Couch

Chapter Summary

In which Rhonda faces her guilt and our final villain is revealed.

A.N.: Maybe some trigger warnings for the nightmare portion.

Chapter 41

Rhonda on the Couch (Remix)

She laid there on the marble floor, blood gushing from her mortal injury. It seemed unending, spreading in a pool around her. The scene around her was a frozen tableau, bystanders immobilized in place like accusatory statues. Her assailant, the only other person mobile, strolled forward, gun at ready, feet stepping into the ever-growing pool, which now contained far more blood than a human body should. And still it grew.

"Why," she sobbed, attempting to pull the shard of metal out of her chest. The razor-sharp edges cut into the flesh of her hands. The blood was now a torrent, flooding the foyer, an inch deep and rising. The statue-still forms of her friends began to sink into the blood. "We were…"

"Friends?" the assailant said, coldly, removing her mask. "Did you think that meant anything to me, you insignificant peasant? You have simply proven useful to me, up until this moment. Now you're worth more to me dead than alive."

Something imperceptible shifted. The figure bleeding to death on the floor was no longer a demure redhead with twin Pippi Longstocking braids, but a scowling blonde girl with a prominent unibrow and pigtails that stuck out at sharp angles to her head. "To think I was starting to think of you as someone I could care about. Guess I was an idiot, huh? You'll never be anything but a selfish, unfeeling bitch."

"Feelings are for lesser beings. Like you." She raised the gun, aiming it at the girl's head. Reality had shifted again, her victim now a petite, bespectacled Eurasian girl.

"And what does that make you? Superior?" she asked, looking back with contempt.

"Clearly," she said. "Someone has to be, I might as well claim the title. But, you know, it wasn't easy. Sacrifices did have to be made… which I thank you for. I suppose without you, I would have no human connection to purge myself of to take my final step to godhood. You understand, don't you?"

The face she aimed at was now dark-skinned, with golden braids and a look of betrayal. "I loved you," she said.

"That's why you have to die," she answered. But not to any of the four previous victims.

For the face of her victim had shifted, one last time. Now… it was the face of a young girl with short black hair.
I awoke drenched in sweat.

I was still having these dreams. Even with Lila freed from Bill's influence, my sleep was still plagued. They weren't quite the same as they used to be, but the core remained. I was the monster in my own nightmares.

After trying in vain to fall asleep again for a good hour (the itching under my temporary cast didn't help; at least I'd hopefully be getting that off later today), I spent the next attempting to find something on TV that might lull me back to sleep, but nothing was obliging. Restless, I finally gave up and wandered downstairs. Big mistake; This late at night, this place was even more imposing and empty, and I felt even more alone with my thoughts than I would've been in my room.

I finally gave in and called Helga's cell, hoping she wouldn't be too irritated.

"This better be good, Lloyd," she grumbled.

"I'm having nightmares where I murder myself," I said.

"…okay, you have my attention," she replied.

I proceeded to describe the nightmares I'd been having since the party, and how I thought they'd be over but now they were just getting worse. She listened, or maybe she'd just fallen asleep on the phone, either way, she remained silent until I was done.

"Huh," she finally said when I was done.

"Is that it?" I asked?

"Well, what did you expect me to say? I'm not a psychologist."

"Yeah, I know, I know, I just… I thought maybe you'd have some insight."

"Well… If I had to guess, you're still feeling lingering guilt over what happened to Lila."

"I know that much," I responded, "but that doesn't explain why the dream suddenly changed. Used to be I was just killing Lila as a sacrifice to the god of popularity, but this time, it was like I was… I don't know what."

"Well, like I said, I don't really have answers, but I can give you the number of someone who's helped me a lot."

"What, like a therapist?"

"I know, right? But Helga, you're so calm and well-adjusted! How could you possibly be in therapy? Look, she's smart, understanding, nonjudgemental, and a big plus is she's familiar with our whole situation. Trust me, I wouldn't recommend her if she couldn't help you."

"Thanks, Helga. And… this must have been really hard to share with me."

"Honestly… no. I don't know what it is, but… I feel like I can tell you just about anything. Which is
crazy because a month ago I wouldn't trust you with my library card, forget about my innermost
secrets."

"Really… why do you trust me so much?"

"If I had to pick a reason? It's probably because you came out to me. For you to put that much trust
in me… well, you certainly deserve mine."

"Um…. Wow. Again. Thanks. I'm… I'm really glad to have you as a friend. I mean that."

"Jeez, shut up, Princess. I don't need you getting all mushy on me."

--

And that was how, later that day, I found myself in the office of one Dr. Kate Bliss, child
psychologist.

Bliss, for her part, seemed utterly unphased at my alien appearance (to be expected, really, since
Helga had mentioned talking to her recently).

"So, Helga recommended me?" she asked as I took my place on her couch.

"She spoke very highly of you," I answered, trying to find a way to get comfortable. "She said you
pretty much kept her sane all these years. My family… we really don't do therapy, but I really need
to talk to someone, and Helga says you're the best."

"Well, with that kind of buildup, hopefully I won't prove too much of a disappointment," she replied
self-deprecatingly. "Since this is our first session, why don't you start out telling me a bit about
yourself."

"Well, all right. My name is Rhonda Wellington Lloyd. My father is an independently wealthy
investor and my mother's an ex-supermodel. My family's been one of the major names in Hillwood
society for over a century. There's a ton of things in and around the city named after us… a hospital
wing, a college dorm, an art gallery…"

"Stop. You're telling me about your family. I want to know about you."

"Well, my family name is kind of a big part of who I am."

"I can understand feeling that way. Family can create expectations of who we think we are. For good
or bad, family can be a big factor in shaping our personalities, to the point where it can almost feel
like we're being forced into a shape we never wanted to be. Do you ever feel that way?"

"…sometimes, I guess."

"Hmm. Well, how about let's try to start a different way. Instead of telling me who Rhonda Lloyd is,
tell me who Rhonda Lloyd thinks she is."

Geez, why not give me a tough one, Doc. Who did I think I was?

"Well… for a long time, I guess I thought of myself as 'the rich girl'."

"Is that no longer something you think of yourself?"

"I… guess I don't."

"Mmm-hmmm… when did you stop thinking of yourself that way, if you don't mind me asking?"
"If I had to put an exact point on it… there was this period where a computer error at my dad's broker completely wiped out our savings. We did get it back, but for about a week, we were completely broke. I'm ashamed to say I didn't take it well at all. It was as if I didn't even know who I was anymore. Being the Rich Girl was such an intrinsic part of my identity that without it, I felt like I meant nothing."

"Self-identity can be very important, especially at a young age. It must have been a very painful blow to your emotional well-being to have your identity thrown into question the way it was."

"It was, but I was very lucky to have someone there to pull me out of my spiral and show me there was more to me than the clothing I wore or the parties I threw."

"Sounds like you have a lot to be grateful to that individual for."

"Yeah… I do. It made it a lot easier to deal with the next time I had a crisis about identity… this time about my sexuality."

"Would you like to talk about that?"

"Not… really? All this is stuff I dealt with a long time ago. I've spent a lot of time on improving myself, accepting my bisexuality… even dealing with my metamorphosis. I've pretty much adjusted to all of that on my own. I'm here because of the nightmares."

"Why don't you tell me about those, then."

And I did, in great detail, being sure to give her full background on the context of what had been happening. For her part, Dr. Bliss was nothing but professional, not showing much of a reaction to my stories of demons and possession and other outlandish occurrences.

"I guess you don't have a lot of sessions like this one, do you?" I commented.

"Well, not until recently," she admitted, smiling. "You're in all the papers, you know."

"I know," I acknowledged. "They got my superhero name wrong. It's Joule, as in the measurement of electricity, not Jewel as in jewelry. I have a feeling that's going to be a whole stupid thing."

"You like getting attention, don't you."

"Yeah, I do. I always have."

"There's nothing wrong with that, you know. Some people do thrive in the spotlight."

"It's wrong if my obsessive need for attention gets my friends hurt, disfigured, possessed…"

"That's the gist of this, then, isn't it. You blame yourself for what happened to Lila."

"Of course I do! Who else would be to blame for it? The only reason any of this even happened is because she showed up to my stupid little party!"

"That seems like a stretch to me. There's no way you could have predicted a mercenary strike force… or a demon."

"Why not? That's the kind of thing that happens to me now! Why shouldn't I have taken this into account?"

"Rhonda… I want you to consider something. If I have this straight… you believe your narcissistic
tendencies are what led to all the terrible things that happened to Lila, correct?"

"Yeah… that's right."

"Well, think about this: isn't it equally narcissistic of you to assume that you're the sole cause of everything wrong that happened to your friend?"

I started to respond, but held my tongue.

"Contrary to the dreams you've been having… you're not the one who pulled that trigger. In fact, you did everything you could, up to and including offering yourself up as a sacrifice. You acted the exact opposite of selfish, Rhonda."

"That's what people keep telling me, but… I just can't shake the feeling that everything is all my fault."

"Yes, you can't… to the point where you can't sleep at night do to the worry that your actions may have hurt someone. Think about that, Rhonda… your nights have been spent wracked with guilt over the possibility that you might've harmed someone. As a psychiatrist, I have studied narcissistic and sociopathic behavior. If you were as selfish as you believe yourself to be, you would not be losing a minute of sleep over your actions. It's clear to me that you do care about your friends, deeply. Don't tell yourself otherwise, because that's simply self-delusion."

"But."

"You can't blame yourself for everything bad that happens. Sometimes, things just happen, and they're out of your control."

"B-but I…"

Deep down, you know I'm right. Now… have you spoken to Lila about this?"

"I, uh… not really. I don't think I've exchanged more than two sentences with her. Frankly… I'm kind of scared of what she's going to say to me."

"You're not going to get closure until you confront what happened, and that means confronting her. This is something you need to do, as much for yourself as for her."

"But what if she hates me?"

"Maybe she will… I can't tell you otherwise. But you'll never know how she feels until you talk to her."

She was right, of course, as much as I hated to acknowledge it. I was going to have to face up to Lila sooner or later, and it was better to get it over with. Maybe she'd tell me off, maybe she'd demand that I never bother her again. But would that really be worse than hiding from her the rest of my life?

Besides, I kind of had to go back there today anyway to get my arm checked.

"Okay… I'm going to do it."

"In the long run, I think you'll be glad you did."

"So, um… I guess you're going to send my folks a bill for the session?"

"Actually, you don't have to worry about payment. My services are free for all PS118 students. In
"Thanks. I'm probably going to take you up on that."

MDI

"Well, good news," Dr. Shortman announced. "Looks like your arm is recovered to the point where I can take the cast off. Now, I want you to try not to overdo it, but there's no reason you shouldn't be able to use your arm normally from now on."

"Thank you, Doctor," I said, as she began removing it.

"It's no trouble at all. Believe me, I wish all injuries healed as fast as yours did."

"By the way… how's Lila doing?"

"She's actually a lot better, considering what's happened to her. If you need to talk to her, she likes to hang out in the hydroponic lab. That's 3808."

"Thanks. Yeah, I, uh, kinda need to see her."

The hydroponic lab was a large room lined with special panels designed to simulate solar light. Some of the plants grown here were used in the building's cafeteria.

I found Lila seated on a bench between a row of lettuce plants and a row of root vegetables. She looked really good. She wore a green sleeveless blouse and khaki slacks, and her hair had been done in a single long braid down her back. She was engrossed in a copy of The Golden One, the latest popular young-adult fantasy novel. It was all about a teen who learned about her alien heritage when her skin suddenly turned gold.

I cleared my throat as I approached. "Nice place," I commented, grateful for an excuse to break the ice.

"Having all these plants around kind of makes me feel like I'm back on the farm. It's very relaxing."

There. We were speaking. This was easy. Just keep it light and maybe we could even get out of this without things getting awkward.

"I like the braid."

"Oh, thank you. Suzie did it for me. I've actually been thinking of changing my look for a while now. Perhaps not this drastically, but.. I suppose if this is what God intended me to be, I'm hardly one to argue."

Oh crap. Subject change! "So, The Golden One, huh? How is that? I've been thinking about reading it."

She looked up, the expression on her face suggesting that she hadn't expected to see me at all. "Why, yes, actually," she said. "Helga recommended it. It's been ever-so-compelling. I've been unable to put it down, to be perfectly honest. I… suppose I find it relatable. Especially now, being… different like I am."

Of course. All roads led back to the elephant in the room. There was no avoiding the obvious, no matter how much I tried to skirt around it. I was going to have to address it head-on.
"Yeah, about that… look, I understand if you're mad at me because of this. The last thing I ever wanted was for anything to happen to you. It's… okay if you don't want to have anything to do with me anymore because of it… I just want you to know that I'm sorry about everything."

"Sorry?" She smiled. "Rhonda, do you think I blame you for this?"

"I… kind of did, yes. If you hadn't come to the party I threw, if you hadn't stayed afterward, you never would've been hurt, changed, possessed…"

"Oh, Rhonda… you have it oh-so-wrong. I don't blame you for anything. I was shot because an evil person shot me. I was changed because Helga saved my life. And I was possessed because a demon took advantage of my trauma and naivete. None of that was your fault. None."

"You… don't hate me?"

"Of course not! You've never been anything but a good friend to me. Actually… I thought you were mad at me. "

"What? Why would you think that?"

'Well, you've been avoiding me. I thought it was because of… well, what happened while Bill was possessing me. I was worried he might've done something to hurt you, somehow."

I flashed back to Bill forcing Lila's lips on me while Nadine watched, the look on her face as her heart broke, Bill twisting Lila's lips into a cruel grin.

"That wasn't your fault," I said.

"So I did do something. What was it?"

"You don't need to know. It's not like I blame you for it…"

"Tell me. I need to know what he did."

I took a deep breath. "Are you really sure?"

"It'd help me sleep at night."

I raised my eyebrow at that. Here I was, thinking that I was the only one suffering guilt-ridden, sleepless nights. Lila'd been having it just as bad as me. No, worse; she'd been the one used.

"Well… like I said, I'd been feeling really bad about what had happened to you, and I was going through a guilt spiral. Nadine helped pull me out of it, and, we, uh… we spent the night together."

Lila blushed. "Oh my…"

"No, nothing like that, we just sorta… cuddled on the couch. It was…" I felt myself blushing in turn. "...nice. I still had nightmares, but when I woke up, she was there holding me, and it was… you know… nice."

"So… are you two a couple now? That's ever-so-sweet!"

"Yeah, well, that's… kind of where you come in. It was yesterday morning. You show up on my doorstep, seemingly normal, but suddenly confessing feelings for me. I'm a little surprised, but I figure that you've had to reevaluate some things in your life. In any case, two days before I would've jumped at the chance, but I'd just discovered that I had feelings for Nadine and I was really invested
in making things work with her, so I let you down gently, and you seemed okay with it, until Nadine walked into the room and you suddenly shoved your tongue down my throat in full view. Of course, Nadine sees this, just as Bill planned, and runs out of there, heartbroken."

Lila looked crestfallen. "I did that to you?"

"Not you, Bill. I don't blame you for anything."

"But I'm the one who gave him control of my body! Everything he did is-"

"You were tricked. You can't..." Dr. Bliss's words were echoing in my memory. "You can't blame yourself for everything bad that happens. Sometimes... sometimes things just happen, and they're beyond your control."

"I... I guess. Are you and Nadine..."

"Yes, everything's fine. We talked it out and everything's okay now. We're still together."

"That's good. I'm very happy for both of you. I... hope I can find someone who'll accept me the way she accepts you."

"I'm sure you will. You're easily the cutest alien mutant alive."

Lila's cheeks went forest-green. "Gosh... I, um..." She began to play with her braid nervously.

"Trust me on this. There's someone for you, and if they're the right person, they won't care that you have more than the normal number of hands or eyes. Helga has someone, Phoebe has someone, I have someone... you will too."

"I hope you're right," she said. "Thank you." She impulsively hugged me.

"No," I said. "Thank you."

--

That night, both Rhonda and Lila would sleep soundly.

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Interlude

Beneath Elk Island

Thirty hours ago, they had released the Old Man from the hyperbaric sleep chamber.

Twenty-eight hours ago, once they'd determined he was ready, they administered an injection of the alien blood donated by the possessed Lila Sawyer.

Twenty-seven hours ago, the metamorphosis had begun.

Over the next day, the Old Man had screamed in agony as the virus tore through his body, cell by cell, forcefully restructuring them one by one. Failing organs were rebuilt, rejuvenated, brittle, aged bones restored, withered muscles repaired. New organs and limbs were forged. Milky, blind eyes took on vibrant life once again.

Now, as the pain of rebirth finally faded, he breathed deeply, his three perfect lungs drawing breath easily on their own, unassisted.

"Feels good to be alive, don't it," he said to the scientist that had attended his transformation. He gave his two pairs of knuckles a good crack.
Doctor (well, once, before her license had been revoked for her unethical practices, forcing her to
take this rather less-than-legitimate position) Loretta Galway regarded her patient. The withered old
revenant was gone. The creature that he had become stood nearly seven hulking feet tall, built like a
Mack truck, huge muscles rippling beneath his blue-gray skin, head crowned with a mane of long
black hair and large, curving horns, back adorned with massive leathery wings, long sinewy tail
trailing.

She had restored a man not just at the door of death, but one who should have long since stepped
through had he not clung to the post tenaciously. She had brought him back to his prime, youthful,
unblemished; what's more, she had given him potential immortality. True, there were some minor
anomalous readings in her scans, but they would probably sort themselves out soon enough. Then,
she would give herself the treatment, and together, they would be King and Queen of a new race.

"How do you feel," she asked her perfect creation.

"Like a new man," he said, flexing his multiple arms. "You do good, work, dollface."

Doctor Galway blushed at the nickname. She already had visions of their future together. "Just
think… as soon as I give myself the injection, the two of us can have eternity."

"Yeah, about that… change of plans. See, I was thinkin' that competition is bad for business." He
began to approach the counter, which held the second vial of Lila Sawyer's blood.

"But… darling… I don't want to compete with you… I want to be your bride!"

"That's what the chicks all say, up until they see the opportunity to stab you in the back. You
wouldn't be the first moll to turn on me, see? So, don't be too shocked that I ain't givin' you the
opportunity."

As his three amber eyes shifted to cherry-red, blistering energy beams lanced out of them and struck
the vial, obliterating it and any hopes Loretta had for the future with her patient. "Nothin' personal, ya
understand," he said. "I'm feelin' real grateful for the new lease on life you've given an old
gangster… just not grateful enough to share godlike power with you." He began to stride out of the
room.

"Where are you going?" Loretta Galway asked, still in shock over the unraveling of her plans for the
future.

"To find me a tailor. It's time for Wheezin' Ed to take back his city… and he can't do that naked,
now, can he?"
Chapter 42

Well, This Stinks

-HELGA-

The week after the fight with Bill passed by in sort of a blur. There was simply not much going on. Mom was stuck home with repairs going on at Budnick's, so she was really turning up the pressure on the mother-daughter bonding thing. And while a part of me actually liked spending time with her, my independent side was beginning to bristle at her constant presence.

New Year's Day came and went. Princess decided to forgo her annual party, still skittish over having a lot of people over after the disastrous end to her Christmas soiree. And so, the decision had been made to have a small get-together on the roof of the Boarding House. Just the Shortmans, the Patakis minus Bob, the boarders, Phoebe and Gerald, Rhonda and Nadine, and Lila. Olga had invited her friend Deb, but she'd elected to stay with her sister instead. Lila brought her dad, and her dad had brought Suzie, leading to some entertaining awkwardness when Oskar was forced into close quarters with his ex's new boyfriend. It was a low key event, just a bunch of friends hanging out, staying up late, stuffing our faces, dancing to old music and watching the ball drop atop Big Barney at midnight.

"Happy 2018, Football-head," I said as the ball landed.

"Happy 2018, Pink Angel," he replied, as we shared our first kiss of the year along with the other couples.

Pink Angel, huh.

I could get used to that…

--

With the holiday break ending and school starting again, Rhonda, Phoebe and I found ourselves seeing less of our significant others and spending more time in each other's company. We continued to make appearances in our superhero identities, sometimes alone, sometimes partnering up.

News of our exploits was definitely spreading, and thanks to one Douglas Cain, not all of it was favorable. His continued crusade against "monster girls" was spreading across social media everywhere, casting our exploits in the worst light possible.

At the moment, the two of us were chilling on the roof of the movie theater after an unproductive sky patrol. "Have you seen this drivel?" Rhonda asked, sending me a link to Cain's latest "scoop". I loaded it up on my visor-screen. It was an interview with that upper-class twit I'd busted at H&B Photo on my first night as Temper. His lawyers had gotten him off, obviously one of the perks of upper-class-twitdom. Now, here he was lying his ass off to Mr. Fake News himself, sitting in a wheelchair, his neck in a fake brace.
"Mr. Collingsworth," Cain began, "Can you tell me about your encounter with the creature calling itself 'Temper'?

The twit choked back crocodile tears. "I… I'm sorry, it's just… it was such a traumatic experience. The mere thought of it sends chills down my spine… that is, if I could still feel my spine…"

"That lying little weasel," I muttered. "I didn't even lay a finger on him."

"Please, Mr. Collingsworth, your story needs to be told. The public needs to know about the kind of horrors these monsters are capable of inflicting."

"Very well" he stammered in his phony Hugh Grant sincerity voice (okay, fine, I may have watched a rom-com or two in my day, I'm not entirely made of stone). "I was merely minding my own business one evening at H&B Photo…"

"You were the lookout for a robbery!"

"…when suddenly, this pink demon comes screaming out of the sky. She… she was quite the brute, Mr. Cain. She shattered my legs and spine with a single blow, laughing all the while. I… I am lucky to be alive. Though, sometimes the pain becomes so intense, I wish she had killed me."

"A chilling, chilling tale. Thank you, Mr. Collingsworth, for coming forward. Your suffering will not be in vain if it leads to ridding the streets of these monsters."

"Anything to help, Mr. Cain. I simply hope that no others suffer as I have."

"Criminy… 'suffering', he says. If he's suffered so much as a stubbed toe, then I'm the Pigeon Man."

"I told you," Rhonda said. "This guy's dragging our names through the mud."

"Maybe one of us should drag him through the mud. Oooh, better yet. We grab him and dangle him by the ankles over a busy intersection for, say, an hour or so? I think that'll do the job."

"I dunno, that seems like it'd be… counter-productive."

"Jeez, you sound like Football-Head."

"I think it'd be a big mistake to sink to his level," replied Rhonda in a perfect imitation of Arnold's cadence. "'You need to be positive and show everyone you're not the monsters people think you are. Trust me, if you think about it, you'll know the right thing to do.'" We both dissolved into giggles.

"That's him all right." I said

"Seriously, though, the thing is he's almost always right."

"Yeah, I know," I acknowledged reluctantly.

"And, admit it… you wouldn't have him any other way, would you."

I sighed deeply. "…yeah… I know." Sure, I joked about "Dark Arnold" but I wasn't sure that the thought of him as a bad boy really held much appeal for me. I was the bad one in our relationship. I didn't want to drag him down to my level. Not really. "So, what's your plan there, Princess? Do you have anything better than the dangling?"

"What we need is some positive PR. And I think that might mean actually going to the public."
"PR? You mean like… going on TV and crap? Because that would be crazy."

"My dad knows the owner of KHWD. I'm pretty sure he could get us on the air to tell our side of the story."

"…you're serious. You're actually serious about this."

"If the public could see us as real people instead of just monstrous boogeymen, maybe they'd accept us."

"…sheesh. You really are channeling your inner Arnold today, Rondaloid. The public is panicky, stupid, and eager to believe the worst about everyone else because it lets them ignore their own crappiness as human beings. You're naïve if you think that trying to appeal to their better nature is a good idea."

"I'm not hearing any better ideas, Helga."

"I'm still partial to the dangling."

"I'm not hearing any constructive ideas."

I groaned. "Fine… we'll try it your way. But if that doesn't work, I vote dangling."

"…okay, deal," Rhonda replied. "Let nobody say that I can't compromise."

"Admit it," I said, elbowing her. "You secretly want to do it as much as I do."

"Of course I do, I just don't think it'll really accomplish anything other than making him even more determined to ruin us."

I hated it when someone shoved incontrovertible logic in my face like that. Deep down, I knew that threatening Cain would get me nowhere, but… it would be sooooo satisfying…

"Okay, so I guess you're gonna make arrangements for the TV thing… until then, I declare tonight officially a bust."

"It has been rather slow these last few days, hasn't it… maybe the bad guys are just as scared of us as everyone else?"

"That could be it, but somehow I doubt that we're that lucky. It feels like we're on the cusp of something big going down. 'Til then, I'm not gonna begrudge myself some free downtime." As if on cue, I felt my stomachs grumble. "Wanna hit up El Patio? I know the head chef and I'm fairly confident I could get him to comp us a couple of burritos."

"Sure, why n- wait, scratch that. I think we might just be able to salvage something from this night after all." She pointed to several people accessing a manhole near the bank. "I don't think those guys are engaged in legitimate sewer maintenance."

I nodded. "The city would've cordoned off the area. I think what we have here is an old-fashioned bank job."

--

The two of us swooped down after the mystery individuals. Rhonda shuddered as I raised the manhole cover. "The sewers. Why'd it have to be the sewers."

"Can't take the stink, Princess?" I teased. Right. Like I really wanted to go down there myself. I'm
such a hypocrite.

She sighed. "If I can take sleeping in dirt and bugs for a week-plus, I suppose this won't be so bad." She jumped down, and I heard a gross, squishy sound as her feet hit the bottom. "Eww. I was wrong. I was horribly, horribly wrong," she moaned.

Though the prospect of landing in the collective eliminations of the entirety of Hillwood held no more appeal to me than it did moments ago, I could hardly let myself be shown up by someone as squeamish and girly as Rhonda, could I? After all, I was supposed to be the baddest bitch in PS118. What's a little poo to the likes of me? And so, I jumped down, my nose immediately assaulted by a stink worse than Harold after a week without a shower. My boots sank into an inch of unidentified sludge and I hoped that Olga hadn't been exaggerating when she said that the suit practically cleaned itself.

"C'mon, Lloyd," I advised, masking my own disgust. "it's just poop. It won't kill you."

"It's trying its damnedest," she shot back, revulsed.

"Get over it. There's nothing down here to be afr-"

That's when something small and furry ran past my foot.

Followed by another something. Then dozens more somethings.

My need to show up Rhonda instantly evaporated as the rodents rushed by. My brain told me they were probably scared off in our direction by the heist crew, but my hearts didn't particularly care and decided that what I would be doing would be screaming in gut-wrenching horror and clinging to Rhonda as tightly as I could until the tiny little monsters were gone.

"I, uh… I don't like rats," I admitted as I finally returned to my senses. Rhonda, to her credit, didn't say a word. I decided that I would not be teasing her any further that night, not after that display. "You think they heard that?"

"Probably. I think we'd better move if we want to catch them before they clear out."

"Easier said than done. These sewers are probably like a maze. Good luck finding anyth--"

"Bridgi, I need a map of the sewer system in the vicinity of the Citizen's Bank of Hillwood."

"Displaying," the simulated voice, based on Bridget's, replied.

"Now highlight most convenient access points for previously mentioned bank."

"Highlighting. Most likely access point displayed in red."

"There we go." She sent the map to my own visor. "It pays to read the manual."

"Showoff." Between this and my reaction earlier, this was not my night.

"It's not a competition. You've shown me up plenty of times."

"I guess. Still… if you tell anyone about what I just did…"

"…skinned alive, limbs torn off, strangled with own guts, soul devoured, yadda yadda yadda, I know the drill."
"Good. Glad we have an understanding."

--

If the perps had heard my outburst earlier, apparently they'd chosen to ignore it, since they were still tunneling their way into the vault.

-Wow. Old school.- Rhonda thought-talked as we approached.

-I don't think they were expecting any company. It looks like they're not packing a lot of weapons.-

-Then this should be easy. Just go in and give 'em a mild zap…-

-No!-

-What? Why?-

-Because sometimes I pay attention in Mr. Frank's science class. We're in a sewer, Princess. Sewers are full of poo, and when poo breaks down, it releases methane. And methane…-

-…is highly combustible. Yeah, I listen in science class sometimes too. So, no fire, and no electricity. Lovely.-

-It just means we have to get in close. It's not like these guys'll put up too much of a fight anyway.-

There were eight of them. I recognized two, one a heavyset, slumpshouldered bruiser with stubbly jowls and thinning hair, the other a weasely little guy with a big, pointy nose and a shock of messy brown hair. They'd been there the day the two of us had been part of the group that went to Elk Island to search for Wheezin' Ed. Well, it looked like the phony Ed and Some Other Guy had gotten more ambitious in their criminal enterprises.

One of them, a rather generic-looking thug, was stationed at the junction. While he was clearly supposed to be serving as lookout, he was instead engrossed in a handheld video game.

"Psst," I whispered. "That boss's weak point is its tail."

"Oh, thanks, I was having troub-" Suddenly realizing I wasn't one of his gang, his head jerked up just in time for me to thump him on the head. "I'm keeping this," I said, taking his handheld, thanking the Fates that Bridget had remembered to give our suits pockets.

The two of us approached the remaining seven guys tunneling in, our footsteps drowned out by the noise. "Hey!" I called out.

Fake Wheezin' Ed shut down his drill but didn't bother turning his head. "I don't wanna hear how bored you are, Chunks, you stay on lookout. We gotta get this done or the Demon's gonna be pissed, and you do NOT wanna have the Demon get pissed."

"I'm afraid 'Chunks' has decided to take a nap," Rhonda supplied. The feminine voice finally made the gang turn and look.

"Ohhh crap," the weasely one squeaked. "It's them monster girls what Doug Cain's been talkin' about!"

"I'm out!" Another one added, hefting his kit bag and looking frantically for an exit. "I heard they eat people! I ain't getting' paid enough for that!" Two others agreed and bolted for it.

"Okay, this is getting out of control!" Rhonda protested. "We do NOT eat people!"
"...if they cooperate," I added.

"Temper, what are you-"

-Play along.- "We'll spare you if you come quietly and tell us what you know. So... who's the Demon?"

The four remaining conscious baddies looked nervously at each other.

"No dice," the big one said.

"But boss," the weasely one whined, "I don't wanna get ate!

"Getting' ate's nothin' compared to what the Demon would do to us! You heard what happened to Johnny Tracksuit! They still ain't found his head! Folks say he ripped it clean off his body and kicked it into the sound!"

Whoever this Demon was, apparently he was so scary that even when confronted with supposed cannibalistic monsters like us, they feared turning on him. Fortunately, my stomachs took that moment to remind me I'd never gotten my burrito.

"Oooh... I am famished. That window for cooperating is shrinking, you guys... if I were you, I'd really consider it."

"Okay, I'll talk!" the weasely guy said. "Okay, so... I ain't never seen the Demon? But word on the street is he's some kinda monster. Like youse dames, but even bigger and meaner. Word is he just showed up in the last week and took over. Anyone who even tried to stand in 'is way, well... they didn't keep standin' in 'is way if you get my drift. They says, if you know what's good for you, you tow his line, or he literally tears you apart."

"I'm not liking the sound of this," Rhonda said, looking uneasy.

"Yeah, no kiddin', Princess," I replied.

"So, uh... I helped youse broads out, right? you ain't gonna eat us, are you?"

"Wha? No, of course not, that's disgusting. I just said that to scare you dorks. We're not monsters."

I called in the capture to Bridget's dispatcher Renee, who relayed the news to the local authorities. It's not like we were on a first-name basis with the cops or anything. We couldn't just haul these guys over and dump them at the local precinct without explanation. For now, we were letting Bridget's organization serve as middlewomen, until we were more established with the public.

"Well, that's that, Rhon," I said once that was taken care of. "So, you wanna go get those burritos?"

"Ugh, please tell me you're joking," she groused, annoyed. "We just stepped out of a sewer, and you think I still have anything resembling an appetite? The only thing I want to do right now is find a tub and soak for about a week."

"Jeez, Princess, you know I love you and all, but you are still the absolute prissiest..." Just then, the wind shifted and I got a really good whiff of her. "OH JEEZ... hurrgh... Oh yeah, no, no, you most definitely need to take a bath or twenty... or maybe dip yourself in a volcano..."

"I'm that bad?"
"I think I'm gonna hurl…" I choked it back.

"You're not exactly smelling of rose petals and summer rain yourself there. How about we grab those burritos another night, when we don't both smell like something that crawled out of a grave?"

"Fair enough," I said, waving the stink away from my nostrils. "So… this Demon guy… do you think it's who I think?"

"Bill hands over Lila's blood to the Old Man, and suddenly a powerful, inhuman creature shows up and takes control of the underworld? It can't be a coincidence."

"My thoughts exactly. This is about to bite us in the butt, and bad. I'm not sure we can handle it."

"Hey," she said. "When the time comes, we'll deal with it. We've handled worse. He may be bigger and stronger…"

"…is most definitely bigger and stronger…"

"…but there's four of us, and most of us have had our powers longer. If it comes down to it, I think we can take him."

"Seriously, when did you turn into Arnold? I thought he had the market on blind optimism cornered."

"I thought that was the part you were attracted to."

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean I wanna hear his sickeningly adorable sweetness outta you."

"Why not? Too confusing?"

"Oh, don't you start up with me."

"That's not starting up. This is starting up." She began to hum a sickeningly familiar tune.

"…no. Don't you dare."

"We're rats. We're rats. We're furry and forlorn."

"Don't even, I swear…"  

"We live In sewers, love in sewers and our hearts are torn!"

I lunged for her, but she sidestepped and continued.

"We laugh, we cry, we sing in harmony/ I love her/ I love him/ and darn it he loves me!"

"Oh, you are evil… I hate that musical! I hate it more than I hate toothaches and telemarketers!"

--

DELETED SCENE FROM "QUANTITY TIME"

[An hour after the episode ended. The aging glamor rat Nibblebella, played by the inimitable Christine LuPone, is on the stage, singing her show-stopping number "Reverie"]

NIBBLEBELLA: Reverie… by the glow of the stalight… recollections of time… when my joy was alive….
BOB: *sniffle* She's known so much pain…

HELGA: *holding back tears herself* Bob… are you crying?

BOB: Ain't no shame in bein' brought to tears by one of the grand dames of modern American theater, Olga.

HELGA: *sniffle* We tell no one about this.

BOB: Agreed.

GUY IN FRONT OF THEM: Shhhhh!

BOB/HELGA: AH, PIPE DOWN!

--
"That's gonna be stuck in your head for the rest of the night, Pataki! Au revoir!" With her final taunt, she launched herself into the air.

Touché, Princess.
Wake Up Hillwood with Jackie Lee and Mike

Chapter Summary

In which the gang does damage control and Bob meets the new boss (not same as the old boss)

Chapter 43

Wake Up Hillwood with Jackie Lee and Mike

MDI Building

-LILA-

Not for the first time, I laid the suit out on my bed. Bright lemon-yellow with dark purple shoulders, trim and accessories, a black sixteenth-note in a white circle over my right breast as my emblem. Bridget's people had concluded that this color combination would look good with my green skin. I wasn't so sure.

To be perfectly honest, I wasn't sure about any of it.

It wasn't even that long ago that hundreds had seen me on a rampage across the city. Okay, not me, but it had been my body. And while the damage hadn't been that bad (Budnick's had already partially reopened while repairs went on, once the building had been declared structurally sound), people still associated my face with destruction.

Now Rhonda was trying to recruit me into her team of superheroes. "What better way to reclaim your reputation than by publicly doing good?" she'd said. She had a point, but… being a superhero could be awfully violent, couldn't it? I wasn't sure I could ever be part of something that involved harming anyone. Even evildoers.

I packed the suit away once again, unworn. It had been nine days since I'd been reunited with my body, and aside from everyone practically dragging me to the New Years' Eve party at Arnold's, I'd been holed up here.

It wasn't totally isolated… I had Phoebe next door (though she'd been leaving the building more and more lately), my dad and Suzie (who I had warmed up to a lot) nearby, Rhonda and Olga had been visiting a lot, and even Helga had put in an appearance or two. But while people came to me, I felt no real need to go out. Especially with all the negativity out there. Helga, Rhonda and Phoebe were being "blown up", as they say, all over social media… and they were the good guys! I couldn't imagine what they were saying about me.

No, it didn't look, at the moment, like I was going to be wearing that costume anytime soon. I instead opted for a white blouse and dark green skirt combo. So attired, I left my room and decided to see if Phoebe wanted to have breakfast. When I passed her room, it appeared that she had already woken and was probably already getting her start.

I headed for the break room, passing the locked laboratory three doors down from us. That ever-so-strange man who called himself Stanford Pines had claimed it for his own and was holed up in there
now studying everything he could find on our condition. I wondered if he could indeed find a cure where Dr. Shortman had failed. I wasn't exactly feeling a lot of hope on the matter.

When I arrived at the break room, I was surprised to find not only Phoebe, but both Helga and Rhonda gathered, heatedly discussing something.

"Oh, Lila!" Rhonda said upon noticing me. "Perfect timing!"

"Hey," Helga said in a non-committal manner. I gave her a smile; this was a huge step for her.

"Why, hello, girls," I said. "What brings you here this fine morning?"

"I have the most amazing news," Rhonda gushed.

"That's one opinion," Helga commented snidely.

"You know how we've been getting all this terrible press?" she continued, ignoring Helga's interruption. "Well… I talked to Daddy, and he got us booked on… are you ready? Wake Up Hillwood! Tomorrow!"

Wake Up Hillwood?

I loved Wake Up Hillwood. Daddy and I would watch it before school when we could. It was… kind of our morning thing. It was so informative and just… ever-so-cheery and sometimes I imagined co-host Mike Strongman without his shirt but that's neither here nor there.

Wait… booked us? As in… all of us?

"Isn't that great? We get to go on TV and present our side to the city!"

"Yeah, on one of those bright, perky morning shows where they ask nothing but softball questions that won't upset the audience of housewives and old people." Helga grumbled.

"Helga, perhaps such an environment is exactly what we need," Phoebe suggested. "Something nice and relaxed, low-pressure. People could simply get to know us."

"Exactly!" Rhonda continued. "We don't need to get hammered by some hard-hitting muckraker out to make a name for himself, like, say… Douglas Cain…"

"It would put me within punching range."

"That wouldn't be constructive," Phoebe advised. "Besides, I seem to remember a certain someone dabbling in a bit of 'fake news' herself. Need I remind you of… the Pataki Press?"

"That was different. It was clearly a work of satire."

"You told everyone I had webbed feet," Rhonda complained, reminded of the incident.

"Satire… besides, that was two years ago. I like to think I've matured a great deal."

"Weren't you talking about how your wanted to dangle Douglas Cain over a busy intersection just a few days ago?"

"I had arrived at the conclusion that that would be the mature way to handle the situation. You disagreed."
"Pardon me," I interrupted, "But I've ever-so-certain that Rhonda's plan is our best option."

"That's it then. Three to one." Rhonda said smugly.

Helga groaned. "This is going to be torture…"

"Oh, I'm certain it won't be so bad."

Phoebe turned to me. "Then you will be coming as well?"

"Oh, um, well, I…" I was hoping I could get out of this conversation without having to commit to anything. I'd been just fine staying here indefinitely. Now, the prospect of going before the judging public (even if it was my favorite morning show) loomed in the very near future, and I absolutely dreaded it. I hadn't felt this kind of uncertainty since my daddy and me had moved to the city.

"You don't have to if you don't want to," Rhonda assured.

"What about me?" asked Helga. "I don't want to do it either."

"That's different," Rhonda said. "This is about getting ahead of the bad PR, and frankly, you've been getting the worst of it. If you're not going to be out there defending yourself, what's the point?"

"We don't need all of us out there, Princess. You're the charming one, Pheebs is the smart one, that should be enough."

"And you're the strong one," Rhonda said. "We need that strength… I need it. I may tease you, but it's been your strength that keeps me going. Face it, if it was just me, I wouldn't be doing any of this. I'd be hiding for the rest of my life. You're the one that showed me how to face the world with this face."

"I'm going," I found myself saying.

Their eyes darted back to me. "Are you sure?" asked Phoebe. "This is not the sort of decision you should impulsively make."

"I am," I said. "Rhonda's words made me realize that I'm hiding from my life, too, just like… that first week of school, when you were… rather… unwelcoming."

"Don't sugarcoat it, Lila," Helga admitted. "We bullied you. I mean, let's face it, I was a colossal bitch back then, and even by my standards, what we did was rotten."

"Yeah, there was really no excuse for that," Rhonda agreed.

"Our behavior was reprehensible," added Phoebe, downcast. "I've never regretted anything as much as I did my actions that week." The others nodded their assent.

"That's ever-so-sweet of you," I said, "but really not necessary. I forgave you all a long time ago. My point is, if you girls hadn't come to apologize to me, it's entirely possible I would've left school altogether. My daddy was actually looking into homeschooling until you showed up. I'm not certain how we would've managed it given how bad our finances were at the time, but anything seemed better than facing everyone again." I took a deep breath. "I almost gave up back then, and I realized that I'm in the middle of doing it again. So… I will be with you there tomorrow."

With my agreement, Phoebe and Rhonda turned their attention back to Helga, who was still the reluctant holdout.
"…okay, fine," she conceded. "I'll go. But I won't like it."

The Next Day

KHWD-TV Studios

And so, here I was, in the costume I had decided I would never wear. The four of us had been admitted backstage, accompanied by Dr. Shortman, as our chaperone. She'd explained, in great detail, to the producers that our presence would be no threat to anyone, and as a known scientific authority, her opinion was taken seriously.

We were greeted at the back door of the studio by a production assistant. "Right," she said. "You're obviously the 'superheroes' we're supposed to be interviewing. Can I get your names?"

"Joule." Rhonda said. "That's J-O-U-L-E. It's a unit of electricity measurement."

"Uh huh," the PA said inattently.

"I'm clarifying because everyone keeps spelling my name wrong."

"Got it. Next?"

"Magnetica," Phoebe answered, bowing slightly.

"Temper," Helga added begrudgingly, still not entirely on board with the plan.

"Mmm-hmm. What about you in the back? The cute green one in the yellow and purple."

Suddenly I was on the spot. What had been the name we'd decided on? I was drawing a complete blank.

"I'm, uh… um…"

"Breathe, Red," whispered Helga. "Don't fall apart now."

I took several deep calming breaths. "I'm ever-so-sorry, ma'am. Just a bit of stage fright. I don't usually have this problem." One more deep breath. "My name is Decibelle."

"Mmm-hmm," the jaded-looking PA said, writing it down. "Okay, the backstage area's down the hallway. There's a breakfast buffet set up for guests. We'll notify you when it's time for your segment."

"Okay, this might not be all bad," Helga admitted. "Are there… waffles?"

"Don't ask me, that's craft services' department. I just write stuff on a clipboard."

I was learning a great deal about television production. For example, it turns out that we were actually filming tomorrow morning's episode. The only parts that were done live were the news and weather segments, which were done in a different studio with actual news anchors.

Backstage was a busy place, with PAs, technicians, stagehands, makeup artists, and others running around like crazy getting everything and everyone ready. One of the makeup people came up to me while I was waiting, watching all the backstage chaos. She regarded me."

"I, uh… I guess someone's already done you already," she said.
"Um," I replied nervously, "Yes… someone did." I was still nervous about what would happen if I told anyone that this wasn't makeup, it was me.

We continued to wait, Helga staking out a spot at the craft services table and daring anyone to get between her and the waffle bar. She was only distracted when the four of us got an unexpected visitor.

"Hey, guys," Arnold said, beaming.

"Hey, Football Head…" Helga suddenly became hyper-aware of the staff, "…ed kid who I have never met before… seeing as I am a superhero and you're probably just some schoolkid that I've never been anywhere near…. And… aw, screw it." She flung herself at Arnold.

"Wow," he said with a smirk. "I had no idea a superheroine named Temper would be so friendly."

"I'm full of surprises. Ah, what're you all staring at? A superhero can't have a boyfriend or something?"

"Wow. You called me your boyfriend in front of complete strangers."

"We all have lapses in judgement. What're you doing here anyway? Isn't it a school day?"

"I… may have convinced Vice Principal Simmons that today would be the perfect day for a field trip to the TV Studio," he said, grinning. "Seeing as four 'special' members of his 'special' class are going to be on TV. Everyone's here to cheer you girls on."

"He, uh… he is aware that secret identities are a thing, right? He's not going around bragging to everyone that we're his former students, is he?"

"It's okay. Your identity's safe. We didn't even tell most of the class that you were the guests today. Well, we told a couple of people…"

"Hey baby," came a voice from the same curtain where Arnold had entered. Phoebe practically leaped the entire distance of the room and jumped into Gerald's arms. On the other side of the room, Rhonda found herself nearly tackled by her own girlfriend.

"Did you think I was gonna miss this, Sparks?" the golden-braided girl asked, smirking. "I was gonna cut school, but luckily Arnold talked me out of it."

"You're so bad," Rhonda teased.

I watched the three reunited couples. Of course I was happy for them; everyone deserved to find that oh-so-special someone that made them feel whole. But I couldn't help but feel a pang of jealousy. I wondered… would that ever be me? Stinky, who was just such a dear boy, was lately with Rani, who had that air of big city sophistication that I was oh-so-sure I would never had, and Arnie was far away, and I'd failed to interest him even when I was normal… could he possibly fall for me like this?

Was there anyone for me?

--

As the show proceeded, we watched it on a screen backstage. Arnold, Gerald and Nadine had gone to join the rest of the class in the audience, leaving the four of us alone again. The first twenty minutes or so was spent mostly on Jackie Lee gushing about her son's exploits, which seemed rather mundane, but I couldn't fault her for her enthusiasm. It did allow me to zone out for a while and imagine Mike's abs. The man had been a quarterback for the Hillwood Rhinos before replacing the retiring Reevis Phildin last year, so they were definitely spectacular.
Don't look at me like that. I'm a healthy young woman. These fantasies are perfectly normal and I am certainly not going to hell for these filthy thoughts.

After that, there was a health feature, followed by an interview with pop sensation Perry Haley, then a report on getting the most from your dishwasher. The other kids were losing interest fast, Rhonda checking something on her new replacement phone, Phoebe asking a PA about some technical aspect, and Helga making another trip to the buffet. Where did that girl put it all?

Finally, the female PA from earlier came backstage. "Okay, girls, your segment is next. Come out when Mike calls your names, answer her questions, try not to go too far off topic. Remember, this is morning TV. Nobody wants controversy."

"Exactly the point of all of this," whispered Rhonda.

"Now, these next guests of ours have been in the news quite a bit recently. That's right… today, only, we have for you four actual superheroes. Some people out there, like certain Internet 'journalists' I could mention, claim that they're a threat," began Mike.

"Oh, I don't like that man," Jackie Lee interjected. "He's just awful and mean, don't you think?"

"Well, they're here today to introduce themselves to all of us so we can get to know them personally. All of y'all, give it up for Joule, Temper, Magnetica, and Decibelle!"

Having been given our cue, the four of us were ushered onstage, Rhonda in the lead waving like a pro, Helga behind her, then Phoebe, and finally me. I looked out into the audience. The entire class was there along with Mr. Simmons. Most of them looked surprised to see us. I actually heard Harold yell "NO WAY! THAT'S THEM!" I could also spot Rhonda's mom, Helga's mom and Olga, Arnold's parents and grandparents (his grandma was dressed in a cheerleader's outfit and leading a cheer for Eleanor Roosevelt for some reason), and those three oh-so-interesting and eccentric fellows that lived in their boarding house. And…. Yes, there was my Daddy and Suzie!

…practically everyone I know. Watching me.

Stage fright was had never been a problem before, oddly enough. I'd been in the junior rodeo back in Pleasantville and performed the female lead in Eugene Eugene for multiple performances in front of a big audience without so much as a drop of sweat. And yet… all those eyes out there, judging me. Did they know I was what the media had dubbed "The Beast of Budnick's"?

"Oh, my, I had no idea the four of you would be so young!" gushed Jackie Lee. "You are the most precious things, and those costumes are so realistic."

"Yeah, well, that's 'cause they ain't costumes," Helga responded. "The clothing part, sure, but all the extra body parts? Those are part of us." She wiggled her lower hands to demonstrate.

Jackie Lee squinted. "You know, there's something very familiar about you. Have you been on this show before?

"What? No! I have never, ever been on a talk show before. You and I have never met. Never. Not even once."

"But weren't you the-" I began…

"NOT EVEN ONCE!"

I suddenly heard Rhonda's voice in my head. -Never, ever bring up the "It Girl". You wouldn't like
the consequences.- This telepathic conversation was going to be hard to get used to. Like the arms, and the wings, and the tail, and the eye, and the horns, and everything else about my new life. They had all been like this for so much longer than I had. It was their new normal. I wasn't sure it would ever be mine.

Trying to defuse the sudden tenseness from Helga, Mike switched topics. "So, how did the four of you get like this?"

"Well, Mr. Strongman…" began Phoebe, taking lead on the question.

"You can call me Mike. Mr. Strongman's my pop."

"Of course. Mike… the truth is that not long ago, the four of us were perfectly normal children until we were exposed to an event that permanently infused us with alien DNA. I can't really go into the specific details of what happened, but rest assured there is no continuing threat of exposure to anyone else."

"…alien DNA," repeated Mike, skeptical.

"I told you, Mike. I told you they were out there," Jackie Lee insisted.

"I know the explanation seems a bit hard to swallow, but… well… can you think of another rational explanation for something like… this?"

She removed her visor to the collective gasps of the audience.

"Folks, right now my mind is completely blown," Mike said. "From where I'm sitting, that eye is most definitely real."

"Does that hurt?" asked Jackie Lee.

"Not… really? It's just there. It hurt to grow it, but just having it isn't a problem."

"Oh, you poor dears. It must have been terrible, like my dear little Corey stubbed his toe yesterday, and only cried for five minutes. I was so proud of him…"

"Always with the Corey," muttered Helga under her breath.

"So, I'm told you girls actually do have superpowers," Mike continued, trying to interrupt Jackie Lee from going on yet another tangent about her child.

"Why, yes, Mike!" Rhonda replied, seeing a chance to grab the spotlight for a bit. "The four of us share some common powers, like super-strength, heightened senses and reaction time, a degree of invulnerability, and, naturellement, flight…" she flexed her wings to illustrate, "but each of us also has our own unique super-ability. For example, you might say I have a bit of an…" She arced a stream of electricity between her two upper index fingers, "electric personality?" The audience oohed and ahhed her display.

"Mind blown. You're blowing my mind right here. How about the rest of you? Temper, was it? That's a real unusual name. So is your power, like, getting really angry?"

"Well, if you ask some people, you might think that," Helga said. "But, actually, my power is projecting intense heat and cold. I took my name from the process of tempering, which involves strengthening metals by exposing them to extreme temperatures." She smirked "And because you don't wanna piss me off." Chuckles from the audience.
"That's crazy. That's crazy right there. We can just bleep that part out in post, right? Okay… 'Magnetica'… well, it's obvious what your power is."

"That's correct, Mike… I can talk to fish." Laughter. "But seriously, yes, my specialty is magnetism."

They were all so funny and charming. Everyone is always saying how funny and charming I am, but I've been telling that same stupid joke about the goat for over two years now. I'm not very good at improvising. And I just had to be coming up next.

"And what about you?" Mike asked, confirming my fears.

"Um… s-sound," I said, more nervously than I intended to come off, and I suppose the fact that I'd been playing with my braid the entire time hadn't exactly helped with that. "I can control sound."

"Oh, that seems like a pretty interesting power. I bet you could do all sorts of crazy, mind-blowing things with that."

"Well, I… really haven't gotten a handle on it yet. Right now all I can really do is, just… make a lot of noise. These gloves are supposed to have speakers that help me focus it, but I haven't tested them out. Actually…" I felt my cheeks heating, "this is the first time I've ever worn this suit. I'm not really a superhero yet. Maybe I shouldn't be one." I wondered if it was possible to vanish into my seat.

"Oh, you sweet thing," Jackie Lee said. "Everyone has to start somewhere. Like my Corey. Did you know that, just last week, he drank out of a regular cup for the first time? He said 'Mommy, I don't wanna drink out of the sippy cup anymore,' and you know, he only spilled half of his drink."

Mike cut her off. "We're going to take a break right now for some messages from our sponsors. When we come back, our studio audience will have a chance to ask our guests some questions of their own. It's gonna get crazy, folks." He made the "cut" motion.

"I'm sorry, Mike, Jackie Lee," I said. "I've been just the worst guest."

"Are you kidding?" Mike retorted. "You got something people would kill for. You're adorable. The way you sit there all bashful, playing with your hair. Those freckles. Morning show audiences eat that sh- stuff up."

"Yeah, you're absolutely killing it," agreed Rhonda. "This is all about getting the audience's sympathy, and you're like a high-powered sympathy vacuum-cleaner. Just keep doing what you're doing."

"I'm… oh-so-certain I'm not really trying to do anything."

"Yes! Like that! Throw in those 'oh-sos' like you always do. They'll love that."

"Totally," Helga added. "These saps are suckers for cuteness."

"Um… I guess…" I was starting to wonder if I should have ever left MDI.

A PA began counting down as the break ended. "We're back! Let's take this to the audience. I bet they've got a bunch of questions that'll blow our minds. Yes, you, in the yellow shirt and glasses?"

"Yes, I have a question for the lovely Joule," a familiar face asked.

"Oh no," muttered Rhonda. Helga was trying, and failing, to stifle her laughter.

"Did you ever consider becoming a villain instead of a hero? Because… you have stolen my heart!"
"Ugghhh," Rhonda groaned, facepalming. "Cu- young boy I have never met... trust me, you do not want to get involved with a superhero. Our lives our dangerous."

"Danger's my middle name, baby! Thaddeus Danger Gammelthorpe!"

"Ah thought it was Quincy," Stinky commented.

"Well... I'm having it changed as soon as I turn 18!" he spat back. "Now, how about we ditch this pop stand and you give daddy some mutant sugar!"

"Looks like you've already got yourself an admirer there, Joule. That is crazy," Mike said, smirking.

"Yes, lucky me," Rhonda replied through clenched teeth. "Next question."

"Yes, I have a question," a man in a trenchcoat with a large black afro and bushy beard asked. "Is it true that Decibelle is the one that wrecked Budnick's Department Store?"

I froze. The world seemed to lose all focus.

"Who is that?" Mike asked? "Who let that guy in here?"

The man whipped off his wig and fake beard. "It is I, Douglas Cain! Now, answer my question! Eyewitnesses claim to have seen a creature matching your description causing the damage at Budnick's! Is it true that you are the one who did it?"

"Hey!" Helga spat at the muckraker. "Back offa her! She doesn't have to answer you!"

"The public has a right to know!" demanded Cain. "Are you, in fact, the Beast of Budnick's?"

I wanted to disappear. Or spontaneously combust. Anything that would get all these accusing eyes off of me. I was curling up into a ball, tail tucked under me, wings wrapped protectively around me. I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes. Please, please, I prayed, please let this end...

"I'm sorry..." I whimpered...

"No!" Rhonda demanded. "Don't you dare give that bully the satisfaction of seeing you fall apart!" She took my hand. "Be strong. You have nothing to be sorry for." Through our mental link, I could feel her confidence flowing into me, bolstering my own.

Douglas Cain was right about one thing. These people did deserve the truth.

"It was me." I said.

The audience gasped.

"L-Decibelle, what the heck do you think you're doing?"

"Telling people what really happened." The tears were really starting to sting now, so I pulled my visor off and started dabbing at them with a tissue. "The Beast of Budnick's... was me. The truth is... in the first days following my transformation, I was in a deep state of shock. I couldn't cope with what happened to me. I... was ever-so-traumatized. And... I was taken advantage of by something ancient and terrible."

Muttering.

"Something evil used me. Tricked me into giving it my body and allowing it to run rampant. If my
friends here hadn't managed to restrain me, purge the entity from my body, and restore my spirit, who knows what could have happened. So... while I wasn't the one who directly caused the damage, it was ultimately my responsibility. And for that... I am just ever-so-sorry. I only pray that someday, this city can forgive me."

"Ha!" Douglas Cain shouted triumphantly. "You heard her! She admitted it! And it was I, Douglas Cain, who uncovered the-"

And then an audience member punched him in the face.

"You made that poor girl cry, you jerk!" another shouted.

"Get outta here, ya bum!" another added, amidst a chorus of boos.

"You fool!" he sputtered, some of his teeth apparently damaged. "Can't you thee I've ekhposed a dangeroun-" He was drowned out by louder and louder jeering, and finally dragged off by security. "You imbethile have no idea of the danger in your midhth! Lambth to the thлаughter! LAMBTH TO THE THLAUGHTER, ALL OF YOU!"

"Wow. That was crazy. Did you see how crazy that was? It blew my mind," marveled Mike.

"What a truly awful man," commented Jackie Lee. "When I saw him make Decibelle cry, all I could think of was my darling Corey crying like that. What kind of man does that to a little b- girl? You poor thing, you don't deserve that kind of terrible treatment. Everyone, let's show Decibelle that she's loved."

Applause. Cheering. For me.

They supported me. I told them I was the monster that had wrecked a department store and rampaged across a city and they supported me.

"Th-thank you," I stammered. "I... thank you all just ever-so-much."


"Well, that's all the time we have for this segment, but how about one more round of applause for all of Hillwood's new superheroes! Let's give it up for Decibelle, Temper, Magnetica, and Joule!"

Another raucous round of applause. "Up next, Rochelle Roux shows us how to make your scrambled eggs perfect every time," informed Mike.

"I actually kinda wanna see that one," admitted Helga.

"I think Decibelle's had enough," remarked Rhonda. "Let's go get some ice cream in her. I'm gonna ask Daddy to rent out Slausen's for the rest of the afternoon so nobody'll bother us."

"That... does sound nice," I replied.

"You had me at ice cream," Helga added.

"I'm honestly surprised you still have room after you demolished that buffet," Phoebe good-naturedly jibed at her.

"There's always room for ice cream," she deflected.

--
Slausen's
With the whole place to ourselves for the next few hours, the other girls decided that it was a waste for it to be just the four of them. So they'd invited their respective boy/girlfriends, and that had expanded to the rest of Class 6A. The whole gang was now engaged in an impromptu wrap party for the episode at Rhonda’s dad’s expense.

I nursed my pistachio milkshake and listened in on the conversation.

"So, like, it was mostly pretty boring, but we got to skip school and I got to see someone get his teeth knocked out, so that was pretty cool," Harold was saying.

"Yeah, an' then they dragged the guy out of there and he went totally crazy! I reckon that's the funniest thing I ever seen!" added Stinky.

"And I got to bask in the glory of Rhonda's splendor," gushed Curly.

"Oh lord…" muttered Rhonda, facepalming. "Why did we invite him again?"

"Endure, Sparks… endure," assured Nadine. "Just like I'm going to endure the consequences of this banana split."

"You really shouldn't've ordered that," scolded Rhonda.

"Hey, maybe tonight'll be full of stomach cramps, but sometimes the real thing is worth it."

I could just about see her give Rhonda's hand a squeeze under the table. Their relationship still wasn't common knowledge, and I suspected neither was quite ready to go public with the rest of our classmates, Still… you could see just how happy they were just being together.

At another table, Helga and Arnold had gotten into an impromptu eating race, and Gerald and Phoebe were trying to feed each other by launching ice cream nuggets into each other's mouths and failing spectacularly, sending them into giggle fits. Again, I was warmed by how sweet they were which each other, but reminded that I was alone.

"Uhhh… hey, Lila," a quiet voice began behind me.

I turned. "Oh… hello, Sid,"

"Um… you were pretty great out there," he continued.

"Oh, yes… I'm oh-so-certain I did a wonderful job of falling apart before a live studio audience. I mean, hey, why not top off being impaled, mutated, manipulated, and forced out of my body while a monster uses it to hurt people with, why not top all of that off with a good old-fashioned public humiliation?" Huh. That was uncharacteristically bitter and sarcastic of me.

He rubbed the back of his neck a bit sheepishly. "Well… It was honest. I mean… if I went through the kind of thing you went through, I'd be an even bigger mess. Being a mess is kinda my thing." He grinned self-consciously.

I smiled in spite of myself. "I'm not supposed to be, though. I'm supposed to be kind and nice and 'ever-so-perfect', but these days, it's just, it's just hard." I sighed.

"Then, I dunno… don't?"

I wasn't quite sure I heard him. "I'm sorry?"

"Stop trying to be perfect all the time. It… it seems like it's not making you happy."
"But… isn't that why everyone likes me?"

"Well, I mean, you're nice, and kind, and pretty… like, really pretty…." I felt myself blushing. "But… nobody's perfect. It's fine to feel sad… or angry… or to want things… you know?"

Did I know? Ever since I moved here, all I've wanted was to be liked, to fit in. And what people liked me for was for being Miss Perfect. After what had happened to me, I wasn't so sure I could ever be her again.

And yet, here, I had snapped at Sid, and he still wanted to talk to me.

Maybe… maybe there was more to Lila Sawyer than being perfect.

"So, um… I was thinking," Sid continued, "…maybe, when everything's less crazy for you, the two of us could, I dunno… hang out and do… stuff?"

I smiled again, this time not in spite of myself. "That could be nice," I said.

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-INTERLUDE-

Big Bob's Beeper Emporium, the following morning

"Well, if you ask some people, you might think that. But, actually, my power is projecting intense heat and cold. I took my name from the process of tempering, which involves strengthening metals by exposing them to extreme temperatures. And because you don't wanna *BLEEP* me off."

"Heh heh," Bob chuckled to himself. "That girl is definitely a Pataki."

He sat there in his office, in his T-shirt and boxers, watching his little girl on TV. This was pretty much what he did most of the day now, sit and watch the morning shows, his "stories", the Wheel. There were no customers anymore, not that there had been many to begin with. Just people showing up to deliver "merchandise" (read: very illegal goods) and others to retrieve it. His presence wasn't needed. He was just the veneer of legitimacy on the operation.

At least it kept the cable bill paid.

He'd turned on the TV today, and there she'd been. The girl he'd called a monster, in a moment he wished he could take back. She was no monster… she was a hero. She was making a difference. And he had been too damned stupid to see what he had.

Story of his life, really. He'd driven away one daughter, then the other, then his wife, then lost control of the business he'd built up from nothing. The Beper King, ladies and gents. A king with no crown, no kingdom, and a throne with the stuffing coming out of it in front of an old TV.

He couldn't say it wasn't exactly what her deserved.

Still… he couldn't help but feel some pride, seeing his girl on TV. Maybe, one day… he'd be able to face her again and ask forgiveness.

Outside, he heard the bell dingle as the front door opened. Probably Jimmy Twice, here to deliver the "flour." Nothing he needed to bother with.

So he was surprised when the door to his office opened, revealing Little Gino himself.

"Pataki," he said. "The boss wants to see you."
"Why me? I'm nobody," protested Bob.

"This is true. Nevertheless, the boss has taken an interest in you, so you'd better not keep him waiting. And put some pants on, for god's sake."

---

Little Gino's driver brought him to an out-of-the-way building in the bad part of town. "The new boss… he… stands out a bit, you see. He don't like to go out in public a lot. He prefers business brought to him," explained Gino.

He was ushered down the hallway, which seemed typical of a run-down tenement. Thus, he was unprepared when the double doors opened to reveal an opulent office, with fine antique furniture, expensive art work, and an imported Persian rug. He was seated in one of the fine Louis XVI chairs facing the massive mahogany desk. Opposite, he saw only the back of an immense swivel chair. Slowly, the chair rotated to reveal….

A demon.

"Sorry for the theatrics," he said in a rough voice, "but I do love a good dramatic reveal.

The being had to be at least seven feet tall, with an Olympian build. His skin was blue-grey, his eyes an amber-colored, slit-pupilled trio, his hair long and black, slicked back and pulled into a ponytail, his head crowned by large curved horns. He wore an expensive black Italian suit, clearly tailored specifically to accommodate his four massive arms and the leathery wings growing from his back.

He was just like Helga, Bob realized. The very monster he'd thought she was.

"Ah… Big Bob Pataki. The Beeper King." The creature smiled, revealing fanged teeth. "Might I offer you a bit of hospitality?" He took a bottle of amber liquid and a glass from his desk. "It's single-malt. Eighteen years old. A lot nicer than the stuff I used to run in the old days. Back then, if you didn't go blind, you were sittin' pretty."

"I don't need a drink," Bob protested.

"Oh, I would reconsider if I was you," the creature said. "There may not be another opportunity in the future. If you get my meaning."

Shaken, Bob accepted the poured drink. Nervously, he sipped the amber liquid. He was actually not much of a drinker, but on occasion he would treat himself to a tipple… here though, now, it felt like he was being offered a last meal before his execution, and the Devil himself was doing the offering.

"There," he said. "Isn't it a lot easier if you cooperate? Now, allow me to introduce myself. Folks around here call me 'The Demon'. I suppose it's understandable give my current appearance. But, in the old days, they called me Ed Maldonado… or, more commonly, 'Wheezin' Ed.'"

Bob nearly spit out his drink. "Th-that's impossible. Wheezin' Ed's been dead for eighty years. Even if he wasn't, he'd have to be at least-"

"One hundred twenty-eight years old as of last August," Ed confirmed. "I know, I know, I don't look a day over immortal. Well, that wasn't the case until recently. I have, as you see, gotten a new lease on life. Unfortunately… that lease may be revoked." He undid his tie and pulled down his collar, revealing an ugly purple-black lesion. "A few days after my 'rebirth', these started showing up on my body. Tiny at first, but they're starting to spread. To put it simply… something went wrong. I'm going to lose everything I worked for."

"Jeez, that's a sad story," Bob said sarcastically, "But whattaya want me to do about it? You think I
can fix monsters? Do I look like Doctor Frankenstein?" He had a feeling that he knew exactly why Ed wanted him, but he hoped he could stall. It was pretty much all he had.

"Oh, not you, Bob. You're just the bait. I need your daughter. Temper."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," he lied.

"Don't you? Temper? AKA Helga G. Pataki?" Belied by his calm voice, his hand gripped the edge of his desks, the talons sinking into the would. Bob could only imagine what they would do to flesh. "Your youngest daughter. Sixth-grade student at PS118. And one of the first to be transformed by the same virus that made me the handsome young man I am now. Only, as seen recently on Wake Up Hillwood, she's still in perfect shape, despite having been in this condition far longer than myself. I need to know why. And so… I am going to have my people let her know that I have her father, and if she wishes to see you alive again, she will give herself to me."

Bob chuckled mirthlessly. "Then you're outta luck, bucko. The girl hates me. She's never gonna show up, not for me. You're wasting your time."

"If I were you, I'd hope you were wrong," Ed replied through his shark's grin. "After all… both our lives are depending on it."
Demon Rising

Chapter 44

Mendlowitz's Fine Tailoring

This is some kind of delayed punishment, Ben Mendlowitz thought. Punishment for stealing that vest back in fourth grade.

What had possessed him to do it, he had no idea. It was just a vest. A very fine vest, to be sure, but just a vest. It wasn't as if he desperately needed it or anything. But yet, something had compelled him to sneak into the tailor's shop and steal it the moment the owner's attention was distracted.

He probably would have gotten away with it too if he hadn't accidentally stepped on the owner's cat's tail in his hurry to get out. The little monster had jumped on him, yowling and scratching (and, in the process, tearing up the vest so it was in no condition to return). The owner had caught him and called his parents, and decided that Ben would work for the tailor until he paid off the ruined vest.

What was supposed to be a punishment instead kindled a life-long love of tailoring in the young boy. At first, he was mercilessly mocked by his peers for his rather unmanly talent with a needle and thread, but they quickly changed their tune when it turned out he could repair the clothing they destroyed while playing, instead of having to go before their parents and explain just why there was a huge split in their good Sunday pants.

Now, he owned the very tailor shop he had stolen from those many years ago. Everyone in the neighborhood came to him for their alterations. He had also attracted a rather different clientele of certain less-than-law-compliant individuals who came to him for custom bespoke suits. It didn't really matter; there was nothing illegal about what he did, and they certainly paid generously and were nothing but courteous.

Which brings us to his latest, and most… unusual client.

This client had insisted on using the back door. When Ben opened it, it was all too clear why he had.

He'd no idea what to expect. Certainly, not to come face-to-face with a hulking, winged, four-armed, three-eyed beast clad in nothing but a pair of extra-extra-extra-extra-large boxers.

"I'm gonna need a suit," he said simply, as if this was just an everyday occurrence.

Miraculously, Ben's heart chose not to immediately go into cardiac arrest. "Cash or charge?" he said.
"The money will be wired to your account," the monster replied. "I intend to pay quite handsomely, given the… challenge inherent in my request."

Ben nodded. "Let's get started with the measurements." Surrrepetitiously, he pinched himself. Nothing. No, there would be no waking from this nightmare.

And so began easily the hardest project of his lifetime. Taking measurements no tailor should ever expect to take, such as wingspan, tail location, and lower shoulder size (he was, of course, not the one responsible for any of the four female mutants' outfits), using them to design an outfit that would be easy to put on and remove, and of course, assembling the damn thing, all on his own since he certainly could not breath a word of his involvement to this to everyone. It was lucky he had enough material on hand, as a paper trail would be very unfortunate.

At last, it was done. The creature now stood in front of Ben's three-way mirror admiring himself. "Well done, Mr. Mendlowitz. Yes, this appears to be satisfactory." He examined his lapels with his upper set of fingers. "And it's proving to be durable, which is fortunate for you."

The implied threat was not unnoticed. "Y-yes, well, given your, ah… robust physique, I made sure there was room for you to be able to move."

"Excellent. Yes… you have done a fine job. Expect payment from my offshore account by this afternoon, and, of course, a little something extra. Don't bother to wrap it, I'll wear it out." He strode out and opened the door, which came off its hinges in his grasp. "A little something more extra. Thank you once again. I'll be certain to take advantage of your services in the future. Arrividerci!"

The beast launched himself into the night sky. Ben watched numbly as he did

"He…. He'll be coming back…"

Slowly, still in shock, Ben walked over to his phone, looked up a number in the phone book (he was still old-fashioned that way), and dialed.

"Hello, Hillwood Psychiatric Institute?" he asked. "How does one go about committing oneself?"

--

Three days later

A nondescript back room behind Giuseppe's Tratteria, as is demanded by cliché

Little Gino had received notice of this meeting of the heads of Hillwood's gangs this morning. Naturally, not being a trusting sort (trusting sorts did not tend to last long in his chosen profession), he had brought along insurance in the form of his two least mistrusted capos, Frank "Crusher" O'Dowd and Jimmy Twice. As he took a seat at the table, the two took up residence behind him, daring anyone to try anything funny.

As expected, the other gang leaders had brought their own muscle. To Gino's left sat Anatoly Rezhenko, head of the local branch of the Bratva. He was a well-built man, in his late sixties but deceptively youthful-looking for his age, clad in a white linen suit and pale pink shirt, tieless, wearing brown-tinted glasses, his hair white but full.

Next to him was David Huang of the Tong, at 25 the youngest at the table. He had slicked-back hair, mirrored sunglasses, and prominent sideburns, like some kind of Chinese Elvis. He wore a white windbreaker, khakis, and a red Hawaiian shirt. Kids today. No class.
Rounding out the table were Daisuke Koji of the Yakuza, Ed Barrera of the Bahala-na, a small-but-growing Filipino gang, and Kevin Wills, the head of the Jamaican Kings.

"So let me get this straight," the latter said. Surprisingly, he lacked any trace of a Jamaican accent; in fact, he sounded slightly British. "None of us called this meeting?"

"I assure you," Gino said, "if it was me, I would admit to it. No, I am every bit as much in the dark as the rest of you.

"Well, it ain't me," Huang interjected. "I got better things to do with my life than waste it talking to a bunch of fossils."

"You will show respect!" one of Rezhenko's men demanded, grabbing him by his shirt. In a blink, one of Huang's had a knife at his throat, and for a moment it looked as though a gang war would start up right there in that room.

"Gentlemen," a voice came from the speaker on the table, "Let us not fight over such trifling slights. There will be a place for all of you in Hillwood's new underworld… just so long as you remember who is in charge."

New underworld? Gino didn't like the sound of that. Some guy thought he could come in and upend the whole order, take charge. That kind of ambition was a recipe for disaster.

"You plan on showing yourself, mystery man?" Barrera asked? "I aint takin' orders from a box."

"I ain't takin' orders, period," Huang added.

"Boy is… young, impetuous, but correct," Rezhenko supplied. "You are not giving us much reason to follow you if you are not bold enough to be showing your face, yes?"

"I suppose it is time I revealed myself, yes. Do not be too alarmed at what you are about to see."

The double-doors at the end of the room, were flung open, revealing a huge man who had to be wearing some kind of crazy monster-movie getup, because otherwise, Gino was looking at a blue-grey, four-armed monster man with giant wings.

Hadin't there been news about some winged, multiarmed creatures trashing the area around Budnicks' come to think of it? Whoever outfitted this guy must've worked on them, too. Maybe it was some kind of publicity thing for a movie. Maybe Hollywood, tired of just profiting off stories of organized crime, wanted in on the real thing.

It was funny what leaps the human brain would take to rationalize the seemingly impossible.

"Bit late for Halloween, innit?" Wills quipped.

"Ah, you refer to my appearance," the "creature" replied. "Rest assured, I am wearing neither costume nor makeup. What you see is what you get." To emphasize, he brought his fist down on the mahogany table, shattering it to splinters. "I take it this ends all doubts about my authenticity?" The implied: This could happen to you.

"Who are you?" Gino asked, incredulous.

"Well, let's just say I got history in this town. See, back in my day, they used to call me Wheezin' Ed, on account'a my chronic breathin' problems."
"Wha, is this some kinda joke, some kinda joke!" Jimmy Twice had earned his nickname for his habit of repeating himself when he was angry. "You ain't Wheezin' Ed. There's no way he'd still be alive... if he ever even existed, even existed to begin with!"

Twice was a moron, but he had a point. To this day, no one was sure if Wheezin' Ed had actually been a real guy or just a horror story told by old mobsters to scare the young'uns with tales of his supposed brutality. They'd tell of the time he punished a stoolie by feeding him to starving rats, for example, or how he'd dismembered a rival with a rusty machete. It was the mob equivalent of campfire tales about the guy with the hook for a hand.

"I admit I look young for my age. I owe it all to good genes. As in the alien DNA that has given me my new physique."

"Alien DNA?" responded. "Oh, that's a good one, a good one! You think you can fool me with your fairytales? You're just some schmoe who's trying to cash in on an urban legend. You got some Hollywood guy to make you up like that red guy from the movie about the boy from hell, what was it called.. Devil Kid or somethin'.. an' then you just prance in here, prance in here like you can take over the world with your stolen name an' your monster gimmick..."

"Twice, you ****ing moron," interrupted Huang. "You saw what he did to the table, dude! That ain't fake!"

"Pfft. Guy probably had a breakaway table put in before we got here. Thing woulda fallen apart if you looked at it funny. I seen a whole buncha those Hollywood behind-the-scenes documentaries. I know how they do things. I don't buy it, an' if you're smart, like me, smart like me, you won't buy it neither."

As he was ranting, the other gathered criminals had all gone quiet, for the massive beast-man claiming to be Wheezin' Ed was slowly walking up to him, a look of disdain on his face. Jim suddenly clammed up, not that secure in his conviction that "Ed" was a fake, especially now, face-to-three-eyed face with the brute.

"Wheezin' Ed" stared down the young, dimwitted capo, for what seemed like an eternity. Then, suddenly, he burst into what sounded like genuine laughter. Disarmed, everyone slowly joined in.

"This guy!" he said, grinning broadly. "This guy right here!" He clapped Twice on the shoulder convivially. "What a mouth on him, am I right? He's got moxie, this guy has."

The tension seemed completely gone, but suddenly the smile left Ed's face.

"I hate moxie," he continued, and his lower-right fist thrust forward, into, and through, Twice's abdomen, emerging through his back coated in blood and viscera. Twice looked down at the massive would in his torso, his fading consciousness registering just what had happened, and what was about to happen. Namely, his death.

Nor was what had just happened lost on anyone else in the room. The message was clear. Toe the line, or the same fate would befall you. Whether this creature was truly a reborn Wheezin' Ed or not, it was clear that, for now, he was firmly in charge.

Ed pulled his arm back a bit, and Twice's corpse slid off, collapsing to the ground, a pool of blood collecting underneath him. Still in shock over the sudden gruesome murder, the gathered men looked to him, attempting to anticipate what he would do next, looking for a possible exit.

Ed looked over at Gino, his expression suggesting that it was his responsibility to apologize for his
underling's Insubordination.

He shrugged. "That guy was an idiot," he said by way of explanation, his casual manner belied by the sweat of pure fear dripping from his brow. "Never knew when to shut his mouth. But he was my ex-wife's nephew, y'know? One late alimony payment and I gotta give this gavone a job or she hauls my ass into court. I ain't gonna go out on a chump charge like Capone, ya dig?"

Ed shrugged, as if this was a simple misunderstanding, as if he hadn't just eviscerated a man in full view of the entire room with his bare fist, as if the man's fresh corpse wasn't lying on the fist, as if his blood and guts didn't still coat one of his sleeves. "I get it. Family gotta hire family. Watcha gonna do, eh?"

This guy wasn't a man. He was like a demon walking the earth. And we were all burning in the hell he would create.

"Okay," he said. "Now that all that's been settled, let's get down to business. First, I'm gonna need that mess over there cleaned up." He examined his sleeve. "And find me a good same-day dry cleaner that don't ask inconvenient questions. This is my only suit. I'd order another, but my tailor just had a very inconvenient nervous breakdown."

--

Once the meeting was over, Ed surveyed his new office. It was in a nondescript out-of-the-way building downtown. He'd furnished it with the best (his personal fortune was still, even after most of it had been spent on life-prolonging procedures and technologies, enough to outfit the place in the manner he thought befit him). The furniture was all specially reinforced to support his 400-pound-plus bulk.

They were calling him "The Demon" now. He liked that. It was way more fearsome than "Wheezin' Ed." Sure he'd had a reputation, but really, what was so scary about a guy with a respiratory condition? Now, "The Demon"… THAT was a name to be respected.

He lowered himself into the massive swivel-chair, chest bare as his shirt and suit-jacket had been rushed to the cleaners. People were always eager to get things done for you as long as you gave them the proper motivation.

He reached over to pour himself a glass of scotch. Alcohol had little effect on him these days, but he still liked the smoky taste and the velvety burn as it slid down his throat. It was at this time that he felt a sharp pain pierce his shoulder.

It was over in a moment and he dismissed it as an anomaly but several minutes later, halfway through his glass, a second pain flared in his thigh.

He rationalized it as another fluke, but over the next few hours, he felt more pains, in his torso, his arms, his tail, his neck. This was not going away.

He reached over to his phone (a real phone, not those fancy little rectangle-things that everyone used these days) and dialed Dr. Galway.

"Doc," he said. "Something's very wrong"

"What wrong?" the broad asked.

"What's wrong, she says. Everything hurts is what's wrong. Stuff ain't supposed to hurt. I'm supposed to be eternally healthy, but I got pain all over my body for no reason."

"Impossible," she said. "Your metamorphosis went off flawlessly. Any anomalous readings were
minor and temporary. You should not be experiencing chronic pain for any reason."

"Yeah, well I am, dollface, so you better get your butt over here and do something about it, capische?"

"Very well, I'll be there as soon as I can."

"See you do. Remember, if you get cold feet, I know where your family lives."

--

They were back in the bunker under Elk Island, Ed strapped into an elaborate scanning apparatus as it took its readings.

Loretta was no longer under any pretense that she mattered one bit to the mutated gangster beyond the service she'd provided for him. If his earlier rejection of her and prevention of her ascendance had confirmed that, then his threat to her family had cemented it.

Her father lived in a retirement community in Boca, her mother was being cared for in a nursing home nearby, the early stages of dementia taking hold. Her brother, a schoolteacher, his wife, an interior decorator, and their twin sons lived in Chicago. She knew that Ed would not hesitate to kill every last one of them.

If her transformation had been successful, she would have used her own blood to potentially cure her mother, giving her a second chance at life. That had been denied her. He had denied her that. Whatever misguided desire Loretta had had for the man had evaporated, replaced by a single-minded need to see his ruin. But for now, he held all the cards, and she was forced to dance on his strings.

"Well? Give it to me, doc. What's wrong with me?" Ed asked.

"The scans are inconclusive as of yet, but I'm detecting definite instability in your genetic makeup."

"English, doll. I ain't got no fancy science degree. Dumb it down for me."

"We took biosamples from subjects 1-L and 2-P when we brought them in, as well as more recently from Subject 3-S. All had perfectly consistent genetic structures. When we injected you with Subject 3-S's blood, upon completion of your meta-" She noticed she was losing him, remember, dumb it down, she told herself, "when you changed, we scanned your DNA or what passes for it now… and we found some very minor flaws that seemed inconsequential at the time. I assumed they would sort themselves out. Based on this most recent scan, though, those flaws haven't fixed themselves, and are, in fact, getting worse. Your DNA is, for lack of a better term, beginning to break down."

"You mean you screwed up," he said angrily. "You botched the job and now I got, what… mutant cancer?"

"That's… actually not far off," Loretta said. "Look at this." She indicated a tiny purplish-black lesion on Ed's wrist.

"So take that off."

"No point. A: That lesion is every bit as invulnerable as the rest of you and B: Even if I did remove it, the genetic anomaly that led to its growth is still there. You're just going to grow more of them, bigger ones, elsewhere, inside and out. Until the lesions and tumors consume all of your healthy tissue."

The look in his eyes told everything. For a man who feared death above all else, and had thought
he'd been given a seemingly permanent reprieve, the news that that very reprieve had transformed into a new, even more agonizing death sentence had to be absolutely devastating. For as much as Loretta despised this man, the doctor in her felt a sharp pang at being forced to tell him.

"Why is this happening?" he asked, still in shock over his sudden reversal of fortune.

"As of right now, I have no way of knowing. It could be any number of things. It could be because you were too old when the procedure took place. It could be because some pre-existing condition you had interfered with the alien DNA integrating into your own properly. For all I know, it could just be because you're male. All the other known subjects are female. Maybe the alien genome is incompatible with Y chromosomes. I can't tell. The data we have from the other subjects is incomplete. If we had one of them available to study at length, maybe we could solve this problem, but with the limited knowledge we have, there's nothing I can do. I'm sorry." She was not sorry. Not one bit. She hoped he'd burn in the hell he deserved. But she sure as hell wasn't saying it.

"So… what if I got you one of them. Would that help?"

"Well… I suppose that would be a step forward, yes, but even then-

"Then that's what I'm gonna do. You get the lab ready. I'll bring you your rat."

He returned to his office, pondering which of the kids he'd grab.

The rich one? No, his people had already made two attempts on her. She would be ready for a third.

That little blue one that had showed up at the department store? His people had nothing on her. He had no idea where to find that one.

The green one had been useful, but after the department store incident, it seemed like she'd dropped completely off the face of the Earth. Maybe the others had killed her. No great loss there. Less competition.

The pink one was probably the best bet. Pataki or something. Where had he heard that name before? He could've sworn…

…that was it. He'd asked Big Gino to give him a rundown of all the pies his people had their fingers in, and one of the things he'd listed was "Big Bob's Beepers", a failing electronics concern "owned" by one Robert Pataki, now a front for Gino's drug distribution network. He checked his files to make sure; yes, there was a definite resemblance between the elder Pataki and the pink-skinned mutant. The file said that he had two daughters, and one would be just about Helga Pataki's age.

There. He had his bait.

He dialed Big Gino. "Get me Pataki," he demanded as the subordinate answered.

"…you mean Big Bob Pataki? What do you need with him? He's a nobody. Just a laundering front."

"That's none of your concern. Just bring him to me. I have a request of him."

There. The hook was ready, the bait was on its way. All that remained was to reel in his fish.
Chapter Summary

In which Helga goes one-on-one with an Urban Legend

A.N.: New fanart up on metalheadrailfan's DA page featuring a Teenage Mutant Maybe-Ninja Helga. Check it out.

Chapter 45
Daddy-Daughter Day
Sunset Arms, Afternoon

-HELGA-

"Okay, go back again… this is my favorite part…"

Dutifully, Arnold rewound the DVR back to the exact moment I wanted. Yes, my pet. I have trained you well, I mused.

"Okay, here it comes…" I informed, just moments before watching Douglas Cain's face get punched in for the thirty-first time. "Yes! Right in the money-maker!"

Arnold rolled his eyes. "Are you ever going to get tired of watching that."

"No," I said. "Never. It will remain a compelling viewing moment for as long as I live. I want it playing on loop on a big screen behind us the day we get married. I want it on my tombstone when they bury me…. five hundred thousand years from now."

"I, uh, don't think I'll last that long."

"Like heck you won't. I plan to graft your head to my shoulder when your body gives out. I'm sure Pheebs can make that happen… lord knows how I'll find the room, but we'll cross that line when we come to it."

He looked alarmed at my joke. "Don't I get a say in this?"

"Oh, Arnold, Arnold, Arnold… no. No you don't. You will be my second head for all eternity and you will like it."

"Whatever you say, Helga," he replied, knowing better than to push the matter.

"Now play it again.

"Very well. Douglas Cain getting punched in the face, take 32…"

"BOOM! Someone's gonna need a nose job, am I right?"

The corners of Arnold's mouth actually twitched upwards a bit.
"Ooh. What's this? Amusement? Is Saint Arnold of Vine Street actually taking a bit of shameful pleasure in someone else's pain? Could it be that I have finally corrupted him?"

"Well… he kinda did have it coming to him…"

"Good…. Goooooo…" I rubbed my hands together in my best Palpatine impression. "Let the power of the Dark Side flow through youuuuu…"

"Stop," he said, giggleing. "You know it drives me crazy when you do Star Wars impressions!"

"Is that so…" I assumed a stuffy British accent. "The odds of me stopping are now five million, seven hundred sixty thousand to one!"

"You fiend…"

"I saved the best for last…"

"No," he protested. "Not that one. I won't be responsible for my actions!"

"Too bad." I did my best Chewbacca yowl.

"Temptress…” He glomped on tightly and began showering me with kisses.

I sort of lost track of time and place and was only vaguely aware of the door opening. It was Rhonda's voice that brought me back to reality.

"…so, do you think it could actually work?" she was asking.

"Yes," Phoebe's voice replied, "but it would be very risky, and I would only recommend trying it in a dire emergency- oh my, I believe we just interrupted a moment."

We snapped out of it. "Oh, um… we were just, uh…" Arnold stammered.

"It's pretty clear what you were 'just, uh…"" Rhonda replied with a smirk. "We were just coming to ask you if you wanted to patrol with us this evening, but you clearly have other matters at hand."

"Thin ice, Princess, step carefully…” I threatened.

"Puh-leeeeeze, Helga. Like I'd hold a smooch session with Arnold against you."

"It was the Chewbacca impression, wasn't it," Phoebe commented knowingly, her eyes twinkling. Chewbacca impression? mouthed Rhonda confusedly.

"What ca I say, Football-Head's weird," I dismissed. "What are you two all chummy about today?"

"Eh, we were just talking about some advanced moves," Rhonda said. "Theoretical, mostly."

"And impractical," added Phoebe. "Not really worth discussing."

"So, it's NOT about a surprise party for my twelfth birthday in two-and-a-half months."

"No, we wouldn't be planning that this early," said Phoebe.

"Though, we should start working on a theme…” Rhonda suggested. "Oooh, how about 'Evil Twin'…. We get a bunch of remaindered 'It Girl' dresses and everyone dresses up as Zombie Helgas!"
She was trying to get to me. In a friendly way, of course, but such a slight could not go unchallenged. She had, after all, inadvertently revealed to me her particular phobia during our little road trip. "Sounds good. As long as we can do an evil clown theme for yours."

Her gaze met mine, her smirk undiminished. "Bring it, Hellcat. It'll only prove that I look good in literally anything."

We stared each other down for a moment.

"You're all right, Princess," I conceded, then we both cracked up.

"You realize we both have to do it now." She said.

"Oh, absolutely," she said. "I'm kind of looking forward to being horrified beyond belief."

"You're that scared of clowns?" I prodded.

"I'm talking about Harold in a dress," she responded.

I shuddered. "Oh, yeah, that's gonna be sight."

"Like, y'know, I bet some of the boys could pull it off. Arnold, for example."

"What?!" He said, suddenly realizing the implications of our discussion.

"Oh, definitely," I said. "I can picture him with the pink bow in his hair already."

"Now, hold on," he said. "There is no way I am wearing a pink dress for Helga's birthday!"

"You shouldn't have said that, Arnold," Phoebe warned. "Now it's definitely going to happen."

"No," Arnold said, realizing that with his words he'd doomed himself.

"Oh yes," I said. "Your fate is sealed, and you will look fabulous."

"NOOOOO!" he said again, more emphatically. Poor Football Head. So easy to get wound up.

Life was good. So, of course, it was all about to get blown to hell.

I felt my phone go off. I dug it out of my pocket and stepped aside to check it. These were my friends and all, but my business was my business and I was still pretty guarded about it. "Hold up," I said. "Just gotta check this."

There was one message. Blocked number. I would've dismissed it as spam if not for the subject line: "For Helga (Temper) Pataki's eyes only."

Who could this be from? Bridget had this number, but she always used WOOHP'S official message app, not the generic text service that this had come from.

Hesitantly, I opened the message.

What I saw made my blood run cold.

There were only three things in the message. The words "Tell no one", a phone number, and a photo.

The phone number was probably a front. When I dialed it, my call would probably be routed through
dozens of fake networks before actually connecting with anyone.

The photo was of my father.

He was tied to a chair in a dark dingy room. No, not just a dark, dingy room. I recognized it right away. This was the Beeper Emporium's boiler room. His black eye and fresh bruises on his face and arms suggested that he wasn't a willing participant.

The message was clear: Call or he suffers.

Quietly, making sure to keep my face neutral, I closed the message and slipped the phone back into my pocket. "It was nothing. Tubetube alert. One of the channels I subscribe to posted something."

"Oh? Which one?"

Crap. What was a channel none of them would have any interest in? "The... paint drying channel?" Oh, bravo, Pataki. Quick thinking.

Rhonda shrugged. "It's fine if you don't wanna tell us. We probably all have interests we don't want anyone to know about."

Whew, bullet dodged. Thank goodness for skeletons in everyone's closet. Now, I had to find a way to get away from everyone, which is easier said than done in a boarding house where everyone seems to be underfoot all the time and there are two people with superhuman hearing who can eavesdrop on my every word.

Well, there was one place in this pile where you were guaranteed privacy....

"Uh, s'cuse me, gotta go see a man about a horse," I pleaded, and ran off. Nobody would dare try to eavesdrop on me in there.

Unfortunately, I got there just in time to see Grandpa slip in. "Hey, Shortman's girlfriend. Remember that one piece of sage advice I give everyone?"

"Don't eat raspberries? Um, well, this is actually kind of an-"

"Well, that goes double for loganberries. I ain't gonna be comin' out for a lonnnng time. Sorry!" He slammed the door.

Well, that was the end of that plan – oh, wait, didn't Arnold once say there was a second bathroom in the basement? I made my way for it, and was about to make it in when a smoke bomb went off in my face.

"So... trying to assassinate the Daimyo, are you?" The smoke cleared, revealing Grandma in a ninja outfit, brandishing what I hoped was a prop katana blade. "This affront against the Clan of the Lotus will not go unchallenged."

Ugh. Normally, I'm totally on board with Grandma's brand of crazy, but now was not the time for this. "Mrs. Shortman, please, I-"

"Call me Kaze, the silent but deadly."

"No, that would be Phil. Agh, never mind..."

Well, that was a bust.
There was still a way out, though. I didn't like it, but it was going to have to do.

I was going to have to pull a Classic Helga. Which meant I was going to have to purposely antagonize three of the people I cared the most about in this world.

I returned to the living room and, luckily, I'd been given an opening. Arnold and Rhonda were talking, Rhonda in mid-laughter over something Arnold had just said. Well, now it was time to act like I'd never acted before. Time to channel every awful afternoon talk show I've ever seen...

"And just what the hell is going on here?" I demanded angrily.

"Oh, Arnold was just telling me about this stunt Sid and Stinky pulled today-"

"Don't lie to me, you skank! You were hitting on my man!"

"What? Helga, I-"

"Oh, sure, 'I'm in love with Nadine.' Perfect cover to make a play for Arnold, isn't it." Oh, Arnold my love, forgive me for what I am about to do. "And you. You weren't exactly fighting her off, were you. Just how long have you had a thing for her?"

"Helga, she's telling the truth. You know I'd never-"

"LIAR!" I slapped him across the face. I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry. "And you! You were watching the whole time and you did nothing to stop it!"

"Helga, there was nothing to st-" Phoebe began to protest, but I cut her off.

"You're all against me, aren't you! Even my so-called best friend. I should've known better. Well, fine! You won't have Helga G. Pataki to kick around any more!" Before anyone could say a word, I stomped off, making a beeline for the back door, hoping they'd be too stunned to try following me.

As soon as I hit the back yard, I launched myself away as fast as I could, hoping to get far enough out of Phoebe and Rhonda's telepathy range before they regained their senses.

--

-PHOEBE-

"Okay, so… it's not just me, right?" asked Rhonda. "That escalated way too quickly. I mean… that was zero to crazy in nothing flat."

It was moments after Helga's sudden outburst and departure. Arnold had just been telling us about Sid and Stinky releasing a bunch of live frogs in the midst of a biology lab (it was dissection day, and no one was expecting the subjects to be lively).

"Helga can be… emotionally mercurial," I admitted, "but no. She wouldn't lose it that quickly, and certainly not with people she trusted. No… that was completely forced."

"Yeah," agreed Arnold, rubbing the still-red cheek that Helga had slapped. "I could see it in her eyes. She was faking it. She wanted to get out of here and she needed an excuse, even if she had to make one up."

I could tell he was hurt. Not from Helga's slap, but from the fact that something was clearly bothering her, but she wouldn't tell him what.

"So, why would she act like that?" asked Rhonda. "I mean, you said it, she trusts us, so why would she fake a tantrum when she could just let us know what happened?"
I sighed. Helga… was difficult. Having been her closest friend for as long as I or anyone else knew, I knew better than anyone just how difficult. "She's a very proud girl. She's been opening up more and more lately, and I'm very proud of her for that, but there are still parts of herself she keeps closed off. Her deepest vulnerabilities."

"She starting acting weird right after she got that text." Rhonda realized. "She got all jumpy, nervous… she ran off to use the bathroom, came back way too fast, had the sudden fake meltdown…"

"Clearly, that was no TubeTube alert," I agreed. "I have the sneaking suspicion the text Helga received was from someone of ill intent. And whoever sent it is holding something over her head that she feels she can't share with us."

"Phoebe, you're the one who knows her best," Arnold said. "What kind of thing would she be that guarded about?"

"Well, lately, if there's anything she refuses to talk about, it's the situation with… her father. I know he's in some kind of trouble with organized crime, but that's all I know."

"You think that's it, then? Something related to her dad?" Rhonda asked.

"If there's anything that she would absolutely not want us getting involved in, that would be it. That's why she took such great pains to make sure we wouldn't go after her."

"…so, we're totally going after her, right?"

"Well, obviously," I replied. "The logical place to start would be the Beeper Emporium."

"That sounds like a plan to me," Rhonda said, pulling her costume out of her bag. "Arnold just has to decide which one of us he's flying with. Because we know how it's going to go; he'll demand to come with, we'll say 'no, it's too dangerous,' he'll follow us anyway. So why put up a fight?"

I raised a finger and opened my mouth to start protesting, but I had to admit Rhonda's words rang true, and it's not as if Arnold wasn't a clever, resourceful veteran of multiple adventures, despite his lack of powers. "Fair enough. So, which of us will be transporting you?"

Arnold glanced back and forth between us. "I, uh… Phoebe, I guess. No offense, Rhonda, I just think Helga would object less."

"Are you saying I'm not desirable?" I teased.

"No! I-"

"Because your best friend seems to think otherwise,"

"Of course I'm not saying that! I'm sure you're great, Phoebe, but-"

"Oh, relax, Arnold, I'm only kidding! Helga's right, you're just so easy to fluster!"

"And so cute when you get flustered," Rhonda added, smirking.

Arnold's cheeks went a deep crimson. "This is why I need Gerald around. I hate being outnumbered."

--HELG-
I shot away from the Sunset Arms towards downtown, in the general direction of the Beeper Emporium. I landed on the roof of BuyLots, a new big-box store several blocks down from there, and, along with the rise of e-commerce and Bob's steadfast refusal to stock newer tech, one of the reasons why the Emporium had seen better days. Not exactly a favorite place, but far enough away that my mystery caller wouldn't see me.

Making sure no eyes were on me, I dialed the number that had been sent to my phone.

"Miss Pataki," a gravely voice on the other end replied. "It appears I have gotten your attention."

"I'm really not interested in changing service providers," I responded.

The man on the other end chuckled. "It's good that you still have a sense of humor after all your recent troubles."

"Who is this, and what do you want from me?" I asked.

"Ah, yes… down to business. Well, you may not recognize my voice, but the two of us have spoken before. You and your friend were guests at my private Wyoming facility a month ago."

"You're the Old Man," I confirmed.

"Well, technically, I suppose the name still applies, but more recently folks have taken to calling me the Demon."

So we were right. The Old Man had had himself injected with Lila's blood, and it had transformed him just as it had transformed the rest of us. We were dealing with something at least as powerful as any single one of us. Probably even more, given that we were mere tweens and he was a full-grown adult.

And I was about to go into this situation alone.

"Now, as to what I want… that would be you."

"Me?"

"I have need of you, for reasons I don't wish to reveal over the phone. Now, as you have seen, I have come into the possession of your father. If you want to see him alive, come to the Beeper Emporium. Alone. You go to the cops, I rip his head off. You go to the Feds, I rip his head off. You get WOOHP involved, I rip his head off. You bring any of your little friends, I- well, I'm sure you get the idea."

"Yeah, you're crystal clear, 'buddy'. I'll be there. Alone."

"Good. I'm glad we're on the same page, Miss Pataki. I look forward to our finally meeting in person."

"Yeah, that makes one of us." I disconnected, uninterested in wasting any more time on the phone with this guy now that the details had been finalized. I wanted this over with. I mean, obviously, this was a trap. But what choice did I have but to cooperate?

I took to the air once more, heading towards the Emporium. How long had it been since I'd last set foot in there? It probably hadn't even been a month yet, but it felt like another lifetime. So much had changed. Mom was sober now, I was on good terms with Olga and somehow even with Lila, and, perhaps most unbelievably, I was actually able to be open about my feelings for Arnold. Miracle of
I set down at the entrance. The Demon had a couple of his goons stationed there. They gave me a perfunctory nod as I entered. Clearly he'd let them know I was coming.

Inside, the place looked more or less the same. You'd never guess that it was anything more than a failing business left behind by progress, rather than a front for mob activity.

I made my way to the back, where the storerooms and the stairs to the basement were. "All right", I said, all four hands held in the air. "I'm coming down."

I made my way down the stairs, slowly as to not provoke any sort of response. While the Demon seemed calm on the phone, who knew how stable he really was?

The basement area held more storerooms (likely filled now with goods of a less-than-legal nature) and the utility, boiler room. And there, standing in front of the door, was the Demon himself.

Criminy, he was HUGE. He dwarfed me in both height and sheer physical bulk. Buff as I was, I was still just an eleven-year-old girl and he was fully-grown. Even his tail was bulkier somehow. It looked like he had a python growing out of his butt. The expensive, tailored suit he wore somehow only seemed to emphasize his brutish nature.

He looked at me with a smirk. "Yer outta uniform, Temper."

I shrugged. I hadn't bothered changing out of the T-shirt and jeans I'd been wearing at Arnold's. There was no point. I wasn't here as Temper. I was here as Bob Pataki's daughter. "I wanna see my father."

"That seems reasonable," he said, opening the door.

Bob was exactly as I'd last seen him, in his usual green polo shirt and khakis (curse you, Rhonda, for making me notice details like this), tied to a chair, bruised, battered, his head down, seemingly a broken man.

I was barely aware of my own motion, but apparently I had run to his side and crouched down at some point. "Bob? Are you all right?"

He shook himself out of whatever haze he was in. "Helga? 'zat you?"

I smiled in spite of myself. "You actually got my name right on the first try."

"Wha? Oh, uh, yeah. Guess I did." He looked up. "Why'd you come for me? I don't deserve it. Not after the way I treated you." His head hung. "And I wasn't much better before that, was I?"

"Yeah… I'm not gonna lie, you've been kind of a lousy dad. But you're still my dad."

"Well," interrupted the Demon, "this has been a touching family reunion, but I think we'd better get down to brass tacks here."

"Fine," I said, not moving. "What is it that you want from me? You already got what you needed. You're not a shriveled-up old geezer, you're a big ugly monster in the prime of his life. So what do you need my help with anything?"

"You see, therein lies the problem. Your friend's generous donation didn't exactly take."

"Looks like it took just fine from where I'm crouching," I said. "You're just like me, only not nearly
as cute."

"There have been… complications." He pulled his collar down, exposing a large, purplish-black growth on his neck.

I recoiled involuntarily. "Ew."

"And there are more of these. Inside me and outside me. And they're getting worse. You, on the other hand, have been a mutant far longer than me, and you're still in perfect shape. There has to be a reason for that. My people need to find out exactly what. We need you to do that."

The message was clear. The secrets that made my body stable while his was deteriorating were locked inside me, and his doctors would need to do a very thorough examination of every aspect of my body in order to find out why.

That almost definitely meant dissection.

To save my father's life, I had to give up my own.

"You're going to let him go," I said. "You're going to forgive all of his debts to your organization, and you will leave him alone, forever. Furthermore, you're not going to go anywhere near any of my family, or any of my friends. Otherwise, no deal."

"You're awfully demanding, considering your position."

"Oh, can it, ugly. We both know that if I agree to this, I'm not going to survive whatever it is you do to me to pry the secrets out of my body. I figure if I'm gonna die, I might as well get my money's worth. So excuse me if I'm not ready to just roll over for you."

At those words, Bob went completely pale. He apparently didn't have any idea of the full extent of what the Demon planned to do to me.

"You got moxie, kid," he said. "As I told the late Jimmy Twice before I punched a hole in him, I hate moxie."

"Face facts. Without me, you're gonna die. You need me a lot more than I need you."

"You're a tough negotiator, kid. All right, fine. You got yourself a deal."

"What're you doin', Helga?" pleaded Bob. "You know he ain't gonna keep his bargain! You're throwin' away your life! Just forget about me, like you shoulda. Like everyone else did."

I slowly got up. As I passed his ear, I whispered, "When it happens, run like hell,"

"Wha-"

I walked forward. "Okay, Uggo, I'm yours. Now let him go."

"Mmm… about that. I think I'm going to hold onto him for a little while longer, just to make sure you don't back out on the deal."

"You know, I kinda figured that would be the case."

Over the past week or so since our battle with Bill Cipher, Phoebe, Rhonda and I had been working on expanding our repertoire of uses for our powers. One of those moves came in useful right now, as I suddenly combusted a bit of the air right in front of the Demon's face, releasing a blinding, burning
flash and a burst of smoke. The guy may have been a big hulking brute, but he still had eyes and lungs.

I took liberty of the distraction to rush back to Bob, slicing through the ropes binding him to the chair with my four sets of claws. "Run!" I said. "Get out as fast as you can! I'll hold him off!"

"Are you crazy? You're half his size!"

"Yeah, but I'm a Pataki. That makes me twice as mean." I flung myself at him, knocking him off-balance, pummeling him with my fists. It was like punching a huge slab of solid meat. There was almost no give. "I'll be fine! Run! Don't look back!" I wasn't sure I would be fine, but I had to buy time for Bob to get out.

"You backstabbin' little runt!" the Demon bellowed, trying to shake me off. "Just for that, he's dead. Your mom, dead. Your sister, dead. Your friends, dead. Your grandma in South Dakota, yeah, I know about her, dead!"

I could hear running footsteps fading, confirming that Bob had indeed run for it. Good, I didn't have to worry about him anymore. I could now focus on finding a way to get myself out of this.

I pushed off the Demon with my feet, launching myself backward, wings spread a bit to slow me. That was one thing I had over this guy, I was smaller and more agile, which meant the cramped quarters down here in the basement were a lot easier for me to move around in than him. I kept him in my sights as I backed toward the boiler room's door.

His eyes were watery and red, but it looked like his vision was starting to clear again. That wasn't good. His gaze locked on me, and… were his eyes getting redder? Shouldn't they-

Instinctively I dodged to the side as a trio of red energy beams shot from his eyes and blasted the door that had been behind me to smithereens. So that's what he does, I thought to myself.

"Thanks for getting the door for me, Bluto!" I shouted, dashing through the scorched entranceway and toward the stairs. I heard him lumbering behind me (score one more for youth; I was way faster than he was), and the tell-tale crackle of his eyes charging up for another blast. I dodged once again, and this time he took out the stairs in their entirety.

Big deal. I have wings.

I launched myself off the ground with all the power my legs could muster, shooting up the stairwell and into the store's backroom. I hoped I had enough of a head-start on him to get clear of the building.

I did not expect him to start blasting his way upwards through the basement ceiling. The first beam tore through the floor three feet directly in front of me, and it was only blind luck that my momentum didn't carry me right into it.

A second blast tore through a few feet forward and to the right, then a third counter-clockwise from the first two. Cracks spiderwebbed outward through the floor in the area, as it began to buckle. He was going to bring this whole place down on top of us.

I lifted myself off the floor with my wings just as a large section of the floor collapsed down into the basement beneath. I hoped against hope for a moment that the Demon had managed to bury himself, but that proved futile as he launched himself upward, landing heavily in front of me. What was left of the floor shook, and the building’s superstructure groaned as the shockwaves weakened its supports.
"You think you can get away from me?" he growled, eyes still crackling. "I was breaking shins before your great grandpa was in diapers! I was the name everybody whispered in their nightmares. I was WHEEZIN' ED!"

"No kiddin'?" I said. "Big fan, actually. I'd ask for an autograph if you weren't trying to kill me."

"You got a smart mouth. I'm gonna slap it right off your face. He backhanded me, faster than I thought he could move, or maybe I was on the fading end of an adrenaline surge; either way, I was knocked back into the checkout counter, wrecking it with my impact. I was dazed but retained just enough consciousness to roll to the side as Ed (I finally had an actual name for him!) fired another of his knockoff Cyclops-from-the-X-Men blasts, blowing apart the counter. I hurled a blast of flame at him, but my aim was still a bit off and all I managed to do was melt a display stand of "cutting edge" flip phones. No big loss there.

I shook off my dizziness as best I could, looking for a clear path to the door, but before I could find one, he was on top of me, bringing back his fist for a blow that would knock me cold at the absolute least, and might just have spelled lights out permanently; after all, he could probably get whatever he needed as easily from an autopsy as from a vivisection. I ducked at the last moment, causing him to take out the support pillar behind me. The building groaned again. It wouldn't take much more to bring it down on top of us.

"Stand still so I can pulverize you, ya little squirt!" he roared, as if demanding it would somehow convince me that it was something I wanted to do. Oh, yes, Mr. homicidal mutated gangster, I would just love for you to pound me into something resembling pie filling. It would fulfil one of my lifelong ambitions! Yutz.

He had backed me into a tall display cabinet now. "Okay. You asked for this, you know. I would left your family alone if you'd just kept up your end of the bargain. It woulda been quick and painless. But now… you're all gonna suffer. Ain't no way out for you now."

No way out, huh? No. There was still one dirty trick I had up my sleeve. The same dirty trick any small girl fighting a big guy had available.

"Liar liar, pants… on fire." And I launched a fireball directly at Wheezin' Ed's crotch.

The agonized, infuriated scream was so worth it. While he attempted to smother the blaze, I dashed past him for the door. Utterly enraged, he unleashed one last beam. It missed me, but it clipped the remaining support pillar.

With a final groan, the building's superstructure began to give way. The beeper market was about to collapse… literally.
Market Collapse

Chapter Summary

In which our heroes take down Wheezin' Ed for good.

[Trigger warning: Body horror]

Chapter 46

Market Crash

-RHONDA-

It took a bit of time to change clothes, but we'd gotten it down to a science by now. Within minutes, Rhonda W. Lloyd and Phoebe S. Heyerdahl had made way for Joule and Magnetica. Arnold P. Shortman remained Arnold P. Shortman.

We prepared to leave through the skylight in Arnold's room, Phoebe having tried to find a dignified way to carry him before simply giving up and settling for a bridal. "Sorry about this," she apologized.

"Honestly, I really don't care," said Arnold. "It's not like anyone's watching."

"Hey, Shortman," Arnold's grandfather interrupted, proving that one should never tempt the fates, "I just wanted to let you know that we saved some meatloaf for y- oh, I see your little friend there's carryin' you like a sack o' potatoes."

"Grandpa…" Arnold complained.

"It's all right. Your grandma used to carry me around like that. It was fun up until we went to Hawaii and she tried to sacrifice me to the volcano god, but that's a story for another time."

"All praise Pelé!" shouted his grandma somewhere in the background.

"It wasn't even a real volcano! It was an amusement park ride and you were praying to a guy in a gopher suit!" The old woman cackled hysterically in response. "Some days I wonder if I'm the crazy one."

His grandmother poked her head in. "Seriously, do be careful out there."

"Don't worry, Mrs. Shortman, we'll take good care of him."

"I expect no less, Silkworm. Remember your training."

I bowed. "Hai, sensei." We'd made quite a lot of progress in my lessons since the early days. I actually had some decent moves now. I was no longer totally hopeless next to Helga or Phoebe.

We launched ourselves upward and flew off in the general direction of the Beeper Emporium.

I spotted something as we reached the BuyLots. "Phoebe, take a look at that."
"What?" Arnold said, looking down. "I don't see anything."

"We have better eyes," Phoebe said. "I'll take us in closer."

We set down on the roof of the BuyLots, where someone had burned letters into the surface of the roof. "Looks like she left us a message after all."

The message read:

I'm sorry I went crazy on you guys like that. The Demon has my dad. I can't get any of you involved in this or he'll hurt him. I don't know if I'll ever see you again, but know that you have been the best friends I have ever had. Tell Arnold I love him. I love you all.

"Looks like you were right, as usual," I said.

"I take very little satisfaction in that," Phoebe sighed. "If she had simply let us in, we could have helped her."

"Hey," Arnold said. "It's not over yet. We're not that far behind her. We can still be there in time to help her out."

"Hope you're right. Did you manage to get in touch with Lila, Rhonda?"

"She doesn't have a cel number, and her suit wasn't connected. I left messages with the MDI receptionist and on her dad's answering machine, so hopefully she gets one of those. If not... I guess we'll have to handle this on our own."  

"I suppose we simply hope for the best. I suggest we make for St. Augustine's Cathedral. It affords a very good view of the Emporium while providing cover," Phoebe proposed.

"Good call," I said. We took off again, and within a few minutes were atop the cathedral blending in with the gargoyles (though I like to think we're significantly prettier).

"I don't see her," I said. Telepathic conversation would have been more stealthy, but we had decided to keep it verbal for Arnold's sake. "There's just a couple of thugs standing at the door... wait..." Someone was coming out. "I think it's her dad. She must've been able to get him out."

Big Bob Pataki looked like he'd been through the wringer. Everyone knew him as this unstoppable ox of a man, but here he was, battered, bruised and seemingly broken.

"Hey, where do you think you're goin', Pataki?" one of the goons demanded, grabbing him as he attempted to hastily exit. "The boss made it clear you don't leave until he says you leave, and he ain't said you leave."

"Maybe he needs another round of 'private discussion', Knuckles?" the other asked.

"I think you may be right, Lefty," the first replied.

The message was clear. It was time to move. The two of us (Phoebe still toting Arnold) jumped off the cathedral roof, landing squarely in front of the thugs. I took point since I didn't have to protect anyone.

"I think 'private discussion' time is over." I said. "Let him go and we'll go easy."

"Lefty" looked a bit hesitant, but Knuckles arrogantly smirked at us. "Go play somewhere else, kids. We got grown-up business to take care of here."
In response, I grabbed Knuckles by the shirt and lifted him off the ground. "Maybe I didn't make myself clear. You aren't going to win this one." He reached for his gun, but I grabbed for it with one of my free hands and crushed the barrel flat. "As I was saying...." I flung him into the garbage cans by the curb. "You guys are getting trashed."

"Nice," Phoebe said, hi-fiving (fouring? Is it a five if your fingers only number four?) me for a well-timed pun. Arnold had been set down and was now watching from a distance.

Lefty had watched me dispatch his partner in a state of shock, but had recovered and was now drawing his own gun. Unfortunately for him, he had turned his attention away from Bob; we were a new, immediate threat now and he was clearly not. This was Lefty's mistake; in truth, a spark of the old Big Bob remained, fanned into flame by the treatment he'd been subjected to, the sacrifice his daughter had made for him, and the self-loathing at the fact that he had let himself get to this sorry state. He had had enough, and Lefty was a convenient focus. So, as Phoebe magnetically pulled the gun out of the thug's grip, Bob swung him around and delivered a right hook to his face, followed by a haymaker right in the jaw. The thug crumpled to the ground.

"That was rather impressive, Mr. Pataki," marveled Phoebe.

"Learned to box in my Army days," Bob said with a bit of pride. "Did some prizefighting in college, until I took a few too many to the head. I guess that's why I have trouble with, whadayacallem, names." He turned back to the building. We could hear a commotion going on within. "She's still in there. With that... THING. What was I thinkin'? I gotta go back in there an' -"

"No, Mr. Pataki," Arnold said, grabbing his arm. "It's too dangerous!"

"Let go of me, Alfred..."

"He's right, Mr. Pataki," I warned. "Can you feel it? Whatever's going on in there is so intense you can feel the vibrations even out here. You have to let us handle it."

Suddenly, the building itself began to shudder. Windows shattered. Chunks were falling off the façade, cracking the pavement with their impacts as the Emporium's very skeleton began to scream and buckle.

"No... she's still in there..."

"I've got this!" Phoebe shouted, reaching out with all four hands. The building's frame squealed in protest but held in her magnetic grip. "Okay, I've braced the building, but I..." she winced. "I can't hold it up forever. You need to get in there and pull her out before I lose it!"

"Got it. Good luck, Phoebe."

--

-HELGA-

Chunks of ceiling were falling all around me. The building's frame was buckling. And I was still too far from the entrance to make it out.

I was about to find out just how durable I was. Mutant vs. building. My money was on the building. It was a shame I wasn't going to live to collect.

And then just as abruptly as the collapse had started, it groaned to a sudden halt. I wasn't about to question my reprieve. I made a mad dash for the door. Or at least started to. Leave it to Ed to finally get lucky. I felt his beam punch right through the membrane of my left wing. My entire back lit up in sheer agony as I felt to the floor, mere feet from the door. He was on top of me within moments,
grabbing my by the hair. "A deal's a deal!" he said, ready to deliver the final blow. "Don't matter if you're in one piece as long as."

And that was all he said as a bolt of raw electricity sizzled over my head and struck the brute squarely in the chest. "Hey! C'mon! Phoebe's holding the building up, but she can't do it forever!" Rhonda reached out and pulled me free of Ed's stunned, heavy bulk. Never, ever have I been so happy to see someone that I absolutely, positively had hoped wouldn't follow me.

"Guess we're even for the bullet now," I remarked as she helped me out of the building.

"I'm not doing this because I owe you, you moron," she snapped. "I'm doing it because I care about you. You're still not quite getting this whole 'friends forever' thing, are you."

"I'm working on it," I said. "Give me time."

We made it out of the building, Rhonda practically my crutch as I hobbled along. My wing and back were still in agonizing pain. Bob was at my side in moments. Phoebe stood to the side, dripping with sweat, barely able to stand were it not for Arnold supporting her. A tiny trickle of teal blood came oozed from her nostril.

"She's out!" Rhonda shouted. "Let go!"

With a final grunt of pain, Phoebe dropped her grip on the building's iron frame. With a final groan, it gave way, and Big Bob's Beepers finally collapsed into its own foundation. Her energy spent, she sagged into Arnold's grasp, who nearly collapsed under the sudden weight. He managed to gently ease Phoebe to the ground before rushing to join us.

Rhonda looked down into the pit of rubble. "No explosion?"

"The gas company cut us off weeks ago," Bob replied.

"Sorry, dad," I said. "I know this place was pretty much your third kid."

"You'd think I'd feel worse about it," he said, looking down at the pit. "But I got what's real important right here."

"Sellable real estate?" I teased.

"I dunno how much I'd get for it, considering there's a monster buried under the foundation."

I looked down. That could have been me down there. It almost was. This whole situation could have been the end of me, and all because I still can't let people in. I thought I was doing better, but I would've died over stubborn pride. I was lucky to get away with just a hole in my wing and some bruises, and that was just because my friends never gave up on me.

Things were going to have to change.

"So, did you mean it?" Rhonda asked.

"Mean what?"

"When you left us that message where you said you loved us."

"Pfft. No. No no no. That's just the kind of thing you tell people when you think you're gonna die 'cause you think it'll make them feel better. Like I love you, Princess. Ha! With your frou-frou attitude and prissiness and… courage, and loyalty, and… damn it, you tell anyone I wrote something
"I love you too, Helga," she teased. Ugh, curse my sentimental soul. She'll never let me live this down.

"Hey, Pheebs," I said, changing the subject. "That was pretty awesome. You okay?"

"I'll be fine in a little while. Just a headache and some dizziness. I never tried anything close to that scale before. Also, I love you too."

"Jeez, I'm being ganged up on here. Remind me never to be open with my emotions ever again."

Rhonda was still looking up into the pit. "So that's it. It's really over."

Suddenly, the rubble began to shake.

Of course. I've seen a million zillion horror movies, so of course I should've known better. The monster never stays dead the first time.

A blue-gray fist punched up. "Are you freakin' kiddin' me?" Bob grumbled incredulously. "Criminy, what's it take to kill this guy?"

"Everyone, away from the pit!" I shouted. We backed off, Rhonda helping Phoebe back to her feet. We had gotten across the street when Ed freed himself. He leaped out of the pit, heavily, shattering the pavement. His suit had been shredded, exposing the large purple-black lesions decorating his skin.

"That... was my only suit," he growled.

"I set his crotch on fire," I bragged.

"Nice," Rhonda said, hi-fiving me. "So, what's the deal with this guy?"

"He says he's Wheezin' Ed. He got mutated with a blood transfusion from Lila, but something went wrong and now he's got mutant cancer, and he wants to vivisect and/or kill-and-dissect yours truly to find a cure for himself."

"Oh, is that all," she deadpanned as the brute lumbered forward. He looked a bit unsteady and one of his wings looked even more messed up than mine, but he was still a lumbering freight train with s in his sights. "I think it's time. Phoebe, I'm gonna do the thing."

"Rhonda, no, I told you, it's too risky!"

"Helga's in bad shape and you drained yourself. I'm still in peak condition. If anyone's fighting this guy, it's me, and I need every edge I can get. I'm doing the thing."

She stood, legs akimbo, fists all clenched, eyes closed. Electricity began to crackle around her body as she "hnnnngghed in concentration.

"What the heck is she doing?" I questioned. "Looks like she's trying to go Super-Saiyan."

"She's trying to use her innate bioelectricity to hyper-stimulate her muscles, greatly increasing her strength and speed."

"Wait, that's what she's actually trying to do? I was joking! Is that actually something that could work?"
"In theory, but there's a real risk that she could fry her nervous system. And even if it does work, she can't keep it up for long."

I glanced back at Rhonda, and damn if it didn't look like it was straight out of anime. Her muscles actually were starting to swell, and her hair was starting to stand on end as her eyes crackled with the electricity inside her, visible even through her visor. With a howl, she launched herself across the street at a speed I didn't think she was capable of, her upper-left fist colliding squarely with Wheezin' Ed's jaw. Unlike my punches, it looked like this one actually hurt him. Her other fists rapidly followed suit, hitting him in the gut, the solar plexus, the nose, the eyes, over and over again, pounding him relentlessly, each blow leaving a thunderous impact.

"Arnold?" I said.

"Yeah?"

"You are the one true love of my life and you always will be, but I think I might be a little gay now."

"I understand," he said.

"Good. Now get my dad away from here."

Am I too young to think about threesomes? Yeah, probably. Ah well, I've always been mature for my age.

--
-RHONDA-

I've never been in so much pain.

I've never felt so alive.

My muscles are on fire and they are driving my fists forward, delivering every bit of that pain toward him, the architect of all our problems.

It amazed me how natural it all felt, how instinctive. One move flowed into the next seamlessly, hands, feet, tail all working in perfect sync. Mrs. Shortman's training was proving to be very effective. Every strike was finding its mark, every one of his was blocked or deflected. Maybe it was the hypercharging technique causing some kind of euphoria, but I didn't care. I was unstoppable and there was no way I could lose.

And then, as soon as it came the fire began to die out. My body, once lighter than air, now felt like it was rapidly filling with lead.

At least I had made an impact. Wheezin' Ed looked like he could barely stand. One arm hung limply. His body and face were a mass of bruises, two of his eyes nearly swollen shut.

And still he moved forward. Unevenly, like something wasn't quite right inside. But still.

"Sorry, guys," I panted. "I guess I thought I could finish him, but I burned out fast."

"What are you talking about?" Helga commented. "You were going at it for, like, a good ten, twelve minutes! It was pretty damn spectacular, if I say so myself."

"Oh." I guess I'd lost track of time. "Still, it wasn't enough."

"It might be," Phoebe said. "Look at him. The tumorous growths are getting bigger, and the bruises
should be starting to heal, but they aren't. His healing abilities must not be working properly. They're feeding his tumors instead of repairing his injuries."

"Kill… you…" Ed said through a broken jaw filled with broken teeth. Even the effort of making that amount of noise seemed to cause him pain as he stopped, sagging.

I was pretty tapped out… had just enough juice left in me to keep from regressing to a drooling moron… but I had no intention of just lying down and letting Wheezin' Ed (and who knew? Gerald's urban legend had been right all along!) bulldoze me. But now, that wasn't looking as inevitable as before.

Nevertheless, we braced ourselves. Helga, battered as she was, stood steadily next to me. "You okay?" I asked.

"It's not as bad as it looks," she said. "My wing's just kinda numb right now – I think my body shuts off pain when it gets too bad - and the other bruises are starting to heal. I think I can go another round."

"Yeah, but can he? He's not moving…"

And then the bone spurs burst outward through his skin a he howled in agony. They seemed to jut out in completely random places and at completely random angles, as if his own skeleton was trying to escape in any way possible. One actually had sprouted from his back and pierced his own wing. I suddenly regretted eating lunch today, since I felt like it, too, would try to escape.

"Great. Now he's Doomsday," muttered Helga.

"Just have to be careful where you punch," I advised, pushing my last meal back down. Superheroes don't puke, damn it.

His latest mutation over, Ed looked around, seemingly confused, as if trying to figure out where he was and what he'd been doing. "I think that last thing might've broke his brain," Helga suggested.

"Oh, good, now he's a brain-damaged spike-covered monster. This just keeps getting better."

"You knew the job was dangerous when you took it."

The spike-covered Ed finally seemed to realized where he was, remembered his grudge toward us, and lumbered forward, awkwardly, his spikes sometimes even jabbing into his own flesh, drawing blood. He swung one of his fists at me, slowly, clumsily. I dodged easily, but one of his spikes tagged me, drawing blood. Another fist came at me. I instinctively grabbed the spike jutting out of it and was surprised as it snapped off ridiculously easily. Ed shrieked in pain, a sound barely human anymore. "They're sharp, but they're brittle!" I advised.

"Look at those veins running through them, and how irregular they are." Phoebe explained. "They're likely osteomas. Bone tumors. His cancer's metastasizing at an accelerated rate. I think he's not going to last much longer."

As if to illustrate her comment, Ed froze again, convulsing. He collapsed to the ground, body twisting and contorting unnaturally. More growths forced their way through his skin as he began to choke to death on his own vomit.

"Oh god, that's just disgusting!" Phoebe said, turning away in revulsion and gagging.

"…scuse me for a second." It was no use anymore. One mushroom brioche and a glass of orange
juice coming up. "Sorry," I said, wiping my mouth.

"I've seen literally every horror movie ever made and even I'm on the verge of upchucking," Helga replied. "As is, this is probably gonna traumatize me for life. I can't believe I'm watching a guy die for the second time in less than a year."

"Oh, right, you were there for-"

"For LaSombra, yeah. I had nightmares for weeks. I… I can't look at this anymore." She turned away, looking as if she was ashamed of her weakness.

I placed a hand gently on her shoulder. "Nothing wrong with being human for a moment."

"Present appearance notwithstanding," added Phoebe, taking the opposite.

"Thanks," Helga said, smiling weakly. We stood there for a moment, just taking in what had happened.

"It's not always going to feel this bad, is it?" Helga asked.

"It's not like we were trying to kill him…" I said. "He was pretty much dead on his feet already."

"Yeah, but if we hadn't, he would've…"

"…probably died a week later just as painfully." I said. "You can't beat yourself up for this. Just… take the win. It may be deus ex machina, but it's still a win."

"I guess. I just wish I could feel good about it. …Deus ex machina? Really?"

"Like I keep telling you, I'm smarter than I let on."

We were only vaguely aware of the approaching sirens, still a bit shellshocked. It should've been obvious that a sudden building collapse would get the attention of police, fire, and media, but the obvious wasn't exactly coming to mind after all that we had been through.

"Are… you three… responsible for this?"

"Hmm?" I snapped out of my daze and looked up. A police officer was looking down imperiously at us.

"I said, AAAARE… you three responsible for this? We're talking… disturbing the peace, wanton destruction of property, generalized mayhem, aggravated loitering… and you are… clearly underage and out past curfew in ridiculous costumes, which… HAS… to be some kind of violation."

"Lee, you idiot, don't you recognize them?" Another officer pushed her way forward. I recognized her as Fran Pudney, the officer I'd met during the fight with the possessed Lila. "Those are those superhero kids, the ones who have been helping out these last couple of weeks. They were just on TV, remember?"

"I…. don't watch TV. Anyway, IT doesn't matter, theyCOULD still be responsible for this case of saboTADGE."

"Maybe... look, could you just give them a chance to explain themselves before you send them to Hiker's Island?" She turned to me. "Make it good, kid. I'm putting myself on the line for you."

"Okay, well… you know that new crime boss, the one they're calling the Demon?" Helga stated.
"We... HAVE received reports of such a person," the Shatneresque officer replied.

"Well... that's what's left of him back there." Helga indicated, jerking a thumb back to the still-twitching mass of mutated flesh.

"Ugggh!" a third officer commented, looking a little ill. "What the hell is that thig?"

"Long story short, the guy thought he could cheat death by injecting himself with our blood. As you can see, it didn't work so good. Guy went and Cronenberg'd himself."

"We got a tip this guy was holding a local businessman hostage," I added. "We were able to rescue him. The Demon fought us, but the building got wrecked in the process. We didn't kill him, though. That was a result of the same process that changed him."

"I see," Pudney remarked, still not quite clear. "I'm still going to need you three girls to come downtown and give us a full statement, all right?"

"That seems reasonable," agreed Phoebe.

"But what the heck are we supposed to do about that thing?" the third officer complained. "I am not touching that."

"I'd think the coroner's office would be the one to deal with that," Pudney answered.

The discussion was interrupted by the descent of a helicopter. A rope ladder descended from the vehicle, bearing an older, dapper-looking gentleman with thinning hair and a pencil mustache.

"Director Lewis, WOOHP," the man said in a crisp British accent, flashing ID. "We'll be taking the creature's remains into custody. Ah... special agents Joule, Magnetica, and Temper. It's a pleasure to finally meet you."

"Likewise, Alfred," Helga snarked.

"Helga!" scolded Phoebe.

"Quite all right," Lewis remarked. "I actually get that a lot. One must have a sense of humor in this business." More agents piled out of the helicopter, loading the soon-to-be-late, unlamented Wheezin' Ed onto a gourney, which was slowly raised back into the vehicle. "Ta for now, ladies!" the director shouted as he ascended.

"Well, I guess that settles that," Helga said. Out of sight, out of mind was implied. It would be easier to suppress this trauma without Ed's dying body just out of view.

"Deus ex machina. Literally descending out of the sky this time." I said. "Gotta love it."

--HELGA--

We left the precinct about two hours later. It had taken that long to explain everything about the situation. The oddly-speaking officer, who we found out was named Lee J. Booker, constantly tried to bad cop us. It felt like he thought that Pudney was playing along as the "good cop", but Pudney just wanted him to stop already.

Eventually, Booker just couldn't find an excuse to keep us any longer, and we were let go. By this time, the hole in my wing had nearly closed.
"Think you can fly, Helga?" Rhonda asked.

I flexed my wing. "I'll probably be a little wobbly, but yeah, I think I can manage.

Arnold and, surprise of surprises, my dad were waiting for us as we exited the station.

"So, uh… how's the, ah, wing," asked Bob.

"It's fine, dad. I heal pretty fast."

He blinked. "You called me dad."

"Yeah… guess I did." I gave him a smile. "So… what're you gonna do now that the Beeper Emporium is finally history?"

"I don't know, really. It always felt like if I lost the beeper business, I lost everything. But in the end, it really was just a building." He brightened a bit. "A building that had a pretty big insurance policy on it."

"Y'know," Rhonda added, "my dad'd probably still pay for the land. Probably more now that he doesn't have to pay for demolition."

"Ernie's gonna be heartbroken," I supplied. "I think he was looking forward to the day he finally got to take a wrecking ball to the place."

Dad surprisingly, chuckled a bit at that. "Good riddance. Hey, how about I buy us a round of Yahoos? I think I can still afford that."

"Sounds like a plan, dad. We can toast to not being dead."

We were about to hit the nearby Dusk-to-Dawn, y'know, give 'em a little thrill, when Rhonda's visor beeped. "Hey, Lila. Looks like we didn't need you after a- what's that? Hold on, I'll put you on speaker." She tapped the side.

"Hello?" Lila's voice came over the speaker clearly.

"We're all here, Lila," Phoebe said. "What do you need to tell us?"

"Okay, first, I'm oh-so sorry that I wasn't available to help, but that's what I called to tell you about! I haven't been available because I've been in Dr. Pines' lab! You have to come over right now!"

"Why? What is it?" I asked.

"It's ever-so-wonderful! Dr. Pines and Dr. Shortman… they've found a cure!"
Epilogue: Normal?

Chapter Summary

In which all's well that ends well. For now.

Epilogue

Normal?

-HELGA-

So… this was it.

Apparently, my brief career as an alien-hybrid superheroine was soon to come to an end.

"How about that," I said to Arnold. "A cure. I'll… be back to normal."

"You, uh… you don't seem too enthusiastic about it," Arnold noted.

"No, no, it's fine. I'll be able to go back to school with everyone, we can be seen together in public again… everything'll be like it was, only better because we won't have to sneak around anymore. This is a good thing. I won't miss this at all, believe me. Okay, so… maybe I'm gonna miss the superpowers… and I've gotten kind of attached to the tail… and the extra arms really come in, no pun intended, handy sometimes, and…"

"You don't want to change back, do you."

"It's… it's not a question of that, Football-head. If I could have something resembling a normal life and still look like this and have these powers, then, yeah… I would stay like this. But life kinda doesn't work that way."

"It's not fair," he said. "You shouldn't have to force yourself to be like everyone else just to fit in."

"Yeah, but that's the thing. Life isn't fair. We all gotta make compromises." I held out my hands to him. "C'mon. One last ride?"

"One last ride," he said, smiling, allowing himself to be gathered into my arms.

I nodded to Phoebe and Rhonda. "Go ahead, guys. Don't wait up. I think we're gonna take the scenic route."

--

The scenic route turned out to be pretty much a full tour of Hillwood. Westward to the docks, the salt air tickling our nostrils. Across the bay, over Elk Island, where the usually pristine wilderness was being disturbed by activity. Apparently, the authorities had gotten wind of exactly where Wheezin' Ed's organization was hiding. Didn't really matter; soon enough, that wouldn't be my problem anymore.

Back east over the bay, past the boardwalk and the fish district. Across Tina Park and the lake. Through Midtown, no longer festively lit for Christmas but still sparkling. Down southward, to the
neighborhood. Familiar sights, PS118, the boarding house, Gerald Field, Green Meats, Mrs. Vitello's, Slausen's… things we would see every day, but never again from this angle. I circled around an extra time just so we could take it in.

Northward again, once again crossing Midtown this time on the east side, then up through the rich part of town. Past that, along the causeway to the industrial/corporate sector, as the MDI building began to loom in the distance.

"Arnold?" I asked.

"Yes?"

"Would it be so bad if I just… kept going? If I went past the building and we just kept on flying and never looked back?"

"Is that what you really want?"

"No, of course not. It'd be kinda stupid to just abandon my family when I'm actually talking to all of them again. But… this is just kind of a perfect moment and I want to savor it."

"Well…. You don't have to land right away."

"No, I don't, do I."

And for a few more minutes, we just circled around, enjoying the view and the togetherness.

--

Phoebe and Rhonda were already waiting on the roof when I finally descended.

"Princess, what gives?" I asked. "I thought you'd be the first in line if there was a cure."

"Well, we agreed that we'd all wait here for you and go in together."

"Yeah, you really didn't have to," I replied. "It's fine."

"That and…" She mumbled something.

"What's that? I didn't hear-"

"I said I'm not so sure I want to go back to normal."

I raised an eyebrow. "What, are extra body parts suddenly the new big thing out of Paris?"

"I know, it sounds crazy, but I've actually grown to like the new me. I know I always say 'it's better to look good than feel good', but… I feel good. And hey, I'm still pretty hot even as a mutant."

I groaned. "You make it really hard to like you sometimes."

"Ah, c'mon, you love my in-your-face self-confidence."

"If that's what you wanna call it… Phoebe, you wanna be normal, right?"

Phoebe gave me a knowing look. "A part of me does, but… another part of me doesn't. Do you want to know what I think, or do you want to convince yourself to go through with it?"

I felt my cheeks burning. "Does it really matter? The world wants us to be normal. And while I like being different and powerful, I also wanna do other stuff, like go to college and get married write a
bunch of successful books and be rich and famous and maybe decide who lives and who dies. And most of that, I can't do like this, not without attracting a lot of the wrong kind of attention. Sure, Wheezin' Ed's dead and Bill's banished forever and no one is currently trying to kill us, but it's only a matter of time. We attract negative attention just by existing."

Rhonda considered my words. "You kind of make a good case there. There are a bunch of 'normal-life' things I still want to do."

"I suppose my current appearance will make attending Stamford in the future a bit hard," Phoebe added.

"Well, I guess that's it then. Here's to the final meeting of... did we ever come up with a name for this whole team thing we have going?" I asked.

Rhonda shrugged. "I don't think so. Didn't really seem important."

"Well, I guess it doesn't really matter now." I mused. "C'mon. Let's go get cured."

--

"The key, I found, was located here, at the juncture of these matrices. By modifying these base connections, I was able to introduce foreign coding and rewrite..."

Stanford Pines was rambling on and on about something or other in front of a diagram of our weird "honeycomb" DNA molecules and I wasn't understanding a word of it. Rhonda looked lost, I was beginning to nod off, and even our resident science geek seemed bored. "Pheeb, for the love of Mike, pleaase translate this into English," I prodded.

"Helga, I'm as lost as you are," she said.

"Oh, c'mon, say it ain't so!"

She glared. "I'm in sixth grade, Helga. Do you honestly think I know as much as a sixty-plus-year-old superscientist who has traveled the entire universe? I swear, sometimes you treat me like I'm some kind of magical supercomputer!"

"..sorry. I really didn't know you felt that way."

"...and by switching out the single bond for a double bond..."

Taking mercy on us, Stella interrupted. "Long story short... We figured out how to hack the virus." She tapped the intercom. "You can come out now, Lila."

"All right," her voice answered. The door opened, and a very human-looking Lila, wearing a hospital gown, emerged.

"Whoa," I said. "You really did do it."

"It's actually a bit more complicated than-"

Suddenly, Lila froze up. "Sorry... I thought I'd be able to hold it longer," she said. Her skin rapidly shifted back to an emerald tone as her extra limbs regrew and her more alien facial and bodily features reasserted themselves. She shook her head. "How long was it this time?"

"Nearly fifty minutes," Stella said approvingly, checking her watch. "Almost a quarter-hour longer than the last time. How was the pain?"
"Much, much less," Lila answered. "It was mostly just a dull throb this time."

"Good," Stella replied. "Your body's adapting to the shifting. If all goes right, eventually switching forms will come as easily as changing clothes."

"Gosh, do you think so?" asked Lila.

"You'll probably need a few more boosters, but yes… you should have full control of your changes soon."

"Wait," Rhonda said. "What exactly are we looking at here?"

"Well… Dr. Pines got a bit technical. Let me break down exactly what this is. See,, when Lila told you we had a 'cure', it wasn't entirely accurate. It's actually more akin to a vaccine… of a sort.

"Basically, I was stuck, because I didn't know exactly what we were dealing with. I had no frame of reference for extraterrestrial viruses. Ford – that is, Dr. Pines – has over thirty years of experience with the extraterrestrial, and he was able to recognize the source of the original infection. It was a race of near-extinct plant-animal-hybrid dragons called the Ka'Thaari. When their homeworld was destroyed, most were wiped out, but some of the spores they used to reproduce clung to fragments of their world. Long story short: a few chunks of the Ka'Thaari Homeworld wound up on Earth, and you girls stumbled, literally, onto one of them.

"Once we established, exactly, what you were, we were able to start breaking down your new genome by plugging what Ford knew into what we already knew. We extracted a sample of the virus in your blood, and modified it to rewrite your DNA… or 'XNA', as we call it now… to give you the ability to restore your old appearance for periods of time that should increase as you get more used to it.

"It's not really a cure… you'll mostly still be the same on this inside… but it's the best we can do for now," she finished apologetically.

"So, what you're basically saying is," Rhonda asked to confirm, "we'll still be super-powered beings, but we'll be able to look normal and go back to school and go out in public without being stared at and all that?"

"That's about the size of it, yes," Stella answered her.

"I'm cool with that," she replied.

"Yeah," I said, "that… actually kinda sounds pretty great."

"You're not disappointed?" Stella asked.

"Not at all," Phoebe said. "Actually, all of us were rather ambivalent about the prospect of permanently losing our alien forms. They're odd, yes, and rather difficult to adapt to, but also…"

"'Unique' and 'Special'?" I supplied doing my best Mr. Simmons.

"…yes. That," Phoebe finished. "We've all grown to appreciate the gifts they bring… at least the three of us have. Though I don't begrudge Lila holding out hope for a permanent cure." She looked hopefully at the green-skinned redhead.

"To be perfectly honest," she replied, "…no, I'm not very comfortable with my new self yet. I'm not sure I'll ever be. But, well… I am glad that it's led to this bond I share with the three of you. If that
remains strong in the future, well, then, everything I've gone through has been worth it."

"Awww," Rhonda said. "Group hug!"

"Wha- No! No! I'm not ready-" I protested as six pairs of arms locked around me into a crushing embrace.

Having friends better be worth this.

--

-ARNOLD-

Was it a rule that waiting room magazines had to be terribly out of date? The Sports Illuminated I was reading was speculating on whether 2018 would be the New York Knicks' best season ever (a thought well past wishful thinking and bordering on psychotic delusion). I was only half-paying attention; my thoughts were entirely on the treatments Helga was undergoing. Sure, Lila had already undergone them with no discernable problems, but it was still a more-or-less untested procedure and anything could go wrong. Especially dealing with alien physiology. I inwardly shuddered at the memory of Wheezin' Ed's dying form, a near-unrecognizable mass of mutated tumors. The thought of something like happening to Helga was horrifying.

"She'll be all right," my dad assured me, picking up on my nervousness.

"How do you know? They're literally hacking her DNA. Who knows what that could do?"

"I trust your mom, kiddo. The twelve-fingered science hobo not so much, but your mom'll keep him in check. And, well… let's just say I have this feeling that everything's going to work out in the end, all right?" It seemed like he knew something more than he was letting on, something very specific, but he wasn't telling and I was in too nervous a state to want to pry.

I resumed my inattentive skimming of the magazine, currently a feature on the Hillwood Caribou's goalie, Ivan Alloyshavich Smerdyakov. I tried in vain to allow it to take my attention.

"Yo, Football Head!"

My head snapped up.

She was beautiful.

"So… Helga Classic. More or less. Watcha think?"

She'd changed back into one of her old pink-and-white dresses, her hair once again set in pigtails, bow perched atop her head. Her face was almost as he'd remembered it, save one difference.

"I actually kinda miss the monobrow," I found myself saying.

"Yeah," Helga admitted. "Me too, a little. But I think those follicles are just gone now or something. What I really wanna know is where my upper eyebrow goes. It's just kinda… not there when I'm 'human', but comes back when I change back again."

"How does it feel?" I asked.

"Weird. Kinda like I'm… blunted. I sorta still feel my extra parts but they're not there. Your mom says that's gonna eventually go away as I get more used to switching forms, but for now it's kind of disorienting. And my powers just kinda… shut off when I'm like this."
"So… what you're saying is you're normal."

"More or less. My organs are still messed up and my blood is still the wrong color, and I'm not invulnerable but I still have the super-healing and I can still mentally communicate with the girls because my brain's unchanged… I'm sure your mom can explain it all to you. In the meantime, though… on the outside at least, I'm back to the old Helga. At least until I have to change back. So… disappointed I'm the plain old me again?"

I smiled. "Helga, 'plain' is not a word I'd ever use to describe you. But if you're asking if I like you any less like this… of course not! I think you're beautiful this way, and I think you're beautiful as a three-eyed, four-armed mutant!"

"What if I had ten arms?" she teased.

"That would just mean more hugs."

"What if I had two heads?"

"More eyes to gaze into and more lips to kiss."

"What if I was a big gross slime-covered worm-thing?"

"Well, getting a grip on you might be a little hard, but I'm sure we'd find a way."

"What if I learned the accordion?"

I mock-winced. "Oooh. That's a tough one. But I'm sure I could learn to love you, as soon as I got the surgery to permanently cut my auditory nerves."

"Oh… come here and kiss me, ya big lug," she said, yanking me close for a smooch.

"I kinda got used to the lizard tongue," I said when we separated. "But this is also nice."

"Flatterer."

"So… shall we go to Slausens' to celebrate?"

"Probably not a good idea since I'm not stable yet… but I will take a rain check for as soon as I can hold on to this form for more than a couple of hours."

"It's a date. How about Chinese takeout and Fight Fighters, then?"

"Sounds like a plan, Hair Boy."

--

That evening, Miles and Stella were curled up in bed, celebrating the end of Stella's late nights. Well, technically, they'd just finished celebrating. At the moment, they were basking in the afterglow.

"It's been way too long," Stella said, snuggling up to her husband.

"Waaaay too long," agreed Miles. "But hey, it was worth the wait."

"That it was," Stella remarked. "So… are you ever going to tell her?"

"Tell her what?" Miles asked, feigning ignorance.

"You know exactly what."
"I really don't see the need," he said. "It's not like it's something she needs to worry about at this age."

"So you're not ever going to mention that mural we found in the darkest depths of the Green Eyes' Temple, ten years ago. The mural of Xothipacla, the Goddess of Love… who just happens to have pink skin, golden hair, three eyes, four arms, bat wings, and a lion tail. And a mortal lover who looked an awful lot like a grown-up version of our son."

"Like I said… it really doesn't seem like the kind of thing that needs to concern her right now. Let her grow up, and if it's her destiny to be a love goddess, well, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it, won't we."

"Hmmm… mother-in-law of a goddess. I could get used to the thought."

"Getting a little ahead of yourself there, dear. They haven't even graduated grade school yet."

"Let a mother dream, dear. Let a mother dream."

---

End Notes

The concept for this stories' narrative is that this is an autobiography written later by our heroes, and they're alternating chapters. Therefore, I'll be alternating the POV every chapter and I might bring in some others later.

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