Beyond This Morning

by Renaerys

Summary

Once upon a time, three little girls were born to save the world. Years later, someone who has never forgotten the cost is ready to collect.

-Or-

The Girls reunite in Townsville in the wake of a shared loss long left unacknowledged. A string of missing persons cases has the police stymied, while an unexpected uptick in monster attacks tests the limits of the Girls' trust—in each other and in those they once vowed to vanquish.

Adult PPG/RRB
I’ve been toying with the idea of a proper PPG multi-chapter fic for years. The show was a staple of my childhood media consumption, and the Girls have always had a special place in my heart. For those of you here for some romance, this is properly tagged as PPG/RRB and will be inclusive of all three ships.

Because the Boys and Girls are Adults™ here, this fic is rated Mature for language, adult content, and adult themes. I want to explore the mundane, normal, sometimes heartbreaking struggles that come with being adults responsible for their own mistakes and happiness, but complicated further by what it means for them to be Super in a post-PPG world.

This starts off slow, but we are fast going to get into the thick of things. There is some violence, but not enough to warrant a warning tag. This fic is going to get a little (a lot) angsty, but stick with me and you’ll eventually be rewarded with a bona fide Happy Ending. Thanks for reading, and I really hope you enjoy!

Like all nineteen-year-old boys, Danny Chang had big dreams for his future. A Freshman computer science major at Citiesville Community College, he saw himself joining the ranks of Google or Apple making technology that would change the world. He worked hard, knowing he faced stiff competition from others like him at far more prestigious universities, but hard work was in his blood.

His mother, Doris, had come to this country when she was his age, ignorant of the language and culture, and she’d carved out a space for herself working long hours at the Wright Chalk Factory. She’d had dreams, too. Dreams that included a better life for her son than the life she had led.

But dreams were sand through a sieve without hard work to realize them. Doris had labored at the factory, and now Danny delivered pizzas in his 2008 Subaru Outback. Ragazzi’s didn’t pay for gas, but he didn’t want to schlep around Citiesville at night on a bike, so sacrifices had to be made.

Tonight, he had an extra incentive to get his deliveries done as quickly as possible. There was a show off-campus that he wanted to check out. Danny wasn’t a big partier, but there would be a DJ performing who was only playing this weekend, and he wanted to check it out.

He parked alongside the curb across the street from an apartment building to deliver two large Meat Lover’s pizzas and locked the Subaru. He wasn’t familiar with the area, which was in the oceanside district clear on the other side of the city from his school. It was dark, just after 8 p.m., and there was hardly anyone about, not even many cars. It was a quiet, residential area that seemed out of place in a city that never slept.

The apartment lobby was brightly lit, and the automatic doors slid open at his approach. A sleek, modern interior greeted him, white and cold and expensive. There was no one at the front dest, and an elevator required a security badge to access. Danny set the pizzas on the desk and rang the service bell. The chime echoed loudly against the high ceiling, as though trying to fill a space far
too large for something so tremulous.

He caught his warped reflection in the silver bell and scratched his baby-smooth chin. He had a young face, too young to go anywhere without a fake ID, but he’d remembered to bring his tonight. It was a photo of a thirty-five-year-old Filipino man name Vicente Mendoza, but to the brutish, white bar bouncers, he looked the same as the hundreds of Asian men who lived in the city. Thank god for casual, everyday racism, at least for tonight.

Danny smiled wryly at the thought. One day, none of this would matter. He’d have a degree, he’d land a good job, and he’d be making enough money to support both his aged, single mother and himself. And then, he wouldn’t have to be Vicente Mendoza anymore.

Lost in thought, he realized that he’d been standing here for several minutes, and yet no one had answered the bell call. He walked around the desk, leaving the pizzas.

“Hello? Pizza delivery.”

No sound through the door marked “Staff Only”. He tried knocking on it, but no one came. The door was locked. The lobby desk was immaculate and sparse with only a desktop computer, a cup of pens, and locked file drawers.

“Hello? Is anyone here?” He rang the bell again, but no one came. “Great, a prank order. This’ll come out of my paycheck.”

It happened every so often, but his boss was a stingy old bastard who refused to swallow the cost when it happened. Sighing, he fished out his phone to call his mother and see if she was awake and able to take the pizzas. They shouldn’t go to waste.

Before he could scroll to her contact, the staff door opened and a woman in a rumpled skirt suit emerged. She smiled brightly. “Can I help you with something?”

Danny blinked. “Uh, yeah. Someone ordered a couple pizzas.”

She glanced at the pizzas. “Are you sure you have the right address?”

He checked the address on the order and read it to her. “Two Meat Lover’s pizzas for Joaquin.”

The woman’s painted smile twitched. “There’s no one here by that name. I’m sorry, it seems like someone called in a fake order and sent you on a wild goose chase.”

Danny sighed. “Yeah, I figured as much. Listen, do you want the pizzas?”

“Me?”

“It’s just, my boss docks delivery staff’s pay when this happens, so if you can take them, it’d really help me out—”

She’d fished out a few bills from a wallet she’d produced before he could finish. “Here, I’m sorry for your trouble. Please be on your way.”

Danny accepted the bills. She’d given him a $100 bill. “Uh, this is, like, way too much. I don’t even think I have enough cash on me to break this.”

She shook her head. “It’s fine, keep the change and leave the building. We’re not open to visitors at this hour, so you really can’t be here.”
Danny took a moment to look at her properly this time. She was white, forties, brunette, bright red lips. Her suit wasn’t rumpled, but disheveled, like she’d been doing something physical. What was that brownish stain on her collar?

“Hey lady, are you okay? You look…”

Impossibly, she smiled even brighter and walked around the desk to him. “I’m just fine, but I really must insist that you be on your way now. You really can’t be here.”

Clickety-clack, her heels on the tile. She took his elbow and squeezed, still smiling. He was reminded of those A.I. robocallers that sounded like talking to a real person, until they were asked if they were robots. Of course I’m a real person—cue the forced giggling.

Danny was very much ready to leave. He headed for the door. That was when the elevator dinged and the doors opened.

A man in a one-piece, navy uniform stumbled out the doors and hit the ground with a thud. Danny and the woman turned. Delirious, blue eyes found Danny’s as the man on the ground, sweating so profusely that Danny wondered if he was actually drenched in oil, struggled to get through the doors.

“What the hell?” Danny said.

The woman tightened her grip on his elbow painfully hard. Her smile was gone when she spoke into a sleek radio piece in her ear that Danny hadn’t even noticed before. “Security to the main lobby. The test subject is here and conscious—Out of the fucking elevator! Just hurry!”

Danny tried to struggle away from her and from the madman on the floor inching closer to them. Was that a rash on his neck and cheeks? He looked severely unwell. “Let go of me!”

Her grip tightened around him. “It’s a little late for that, sweetie.”

All the blood drained from Danny’s face as he met her gaze. Gone was the plastered automaton decorum. The woman staring back at him was as cold as a corpse. There was no light in her eyes, no mercy, and a primal part of Danny knew she wasn’t going to let him leave here alive.

He began to struggle in earnest. “Get off me!”

The man on the floor coughed as he dragged himself over the tiles. His nails were long, too long for a man’s, and cracked the tile were he dug his fingers in. “Please,” he slurred, his eyes feverish and unfocused. “I got ‘em what they wanted, please—hrrrnh!”

He vomited right there, black bile that looked more like petroleum than anything the human body could discharge.

Danny moved without thinking. He shoved the woman with all his might, no longer caring about the money or about her. He had to get out of here by any means necessary. The shove surprised her, and her grip loosened. He had his chance to run, and he did.

He made it three steps before he tripped over his feet in his haste, landed on the floor, and smashed his nose. Blood and pain erupted in his face, and he screamed in agony. Even still, he had to move. He had to move. He got to his unsteady feet, his head swimming, and the woman was on him with her small but steely hands. He flailed. She held on, until she didn’t.

The man on the floor had crawled close enough to grab her ankle, and he yanked with surprising
strength until all three of them were on the floor again. A terrible, fetid stink made Danny’s eyes water, and he realized it was coming from the man. The woman shrieked incoherently. She inadvertently smacked Danny in the face, making him see stars, and he fell back, dazed. He vaguely registered the elevator doors opening again, and a group of people in black with rifles poured out. People shouted, shoes slapped the tile, and Danny willed himself to escape this nightmare.

The woman screamed, and something cracked. Maybe not in that order. Danny didn’t care, he was on his feet and stumbling for the doors, but he never made it. A sharp pain in his shoulder startled him, and the second one in his neck sent him crashing back to the floor in a heap. He was not getting up again. He could barely feel his limbs as the tranquilizer seeped into his bones like lead weighing him down.

Through his tears, he caught a blurry vision of the madman, also shot, rising impossibly on his knees with a guttural roar. The woman lay on the floor nearby; she wasn’t moving. Uniformed men shouted at each other, and the man swiped at them with his rash-red claws. Danny didn’t think it was possible for a person’s skin to be such an angry shade of crimson.

“Restrain it!” barked one of the men.

Soon, they did. The madman fell mostly still, twitching only erratically.

“Is she alive?” asked another.

“Doesn’t matter. Grab her and the kid. And get the cleaners in here. This room reeks like a Lumpkins’ armpit.”

Danny felt arms envelop him and haul him up. He tried to protest, to scream, but he couldn’t even move. His transporter carried him over the bodies of the woman, who Danny instinctively knew must be dead, and the madman still writhing. The rash desiccated his skin and split it like scales.

“Hey, who ordered pizza?”

“Joaquin mentioned something. I’ll grab them. Damn, I could eat a horse after chasing that ugly fucker all the way up from Level 7.”

Someone laughed. One of the uniforms grabbed the pizzas.

“Please,” Danny muttered, his own voice unrecognizable and blood from his broken nose acrid in his mouth.

“Sorry, kid,” said the man carrying him in the elevator. “Just bad luck, I guess.”

The man carrying the pizzas joined them while the others remained. “Smells good. Is that pepperoni?”

Danny wept silently as he hung limp and upside-down, and the elevator carried him down to depths unknown. He closed his eyes and passed out, and he didn’t dream.

It was raining when Blossom exited the Citiesville International Airport. She stared at the multitude of Ubers and Lyfts clogging the Departures level like ants escaping a flood. People cursed and slammed doors in their haste to escape the downpour and make their red eye flights. A woman with two enormous Husky dogs argued with a terminal employee, a mess of jabbing fingers and spittle-slick lips. A baby cried in a stroller, uncomfortably jostled as its father ran too quickly
across the street to catch up with its mother and their two overstuffed suitcases.

Blossom took a step toward the grey outside and nearly tripped when an older gentleman rushing to get inside out of the rain bumped her shoulder. She caught herself easily, but dropped her black roller on the ground with a smack. The man didn’t stop to apologize, let alone to help her with her luggage. She closed her eyes and breathed. She tasted tangy smog in the back of her throat under the layers of damp, concrete city.

After a moment to collect herself, she picked up her bag, fished out her phone from her jacket pocket, and called a Lyft. Ten minutes later, Carlos the Lyft driver popped the trunk of his Corolla so she could load up her roller bag, and she settled in the backseat. Light brown eyes found hers in the rearview mirror, lingering.

“The Marigold Inn,” he said as he pulled out of the roundabout and headed for the freeway. “You here on vacation, Blossom?”

Blossom tensed at the sound of her name on a stranger’s lips, but a quick glance at his mounted Pixel and her picture hovering in the corner of the screen reminded her that of course he knew her name, it was part of the app. She averted her gaze out the window all the same. “I wouldn’t call it that.”

Instead of taking the hint, Carlos pushed his luck. “Well, it may not look like much from here, but your part of town’s got a view of the bay. Nice when it’s sunny.”

“Mm.”

Blossom watched the rain run down the window of Carlos’ silver Corolla as the industrial, concrete grey of the south side city limits gave way to the imperious, glass and steel grey of downtown Citiesville. Even she in all her natural, fiery red paled and waned under all that dreary monotony. Not that it mattered. Waterlogged and exhausted from the flight and the whirlwind day leading up to it, Blossom was more ashes than open flame as she stared out the window at this tired city she had never imagined setting foot in again so soon.

There was a lot she’d never imagined happening these days.

Carlos was talking to her again, but she didn’t catch it. “Sorry, what did you say?”

He glanced at her surreptitiously in the rearview mirror. “Just saying if you’re new around here and you wanted some company, you know, I’ve lived here my whole life, so I know my way around.”

Blossom must have been glaring at him something spectacular because he immediately backtracked.

“Uh, not that I’m hitting on you or something. Sorry, I just meant…” He rubbed his mouth. “Shit, please don’t dock my rating for that.”

“It’s fine, don’t worry about it,” Blossom said.

He watched her in the mirror again as they paused at a stoplight. “You just seem a little sad, is all.”

Blossom had the overwhelming urge to laugh at him then. She didn’t. She smiled thinly. “Nonsense, I’m here to see my sisters. I couldn’t be happier.”

Carlos didn’t try to strike up conversation with her again, and she was glad for it. She mumbled a
thank you when he dropped her off in front of her hotel, retrieved her bag from the trunk, and trudged inside to check in. Bubbles had offered her a room back at their childhood home—now solely Bubbles’ home—but Blossom had refused. She didn’t want to impose, she’d said. Bubbles hadn’t pressed her over the phone, but she had promised they would talk about it again when Blossom landed.

Blossom hadn’t called Bubbles to let her know she’d arrived yet. She was pretty sure she wasn’t going to.

After settling in to her queen bed suite and opening up the curtains (with a view of the solemn, foggy bay, Carlos hadn’t been lying about that), Blossom headed for the bathroom to wash her face. Under the stale lights, her pale skin appeared sallow and jaundiced. The bags under her half-lidded, pink eyes were shadowy and sore. Her waist-length red hair was tangled and damp from the rain. Thirty years old with the world at her feet and her future bright ahead of her, and she looked like she’d died ten years ago. No wonder Carlos had thrown her a bone, Jesus Christ.

But even here in this tiny, bleached, hotel bathroom with its cheap bar soap and stingy little two-in-one shampoo bottles, Blossom scraped together the last dregs of her pride and splashed cold water on her face. A quick hair brush and some mascara later, and she was out the door in jeans and a simple cardigan with no destination in mind as long as it was not here.

“I need a drink,” she said to the receptionist on duty, a high school boy named Todd with an unfortunate brush of acne under his jaw.

“Um…”

Blossom sighed. “Sorry, I’m not usually this rude.” She ran her hand through her long ponytail, a calming force of habit. “Just please point me to the nearest bar.”

Todd the receptionist gathered his high school courage and helpfully provided Blossom with a map of the area. The nearest bar was a convenient few blocks away, and the Marigold had plastic ponchos for guests daring enough to brave the rain. Blossom donned the clear plastic and headed out.

B-3 was nothing special judging from its concrete and sheet glass façade, but inside it was almost welcoming. Worn, leather tub chairs huddled around low tables between exposed, wooden support beams. The repossessed concrete walls were bare and cracked in places, but in a manner that suggested fashionable destruction rather than shabby upkeep. Edison lights hung on skinny cords from the high ceiling and cast the open room in a warm, buttery glow. A long, dark bar stretched the length of the far wall.

Blossom removed her dripping poncho and dumped the sopping heap in the umbrella stand at the door without much thought. She made her way past a few seated patrons to the bar and took a seat at the end. Her phone buzzed.

[Bubbles: Did you land yet?]

[Bubbles: Your flight status said you landed over an hour ago. Where are you?]

Blossom’s thumbs hovered over her iPhone’s keyboard, but she drew a blank. All she could do was stare at the bright screen.

“Brave of you to come out in the rain,” said the bartender. Pale fingers slipped a cocktail napkin toward her. “What’s your poison?”
Blossom didn’t bother looking up as she traced Bubbles’ smiling icon with her thumb. “I’ll have a glass of red wine, please. Dry.”

When he didn’t respond or move out of her space right away, Blossom frowned. She was really not in the mood to be hit on or even talked to right now, but she was running out of what little courtesy she still had in her and—

“Blossom?”

It took her a moment to recognize him after so many years, but there was no mistaking those deer-in-the-headlights baby blues. “Boomer?”

“Damn, it really is you.” He offered her a small but genuine smile and leaned forward on his elbows. Cornflower bangs fell into his eyes in a way that she may have found pretty if he were anyone else. A three-piece suit flattered him the way fashion always flatters a good figure, but it didn’t quite suit his style. There was nothing dark or smoldering about Boomer. Or, there hadn’t used to be. “What’s it been, ten years?”

“Twelve,” Blossom corrected him. “High school graduation.”

He grinned. “I think you might be off by a few days, or did you forget the grad party at Vista Lake?”

Blossom set her jaw. She hadn’t thought about high school in ages. She hadn’t much cared to. “Right.”

He studied her, and she found that odd. Boomer had never been the studious type, be it books or people. Not that she remembered, at least. She was starting to wonder if she remembered much at all.

“I’ll be right back with your wine.” He winked and headed to the opposite end of the bar where a collection of wine bottles sat waiting.

Blossom sat back in her bar stool. Of all the bars she could have walked into, it had to be one where someone from her past worked—a former Rowdyruff Boy, of all the things. What were the chances?

Briefly, bizarrely, she fantasized about reaching across the bar, grabbing him by his perfectly smoothed black tie, and launching him clear across the room to open up more cracks in the concrete wall. Her unused muscles tingled with the phantom sensation of exerting her unique brand of force, and her pulse spiked. To just break something, someone—someone who wouldn’t truly break so it was okay, it wouldn’t actually hurt him, just crack him open—

“One very dry, very French wine for the lady.” Boomer deposited a goblet filled with dark wine on her cocktail napkin.

Blossom bit her tongue hard enough to taste blood, but the pain dissolved in mere seconds thanks to the Chemical X bonded to her bones. She fished out her wallet from her purse.

“On the house.” Boomer was still watching her with that pensive, soft smile.

“That’s not necessary.”

He shrugged. “My bar, my rules.”
Without meaning to, Blossom’s sharp mind filed that information away for later. It was like a sponge, her brain—always soaking up facts and gossip and so many secrets until it was too much to contain in her skull, the pressure enough to burst. In lieu of answering, she took a long gulp of the wine.

Boomer said nothing as he watched her drink down half the glass in two sips and set the goblet down with a heavy sort of permanence.

“Thanks,” she muttered. A migraine teased her temples like butterfly kisses. She was definitely going to need more wine before the night was over.

“Sure.” He reached behind the bar and produced a small bowl of peanuts and a lounge menu for her. “Try the sliders. You won’t regret it.”

Blossom let herself really look at him then. He was tall, just shy of six feet, and he filled out his suit as well as anyone with inhuman strength and ability ought to, she supposed. His baby-faced, boy-next-door charm from his youth had given way to a strong jawline and wiry frame that probably pleased many a patron on lonely nights, but not Blossom. The only thing that could please her tonight would be another glass of wine.

Those hooded, blue eyes watched her a little too carefully, she noted.

“There’s not much you can do with grilled meat in a bun that hasn’t already been done before;” Blossom said.

He laughed, light and amiable. “No reason to fix what’s not broken.” He took the menu from her and went to order the sliders.

Blossom had not been looking for company tonight, least of all from a former Rowdyruff Boy. There was…history there. And while it had been years since Boomer and his notorious brothers had outgrown their wanton destructive tendencies and general penchant for mischief and mayhem (as far as the public was concerned), there was no forgetting who they were, why they were created, where they had come from. There was no forgetting where she’d come from, either.

Well, glass of wine number two might have something to say about that.

“What about Napa? It’d be perfect—we could have the ceremony at a vineyard all to ourselves.”

Blossom downed the rest of her wine to drown out that phantom voice in her head. She grimaced. It was a nice wine, really. It didn’t deserve her crass mistreatment of it. But some things could not be salvaged no matter how pretty or perfect they appeared to be on the outside.

Boomer returned with a long plate topped with three micro burgers and some smoky dipping sauce. “Another?” he asked, eyeing her empty wine glass, and then her empty hands.

Blossom hid her hands on her lap. She hadn’t even realized she’d been rubbing her bare fingers. “Yes, please.”

“Coming right up.”

She picked at the food. It occurred to her that she’d skipped dinner. The flight out here hadn’t exactly been smooth planning. As it was, she’d barely had the nerve to brave her apartment to pack up her clothes and a toothbrush before she got the hell out of there and called Bubbles to sob her stupid, broken heart out because she’d had no one else to call.
Weird how we are loneliest when the only ones left to reach out to are family.

Boomer returned with a fresh glass of wine just as Blossom forced herself to swallow a bite of food. “So, what’s the verdict? Was I right or what?”

Blossom washed down her food with a deep swallow of wine. “It’s fine.” And then, because she just couldn’t help herself no matter how terrible her day was going, “Thank you.”

He left to tend to some of the other patrons for a bit, and Blossom nursed her pitiful dinner. Her phone buzzed; Bubbles again, asking where she was. Blossom sighed, finished her second glass of wine, and texted back.

[Blossom: I’m fine. Checked in to a hotel.]

Immediately, Bubbles wrote back.

[Bubbles: No way!!!! You’re staying here. I’m coming to get you, okay? Just text me the address.]

Blossom rubbed her temples and reminded herself that Bubbles meant well. She’d picked up the phone, which was more than Blossom could say for Buttercup. Life as a big city detective must be as busy as it was harrowing, she supposed. Not that Blossom blamed her sister; she probably would not have picked up in Buttercup’s shoes, either.

[Blossom: I’ll see you tomorrow.]

She turned off her phone.

“So what’s a hotshot lawyer from Metroville doing back in our neck of the woods, anyway?” Boomer asked as he polished glasses. “You here to put away a murderer or something?”

Blossom could only guess that Boomer knew about her current (former) career through Bubbles. Which meant they had stayed in touch. Which meant…something. Honestly, right now, she didn’t care enough to dwell on it. “Not many murderers out there killing corporations.”

Boomer nodded like he understood this perfectly. “Huh. I always thought you’d end up doing, like, pro bono. Public defender, immigration, you know.” He nodded at her.

You know.

Blossom pushed her empty glass of wine toward him in a silent request. “Not much money in that. Student debt doesn’t pay for itself.”

He accepted her glass and pulled the wine bottle out from beneath the bar. “I guess I wouldn’t know.”

He poured, and she watched. The third glass went down smooth like water, a worthy contender to her building migraine. Chemical X could work wonders, but it could do nothing for stress.

“This is your bar,” she said, a little surprised at herself for initiating conversation when she’d come here to do the exact opposite. She blamed the way he reminded her of Bubbles. Sometimes there was no helping talking to someone who was genuinely listening.

“For the past three years, yeah.” He smirked. “Don’t know about student debt, but commercial rent’s a bitch and a half.”

Blossom cracked a smile. “Then you could use all the customers you can get.” She went for her
wallet again and slid her credit card toward him.

“Blossom—”

“Just take it, please. I get double points on dining, anyway.” She went back to her new glass of wine.

He let out a sharp breath. “Right.”

With her tab now open and waiting, she was not shy about ordering dessert. Boomer poured her a glass of water, unsolicited.

“I'll put it on your tab,” he teased.

Tongue loosened with alcohol and her self-restraint tossed to the wind considering the circumstances that had landed her back here in the first place, Blossom was forthright. “You’re not like I remember you. Not at all.”

His eyes flashed with something she couldn’t read, it was gone too fast. “What, not an awkward teenager trying to cover up his insecurities by playing the class clown? Or not dumb?”

“Not clueless,” she said, ignoring the self-deprecating opening. She hadn’t lost all her wits, thank you. “You’re...perceptive.”

He watched her a moment, perceptive as he was. “You see a lot standing behind a bar.”

“So, what do you see?”

Slowly, as if not to spook her, he leaned on the bar and showed her his palms. “How ’bout you tell me?”

Unbidden, Blossom recalled an incident far in the past when Boomer, stripped of his smelly clothes and trapped in the basement of her childhood home, sat curled up in the corner, barely able to move.

“I don’t care what they say,” he’d said, more to himself than to Blossom and Buttercup. “I’m not dumb.”

She sipped her wine to hide her trembling lip. “I don’t think I’ve had enough wine to entertain such a conversation with you.”

“Always gotta be the leader, huh?” he said.

“What does that mean?”

He took her empty slider plate and discreetly pushed her water glass closer. “You know what it means.”

She said nothing, and he left to deposit her dish in the sink. Blossom set her jaw and reached over the bar for the bottle of red to refill her glass, seeing as he wasn’t going to do it.

At some point, she was good and drunk. It wasn’t an exact minute or second she could pinpoint, more like a gradual awareness that yeah, this was happening, and finally. With all the Chemical X in her system burning away night and day, it was hard to enjoy a stiff drink like a normal person.

“You’re never going to be normal, Bloss!”
Blossom rubbed her tired eyes hard, willing his voice back down to the black pit in her heart whence it came. Boomer was busy seeing to other patrons, and if she wasn’t so determined to wallow in her own issues, Blossom may have appreciated how good he was at his job putting on a show for those looking to be distracted. Even her, yes.

“It’s a guy,” she said when he paused near her to fill an order on the computer. “A man, I mean.” She sipped her wine. “Isn’t it always.”

Boomer eyed her over the computer, the greenish light garish on his cheeks. “Husband?”

Observant indeed. She would have to be more careful getting hammered in front of him. Next time. 

_Ha._


“He cheat on you?” He asked the question like he was asking after her good health.

Blossom said nothing, only drank her wine. Boomer’s gaze was heavy on her profile.

“You let him live?”

Blossom found that question absolutely hilarious, because he was him, and while he knew very little about her, he knew her like most never would, and he was dead serious. She burst out laughing. Boomer didn't even crack a smile as he waited for her to calm down.

“I forgot how funny you used to be,” she said, resting her chin on her palm.

“And Blossom thought that was an odd thing to ask. As if she might have been engaged to Wei and he never knew she was that Blossom, leader of the once-venerated Powerpuff Girls of Townsville, monster-slayer and superhero, unrivaled by the likes of mere mortal men so high up on her pedestal. As if he never swore that none of that mattered, that she was as much flesh and blood and heart as he was, and so goddamn beautiful he could cry. As if he couldn’t love her without expectation, unguarded, equally.

As if a man could love a god and expect to ever be anything more than just a man next to her.

“Yes,” she said, no longer caring that her breath hitched in front of him, that he could see what she normally kept so carefully composed because it just didn’t matter anymore. “He knew.”

She finished her glass of wine and gestured at him for another. He looked like he wanted to say something, but she glared at him over the rim. Unbidden, an old, achingly familiar heat pooled in the backs of her eyes, flashing them bloody red. Boomer pulled back instinctively, tense.

“Please,” she commanded.

He said nothing and fished out another bottle of wine for her. Blossom grabbed the bottle from him before he could put it away, and he didn’t fight her on it. Smart choice. Perhaps he really wasn’t as dumb as he used to be, she thought, deriving some meager, petty satisfaction from her judgment. It did nothing for her.

Blossom drank her wine, and Boomer didn’t try to engage her again, though he annoyingly hovered nearby as though to keep an eye on her. She was beginning to reconsider her earlier whim of
yanking him over the bar and beating the daylights out of him, just to know what it would feel like after years of calculated restraint.

At some point, Blossom stopped counting the glasses of wine as she slumped on the bar, half asleep and wholly drunk. And still her migraine persisted. She thought of Wei and his chunky glasses that she’d picked out as half a joke, and how he’d kept them because she’d said they made him look cute. How he’d proposed to her as they watched the sunrise over the ocean from their high rise apartment, quiet and over their usual morning coffee, soft whispers and gentle touches.

She thought of his late working nights and hers, so many billable hours and so many E.R. shifts. The way he’d clam up when someone occasionally recognized her and asked for an autograph, or a picture, or a show of that legendary strength. The fight they’d had after she’d abandoned their date night to intervene in a hit and run they witnessed, tearing off in a streak of blinding pink after the fleeing car, and the aftermath with the police. The odd texts he’d get in the middle of the night. The late nights that turned into over nights. The smell of someone else’s perfume on his scrubs. The look on his face when she accidentally grabbed his hand just a little too hard while they argued and sent him sprawling on the floor like a rag doll. The way she’d left with hardly more than the clothes on her back, because he’d told her to get out. Get out and don’t ever come back.

Most of all, though, she thought about how much she still loved him.

“Blossom,” said a gentle voice. A warm hand shook her shoulder. “Can you hear me?”

Blossom didn’t remember laying her head on the bar, and she certainly didn’t remember Bubbles being here. “Huh?”

“Hey, you.” Bubbles smoothed her bangs. Her big, blue eyes were glassy with unshed tears. “Come on, let’s get you home.”

“Let me help,” Boomer said somewhere above Blossom,

“It’s okay, I’ve got her.”

“You’re gonna fly her home in this rain?”

“No, I drove. You know that annoying ordinance. It’s fine, thanks for calling me, Boomer.”

“No problem…”

Blossom barely heard the rest of their conversation as she felt her body being pulled up and out the door, into the passenger seat of a car, and driven away.

“My hotel,” Blossom muttered, her face pressed to the glass.

“No way. You’re coming home and that’s final. Really, why didn’t you just come home in the first place…”

Blossom’s eyes followed the grey, wet city passing her by as Bubbles spoke softly, streetlights and smog, the red-painted suspension bridge that whined under the weight of cars. For the life of her, she couldn’t remember why she hadn’t just gone home. For years, she hadn’t been able to remember that.

She passed out just as they cleared the bridge and passed the colorful ‘Welcome to Townsville’ sign on the side of the freeway.
Getting a substitute teacher for twenty kindergarteners with less than 24 hours advance notice was impossible even for Bubbles, former superhero and current employee of the month at Pokey Oaks Elementary School. She felt awful leaving Blossom home alone in the state she was in, but it couldn’t be helped. With any luck, she’d sleep in through the hangover. Bubbles left her a handwritten note on the fridge telling her what time she’d be home, the Wifi password, and a drawing of a smiling elephant. A post script simply read, “Please don’t leave.” Bubbles hoped the message would get through to her impossibly stubborn sister.

She faced her kids and her day with a bright smile on her face, pulled her short, blonde hair into low pigtails, and busted out the finger paint.

Hours later, she flew home as fast as she could and all but broke the door clean off its hinges in her eagerness to get inside. “Blossom? Are you here?”

There was no answer, but she heard movement upstairs. Sighing in relief, she slumped against the kitchen counter and allowed herself a moment to breathe. She pulled out her phone and checked her messages. Nothing from Buttercup, to her extreme annoyance. Hadn’t she gotten all Bubbles’ texts and voicemails yesterday? The least she could do was reply.

There was, however, a text from Boomer.

[Boomer: You girls make it back to Townsville okay?]

She bit her lip to hide a smile.

[Bubbles: You worried about me?]

[Boomer: Am I allowed to be?]

She stared at her phone, not sure how to respond to that. She and Boomer had been down this path many times before, and somehow they always lost their way. Sometimes she wanted it that way, but there was only so much she could take before life found her again, or his brothers found him. Old habits died hard.

[Boomer: Obviously I know you can handle yourself. I just meant Blossom seemed pretty upset last night. Scared the shit out of me tbh. Reds have that temper you know…]

Bubbles sighed. Another moment missed. Oh well.

[Bubbles: She’s just going through a bad time. Sorry you got caught in the middle.]

[Boomer: It’s okay. Good excuse to call you 😘]

Bubbles shook her head. “Oh Boomer…”

[Boomer: She sticking around this time?]

[Bubbles: I don’t know.]

[Bubbles: I really hope so.]

[Boomer: I know.]

I know you do.

Bubbles tapped his contact. Her thumb hovered over the call button, but she hesitated. As much as
it would be nice to hear his voice, she wasn’t ready to let them fall back into old habits. Especially not with Blossom back in the picture in the state she was in. Family came first, always and forever. Like Boomer, Bubbles had never forgotten that promise.

[Bubbles: I have to go.]

[Boomer: Okay.]

She bit her lip hard enough to hurt, but pocketed her phone all the same and headed upstairs to find Blossom. She wasn’t in the spare bedroom Bubbles had made up for her, though the bed was neatly made and the pillows carefully fluffed. Yesterday’s clothes were tucked out of sight in a hamper, the bath towel perfectly folded and hung. Bubbles couldn’t help but smile at the orderly sight. Some things would never change.

She found Blossom on the floor in the Professor’s old bedroom just sitting there with her knees folded to her chest and a framed picture of their family all together the day of high school graduation. Her hair was long and loose over Bubbles’ borrowed clothes. The grey bedspread was covered in a thin layer of dust, and the room smelled faintly of stale musk, like the window had been closed for too long. A collared shirt and blue tie sat on the chestnut dresser, perfectly folded like the day they had been placed there, untouched.

Bubbles bit her tongue, and her heart rate spiked. It had been a long time since she’d last set foot in this room. Slowly, she stepped across the threshold. Blossom didn’t even look at her as she stared at the family picture.

In silence, Bubbles carefully sank down on the green throw rug next to her sister, close enough to feel her warmth. She didn’t say anything, and neither did Blossom. They just sat there together looking at themselves smiling for the camera, their arms around Buttercup and the Professor like they were really, truly happy.

“Do you ever wish you could go back?” Blossom asked after a while.

Bubbles looked at her, but Blossom was still watching the picture of them, as if it was the only thing that existed. “To high school?”

“To naïveté.”

Bubbles laid a hand over Blossom’s. “I miss him, too.”

“I miss his love.” Blossom closed her eyes, which were red-rimmed like she’d been crying. Bubbles only just noticed. “I don’t think anyone in the world will ever love me like he did.”

“Oh Blossom…” Bubbles couldn’t help her own tears as she clutched her sister’s hand like she used to do when they were little and she was afraid of the dark and Blossom always knew how to be brave enough for the both of them. “I love you.”

She sniffled and felt her tears fall, and Blossom pulled her close in a hug. “I know you do,” she said, weary and bone dry.

Bubbles wished more than anything that it could be enough.

Running personal errands for her estranged sister who just decided to show up again out of the blue was the icing on the fuck-this-day cake. Buttercup did not have time to play Task Rabbit when she had an actual job to do.
Todd the receptionist looked like he was about to piss his pants at the sight of her and her six-foot-five, basketball star partner.

“Look, just give me a spare key card so I can get my sister’s crap and get the hell out of here,” Buttercup said. She flashed her gold Citiesville Police Department shield.

“R-Right away, Officer!” Todd squeaked.

Buttercup rolled her eyes. “It’s Detective. And relax, I’m not going to eat you.”

Beside her Ty laughed, rich and throaty and warm. “Don’t worry, kid, she won’t. I just watched her put away a half pounder with Animal Fries. You’re safe.”

“For now.”

Ty sighed and shook his head.

Todd wasn’t even listening anymore as he fumbled to copy a new card key for the two detectives and tossed it to Buttercup like a hot potato. Grumbling curses, Buttercup trudged up the stairs to Blossom’s room, found her unpacked suitcase at the foot of the bed, and resisted the urge to hurl it out the window.

Ty waited for her back in the lobby. “Got it?”

“Yeah, yeah. Let’s just get out of here before I change my mind.”

The partners made for a comical sight exiting the Marigold. Ty towered over her by a good foot with eyes as black as coal and skin like polished teak. Cut like a diamond and bald on purpose, he was a commanding sight to behold. Next to him, Buttercup appeared dainty and small with her heart-shaped face, compact athletic build, and dark hair professionally tucked into a ballerina’s bun.

The Celebrities, their CPD colleagues had dubbed them, mostly facetiously. Ty still got recognized from time to time despite his short-lived stint in the NBA before a bad knee injury ended his fledgling career before it took off. Ironically, his face tended to attract more recognition than Buttercup’s. Perhaps it was their polarizing appearances. Next to Ty, she was just another short, cute, brunette woman. To those who did recognize her, though, it wasn’t her killer resting bitch face that had them quaking where they stood.

“So, you heading to Townsville, then?” Ty asked as they walked around the block to their parked sedan.

“If I don’t, I’ll never hear the end of it. Might as well just get it over with.”

Ty shrugged. “I think it’s nice you got your family all together for once. What’s it been, three years?”

“Four and change.” Buttercup hopped off the curb and headed for the trunk of the car. Her sharp, green eyes alighted on a group of men loitering outside a bar smoking cigarettes. A couple of them watched her, but she ignored them.

Ty whistled. “Not even a birthday card?”

“Not even a lousy birthday card.” Not that she’d ever bothered to send Blossom a birthday card either, but that was completely beside the point.
Buttercup popped the trunk and pulled out a worn jean jacket. At least the trip to Townsville could serve some functional purpose in returning the jacket to Bubbles a month after she’d left it at Buttercup’s apartment by mistake.

The men continued to watch her out of the corner of her eye. One flicked the glowing, orange butt of his cigarette on the ground and snuffed it out with his booted toe.

“Well, the way I see it, you got four belated birthday to celebrate all at once,” Ty said. “You sure you don’t want me to cover you tomorrow? Should be a pretty routine house call.”

Buttercup donned the jean jacket over her button down blouse. It smelled like stale smoke and coconut shampoo. She wrinkled her nose. “No, I’ll be there, so you better not start without me.”

Ty chuckled. “Wouldn’t dream of it, partner.”

Buttercup frowned thinking about tomorrow. Missing persons cases were always depressing considering how few of them were ever resolved with a happy ending. The guy missing was just a kid, Danny Chang, a Freshman at Citiesville Community College. Buttercup had taken the case just this morning upon a personal request from the kid’s mother, said she wouldn’t talk to anyone but Buttercup. As if she could work some miracle the other, far more seasoned detectives in the CPD couldn’t.

Then again, she couldn’t fault the woman her blind hope. It had taken years and many failures for Buttercup to understand that some problems could not be solved with fists and fury alone.

_Blossom would be so proud_, she thought bitterly.

Ty ducked into the driver’s seat of the sedan, and Buttercup retreated to the sidewalk with Blossom’s roller bag in tow. She pulled out her phone to call a Lyft, and Ty waved as he drove away back to the station.

“You lookin’ for company, babe?”

Buttercup didn’t bother looking up at the lanky guy slinking toward her. His buddies watched, still smoking and talking softly. “Aren’t we all,” she said.

“How ’bout we look together?”

Buttercup looked up from her phone to tell the guy to move along, she could not be less interested in hooking up with some strung out townie, when she was met with the glint of steel. The guy smiled down at her over the edge of a switchblade.

She sighed, bored. “You really don’t want to do that.”

He nodded at her phone, like he expected her to hand it over. “You’re right, I really don’t. So how ‘bout you just be a good girl?”

Buttercup’s eye twitched. What was she just thinking about problems and fists? It all seemed a bit fuzzy now. “Last chance, asswipe. Walk away.”

The asswipe didn’t appreciate his new nickname, and he sneered. The knife wiggled closer to her face. “Figures. Don’t say I didn’t try to be gentle.”

Buttercup let him grab her wrist and squeeze hard enough to force her to drop her phone. At least, it would have been hard enough if she were anyone else. There was a moment of confusion on his
face, a split second where his mind and his body told him conflicting information about the small woman below him with a wrist made of steel. Then she grabbed his switchblade with her bare hand.

“Don’t say I didn’t try, too,” she said, and snapped the blade like it was nothing but plastic.

Unfortunately, the asswipe’s pride outweighed his sense of self-preservation in the face of something he didn’t understand. He heaved against her, intending to use his superior height and weight to knock her down. Buttercup glared up at him and shoved him hard.

He went flying.

The other guys who’d been watching this all go down ducked and scrambled when he went sailing through them, knocking a few over before the concrete wall broke his fall with a sickening thud. Groaning, the asswipe trembled on the ground.

“Shit, man,” said one of the other guys, blue eye wide. “I think she’s—”

“Whatever, let’s just get outta here!” said another of the group.

Buttercup dialed 9-1-1 and left a terse message with the operator about a bar fight gone too far. Flashing her detective’s shield, she strode purposefully to the three remaining men, one of whom was hunched over the asswipe still groaning in pain on the ground.

“Names,” she said, showing them her badge.

“W-We didn’t do anything—”

The guy shut up quick when he saw Buttercup’s fist begin to glow with unnatural green energy.

“Names,” she said again. “Now.”

They gave her their names.

“EMTs are on their way,” Buttercup said, holstering her badge. “You make sure your friend Travis here stays awake. He probably has a concussion.”

“Y-You’re not gonna arrest us?”

Buttercup smoothed a flyaway that had come loose from her bun. Travis was watching her without really seeing, too dizzy to process much. She looked down on him in disgust. “Lucky for you morons, I have somewhere to be.”

She stalked off to get Blossom’s suitcase sitting on the sidewalk and cast the men a last, bored glance. “You pull this kinda shit again, and I won’t be wearing my badge next time.”

They just watched her, dumbstruck.

That’s right, peons, she thought to herself, letting the old, angry pride warm her blood. Take a fucking knee.

She hoisted Blossom’s suitcase over her shoulder and left them like that. Ambulance sirens whined in the distance, but Buttercup was long gone.

Bubbles cooked dinner that night, and Blossom wished she could be happier about it. Of the three
sisters, Blossom had enjoyed cooking the least. Wei had been just as averse to cooking as she was, and so they had turned takeout into a kind of art form to be mastered and managed. Creatures of habit and routine, they had mapped out Metroville’s best restaurants by price, quality, and ambience. The wall-sized map they’d drawn and marked with all their top picks was still in the apartment they shared (used to share) just off the kitchen they hardly ever used—

“Blossom, did you hear me?” Bubbles called from the kitchen.

“What?” Blossom looked up from the dishes she’d been washing on autopilot.

“I asked if you could get the door. You didn’t hear the bell?”

Blossom shut off the water and dried her hands. “I guess not.”

Bubbles looked at her with a sad, contemplative sort of understanding. Thankfully, she didn’t press.

Blossom dried her hands and went to the door. “I’ll get it.”

The sight of Buttercup standing on the welcome mat should not have come as much of a surprise, but there was something inexplicably surreal about seeing her there in an old jean jacket, her hair pulled out of her eyes, and a forty-pound suitcase draped casually over her shoulder.

For a moment, neither sister said anything as they looked each other over.

“Did you fly here?” Blossom asked, noticing the lack of any unfamiliar car parked in the driveway.

Buttercup tensed, an age-old defensive reflex whenever Blossom questioned her about every little thing she did. “Why the hell wouldn’t I?”

Blossom might have pointed out that there was a ban on the use of powers within Citiesville city limits, had been for years since the three Super sisters had accidentally blown up the bridge in pursuit of a group of robbers.

And yet, Blossom could not think of an answer to Buttercup’s rhetorical question. There was no reason at all that she, of all people, wouldn’t use her powers. For Buttercup, there had never been a reason not to.

Blossom pursed her lips and simply nodded. She stepped aside for Buttercup and locked the door behind her.

Dinner was awkward.

Unspoken between the sisters was an agreement about what not to talk about. Which was just fine with Buttercup; she wasn’t the one who’d disappeared after the funeral with nothing but a half-assed apology over the phone a week later.

Not that Buttercup called many people herself over the years either, but that was neither here nor there.

I call Bubbles.

More like Bubbles called her. Still, that counted. And they made a point to spend holidays together. Even the occasional weekend when Buttercup wasn’t balls deep in work. It was more than she could say for most of the other detectives in her precinct, and it was certainly more than she could
“You look good,” Blossom said as she poked at her risotto. “Happy, I mean.”

Buttercup leaned back in her chair. “Yeah, it’s all rainbows and sunshine over at CPD Homicide.”

Bubbles winced. She didn’t like it when they talked about Buttercup’s morbid line of work.

“Fulfilled, then,” Blossom said without missing a beat.

Buttercup shifted in her seat. “It pays the bills and puts the bad guys behind bars. Sometimes.”

Blossom smiled faintly, like it was a struggle for her to manage even that much. She really looked terrible—too pale, too tired, too done with everything. “You can take the Powerpuff Girl out of Townsville.”

Buttercup stiffened at the mention of their old shared moniker. It had been a very long time since anyone referred to them as the Powerpuff Girls. Hell, Buttercup hadn’t heard the name at all in years. It was in the past—the team, the fighting, the girl power, the memories, the family… All of it.

“Don’t know about that,” Buttercup said, an edge to her tone that hadn’t been there before.

Bubbles got up. “Who wants dessert? I have ice cream!” She dashed to the freezer and began pulling out pint after pint of ice cream.

Buttercup took a swig of her beer. “I gotta say, I never expected you to sell out to corporate in the end.”

Blossom abandoned her cold risotto. “Like you said, it pays the bills.”

“Bullshit.”

“I have cookies ‘n cream, double fudge chunk, and…oooh! Strawberry balsamic!” Bubbles said brightly.

Blossom and Buttercup ignored her.

“I’m not going to argue with you,” Blossom said softly. “That’s not why I’m here.”

“Why are you here?”

“Um, Buttercup! How many scoops do you want?” Bubbles tried.

“I mean, four years is a fuck-long time to stay away. Not that I blame you for getting out—hell, so did I—but I never ran.”

Blossom stared at her, dead-eyed and tense. “I wasn’t running.”

“No? What do you call showing up back here unannounced out of the blue, then? Who died this time?”

Bubbles slammed a stack of bowls roughly on the table, startling both Blossom and Buttercup. Buttercup caught a glimpse of her blue eyes alight with cold fire, a warning.

“That’s enough,” Bubbles said.
A tense silence settled over the sisters for a few breaths.

“No one died.” Blossom rose out of her chair. “Sorry you made the trip out for nothing.”

“Blossom, wait,” Bubbles said.

But Blossom walked out of the kitchen and disappeared upstairs. And that was just fine with Buttercup. She snagged the cookies ’n cream pint and a spoon and floated to the living room.

“Buttercup—”

“Save it. She wants to fucking mope like a prima donna after ghosting us for four years? She can do it alone.”

Bubbles followed her to the living room just as Buttercup found the remote sitting next to a picture of the girls and Professor Utonium at the beach back when they were five. She scowled at the grinning faces and waited for the Hulu app to load.

“I know you’re upset with her, but she’s been through a lot.”

Buttercup ate a large scoop of ice cream and selected the latest Halloween movie to watch. “You’re something else, you know that? Like, do you hear yourself?”

Bubbles floated in front of the television, arms crossed. “She just got dumped by her two-timing fiancé and quit her job because she couldn’t bear to be in the same city as him anymore. We’re family. Whatever our issues are, we’re supposed to be there for each other.”

Buttercup was on her feet so fast she was nothing but a green blur. Bubbles held her ground, unfazed. “Tell me something,” Buttercup whispered dangerously. “Where was she when we needed her?”

Bubbles shook her head. “We all process grief differently.”

Buttercup had heard enough. “I’m not one of your kindergarteners. You and I both know there’s a wrong way to process, and she’s been wrong for four fucking years.”

“I know she made a mistake. But it doesn’t mean she doesn’t deserve our help now.”

“Whatever. She’s your baby bird to help then. Don’t involve me.” Buttercup fell back on the couch, pulled up her feet, and dug in to her ice cream pint as the opening credits rolled. “Move, I can’t see.”

Bubbles sighed her exasperation, but she floated out of the way. She let her hand rest on Buttercup’s shoulder briefly. “Thank you for coming tonight. I know it’s hard for you.”

She floated back toward the kitchen.

“Hey,” Buttercup called to her. “It’s not your job to carry her. She can fly the same as you or me.”

Bubbles’ reply was so soft that, were it not for Buttercup’s super hearing, she would have missed it. “I’m not so sure.”

Buttercup was determined not to let it get to her. Just being in this house set her on edge, always had ever since the car accident four years ago. It had ceased to be a home and simply existed as walls and a roof, a shell lacking the color and warmth of her childhood. Buttercup had never known it was possible for a home to stop being a home until she stepped inside after the
Professor’s funeral and didn’t recognize the plaster. Bubbles had locked herself in the girls’ old bedroom and sobbed all day and night.

Blossom had not come home at all at first. They’d searched for her for days to no avail.

Michael Myers was stalking across the screen and a high school boy was screaming in the background. Buttercup forced herself to indulge the distraction from those uncomfortable memories, the blood and bodies on screen passing in a monotonous blur.

Eventually she paused to use the bathroom and floated silently across the living room. On her way back to the couch, her super hearing picked up voices upstairs, and she stilled. They were too faint to make out the words, and Buttercup had no reason to care either way. Bubbles was going to waste away one of these days from giving away so much of her love to people who couldn’t or wouldn’t properly return it.

And goddamnit, but Buttercup couldn’t abide that.

She floated upstairs to the guest room’s closed door. Light filtered from under the crack at the bottom. This close, and Buttercup could hear them talking softly. Or rather, she could hear Bubbles talking. Soothing, understanding Bubbles who just wanted to help her sister. Buttercup clenched a fist.

She thought about bursting in there, about the look on her sisters’ faces if she did. She thought about demanding an explanation, just a single reason for all of it. Because surely there was one. Surely Blossom, the eldest and the team leader and the most put-together of the three of them, had her reasons.

Buttercup pressed her ear to the door.

“More than anything, it just feels surreal. That someone so…fragile could do me so much damage,” Blossom said in a neutral tone that did not match her miserable confession. “I’ve faced monsters, masterminds, even the devil himself, and none of them hurt me as much as he did.”

“It’s not your fault,” Bubbles said.

Blossom didn’t seem to hear her as she spoke from a deeply buried place inside, cold and hollow. “And I let him. I let him hurt me.” Shuffling, and sniffling. “I think I wanted him to hurt me just so I knew he could, and I could be…”

More shuffling. Buttercup imagined Bubbles holding Blossom close in a hug as they sat together at the foot of the bed, just like they had when they were little and Buttercup listened furtively from around the corner.

“I tried so hard to be normal,” Blossom sobbed.

“I know, shh, shh,” Bubbles soothed.

Buttercup had heard enough. She floated back downstairs, suddenly restless and wide awake. The movie was paused on a scene where the killer was emerging from the shadows to surprise his unwitting victim. The cookies ’n cream was softly melting in the half-empty pint. Buttercup was struck with the overwhelming urge to hurl the pint at the wall and watch the sweet treat spoil.

“I don’t care,” she said to herself.

I don’t.
She sank back onto the couch and resumed the movie. The too-soft ice cream dripped off her spoon, but she ate it anyway. Her family grinned at her in the beach picture, their preserved happiness stale and a little sad. Their eyes seemed to watch her, and Buttercup thought about turning the picture around so she wouldn’t have to look at it anymore. She didn’t even remember taking the picture all those years ago, or the laughter that had inspired her toothy grin.

*It’s just a dumb old picture.*

She shoveled more ice cream in her mouth, her tongue long since numbed to the flavor, and watched the grisly final act of her movie.

The picture remained perched where it was, softly watching over her until the end credits rolled.

Chapter End Notes

Just a casual opening chapter, hah… Yes, the Professor is dead in this fic, but it’s not an arbitrary decision on my part, and it will be explored as the story unfolds. While I know it might be upsetting to see the Girls having drifted apart as adults, I think a loss like this could lead them to that point. This fic is not about how they’re leading separate lives, but rather it’s about how they find their way back to each other in spite of their shared loss and learn how to be a family again.

Please share your thoughts in the comments! Comments are the #1 most motivating part of writing and sharing fic. Whether you have time for two words or twenty, I really want to hear from you!

Next time: Blossom and Buttercup hash it out the best way they know how—with a friendly fight. Brick approaches Buttercup with a case she can’t refuse.
Blossom rose early the next morning, her senses primed for her usual morning coffee and quiet. But when she opened her eyes to a bedroom that wasn’t the one she shared with Wei, all she wanted to do was fall back into oblivion and forget a little longer.

Her body, however, couldn’t forget its daily craving, and so she rose. The early morning was a little chilly, but she had her suitcase thanks to Buttercup and rummaged around for something warm. She donned a cream-colored henley and pastel leggings, fixed her face and hair, and headed downstairs.

To her immense surprise, she was not alone. “You’re up early.”

Buttercup was dressed in black yoga pants and an oversized, green tank top with her hair long and loose. It was longer than Blossom remembered, grown just past her shoulders and mussed from sleep.

Buttercup grunted from her place hovering over the whirring coffeemaker. “Don’t sleep much.”

Blossom supposed she wouldn’t either if she spent her days investigating murders and the villains who committed them. She couldn’t help but find it strange, though. Of the three sisters, Buttercup had always been the heaviest, latest sleeper. Every day in high school was a struggle to get her moving and out the door in time for first period.

The sisters exchanged no words as Blossom walked across the kitchen to grab a fresh mug from the drainer for her coffee. She was pleased to find that Bubbles kept up a stock of almond milk in the fridge, so she grabbed that, too. For a couple minutes, the only sound was the coffeemaker sputtering out drops of liquid life as Buttercup watched it like a hawk. Blossom decided to distract herself by looking for the sugar, but she had no luck locating it in the pantry.

“Sugar’s on the top shelf,” Buttercup said when the machine finally calmed. She poured herself a mug, black.

“Oh, thanks.” Blossom found the right cabinet, but seeing that the sugar was too high to reach, she grabbed a chair from the dining table to stand on.

“What’re you doing?”

“What does it look like?” Blossom snatched the sugar jar and hopped down from the chair.

“It looks like you forgot you can literally fly.”

Blossom returned the chair to the dining table and began fixing herself a mug of coffee with all her preferred add-ins. “Oh. Habit.”
Buttercup looked at her strangely. Blossom ignored her and leaned comfortably against the counter, warming her fingers on her steaming mug.

“But you flew here from Metroville.”

Blossom frowned as she sipped her coffee. “On a plane, yes.”

Buttercup continued to look at her like she was a leper, and Blossom was beginning to grow irritated.

“When’s the last time you flew at all?”

“I don’t see why that matters.” She would just have her coffee on the porch away from Buttercup’s interrogation. But when she made to leave, Buttercup blocked her way.

“I haven’t even seen you floating, now that I think about it.”

Blossom tried to go around her, but Buttercup grabbed her wrist. “Let go.”

“When’s the last time you used any power?”

Unbidden, Blossom recalled her own grip on Wei’s wrist. Perhaps not as tightly as Buttercup was gripping her now, but enough to mark him. Enough to knock him down. Hot, sticky anger and shame possessed her body before she could think about it, and she yanked her wrist free.

“I’m not having this conversation with you.”

When she shoved past Buttercup this time, she was successful. But her ornery sister was hot on her tail and followed her outside.

“That’s just great. What else is new?”

Blossom glared back at her from the front lawn. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know exactly what it means.”

Whatever.

It was too early in the morning to engage in a futile argument. Blossom took the high road and simply ignored her sister.

“There you go, ignoring me. You know, you were always a self-righteous princess, but at least you were still my sister.”

“Excuse me?”

“No. I’m not excusing you. That shit might fly with Bubbles, but not me.”

Blossom was done taking this passively. She set her steaming coffee mug down on the wooden patio railing. “And what shit would that be? Go on, Buttercup, say it. You’re obviously holding on to something, so let’s hear it. I’m all ears.”

A neighbor walking his dog glanced at them from the sidewalk, slowing to eavesdrop while his dog squatted down to pee in the yard.

Buttercup got in her face, uncomfortably close. Blossom was the taller of the two by a couple
inches, but what Buttercup lacked in height she more than made up for in pressure. It burned to
breathe in her presence this close.

“You’re a selfish piece of shit.”

Blossom did not even blink. “Okay.”

“You ghosted us when we needed you the most. Now you have the nerve to come crawling back
when it’s convenient for you, just expecting us to welcome you back like nothing happened.”

Blossom pursed her lips, but she said nothing, not trusting her voice.

Buttercup narrowed her eyes to slits. “You threw away everything that made you you for some
soggy, used tissue of a guy just to soothe his pathetic ego. And you couldn’t even do that right.”

It took everything Blossom had in her not to break Buttercup’s face with her fist. She had never
wanted to hit someone as much as she did right now. Even the encounter with Boomer the other
night could not compare. “You know nothing about it.”

Buttercup bared her teeth in a cruel smirk. “Oh, I know everything about it. And you know
something else, Leader Girl?”

Blossom shuddered at the old moniker. She imagined her temper, poisonous and enraged, tearing
her apart from inside like a living thing the longer she let Buttercup insult her.

“I think maybe he was right about you. You’re nothing but an empty shell. That’s why he couldn’t
keep his dick in his pants—”

Blossom didn’t even think about moving, she just did. The punch was swift and hard, harder than
she’d allowed herself to indulge in a very long time. Buttercup went flying into the neighbor’s yard
and landed in the dividing shrubs, shredding them to splinters.

Blossom’s fist sparked with violent, pink energy. The neighbor walking his dog gasped, and she
turned her tempestuous glare upon him. The dog whined and bent its head. It was a sobering sight,
and Blossom faltered.

It was her mistake, because suddenly she was the one flying and eating asphalt. Buttercup had
lunged at her and sent her crashing into the street. The road split where Blossom’s head connected,
and she tumbled. The dog barked. The neighbor shouted and ran. Faces appeared in the windows of
the surrounding houses as people looked out to see what had caused the sudden, loud disturbance.
Bubbles was one of them.

“Buttercup, no!” Bubbles shrieked from the front door.

But Buttercup wasn’t listening. Neither was Blossom as she swallowed the pain in her face, dulled
as the Chemical X in her system awakened and healed it completely, and she lifted her hands to
block Buttercup’s next punch.

The collision was ear-splitting. Pure power crackled between them like lightning. The crack
Blossom had opened up in the street whined and deepened to a proper crater as they pushed against
each other with all their superior might. Green met pink in a moment of raw clarity, and Blossom
understood that her sister was dead serious. She wasn’t going to stop, but neither was Blossom.

With a grunt of effort, Blossom finally let go of the elemental rage and sorrow and shame she had
been holding on to for far too long and lost herself in it for one blinding, blissful moment. And she
fought back.

The explosion was deafening. One minute Bubbles was speeding to break them apart, and the next she, Buttercup, and an entire section of the sidewalk were blown back with the force of a speeding train. It was in Blossom, around her, this power, chemical and unmatched, and it quickened her blood like a drug. She stepped out of the crater, pink pennons rising from her skin and clothes, and her sharp eyes alighted on Buttercup above her.


“Blossom, wait!” Bubbles screeched.

But Blossom was already crouching, her knees curled to spring, and she launched herself into the air with everything she had. Buttercup took off, nothing but a green streak racing for the firmament, and Blossom rocketed after her. Even after so long dutifully grounded, gravity was as easy to leave behind as the last shreds of her restraint, and soon she was bludgeoning Buttercup with cold, familiar abandon.

They clashed high above the ground, a brutal and vicious dance of light and kinetic power, each blow meant to shatter and suspend, but they could take it. For every punch Blossom landed, Buttercup returned it in savage kind. It was a call for blood, a demand for control, and neither was willing to back down.

“That the best you got?” Buttercup shouted over the rushing air between them.

Blossom crashed into Buttercup, and they plummeted as one. By now, the neighbors were out in full force filming everything on their smart phones, broadcasting live the explosive fight between two Supers who’d rarely shown their colors in years.

Just before Blossom could smash Buttercup into the road, Bubbles was there forcing them apart. “Stop this!” she yelled, her sky blue energy rising off her like fire to match their intensity.

Buttercup ignored her and blasted Blossom with her eye beams. The pain was burning and intense, and for a moment Blossom lost all understanding of herself as she jettisoned high into the sky. The suspension did not last long, and suddenly Buttercup was there, fistong her shirt and yanking her hair, merciless.

“Come on, Red,” she snarled. “Show me some temper. Let it all out.”

“You have a poisonous temper. It’s not normal.”

Five of them she’d thwarted, the memory as clear as the night it had transpired. Felony-murder charges for four, assault with a deadly weapon and murder one for the fifth. She’d lost it at the sight of the cashier slumped over the open register, a wad of blood-stained bills in his fingers. She just had to intervene, just had to risk even their lives for the life of some guy who was already dead. Wei had made her cry that night. Didn’t she understand that there was a system to deal with these things? That regular people couldn’t be vigilante heroes without facing legal and mortal consequences? Didn’t she care about him? About their relationship?

That was the last time she’d let go of her temper in two years. The last time she’d flown and punched and struggled. The last time she’d been the girl she left behind. And she was still left behind, even now. There was no getting her back, really, she knew that even if Buttercup did not, refused to accept it. But she would be damned if she continued like this, a grey, hollow revenant exiled from both worlds when she had a chance to feel something. Even if it was pain; especially if
it was pain.

Blossom could not waste the chance Buttercup was giving her, however ephemeral or futile. There was nothing else left to hold on to anymore.

“With pleasure.” Blossom’s body quaked with power and rage and regret. It was all-consuming and cold, frozen fire igniting her blood and culminating in a bitter wind upon her lips.

Buttercup was either too slow or too proud to avoid the blast of Blossom’s ice breath. There was no escaping it, truly. All those years and the storm inside her had only grown colder. Frost shackled Buttercup like chains and weighed her down in frigid chunks, until she herself was nothing but ice, too. And just as she started to fall, Blossom was there. She punched Buttercup’s sternum, shattering the ice and sending her falling back to Earth.

Blossom could feel it.

Her body screamed with a sweet kind of agony she had not experienced in years even in her occasional spars with Bubbles or her countless hours at the gym beating bag after bag to a sandy pulp. Even out of true practice and true pain, her muscles sang and her soul ignited.

And she knew Blossom felt it, too. Blossom had always felt it in a way Bubbles did not appreciate in quite the same way. Because Blossom was the leader, the best at what she did. And thirty-year-old Buttercup could admit what thirteen-year-old Buttercup staunchly denied, which was that Blossom, on the rare occasions that she got truly and terrifyingly serious, was the strongest of them.

But that was just it, see. Blossom was strongest when she meant it, but Buttercup always meant it. Right now, she had four years’ worth of meaning it to cram down her estranged sister’s throat and hope, desperately, that she might reach something still kicking and screaming buried down deep.

Buttercup landed in an empty Malph’s parking lot, her body frigid and her sternum screaming in pain even as the Chemical X quickly healed what was hurt. She’d just managed to pull herself out of the small but deep hole she’d landed in when she heard Bubbles touch down next to her.

“This is insane!” Bubbles said, frantic and frazzled in her plaid pajamas. “You guys are going to wreck the whole neighborhood like this, and for what?”

Buttercup spit bloody phlegm but didn’t cast Bubbles a glance as she spotted Blossom coming straight for her. “Stay out of this, Bubbles.”

“And let you beat the crap out of each other for no good reason?”

“Yes!” Buttercup hauled herself to her feet, instinctively tracking Blossom’s trajectory and velocity as she anticipated what kind of attack might be coming next. “You had your time with her, so now it’s my turn, my way. Stay out of it!”

She didn’t stick around to hear Bubbles’ reply and tore off into the sky. Blossom came at her with her ice breath again, a wicked wind too broad and fast-moving to avoid, but Buttercup fearlessly flew directly into it. Her skin sparked with raw power, its friction super-heated and barely enough to keep her blood from freezing in her veins as she burst through the other side and surprised Blossom with a hard kick to her gut.

The sisters tumbled through the air at terminal velocity, struggling both for dominance and to extricate themselves from each other. Buttercup yanked Blossom’s hair again, and this time
Blossom let out a strangled cry of challenge. Careless of the pain, she slugged Buttercup in the face, and Buttercup’s fingers came away with broken, orange tangles. Just in time too, for they landed on the ground not a second later and squared off like a couple of gunmen ready to draw.

“Pathetic,” Buttercup spat, masking the ache in her face. “I’ve barely broken a sweat. And here I thought you weren’t going to hold back anymore.”

Blossom narrowed her eyes. “Still as mouthy as ever, Buttercup. One of these days, someone’s going to relieve you of your tongue.”

Buttercup patted her chest in a taunt. “Ha! If you can get close enough to try, I’d let you do it. But you’ve gotten slow and predictable.” She crouched in a fighting stance, ready to lunge at the drop of a hat. “Maybe I oughtta kick you into shape!”

People had begun to gather now that they had landed and paused their frenzied violence, including a couple local news vans eager to broadcast something other than the same old quotidian bullshit. Bubbles was there too, but she hung back as she watched, her expression wary. Buttercup had a mind to just attack Blossom again now and get them away from the spotlight, but Blossom didn’t seem to mind the sudden attention. She lit up with a fiery grin that reminded Buttercup so much of their youth spent bludgeoning monsters and bad guys that she almost lost her nerve for a second.

“Four years or forty, it wouldn’t make any difference at all,” Blossom taunted her. “I’ll always be the leader.”

Blossom’s unabashed arrogance would have made Buttercup seethe under normal circumstances, but right now all she could see was the ghost of the girl who had once been so much more than just her commander and leader, brightly resurrected. Unable to help herself, Buttercup bared her teeth in a giddy smile of her own.

“Oh, yeah? Then prove it—”

Blossom lunged before Buttercup got a chance to finish her sentence, and suddenly they were at it again.

It was barely 7 a.m. and Brick was already set to murder the next person stupid enough to cross his sights. Hung over after a night of annoying but necessary socializing to close his latest deal, he’d planned on spending his day off locked away in his penthouse apartment overlooking the Citiesville bay far above the urban gloom and grey. There was a reason he’d picked the tallest apartment building in the city for his home. Even with that dumb fucking law banning the use of super powers within the city limits, up here he could live among the clouds, as close to flying and as far away from the plebeians below as he could get.

He’d planned on enjoying that sky-high quiet today, until a phone call startled him from the barely two hours of drunk sleep he’d gotten. Any other day and he may have let it ring, but this call had come through on his private line, a number only four people in the entire world possessed. It was too early for Butch to be conscious, and Boomer almost exclusively texted. Most likely, it was Princess Morbucks. No one else would have the gall (or lunacy) to bother him this early unless it was well and truly important. He thought about ignoring the call anyway, but ignoring Princess was like trying to ignore oncoming traffic at rush hour. Best not.

Brick muttered curses to himself as he fumbled for the red-cased iPhone in the drawer of his nightstand, wondering what she might want. Last night had been a complete success, thanks in no small part to her crucial introduction to the very artist his client had previously requested to meet in
order to smooth over the deal. Everyone had gone home happy, with the exception of Brick’s hangover. Nothing a day of rest and his seven percent cut couldn’t remedy.

To his genuine shock, it had not been Princess’ name blinking on the iPhone screen, but that of his former creator and caretaker, Mojo Jojo. Brick had almost missed the call entirely staring dumbly at the screen. Mojo had never once called him on this line after Brick had warned him that it was strictly for emergencies. To which the monkey mastermind had easily agreed, insisting that there were no such emergencies that would ever require any assistance from the likes of Brick and his Super brothers. Brick had forgotten he had even given Mojo this number. More curious than concerned, he’d answered the call with a raspy, “Hello?”

Nearly a half hour later, Brick’s blood pressure was dangerously high as he paced his ultra-modern apartment, fists clenched and glowing red with apoplectic rage. He was trying very, very hard not to blow up his home out of pure spite. He silently digested the new information Mojo had relayed to him in his typical bloviating fashion.

“I thought you should know, which is why I am telling you, so that you will know what I have told you.”

Brick was so pissed that he’d hung up on the monkey. “Could have fucking told me years ago!”

A migraine raged behind his tired, bloodshot eyes. Brick roughly scratched his fingers through his short, red hair. He needed to calm down, and the best way to do that (barring unrestrained destruction of his physical property) was to call his brother.

Boomer was not happy to be woken up so early, but when Brick impressed upon him that it was important on pain of imminent property damage, he sighed and promised to be there in five, screw the ordinance. Not like anyone could impede a former Rowdyruff Boy when he got going.

It was three minutes later that Boomer landed on the balcony, shivering so high up in the T-shirt and sweatpants he’d worn to bed. Brick let him in and slammed the sliding door shut with a little more force than necessary.

“All right, man, what’s so important that it couldn’t wait—”

Brick was suddenly in his face, red eyes blazing. “Someone broke into Mojo’s lab the other night.”

“Oh, and that’s our problem because…?”

Brick bared his teeth and showed Boomer his back. It wasn’t his brother’s fault, he reminded himself. No, it was no one’s fault but Mojo’s, that conceited prick. “Because, the thief wasn’t just after electronics and cash; he made off with DNA samples.”

Boomer looked at him blankly. “I still don’t—”

“Us. He was keeping samples taken from us. Hair, skin cells, blood—fucking stem cells, and I had no idea!”

Brick was so worked up that he was radiating crimson energy and making the furniture float. Boomer pressed down firmly on his shoulders. Wisely, he said nothing as he applied enough pressure to send Brick falling if he were a normal person. It was shameful, letting his temper overwhelm him like this even temporarily, but it was better than actually unleashing it. He wasn’t Butch, after all, and Boomer was here.

Seconds passed as the brothers exerted their pressure against each other, and Brick breathed.
Slowly, the furniture floated back down and settled. Miraculously, only a single lamp fell and broke.

“I had no idea,” Brick said again, his voice strained as he tamped down his rage. He winced and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Fuck.”

Gradually, Boomer loosened his hold as he sensed that Brick wasn’t going to go nuclear anymore. He swallowed hard. “What do you want to do about it?”

What could he do? Without knowing who the culprit was, he couldn’t retrieve what had been taken. Beating the shit out of Mojo for keeping such an invasive secret from him all these years wouldn’t accomplish much beyond the transient satisfaction of sadism properly (and deservingly) directed.

He could not get past the fact that he’d never even known about Mojo’s little stash. It did not surprise him to learn about it, knowing Mojo, but this fury was proving hard to shake even with Boomer’s anchoring presence. No, Boomer was right; he needed a plan for what to do next.

“You want to put the word out?” Boomer offered.

Brick glanced at his brother. Ordinarily, it may have been Brick’s initial course of action. With his web of connections, Boomer’s eyes and ears on the ground, and Butch’s unique talents for disappearing problems, the brothers were a systematic problem-solving machine.

However.

“No, keep it quiet. I don’t know who did this, or if they even know what they took. Until I do, I don’t want to tip them off that I’m hunting them.”

“But then, how’re we going to figure out who stole the samples? You don’t just want to leave this to the cops, right?”

Brick grimaced. Right now, everyone was a potential suspect, except… “More like one cop in particular.”


Brick grunted, already formulating a plan. He needed coffee, badly. It was too damn early to be scheming, and if he was going to approach that harpy willingly, he was going to do it properly caffeinated.

“She’s the only cop I know for certain is completely uninvolved in this,” he explained as he trudged to his immaculate kitchen.

Boomer plopped down on the couch without waiting for an invitation and turned on the television. “I guess that makes sense. I doubt a former Powerpuff Girl would care about a bunch of our DNA. But don’t ask me to go see her with you. Pretty sure she hates my guts…”

Brick’s migraine was fully awake now, so he popped some aspirin from the medicine cabinet and waited for his espresso to be ready. Despite the headache and lack of sleep, he felt better now that he had some semblance of a plan taking shape.

But like Boomer, Brick also did not relish the idea of seeking out Buttercup. The woman was an impossible virago with a chip on her shoulder ever since their youth. Despite sharing a city, Brick
had done an excellent job of remaining completely uninvolved in his former life and all the annoyances that had come with it, including the former Powerpuff Girls. Gone were the days of flaunting his powers like some half-cocked teenager with something to prove. Brick had learned to live very well in the shadows, and in the shadows he planned to stay.

Except now some asshole was dragging him out by the balls. When he found out who was behind this, he wasn’t even going to leave it to Butch. No, this was a direct affront to him and his position. They wanted to fuck with Brick? He’d fuck them right back—

*Pop!*

Brick sighed. The ceramic espresso cup he’d been holding shattered in his hand. He hadn’t even realized he was squeezing it so hard. He really needed to pull himself together. It wasn’t like him to surrender to his emotions like this, to let things get so personal. Except this *was* personal. As personal as it got.

“Holy shit!” Boomer shouted from the living room.

Brick ignored his brother, calmly retrieved a new cup from the cupboard, and downed two shots’ worth of espresso. Only then did he return to the living room to see what had Boomer so worked up.

He froze at the scene playing out on the television.

“This is Benny Santiago coming to you live from the Pokey Oaks South neighborhood just outside of Townsville. Residents were awakened this morning to what they initially believed to be an earthquake, but in fact two of the Powerpuff Girls have been engaged in a friendly fight since just after sunrise…”

The camera feed cut to the sky, but it was almost impossible to follow the high speed Super battle raging. Brick’s sharp eyes, however, could make out the telltale streaks of green and…

“Damn, didn’t take her long at all,” Boomer said as the sky burst with a wave of supernatural frost.

Brick made out Buttercup, slowed down by the cold but no less deterred. The reporter was commenting on the fight and speculating as to its cause, when the screen shook as the cameraman began to run.

Brick’s eyes were glued to the set, knowing what was coming but not quite able to believe it. It had been years since he’d last seen her in person, heard her voice—

“Maybe I oughtta kick you into shape!” Buttercup’s raspy voice taunted.

Brick stared at the shaky view of Blossom standing opposite Buttercup. Both were battered from their fight, which Benny Santiago was still speculating on even as his cameraman inched closer to the Supers.

“Four years or forty, it wouldn’t make any difference at all,” Blossom said, eerily calm. The camera zoomed in on her face. She was grinning fiercely. “I’ll always be the leader.”

A strange shuddering overcame Brick hearing her voice dripping with familiar arrogance, seeing her battle-worn and cocky and self-righteous like she’s always been. Unconsciously, his skin began to spark with latent power, his body primed to meet her threat as though they were kids again and she dared to challenge him. As soon as it happened, he backed away from the couch and forced his power to dissipate, overwhelmed at his frightening lack of control from watching a fucking news
clip. Luckily, Boomer was too absorbed in the action to comment on Brick’s odd reaction.

“Wait, what do you mean it didn’t take her long?” Brick demanded.

The camera struggled to follow the rest of Blossom and Buttercup’s fight, but to little avail now that they were airborne again.

“She came to B-3 the other night. I got the sense she was looking for a fight. Guess I’m not surprised Buttercup obliged her.”

Brick stared at the man bun tied at the back of Boomer’s head, incredulous. “You’re telling me you already knew Blossom was in town and you didn’t think to mention it to me?”

Boomer cringed at the shot capturing Buttercup energy blasting Blossom with enough force to send her crashing into a public park. “Oh, what? I didn’t think you’d care.”

“You didn’t think I’d care that another Super with an excellent track record of meddling in my shit just dropped into my backyard unannounced?”

At the eerie monotone in Brick’s voice, Boomer reluctantly turned to face him. “…Okay, when you put it like that I get how it sounds kinda bad.”

Boomer had come a long way, it was true. It had taken a while for Brick to really appreciate his little brother’s strength of character, but mornings like today he was always reminded, and he was grateful to have Boomer as a calming counterpoint to lean on.

But the guy was so fucking obtuse sometimes.

Brick grabbed him by his himbo man bun and forced his face around. “You think so?”

Boomer flushed, but he wisely didn’t struggle. “Dude, I’m sorry. I wasn't thinking about it.”

“I can tell.”

“She was just really upset and I felt bad, okay? She wasn’t Blossom the Powerpuff Girl the other night. She didn’t ask about your work or anything; we didn't even talk about you at all.”

Brick narrowed his eyes. “Boomer.”

Boomer narrowed his eyes right back, no longer willing to be cowed. “Look, I was just being a decent person listening to her pity party, okay? Not like she didn’t deserve it since her shitbag fiancé cheated on her. If you have a problem with that, then you can fuck off.”

Boomer averted his gaze in submission, but he had that stubborn set to his jaw that Brick recognized all too well. Fucking Boomer and his bleeding heart. Finally, Brick released him and Boomer rubbed his abused head.

“Anything else you want to tell me while we’re on the subject?”

Boomer stared at his hands with his head bowed in defeat, but his eyes were hard. “There’s nothing more to tell.”

There better not be.

Brick had become very good at avoiding attention and scrutiny over the years, but there was a very particular attention he did not want to attract if he could help it. And Boomer had always been a
little too chatty with the women he was involved with, including one who just happened to have powers on par with their own.

“I’m taking a shower,” Brick said. “Remember what I said about laying low.”

Boomer grunted. He would likely be long gone by the time Brick reemerged, preferring to avoid confrontation whenever possible. But Boomer, like Butch, was predictable. Most people were.

Brick cast a last look at the television, which was now back to the news station headquarters. A still of the fight captured Blossom and Buttercup mid-punch as the anchor recounted the events to those just tuning in. Brick gritted his teeth as his gaze lingered on Blossom’s grainy action shot.

He wondered how this day could get any worse than it already was.

To the surprise of exactly no one, the girls received a summons to the mayor’s office once Buttercup and Blossom ceased beating the crap out of each other. Unlike its neighbor south over the Golden Bay Bridge, Townsville did not have a ban on conspicuous use of super powers, but the city had gotten used to not having to pay for public works reconstruction projects in the wake of their former superheroes’ antics. Luckily, the damage Blossom and Buttercup caused was minimal, all things considered, and Mayor Sara Bellum was persuaded to put it on the city’s tab in light of the their many years of community service.

Bubbles sat with Blossom and Buttercup on the roof of City Hall, where the cameras could not reach them. They were a mess, their clothes ripped and dirty and their bodies bruised but slowly healing. But they were calm and quiet now, and Bubbles was silently grateful that the chance she had taken trusting Buttercup’s judgment this time had paid off. She made a mental note to do that more often.

They sat there on the dome high above the city for a long time in silence, until Blossom finally broke it with a shudder like she might cry. She didn’t.

“I’m sorry.” She loosely hugged her knees and leaned over them.

At length, Buttercup sighed and rubbed her tired eyes. “I know. But it’s not enough.”

“I know.”

Bubbles said nothing. It was not her place, and she silently reminded herself that that was okay.

Blossom had her eyes closed now. She looked so small with her knees curled to her chest. “I don’t know what to do with myself.”

Bubbles felt the overwhelming urge to weep then. Even after the quiet confessions Blossom had shared with her, and even suspecting this was coming, it was almost too much.

“You’ll figure it out,” Buttercup said, her eyes trained on the endless blue above. “You always do.”

Blossom took a shaky breath and nodded. Bubbles scooted in between them and put her arms around them. After a moment, they both leaned into her, just enough to feel each other there.

The sisters stayed there together for a long while and watched the world wake up.

Buttercup’s day was just getting started as she dragged her showered, sore ass back to Citiesville,
this time in a proper Uber through Townsville to avoid any unwanted scrutiny. After her early morning brawl with Blossom, it was all she could do to avoid the cameras parked outside her childhood home waiting for a chance to interview the churlish Super.

“Hey, you look really familiar. Have I seen you on TV or something?” asked Dave the Uber driver.

Buttercup popped the collar of her trench coat to hide more of her face and pressed the Quiet button in the app. “No.”

Dave got the message loud and clear, literally, and shut up the rest of the way to the CPD station.

Chief of Police Tom Foolery passed Buttercup on her way to her desk. “That was some spectacle on this morning’s news, Utonium.”

“Sir,” Buttercup said, pausing because blowing off the Chief was a bad move no matter what the reason.

“I hear your sister’s back in town. Hell of a reunion, if you ask me.”

*No one asked you, chump.*

Foolery was a box of a man, big and meaty and balding with his face always flushed like he exerted himself simply strolling across the station. He wore a rumpled brown suit and the most hideous blue tie with dog faces printed on it. He was not an incompetent man by any means, but he had a reputation as a brown-noser more concerned with the optics of his position than its capacity to do good. Ironically, his preference was the reason he’d advocated for Buttercup’s matriculation into the CPD. Suffering through the occasional PR event with local government officials or wealthy donors was the price she had to pay to stay on the force as a Super, but if it meant Buttercup had unfettered access to CPD resources and could be in a position to help people who really needed it, she was (grudgingly) happy to pay it.

“Well, I better get to it.” Buttercup started to walk around him.

“Not so fast.” Foolery blocked her path. “Someone’s here to see you. I put him in my office.”

Buttercup was too shocked to hide her reaction. “You what?”

“Keep your voice down, for Christ’s sake.” He looked over her shoulder at the other officers, a couple of whom glanced at them. “Discretion. Learn some.”

Buttercup wondered if her mysterious visitor was literal royalty to have kicked the Chief of Police out of his own office for a private meeting with her, but decided not to ask and prolong this asinine conversation longer than it had already gone on. “Ty and I have an interview with Doris Chang to get to. She’s been pressing us to open an official missing person’s case.”

“It can wait. Now get in there and do your job.” He paused before he let her pass. “And would it kill you to smile a little?”

Buttercup saw red as he pushed past her on his way to the break room for more coffee. She briefly fantasized about strangling him with his stupid dog face tie as she marched to his office. She’d do it with a smile on her face, too.

She passed Ty at their conjoined cubicles on her way and splayed five fingers at him. She fully intended to make this bullshit clandestine meeting as short as possible. It was probably just some rich asshole looking to get a Super on his personal payroll. Fucking entitled snobs, the lot of
She entered the spacious office and closed the door behind her, but before she could open her mouth to demand what the visitor wanted, he turned to face her in the Chief’s swivel chair.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Buttercup sputtered, stupefied for the second time in as many minutes.

Brick leaned back casually in the oversized leather chair, his arms splayed comfortably like he owned the place. Considering the rumors about his sordid line of work, Buttercup wondered if, in a sense, he did.

“Buttercup. I have a job for you,” he said in that flat, callous tone that could have made stone sweat. Despite herself, Buttercup felt a familiar chill down her spine at the easy control he exuded with just his voice. It reminded her so much of Blossom when she would dole out orders with every expectation that they would be followed without question.

Or when she was flaunting her power.

“I’ll always be the leader.”

But also, screw him. He wasn’t her leader, and she wasn’t about indulge his delusions of grandeur for even a second. She marched right up the desk and slammed her fists on it. Fearless, she glared daggers at him that would have made any lesser man seriously consider his mortality. Brick did not so much as blink.

“You must have balls of steel approaching me without any witnesses to see us,” she hissed. “I know what you’ve been up to these past few years.”

“Nothing so nefarious that the illustrious Chief of Police wouldn’t loan me his private office on request.”

Buttercup glared mightily at him, but he was completely unreadable. Not even a taunting smirk or a flash of emotion passed behind those heartless, bloody eyes. And the worst part was that Buttercup knew he was right. She had her suspicions about him, sure. No one that smart and that ambitious with the history he had could be anything other than guilty. The problem was, no one had ever been able to connect him to the backroom deals Buttercup was sure he brokered. Convenient business mergers or political favors or even the occasional “disappearance” of valuable art—they all happened, and Brick was never caught with his dick in his hand at the end of it. There was no proof, no willing witnesses, and no trail. On her worst days, Buttercup gaslit herself into thinking it was just her dislike for the guy clouding her judgment. But she had seen evidence of his meteoric rise over the years, accumulating a substantial wealth to his name, friends in high and low places, and a reputation as a closer flying under the proper legal channels. On paper, Brick was as clean as they came, always had been.

Buttercup removed her badge and laid it on the desk between them. “Come see me after hours and we’ll see how nefarious you really are.”

He rose and walked to the window overlooking downtown Citiesville. He wore dark jeans, a black blazer, and a skinny tie that did his tall figure every favor. His short red hair was styled and messy to draw a favoring eye, but Buttercup fantasized only about anchoring him with it and blasting his impassive face at point-blank range. Even after his days as a delinquent Rowdyruff Boy were behind him and he was, for all intents and purposes, a regular high school student who sat a couple rows in front of her in English, Buttercup had never warmed up to him the way she had to his
brothers. Boomer was annoying, but eager to please and good for a laugh. Butch was a pain in the ass, but he was entertaining and always up for some fun, especially where her sisters were too busy or too chickenshit. While she’d found common, albeit uneven, ground with the self-proclaimed fiercest fighter of the Rowdyruff Boys, Brick had always remained a distant shadow looming over his brothers, unknowable and other. And he seemed to like it that way.

“I wouldn’t be here if I thought I had any other choice,” Brick said, his back to her.

That surprised her, and Buttercup was glad that he wasn’t looking at her in that moment. “What the hell’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means I need an honest cop who’ll see this through to the end, no distractions.”

“I repeat, what the hell’s that supposed to mean? ‘Cause if you think for a second I would ever do anything to help you, then you’re out of your goddamned mind—”

“Someone pillaged Mojo Jojo’s lab and made off with DNA samples,” Brick cut in, an edge to his tone that hadn’t been there before. “Mine, specifically. And my brothers’.”

Buttercup stared at him, agape. Despite their mutual animosity and her growing urge to screw the rules and paint her boss’ office with his entrails, she was floored by the real emotion in Brick’s voice, even if it was only anger.

He turned to face her. “So you can understand why I’m coming to you with this.”

Years of police training and a lifetime of loyalty to her sisters and their shared gift kicked in. “Back up. Are you sure they were stolen? Not destroyed? And why would Mojo even have any of that?”

“Insurance, inspiration, arrogance. Take your pick. He called me personally and told me what happened.”

Buttercup’s mind raced as she wrapped her head around what he was telling her. She didn’t know much about the science behind it, but she knew the cesspool of greed and megalomania that was human nature. Depending on who was behind the theft, Rowdyruff DNA could be considered trash or the ultimate treasure. And access to those Super cells might mean a budding threat to his brothers, which inevitably meant a threat to her sisters, too.

“Fuck,” Buttercup swore, leaning her weight against the Chief’s desk.

Brick watched her, his hands in his pants pockets and his posture rigid. “In a word.”

“Mojo’s lab is in Townsville PD’s jurisdiction.”

“I’m sure you have plenty of connections there.”

“I could probably get a look at the file as a courtesy, but there’s no reason for them to hand the case over to CPD.”

Brick’s gaze darkened. “Then find a reason.”

“What are you coming to me, anyway? Why not just investigate it yourself? You have your own brand of unlimited jurisdiction.”

Here, he hesitated. “I’d be going on nothing. Mojo has no idea who could be behind this.”

Buttercup had spent enough time over the years dealing with the filthiest dregs of the Citiesville
underbelly, and she’d picked up a skill or two dealing with liars and cheats. Namely, how to spot them.

“You’re lying.” But why? Why would he come to her when he could just do it himself…

And then it dawned on her.

“I get it. You don’t want to show your face.”

Brick surprised her again by shrugging. “You wouldn’t in my position, either.”

Buttercup crossed her arms and smirked. “Seems to me like my best bet might be to dangle you out in the open, then. Draw a little attention, stir the pot. Someone’s bound to come forward somewhere when they hear how the great and powerful Brick let one slip out from under him.”

Brick slowly approached her, and Buttercup was forced to look up at him. Fucking jerk. Every move he made was some calculated power play, and he always had to come out on top.

He stopped just close enough to loom over her. “Seems to me like it won’t be my problem to answer for. I’m the bad guy, remember? I don’t care who gets hurt.”

Buttercup was on him before she could think rationally about it. He didn’t fight her as she slammed him against the wall, her green eyes burning acid as every cell in her body screamed to let him have it, to hell with the rule of law. “Threaten me and my sisters again and I will personally relieve you of your spleen, douchebag.”

He sighed. Like a spent parent trying to make a stupid child see reason. “It’s not a threat, Buttercup. Think rationally for five minutes about what I’m saying and you’ll see I’m right. You taking point as a cop will keep the attention off my brothers and your sisters. Like it or not, we’re all in this sinking ship together.”

She knew he was right, but she didn’t have to like it. With a snarl, Buttercup shoved him against the wall hard enough to crack it, but he was unfazed. Newly pissed off, she snatched her badge from the desk and marched to the door, where she paused.

“Fine, I’ll look in to it. But you better share what you find out on your end, too.”

“I just said I’m not looking in to it.”

She sneered. “Cut the shit, Brick. I know you’ll be putting out feelers, even if you’re being discreet. Your massive paranoia couldn’t handle leaving everything to me. Like you said, we’re in this sinking ship together, so grab a bucket.”

He said nothing to that, and Buttercup went for the door.

“Oh, and I’ll be personally thanking Mojo for keeping his little collection on hand without your consent.”

Brick let out a sharp breath. “Be my guest.”

They shared a look, an unspoken understanding passing between them.

“I’ll be in touch,” Buttercup said.

Brick nodded, and she left.
“Hey, partner,” Ty said when he saw her emerge. “Everything all right?”

“Right as acid rain. Let’s just get the hell out of here. We’re going to be late meeting Mrs. Chang as it is.”

“You got it.” Ty glanced at the door to the Chief’s office just as Foolery went back in and Brick came out. They exchanged a few pleasantries as Brick thanked him for his generosity. Ty wisely said nothing about it. “I’ll drive.”

Blossom passed the next couple of days quietly as Bubbles went to work and Buttercup was back in the city. The paparazzi had thankfully died down to a trickle, but Blossom still did not want to chance venturing outside. Since her fight with Buttercup, she felt strangely calmer than before, not like she might burst at any second. It had felt good, alarmingly so. Feeling the wind in her hair as she flew, the crunch of concrete under her bare knuckles, the full-body shiver of her ice breath—all of it had felt so good.

She’d woken up the next day not cringing at her own reflection. Today, she even braved a small smile. Currently, she was going through some of her old clothes and knick knacks from high school and college that the Professor had kept and that Bubbles hadn’t had the heart or the time to get rid of. She found a thick, red ribbon among her things and tried to remember the last time she’d even worn a ribbon. Feeling strangely nostalgic, she headed for the bathroom to tie it around her ponytail. The bow hung limp over her long tresses, not at all like the upright version she used to clip to her hair as a child like some kind of crown. It looked unfamiliar on her, she admitted. But she decided she liked it all the same.

A knock on the door that afternoon startled her as she was going through some old photo albums in the Professor’s room, and she headed downstairs to see if the paparazzi were now graduating to full-on harassment. To her surprise, a familiar face stared back at her through the peep hole.

“Robin?” Blossom blurted out when she opened the door. She would have recognized those big, blue eyes anywhere.

Robin Snyder brightened at the sight of her. “Blossom! Oh my god, I wasn’t sure if you’d be home, but I saw on the news that you were back and I just had to stop by and see you!” Before she could do a thing about it, Robin enveloped her in a warm hug. “Oops! Sorry, I got a little excited there. Didn’t mean to invade your personal space like that.”

Blossom ushered her inside. “No, it’s fine, just a little unexpected.” She glanced down at her clothes, which were casual and comfortable for a day at home, and felt a bit embarrassed. “Sorry, if I’d known you were coming, I would’ve cleaned up a little more…”

Robin snorted. “Oh, please. You look as gorgeous as ever. Besides, I’m the one bothering you, so it’s me who should apologize. Actually, Bubbles told me to come over and surprise you…”

Blossom cracked a smile. “That sounds like her.”

They headed for the kitchen, where Blossom made tea and dug up some cookies from the pantry. Once the initial shock of seeing one of her former childhood friends passed, it became clear that Robin was genuinely happy to see Blossom after so much time gone by and was simply interested in catching up. Even though they had fallen out of touch, Robin had kept up with Bubbles, and now the two were thick as thieves.

“So how long are you back for?” Robin asked as she twisted her short, brown hair.
“Indefinitely, I guess. I quit my job in Metroville and came back here without much of a plan.”

“That’s great! Change is good for the soul. But I’m a little surprised to know you don’t have a plan. That doesn’t sound like you.”

Blossom smiled awkwardly. “I guess it doesn’t, huh.”

Robin didn’t miss a beat. “Well, if you’re bored at all and looking for some interesting work to keep you busy, you let me know. There’s always good opportunities for lawyers, especially someone with your Big Law background.”

“What are you, a headhunter?” Blossom teased.

“Nah, I work at a foundation downtown. I guess I’m always kind of in fundraising mode, whether it’s for cash or talent. It’s so tough finding good corporate attorneys willing to work full-time in the nonprofit sector! Guess we can’t really compete with those law firm paychecks.”

Despite herself, Blossom’s curiosity was piqued. “A foundation? What kind of work do you do?”

Robin launched into an animated spiel about the Swathe Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to bringing technology education to underprivileged communities throughout the greater Pokey Oaks County. They were doing good work partnering with local venture capital firms and successful tech companies here in the Polonium Peninsula, the heart of tech and innovation in the country. Blossom expressed her admiration for SF’s mission, and Robin dazzled.

“Hey, I have a great idea! Why don’t you come to our offices tomorrow and just poke around? I could introduce you to our general counsel, maybe have you observe some of the workshops we do for high schoolers, you know.”

“Oh, I don’t know, I wouldn’t want to impose on your time…”

“Nonsense. I always have time for friends.”

Blossom bit her lip. She’d only just quit her previous job, and this was not only a severe departure from that, but at a time when she wasn’t emotionally sure she could handle the responsibility. She wasn’t sure she could handle much of anything right now.

“Hey, look, it’s totally no pressure. I know I can be a little intense. Part of the job, I guess. Even if you’re not looking for anything right now, I think you might like seeing what we’re about. I seem to recall you having a passion for helping people.” She smiled a genuine smile and put her hand over Blossom’s.

Blossom stared at their connected hands and wondered at Robin’s words. They were the same words she had repeated to herself time and again as she studied her butt off in law school. The law firm path was supposed to be a temporary stopover to pay down her student debt, never a permanent career.

But then her father passed away, and Blossom had lost sight of her path. She met Wei, and he helped steer her back to the familiar, the safe, all the while supporting her like she thought she would never have again. She’d lost track of time, lost herself in him, just lost herself completely…

“You’ll figure it out,” Buttercup had promised her, so easy and so sure. “You always do.”

 “…my card, in case you change your mind. But really, it’s no pressure at all. If you want to come by for lunch or happy hour, I’d love to see you then, too—”
“I’ll come,” Blossom said. “To your work, to meet the GC, everything you said. I’ll come.”

Robin blinked. “Oh, well, that’s great! Are you sure? I know I kind of blew in here unannounced —”

“Robin,” Blossom said, squeezing her hand back and holding her gaze. “I’ll come. I’d like to.”

Robin smiled. Her impossibly blue eyes shone with emotion. “That’s great, Blossom. That’s really great.”

When Bubbles got home that evening and Blossom pulled her into a fierce and unexpected hug, she figured Robin’s visit had gone well.

“Thank you,” Blossom said, her voice thick with emotion.

Bubbles smiled and pulled her sister close. With delight, she noticed the pretty, red ribbon tied in Blossom’s hair, and she smiled wider. “You’re going to be okay. I promise.”

Blossom nodded and hugged her tighter. They stayed that way for a few blissful minutes, and Bubbles had never felt more sorry for Blossom’s ex-fiancé. He had thrown away an amazing, beautiful love, and he would never realize it.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so, so much to everyone who’s been leaving kudos and comments! You guys are all lovely.

Next time: Buttercup hangs out with some animals. Blossom goes to a party and meets two faces from her past she thought she would rather forget.
They Told Me You Were a Killer

Chapter Notes

WARNING: This chapter contains mature sexual content. If you would prefer to read a version of this story without smut, please check out the FFNet version.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Buttercup had so much she’d rather be doing than seek out a geriatric former super villain, and yet here she was at Mojo Jojo’s ostentatious, volcano-top observatory wondering how no matter their species, some men could not help but announce to the world that they were compensating for something. Officer Wes Goingon of the TPD had been gracious enough to give her a copy of the police report on the burglary and the CCTV footage of the masked thief escaping in exchange for the promise of catching up over drinks in the near future. Buttercup resented resorting to personal connections and nepotism to get what she wanted, but in this case being high school friends was serving her greater need to keep a low profile.

She pounded on the door. “Mojo! Open up!”

She heard him grumbling and shuffling on the other side of the door, and when he opened it he had to look up to meet her gaze. Time had not been kind to Mojo in the aesthetic sense. He walked with a slight hunch, his back unable to hold up the enormous weight of his brain in his old age. His once black fur was frosted with silver and coarse, and wrinkles lined his mouth and eyes. Those wrinkles deepened to crags as he frowned up at her.

“Buttercup, to what do I owe the tremendous displeasure of your presence here presently?” he said.

Buttercup rolled her eyes. “Believe me, the displeasure is all mine. Can I come in?”

She didn’t wait for him to admit her and floated over him inside. Perhaps it was his age, or simple self-preservation against her fists, or maybe he was just tired, but he didn’t protest her barging in without permission and closed the door behind them.

“I’m going to cut right to the chase,” Buttercup said. She landed in the living room, which was spacious and extremely high-ceilinged to accommodate the giant robots he used to build. “I’m looking into the burglary, and I need you to answer a few questions.”

Mojo’s sour expression was practically engraved on his jaundiced face as he slowly shuffled past her. “I see.”

Buttercup matched his dour glare and followed him to the kitchen, where he had a pot of tea on the stove. She only stared when he offered her a cup. “Are you serious?”

“I do not compromise my manners on anyone’s account, especially not yours, Powerpuff Girl.”

Buttercup bristled, but she accepted the tea without protest. She wanted his cooperation, not to set him off and drag this out any longer than it needed to go. “Noted.”

He grunted and led her back to the living room, where they sat opposite each other on matching
purple sofas. A nearby credenza housed an eclectic collection of ships in bottles; Buttercup recalled that Mojo was quite passionate about building them when he was not busy breaking the law. There were also a few framed pictures—one of a very young Mojo next to his original Robo Jojo, and one of him post-paint ball brawl with the Rowdyruff Boys when they were in elementary school.

Buttercup set her tea down on the coffee table. “I’ve read the police report on the burglary. You didn’t tell them about the DNA samples that were stolen. Why?”

Mojo sipped his tea and leaned back in his seat. “So that is why you have come. Which means there can only be one explanation, and that explanation is that my son is a traitor and a coward because you have come instead of him, since you are here and he is not, which explains a lot.”

“Well, on that much we can agree,” Buttercup muttered. “More importantly, why the hell were you keeping Rowdyruff DNA here at all? Do you have my DNA too? My sisters’?”

“Why, are you offering to donate?”

“Cut the crap, Mojo. Did anyone know you had the samples?”

“Oh puh-lease, anyone with an even mildly scientific inclination would have done the same thing. Perhaps you should have a look at your father’s laboratory. You may be surprised at what you find.”

Buttercup’s eyes flashed red. To his credit, Mojo flinched. “I did not come here to talk about my father. Answer the goddamned question already.”

“If you are here, which you presently are, then you know as much as I know about the unwarranted breaking and entering into my place of abode to steal that which belongs solely and exclusively to me, Mojo Jojo, because it is mine and no one else’s. There is nothing more to say on the matter.”

“Well that’s so helpful,” Buttercup sneered.

Mojo finished his tea as he scrutinized her. Even after all these years, he continued to wear a helmet over his engorged brain, and it still gave her the creeps just thinking about it pulsing away under there, hatching plans and schemes. “I am surprised at you, Buttercup. I would not have guessed you would come here simply because Brick ordered you to.”

“Excuse me?”

Mojo bared his sharp teeth in an unkind smile, and she knew she’d reacted just as he’d hoped she would. “Then again, perhaps it is not so surprising considering Blossom’s prolonged absence. You have always lacked direction and initiative without a true leader’s guidance—”

Buttercup was on him before she could even think about it. Her fingers clenched around Mojo’s thin neck as she lifted him over her like he was nothing but a doll. He pawed at her wrist and wheezed for air, but still he watched her with those condescending black eyes.

“I’m about to find direction around your windpipe, you piece of apeshit,” she snarled.

Mojo wheezed. “Violence is your only virtue. How pathetically predictable.”

Buttercup fantasized about popping his stupid head off like a bottle cap. It would be criminally easy for her, and many would probably thank her for putting an end to the monkey menace once
and for all. But cornering Mojo as he spoke to her of violence reminded her of the way she’d cornered Brick at the CPD and how he’d let her burn her fuse because what else was she going to do? What else could she do?

With a snarl, Buttercup roughly tossed Mojo back onto the sofa. “Predictable, huh? I’m not here to bust your ass, much as it would brighten up my day. Now tell me you don’t have any other stolen DNA locked up here, or else watch me burn this place to the ground to make sure.”

Mojo rubbed his abused neck, but he was not cowed. “There is nothing else. The thief took everything and then some. Now, you have overstayed your unwelcome and I wish for you to leave at once.”

“Way ahead of you.”

Buttercup was happy to go. It was clear that she would gain nothing new from questioning him further. She turned, and the picture of Mojo with the Boys on the credenza leered at her, taunting. Brick had his stupid red cap on, like he always had when they were kids. Buttercup fantasized about incinerating the picture with her eye beams.

Fucking Brick making her come here because he was too chicken shit. Low profile my ass.

“Oh, and Buttercup?” Mojo called to her in the foyer.

“What,” Buttercup spat over her shoulder.

“What,” Buttercup spat over her shoulder.

Mojo grinned sinisterly. “Do give my love to Brick when you report back to him.”

Unbidden, Buttercup’s energy spiked and manifested upon her skin as flaming, green sparks. God, it would be so easy to raze this place to the ground with Mojo inside it. So easy…and so weak.

“You would just be proving his point,” she imagined Blossom’s pedantic voice in her head.

Buttercup flipped Mojo the bird, and then shot a small but potent blast of green energy from her fingertip at the ceiling. It smashed through the chandelier and sent it crashing to the floor right on top of the glass coffee table. Both pieces shattered.

Mojo’s smug smile warped to almost comical indignation, and Buttercup derived some small satisfaction from her childish retaliation even though she could practically feel Blossom’s shade rolling her eyes. She left without a word and slammed the door behind her.


Fucking Blossom, too. Buttercup was a cop, a respected member of the community in her own right. She’d earned that on her own, not as the toughest fighter of a disbanded superhero trio.

“Who needs ‘em?”

She floated back to the ground. Observatory Park played host to a number of patrons on this sunny day. Some were relaxing with kids, others out exercising, and more than a few dogs chased frisbees and tennis balls. Buttercup wanted to leave, she really did, but her sense of duty demanded she ask around if anyone had been here the night of the burglary. Maybe the TPD had missed something.

Sighing, she got to work chatting up a pair of joggers passing by. They regularly ran through here and had been in the area the night of the burglary, but they didn’t recall seeing anything suspicious.
“Well, besides that old Mojo,” said one of the joggers. “But he’s always suspicious! Maybe he did it?”

“No, he was the one who got burgled,” Buttercup said. “Thanks anyway.”

She passed some dogs wrestling over a chew toy and ignored them, but an older dog relaxing in the grass watching the others looked up as she went.

“Buttercup, is that you?”

Buttercup stopped mid-float and looked around. The old dog was peering up at her through rheumy, dark eyes lined with gunk. It took her a moment, but Buttercup recognized this dog despite the white slowly drowning out his black spots in his old age.

“…Talking Dog?”

Talking Dog wagged his tail excitedly. It had a bend in it from an old break. “I thought I recognized your voice.”

His eyes were unfocused and filmy. Buttercup realized he must be totally blind. Christ, how old was this dumb dog? She was honestly amazed that the was still alive, supernatural talking abilities notwithstanding.

“Are you okay?” Buttercup asked, surreptitiously looking around to make sure no one was gawking at her talking to a dog like a crazy person. “You look terrible.”

“Well, that’s not very nice.”

“Guess not. Look, uh, it was…great to see you, but I’m kind of in the middle of something—”

“Did you find that burglar yet?”

“How do you know about that?”

“I may be blind, but I’m not deaf.”

He had her there, she supposed. “I’m working on it.”

“Well, I hope you do. He was very rude to my daughter. Tell her, Carla.”

Carla the dog barked energetically nearby.

“Awful, right?” Talking Dog said.

Buttercup rubbed her temples and willed herself not to commit (further) animal abuse today. “Oh yeah, I can just hear the anguish in her voice.”

“Tell me about it. Who kicks a dog?”

*Me, if you don’t get to the fucking point.*

“Look, Talking Dog, as thrilling as this has been, I have to keep looking for witnesses, so why don’t you go fetch a stick or something—”

“But I am a witness. We all are. We were there that night! Tell her, Carla.”
Carla yipped again.

Buttercup did not know why she was still here talking to a literal dog.

“I mean, I didn’t witness anything, on account of being blind as a bat, you know, but I tasted the crime in progress.”

“You what?”

“Oh, now you want to know? Well, maybe I don’t feel like sharing anymore,” Talking Dog said.

Buttercup snatched him by his scruff and dangled him in front of her face. “Oh no. You can’t just say you have information about a crime and not fork it over.” Carla yipped nervously, and some nearby dog owners had stopped to stare at Buttercup manhandling the poor pooch.

“Listen, you old mutt. I’ve had a shitty day dealing with Mojo trying to solve a crime that isn’t even my problem because I’m a great cop and a really excellent person in general, so you better tell me what you know or I’m sending you to the pound, got it?”

Talking Dog shrank from her. “All right, all right! No need for threats.”

Buttercup set him down. “Well?”

“Chalk.”

“Chalk?”

“Chalk. That’s what he tasted like. Isn’t that right, Carla?”

Carla barked unhelpfully.

“And how the hell is that supposed to help me?” Buttercup demanded.

“You’re the great cop; you figure it out. All I can tell you is that he tasted like chalk. A lot of chalk.”

Well, Buttercup supposed it was more than what she had before. What could it mean? Chalk… Maybe the burglar was a school teacher. Or a professional hopscotch player. Who else used chalk enough to be covered in the dust?

“Hey, how about a reward for the tip? I’m partial to steak,” Talking Dog said. Carla barked her agreement.

“What, do I look like Door Dash to you?”

“I can’t see anything.”

Buttercup rolled her eyes. “Whatever, I have shit to do. Thanks for the tip.”

“Hey, wait—”

Buttercup launched into the air with every intention of heading back to the CPD station. She didn’t want to involve Ty in this side investigation considering the sensitive Super nature of it, but maybe she could float the chalk clue by him. It couldn’t hurt, she supposed.

On the way, she pulled out her phone and powered up the Door Dash app. She kind of wished she
Blossom’s visit to the Swathe Foundation main offices in downtown Townsville went even better than expected. She wasn’t sold on the idea of nonprofit work going in, but after speaking to Robin and some of the other employees, as well as wrapping up her visit sitting in on a coding workshop for a class of teenaged girls, something sparked for her.

Her interviews were fast tracked, and before the end of the week she had a firm offer in hand with a modest but livable salary attached, and the promise of truly good work ahead of her. She’d approached SF unsure and not really intending to make anything serious of it, and now she was in her second week of work collaborating directly with the general counsel and the executive team, adding her sharp mind, innate compassion, and professional training to a team of dedicated people who truly believed in making a difference in the world.

It felt good to have a purpose again. It felt good to be needed, to be relied upon, and to be doing something worthwhile with her skills. And it felt good not to dwell on her failures and losses for a change.

Tonight, Blossom had been invited to a fundraising event where the SF executives would be schmoozing with wealthy potential donors and philanthropists. The party was Townsville formal, which Blossom learned from a very savvy Robin to consider closer to business semi-formal. Townsville was not Metroville, and the Polonium Peninsula tech millionaires preferred to spend their riches on travel and leisure rather than the latest fashion trends.

Blossom showed up in a simple but elegant black dress slashed with red. The two-toned skirt whispered about her knees, revealing a flash of red with every step. She was one glass of champagne in and politely chatting up a twenty-something techie with the net worth of some small nations when the general counsel, her boss Beto Gonzalez, led her to a small group of people quietly talking near the back of the room.

“Blossom, sorry to pull you away, but I wanted to introduce you to a few of the members of our board of directors,” he whispered.

“Not at all, thank you. I’d love to meet them.”

A young guy in a Nirvana T-shirt and skinny jeans wearing sunglasses tried to block their path and introduce himself to Blossom, but Beto artfully steered them away with a polite excuse.

“Tech bros. A hazard of the job, I’m afraid.”

“I can handle a few tipsy software engineers,” Blossom said with a smile.

Beto grinned. “I have the utmost faith in your abilities, but I also have the deepest sympathy for your ears.”

They shared a laugh as Beto led them to the small group of people gathered.

“Beto, I was wondering where you’d gotten off to!” said one of the men, older with stark white hair but dressed in a spiffy suit. He glanced at Blossom. “Although, I suppose I couldn’t blame you for seeking out new company when you spend so much of your time having to look at my ugly mug.”

Beto laughed. “And on that note, I’d like to introduce my colleague, Blossom Utonium. She’s a
very talented attorney who recently came over from Frost & Kline in Metroville. Blossom, this is Theo Grand. He’s been on SF’s board since our inception.”

Theo smiled broadly, and Blossom instantly liked him. He had a face made for smiling, and the personality to match it. “Made a good bet on these clowns in the end. But I always do.” He winked.

Beto went down the line, introducing Blossom to two more directors, all older men with long histories working in tech and financing in Polonium Peninsula from here to Metroville and even farther north.

“And last but certainly not least, allow me to introduce—”

“Princess Morbucks?” Blossom blurted out.

Princess smiled like she had a secret and offered her champagne glass to Blossom. “You’re welcome.”

With no other choice, Blossom numbly clinked her glass to Princess’.

Beto looked between them. “Oh, you two know each other?”

“We went to grade school together,” Princess said. “Once upon a time.”

Blossom could only stare. The last time she had seen Princess was high school graduation, and physically not much about her had changed. She was still short and curvy, still crowned with a mane of auburn corkscrew curls, which she wore long and loose tonight, and her brown eyes were still penetrating like some nocturnal big cat’s. A splash of dark freckles dusted her nose and cheeks, and her painted lips curved in a sly grin. She was overdressed in a stunning yellow cocktail dress that seemed to make her glow. That, and the diamonds that iced her neck and ears.

“What a small world!” Theo said. “In that case, don’t let us stand between you. Blossom, it was lovely to meet you. I’m sure we’ll be working together in the future very soon.”

The men left, and soon Blossom found herself alone with her former childhood nemesis.

“Princess,” she said, forcing her voice to stay neutral and polite. “You look good. It’s been a long time.”

Princess’s dark eyes sparkled with some hidden mirth, and Blossom got the uncomfortable feeling that she was laughing at her. “I look great, actually. And yeah, it has been a long time.” She eyed Blossom’s sleeveless party dress and trademark hair ribbon. “You look good, too.”

“Ladies, may I offer you some refreshment?” asked a passing waiter.

“You absolutely can. Just set it down here. Yeah, the whole thing.” Princess all but manhandled the poor waiter into giving up his entire tray of bruschetta. He demurred, but Princess waved him off. “Ugh, I haven’t eaten all day. It’s about time they started bringing out the apps.”

Blossom sensed herself moving to follow Princess without really thinking about it, and soon she was staring down a mini bruschetta at a standing table while Princess crunched on her crostini.

“What, not hungry?” Princess said.

Instead of answering, Blossom ate the appetizer in one bite. It was not memorable. Princess must have read something on her face because she smirked.
“You’d think with all the cash SF rakes in, they could afford to get some decent catering. I brought it up at the last board meeting, but clearly I’ll have to re-emphasize my point.” She eyed Blossom curiously. “What’s up with you? I don’t remember you being all shy and weird.”

Blossom gaped at her. “What? I’m not shy!”

“Yeah, you weren’t shy when you and Buttercup beat the crap out of each other on live television. Looked pretty satisfied with yourself to me. What was that all about, anyway?”

Blossom shook her head, unable to believe she was actually having this conversation with Princess Morbucks, of all people. “Sorry, I’m just…”

“Just what?”

Blossom decided to forgo her inhibitions and just come out and ask. “What are you doing here? Really.”

Princess burst out laughing. “Oh god, your face! That was priceless.” She fanned herself to calm down. “I guess you wouldn’t have any reason to keep up, huh?”

Blossom said nothing.

“Like Beto said, I’m on the board. A non-employee director, in the flesh.” She gestured to herself. “I got that, but how? And why?”

Princess quirked a brow. “Huh, you really don’t know, do you? Okay, executive summary: I’m a VC. One of the best in the Peninsula, by the way. I have my own firm, but I angel invest on the side when I feel like it. Don’t look at me like that, Google it if you don’t believe me.”

Blossom did, and she was amazed to see that not only was Princess a respected venture capitalist, but also she was on the boards of a couple early-stage tech companies in addition to SF. Educated in France and here in the United States, she was the picture of capitalist success and privilege if Blossom ever saw it.

“This is…”

“Amazing, right? I know.”

“I was going to say unexpected. Your family is already so wealthy. I guess I never thought you would branch out on your own. You never seemed the type.”

Princess regarded her. “And you never seemed the type to go corporate. It’s almost like people grow and change with experience…imagine that.”

Blossom flushed, but she held her tongue. She supposed she deserved that one.

“Although, you’re here now, so I guess you’ve come full circle.”

“So have you, it seems.”

Princess grinned. “Maybe. Or maybe I just like meeting new people.”

Surreal, that was how Blossom would recall her meeting with Princess Morbucks. It was almost like talking to a normal person who hadn’t tried to destroy her and her sisters countless times, who hadn’t bullied and ostracized her in high school, who didn’t value money and status over all else.
Well, perhaps that last one was still viable.

“I’m not new people,” Blossom said.

“Aren’t you, though?” Princess popped another bruschetta in her mouth. She winced at the subpar flavor.

Blossom found that she could not really disagree. This woman standing opposite her was Princess Morbucks, no doubt about it, but she was much more than the spoiled brat Blossom had grown up with. Or perhaps she’d simply found an appropriate outlet for her greed and competitive nature—a positive one, judging from her involvement with SF. Blossom herself was much changed from her self-righteous high school hero persona, though she had not quite come to terms with where she’d landed. These days she felt like she was still falling, waiting for the ground to hit.

“I guess you’re right,” Blossom conceded.

“I usually am.” Princess flashed her a haughty smile and sipped her champagne. She immediately put it down when she caught sight of someone over Blossom’s shoulder. “Speaking of which, here comes a new face you know well.” She waved. “You’re late.”

“I told you I would be.” A tall, well-dressed man walked around Blossom and the table to approach Princess.

She instantly recognized him as Brick, though she was having a difficult time believing her eyes. Brick glanced askance at her, his scarlet eyes lingering on hers just a little too long to be confirmatory. Like he wasn’t surprised to see her here at all.

“Blossom,” he said, his voice low and soft as though uttering a secret. It nonetheless carried over the din of conversation to her super-sensitive ears.

Blossom set her champagne flute down on the table to force her hand not to shake. “Brick,” she said, breathless with shock.

That got an odd reaction from him, and his eyes flashed with an emotion she could not name, it was gone so fast.

Princess, meanwhile, watched them watch each other with thinly veiled curiosity. She downed the rest of her champagne and crumpled up her used napkin on the now empty tray of bruschetta. “Well, I’m off to network. Find me later, Brick. Oh, and Blossom?”

Blossom tore her gaze from Brick to look at Princess, and she flushed, embarrassed for no good reason. Princess merely smirked.

“Surprisingly not terrible catching up with you. I’ll see you around.” She exchanged a short glance with Brick and sauntered off.

Alone now with Brick, Blossom forced herself to calm down. Like Princess, he was a bit overdressed in a dark, designer suit and a blood-red shirt. He was taller than she remembered, though not as tall or lanky as Boomer. He was clean-shaven, but a strong jaw and lean cheeks made him look his age, perhaps a little older. His face was not strikingly handsome, maybe a little above average, but not anyone she might have readily noticed above others in passing.

Except the eyes.

Lurid, they burned with an intensity of feeling threatened but not revealed. Those same eyes
watched her now, studied her as she studied him, almost gravitational in their command for her focus. Blossom did not remember such a consuming intensity in him back in high school. Or perhaps she’d never noticed it directed at her. She repressed a shudder.

“Nice dress,” he said, taking a sip of his whiskey neat.

Acutely aware of his scrutiny, she touched her bangs, and his eyes followed her fingers.

“Thank you,” she said.

He seemed to realize what they were both subconsciously doing and averted his gaze. Blossom released the breath she’d been holding.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded, regaining a bit of her composure.

He looked back at her, and this time it was with the imperious, cold resolve she recognized all too well from their childhood. “Working. You?”

“Also working. Although, tonight is supposed to be more play than work.”

“So they say.”

It was awkward, she could feel it. Here was a man she had not seen nor spoken to in years, and for good reason. They had never gotten along, and not simply because they were arch enemies as children. There was always competition between them as they grew older, an insatiable need to best the other, which sometimes devolved into petty, at times cruel arguments. They had never been friends even when they were no longer bitter enemies; more like obstacles ever and inconveniently in each other’s way in their race to the top.

“You’ve been gone a long time,” Brick said. “Any particular reason why you’re suddenly back?”

Blossom was instantly suspicious. She remembered drunkenly talking to Boomer her first night back, but she wasn’t sure what, if anything, he’d told Brick about it. He was watching her with an unreadable look, and she felt a power imbalance between them in that moment. He’d obviously known she was back, and yet she was left completely off her guard seeing him tonight out of the blue.

She drank the rest of her champagne and decided to be frank with him in the hopes of gleaning an honest reaction and balancing the scales a bit. “Broken engagement, couldn’t stand to be within a hundred miles of the guy afterwards.” She set her glass down. “But I’m sure you heard it all from Boomer already.”

Brick pressed his lips together, and Blossom knew she had him. His tells, and Boomer’s loudmouthed loyalty to him, it seemed, had both survived the test of time.

“A little.”

“Charming,” Blossom said, not at all charmed. “Excuse me.”

She fully intended to abandon him. What did she care what he knew? It was partially her own fault for drinking too much in front of Boomer, and in the end, what did it really matter? His knowing her shame wouldn’t change a damn thing, anyway. They were no longer in high school, and she didn’t care what he thought of her or her failures.

She lingered at the bar while the bartender prepared her a fresh drink and looked around for Robin.
She was networking with a larger group and engrossed in conversation. Blossom was wondering how much grief she would get from her effusive friend for ducking out of here early when Brick appeared next to her, blocking her view of Robin.

“That was uncouth of me,” he said, not looking at her. “I apologize.”

Blossom stared at him a moment, genuinely surprised. Had he ever apologized to her for anything in all the years they had known and battled each other? She could not recall.

“Miss, your drink,” the bartender said, sliding a glass tumbler to her.

Blossom took a sip of her drink and glanced askance at Brick. He was watching her from the corner of his eye, awaiting her judgment. “Thank you.”

He held her gaze as though daring her to take it back, he didn’t need her forgiveness. Instead, he surprised her again. “He’s my brother.”

An explanation? Really? Blossom wondered if he was really Brick or some imposter who had grown a few manners since high school. “I understand.”

Brick dropped the subject to her relief, and they fell into a short but not uncomfortable silence while he ordered another drink for himself. “How long are you in town for?”

Blossom leaned on the bar and played with her ponytail absently. “I don’t know. A while I guess, now that I have this job.”

“I never pegged you for the nonprofit sector.”

She looked at him oddly. “Is that supposed to be joke?”

“There’s no prestige in it.”

That old, knee-jerk reaction that itched at her like a rash whenever she was in his presence back in high school made itself known now. She wanted to throw it back in his face, because what did he know about her?

He shrugged before she could say anything. “I always imagined you aiming for the top of whatever path you chose.”

Blossom bit her tongue before she could retort something nasty. There was no derision in his tone or in the way he looked at her, more curious than accusatory, like he didn’t know but genuinely wanted to. “Who says I’m not?”

He sipped his drink, but Blossom caught the curl of a smirk behind his glass. “You never could resist a challenge.”

“And you were always such a poor loser.”

“No worse than you.”

They had leaned closer to each other without realizing it, and Blossom cleared her throat and pulled back to a more respectable distance. She frowned and swirled her drink. What was she doing talking to Brick here, anyway?

“Fair enough,” she said, looking around again for Robin and a way out of this strange conversation with a man she had not spared a thought for in years, yet tempted something from her she’d long...
thought outgrown and buried.

“It doesn’t suit you, losing.”

The way he was looking at her tempted her again. She was quite sure they weren’t talking about her job anymore. “You say that like it’s a choice.”

“There’s always a choice for people like us.”

For people who weren’t normal.

“You’re never going to be normal, Bloss!”

A wave of sadness and shame passed through her, and she was suddenly cold. “Sure.”

Brick narrowed his eyes, but he said nothing further on the subject. Feeling a little awkward again, Blossom decided she would go home, after all. She’d made her appearance, and as far as she was concerned that was enough. She opened her mouth to excuse herself, but she was interrupted.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” said a woman who had taken position at the front of the room with a microphone. “Please raise your glasses as I welcome the president of the Swathe Foundation, Mr. Simon Swathe.”

People clapped, and SF’s doughy, bespectacled president made his way on stage. Blossom had not met him personally, but he was a wealthy philanthropist and well-respected by his employees.

“See the woman in white over there? The blonde.”

Blossom gripped her glass tighter at the sound of Brick’s voice so close to her ear, soft so as not to be overheard. She saw where he was looking at a handsome woman in her thirties watching Simon speak.

“What about her?”

“That’s Dinah Swathe.”

“His wife?”

“More like he’s her husband. She’s big pharma, a brilliant scientist.”

Blossom understood. “The pants.”

“Pretty much.”

Simon’s speech carried on. He had a bit of a droning voice, in Blossom’s opinion, but a lot of energy.

“And I care because?”

He quirked his head in question. “You don’t want to know who you really answer to?”

“I don’t work for her; I work for him.”

“Sure.”

Blossom turned to face him. “And who do you work for, exactly? What’s your connection to all
this? Or am I supposed to believe you’re just that passionate about tech education in underprivileged communities?”

He regarded her. “Me? I’m just passing through.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Sure.”

Simon finished his speech, and Dinah was waiting to kiss his cheek when he joined her. Blossom watched them, looking for any sign of…what? She wasn’t sure, but Brick’s comment burrowed in the back of her mind like a hungry centipede, and she could not shake it.

An older man approached Brick and Blossom at the bar just then. His gaze lingered on Blossom, but it was Brick he’d come for.

“I’ll be right with you,” Brick said, careful not to address the man by name.

Blossom was about to dismiss him to whatever business he was up to that he clearly did not want to discuss in her presence, when he suddenly took her hand in his and pressed a light kiss to her knuckles. They locked eyes.

“You’ll excuse me,” he murmured against her fingers before finally releasing her.

Her throat knotted at the sight of him bent before her, those violent eyes half-lidded in quiet challenge, as if to say, “Your move.”

And then he was gone, tailing the older man out of sight. Blossom stood there catching her breath. She fisted her kissed hand and discreetly blew on it. The chill of her ice breath had a numbing effect, instantaneous and effective.

There was no denying his pointed look the second time around. Desire, plain and simple, at the prospect of her. She had not experienced that look in a very long time, or at least she had not afforded it any attention. Not since Wei.

And now she had no idea what to do about it.

Brick finished his business with his client sooner than expected. Princess had once again come through for him by providing access to the gala for his client’s proxy to approach their target in a controlled setting that wouldn’t raise any eyebrows. The deal was done, accounts were exchanged and deposits made, and within the hour Brick’s client would have access to certain insider information that would quadruple the return on his investment come opening bell on Monday.

The party was still in full swing, and it was only 10 p.m. on Friday. SF had spared little expense, booking the meeting room at the Chrysanthemum Suites, one of the city’s most luxurious business hotels downtown, and providing an open bar all evening. He’d booked a room for himself at the hotel, anticipating any number of complications or problems with tonight’s business, and he was almost disappointed that none had come to pass if only for the wasted evening left over. He could have just gone home to his own bed if he’d known it would go so smoothly tonight.

He wandered through the crowd of elbow-rubbing philanthropists and techies, half-heartedly searching for a bright, orange ponytail and a blood-red ribbon among them just to see if she was still here, when a smiling face blocked his path.

“Mrs. Swathe,” Brick greeted, polite but reserved.
She smiled brightly. “Oh please, call me Dinah. Mrs. Swathe is my mother-in-law.”

“Dinah, then.”

“Much better. I was hoping to run into you, actually. If you’re not busy.”

Brick studied her carefully. “I was going to head home, actually.”

“Ah, then I won’t keep you.” She fished around her clamshell clutch and produced a sleek business card, white with a single phone number embossed in gold and nothing else. “I’ve heard you’re a reliable friend to have, Brick.”

He accepted the business card, wondering what she could want so desperately as to seek him out. “I can be for the right price.”

“Oh, I’m sure we can work something out. Let’s say brunch tomorrow then, shall we? My assistant will be in touch with the details in the morning.”

Brick merely nodded, and she excused herself to greet more people. He watched her go, intrigued in spite of himself. Dinah Swathe was a big name with plenty of important connections that could bring in a lot of business for Brick. They had crossed paths before, but she had never engaged his services. There was not much a woman like Dinah Swathe wanted for in the world that she didn’t already have.

Pocketing her business card to mull over later, Brick scanned the room again, wondering if he really should just go home like he’d told Dinah. That was when he spotted Blossom towards the back of the room talking to two men, faces Brick vaguely recognized as serial entrepreneurs. They were laughing at something. Blossom’s back was to the table behind her. Something in her polite but reserved endurance keeping up with the conversation irked him the way a pebble in his shoe might irk him, small yet unspeakably offensive. Brick came up behind the two men, ignoring them completely, and reached for her in between them.

“There you are,” he said. “We’re leaving.”

She narrowed her eyes in suspicion, a look he recognized all too well from their school days, and he wondered if she would play along or tell him to fuck off. He gave it a fifty-fifty shot because he was arrogant, and because so was she.

“Hey, we’re in the middle of a conversation,” said the older of the two men. He was big and tall, taller than Brick by a good few inches. The way he was looking at Brick foretold a swift and promising sort of violence, one Brick had not come here looking for but suddenly felt compelled to oblige just because he could.

He cast the guy a cursory glance. “Didn’t see you there, buddy. My bad.”

The guy’s eyes flashed with anger, but before he or his much smaller friend could do anything about it, Blossom snaked her hand around Brick’s arm and squeezed. Hard.

“I’m ready,” she said, her voice poisonously saccharine. “Let’s go.”

Don’t start anything.

He could practically hear the threat in her tone as she crushed his arm in her small hand. He flexed under her fingers, a silent reminder of just who she was attempting to manhandle and why it would never work unless he allowed it. Which, having gotten what he’d come for, he did.
“Excuse us,” Brick said to the two men, who could do nothing but watch as Blossom left with him. As soon as they were out of immediate sight of them, she spun him around. “What was that about?” He shrugged. “You looked like you needed an out. I provided one.”

“You of all people know I can take care of myself. So why bother at all?”

This close and he could smell her perfume. He took a moment to look at her from this angle and decided to be honest with her because he wanted to see what she would do. “I wanted to.”

She blinked and suddenly realized just how close they were standing. She pulled back, but he took her by the arm and held fast. Suspicious anger darkened her rosy eyes, nearly red in the dim lighting. Red like her ribbon, like her lips, like him. As before when he’d kissed her hand, he felt the energy jumping between them, gravitational and kinetic, lightning awakening a creature neither of them would have ever before considered. Time, perhaps, and distance. They were older, the petty rivalry and insecurities of their teenage years long behind them, leaving only clear-headed control without distraction except in each other.

Brick had not come here looking for something, least of all with her. He had rules, and he lived by them. But if anyone was above the rules, it was him. He made them; he could just as easily break them if and when it suited him. And something about the way she had first said his name, breathless as a ghost, made him feel like breaking something tonight.

“Why?” she asked.

“I think you know why.”

Her lips parted, and she searched his face.

He could see her weighing it all out in her head, in those illuminated eyes he could always pick out of a crowd ever since they were kids. Maybe she was thinking about their pasts, how they were always at odds in all that they did. Maybe she was thinking of her sisters, what they might think if they found out. Or maybe she was still hung up on her trash bag ex Boomer had told him about, the weak, entitled human who had dared to cross her, and she’d fucking let him.

This last thought ignited a visceral disgust in Brick, not because of her per se, but because of what she was. What they both were. In a way, she too disgusted him for it, letting it happen like she did. People like her, like him, they didn’t get used and tossed away like old gum; they were supposed to be far above all that. He had the overwhelming urge to purge her of it, of all of it, until she couldn’t remember anything or anyone who’d ever come before him simply because he could.

Blossom took his hand from her arm with a subtle but overpowering force. This close to her, he could see the pink sparks of her raw power jumping between her fingers. They seeped through his suit sleeve like needles, death by a thousand cuts.

“I know, Brick,” she murmured.

He discreetly slipped his hand over the small of her back and stepped closer until her chest brushed his. “Give me a clear answer.”

To the crowd pressed in around them, they appeared to be two friendly colleagues mindful of the noise as they attempted to converse. There was a power in this deception, in the game they were playing, and he was curious to see what she would do next.
She ghosted his cheek with her lips, as if to kiss him in greeting, but she did not. “Yes.”

*Oh.*

He swallowed. “This way.”

She allowed him to guide her through the crowd. They were blocked not ten paces from the exit by Theo Grand, who wished to bid Blossom a good night, he was heading out a bit early.

“It was lovely to meet you,” he said graciously and took her hand to shake. “I look forward to working together going forward.”

Blossom, by some supernatural power, smiled demurely and spoke clearly and politely despite Brick’s hand radiating heat and raw energy into the small of her back in his mounting impatience for this vapid conversation. “You too, Mr. Grand. Have a good rest of your evening.”

He turned his sights on Brick next. “Oh, excuse me, I don’t think we’ve met.”

Brick valiantly suffered through Blossom’s quick introduction and offered his hand to shake.

“Strong grip you’ve got there, son,” Theo said, taken aback. “Mighty strong.”

Blossom discreetly reached behind her and grabbed his wrist in a grip that would have literally crushed Theo’s hand. Brick chuckled at her warning and dug his fingers deeper into her dress, earning a soft gasp.

“Please excuse us, Mr. Grand,” Brick said smoothly. “We were just on our way to get some air.”

“Of course, don’t let me keep you.” Theo eyed Brick with a mixture of polite distance and a little wariness. “Enjoy the night.”

*I will.*

He all but shoved Blossom onwards, vowing to eye beam the next fool who dared to get in their way, to hell with her indignation. None did, and soon they were passing through the lobby to cut to the elevators. Brick had booked a room on one of the higher floors for himself, as per his preference. Unfortunately, they were not alone in the elevator and were forced to endure the presence of a very well-endowed woman and her equally thick husband pushing them back into a corner for thirty fucking floors.

Brick had not felt the need to murder innocents with the intensity and frequency he was experiencing tonight in a very long time. He thought about telling Blossom this, but she would certainly react poorly. He thought about telling her anyway just to see it.

The minute they were out of the elevator, which was unfortunately the same floor as the voluminous couple, Brick took Blossom’s wrist and dragged her after him to the end of the hall. He didn’t look back at her, instead focusing on opening the door. The key card failed on the first two attempts, and he was this close to throwing all discretion to the wind.

“I’m going to pulverize this fucking door,” he hissed.

“Give it here.”

Blossom snatched the card from him, slid it through the reader, and pushed the door open. They stepped into the dark room, and the door fell closed behind them.
This was insane. Somewhere between the elevator ride up and stepping over the threshold, Blossom vaguely acknowledged this. There were probably a million reasons why a casual hookup was a bad idea. There were many more why it was a very bad idea with Brick specifically. It wasn’t her style; it wasn’t her. And he… He wasn’t for her.

But she could not bring herself to care. Not when he took her waist in one hand and parted her lips with the other. “Finally,” he said, or perhaps not. Perhaps it was her voice. Perhaps she had imagined it entirely, lost now between them as he tested her with a first, feverish kiss, and she let him.

Unable to make it past the threshold, they stood pressed together a couple feet from the door. Her fingers curled in his shirtfront and his parted along her back to clutch her neck and her waist, as though he meant to shackle her to him. Blossom hummed at the pressure on her skin, and he deepened their kiss.

But as her body enjoyed him, her mind persisted against him. All she could feel was Brick, but all she could think about was Wei and how much she still loved him in spite of everything. Too much, too fast, too tempting. “Hey,” she managed, barely breaking their fervent kiss.

His fingers tightened around the back of her neck, strong enough to snap if she were anybody else. Scarlet sparks prickled her skin where his fingers dug in, raw power and raw desire looking back at her through half-lidded eyes, and for a moment she forgot why she’d bothered interrupting him at all.

“You want this,” he said, not a question but waiting for an answer all the same.

She bit her lip, and his eyes were drawn back to her mouth. “I’m… I haven’t since…”

His eyes flashed, but not with the guarded understanding he’d shown her before. He shoved her against the wall—on the other side of the room. The vase of fresh-cut flowers on the coffee table fluttered precariously as traces of his shattering, crimson power blazed behind them, incandescent. The air left Blossom’s lungs having been transported faster than the speed of sound, and she was breathless.

“I don’t care about him,” Brick said. The threat caressed the shell of her ear upon his breath, tightened with his fingers around her hips. “I don’t care what you did with him.”

He kissed her hard as she opened her mouth to respond to that, to…what? To protest? To deny him? There wasn’t a bone in her body that wanted to deny him when he kissed her like that, like he expected something from her she had never been able to give before because Wei was fragile and she was not and yet he had shattered her to pieces all the same. And it was those cracks she wanted to fill, just for a little while, so why not with Brick when he was here and very willing?

Abandoning her anxious thoughts for pure instinct, Blossom grabbed Brick’s shoulders and shoved him against the wall hard enough to crack the plaster. The crumbling sound momentarily petrified her, and in a moment of delusion, it was Wei she saw beneath her powerful hands, fearful and trembling. But those scarlet eyes darkened with an almost animalistic purpose as Brick’s body sparked with pent up power, and she realized that wasn’t fear at all, not even close. She almost laughed in his face, but never got the chance before he shoved her right back with enough force to break something, but not her. She barely felt her back bump the granite-top bar, cracking it like eggshells, as he leaned her back against it and kissed her deeply. That stone-splitting sound, that feeling that not even the elements of the Earth could compare to her, went straight to her core.

He lost his suit jacket and shirt in the blink of an eye, but Blossom’s dress had a finicky button
clasp and zipper down the back. Brick growled in frustration, and before she knew what was happening, he’d spun her around and laser eye-beamed the zipper all the way down to the small of her back.

“Brick—!”

Undone, the dress pooled at her feet and he was on her with a hand over her mouth and jaw to silence her and expose her neck to his kiss. Her back was on fire where he pressed against her, electric, and his other hand closed around her breast. Blossom closed her eyes to everything but feeling, and she didn’t notice her fingers cracking the granite where she squeezed its edges.

“Relax, I’ll buy you a new one,” he said.

His sultry words, delivered with such disregard for the trouble he caused, infuriated and inflamed her desire. He was strong, as strong as her, and she couldn’t move. He had his way with that clever mouth on her neck and teasing, twisting fingers, and yet the momentary cession of control awakened a powerful fantasy that she felt desperately in her flush skin pressed against the cold granite. The sound of his low laughter snapped her out of it, and she pressed a breathy kiss to the palm of his hand covering her mouth.

Instantly, he pulled away before she could freeze his entire arm solid. Frostlings dusted his arm, slowly melting under his sparking power. Blossom looked back at him over her shoulder, her breath misted with frost, and she couldn’t help but smirk in triumph at the sight of him so aroused and so surprised at the same time. They locked eyes, and she saw a familiar challenge in him rise to meet her.

“That was for my dress,” she said.

“So that’s how you want to play. You reap what you sow.”

She nearly faltered at the dangerous tone in his voice. He tangled his fingers in her ponytail and forced her to look up at him as he pressed their bodies together again. Blossom had never been one to be possessed by another in any way, but something about the way he spoke to her of provocation in their intimacy made her want him like she had never wanted anyone before.

“I’m waiting,” she said, unsure where this audacity was coming from. She had never been this way with Wei, and it both unnerved and excited her.

His eyes flashed at her baiting, and the next thing she knew they were flying through the room and landing on the bed in the blink of an eye. In his force, she was honestly surprised they hadn’t broken the bed with their landing, but there was no time to worry about it when she felt his fingers slip past her underwear and caress her.

“Fuck,” he rasped, belying his slipping control. “You’re dripping for me.”

Blossom wanted to tell him it wasn’t for him, nothing about her was for him and she was just using him, as he was using her. That was all this was. But there were far more immediate concerns on her mind, like pulling him down and kissing him again. She threaded her fingers in his hair, marveling at its softness, and gave him a sharp tug. Brick obliged her with another finger, and she writhed and whimpered against his lips.

She felt him smile against her, and she realized too late that she’d given him everything he needed to even the score when he pressured her firmly with the heel of his hand right where she needed him most. Blossom cried out and slipped her arms around his shoulders for something to hang on to
as he brought her to oblivion.

Half aware as she floated on the high of her pleasure, she vaguely registered his shifting weight above her as he took a moment to admire her. Even through the haze, Blossom felt her desire quicken and simmer again watching him appraise her like she was the most gorgeous creature he’d ever laid eyes on. Self-conscious and even a little shy when it came to intimacy in her past relationships, there was nonetheless something undeniably hot about Brick, a Super with the strength of a thousand regular men at his fingertips, admiring her so unabashedly. He brought his slick fingers to his lips and licked them clean one by one almost as an afterthought, and Blossom’s mouth went dry at the sight. She clenched her thighs as a pulse of pleasure curled low in her belly watching him.

Red eyes flickered to hers, caught, and she could not read his expression. “Let down your hair.”

Blossom was too far gone to resist his command, and she no longer wanted to. Slowly, she pushed herself up on her elbows, untied her red ribbon, and pulled out the elastic tying her thick hair. It fell about her shoulders, long and a little mussed. All the while, she watched Brick’s eyes following her hands, her lips when she wetted them with her tongue, and she wondered just which of them was truly in control here. Perhaps neither of them. Perhaps it had never mattered.

He was out of his pants and rolling on a condom by the time she’d settled back against the many pillows. She bit back the pang of disappointment that he’d moved too quickly before she had a chance to explore him, but forgot about it entirely when he invaded her space once again. She reached for him, but the ghost of a smirk was all the warning she got before he flipped her over. He grabbed a fistful of her hair in one hand and drew her hip toward him with the other, making his crude intentions clear.

Blossom scoffed her frustration, but shivered at the feel of him lowered over her back. He pulled her by the hair and pressed a surprisingly soft kiss to the shell of her ear. “My turn.”

He entered her completely, and she moaned through her teeth. There was something hateful about their coupling, about him, and about her too, but hate was what she wanted now. Wei hadn’t even given her that much after he left her, alone and sad and still wanting him like the poor fool she was. Even now she couldn’t bring herself to hate him, but she could hate Brick, and she could hate how good it felt to be with him like she never was with Wei.

Blossom arched her back against him, and he hissed at the sudden shift in their angle. He kissed her shoulders like he couldn’t get enough of her, and she found his hand on the bed steadying them both. She curled her fingers around his and crushed them with all her strength. It only set him off, and he pounded into her mercilessly until she could feel her orgasm on the horizon and hell, he was going to finish her off like this. It would not do.

Summoning her legendary control, Blossom shoved him off her completely.

“Blossom,” he snarled.

He would have made a comical sight there on his back, painfully aroused and looking like he was seriously trying to decide between murdering her and bending her over the side of the bed. Blossom didn’t give him the chance before slinging her leg over his waist and mounting him. He gasped—gasped—when she lowered herself over him, and she grinned triumphantly.

“Brick,” she returned, impossibly smug.

She rocked her hips against his, and the needy sound he made was one she would not soon forget.
“Always the leader, huh,” he said, breathless as he dug his fingers into her thighs.

Blossom flushed for the first time since they’d begun their twisted tryst. Pride and lust roared within her, and she felt electric as her power danced freely upon her skin, mingling with his. “You’re goddamn right I am.”

If she wasn’t so caught up in their pleasure, she may have appreciated his own flush at her bold words, awed and proud and wanting her like he had never wanted another woman in his life. She let herself entertain this fantasy that she affected him as much as he affected her. Power and control, and they were drunk on it. She drove her hips into his again, and he rose to meet her.

Blossom let her palms roam his broad chest and threw her head back, enjoying this moment on top of him, on top of the world, and he let her. And that…that was something.

He shifted under her with a grunt and cradled her to his lap as he sat up. Blossom wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him hard. His teeth on her lower lip stoked her passion and her hatred, but somewhere along the way she’d lost sight of the line dividing them and simply gave in to feeling him.

He came first, and she felt it like a shock to the nervous system at every point of contact with him. He groaned into their kiss as he crushed her to him. Feeling him come apart beneath her was an incredible boost to her ego, and she smiled into their kiss.

Red eyes fluttered open, and he clumsily but purposefully slipped his hand in between them to touch her. Blossom nearly choked at the lancing bliss that radiated through her from his fingers, and it was his turn to grin as he swallowed her cries with a biting kiss that would surely leave a mark.

They stayed that way a moment as he continued to caress her down from her incredible high, and they lazily made out. Exhausted and sated, they eventually slumped against the pillows, and Blossom laid her arm over her eyes to catch her breath as he rolled over to dispose of the condom in a nearby waste bin.

A quiet but comfortable silence followed as they lay there side by side and slowly came back to Earth. Blossom began to feel cold lying naked in the darkness, and she thought about slipping beneath the covers.

No, I should just leave.

No point in ruining a perfectly acceptable ending to the night she didn’t know she needed by doing something stupid like spending the night with Brick. It would suck flying home in the middle of the night with her ruined dress (maybe she’d borrow one of the hotel bathrobes and return it some other time), but it was better than grabbing a ride share and enduring another person’s judgment, she supposed. She was already shifting on the bed to get up and do just that when Brick’s hand closed around her arm with enough force to stop her but not enough to keep her there should she try to pull away.

“Just stay,” he said. “You’re already here.”

His eyes were closed, but his brow was furrowed and his lips turned down just so, like it pained him to speak at all. She wondered what bothered him more, her staying or him having to tell her so.

Blossom wasn’t sure why she did it, not really. It wasn’t for him, no, certainly not. But it wasn’t really for herself, either. She wasn’t sure what this was, but ending it here seemed somehow
premature after he’d asked her to stay. She was already here, as he’d pointed out, and this bed was
large and soft even if it wasn’t hers.

She slipped out of bed to use the bathroom, and he didn’t try to pull her back. By the time she’d
cleaned up and returned, he was on his side under the covers facing away from her. Blossom
quietly slipped under the sheets and faced away from him. She hugged one of the many pillows
tight against her chest and tried to ignore the subtle heat at her back that signaled another body
beside her, inches apart. With a tired sigh, she buried her face in the pillow at her chest and drifted
into a blessedly dreamless sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: It’s a perfectly lovely Saturday for a monster attack or two. Also, the Blues
know best, always.
Follow the Leader

Chapter Notes

Small warning that there’s non-explicit adult content in the first section of this chapter. It doesn’t rise to the level of smut at all, but I don’t want anyone to be caught by surprise, either.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Brick woke slowly the next morning later than usual. The sun was already up, and the digital clock on the nightstand blinked 7:16 a.m. Yawning, he stretched in bed and inadvertently brushed against something soft. He froze catching sight of Blossom still asleep next to him. She clutched a pillow to her middle, and her soft breathing fluttered her long bangs. Unsure what to make of her lying there so peacefully, he watched her a moment.

And then, he remembered their prurient activities the night before. That thick, red hair had cascaded down her back as she rose over him like Botticelli’s Venus. The divine comparison made him cringe, but the mere memory of it made him want to reach for her again now. Fine, he was an adult and he could admit to himself when a woman pleased him in bed.

But it was her.

And she hadn’t just pleased him; she’d been better than anyone he’d had before. The memory of her body was one thing, but her power, her strength…

He knew Boomer had been with Bubbles before, though he’d never cared to ask for details, obviously. Bad enough that his brother had always been childishly enamored of the effervescent blonde without Brick reminding him. But he’d always secretly wondered what it was like to be with someone like them, like him. Someone who could handle his baser instincts and even delight in them without fear of breaking. It was…

Well, it was something he would not be repeating. Ever.

No matter how good it had been.

He hadn’t realized he was touching her hair until that moment, and he abruptly yanked his hand away as though burned. The shifting stirred her, and he cursed his lapse in control. Still as stone, he waited for her to settle again, this time on her back with her lips slightly parted. He recalled biting her bottom lip as she came, all but screamed her pleasure into his mouth.

Under the sheets, he felt himself twitch and knew this was going to be a problem he’d have to deal with.

Quietly, he floated out of bed so as not to rouse her and made a beeline for the shower. On his way, he passed the crack in the wall he’d made when Blossom slammed him into it, and he had to physically bite back a groan as he stumbled to the bathroom and ran a very cold shower.

As the water rendered him numb, he waited impatiently for his boner to subside. Only to recall the way Blossom’s ice breath numbed him and how he’d nearly lost his mind when she looked back at
him and dared him to keep her waiting.

“Goddamnit,” he swore as he felt himself stiffen in spite of the cold. Or, alarmingly, because of it.

Deciding to just get it over with, he took himself in hand and got down to business with absolutely no intention of dragging it out. He finished with a strangled groan, which he made every effort to stifle because god fucking forbid Blossom’s super hearing pick up on what he was doing. Not exactly a dignified parting impression.

He’d never felt more pathetic finishing in his hand. The cold was doing nothing for him. Pitifully, he wondered if perhaps she had ruined him for all future women he would be with, all of whom would inevitably be normal. Beautiful, undoubtedly. Experienced, absolutely. But mundanely, miserably normal. Perhaps it was fitting punishment for breaking the rule he imposed on his brothers. Not that it had ever stopped Boomer before…

Thinking of Boomer in the shower was just the (abjectly horrifying) remedy he needed, as it turned out. He began to feel the biting cold and shivered tremendously. The rest of his shower was fast and efficient, and he was out and dry in a matter of minutes.

Quietly, he made his way back to the room to change, wake Blossom, and kick her out as soon as possible. The bed was empty when he emerged, however. The sheets were neatly pulled up and smoothed down. As much as Brick appreciated (demanded) a clean space and a tidy partner, he was one hundred percent not thinking about Blossom in that regard, ever. The sight of the perfectly tidied space irked him.

He hadn’t formally dismissed her yet, but she’d gone ahead and left anyway.

Determined to get her out of his mind, he quickly dressed in the clean clothes he’d packed in a small, black overnight bag on the sofa in the other room. He noticed the cracked granite bar top and rolled his eyes. He’d have to pay for that one. Still…

Worth it.

Gathering up last night’s clothes proved futile; Blossom had already done it and folded his pants on a bar stool. There was also a note scrawled on hotel paper resting atop them:

*I took your shirt since you ruined my dress.*

- Blossom

Brick snorted in amusement recalling how he’d eye beamed her dress right off her. The thought made him flush with heat, and he immediately dropped the grin. There was no time for that nonsense now; he had shit to do today, and he was already getting a late start.

He checked his phone for messages and had an email from Dinah’s assistant with details arranging an early lunch that day. Brick shifted gears easily as he wondered what Dinah could want from him. It must be something illegal, he was sure. She had resources and connections on her own without his interference. Curiosity niggled him.

After a trip back home, which took more time than he liked having to Uber there without relying on super powers, Brick arrived early at the ritzy French restaurant downtown where Dinah was scheduled to meet him. He was seated on the veranda, where he pulled out his phone and found a new text from Butch.

[Butch: Hey Broski! Just got back to town and need a place to crash tonight. Where u at?]
Brick checked his calendar. Butch was indeed scheduled to arrive today and he’d forgotten. He pulled up his email client and fired off a message to his realtor for an update on the apartment hunt for Butch. The reply was almost instantaneous, and it included three options for Brick to choose from. Pleased that his money was being put to good and timely use, he forwarded the email to Butch.

[Brick: Pick one.]

[Butch: The 2 bedroom.]

Brick frowned. Why would he need that much space?

[Brick: Fine. Ready by Monday to move in. Find somewhere else to stay until then.]

[Butch: You really gonna kick Brisa to the curb?]

“Goddamnit.” Brick stared at his phone. Butch hadn’t said anything about her coming along. He checked his watch and texted Butch the address for the restaurant he was at.

[Brick: Be here in an hour. We’ll discuss this in person.]

He pocketed his personal phone, removed his blazer, and rolled up his sleeves to relax a little. The waiter brought him a bourbon because it was 5 o’clock somewhere, and Brick had a feeling he would need the alcohol for this meeting. She was ten minutes late. That didn’t bode well.

He was getting ready to leave because his time was valuable, when he heard her approach.

“You weren’t just trying to sneak off, were you?”

Dinah Swathe moved like mercury, fluid and deceptively eye-catching, but poisonous in the way certain older women were because they knew the true shape of this world. Brick found himself wondering what Blossom might think of her white sundress with her Michael Kors purse and Gucci sunglasses, perfect for a Saturday luncheon. Probably not much, but that was because people like Blossom were too quick to accept the good in others instead of question their motives.

Brick sipped his bourbon and let it linger on his tongue to burn the taste of Blossom out of his mouth as he focused on Dinah. “I was considering it. It’s rude to arrive late.”

“You’re absolutely right. Please forgive me, my son was a bit of a handful this morning and I was late getting away. I hope you weren’t waiting for too long?”

Brick relaxed back in his chair as she settled in across from him. “Just a few minutes.”

They ordered their food (Brick ignored Dinah’s suggestion even though she said she often came here and knew what was good). They waited for it to arrive while Dinah led the conversation with shop talk. She was telling him about her biggest long-term project, something about immune-deficiency viruses and her team’s tireless work on finding a cure.

“You wouldn’t know this, but my mother died quite young of sickness. There’s not a day that goes by that I don’t miss her. She never had the chance to meet my son—well, neither of my parents did. But that’s why this is so important to me. I have finally achieved enough clout in my company and I have the funding to back me up. I can make a difference now that I never could even just a year ago.”

“How selfless of you.”
Dinah did not detect his sarcasm. “It’s not about being nice, it’s about helping people because I find myself in the position to do so. This is my life’s mission. If I can save even one person, that would make this research worth every penny and every hour spent finding a cure.”

Brick studied her. She had a reputation in the biotech community for her savvy leadership and business acumen, but she was also well-regarded as a top geneticist. Brick was not a scientist, but he kept his fingers in many cookie jars and cultivated relationships with those who knew better than he did. If Dinah achieved her cure, no matter how effective it ended up being, she could be on the fast track for a Nobel Prize. It was the type of honor that opened many, many doors.

On a more personal note, he wasn’t sure what to make of her. She seemed earnest, and what he knew of her research painted her as a true philanthropist and altruist. He didn’t have to agree with her views or priorities in order to believe them. But…

“But?” he asked.

She blushed. “There is a but, I’m afraid. That’s where you come in.”

“What do you want?”

“To be frank? You.”

If he’d been drinking, he may have choked. “Excuse me?”

“More specifically, I want what you have.” She leaned in closer. “Chemical X.”

Oh. _That._

“No.”

Dinah sighed. “No you won’t do it? Or no you can’t get it?”

Brick narrowed his eyes. “My answer is the same.”

“I figured you might be reluctant. Which is why I’m prepared to make it worth your while.” She wrote down a number on a napkin and passed it to him.

To his credit, Brick maintained his composure even as his heart rate kicked up. That was _quite_ the number. But still.

“What you’re asking for is priceless. Take it from someone who would know.” He made his point by letting his energy manifest at his fingertips, red and crackling.

Dinah stared at the little lightning in the palm of his hand, mesmerized. “Yes, I believe you.”

He clenched his fist and the energy fizzled. “Then you know why the answer is no.”

“Just hear me out, please. Chemical X makes you invulnerable to bullets and lets you fly. That’s all well and good, of course, but it’s not what I’m after.”

“It’s what everyone’s after.”

To be Super, to be more than mortal, it was humanity’s dream for as long as there were stars in the sky. They sustained themselves with fantasies of an immortal soul, of an afterlife filled with riches and pleasures, even of earthly delights only the highest bidders could ever know. But none of it could compare to the power of gods. Brick knew his value better than anyone.
The waiter brought their food, and Brick was content to find his food decent.

“When was the last time you were ever sick?” Dinah asked.

The change of topic threw him, but he considered her question. “I don’t think I’ve ever been sick.”

“Chicken pox? Flu? How about the common cold?”

Brick shook his head. “Never had them.”

“Exactly.”

“I see. You think because Chemical X makes me immune to diseases and infections, it could make everyone else immune, too. You think it could be the key to your panacea.”

“Beyond that. I may even be able to vaccinate people against any number of common and severe illnesses. Can you imagine it? A world without sickness at all. No colds, no cancer. It would be revolutionary. Kids with leukemia? Cured. AIDS epidemic? Dead in its tracks. My project is just the beginning.”

“And the end is sky-high returns for your shareholders.”

She smiled. “The worm on the hook to keep them happy. But it isn’t just about the money. Think about what a difference we could make the world over in time.”

“We?”

“Of course. You don’t think I would withhold the details of my research from you, do you? Like you said, you know your value. To me, transparency is a small price to pay if it means I have your support and cooperation.”

Brick considered her proposal. The very idea of someone having access to Chemical X was troubling, even if it were possible to procure her a sample. But the only people who had ever possessed it were its creator, Professor Utonium, and his first ever creation, Mojo Jojo. The latter was not someone he wanted to deal with ever, and the former was dead. Notwithstanding Brick’s lack of a personal connection to the man, he could appreciate the loss of such a brilliant mind. Professor Utonium had invented Chemical X. What else could he have accomplished in his life had it not been snatched away from him?

He wondered if Blossom and her sisters might have a cache of X somewhere, but immediately quashed the thought. Bad enough that he’d already had to suffer the ignominy of Buttercup’s help; he was in no rush to avail himself to her sisters without a compelling reason.

“Please, Brick. I would not have come to you if I hadn’t exhausted every other avenue. This research could help a lot of people in desperate need. So if my price doesn’t suit you, then just name it. This is too important to me personally to quibble over arbitrary numbers.”

Jesus, she was really serious. “How far along is your research?”

“Very. It would depend on what I can learn from studying Chemical X’s properties, how it reacts to human cells, but I’m very confident and extremely motivated.” She averted her gaze, her dark eyes wistful. “My son is… Well, my mother’s bad luck runs in the family, you could say.”

Brick watched her impassively. People, even kids, fell ill all the time. It was naught to him personally, and any hypothetical child born of his body would come into the world Super, as
immune and immutable as Brick himself. Why should he care about some kid he didn’t even know?

But she cared, and Brick knew a thing or two about the single-minded motivation born of threatened family ties. Whatever she was trying to accomplish, Dinah Swathe was not the type of person to give up. And if she actually succeeded...

Briefly, he entertained the possibility. The chance to know her research progress, to get a look at the inside, that was valuable. He could think of several of his current clients off the top of his head who would be interested in her project, and the doors they would open in exchange for details or better yet, a seat at the table. All the best philanthropists were capitalists because there was nothing, not even a reputation, that money couldn’t buy. Especially a reputation. God, he could hear his pitch already forming, could see the intrigue in their faces when he presented them with this unique opportunity.

Brick rubbed his mouth. Dinah watched him expectantly, hopefully. She really was guileless, it seemed. Just someone who deep down wanted to help people in need when she could have used her talents to help herself instead, just because she could. For a moment he saw red instead of blonde, a splash of freckles on her nose, pink eyes staring back at him, daring him to doubt her resolve when they both knew that was the one thing he could never doubt about her.

“Hypothetically speaking,” he began, slowly. “Before I gave you a drop of X, I would require unfettered access to your lab, your team, everything and everyone connected to this, even the janitors cleaning up your trash.”

Her eyes lit up. “Done.”

“I mean everything. No restricted access. And when you’re done with the X, I’d take it all back.”

“Absolutely. What’s left of it that wasn’t used in our trials, you can take back.”

“If you want me to sign an NDA, I’m not doing it without a lawyer present. No standard, boilerplate, non-negotiable bullshit. If I don’t like it, I’m not signing it and you can consider this negotiation over.”

“I can work with that.”

He slipped her napkin back across the table. “And double that.”

She smiled knowingly. “Anything else?”

There was a commotion at the hostess stand drawing stares. Brick checked his watch.

Right on time.

He finished his drink and rose. “My brother comes with me to see your lab.”

“Your brother?”

Brick grinned in a way he knew made people uncomfortable. Dinah didn’t bat an eyelash. “Think of him as the brawn to my brains. My personal guard.”

At this, her heart rate spiked and her breath caught. He let her stew on that.

“Before you go, do try this. It really is divine.” Dinah passed her plate across the table toward him.
Brick considered, but decided to humor her since she was going to be paying him enough to buy his own island. He took a bite, and the food melted in his mouth. It put his own meal to shame.

“It’s decent,” he grunted.

Dinah smiled. He fantasized about spitting the food out just to spite her, but he forced himself to swallow.

“I’ll be in touch, Brick,” she called.

Brick got out of there to intercept Butch before he blew up the restaurant in his impatience. The taste of her favored food lingered on his tongue, thick and rich, and in his haste to leave he didn’t even consider how he’d let her get the last word.

Bubbles was not dumb. She knew Blossom had not spent the night in her bed last night, and so hearing the upstairs shower running just past 8 a.m. alerted her to Blossom’s surreptitious return from wherever she’d been.

And whoever she’d been with.

Bubbles hummed as she prepped the coffeemaker and mixed pancake batter. If there was one thing she knew about her sister, it was that with Blossom, anything and everything was only ever just a matter of time. Best not to poke and prod, but instead let her come out of her shell on her own.

Still, the idea that Blossom had just had a fling with a stranger piqued Bubbles’ keen interest. What kind of person could draw her poised, no-nonsense, older sister into a spontaneous night of passion? She knew she shouldn’t push, but Bubbles was burning with curiosity.

“Don’t look at me like that, Cheeto. You know you’re curious, too,” she chided her pet goldfish glugging aimlessly in a bowl on the counter.

“Who’s curious?” Blossom asked as she walked downstairs. Her damp hair was pleated in a thick French braid down her back.

Bubbles smiled brightly. “Me, about what you want for breakfast! We have pancakes.”

Blossom cracked a smile. “Just pancakes?”

“The meanest flapjacks outside the Otto-Time Diner.”

Bubbles finished with the pancakes while Blossom poured coffee for herself and orange juice for Bubbles, and they sat down for a lazy Saturday breakfast. They talked for a bit about Bubbles’ work and Blossom’s, and the conversation naturally veered to last night’s fundraiser.

“So you had a good time?” Bubbles asked.

Blossom sipped her coffee. “I guess I did. Beto’s a great boss, and he introduced me to a lot of people. Oh, you won’t believe this—Princess is on the board of directors.”

“Princess Morbucks?”

“The one and only.”

“Wow. So you talked to her?”
“A little. She’s…”

Bubbles waited for her to finish her thought.

Blossom shook her head. “You know, I’m not really sure.”

Bubbles lathered her pancakes in more syrup, thoughtful. She bit her lip and didn’t look up from her food. “Any other interesting encounters last night?”

It was the hardest thing in the world not to look up at Blossom’s reaction, which she could only imagine was red-faced with embarrassment. But Bubbles was nothing if not gracious, and so she waited a polite five seconds while cutting her pancakes for Blossom to compose herself before looking up.

What she saw, however, was not the fluster of prudish shame, but rather conflict. Indecision. Bubbles stared, she couldn’t help it. Blossom looked disappointed.

“What, was he married?” she asked.

There was the expected flush, right on cue. “Of course not! I-I mean…”

Bubbles smiled, genuine and soft because something told her Blossom needed genuine and soft right now. “You didn’t come home last night. It wasn’t hard to put it together.”

Blossom rubbed her face. “Great. That’s just great.”

Bubbles giggled and reached for Blossom’s hand. “Hey, cheer up! I’m happy for you, really. This is good.”

“You think it’s good that I slept with someone last night?”

“I do, because I know you wouldn’t have done it if you weren’t ready. Look, Blossom.” She closed her other hand over Blossom’s and held it firmly, lovingly. “Wei hurt you. Deeply. And before you try to take on some of the blame again, I’m going to stop you right there because you’re wrong, okay? Nothing you ever said or did deserved the way he treated you. Nothing.”

Blossom watched her with wide, doe eyes. Bubbles smiled brightly.

“So if you had fun with a guy last night, then consider me 100% on your side. You deserve to feel good again.” She paused. “It was good, right?”

Blossom averted her gaze. “Well…” She bit her lip and closed her eyes. “It was great.”

Oh ho! “Great?”

“Okay, it was amazing. Really amazing. Maybe the best I’ve ever had.”

Bubbles squealed and snatched Blossom’s hands in hers. “That’s fantastic! Oh my god, okay, tell me everything.”

Blossom sputtered. “Everything?”

“Details! You know, was he hot? He must have been hot if you decided to sleep with him.”

“He… Well, he’s definitely handsome, but it was more like his attitude that convinced me.”
“Uh-huh, okay, okay, good. So, like, suave? Charming? Charismatic?”

“I would say intense. And…demanding.”

“Oooh, Blossom. I never pegged you for the type to go for the brooding, mysterious Dom.”

“Neither did—wait, what?”

Bubbles grinned wickedly. “Please, you’re always in charge and on top of everything in your life. You usually go for guys who let you run the whole show.”

Blossom gaped at her. “I do not.”

“Um, Nico.”

“My college boyfriend?”

“He couldn’t decide which major to choose without your stamp of approval.”

“He just wanted a second opinion, come on.”

“And Tom, of course. He was sooo in to you.”

“He was very devoted! What’s wrong with that?”

Bubbles shot her a knowing look. “He nearly flunked out of law school because he was spending so much time cooking you dinners all the time.”

“…Okay, so he was kind of in to me.”

So was Wei.

Bubbles wisely decided not to mention him, though. “Anyway, I’m just saying this is an unexpected but refreshing departure from your usual. Any rebound should be!”

Blossom looked visibly uncomfortable. “Well, you’re not wrong about that. I’ve never been with someone like him.”

“But he was kind? Considerate? Didn’t ignore your needs?”

“No,” Blossom said, a bit breathless as she remembered last night. “He didn’t. He was just…”

“…The best?”

Blossom opened her mouth to respond to that, but she stopped herself and sat back in her chair with her arms crossed.

“What’s wrong?” Bubbles asked.

“Nothing, just…”

“Blossom, you can talk to me. All teasing aside, really, I’m here for you. What’s bothering you?”

She chewed her lip, a nervous habit she’d had since they were girls. “You’ll think it’s stupid.”

“I won’t. Hey.” She waited until Blossom was looking right at her, and she offered her an encouraging smile. “I would never think that.”
For a moment, Blossom looked so vulnerable and fragile that Bubbles wanted nothing more than to hug her close. She would never say it, never put the idea into Blossom’s overanalyzing head, but that look scared her. Blossom was the leader, the decision-maker, even if her literal role had become largely obsolete after the sisters had ceased fighting crime as the Powerpuff Girls in any official capacity. Blossom would always be her big sister.

“I just feel so guilty,” Blossom said in a small, tinny voice. “Like I betrayed him by being with someone else.”

“Just like he betrayed you,” Bubbles finished.

Tears welled in Blossom’s eyes as her emotions got the better of her, and Bubbles was out of her seat and hugging her in a flash. Blossom didn’t cry, and she stifled a dry-heaving sob before it could overwhelm her. “I hate feeling this way. I hate that I can’t help it.”

“I know you do, but you know what? It’s normal to feel this way. You loved Wei; you were going to marry him. That’s not something you can just move on from overnight. It takes time.”

“Normal.”

The way she said it gave Bubbles a chill.

Blossom broke their embrace and settled back in her chair. “I thought I could rid myself of him. I thought being with someone else, someone like…” She shook her head. “I shouldn’t still love him.”

Bubbles’ heart broke for her sister. She touched her face lovingly. “If only love were as simple as should or shouldn’t.”

It was a long moment before Blossom spoke again. “If only.”

Bubbles sensed that the topic was nearing exhaustion for now, and Blossom would clam up if she continued to press her. So she backed off and twirled as she retrieved their plates. “Well, the best way to get rid of toxins in your body is to purge them out. You know, like a juice cleanse.”

“You think me having a one-night stand is comparable to a juice cleanse?”

“Yeah, except instead of juice, you’re getting dick. You know, a dick cleanse.”

Blossom sputtered. “Bubbles! You sound like Buttercup.”

“Since when are terrible dick jokes Buttercup’s exclusive domain? I’m allowed to be juvenile sometimes, too. I’m a kindergarten teacher!”

Blossom groaned and hung her head in her hands. “Just please stop talking about dicks.”

Bubbles’ phone beeped with an incoming text alert.

[Boomer: Hey, want to grab lunch today?]  
She smiled wryly. “On that note…”

“Who is it?”

“Boomer. He wants to do lunch.”
“Oh. So you two are still close?”

Bubbles allowed the change of topic to spare Blossom any further embarrassment; she’d suffered enough for now. “Yes and no.”

“What does that mean?”

“We haven’t been in contact much lately. Not until you came back, actually.” She shrugged.

Blossom got up and began gathering their plates. “Mind if I tag along?”

“What?”

“To lunch.”

“No, I heard you, just, really? You never wanted much to do with the Boys before.”

“It’s just lunch.”

Her back was to Bubbles as she began to scrub dishes in the sink. Bubbles watched her thoughtfully.

“Okay, I’ll let him know.”

[Boomer: Sure. Meet at our usual.]

Boomer instantly texted her back.

[Boomer: Cool, see you then! ]

Bubbles bit back a smile. She typed out a return message without thinking.

[Bubbles: Can’t wait! 😊 ]

Her thumb hovered over the send button, and there it lingered.

“Hey, I’m going to go read for a bit. Let me know when you’re ready to go?” Blossom said, drying her hands and heading for the stairs. Escaping from further interrogation about her fling, more like.

“Huh? Oh, sure,” Bubbles trailed off.

She stared at the message, sighed, and deleted it without sending.

When Boomer touched down in front of the Crepe Escape cafe on the edge of Townsville Central Park, he was surprised to find not just one pretty girl waiting for him, but two.

“Hey, over here!” Bubbles waved and rose from her chair. Her short, curled hair bounced off her shoulders and showed off the cute, nautical sundress she wore.

Blossom did not bother getting up, but she did offer Boomer a small but genuine smile. Unlike Bubbles, who liked to make an occasion of going out anywhere to get dressed up, Blossom was more conservative in jeans and a blazer like she was going to pop over to her office after lunch to catch up on weekend work.

“M’ladies.” Boomer pulled out the empty chair at their table, only to find it already occupied. “Hey, Ricardo. Keeping my seat warm for me, huh?”
Ricardo the fat, orange tomcat yowled.

Bubbles giggled. “Technically, he was here first.”

Boomer smiled and carefully set him down on the patio floor. Bubbles loved this place because the food was great, the prices were fair, and the owner’s two cats lived and lounged here like they owned the place. Boomer wasn’t big on cats, but he didn’t mind being around them when he saw how happy they made Bubbles.

“A thousand apologies, my liege,” Boomer apologized to Ricardo as he waddled off to bother some other customers out of a free treat.

It was a warm day. He shrugged off his windbreaker and relaxed in his chair, casual in khakis and a navy T-shirt.

“I hope you don’t mind me invading your lunch plans,” Blossom said.

“Nah, it’s good to see you again,” Boomer said.

“Sober this time.”

He wasn’t going to say anything about it, but now that she had he just smiled. “Sure.”

“I want to apologize for my behavior that night. It’s really why I asked Bubbles to let me tag along today.”

“Don’t even worry about it. I’m a bartender; compared to my usual crowd, you were an angel, believe me.”

Blossom looked a little uncomfortable. “Still, it was poor judgment on my part. I’m sorry if I caused you any trouble.”

“Blossom, really, you were fine. You were having a bad night. Nothing some quality time with your sisters couldn’t fix, right?”

“Right…”

“And hey, if you hadn’t come into B-3 that night, I wouldn’t have had such a good excuse to call Bubbles. I should be thanking you.”

Bubbles seemed very interested in her silverware all of a sudden. She did not look at Boomer when he glanced at her.

The waiter took their orders and brought them lemonades while they waited for their food. It was a gorgeous day in Townsville. Families enjoyed the outdoors with children and dogs, a band was setting up on the Central Park stage for an afternoon show, and stylish locals and tourists with shopping bags patrolled the boutiques and shops that lined the surrounding block. Boomer hadn’t been here with Bubbles in some months, but it had the best people-watching views in Townsville. He was lost in thought thinking about how she’d held his arm as they walked around Central Park on a day much like this one so long ago, and he didn’t hear the conversation at the table.

“Sorry, what was that?”

“I was asking about your bar,” Blossom said. “I guess I’ve been…out of the loop for a while. Why did you decide to open a bar?”
Boomer looked at her oddly. It took him a second to understand that she was trying to be polite in asking him about his life. Not that Blossom had ever been impolite growing up, but it struck him that this might have been the first conversation he’d actually had with her that lasted more than thirty seconds and didn’t consist of him asking her if she’d seen Bubbles anywhere.

“Uh, well, it sort of just happened. I didn’t exactly plan on it, but the space opened up and I was in between jobs at the time. I was actually thinking about moving out of town, but…”

He glanced at Bubbles, but her expression was unreadable. She smiled sweetly, and he wrung his hands to give them something to squeeze. Blossom’s eyes were drawn to his hands.

“But then Brick loaned you the money for the lease downpayment, right?” Bubbles said.

Boomer recalled that conversation with eviscerating clarity. He’d rarely seen Brick so pissed off before, as if it were him Boomer was leaving and not Bubbles. But that was stupid; he couldn’t leave her if she was already gone. There had simply been nothing left for Boomer here, or so he’d thought.

“You’re no good on your own,” Brick had said on that late, late night as Boomer stood over a half-packed suitcase.

Red eyes ablaze with pent-up power, fists shaking, bursting at the seams on his last rope. Boomer took one look at him ready to snap, and he knew he couldn’t leave. Not because he was no good on his own, but because Brick wasn’t.

“Yeah, he did,” Boomer said. “And now I’m here to stay.”

“I’m glad you did,” Bubbles said.

“Yeah, me too.” Most days, it was true enough.

“How is he?” Blossom asked.

“Who, Brick? He’s fine. Works too much, but he’s always been like that. I’m sure you remember.”

Blossom fiddled with the bendy straw in her lemonade. “Yes, I remember.”

Boomer watched her. She seemed like she wanted to say more, but couldn’t find the right words. Maybe she was uncomfortable talking about Brick. He supposed it had been many years since they’d seen each other. And seeing the way Brick had reacted to the news report showing her fight with Buttercup had been…unnerving.

Unlike his brothers, Boomer had never felt the inexplicable urge to best Bubbles in anything. Even when they had been nemeses, he mostly went along with Brick’s schemes because what else was he going to do? Maybe it had something to do with the intimacy he and Bubbles had found as they grew older. He felt it now even though they hadn’t been together for a long time. She would always be a part of him, just as his brothers always would be, too. He had accepted that with Brick’s loan to open B-3. Brick, however…

“We watched your fight with Buttercup on the news. I think he was really affected seeing that you were back in town and fighting after so long,” Boomer said. “Brought back some specific memories, I guess.”

Blossom’s rosy eyes flickered to his, guarded.
“Speaking of memories.” Bubbles pulled out her phone and opened up the Pictures app. “I was going through my iCloud before we met up today and found these. Look how young we were!”

“Oh man, how do you even have these?” Boomer scooted his chair closer to Bubbles so he could see the pictures over her shoulder. The album was old pictures from middle and high school, most of them featuring some combination of the Girls and the Boys together with their friends.

“Buttercup looks like she’s going to skin you in this one,” Bubbles giggled. “I think it was Senior year?”

Boomer swallowed as he studied the selfie of Bubbles and himself while in the background, Buttercup in her volleyball uniform tried to get out of a cackling Butch’s choke hold and make a swipe for Boomer. “Yeah, pretty sure that was when she found out I asked you to Homecoming…”

Bubbles scrolled through a few more. There were a lot of selfies and candids of Boomer and her goofing off in between classes, and a handful with Butch and Buttercup. One featured them laughing together on the green with some boys whose names Boomer didn’t remember.

“They were weirdly friendly Senior year,” Boomer recalled.

“Butch and Buttercup? Yeah, when they weren’t beating each other up. I guess that’s what you call a love-hate relationship,” Bubbles said.

Boomer wasn’t sure what he’d call it. He’d asked Butch about it once after graduation when Butch was getting ready to deploy with the military overseas on his first tour.

“You know, just killing time,” Butch had said with a grin Boomer had not quite understood at the time.

“Oh look! Blossom, I think this was when you won that world history competition Freshman year,” Bubbles said.

Boomer squinted at the picture. “Brick doesn’t look very happy about it.”

“That’s because I beat him by one point,” Blossom said. She scooted her chair closer so she could see the picture. In it, her 14-year-old version grinned proudly through her braces as she clutched her first place medal. Next to her, Brick had his arms crossed over his second place medal and his trademark red cap pulled down low. Mary Mack showed off her buck-toothed grin as she proudly held up her third place medal next to Blossom.

“You never forget a victory, huh?” Boomer teased.

Blossom smirked. “Never.”

There were a few other pictures mixed in with various of the Boys, the Girls, and their respective friends throughout the years. One of Butch sneak-attacking Blossom with a Super Soaker in the cafeteria made Boomer snort. The next one was of Butch frozen solid and Blossom stalking away. Boomer, Buttercup, and even Brick were among those gathered around laughing their asses off.

“How did you even take all these pictures?” Boomer asked.

Bubbles winked at him. “You know I ended up majoring in photography, right? I guess I was always a shutterbug.”

“I can’t believe I used my ice breath so indiscriminately,” Blossom said, genuinely ashamed.
“Oh come on, that was hilarious,” Boomer said. “Me and Brick didn’t let him live that one down for months afterwards.”

The next picture was from graduation day with Blossom and Brick sharing the podium in their purple robes and regalia. They had been co-valedictorians after four years of ruthless academic struggle and a terrified Principal Carter, who was not about to name just one of the Supers valedictorian and risk the wrath of the other.

Bubbles giggled. “I remember how he refused to wear the cap because he wouldn’t take off his hat.”

“I guess some things have changed, after all,” Blossom said.

Bubbles continued to scroll through the pictures, but Boomer glanced at Blossom. “Did you see my brother recently or something?”

Blossom looked up at him and flushed cherry-red. “What?”

“Who did you see?” Bubbles asked, still absorbed in scrolling through the pictures.

The waiter returned then with their food and Ricardo the cat, who began to paw at Boomer’s pant leg looking for a treat.

“This looks so good,” Blossom said, eagerly tasting her food. “No wonder you love this place.”

Bubbles preened. “I have great taste. Did you forget?”

“No way.”

Boomer watched them as they enjoyed their food, and he decided to let the topic of his brother drop for everyone’s benefit. It was probably nothing, anyway. Of all the people in this city, Blossom was probably the last person Brick would ever want anything to do with.

“Hey, what do you guys think about taking a walk around the park after this?” Bubbles asked.

Neither Blossom nor Boomer got the chance to answer her when a commotion in the park drew their attention. Dogs were barking and people were running and shouting in their general direction. Their waiter came out and began asking everyone to get inside, there were police reports of a monster attack incoming from the bay on the other side of Central Park.

“Wait, really?” Bubbles said. “But there haven’t been monster attacks this far into town in years!”

“Yeah, isn’t there some kind of forcefield around Monster Island or something?” Boomer asked.

“Never mind that, just get inside! We have a protocol for this!” the waiter said, scurrying to help other patrons inside.

In the distance, Boomer could hear a low, rumbling roar that gave him the creeps. Whatever it was, it sounded big. Ricardo the cat meowed and brushed against his leg.

“If there’s a monster, we may have to deal with it,” Blossom said in a voice that didn’t quite sound like her.

Bubbles put a hand on her shoulder. “Hey, are you okay? You know Townsville has the Monster Deterrent Signal to rebuff the monsters now.”
“I’ll be better once I’ve seen for myself that the citizens can handle things without our help. More importantly, I don’t know where Buttercup is.” She looked right at Boomer. “Are you able to help?”

Boomer’s eyes widened. “You want me to help you fight a monster? For real?”

Not that Boomer didn’t think he was capable, of course. But every fight he’d been in had been under Brick’s sure command and with Butch’s invincible energy to keep them all going.

“Maybe,” Blossom said, her gaze hard. “If the MDS doesn’t have it under control, we may need all the help we can get. There’s no time to call Buttercup back from Citiesville.”

“I mean, I don’t really do the whole hero-monster-slaying thing. Not, like, on principle, just in general…”

Bubbles downed the rest of her lemonade and left a few bills on the table. “We better get going. Sounds like the big guy is really making a mess. Are you coming or not?”

She was looking at Boomer expectantly, and he nodded numbly before he could stop himself. What choice did he have, really? “Yeah, I guess.” He glanced at Blossom. “Lead the way?”

She set her jaw. “We’ll have to fly. Sorry, Bubbles.”

Bubbles sighed and smoothed her dress. “Thank god for Spanx.”

Buttercup’s day was off to a shitty start, if she did say so herself. After the frankly useless interview with Doris Chang, she and Ty had been hitting dead end after dead end in Danny Chang’s disappearance. They could not even pinpoint the specific date and time when he’d definitively disappeared. The kid was kind of a loner without a roommate at Citiesville Community College, so it wasn’t until his mother had tried calling him repeatedly without avail that she suspected something was wrong.

“Doesn’t look good,” Ty said grimly. “You know these cases usually take a turn for the worst after the first 48 hours.”

Buttercup did not want to hear it. She couldn’t get Doris Chang’s hopeful look out of her mind. The woman had no one in the world but her only son, and she took Buttercup’s hands in hers and smiled when she said she was putting her faith in the CPD to bring her boy home. Buttercup had not been so foolish as to make promises she couldn’t keep, but she may as well have considering what a failure she felt with every passing day.

“I’m not going to be the one to tell Mrs. Chang that,” Buttercup said petulantly.

Ty handed her a coffee in a paper cup from their usual corner stand. He had a glazed donut in his other hand, which he offered to her. “You look like you need it.”

Buttercup grumbled but accepted both the coffee and the donut, the latter of which she scarfed down in two bites. “Fanksh,” she said through a mouthful of food.

Ty paid, and they walked side by side back toward the precinct. “Let’s review the facts. We know where he was that week and who he was with.”

“Except when we don’t. Kid was a loner. He delivered pizzas, and he kept to himself.”
“Yeah, but even loners have a friend or two somewhere. Or maybe someone he liked? Every nineteen-year-old’s crushing on somethin’, you know.”

Buttercup sipped her black coffee, lost in thought. “Mrs. Chang said he never mentioned any boyfriends or girlfriends.”

“Would you talk to your parents about your teenage love life?”

“Fair point. All right, say he had someone. If he’s what the other kids described, I doubt he ever acted on it.”

“Oof, Miss Murphy! Chin up, not everything has to go wrong. Just gotta find one thread to tug on.”

Buttercup grimaced. “Believe me, I’ll do plenty of tugging once we find one.”

“That’s the spirit.”

She side-eyed him. “Since when are you so optimistic, Mr. 48 Hours?”

Ty shrugged. “‘Spose one of us should be. On account of Mrs. Chang, of course.”

Buttercup bit her lip to hide the threat of a smile. “Yeah.”

They were approaching the precinct a block away discussing leads to follow up on the Chang case when the ground shook. Ty’s coffee sloshed and burned him, and he swore. Buttercup was steadier on her feet, but she didn’t hear his complaint as ingrained instincts narrowed her focus and her senses.

“Was that just an earthquake tremor—oof!”

Ty lost his voice and his coffee when Buttercup tackled him out of the way of a falling hunk of metal and concrete that landed on the sidewalk where they’d been standing just a second ago. They tumbled, and he was so much taller and broader than her that she struggled to hold onto him without hurting him as they skidded. But Buttercup didn’t have time to worry about his dignity when the rest of the skyscraper’s top floors came crashing down over fleeing, screaming people.

Buttercup didn’t even think before moving. One moment she was clutching Ty to her, and the next she was flying, her power crackling green along the length of her body, and she caught the massive debris with her bare hands. The strain on her muscles was fire, but the Chemical X in her system kick-started like an old engine and roared to life with a vengeance. Light as a feather, she fell back to the ground and carefully laid the hunk of debris on the road to deal with later. Luckily, no civilians had been injured. That had been way too close.

A blood-curdling roar sounded on the other side of the crumbling building, and Buttercup caught a glimpse of black horns on a red-scaled head. The monster was fifteen stories tall, at least, and all she could think of was how the hell it had gotten this far into the city without her so much as hearing its passing.

“Buttercup!” Ty shouted.

“Call for backup!” Buttercup barked at him, her eyes tracking the crown of the monster’s head as it took another tremor-inducing step. “All these people are in danger!”

“What the hell are you gonna do?!”
Buttercup snarled. Adrenaline and X quickened her blood in anticipation of a fight. “What I’m good at.”

Anti-Super ordinance or no, it was easier to ask for forgiveness than for permission. From the look of the red behemoth rampaging right in the middle of downtown, Buttercup guessed the odds were in her favor. She threw her jacket at Ty and tore off into the sky.

The monster was a big one, all right. Bigger than she’d seen in a while, and it was wreaking havoc. And thousands in property damage. She couldn’t wait to talk to the mayor about the cleanup bill after this.

It charged down the street with alarming speed for something so big. Deciding to make this fast before it could decimate the whole of downtown, she came in hard and swift with an uppercut to the monster’s crocodilian jaw. Dark eyes swiveled to see her, dilated and wide, and its head snapped up under her power. Buttercup immediately flew around in back of the creature and kicked it hard in the neck, but even this was not enough to ground it. Instead, it lurched precariously into the office building next to it and sent even more debris crumbling to the ground.

“Shit!” Buttercup swooped in and grabbed its scaly shoulder to pull it back and hopefully spare the people in the building it had just compromised, but the scales moved under her hands. “What the —”

Too fast to counter, the monster flexed and unleashed a hail of scales like throwing stars, razor sharp and damn fast. Buttercup grunted as they tore at her sleeveless green blouse and hit her impenetrable skin, painfully bruising. More concerning was their broad scope. Scales shot through windows and embedded in concrete. They whistled like homing missiles and struck fleeing civilians, crippling them where they fell. The metallic tang of blood hit Buttercup’s sensitive nose, and she blanched.

“Help!” cried a woman on the sidewalk. She clutched her injured side.

Sirens wailed as the police arrived on the scene. Standard-issue handguns and riot shields would not do much against the bulldozing monster. Buttercup swooped down and scooped up the injured woman, flew to the nearest police vehicle, and deposited her on the asphalt next to it.

“Help her,” she ordered the uniformed officer she recognized from the precinct but whom she did not know by name.

“Buttercup! I-I mean, Detective!” gasped the woman—Murray, read her embroidered name tag.

“Don’t think, just do it. And I’m going to need a perimeter to keep civilians away from here. Think you can manage that, Murray?”

Murray was piss-pants afraid, that much was obvious, but she set her jaw and nodded resolutely. “Yes, ma’am.”

Buttercup liked her already. “Good.”

Murray was reaching for the bleeding woman with one hand and her radio with the other when Buttercup took off again. No way she could let that monster unleash another barrage of scales. Others were writhing and bleeding on the ground, and more were probably injured in the surrounding buildings. She needed to end this fast.

“Buttercup!” Ty shouted. He was running, a shotgun in hand, and a uniformed officer tailed him with a riot shield.
“What part of ‘get out of here’ don’t you understand?” Buttercup shouted right back.

The change in the air current was her only warning when she turned and got a face full of monster tail and went careening into a parked car, which in turn crashed into a corner Starbucks with Buttercup wrapped up inside it. Her head swam, and jagged metal poked her ribs painfully. One look at herself through the haze, and she knew if she’d been normal she would be short a kidney and a half. Coughing, she forced the twisted car apart and stumbled out of it. There were patrons staring wide-eyed at her from a corner booth, frozen mid-sip of their lattes.

“How’re you looking at?” Buttercup spat.

The couple shot out of their seats and ran for cover behind the barista counter.

Outside, the police had formed a mobile perimeter as best they could ahead of the advancing monster. It was recovering from Buttercup’s uppercut, however, and no flimsy police barricade would stop it. One officer was directing others with shotguns and rifles, while Murray was speaking into a megaphone directing civilians to evacuate the area.

Buttercup was getting ready to take another crack at the monster when it jerked erratically and lunged half a city block. She barely had time to shout a warning when it came down on its front claws right on top of the police barricade, crushing three police cars and the officers taking cover around them.

One of them was Ty.

“No!” Buttercup was flying faster than she’d ever flown before, her eyes burning with tears and power as she let loose a reckless laser eye beam right at the monster’s wrists. It roared in pain when her power seared through its scales and opened a hole through the other side.

Buttercup didn’t care. She flew to where she’d last seen Ty, fearing the worst. It was Murray she found first, crushed from the chest down under rubble and a mangled car door. Her megaphone was still in hand, her eyes glassy. Buttercup shook with despair and a fury so deep it may have scared her if she’d been in her right mind.

“Buttercup,” Ty called, his voice weak.

He was alive, thank god, but his legs were a ruin.

“Ty! Shit.” Buttercup landed at his side.

“I’m okay,” he said through gritted teeth. “The monster.”

Buttercup let out a strangled growl at the reminder. What the hell was wrong with her? How could she have let the damage get this bad? People were splattered like goddamned ants on the sidewalk because of her incompetence. Years of training for the force, to serve and protect. Years of fighting alongside her preternatural sisters and she had no fucking idea how to deal with this completely on her own.

*I was never on my own. I had them.*

But they weren’t here now, and for a chilling moment of clarity, she was afraid that she wasn’t enough.

The so-called toughest fighter, and she was fucking *shaking.*
“Buttercup,” Ty prompted her. His bald head glistened with perspiration, and his eyes were dilated in pain and his own fear, yet he seemed to be holding it together far better than she was. “Hey, snap out of it. We need you.”

She met his eyes, and she had no idea what to say to him.

Above them, the monster roared. Smoke rose from its sawed-off nostrils and in between its jagged teeth. The son of a bitch was going to breathe fire. Buttercup stole one final glance at Murray’s body, committing her face to memory because it was the very least she could do for her now. She crouched low and prepared to attack all out in the hopes that her brute force would overwhelm the monster’s when out of nowhere, something slammed into the creature’s jaw and cut off its dragon’s breath.

A figure floated high above, glowing green and cruelly cackling. “You look like a bitch I used to know down in Florida, you shriveled red fuck. You ever been to Jacksonville?”

Buttercup gaped at Butch’s familiar, spiky hair poking out above a black leather jacket. Since when was he back in town?

“Buttercup.”

Silent as the grave, Brick appeared next to her in his typically elitist business casual. Most bizarre of all was the little girl whose hand he was holding, because this day was not weird enough already.

Blossom took off first in a flash of pink, and Bubbles and Boomer were right behind her. She didn’t look back at them for fear that she might lose her momentum and her composure along with it. She was flying toward what she could only assume was an enormous monster whose presence in the city could cause widespread panic, property damage, and serious bodily injury.

*Maybe the government’s defense system can handle it.*

But she knew even before they tracked down the monster that it could not. Right there at the western edge of Central Park where the city gave way to the bay, an enormous, filthy sludge monster was moving slowly but surely over the beach and onto the street, closer to civilization. It had been years since Blossom had seen a monster in the flesh, and she froze in the air now and simply stared.

“He looks like he came out of the sea,” Bubbles said, pulling her bobbing curls back into pigtails out of her face. “But that means he must have gotten past the MDS.”

“Maybe it’s down or something?” Boomer said.

“No, it seems to be working just fine.” Blossom watched as police officers blasted the monster with sound waves invisible to the human eye but visible to hers. The frequency should have been enough to send the monster fleeing from them back in the direction it had come, but it was merely veering the creature off course. Whatever they were doing, it wasn’t powerful enough to overwhelm the monster’s will.

“Maybe they have the wrong frequency?”

Blossom was about to respond to that when all of a sudden, the sludge monster formed a thick arm and brought it crashing down on the ground. Pale, glue-like sludge flooded the street and stuck to anything in its path.
“Oh my god!” Bubbles cried. She took off to save as many fleeing people as she could carry.

“Bubbles!” Boomer flew after her, leaving Blossom floating alone.

Blossom covered her mouth. She had no idea what to do. She tried to think of a plan, but her mind drew a blank. It was as if every battle she’d ever fought was wiped from her memory, and she was just a woman facing a monster bigger and stronger than she could ever be.

“Help me, please!” cried a struggling civilian. He was stuck in the muck, and a car was floating towards him at alarming speed.

Blossom sped off to save him before the car could crush him under its weight, and she set him on the ground out of the danger zone.

“Oh, thank you! Thank you so much!” he gushed.

“You’re welcome.”

“Wait, I know you! You’re that Powerpuff Girl! Thank god you’re here!”

“I’m not—”

“Blossom, look out!” Bubbles screeched.

The monster had belched out a huge slime ball, and it came hurtling straight for Blossom’s location. People screamed, too slow or too trapped to flee, and Blossom reacted purely on instinct. She took a deep breath and unleashed her ice breath on the falling sludge.

Which worked for all of three seconds. The roiling sludge broke apart in slushy chunks, hardening to deadly ice as they fell like meteorites. Blossom gasped and zapped the closest ones with her laser eye beams, but there were too many pieces. She watched in horror as one chunk crashed on a car and the couple struggling to get out of it, burying it completely in the muck.

“No!” Blossom took off, heedless of her own safety, and dove into the muck to save anyone still breathing. She pulled out four people just as Bubbles and Boomer came in with blue energy beams blazing to zap the rest of the falling, icy sludge bomb.

In a matter of seconds, the situation had gone from bad to critical. If this thing progressed any farther into the city, it could endanger countless people with a single punch.

“Blossom! We need a plan!” Bubbles shouted.

“I—I don’t know!”

“You need to figure it out fast because he’s getting mad!”

The sludge monster had noticed the three Supers buzzing around it. Watery, yellow eyes swiveled to see them, and it roared, gurgling and eldritch. From its oozing muck, it began to bubble and shift. Anything stuck in it, from cars to trees to chunks of asphalt, was swept up and gathered in a growing, tumorous mass at its back.

“Shit, it’s gonna throw the whole thing at us!” Boomer’s body crackled with brilliant blue power. In his hands, an enormous, sparkling baseball bat materialized.

“Boomer, no! It’ll just disperse like the last one and do even more damage!” Blossom shouted.
“Then tell me what to do! You’re supposed to be the leader!”

Blossom had no words for him, no plan. Why couldn’t she think of a plan?

“I-I can’t—”

Bubbles was in her face then. “You can. You’re my sister and my leader and I know you can.”

Bubbles’ hands on Blossom’s shoulders were warm and heavy, too heavy. She wanted her to take charge, but Blossom had not commanded anyone for a very long time, no matter what she said or boasted. That life was gone, as gone as the Professor and her childhood and her dreams of the picture-perfect life she’d almost had, until she’d lost that, too.

“You’re never going to be normal, Bloss!”

Even now, Wei’s hurtful words from the night she’d found out about his affair remained branded to her bones. She’d promised him she was the woman he had always loved, apologized and cried her eyes out for accidentally manhandling him in her anger—she would never, ever hurt him. But it wasn’t a promise she could keep, not in his eyes. She was not normal, and he was not willing to accept that.

“Here it comes!” Boomer said, readying his bat.

“Blossom, please!” Bubbles screamed, desperate. “We need you!”

Bubble’s sky blue energy dug into her skin as her emotions roiled, and Blossom could almost taste them—fear, anxiety, but not for herself. There was strength there too, just beneath the surface waiting for direction and purpose and a word to unleash it.

“Damn it, get back!” Boomer couldn’t wait any longer as the sludge bomb descended upon them, seconds away from impact.

And Blossom saw it, their failure and the fallout and all those people on the ground who didn’t ask to be caught up in her trauma and temper. But that, that she could never, ever abide. Blossom was many things, and one of those things was a hero.

“I’m not normal,” she said.

So be it.

“What?!” Bubbles said.

*I’m Super.*

*I’m the leader.*

Bubbles was right. Four years gone or forty, she would always be the leader.

“Boomer!” Bubbles dashed to help him when he put himself in between the hurtling mass and the sisters, her eye beams blaring. Neither of them could afford to wait for Blossom anymore.

Blossom watched the huge mass plummeting for them, and her mind raced. Too big, too fast, too close, and far too unstable for her ice breath to freeze solidly. Impossible to deter, unless—

The idea came to her like lightning, and she didn’t question it. She flew to Bubbles and grabbed her by the shoulders. “Bubbles, Sonic Scream now! Boomer, earmuffs!”
Boomer threw a bewildered look back at her. “Huh?!”

Bubbles did not hesitate to obey. She opened her mouth and let out an ear-piercing shriek so powerful, the sound waves visibly distorted the air around her. Blossom flew as fast as she could to grab Boomer out of Bubbles’ direct path, and she barely made it before the Sonic Scream could burst her eardrums.

Boomer gagged, his bat dissipating as he covered his ears just a second too late, and he stared back at the warped sludge bomb. Contorted under the effects of the Sonic Scream, it slowed just enough for Blossom to rush back and confront it with her ice breath. This time, the ball froze completely solid.

“Boomer! Batter up!”

Perhaps too shocked to question her, or perhaps too beholden to that tone that expected absolute obedience without question, Boomer summoned his energy bat again and slammed into the ice ball with a crack. He hit it so hard that it launched into the stratosphere.

Bubbles screamed again, but this one was girl-pitched and gleeful. “You did it! I knew you could!” She threw her arms around Blossom in an enthusiastic hug.

Blossom was shaking and short of breath, but the adrenaline high of a theory tested positive had her hyper-focused and feeling like she was seventeen again and invincible. “Don’t celebrate yet. We’re going to do the exact same thing to him.”

“You think you can scream something that sprawling?” Boomer asked.

Bubbles flashed him a Buttercup-worthy smirk. “I’ll make it work.”

“First, we need to clear the area. Drop all the civilians past Juniper Street. That should give Bubbles a clear shot without risking any lives.”

“On it!” Bubbles took off in a flash of blue.

“Hey.” Blossom put her hand on Boomer’s shoulder before he could fly off to help Bubbles. “We have one shot. I know I’m not your leader, but I truly need your help here. We can’t win unless the three of us work together.”

He nodded grimly. “You’re my leader right now. Just say the word and I’ll be ready.”

He darted off to carry out Blossom’s instructions, and she watched him go. Everything depended on the three of them working together flawlessly. If Bubbles lost her momentum, or if Blossom couldn’t maintain her ice breath, or if Boomer struck too late, they could fail. It wasn’t just about her team trusting her; she would have to trust them, too.

Blossom took a deep breath. It would be over soon.

She took off to relay her plan to the police and start herding civilians out of harm’s way.

Buttercup was torn from her staring contest with Brick—what the hell is he even doing here?!— when the monster suddenly shot out far too fast for a creature of its size and girth and slapped Butch right out of the sky. Brick and Buttercup both watched as Butch went flying into a building with an ear-splitting crash, and the monster resumed its advance toward what remained of the police barricade.
“What the fuck,” Ty said, trembling. Two more uniformed officers had gathered to help him and the others, but they paused to watch Butch get his ass handed to him.

Brick shoved the little girl at one of the officers. “Watch her.”

“No, I don’t wanna!” the little girl protested. Her brown eyes were wide with fear but staunchly defiant. One look from Brick, however, made her rethink her little rebellion, and she lowered her gaze.

“It’ll be okay,” Brick said, surprisingly gentle. He touched her dark, braided hair almost affectionately. To the cop he’d pawned her off on he said, “Go.”

The cop nodded, cowed by that tone and smart enough not to question it. He took the little girl by the shoulders and held her close. Above, the monster was getting ready to breathe fire again. There was no sign of Butch, but Brick did not seem worried in the slightest.

“You take the left knee. I’ll take the right. We’ll stop it in its tracks,” Brick said, calm as the sky is blue.

Buttercup finally found her voice. “That thing’s about to fire—”

Butch flew out of the building he’d crashed into and slammed into the monster’s belly. It let out the equivalent of a belch and coughed up black smoke, but no fire. Only its tail saved it from falling over entirely.

Brick glanced at her with barely concealed smugness. “The left, Buttercup. Don’t make me order you again. Or do you want to see more people get hurt today?”

She would have liked nothing better than to knee him in the balls just to wipe that goddamned self-satisfied look off his face, but she knew he was right even if it killed her admit it. Just hearing the cool confidence in his voice as he told her what to do and how to do it, like he’d already foreseen the end of this battle, comforted her to the point of shame recalling Mojo’s words to her. But there was no time for her shame or his arrogance, not when Ty was hurt and many more were still in danger.

Swallowing a curse, she spat, “Fine,” and took off in a blur of green.

Brick was right on her tail, and together they unleashed their eye beams on the monster’s knees. Buttercup kept going and punched with all her might, and she couldn’t deny the morbid glee upon feeling bones crack beneath her knuckles. The rush of battle fired her blood until it sang, and she bared her teeth in a grin and drove in deeper until there was nothing left to resist her. The monster roared and fell, its legs shattered, and Buttercup met Brick’s bloody streak in the middle.

“Hah!” Butch whooped, flying down to join them. He cast Buttercup a razor-blade grin and openly checked out her figure. “Hey, doll. Long time.”

Buttercup was about to tell him to fuck off with that infantilizing nickname when the monster began to tremble. “Shit! It’s going to shoot everywhere!”

“Butch, shield! Big as you can!” Brick was quicker on the uptake.

Miraculously, Butch snapped to attention and faced the monster with his palms open. Green energy crackled and spread over his hands and grew into a large forcefield almost as wide across as the
street just as the monster unleashed a fresh barrage of bullet scales. Brick barked another order, but Buttercup didn’t hear him. She was already flying back to Ty, afraid for him and the other vulnerable civilians still in the zone of danger. Her gaze locked on his, but movement caught her sharp eyes; some scales had gotten past Butch’s impressive forcefield and hurtled right for the civilians.

“Look out!” Buttercup screamed.

She landed hard and tried to shield Ty and the two nearby officers with her body, but she was only five-three and lean. The little girl gasped and clutched at the officer who couldn’t protect her. Buttercup reached for her, desperate as she braced herself for the pain and prayed she would be the only one to feel it.

Pain never came, however, and Buttercup fell to her knee as her hand closed around the little girl’s elbow and yanked her close. She need not have bothered. Green sparks crackled in the girl’s palms, and a mystical shield shimmered around their group. Not a single scale had penetrated it. Buttercup stared at the girl, unable to comprehend what her eyes were telling her.

“You… You’re…” she stuttered.

“Enough!” Brick bellowed. “Butch, Buttercup! Take out the head, now!”

Every instinct in Buttercup bade her obey the leader’s command, and at this point she was done resisting it. The little girl dropped her small shield and lost her balance. Her blue dress was dusty, and her forehead glistened with perspiration. Buttercup let her go but was surprised when the little girl reached for her. The officer Brick had charged with her care pulled her back, and she whimpered.

“You’re okay, kid. Just wait here,” Buttercup said, because it felt wrong to leave her without some assurance after what she’d done to spare them all.

The girl’s eyes widened, and it was the last sight Buttercup saw of her before she took off. Butch passed her in a blaze of jade, and they parted around the monster’s head before rocketing straight for each other through its skull. Buttercup let loose a battle cry as she slammed into the monster’s head just under one of its curled, black horns and didn’t stop until she heard the crack of scales and the crunch of bone. Above, Brick came down hard and true, and the trio’s combined force was too great even for the monster’s adamantine armor. Its head crushed like a soda can under a boot, and it went down at last.

Buttercup landed amidst the carnage, her blouse and pants soiled with dust and monster guts, her body bruised and battered where those projectile scales had peppered her like bullet spray. Butch looked little better, and Buttercup almost threw up at the sight of him carding his monster-gut-sticky fingers through his hair like gel. Somehow, Brick had come out of it the least soiled of the three of them, and yet he picked at a smudge on his sleeve as though it were the greatest inconvenience he’d suffered today.

“Aaaah man! I’m back in town for, like, an hour and already I get a monster brawl? Fuck, it’s good to be home,” Butch drawled.

Buttercup snapped. “What the fuck is good about innocent people dying, you asshat?!”

Butch regarded her like he’d only just noticed she was standing right there. He draped an arm around her shoulders and leered. “You mean, besides getting to see me in action up close and personal?”
Buttercup punched him in the stomach with the cold remorselessness of one who was Completely Fucking Done, and he keeled over and gasped for air. Brick did not so much as glance their way for the entire exchange.

Butch wheezed. “Spared my ‘nads, huh? You are happy to see me.”

Oh, she’d show him happy, all right.

“Daddy!” The little girl-turned-savior ran toward them and threw her arms around Butch’s waist as he struggled to right himself.

Butch coughed and reached for her. “Hey, kiddo. You see me punch the crap outta that monster?”

She grinned from ear to ear. “Yeah! You were so cool!”

He picked her up in his arms, hiding a wince as he hugged her close. “Way cooler than Uncle Brick, yeah?”

She giggled. “But Uncle Brick is always cool.”

Brick smirked and looked up from his meticulous grooming. “Damn right I am.”

Butch made a show of being offended and blew a raspberry against her neck, drawing a full-body laugh from her. Throughout the entire exchange, Buttercup could only stare like an idiot. Butch noticed her gaze, and his expression guarded a little.

“He, Brisa,” he said, hiking her higher on his hip. “This is Buttercup. You remember I told you about her, yeah?”

Brisa grinned shyly and buried her face in Butch’s neck. “Mm-hmm,” she mumbled.

“She’s like me, but with tits.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Buttercup snapped before she could help herself.

Butch grinned wolfishly. “Language, BC. My daughter’s only five, you know. So impressionable.”

Daughter.

Buttercup honestly had no idea what to say to that.

“You gonna say hi, Brisa?” he said.

Brisa looked up at Buttercup shyly. “H-Hi.”

Buttercup cocked her head, dumbfounded. “Um…hi.”

“Daddy, did you see it? Didya? I did the shield!”

“No way, really? I missed it! Did you block some of those flying scales?”

Brisa lit up with pride. “Yeah! Um…” She glanced at Buttercup.

“I saw it,” Buttercup said, swallowing hard. “She saved my partner’s life.”

Butch smiled, and Buttercup was floored to see how genuine it was. “That’s my Supergirl.” He nuzzled Brisa’s nose with his, and she burst into giggles again.
Police and civilians were gathering now that the threat was neutralized, and Brick cast them a hard look.

“Butch, we’re leaving. On foot. I don’t want the cops on my dick about violating the ordinance.”

He shot Buttercup a pointed look.

Butch set Brisa down, and she immediately went to hold Brick’s hand. “Fiirrime, whatever. Hey doll, post-monster happy hour later?”

Buttercup got in his face and grabbed the popped collar of his leather jacket. “Call me doll again, pencil dick. See what happens.”

Something changed in his look, not entirely playful, not wholly nice. “So I’ll see you later, then.”

She released him without further violence, but only out of consideration for Brisa, who did not deserve to watch her dad get his ass beat right in front of her no matter how badly he was asking for it. Brick watched her with subtle consideration, but he said nothing. Buttercup suddenly had a bad taste in her mouth.

“Just get out of here before the press gets here,” she barked. “I’ll deal with the cops.”

They left without further fuss, and Buttercup was left to handle the aftermath as she wondered what in the hell she was going to say to Chief Foolery and the mayor to convince them to let her keep her job and remain in the city after that shit show.

Commanding Officer Mike Brikowski did not put as much faith in Blossom’s plan as Boomer and Bubbles did. After five excruciating minutes listening to him bleating about all the trouble her vigilantism was causing honest cops who were just trying to do their job, she cut her losses and deposited him on a nearby rooftop safely out of the danger zone.

“What’s the plan, Blossom?” asked an officer Blossom recognized from her high school class, Wes Goingon. His dark eyes were steady, his smile encouraging. “The rest of us are ready to help, just tell us what you need.”

Blossom flushed with pride having all their attention on her. “Thank you. I’m going to need you all to re-direct the MDS frequency on my command. We’re going to herd the monster to a designated area so Bubbles’ Sonic Scream will do the minimum amount of damage to the city.” Her orders were clear and confident in their delivery, and the officers were quick to obey.

“One moment, Blossom.”

“Blossom! You’re Blossom of the Powerpuff Girls, right? Can you tell me about what’s going on here?” asked Benny Santiago, a young and enthusiastic reporter with a cameraman filming his every move.

The monster roared and crashed into a building. The metal whined and glass shattered. Within it, people screamed as they tried to flee down the fire escape.

“This is a crisis, Benny. Get as far away from here as you can!” Blossom took off to pick up as many people from the building as she could, narrowly avoiding a swipe from the monster’s glue-sticky arm. She sliced through metal and plaster with her laser eye beams and burst inside. “Take my hands! Form a train, and I’ll carry you to safety!”

There were so many, though, that soon Blossom had twenty people desperately grasping at her.

“I can’t take all of you in one trip. Just sit tight and I’ll be right back!”
“No, please! I have kids, you have to take me out of here!” shouted one man.

“I don’t want to die!” cried a woman in tears on her knees.

It was too much, and Blossom needed help. “Boomer, Bubbles!” she shouted at the top of her lungs.

The sludge monster slapped a gooey hand at the building again, and Blossom forced all the terrified office workers against the far wall in a pile as she prepared to take the brunt of the impact.

But just as the monster’s arm collided with the building, Boomer appeared in a blinding blaze of blue. He wielded an enormous, blue sword smoking with the monster’s gooey plasma where he’d sliced clean through its arm and averted the worst of the attack. Bubbles was right behind him and flew inside to help Blossom.

“I’m here!”

Blossom shoved a few of the trembling people at her sister. “Fly them out of here. I have to check the rest of the building.”

She didn’t wait for Bubbles to accept before activating her X-ray vision and pinpointing a few more trapped people on the lower floors already flooding with monster goo. A well-aimed eye beam later, and Blossom had fished the trapped people out and flew them all to safety while Boomer distracted the monster.

Below, Wes and the other police officers had heeded Blossom’s command and were in position. She landed behind them, startling an older officer half to death. Benny Santiago and his cameraman were there filming the whole thing. Blossom ignored him.

“Are we ready to go?” Blossom asked.

Wes nodded. “We are. I just have to give the order.” He showed her his radio.

“Then give it, and everyone cover your ears. My sister has a hell of a falsetto.”

The monster managed to grab Boomer and launch him clear across Central Park. Blossom’s sharp eyes followed his path, but lost him after he crashed through an ancient redwood tree.

“Boomer!” Bubbles screamed.

“Leave him, Bubbles! I need you in position!” Blossom ordered.

He would be fine, and he would be back. A hit like that wouldn’t take him out, no way. Blossom didn’t have time to check on him now that the monster was setting its sights on the police again. If they didn’t act quickly, all would be for naught.

She would just have to trust him to come through, like he’d promised he would.

“All right, Bubbles, on my mark!”

Bubbles looked torn, but she did as commanded and landed hard in the street next to Blossom. The police had their MDS machines blasting at full power, and sure enough the monster was backing off toward the sisters.

“Now!”
Bubbles took a deep breath and let rip a Sonic Scream that ruptured the asphalt under Blossom’s feet. The monster roared in protest, but the force and pitch of the frequency warped and disoriented it. Blossom sweated bullets forcing herself to wait for just the right moment. She could feel the X in her veins pumping and raging, the power on her skin, at her fingertips, the eternal winter in her lungs reminding her that no, she was not normal and she never would be. Normal would not save all these people, but maybe she could.

The monster collapsed on itself as it writhed in shock, and she saw her moment when it condensed into a defensive ball. She flew at the monster and blasted it with her ice breath, circling it to coat every inch of it.

Bubbles was right behind her and lifting the frozen sludge ball. “He’s too heavy!”

Blossom swooped down and took some of the weight. “We’ll throw him together!”

They struggled under the astronomical weight and the slippery ice. Within, Blossom could see the monster starting to churn. It would try to break out if they didn’t hurry, but she could not split her focus worrying about that right now.

“Come on, Bubbles, throw him now!”

Bubbles let out a shout as the X worked overtime in their systems to grant them an impossible burst of strength. Together, they launched the enormous monster high into the air, watched it reach the apex of its climb, and begin to plummet back to Earth.

“Oh, Blossom? It’s still falling!” Bubbles said.

“Boomer will hit it.”

He’ll hit it, he has to.

The ice ball was three hundred yards above ground.

“Boomer, where are you?” Bubbles shouted, trembling with worry.

Two hundred.

“Come on, Boomer,” Blossom said to herself. She began to shake.

One hundred fifty yards and counting.

“Incoming!” Boomer appeared in a flash with a new energy bat, disheveled and dusty but with all the impetus of a speeding bullet.

Blossom flooded with relief at the sight of him. “Go now! Knock it out of the park!”

He was off before Blossom could even finish her command, and he hit the ice ball with everything he had. Huge shards of deadly ice broke away from the mass, and Blossom and Bubbles were ready to incinerate them with their energy beams. Boomer’s bat exploded into blue sparks in his hands, and he cursed. The monster when flying so high and so fast that it was no longer visible after a couple seconds. Launched deep into space, it would never be able to attack Townsville again.

Blossom sank to the ground amidst the ruin of an entire block razed to the ground.

“Hell yeah!” Bubbles cheered. She’d tackled Boomer in a super-powered hug. “We won! We
Boomer coughed, but he couldn’t hide his tired smile as he held her like he finally remembered how good she felt. “If my bar gig strikes out, you think I got a shot at major league?”

“Heh! I love that pun!”

He laughed and spun them a bit. In her joy, Bubbles didn’t seem to mind his touch, and Blossom did not have the heart to interrupt their moment until they were all safely back on the ground. “Good job, both of you. I’m just glad it’s over.”

“Thanks to your plan! Blossom, that was amazing. How did you know he wouldn’t like my Sonic Scream?”

“Yes, Blossom, please share your plan with our viewers!” Benny Santiago had caught up to them with his cameraman, several police officers, and curious civilians. “Are the Powerpuff Girls officially back to fight crime and the forces of evil?”

All eyes were on Blossom, waiting on her every word the way they had all those years ago. Deep down, she’d lived for this moment, the glory and the platform and the prestige. The thought reminded her of something Brick had said to her at the SF gala, and she swallowed hard. “The MDS has been successful on its own for years, but this monster required a more potent frequency to be properly contained. Rest assured that we’ll be working with the mayor’s office to make any necessary changes to the program so this doesn’t happen again.” She paused, cleared her throat. “As for my sisters and I, we will always be here to protect this city and its good people if and when we’re needed, but no. We’re not returning to fight crime on a regular basis. This was a special circumstance.”

“And who is this? Are the Powerpuff Girls now accepting co-ed members? Sir, what can you tell me about yourself?” Benny eagerly shoved the microphone at Boomer.

“Uh, what?” Boomer said, sheepish.

Bubbles was far less camera-shy. “This is Boomer! You might remember him as one of the Rowdyruff Boys.”

“The Rowdyruff Boys? Hey, weren’t you guys super villains back when—”

Blossom snatched Benny’s microphone before he could finish that sentence. “Boomer was instrumental in helping us stop the Sludge Monster today, and I’m eternally grateful for his help. Aside from that, I’ll be speaking with Mayor Bellum about the damage and cleanup and offering any assistance she and the city may request. If you have any further questions, please direct them to Officer Wes Goingon. He and the rest of the brave TPD officers were an integral part of today’s victory.” She passed the microphone to a bewildered Wes, and nodded at Bubbles and Boomer to take off. The last thing any of them needed was an inquiry into Boomer’s now irrelevant villainous childhood.

As she trailed after the Blues, Blossom could not help but think of Brick and how he might react to the news clip if he saw it. When he saw it. She bit her lip.

So much for your low profile...
Happy Thanksgiving to those of you who celebrate it! I decided to update on a whim to give you all something fun to read as you recover from food comas/family time. I hope you enjoyed! And thank you as always so, so much to everyone who’s been leaving kudos and comments. I am extremely thankful to all of you and your continued engagement and encouragement. :)

Next time: The Girls go viral, Blossom and Princess enjoy some rosé, and the Greens blow off a bit of steam.
Buttercup’s shitty day was turning into a shitty night, and the end seemed to be nowhere in sight. After doing damage control with the CPD and Mayor Minor’s office and getting her ass handed to her for violating the ordinance, no one was more surprised than she when Chief Foolery not only stood up for her, but for Brick and Butch, too. After all, no one had any idea how the CPD would have neutralized the Red Monster in the middle of downtown without the Supers’ help.

“I don’t like the idea of a bunch of Supers in my city literally flying under the radar,” Mayor Minor blustered. He was a big man despite his name, barrel-chested and balding and permanently red in the face from the exertion of existing every day as an overworked government official.

“Well sir, their help directly led to the Red Monster’s defeat today. I think that should count in their favor this time,” Chief Foolery argued.

_And in mine, you ungrateful coward._

But Buttercup wisely said nothing. In the mayor’s view, there was precious little distinguishing her from Supers who didn’t have the same vested interest in upholding the law. Best not to give him more of a reason to lump her with the Rowdyruff Boys.

Mayor Minor was not happy about it, but he relented in the end and even thanked Buttercup for her service. She accepted his grudging gratitude with stony aplomb. If the police academy had done anything for her, it was to prove that her years learning the hard way to pick her battles under Blossom’s imperious command had paid off.

Now, she was at the hospital sitting at Ty’s bedside. He was passed out from all the painkillers they had him on, and his legs were mangled under the groin to ankle plasters they’d wrapped him in. She wished she could talk to him, apologize somehow, like this was all her fault. In a way, it was. If only she’d been faster…

“Excuse me, Miss? I’m sorry, but visiting hours are over. The patient needs his rest,” said a nurse in the doorway, her plump face contorted with genuine regret.

Buttercup got up and stretched her stiff limbs. She’d taken a three-minute shower in the dingy station locker room and traded her soiled blouse for a CPD logo sweatshirt, but she still felt disgusting. It was dark out; she didn’t even realize it had gotten so late. “Okay, I’m going.”

The nurse touched her arm on her way out. “Don’t worry, I’ll keep a close eye on him. He’s in a good hands tonight.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.”

In a much softer tone, the nurse said, “And all of us appreciate what you did to stop that monster, ordinance or no. Thank you.”
Buttercup stared after her, a little bewildered. It never ceased to surprise her when people recognized her even after all these years. Yawning, she trudged down the blanched hallway to the lobby of the Citiesville General Hospital. A glance at her phone revealed a whopping seventeen new text messages and four missed calls, most of them from Bubbles. Buttercup texted her back.

[Buttercup: Everything’s fine. Random monster attack. I’ll tell you about it later.]

[Bubbles: Yeah we saw the news. Two in one day, so crazy! You have to come to the house tonight. Blossom and I want to swap stories.]

Buttercup sighed. No wonder her sisters hadn’t shown up in Citiesville if they had a monster of their own to deal with. She Googled the attack on Townsville and scanned the breaking news headlines.

*Eight dead…fuck.*

Buttercup thought of Murray calmly speaking into her megaphone as she directed fleeing civilians out of the danger zone. How many had she saved keeping a cool head? How was it fair that she couldn’t be saved herself?

Buttercup didn’t realize she’d stopped in the middle of the hallway. She stared at her phone screen, but she couldn’t make out the words. A pair of orderlies passed her in the hall. She felt their curious looks, heard one of them huff at her blocking the way.

She sniffled and rubbed her eye, suddenly exhausted. Bubbles messaged her again, but Buttercup didn’t even read the text. She wondered how old Murray had been.

“Miss? Can I help you?” the receptionist asked. She was watching Buttercup from her desk, a look of concern in her eyes.

“No, I’m good,” Buttercup said, shuffling off. “I’m fine.”

*I’m fine.*

She typed out a quick text back to her nagging sister.

[Buttercup: It’s like 1 a.m. I’ll come by tomorrow, promise.]

Sleep, yeah, that sounded like the smart plan. Dreamless, if she was really lucky and really tired enough. She exited the hospital and almost flew to her apartment when she remembered that stupid goddamned ordinance.

“Fuuuuuck,” she hissed. Uber it was, then.

“Well, someone’s happy to see me,” said Butch.

He was illegally parked in the ambulance zone and leaning against his Harley Davidson like he owned the place. When Buttercup approached, he grinned.

“Holy shit, is that a LiveWire?” Buttercup asked, reaching for the sleek, black bike. “These aren’t even on the market yet.”

Butch grinned wider and ran his hand lovingly over the leather seat. “Not the mainstream market, nah. But I know a guy. You should hear her purr.”

Despite his bizarre timing and the fact that she really wasn’t all that happy to see him after the shit
day she’d had, Buttercup reached for the electric motorcycle as if it were her god come down to Earth. “Jesus Christ, she’s beautiful.”

“She’s big enough for two.”

Buttercup glared at him, suspicious. “What are you even doing here?”

“Looking for dead bodies.”

When she continued to glare at him, he laughed.

“Chill, BC. Your cop buddies said I’d find you here.”

“That wasn’t funny. People died today, you ass.”

_They died on my watch._

She shoved her hands in the pouch pocket of her baggy, borrowed sweatshirt.

“Your partner okay?”

Buttercup considered whether he was genuinely curious or just trying to get a rise out of her. She decided it was neither with the way he was watching her like she might lash out and even that wouldn’t stop him from asking, anyway.

“His legs’re smashed up, but he’ll be okay. Bedridden for the foreseeable future, though.”

“Sucks.”

“Yeah.”

He continued to watch her, as though trying to glean something from her rigid posture and pained expression.

“Shouldn’t you be at home with your kid or something?” she asked.

“Don’t got a home. Not until Monday.”

“Oh, that’s great. So Brisa’s just homeless somewhere?”

“She’s at Brick’s. Whatever, she’s been asleep for hours, it’s fine.”

Buttercup didn’t care, of course. What did she care about some kid she didn’t even know?

“So, you getting on or what?” Butch mounted his bike and started the engine. It was almost completely silent.

“Why the hell would I get on a moving vehicle with you?”

“You never protested before.”

“I was seventeen and stupid.”

“Woman, just get on the bike so I can drive you home, for fuck’s sake.”

Now she _really_ didn’t want to get on. But the Live Wire’s engine did purr, like he said it would, and Buttercup would be lying if she said she didn’t want to try out the bike. An Uber would take
another ten minutes just to pick her up, and she was tired.

“Fine. Move your fat ass up so I have room to sit.”

Butch laughed. “You’re such a bitch, you know that?”

“You never protested before,” she shot back.

He faced forward as she settled on the seat behind him and placed her hands on his waist over his leather jacket. “Guess not.”

Buttercup said nothing to that. She was too exhausted to dig up old memories tonight, or ever, and if he didn’t have such an amazing ride she definitely would have sucked it up and called an Uber. But Butch revved the engine and they sped off into the late-night traffic.

“Same place?” his voice carried over the wind.

Buttercup tightened her grip on his waist instinctively. His spiky hair fluttered close to her face smelling like the same shampoo he’d used in high school. She didn’t know why she remembered that.

“Yeah. Same place.”

It was a smooth, quiet ride through downtown Citiesville with few red lights to stop them. Butch detoured through Greektown to go around the destruction caused by the day’s monster attack.

When he slowed in front of a shabby place with a gyro spit rotating in the window, Buttercup thought about protesting. She could smell the roasting meat and spices from the street, and it occurred to her that she hadn’t eaten anything since breakfast.

“I’m hungry,” Butch said, slipping off the bike.

Buttercup was following him in before she could think of a good reason not to.

_Might as well grab something while we’re here._

They were not the only patrons, but there was plenty of room, and they snagged a table near the door. A few quick words with the waiter-slash-cook, and not two minutes later they were staring down enough food to feed a small family. Neither of them spoke as they shoveled food into their mouths.

Eventually, they slowed their pace as they cleaned up plate after plate of food. Buttercup washed down a bite of food with a cold beer she hadn’t even noticed the waiter deliver. Butch chewed on a bit of pita, but felt her gaze. Green eyes, so dark they were nearly black in the cheap, fluorescent lighting, looked up at her. She held her breath, teetering.

“Why do you have a daughter?” she blurted out.

“Popped a rubber,” he said.

“Butch.”

“It’s true. Blew my load right through the little fucker. What a scam.”

“Jesus Christ.”
He stuffed his mouth full of pita and swallowed in one bite. Buttercup was too busy being disgusted to stop him from snatching her half-drunk beer and downing the rest of it.

“Tired of mindlessly slaughtering enemies of the state?”

“Yeah, well, Brisa’s a good kid. Grows on you like toe fungus.”

Butch shrugged. “No one. But she broke her mom’s arm playing at, like, four weeks old, so it’s not like I had any other choice.”

She sat back in her chair and crossed her arms. “Hey, for real. Who qualified you to be a dad, anyway?”

BUTCH frowning at his defensive tone. She remembered the way he’d been with Brisa after the monster attack. That smile… “It looked to me like you don’t seem to mind now.”

“Yeah, well, Brisa’s a good kid. Grows on you like toe fungus.”

Something told her it was much more than just tolerance that Butch felt for his young daughter. Odd that he, of all people, should be responsible for a child when for as long as Buttercup had known him, he could barely be responsible for himself. And yet, even now she could see glimpses of a change in him. He’d left here a trigger happy jarhead eager to swing his dick around in the far reaches of the world, and now?

Well, she wasn’t quite sure what he was now.

“You wanna stop the interrogation and just get to the point?” he asked.

“Okay, fine. Why are you really back?”

Butch leaned back in his chair and mimicked her pose, casually poised to strike. “Vacation.”

“Why not stay in Texas with her?”

“No, idiot. I was just thinking she might be a better babysitter than Brick.”

“Lorena’s back in Texas with her parents.”

Buttercup recalled that Butch had been stationed for training in west Texas after his first overseas tour ended. It wasn’t hard to fill in the blanks between Butch the young, hot soldier and a small-town girl who’d loved him for a night before sending him off to war. Buttercup did not see a ring on his finger, though she wasn’t sure if Butch was the type to wear one.

“Why not stay in Texas with her?”

“Well, that answered that question.

“So, you wanna stop the interrogation and just get to the point?” he asked.

“Tired of mindlessly slaughtering enemies of the state?”

“Somethin’ like that.”
Buttercup still wasn’t entirely satisfied. The Butch she knew reveled in his own power and glory, always had. It was the only thing he cared about other than his brothers.

“Hey, you done? Let’s get out of here.” Butch was already getting up and reaching for his wallet.

Buttercup was faster. “I got it. Consider it your tip for the ride.”

Butch regarded her. “All right.”

The rest of the drive back to Buttercup’s was passed in silence. There were few cars out now, and the motorcycle’s engine was nothing but a whisper over the asphalt. Fog dampened Buttercup’s cheeks and hair and haloed the street lamps in a ghostly haze. She ducked her face lower behind Butch’s broad shoulders to keep the wind off her cheeks. Eventually, they pulled up alongside the curb in front of her apartment building.

“Thanks for the lift.” Buttercup dismounted and fished her keys out of her pants pocket.

“No problem.”

She didn’t look back at him, focused on finding her key and unlocking the heavy door. The light was on in the elevator bank, as it was twenty-four hours a day, but there was not a soul about at this hour. She finally located her key and opened the door.

“Hey Buttercup.”

She looked back at Butch. He was still astride his bike, but he wasn’t looking at her. “Yeah?”

“I’m gonna be in town for a while. I know they got that dumb fucking law this side of the bridge, but you know.”

Of course he was looking for a fight. She should have realized that was his true motive. Although, with the way her life was going right now, she didn’t begrudge him the urge to pummel something. Still, it was him, and they’d been down this road before.

“Work’s a bitch right now, and I don’t have a partner to pick up the slack anymore,” she hedged.

He glanced back at her, but she couldn’t read his expression through the gloom. “Yeah, fine. I get it.”

He started up the engine without so much as a parting word. She flexed her clammy fingers, restless. “That wasn’t a no. I just…have a lot on my plate right now.”

“I heard Brick sicked you on Mojo ‘cause he was too much of a pussy to go himself.”

“Interrogating criminals is literally my day job. I don’t answer to Brick, of all people.”

“Wish I’d been there to see it. I bet you made him piss his old monkey diaper.”

Buttercup recalled the family paintball picture she’d seen at Mojo’s and frowned. “Maybe you can ride along for the next one if you miss him so much. Not that I plan to go back there anytime soon. That avenue’s exhausted.”

“You got any leads?”

She shook her head. With everything going on in her actual job and the monster attack today, she
hadn’t had much time to follow up. “Just chalk.”

“Huh?”

“Talking Dog said the thief tasted like chalk. Don’t look at me like that, I know it sounds fucking stupid, but he was the only witness with anything useful to report.”

“Riiiiight, whatever you say.”

Buttercup rubbed her weary eyes. “Listen, I need to sleep. I’ll see you later or whatever.”

“What about the chalk though?”

She was already halfway through the door. “Go home, Butch.”

“I don’t have a home!”

The door closed on him, and Buttercup dragged her tired body into the elevator up to her cramped apartment.

It was a seldom-acknowledged fact that for all her sisters’ obstinacy, Bubbles was the one person in the world neither of them could refuse for long no matter the circumstances. And so, Buttercup dropped in for dinner the day after the monster attacks despite her busy work schedule.

“This is officially the trashiest news report that’s ever been published about us,” Buttercup said, fuming. “Who the fuck is this Pierce Morgen dude?”

Bubbles was busy feeding Cheeto while trying to snap some cute pictures of him bobbing in his bowl. “Come on, Cheeto, that’s a good boy!”

Blossom, writing work emails on her laptop, hardly spared Buttercup a glance. “You shouldn’t worry so much about the headlines. You know they’re just clickbait.”

Buttercup marched over to the kitchen table where Blossom was camped out and slapped an iPad down in front of her. “Powerpooped: Townsville’s Aging Former Superheroines Ask Powerful Male Super to Step Up to the Plate. You read that and tell me I shouldn’t worry about it.”

“What are we reading?” Bubbles floated over to join her sisters.

Blossom paused her work to skim the news article. Under the headline was a heroic action shot of Boomer hitting the frozen sludge monster into the stratosphere with his energy bat. Immediately, Blossom snatched up the iPad and began reading aloud. “Team leader Blossom was so emotional handling the crisis that she not only assaulted beloved Townsville PD Commanding Officer Mike Brikowski, but additionally relied on assistance from a former super villain, Boomer of the Rowdyruff Boys.” Her hands began to shake as the iPad came dangerously close to shattering. “This is pure sophistry! I didn’t assault that officer, I just flew him to the top of a building outside of the danger zone because I didn’t have time to convince him to listen. He was directly impeding my plan to neutralize the monster and jeopardizing innocent lives!”

Buttercup scoffed. “Yeah, I bet. Wes is always complaining about that Brikowski guy. He’s too lazy to wipe his own ass. How the hell is he anything more than a pencil-pusher?”

Blossom was so mad she began to fume pink. “I’m emotional, am I? I have half a mind to send a very emotional letter to the Townsville Chronicle demanding they print a retraction and issue an
apology.”

Bubbles discreetly slipped the iPad out of Blossom’s dangerous hands before she could destroy it. She made a face as she skimmed through the disparaging article. “Why do some people think having emotions is a sign of weakness? It doesn’t even make sense. Literally everybody has emotions! Of course you’re going to show them!”

Buttercup threw up her hands. “Because they’re sexist shitbags! I mean, look at this: aging superheroines? The fuck.”

Blossom was back on her laptop typing furiously. “I’ll show him,” she muttered to herself.

“Um, Blossom? What are you doing?” Bubbles asked.

“I’m writing the most important reader’s feedback letter the Chronicle will ever receive.”

“No one’s going to read some dumb letter, just dox that guy’s ass!” Buttercup said.

“Oh,” Bubbles gasped as she scrolled through Pierce Morgen’s collection of articles and headlines in the Chronicle’s electronic database. “I think we might be dealing with a serial offender, girls. *Bare Bellum: Make-up Free Photos Show the Strain of Mayoral Responsibilities*. There are a lot like this.”

“Wow, who friendzoned him in high school and triggered his dark side transformation?” Buttercup said sarcastically.

“…and the Chronicle’s tacit endorsement of Mr. Morgen’s poisonously misogynistic opinions recalls the cesspool of anonymous Internet forums that both enable and encourage harm to real life women and girls whose only sin is daring to stand up for what they believe is right,” Blossom dictated as she typed.

“Hey, let me see that.” Bubbles scanned Blossom’s draft. It was short but scathing.

“Oh, not you too. I’m telling you, that guy isn’t going to care about hate mail. He probably gets a semi just thinking about all the women he’s pissed off enough that they write in. We have to hit him where he’ll actually feel it.” She smacked her fist against her palm. “I’m thinking a surprise house call, confront the jerk directly.”

“I’m furious too, Buttercup. But he’ll just interpret any sort of confrontation as an emotional response.” Blossom spat the word “emotional” like a curse.

“You’re a lawyer! You’re literally paid to be confrontational!”

“And as a lawyer, I know what his would say if we confront him. He’ll try to claim we’re threatening him, and he’d have a very good case considering we’re three Supers.”

“Wait, I know! Let’s post the letter on social media!” Bubbles said. “It’ll go viral and then everyone with Wifi will know what a horrible jerk Pierce Morgen is.”

“Bubbles, just because Cheeto’s Instagram account has a thousand followers doesn’t mean they’re going to care about some angry feminist rant. This is the Internet. It’s ruled by the gods of cat videos and porn,” Buttercup said.

Bubbles looked affronted. “Excuse you, Cheeto’s a star and I work *really* hard taking the most Insta-perfect pictures to provide the ultimate cute, curated experience. People care about Cheeto, so
”they’ll care about what he posts.”

“Actually, that’s a great idea,” Blossom said. She had an unnervingly calm look about her now as the gears in her head turned. “We could post it to all the major platforms and be viral within the hour. The Chronicle would have no choice but to take action.”

Buttercup threw up her hands. “Earth to Blossom, no one is going to care about a wall of text posted by random women on the Internet.”

“Yes, which is why we’re not posting it to Cheeto’s Instagram.” Blossom was busy typing. “And we’re not just any random women on the Internet.”

Bubbles moved to peer over her shoulder at what she’d just done. “Oh Blossom, you’re a genius.”

Blossom grinned wickedly as she leaned back in her chair, arrogant and smug. “Yes, but I also still remember the password to our shared Twitter account.”

Buttercup gaped at her. “You didn’t.”

“Oh, oh! We should add a selfie for proof it’s really us making the post! Buttercup, get over here, quick!” Bubbles yanked her sister and produced her cell phone for a quick picture. She uploaded it and the letter to the official Powerpuff Girls Twitter, and in a matter of minutes the notes began to explode in earnest. “One hundred likes and counting!”

“Holy shit. Let me see that.” Buttercup reached for the mouse and scrolled through the re-Tweets and comments people were adding.

Bubbles was both surprised and ecstatic that most of the comments coming in were positive. “Look, we’re trending!”

The #PPG hashtag blew up over the next hour. The sisters’ selfie was shared over a million times as the Internet became enamored of their shared condescending expressions at the camera, and someone had turned it into a meme with the caption “Okay, Pierce”. Bubble’s phone buzzed with texts from her friends and colleagues expressing their excitement.

“I can’t believe it,” Buttercup said. “I thought this account was totally dead.”

Bubbles preened. “No way! As long as the three of us are together, the world can’t forget us so easily. Right, Blossom?”

Blossom looked up at her sisters, and Bubbles noticed the color in her cheeks.

Buttercup snorted. “Yeah, sure. Can’t argue with Internet fame, I guess.”

Blossom and Buttercup held each other’s gazes, and Blossom actually smiled a little. Bubbles had to bite her lip to keep herself from squealing in delight. She wished they would just hug and get it over with, but maybe that was hoping for too much. For now, it was enough.

“Hey Blossom, refresh the page! I want to see how many re-Tweets we’re up to!” Bubbles said.

Blossom chuckled. “Maybe we should make popcorn. Enjoy the show.”

“I’m on it!” Bubbles sped to the microwave to do just that.

Blossom’s politely savage letter was soon republished on Jezebel, Gawker, and a score of pop culture blogs. More people shared their own stories about sexism in news reporting and Pierce
Morgen himself, and the horrible article and Blossom’s response reached a readership the higher ups at the Townsville Chronicle probably never would have imagined. It didn’t take them long to issue an official apology from their social media accounts with the promise of a follow-up and formal apology from Pierce himself.

“I bet he’s pissing himself right now,” Buttercup said, giddy. “That’s what you get for messing with the Powerpuff Girls, motherfucker.”

Blossom stiffened, but Buttercup was smirking at the screen and didn’t notice her slip. Bubbles smiled and squeezed Blossom’s shoulder.

“Yeah,” Blossom said softly. “That’s what he gets.”

Bubbles smiled and threw her arms around her sisters in an annoyingly exuberant hug. “I love you guys! I feel like a real hero tonight, you know?”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” Buttercup complained, but she didn’t push Bubbles away.

Amazingly, Blossom and Buttercup both agreed to stay up together and watch the Internet go to town for a little while longer over a bowl of popcorn. Bubbles took a candid selfie of Blossom looking quite pleased as Buttercup guffawed at the comments. She saved it as her new lock screen without telling them and sat talking with her sisters around the kitchen table of their childhood home, lost in memories and nostalgia and each other for just a little while.

“Does anyone have any other business they’d like to discuss before we adjourn?” Theo Grand addressed the rest of the board of directors of the Swathe Foundation.

“I have some business,” said Princess. “I want to know who signed off on the catering for last week’s fundraiser, because it was an embarrassing disappointment.”

Blossom looked up from her laptop where she was taking the meeting minutes. The directors were looking around at each other guilelessly. No one seemed willing to admit any involvement.

“Princess, instead of talking about an event that’s already past, perhaps we can discuss the next—”

Princess held up her hand to silence Theo, and he shut up. “Was it you, Alexander?”

Alexander looked like he’s just eaten a ghost pepper. “Me?! Wh-Why would you think—”

“Because you okay’d those toxic candy corn dogs at last year’s Halloween gala, and I think we all remember experiencing true horror that night.”

“Those were a hit with the kids!”

“The kids aren’t paying sponsors! Who cares what kind of food they like?”

“That’s a good point,” said Ramona, a reticent, older woman at the end of the table. “And those snacks were disgusting, as I recall. It doesn’t reflect well on us.”

“Thank you, Ramona,” Princess said smugly. “The purpose of those functions is to encourage donors to shell out the big bucks. How do we do that? By offering them a taste of the class that new money millionaires think they’ll never be able to buy. Part of that experience is the food, and ever since you took over the social chair responsibilities, we’ve seen a gradual decline in donations received at our formal events. The last thing a twenty-four-year-old tech bro wants to do is throw
money at an organization that just fed him breaded ketchup.”

Alexander sputtered. “Those were marinara puff pastries! They’re classy!”

“They’re pizza rolls, Alexander.”

“Princess, are you planning to make a motion?” Theo asked.

“Absolutely. I move to strip Alexander of his social chair position for cause, and I nominate myself to replace him.”

“What?!” Alexander said, outraged.

“Do we have a second?” Blossom asked.

“I second the motion,” Ramona said.

Theo sighed deeply. “All in favor?”

“Aye,” muttered the voices around the table.

“Nay! A thousand times nay!” Alexander protested. “I’ve been in charge of party planning for the last two years since Davíd retired. This is my time!”

“And it’s exactly that kind of selfish thinking that’s interfering with this organization’s core values of generosity and quality,” Princess said. “Honestly, how dare you.”

Alexander was beside himself with indignation.

“The motion passes by majority vote,” Blossom said. “Is there any other business on the agenda, Theo?”

Theo got up. “No, meeting adjourned. Thank you everyone for your time.” He shot Blossom a knowing look, and she bit back a smile.

As people filed out and Blossom gathered up her laptop in her bag, she overheard Alexander throwing a fit at Princess.

“You had no right. You know how much I care about being the social chair.”

Princess narrowed her eyes at him. “Care all you want, but you suck at your job. Check the legacy donations statics if you don’t believe me.”

He bared his teeth. “You’re a real cunt, you know that?”

Princess sighed and stepped around him. “Wow, so original—hey!”

Alexander grabbed Princess by the elbow. “I’m not done talk—”

Blossom appeared in a burst of pink and pulled Alexander off of Princess with enough force to make a point. “You’re done talking, all right.”

Alexander shrank under Blossom’s glare and her fist around his shirt collar. He looked like he might actually start crying, he was so terrified. “I-I-I didn’t mean—”

“Leave, or I’ll personally escort you off the premises.” Blossom released him and sent him
fumbling for the door.

He ran off, too thunderstruck to protest. Princess had her phone out and was typing out a text message.

“I’m reporting his ass to HR. By the next meeting, he’ll be removed from the board, you just wait,” Princess said. “Nobody grabs me and lives to tell about it.”

Blossom walked out of the conference room alongside her. “He was out of line. I know he was upset, but he went too far.”

Princess pocketed her phone as they passed by the employee cafe. “Look at you, playing hero. I feel like I should reward you for your community service. Let’s do drinks.”

They came to a fork in the hall that separated the employee offices from the main lobby and paused.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Blossom hedged. Happy hour with Princess? Sure, she wasn’t the heinous, spoiled brat she’d been when they were younger, but they certainly were not friends. Barely even acquaintances. Today was the first time Blossom had seen Princess since Friday’s fundraiser.

Princess sighed dramatically. “It’s 5:30 on a Tuesday. Everyone else has gone home for the day. Are you really going to sit here in your office alone doing work no one is expecting you to finish today?”

Blossom didn’t have any way to argue that logic, to be fair. She was still getting used to the cushy hours that came with the job, a staggering departure from law firm life and not an unwelcome one. “I guess you have a point.”

“Great. My driver’s parked out front. Let’s go.”

And that was how Blossom ended up in a stylish cafe bar in the bay district of Citiesville sharing a cheese board and a bottle of rosé with Princess Morbucks, because life was strange.

Princess was a natural talker and never seemed to run out of things to say, which suited Blossom at the moment considering she wasn’t entirely sure what she would have to say. The Princess sitting across from her now was every bit the entitled heiress she’d always been, and yet there was something markedly unfamiliar about her that tempered Blossom’s knee-jerk disdain for her when they were in high school. She couldn’t quite put her finger on it.

“Okay, what’s your deal?” Princess demanded, reaching for the rosé to refill her near empty glass.

Blossom blinked. “My deal?”

“You look like someone de-alphabetized your encyclopedia collection.”

“I don’t have an encyclopedia collection.” Not since she’d donated it Sophomore year of high school when the Professor bought her a laptop for her studies, thank you very much.

Princess shot her a withering look. “Then what’s wrong with you? You look really uncomfortable. I thought that big monster fight over the weekend would’ve been therapeutic for you.”

Hearing the words aloud made it impossible not to focus on her discomfort. Princess was a dog with a bone, though. Blossom figured it was best just to come clean and get it out in the open. “Honestly? This is a little strange.”
“The gorgonzola? I gave you a chance to veto it, but you said it was fine.”

“No, not that. The cheese is lovely, and so is the wine. This whole place, really, just…” Why was this so awkward? She was a Super! She could punch holes in concrete, but god forbid she try to have a conversation with Princess Morbucks.

“Just what? Spit it out.”

“This is just really bizarre. You and me here together of our own volition.”

“Oh, is that all?”

Blossom frowned. “You and I together have never added up to anything good, historically speaking. Ever since we were kids, but especially in high school. You despised me and my sisters.”

“What’s your point?”

“My point… How are you so nonchalant about this?”

“Because we’re not in high school anymore.”

“Sure, but—”

“But nothing.” Princess took a bite of gouda and chewed thoughtfully. “Look, I don’t know about you, but I’m literally living my best life these days. I’m rich, I’m gorgeous, and I’m the best at what I do. I’ve been in the Forbes 30 Under 30 for the last four years, and I’m the most eligible bachelorette in Polonium Peninsula. Why the hell would I care about anything that happened in high school?”

“I…” When she put it like that, it did sound ridiculous, even petty. Blossom lowered her gaze, abashed. “You have a point.”

“Obviously.”

“But still, you and I despised each other for years. Are you telling me you’ve forgiven and forgotten? No offense, but that does seem a bit hard to believe coming from you of all people.”

This was the girl who had hosted a second Prom at her family’s estate and specifically blacklisted Blossom and her sisters, among other social pariahs. Now, it seemed inconsequential, but for a seventeen-year-old girl whose main concern was just fitting in among her peers, it had hurt Blossom deeply. Princess had always been pulling stunts like that.

“I’m telling you I grew up and made some amazing decisions about what I wanted to do with my life and who I wanted to be.” She sipped her wine. “Actually, in a roundabout way, you helped me do that.”

“Me?”

Princess looked at her pointedly, coldly even. “I used to think you were better than me because you’re Super and I’m not. But eventually, I realized that no one actually cares about any of that. So why should I? I have my own kind of power, and I get shit done.”

Blossom hadn’t thought about it like that before. “That’s really mature of you. I’m kind of impressed.”

Princess shrugged. “I know. Anyway, while we’re camped out in the honesty corner, I’ll admit that
the fundraiser started with me wanting to rub it in your face a little.”

“Gee, and here I thought you’d changed.”

Princess regarded her and didn’t rise to the teasing. “From what I’ve seen of you lately, it seems like you’re finally living your life the way you want too, despite whatever roadblocks along the way. I guess what I’m saying is I can respect that.”

Blossom searched her face for any hint of disingenuousness, but she found none. She suddenly felt quite vulnerable and exposed, as well as an odd desire to be frank. “I don’t think some of the decisions I’ve made over the last few years deserve much respect.”

“See? That right there: candor. The Eighth Deadly Sin, but like all the others, learn the proper dosage and you’ll open a lot of doors. Plus it, like, makes people genuinely like you more, or so I’ve heard.”

“You’re serious.”

Princess shrugged casually. “Also, I just really enjoyed the way you made that prick Alexander practically piss himself. I can’t picture you doing something like that in high school.”

Blossom smiled a little. She felt bad resorting to intimidation tactics, but not so bad that she wished she’d stayed out of it. “I’ve learned that the pen isn’t always mightier than the sword in some situations.”

Princess made a show of fake-gasping. “Blossom, how scandalous! Are you seriously suggesting that it’s okay to intervene when a scumbag grabs a woman in the workplace? Who are you?”

“Hey, High School Blossom absolutely would have intervened, too.”

“High School Blossom wouldn’t have handed that guy his ass for the fun of it.”

“I didn’t do it for fun.”

“No? Then why?”

“Because I knew the lesson wouldn’t have sunk in if I hadn’t. Privileged men like Alexander… They refuse to learn until you strip them of their privilege and force them to confront their own fragility.”

Princess was smirking as she sipped her wine. “How intriguing. You remind me of someone I know.”

“Someone else defend your honor from a different scumbag?”

This got a laugh, and Blossom smiled. “Not exactly, but Brick’s never been the type to let a powerful coward go unpunished.”

Blossom choked on her wine and had to take a moment to catch her breath. Princess was watching her a little too closely for her liking. “Brick?”

“Uh-huh.”

Princess continued to watch her, and Blossom got the eerie sensation that she was waiting for some kind of crack in the plaster. Calmly, she set down her drink and schooled her features. “What about him?”
“Oh, nothing. I was just saying. Why, is there something about him?”

Somehow, Blossom got the distinct impression that Princess knew more than she ought to but was playing coy out of some sense of propriety (or quite possibly schadenfreude).

“Nothing worth mentioning,” Blossom said. “We haven’t seen each other in years.”

“Must have been fun to have the chance to catch up, then.”

“I suppose.”

Princess leaned her chin on her palm and smiled enigmatically. “All right then.”

“…All right then.”

A beat passed in which Blossom tried very hard not to let the awkward tension get to her; she was quite certain she was the only one affected by it.


Blossom soon forgot about her awkwardness when Princess smoothly transitioned into shop talk. She became engrossed right away listening to Princess talk about the latest news and trends in the tech industry, and Blossom offered her own perspective and opinions. Princess spoke with the confidence and esoteric knowledge of one with her finger on the pulse, and almost an hour passed with Blossom hardly noticing. Somewhere in the midst of a debate about the latest IPO flounders, Blossom mentioned a recent major IPO she’d worked on at her old firm, and Princess asked her about her abrupt career path detour.

“It’s a long story,” Blossom said. “And not a happy one.”

“If you say it was because of a guy, I’m going to throw my drink in your face.”

“Please don’t, I like this blouse.”

Princess sighed dramatically. “Ugh, seriously? So even you Supers aren’t immune to troubles of the heart.”

“No, unfortunately. I’m bullet-proof, but not asshole-proof.”

“They have something for that these days, you know.”

“What’s that?”

“Wine. Cheers, bitch.”

They shared a laugh as they toasted, which Blossom felt deep in her chest. It was a real laugh, as though between friends. Princess was not her friend, no, but this was…kind of nice.

“Hey, Princess?”

“Hmm?”

“Thanks for this. For dragging me out, I mean. I wasn’t sure what to expect, but I’m really glad I came.”

“Obviously. I’m excellent company.”
“I’m convinced you have your moments.”

“Wow, high praise. I’ll have to get that engraved on my tombstone.”

“I’ll be sure to autograph it.”

“Please, I will so outlive you.”

“I’m literally bullet-proof!”

“Yeah, but you’re also a hero. You know what Batman said about heroes either dying young or living long enough to become the villain.”

Blossom smirked. “I think I’d make a formidable villain if I set my mind to it.”

“You know, the worst part is you’re probably right. You’d put us all to shame, I bet.”

“Oh come on, I recall you were once a worthy villain to my hero. Think of all that I could learn from your wise guidance.”

“Now that would be a team-up for the ages. The Alexanders of the world wouldn’t stand a chance!”

They laughed again.

“Actually, now that I think about it, we did team up once before,” Princess said. “The Rowdyruff Boys wouldn’t let me join their whiny little boys’ club. You got soooo pissed.”

“Did I? I barely even remember that…”

“Well I remember you made Brick cry.”

“What? No way, I would have definitely remembered that.”

Princess nodded gravely. “Oh yeah, that happened, all right. He’ll never admit it, of course, but…” Something over Blossom’s shoulder caught her eye and she trailed off. “Speak of the devil. Hey, Red!”

Blossom blanched. No, it couldn’t be. It was too much of a coincidence, surely.

“Princess. What’re you doing here? You know this is my usual haunt…”

Brick trailed off when he spotted Blossom in the booth, and they locked gazes for the first time since Friday’s gala fundraiser. Blossom’s mouth went dry as her thoughts immediately shifted to the memory of his skin on hers, his lips poisonously taunting against the shell of her ear as he pressed against her back—

“Blossom,” he said, a little softer as though he’d lost the will to speak.

She swallowed hard. “Hi, Brick.”

They watched each other, and each second that passed was more uncomfortable than the last as Blossom racked her brain for what in the heck she was supposed to say to him now.

Princess came to her rescue, sort of. “So, Blossom told me you two really hit it off on Friday.”
Blossom flushed as scarlet as her ribbon. “That is not what I said.”

“We were just making up for lost time,” Brick said. “Looks like you’re doing the same.”

Princess grinned. “I’d say we’ve all become our best selves since high school. Some of us more than others.” She winked at Brick.

“You know I could never compete with you, Princess,” he obliged her.

Blossom looked between them, curious about their easy familiarity. All she remembered of Brick and Princess in their youth was that she’d briefly had a crush on him in middle school, and he’d hardly given her the time of day. They frequented different social circles, Brick and his brothers having been beneath her radar in terms of social capital and plain old capital, to put it bluntly. Now, though…

Princess noticed her scrutiny. “No, but I can think of someone who could give you a run for your money.”

Blossom gaped at her. Princess had some nerve, or she was a sadist. Probably a little of both.

“You know me. I always appreciate a good challenge,” Brick said.

Blossom looked up at him, and he met her eyes. It took everything she had not to shiver under his scrutiny.

Is he...

No, he couldn’t possibly be. Their tryst was a one-time affair, one and done. It had shaken her, but Bubbles had helped her through it, and now she was determined to move on. Everybody needed a rebound, it was fine. She was fine.

He’s fine...

Blossom stood up all of a sudden with every intention of taking a long, hard look in the mirror and maybe bleaching her brain of this insanity. “Please excuse me.”

She didn’t care that she was being rude getting up in the middle of a conversation and didn’t look back. She’d intended to go to the bathroom, but there were two other women waiting for it, so she went outside instead. The Citiesville air was cool and pedestrians crowded the sidewalks on their way to the chic boutiques and cafes that lined this street. Despite the exhaust fumes from the cars lurching in traffic, Blossom took a deep breath and rubbed her temples. What was getting into her?

Not a minute after she’d wandered outside, her space was invaded once more.

“I want my shirt back.”

Brick had his hands casually in his jean pockets. A red collared shirt was unbuttoned down the front and exposed a black undershirt that flattered his chest. Blossom bit her lip recalling how she’d run her palms over that same chest, those muscles rippling beneath her fingertips...

And then she realized he’d said something to her. “Of course. I was going to return it after getting it dry cleaned.”

He regarded her ponderously. “How considerate of you.”

She couldn’t tell if he was being serious or not, but she figured it was not worth the headache to try
and figure out. “I’ll drop it off tomorrow. Where do you work?”

“I don’t keep an office.”

Blossom narrowed her eyes. It was not the first time they’d talked about his shadowy job and he’d offered her no details at all. “I see. Then where should I drop it?”

He retrieved a sleek, black smartphone from his pants pocket, stared at it for a protracted moment, and pocketed it again. From another pocket he pulled out an iPhone with a red case. “Just text me when it’s ready and we’ll go from there.”

It seemed reasonable enough. Although, after this he would officially have her number. As soon as she had the thought, she banished it. What a juvenile thing to get hung up on. She was an adult, and it was just a phone number. Brick was many things, but a creep was not one of them. She pulled out her phone and they exchanged numbers.

“I’ll text you, then,” she said.

“Yeah, fine.” He turned to leave.

“Wait.”

He narrowed his eyes slightly, but he stopped to regard her. “What is it?”

“The monster attacks the other day. Buttercup told me what happened here. That you and Butch helped her put the Red Monster down. I just wanted to say thank you, since I doubt she did.”

The glimmer of annoyance faded from his scrutinizing eyes, and he watched her thoughtfully. “Sure. I guess I should thank you for cutting off that nosy reporter before Boomer could share his life’s story.”

Blossom’s mouth went dry. Of course he’d seen the report. “I didn’t think he’d want the spotlight.”

_I didn’t think you’d want the spotlight._

“No.”

And yet, he’d put himself in its path all the same. Curiosity had never settled well in Blossom, and she couldn’t resist the opportunity to satisfy it now that he was here. “Why did you help Buttercup, anyway? Butch I can understand for the excuse to fight, but…”

Brick quirked his eyebrows, an expression that might have been cute if she didn’t know him better. “You think I want to live in a wrecked city?”

“I would think the ordinance was enough of a deterrent from using your powers so ostentatiously.”

His eyes shone with mirth. He took a step closer. “Are you scolding me?”

“No, just trying to understand your motivations.”

“Hm. What else is new.” The ghost of a smile teased her, like a kitten with a toy dangling just out of reach.

She opened her mouth to argue, but the words would not come.

“See you around.” He touched her arm in parting, and then he was gone.
Blossom waited until he disappeared around the corner. He didn’t look back.

“Class, we have a new student joining us today!” Bubbles announced with a bright smile. “This is Brisa. She just moved here from a kingdom far, far away in the land of Texas, so let’s all make her feel at home, okay?”

“Hi, Brisa,” said the room full of kindergarteners in succession.

Brisa smiled up at Bubbles tentatively, but she did not try to hide. Her big, brown eyes were kind but strong and possessed of a sense of adventure Bubbles wondered if she got from her father.

“Why don’t you go take a seat next to Richie?” Bubbles said.

Richie sat at a small table by himself, the only boy in the class without a table mate until today. When he saw Brisa run to sit with him, he blushed like a tomato and tried to hide his smile. “H-Hi.”

“Hi!” Brisa said, bravely plopping down in the chair next to him. “I’m Brisa and I really like puppies. What do you like?”

Richie blinked wide-set, blue eyes at her and nervously tugged on his short, blond hair. “Um, well, I l-like puppies too?”

Brisa burst into a joyful smile. “I like you! Let’s be friends!”

“I happen to like puppies, too!” Bubbles said. “Everyone, grab your crayons and your construction paper. I’d like you to draw the things you like best. It can be puppies like Brisa and Richie, or flowers, or maybe your family—anything you want!”

While the kids happily colored, Bubbles slipped out of the classroom where Butch was waiting. He leaned against the wall with his arms and legs crossed looking more like a greaser bad boy than the father of a five-year-old girl.

“Sounds like you got your shit under control,” he said.


He scowled, avoiding her pensive gaze in favor of watching Brisa share her crayons with Richie and another kid. “You know she’s a Super. You can’t treat her like some other smelly old kid.”

Bubbles watched his angular profile. Tense and taut as a rubber band, Butch was the shortest and stockiest of his brothers. Where Brick was aggravatingly aloof and Boomer was easygoing, Butch was a live wire that threatened to shock anyone who got too close. She hadn’t seen him for years while he was abroad serving, but that much had not changed. Only now, he seemed to have eyes only for his daughter rather than for himself.

There had been an incident back in Texas, he’d explained to her earlier this morning before all the kids arrived for class. He hadn’t been around, and she’d been living with her mother and her grandparents. Some kids found out she was different, and they’d made the mistake of bullying her. But Brisa was Butch’s daughter, after all; she wasn’t one to back down from a fight.

Two of the kids she’d retaliated against ended up in the hospital. Shortly after, Butch took a leave of absence and moved Brisa here to Townsville, but her mother had not joined them. He didn’t offer up any further details, but Bubbles could fill in the blanks well enough on her own. She’d
been lucky to have a parent who could handle having Super daughters, but not everyone could shoulder that burden the way the Professor had. Not everyone chose it.

Bubbles put a gentle hand on Butch’s shoulder. “I promise she’s safe with me, Butch. You don’t have to worry about her while I’m around.”

He grunted, but didn’t shake her hand off. “Yeah, whatever. Just call me if anything goes down.”

“I will.”

He lingered, watching Brisa through the little door window like he was afraid she wouldn’t be here when he got back to pick her up. Bubbles smiled. It was extraordinary how people could grow and change with a little time and patience.

“All right, I’m out of here,” he said at length, tearing his gaze away from his daughter happily coloring with her new friends.

“Anything planned for today?” Bubbles asked.

“Nah, just…” He scratched the back of his neck. “Guess I haven’t thought about it. Haven’t taken a vacation in like…ever.”

Bubbles thought about that. “Give me your phone.”

“Huh? What the fuck for?”

She made a face at his cursing, but there were no children in the hall to overhear. “Do you want Buttercup’s phone number or not?”

He pulled out his phone. “I already have it.”

“She got a new one last year after an IT guy she arrested hacked her phone.”


Bubbles rolled her eyes. “Cool it on the cursing. There, done.” She handed Butch back his phone.

“Sweet.”

“See if you can get her to take a break for an hour or two. She’s working on a case that’s been going cold, and I can tell it’s getting to her. Maybe she’ll listen if the request doesn’t come from her nagging sister.”

“Bet I could out-nag you any day.”

Bubbles smiled wryly. “I bet you could. I’ll see you later for pick-up.”

“Hey.”

“Yeah?”

Butch looked uncomfortable all of a sudden. “Nothing, just, you know. Thanks. For Brisa, I mean.”

Her smile turned genuine. “You’re welcome.”

Danny’s school friends were no help. The pizza place where he worked had a record of his delivery
locations over the week he’d disappeared, but standard inquiry and investigation at each location had turned up nothing of interest. The kid had vanished off the face of the planet, and not a soul seemed to know how or why. Buttercup couldn’t even pin down the exact day it had happened. As time passed, the CPD became more interested in finding a body than a living boy. She understood, but she didn’t have to like it. It didn’t help that Mrs. Chang continued to hold out hope for her boy’s safe return one of these days. Buttercup had just come from her house, hoping for any missed clue in Danny’s things, in what he last said to his mother, anything at all. She came up with nothing.

And it pissed her off. College kids with clean records didn’t just disappear at random. Danny hadn’t been involved in any gangs, didn’t do drugs, didn’t even have a lover from what Buttercup had discerned. He was squeaky clean, just an average 19-year-old kid with a bright future ahead of him and a mother who loved him. Who would wish him harm? And more importantly, why?

And then there was Mojo’s thief. She had even less to work with there—chalk? What did that even mean? And could she really trust the word of a dog, talking or otherwise? The best she could come up with was the Wright Chalk Factory in the industrial quarter of the city. It had been around for ages and employed hundreds as one of the major suppliers of chalk in the country. She had every intention of visiting it, but with so little to go on and up to her eyes in overdue paperwork that Chief Foolery was hell bent on seeing finished, she hadn’t gotten the chance to go yet.

All in all, Buttercup was having a shitty day—no, a shitty week, all things considered. There was still the cleanup after the Red Monster’s attack just a block over from the CPD headquarters to remind her of yet another shitty thing that had gone wrong in her life lately. She was honestly surprised Mayor Minor hadn’t forced her to help with the cleanup efforts.

Enjoying a sad burrito dinner at her desk in the mostly empty station, Buttercup mulled over what the hell she was going to do next. Surely there had to be something she was overlooking, some missing piece of the puzzle she hadn’t examined quite as thoroughly as it deserved. At times like these, she just wanted to destroy something. It didn’t help that Ty was down for the count. Despite her long-standing reputation as the “toughest”, Buttercup had never liked flying solo.

“Man, someone’s been pigging out on shit cake.”

Buttercup resisted the urge to groan, barely. She set aside her half-eaten burrito, not really hungry anyway. “It’s a shit burrito, actually. Also, fuck you.”

Butch straddled the empty chair at the desk across from Buttercup’s and draped himself over the back like it had been waiting all day for him. “What crawled up your ass today? Seriously.”

“At the moment? I’m wondering what the hell kinda security we have that lets any random shady dude waltz into this part of the precinct. I swear to god, if Mancini is sleeping at his desk again…”

Buttercup had half a mind to go scare the receptionist out of his skin, but leaving Butch in here without supervision seemed like a poor choice.

“Oh, the front desk guy? I asked him if you were in. He told me to come on back.”

“You’re joking.”

He grinned and gestured vaguely. “Eh.”

Jade energy sparked in his palm with a pop, and Buttercup snatched it out of the air to smother it before anyone could see. “Cut it out! You can’t just threaten fucking cops.”
He let her manhandle him a bit until she was satisfied that he wasn’t going to fire off a random laser and get her fired by association.

“My bad,” he said, not sorry at all. “It just seemed like the fastest way to get in to see you.”

Because a visit from a Super with a couple screws loose was just what she needed on her plate right now on top of everything else. Great. “What are you even doing here? What do you want?”

“I’m bored. Figured you’d be up for a fight or something. You still owe me that monster happy hour.”

“I have a job, idiot. And you have a daughter; where is she? Why aren’t you with her?”

“Brisa can take care of herself. You saw that first-hand.”

Buttercup stared at him. “She’s five.”

He laughed. “Chill! Boomer’s babysitting her for a couple hours. Don’t get your panties all twisted.”

By now, their escalating voices had drawn the eyes of the other detectives working at their desks. Buttercup was so uncomfortable and tense that she felt like she might burst at any second. The prospect of a fight was looking mighty appealing right about now, but there was that stupid ordinance—

“So, back to that fight—”

“Shut up and come with me.”

Buttercup didn’t wait and hauled him up by his arm through the station. She ignored the looks they got. Most knew not to get in her way when she had that look in her eyes. Sometimes it bothered her that most of her colleagues harbored a healthy fear of her. It wasn’t like she was going to lose her cool and blast everyone. She was a good guy, on their side. Not having Ty around to distract her from all the shit that shouldn’t matter was starting to get to her. Butch was no Ty, but for now he could suffice as a warm body to share the heat.

She marched them to the basement level, buzzed them through the security with her building badge, and headed for a large, cage closet. Butch whistled appreciatively as he took in his new surroundings.

“Not what I had in mind, but I’m game.”

Buttercup didn’t really care what he thought as she signed for two Glock 19s and two boxes of ammunition and handed one to Butch. “You can’t use your powers here.”

He tried to take the gun, but she yanked it away.

“Tell me you understand.”

Butch rolled his eyes. “Yes, Mom.”

“Butch, I am not fucking around. This is my job you’re jeopardizing, not to mention what could happen to your daughter if you get thrown in jail just because you couldn’t keep it in your pants—”

“I got it,” Butch interrupted. He fixed her with a hard, very un-Butch-like stare that made her shiver.
Buttercup nodded, swallowing the odd chill and handing him the empty Glock. “Good.”

They set up in the last two lanes farthest from the check out locker. While Buttercup grabbed them ear protection, Butch made short work deconstructing his Glock down to its parts and inspecting them with a trained eye. Buttercup watched as he expertly reassembled the gun and loaded it.

“I like guns,” he said when he noticed her looking.

“Why?” she blurted out. Outside of Citiesville, surely Butch could simply rely on his powers to cause far more devastating and creative damage than anything a gun could do.

He tested the weight of the gun as he took aim at the target sheet at the end of the lane. “‘Cause anyone can use them.”

Buttercup wasn’t sure what to say to that, so she handed him his ear protection, donned hers, and checked and loaded her own Glock. He waited for her to get ready by some unspoken agreement, and together they took aim and fired a full round. They waited for the silhouette targets to travel down the lanes.

“Your aim’s for shit,” Butch said. “Did you close your eyes or something?”

Her aim was not for shit, but it was embarrassing next to his. He’d landed every bullet through the target’s forehead, nearly flawless.

“Holy shit, Butch.” She couldn’t help but admire his handiwork.

“I like guns.”

Yes, she could see that he did. They went another round. Her aim a little better this time now that she was determined to shoot true, but she didn’t have his experience.

“Didn’t you use your powers when you were deployed?” she asked.

He shrugged. “Not really. Would’ve blown my cover if I did.”

Buttercup lowered her Glock, stunned. “Are you telling me you posed as a Normie? You?”

“Well damn, BC. If I’d known you had such a hard-on for Normies, I would’ve done it a long time ago.”

“Hey, I’m serious.” She tugged on his sleeve. “How long?”

“The whole time.”

_The whole time._

That was years of hiding his true self. It was unbelievable in the most literal sense of the word. The Butch she’d known in high school would have never done such a thing, let alone had the presence of mind to actually keep up the charade.

“Why?” she asked.

He regarded her a moment, but he raised his gun again and took aim. “Guess I wanted to see how the other half lives.”

He fired all his rounds before Buttercup had a chance to respond to that. When he recalled the
target sheet, it was another perfect cluster of headshots.

They emptied a few more magazines, and he said nothing more about his time in the military.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Mordor, who beta'd this and provided some great feedback and general sounding board. You're the best like no one ever was!

Next time: Bubbles puts on her sleuthing cap. The Blues and the Reds try to go on dates; neither of them succeeds.
We Barely Remember Us

Chapter Notes

Happy holidays to everyone who celebrates them! Have a chapter to wrap up 2019. You are all lovely for sticking with me and leaving me your comments. Thank you so much!

BTM has fanart!! Check out the Girls by shebasborg and Reds by Secretie over on Tumblr.

WARNING: This chapter contains mature sexual content. Please read at your own discretion.

Well, it’s…strange.”

Bubbles blinked. “Strange, like…how?”

Clara Clearly, full-time science teacher at the neighboring Pokey Oaks Middle-High School and part-time meddling sleuth, muttered in Spanish under her breath as she stared through the microscope set up in her empty classroom.

“What do you mean, it’s a ‘design flaw’?” Bubbles asked, approaching.

Clara looked up. Her frizzy, brown hair bobbed charmingly, and she blinked large, brown eyes behind her safety goggles. “How do I always forget you can speak Spanish?”

Bubbles grinned. “I can also speak Squirrel.”

Clara removed her goggles. “And that’s anything but a design flaw. I’ve always wondered what squirrels are thinking when I see them rooting around our trash for pizza crusts.”

“Probably that they’ve just scored a very lucky break.”

Clara went to wash her hands at the sink. “Anyway, the design flaw I was talking about is just that, a flaw I’ve never seen before.”

Bubbles frowned and slipped on the safety goggles Clara had removed to peer through the microscope. Little cells floated on a slide, the same gooey color as the Sludge Monster. “I guess I don’t see it.”

“Well, you don’t have a background in biology like me, so no big deal. Basically, different kinds of organisms have different cell structures. A plant looks different from an animal, for example. Monsters are unique because they can be a combination of both, or even inorganic. It’s a fascinating field, actually. If the monsters weren’t so dangerous and hostile, we’d probably know more and have better opportunities to study them.” Clara sighed wistfully.

Bubbles smiled politely. She didn’t get Clara’s fascination with monsters, though it had been an interest that had captivated her since childhood. It did make her the perfect person to ask about the
Sludge Monster, though. “How about this guy? Do you think you can learn anything from the sample I got you?”

“That’s just it: I don’t think I can.”

“But what about the design flaw?”

“Just what it sounds like. There is something in the structure of the Sludge Monster’s cells that I’ve never seen before.”

“Like…a new species?”

“More like laws-of-nature-defying. It shouldn’t have ever been able to live naturally.”

Bubbles frowned. “But that doesn’t make any sense. I fought him myself. He was so…”

_Angry._

That was the only way Bubbles could describe the encounter. Monster fights of old had sometimes tested the limits of her sisters’ abilities, but at the end of the day, those fights were about taming beasts with baser instincts. Most of the monsters that wandered to Townsville came in search of food or shelter. The Sludge Monster had seemed almost angry in its rampage, as though it had wanted to cause as much damage as possible while targeting heavily populated areas.

“I know, I saw it on the news. What I’m telling you is you’ve brought me a sample of something impossible. As a one-off, we could write it off as an anomaly. But if I had a larger sample size, then maybe I could start to find patterns and draw conclusions.”

“The other monster that attacked Citiesville,” Bubbles said. “Of course! I should see if I can get a sample of him too. They’re still trying to clear out the body from downtown, so it shouldn’t be hard. That would help?”

“It certainly wouldn’t hurt.”

Bubbles ruminated on that. “The MDS was too weak to deter the Sludge Monster when it showed up, and the Red Monster bypassed it entirely. How are they suddenly so resistant to it? The Professor designed the system himself, and it worked for a really long time.”

“The million dollar question,” Clara said. “I’d say you have some fieldwork to do, Bubbles.”

They cleaned up Clara’s lab and headed for the parking lot to her car.

“So, do you want to take a road trip to Citiesville with me?” Bubbles offered.

“Oh girl, I would, but it’s date night tonight and Pablo’s taking me to _Le Dunne King Donnet_. Got a babysitter for Carlos and everything.”

Bubbles smiled. “That’s great! That place is so fancy, you guys will have a great time. You know, next time if you want I’d be happy to watch Carlos.”

“You’re a saint, but teacher to teacher, I know we need a break from kids whenever we can get one.”

“Maybe. I guess I just like kids. And I like helping my friends.”

Clara laughed. “Then I’ll hold you to it next time and return the favor when you have a little one of
your own one day.”

Bubbles walked Clara to her car and waved as she drove off, her smile straining. She thought about Clara’s words, and imagined what it would be like to go home to a baby boy or girl. Bubbles had always envisioned herself having kids, a big family with lots of siblings who were all best friends. There was a time she’d thought she’d have it much sooner than later, but…

Shaking her head, she dismissed the thought and flew home to get her car. When she arrived, she found Blossom dressed in a maroon pencil skirt and silk blouse on her way out. “Where are you headed looking so cute?”

“Just a couple errands in Citiesville. Wait, you think I’m overdressed?” Blossom examined her reflection in the foyer mirror.

Bubbles appraised her. “I don’t know. Depends on what kinds of errands you’re running. Are you still on your juice cleanse?”

Blossom shot her a look in the mirror. “That’s not what this is.”

“Huh, well that’s too bad.”

*That’s definitely what this is,* Bubbles thought to herself.

“I’m just doing a little shopping, picking up some dry cleaning, that kind of thing,” Blossom said.

*Suuuuuure.*

“Sure,” Bubbles said, smiling. She fluffed Blossom’s ponytail like she would do when they were teenagers.

“Bubbles…”

“Anyway, you’re in luck because I actually need to run to Citiesville too,” Bubbles artfully dodged her sister’s annoyance.

“You do?”

“Yeah, I’m looking in to the monster attacks with Clara. You remember Clara Clearly from middle school, right? Anyway, she’s a biology teacher at Pokey Oaks high school now, and I told her I’d try to get a sample of the Red Monster so she can do her science magic on it.”

Blossom followed Bubbles upstairs to her room, where she planned on changing into something a bit cuter than an old college sweatshirt. “What do you mean you’re looking in to it? I know we don’t get many attacks these days, but a monster attack isn’t completely out of the ordinary.”

Bubbles selected dark jeans and a pastel sweater with sunflowers embroidered on the hem. “Maybe, maybe not. The Professor kept a log of them all for years, and after the MDS was implemented, it mostly slowed down. Anyway, Clara said there’s a design flaw in the Sludge Monster’s cells and she wants to compare it to the Red Monster’s.”

Blossom’s gaze lingered on Bubbles’ sweater, and Bubbles ignored the glimmer of recognition in her sister’s eyes. “Well, all right. I’m not entirely sure what you think she’s found, but you’ll let me know?”

Bubbles planted a wet kiss on Blossom’s cheek. “As my leader commands.”
They went back downstairs to the baby blue Ford Focus parked in the garage.

“You know I’m not asking as your leader,” Blossom said when they’d pulled out and merged with traffic heading south to the Golden Bay Bridge.

“Hm?”

“About the monsters, what you’re doing with Clara, any of it. I’m just…”

“But you are the leader.”

Blossom was looking out the window at passing street signs. “I know.”

Bubbles sighed softly. It would take time, she knew that. But sometimes even she could be impatient. She was only human, after all. “Buttercup’s right, you know. You’ll figure it out.”

“What will I figure out?”

“Whatever needs figuring out. I know you think you’ve lost something, or left it behind, but it’s still here for you. You just have to let yourself have it.”

Blossom released a sharp breath. “Sounds easy.”

“I think it’s as easy as you choose to make it. Other people can give you their perspective or encourage you, but no one can do it for you. That’s why it’s hard. In the end, I think you have to decide who you want to be, and who you don’t want to be.”

They fell into a comfortable silence as the sounds of traffic and 90s radio tunes filled the space between them. They were halfway over the Golden Bay Bridge when Blossom spoke next.

“What about you?” she asked.

“What about me?”

Blossom wasn’t looking at her, but out the window to the towering sky scrapers of downtown Citiesville. “Have you decided to let yourself have what you left behind?”

Bubbles tensed. Her grip on the steering wheel kneaded the leather, supple under her fingers. She kept her eyes dead ahead on the road. “That’s not really my decision to make.”

She felt Blossom’s gaze on her profile, hair-raising. “I think it is. You’re the one who gets to decide who you want to be, not our father.”

Bubbles’ throat clenched like she’d been prodded with a hot poker. She blinked, feeling the threat of tears, but she steeld her nerve. Blossom’s unnatural gaze was direct sunlight on a bitter cold day. Bubbles didn’t trust her voice.

Finally, Blossom averted her gaze, and with it the pressure of memory. Bubbles released a shaky, silent breath.

“It’s okay to be happy,” Blossom said.

Bubbles couldn’t look at her when the car stopped and she got out to run her errands. When Blossom said goodbye and that she’d meet her back home later, Bubbles just nodded and pulled back into traffic.
She couldn’t say when her tears started or how long she sat in her car parked outside the CPD precinct, only that eventually they stopped, just like they always did. She wiped her face, gathered her purse, and exited her car to get to work on the task she’d come here to do.

Butch and Brisa were watching Night of the Living Dead in Brick’s living room when Brick received a text from Blossom.

[Blossom: I have your shirt ready. I can drop it at your place now if you’re home?]

“The hell?” Brick muttered as he stared at his phone. The sounds of a man being eviscerated by zombies played in the background.

“Gross!” Brisa said.

“Nah, it’s just noodles. See that? How stringy it is?” Butch said.

“Noodles?”

“Uh-huh. This stuff’s all fake. You’d know the real thing if you saw it, trust me.”

“Well, I still think it’s gross.”

Butch chuckled. “Got me there, Supergirl.”

Brick looked over at them from the kitchen, annoyed. “Is that really something you should be showing your five-year-old daughter?”

“Last time she picked Tangled, so this time was Daddy’s pick.”

Brick shuddered at his brother referring to himself as “Daddy”.

“You can watch with us, Uncle Brick!” Brisa said.

[Blossom: I’m in the area anyway. Got your address from Princess.]

“Hard pass,” Brick said, only half paying attention.

“Aw, don’t be scared! It’s all fake guts!” Brisa said with a giggle.

“Yeah, Brick, don’t be a P-U-S-S-Y,” Butch sniggered.

Brick glared boiling red at his brother’s idiot face. “Why don’t you go F-U-C-K yourself? Why are you even here? It’s a school night and it’s almost Brisa’s bedtime. You should take her back to the apartment I’m paying for.”

[Brick: Where are you? I’ll come to you.]

“It’s okay. Your uncle Brick was born with a stick up his A-S-S. You get used to it,” Butch said.

Brick grabbed an empty beer bottle from the counter and chucked it at Butch with inhuman speed. Unfortunately, Butch caught it before it should shatter against his stupid head. The brothers shared a look, but Butch just grinned.

“C’mon, Brisa. We should get you back home for a bath. You stink!”

Brisa giggled. “You stink, Daddy.”
Butch made a show of sniffing his armpit and grimacing. “Yuck, you’re right. Better run home to the bath before… Oh no, I can feel it. It’s happening!”

Brisa shrieked in delight at whatever act she knew was coming. Brick was forced to watch his brother lose whatever remained of his dignity as he jerked like a zombie and began to chase Brisa around the living room demanding to eat her.

“Must…feed…on…stinky little girl! Aarrrrrrgghh!”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Brick muttered to himself. Like he’d ever be caught dead making such a fool of himself.

Butch caught Brisa shaking with laughter and pretended to take a bite out of her. Brick turned off the television and retrieved the empty beer bottle he’d thrown at Butch as they gathered their things and prepared to leave.

“Goodnight, Uncle Brick!” Brisa said, grinning toothily. She reached her skinny arms toward him for a hug.

Brick rolled his eyes, but he opened his arms and welcomed her around his waist for a little-girl-sized hug. “Goodnight, Brisa.”

“I love you!”

Brick sighed. “Yeah, same.”

Butch had the most obnoxious shit-eating grin on his face. It was only with great poise and restraint that Brick held himself back from punching his lights out. His phone buzzed in his hands.

[Blossom: I’m a block away from your apartment building. It’s fine, I’ll just come to you. It won’t take long.]

“See ya, Bro,” Butch said, his eyes lingering on Brick’s phone. “Wouldn’t want to hold up your B-O-O-T-Y call.”

Brick absolutely would have eye beamed Butch then if not for Brisa standing right there.

“Goodnight, Butch,” he bit out.

Butch and Brisa left, leaving a trail of Butch’s cackling in their wake. Not two minutes later, the front desk buzzed his intercom and informed him that a woman was here to see him.

Which, fine, he supposed. Not like he’d ever been able to tell Blossom of all people what to do. Not like she’d ever let him. Unless, of course, she was splayed before him on a hotel bed waiting for him to have his way with her.

“Fuck.” He flushed at the rather graphic memory of their tryst and felt his body warm. So much for getting her out of his system.

She rang the doorbell, and Brick stole a quick glance at himself in the mirror just to make sure he looked good. Satisfied, he opened the door.

“I told you I’d come to you,” he said, a little more harshly than he’d intended.

She immediately glared up at him. “A little gratitude wouldn’t kill you. I have your shirt, as promised.”
She indeed had it tucked neatly in a plastic cover, pressed and perfect. Brick accepted the hanger and looked between the shirt and Blossom standing in the threshold with her arms crossed over her white silk blouse. Against his better judgment, Brick imagined her wearing his shirt and nothing else that morning after their tryst, walking on eggshells so as not to alert him to her escape.

_I would’ve noticed if I hadn’t been yanking it in the shower._

The thought filled him with disgust at his own weakness.

“Yes, thank you,” he said in a clipped tone.

“You’re welcome.”

He turned his back on her to return the shirt to its proper closet. Abandoned, she lingered there in the foyer awkwardly, though when he poked his head out of his room he saw she had wandered inside a couple steps and was smoothing her skirt. Something in her reluctance to enter his space irked him, though he couldn’t place what it was.

“You can come in,” he barked before disappearing back into his room.

“Oh. Thanks.”

He disposed of the plastic cover and the metal hanger and hung up his clean shirt in the closet among the others. She barely made any sound, and he wondered if she’d even come in like he’d offered.

“Take your shoes off. I don’t like shit on my floor.”

There was a little sound like a scoff, and he smirked to himself. As if she’d tread dirt and crap in his house. She would _never_. He imagined her red in the face defending her cleanliness to him and smirked wider.

He found her in his living room keeping her hands to herself as she admired the view from forty stories up. It was a pleasing image, Blossom with her ponytail down her back and her maroon pencil skirt against the starry backdrop of a clear, Citiesville night. There were few clouds tonight. Brick wandered to the mini bar, considered the scotch, and then considered her again.

“What are you drinking?” he asked.

She eyed him over her shoulder. “Oh, um…”

He wondered if she’d decline. He wouldn’t be surprised considering her, and considering him. But she hesitated, and he was feeling comfortably confident. She was here, and while he had no qualms about drinking alone, it would feel like a wasted opportunity somehow. He used her hesitation to reach below the bar and retrieve a bottle of red wine and two glasses from the cabinet. “I’ve been wanting to try this.”

She wandered over as he poured out two goblets, and he handed her one. She smelled it slowly.

“It’s earthy, I think?”

Brick shrugged. “It’s wine.” He took a sip and marveled at how smoothly it went down. He was a snob about certain things, but wine had never been one of them. He could appreciate a nice vintage, but he found most self-identified winos to be pompous imbeciles who would drink gasoline if it had a French label and a hundred dollar price tag.
She tried the wine and he watched her expression soften. “Oh wow.”

“Good, right?”

“Yes. It’s delicious.”

He leaned on the bar, pleased with her agreement. “Of course it is.”

Blossom mimicked his casual stance and narrowed her eyes, a little suspicious, a little playful. “What happened to ‘it’s wine’?”

He shrugged and sipped his glass. “One thing you should know about me: quality’s always a given. I just don’t make a big deal out of it.”

She snorted. “Sure you don’t.”

He let her have that one, only because he couldn’t remember the last time he’d ever heard her laugh at something he’d said. Maybe she never had.

“You have a lovely apartment,” she said politely.

He looked at her, amused. “I don’t think anyone’s ever described anything about me as being lovely.”

She gestured vaguely at the room. “I just meant it suits you. Clean, modern, private. It’s nice.”

“It’s cold.”

She looked at him thoughtfully. “You think so?”

“That’s kind of the aesthetic.”

She walked across the living room to the bookshelf. It was packed with fiction and nonfiction titles, everything from the Tale of Genji to a People’s History of the United States. What drew her interest, however, were the couple of framed pictures arranged sparingly. One was of Brick and his brothers a few years ago just before Butch’s last deployment to Iraq, before he’d switched to private contract. They were posed casually at B-3, Boomer in the middle with an arm slung around each of his brothers’ shoulders.

“Caught me. I’m a sap at heart,” he deadpanned, following her.

She studied the picture. “You guys look really close in this.”

Brick frowned. He wasn’t sure what she meant by that. “They’re my brothers.”

She set the picture back in its place, and he couldn’t help but wonder at the way her hand lingered on the frame as though reluctant to let it go. A little sad, a little nostalgic, a little longing. “Of course.”

He thought about asking, but he didn’t really care. No, that wasn’t quite right. Brick valued information above everything else. Information was power, it was control. To know someone’s secrets was to own them. He wondered what it would feel like to own Blossom, but he dismissed the idea. Whatever he might learn of her, he couldn’t use her the way he could use the unctuous politicians and narcissistic techies he regularly dealt with. He knew exactly who Blossom was, who she’d always been. She was incorruptible, and that made her useless to someone like him.
Even so, he was curious, just because. “You’ve been gone a long time. Your sisters…”

She tensed and let her hand fall. “Yes. You know the story.”

He knew the facts. Professor Utonium’s death had been a difficult blow to all of Townsville having lost such a brilliant mind. Brick had not been pleased to learn the news—a fucking brake failure, random and meaningless, an absolutely pathetic way to go. Brick never knew the man personally, but he deserved better for the sole fact of his accomplishment and standing in the community. It was only natural that his death would affect his daughters deeply, but Blossom disappearing from the radar for near on four years seemed a bit extreme when she and her sisters had been so close in their youth.

“After Wei, I just couldn’t do it anymore, I guess,” she said.

Brick stiffened. He knew the name of her trash bag ex, but this was the first she’d spoken it aloud. In his home, no less. He had the sudden urge to scrub the walls, lest its taint seep in and settle.

“So now I’m back, and it’s a little weird. But I’m trying. I know they are, too.” She touched her cheek, far away. After a moment she looked up at him and remembered herself. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to ramble about my personal life.”

“It’s fine,” he said, even though it wasn’t fine. Brick was extremely uncomfortable listening to her like this. They weren’t friends, they didn’t even like each other all that much. But here they were. He’d invited her to stay and share a glass of wine on a Saturday night after hours. There was a cliché here and they were playing right into it, and yet he couldn’t find a good enough reason to send her home despite his self-made vows to be rid of her after their tryst had ended.

As though reading his mood, she took one last sip of her wine and set it down on the bookshelf. “I should probably get going. Thank you for the wine.”

He blocked her with his arm before she could get far and trapped her between his body and the bookshelf. Why he bothered, he could not quite say. Only… Only he didn’t want to leave it like that, weird and stilted. After their intimacy had ended on such a pleasant, if unresolved, note, it just felt wrong. It felt cowardly. Brick was no coward. “Stay. This wine is too good to waste, believe me.”

She studied him, and he got the impression that they were on the precipice of something. Dangling over an edge, metaphorically speaking. “Really?” she asked, innocent and yet not.

“Yes.” After all, they could fly. There was no edge too high for them, and they could never fall.

He clung to this thought as he waited on her answer. She pressed her lips together in an expression he could not quite read and turned back to the bookshelf. He followed her fingers as they traced the spines, and he licked his lips.


“It’s political philosophy. A classic.”

“The first method for estimating the intelligence of a ruler is to look at the men he has around him.”

Brick recognized the passage, and his eyes drifted back to the picture of him with his brothers. No truer words, most days.
“More like the first method for estimating the patience of a ruler,” he said.

She smiled a little. “Also true.”

“In the vein of history’s most infamous Italians, I prefer Dante.”

“Ah, the Inferno, obviously. It’s certainly the most entertaining of the three.”

“A product of its time, but a classic. And very entertaining, yes.”

“Well, the whole thing is a 1300s edition Burn Book.”

Brick ran his fingers over the spines of the Inferno and its sequels, Purgatory and Paradise, all in their original Italian texts. “It’s a love story, at its heart. He was searching for Beatrice.”

“He was a glorified stalker.”

At this, he laughed. “Also true.”

They sipped their wine, and Brick found that he was considerably more at ease now that the conversation shifted from the emotional to the erudite. If nothing else, Blossom was intelligent and cultured, and Brick had always appreciated that in others. She didn’t protest when he led her by the small of her back to the sofa where they could properly admire the view and continue their conversation and the bottle of wine.

“I’m afraid to ask how much this bottle of wine cost you,” she admitted as they began their second glasses. She’d folded her legs and her knees lightly touched the side of his thigh. He didn’t move away.

“You know that exergame where you run from monsters attacking the city? The one inspired by all the monster attacks on Townsville back in the day?”

“I think so. Monster Runner, right?”

“That’s the one. The guy who invented it is a slob, but he owns one of the rarest wine collections on the west coast.”

“Okay, I’ll bite. How did you get him to give you this wine?”

He allowed himself a grin, feeling arrogant. He did not often brag about his connections and accomplishments, but this one colored in the lines enough to rouse her admiration rather than her suspicion.

“I didn’t. Silvia Salazar’s the reason I got it.”

The look on her face was almost adorable, if Brick found anything in the world adorable.

“The CSO of Bright Technologies? Are you—you know her??”

Brick was not surprised to learn that Blossom was a fan. She’d always been a vocal feminist, if memory served, and she would worship a woman who had made it in a world that didn’t want her.

For a moment Brick was eighteen and cocky and winning, and he wanted her to know it. “A client of mine is an amateur arsonist when she’s not buying up prime real estate. She accidentally burned down one of Monster Runner’s apartments in the city. Would’ve lost hundreds of thousands in rare vintages if I hadn’t been in the neighborhood. Sylvia Salazar was in the market for a very particular
Bordeaux, and Monster Runner practically threw it at me when I asked him for it.”

Blossom was so absorbed in what he was telling her that she hardly noticed his fingers touching her hair over the back of the sofa. “So tonight’s wine was what, a thank you?”

“One of twelve thank yous.”

“You have an entire case of these? That’s quite the thank you. How much are they even worth?”

“Who cares? I like what I like no matter what value others put on it.”

She looked at him for a long moment then, as though trying to see something she couldn’t quite make out. “You’re not what I remember.”

He set down his wine and leaned toward her, spread out and invading her space (his space, it was his house, after all). “You obviously didn’t know me very well.”

“No, I knew you.” She said it with the calm confidence of someone who knew the absolute truth of the world, and despite himself, he felt a chill down his spine. “But you’ve changed. Or at least, your perspective has. You were more myopic growing up.”

“And you were shallower in your judgment. What happened?”

She averted her gaze. “I guess I finally realized people are often more than what they let you see. For better and for worse.”

Brick let his hand slide from her hair to her neck. He felt her stiffen under his touch, and his pulse spiked in anticipation. “Everyone sees what you appear to be, but few experience what you really are.”

“The Prince,” she breathed, still not looking at him. “I suppose that’s true.”

“For better? Or for worse?”

She looked up at him, weary. Jaded. “Depends on who you ask.”

Brick was suddenly angry with her. Angry with her passive acceptance of the way things were, the way people were. He had never directly asked her about her ex, but only an idiot wouldn’t see that he possessed her even now, a parasite eating her alive. What kind of power could he wield over her to shackle her to his ghost like this? She, who was powerful like none other was except for Brick himself. At odds, perhaps, but equal. Parallel and existing on a plane far, far above the rest. Even their siblings could not touch them, not truly.

What the fuck had this guy done to her to bring her so low?

And why had she let him?

“No, it doesn’t,” he said.

She flinched at his harsh tone, suddenly wary. “What?”

“It doesn’t depend on who you ask because no one else’s opinion matters.”

“What are you—”

“You’re a fucking Super. You’re so far above everyone else.”
She watched him like a deer in the headlights, unsure, and it pissed him off. “That doesn’t make me better than everyone.”

“It does, and you are.” He grabbed her chin to force her to look at him. “You’re better than him.”

“I thought you didn’t care about him.”

His own words from their night together thrown back in his face only irritated him further. “I don’t, but obviously you still do. Stop it.”

Her eyes fell to his lips, unconsciously perhaps, but he noticed, and it made him bold. Brick slid his fingers from her chin to her throat so he could loom over her. “Forget him,” he commanded. “It’s why you’re really here, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know why I’m here.”

So honest, so vulnerable. He wanted to purge her of it all over again and make her forget until all that was left was the girl he’d always known and loathed and grudgingly respected.

He slipped his other hand over her knee and along her thigh, pushing her pencil skirt up and out of his way. “I think you do,” he murmured just shy of her lips.

She made a transparently half-assed effort to bat his hand away, but not enough to mean it. In a flash, he had her on her back on the sofa with his knee between her thighs and his hand at the zipper of her skirt. This time, it slipped off without a fuss so he didn’t have to destroy it. Next time, he’d have to get her a new dress to replace the one he’d ruined.

Next time. Right.

But for now.

“Fuck, Blossom,” he said against her neck as his fingers slipped inside her. “I bet you were never this wet for him.”

That snapped her out of her annoying submissive act, and she glared up at him. “Shut up.”

He hovered just out of reach. “No, I want to hear you say it.”

Small hands, deadly hands, fisted his shirt and ripped it apart as though it were tissue paper. Brick almost lost his composure at that. His pants were too tight and she was too ready for him but goddamnit, he would have her truth if he had to edge it out of her.

His thumb pressured her just so, and she writhed in his hand. “Say it.”

He didn’t see her moving until his back hit the floor and she had already incinerated his belt with her eye beams. Any small thoughts he may have held on to about never doing this with her again unraveled with the zipper of his fly; he wanted her like he wanted that five hundred dollar bottle of wine they’d shared. He reached for her, but she shoved him back against the foot of the sofa with a hand around his neck tight enough to mean it.

“I’ll say this,” she said, her other hand wandering dangerously low over his hips. “It won’t be like the last time.”

_Cocky bitch._
Well, she was about to be if he had anything to say about it.

He flashed her what he knew was an infuriatingly smug grin. “I’m waiting.”

He immediately regretted it when he felt her take him fully in hand and tug—hard. Her other hand left his neck and pushed him down flat on the floor so she could loom over him as she alternated between gentle strokes and calculated squeezes. Inches from his face, she watched him intently.

“What exactly are you waiting for?” she asked, coy.

He scoffed and wanted to look away from her probing gaze, but he would not relinquish his pride. Immured, he settled for crass. “You cock shy or something?”

Blossom’s eyes darkened to a bloody red in the dim lighting. She leaned in close as if to kiss him, but her teeth scraped along his jaw and she murmured, “What do you think?”

Her lips on his jaw and neck, the threat of teeth, and her nails scraping along the length of him were a strange combination of pleasure and pain that was getting him worked up like he hadn’t been since, well, since the last time they’d been together. That felt like so long ago. Too long ago. Why had he vowed never to do this with her again? Such a premature decision. He moved his hands over her waist and lewdly groped at her breasts, but she swatted him away.

“Behave,” she said, her tone commanding.

Brick knew that tone, used it himself rather liberally. Being on the other end of it should have offended him—nobody commanded him, least of all her. But the lower she sank with those soft lips and those teasing teeth, the less he gave a shit about anything but what might come next. She could command him all she liked as long as it was like that.

Flower petal eyes watched him through her lashes, and for a moment she simply stopped. It took all of Brick’s control not to wrench her by the hair and get her moving where he needed her most.

Her smile was a wicked wonder that nearly made him reconsider this entire encounter because she knew, and that was unacceptable. As unacceptable as the chill in her breath as she hovered over him and goddamnit, he was reminded of how she’d used her ice breath in their last encounter and how dangerous it had been for his dwindling control—

“Blossom,” he snarled, white-knuckled and stock still and at the mercy of her sinfully sweet smile just shy of him.

She tightened her grip, and he hissed. “My turn.”

His words thrown back at him were the final straw before she kissed him deeply, and he bit back a curse. She worked him with tongue and teeth and pressure, and he was fast on his way to losing his mind. She dragged one hand down his stomach, nails raking the skin, and he felt her like a deep-tissue exorcism. He refused to let her see the effect she was having on him, so he threw one arm over his eyes and clenched his teeth to keep from moaning like some trigger-happy teenager.

She didn’t like that and gave him a sharp nip that was just shy of painful. He sucked in a breath and looked down at her, only to catch her rising off him. They locked eyes, and he shivered. Fucking shivered at the sight of her, like they were young and she was out to punish him for whatever trouble he’d caused.

Punish him she did when she added back her hand and took him full in her mouth again. Brick did curse this time as he watched her suck him off, faster now, insistent, daring him to come because
she wasn’t going to wait on him forever. In that moment he accepted, even with his hand fisting her hair and her on her knees before him, that he was the one at her mercy. This had never been about him at all, and he’d lost the minute he hit the floor.

But.

But her hand on his stomach in a subtle show of domination, her eyes that flickered to his confirming his complete rapture, her mouth around him—oh god, her mouth…

“Blossom, fuck—”

He prepared to shove her off him, but she held on and took his pleasure in her mouth. Brick bit his knuckles to stifle his ecstasy, futile and too far gone to care. Spent, he slumped against the edge of the sofa and looked down on her in a daze.

She held his gaze and gave him a chaste, sweet kiss—if kissing cock could be considered chaste or sweet—and it was honest to god the most sensual act he could ever remember experiencing. He couldn’t help the little moan that escaped him. He was dead certain he would never forget the sight of her like that.

Blossom rose and somehow made it look dignified as she held the dainty stem of her wine glass and took a long, savoring sip. Sluggish and extremely satisfied, it took Brick a second to realize she hadn’t spit anything out.

Oh.

“It’s late,” she said casually. “I’m going to head home.”

By the time he’d shrugged out of his ruined shirt and hiked his pants back up to a respectable fit, she had shimmied back into her skirt, rinsed her wine glass in the small bar sink, and was slipping her shoes on. So fucking considerate. He pulled himself onto the couch, lay back, and carded his fingers through his hair.

“Blossom.”

She paused at the door, her hand on the knob, and looked back at him.

“This isn’t over,” he said.

He wasn’t sure whether he intended it as a promise or a warning. He only knew that it was true, Any illusions he’d harbored about getting her out of his system were demystified as he slowly, abhorrently began to realize they’d only made it worse, and nothing had ever felt better.

She left without a word, and he didn’t bother stopping her.

The problem with his narcissism was that it made him a sore loser, but he loved himself and especially his pleasures too much to ever change.

Oh well.

Alone in his penthouse apartment, Brick burst out laughing. He refilled his wine glass and drank slowly and deeply, the subtleties and the notes superfluous as he simply enjoyed it, simply because he could, and simply because it was his.

Boomer didn’t see her come in. He didn’t notice her at the bar right away as he tended to other
customers and the new hire he was still training and had to supervise. But there she was, bobbing blond curls and a sweater with sunflowers he remembered buying her years ago.

“Bubbles, hey,” he said, automatically wiping down the counter in front of her where she’d chosen to sit. “What are you doing here?”

She smiled a little. “Sorry, should I have called ahead for a reservation?”

“No, sorry, that’s not what I—I mean, I wasn’t expecting you. I’m glad you’re here!” he added quickly. “It’s a nice surprise. I love seeing you.”

Her smile slipped, but her eyes softened on him. “I was in the neighborhood.”

“Yeah? Doing some shopping or something?”

“Actually, official Powerpuff work. Well, kind of.” She leaned in conspiratorially. “I’m investigating the monster attacks.”

“Really? What is there to investigate?”

She told him a bit about the samples she collected from the Sludge Monster that had stumped the Townsville MDS experts and how they had no idea why the creature was able to resist the heretofore reliable defense system.

“So you got some samples of the Red Monster too,” Boomer asked as he mixed her a gin and tonic. “Think Clara’s on to something?”

She accepted the drink with a squeeze of lime. “I don’t know. It seems too early to tell. But I do know something about those monsters doesn’t add up, and I want to find out what.”

“Cool. What can I do to help?”

“Help?”

“Well yeah, I mean, I did help you take down the Sludge Monster, so I guess that makes me part of the team, right?”

He smiled, but she didn’t return it.

_Ah hell, blew it already. Way to go, clown._

He was about to backtrack with a joke, but she beat him to it.

“Yeah, I guess it does.”

She watched him through her lashes, and he noticed she wore a bit of blush. Or maybe it was warm in here? He was feeling a bit warm. His eyes fell to her lips, and then to the straw she captured to take a sip of her gin and tonic.

*Dude, come on.*

A change of subject was definitely in order. The last thing he wanted to do was make her uncomfortable and scare her off.

“Hey, how about some food? I updated the menu since you were last here.” He passed Bubbles a menu.
“I could eat.” She accepted the menu, and Boomer went to help Neha, his new hire, who was busy making a round of margaritas for a table of friends in the corner.

Not-so-subtle whispering drew his sensitive ears to the other side of the bar where a young couple sat with beers. They were talking about the recent monster brawls and, more specifically, Boomer’s involvement. He’d gotten more than a few customers lately drawn to the intrigue of his Super nature. He was used to it and the attention didn’t bother him. Mostly, it was innocent people simply curious to meet someone with powers on par with the likes of Major Glory and other far more famous Supers.

Still, it bothered him enough to ask Neha to take care of them so he wouldn’t have to deal with them.

“So, anything look good?” he asked Bubbles after he’d served the margaritas to the big table.

“I think I’d prefer a real dinner.”

He tried not to let his expression fall. She’d only just gotten here, and now she was leaving again. “All right. Well, I could recommend you a couple places in the area.”

“Sure. When do you get off?”

“What?”

She smiled at him. It took him a minute.

Oh.

Oh.

“Now,” he said readily. “Ten minutes ago. The moment you walked in—let’s just go.”

Bubbles laughed. “Slow down, tiger. Don’t you have to close up?”

“The others can handle it.”

“You sure? I can wait. I don’t mind.”

“I’m sure. Give me five minutes.”

Five minutes later, Boomer was back in his street clothes, and ten minutes after that, he and Bubbles were hitting up his favorite food trucks and sharing a late dinner in the Yuzu Gardens under paper lanterns. It was surreal being here with her like this. They hadn’t been here together in a few years, but it felt like no time had passed.

Halloween was coming up, and even so early in the month, the park’s usual red lanterns were replaced with orange. Streamers wove through the trees, and an amateur players’ production of some Shakespeare play Boomer didn’t recognize was currently running on the outdoor stage. He and Bubbles paused to watch for a bit as they finished their food, and then resumed their walk.

They ended up at the rainbow koi fountain, where Bubbles liked to toss pennies and make wishes. Silly, inconsequential things, like a sunny day, or cupcakes, or a warm blanket on a cold night. Tonight, there were a few kids playing nearby, but it was getting late and their parents were calling them away to go home.

Boomer tossed a penny in. “Let’s see… I wish for popsicles.”
Bubbles giggled. “Popsicles, huh? Might be a little late for Minerva’s, but I’ll go with you after this if you want.”

“Nah, I’d rather stay here a little longer.”

“So flippy-floppy. Okay, I’m thinking… I wish for a happy ending to the book I’m reading.”

“You could just Google that. Like, right now, your wish is my command.”

“No don’t! You’ll spoil it.”

“Yeah, but if it’s a sad ending, don’t you want to know so you can stop reading?”

“No, I’d like to read it to the end, no matter what happens.” She looked at all the sunken pennies in the fountain. “But I’ll hope for a happy ending, anyway.”

Boomer watched her. From the moment she’d walked into B-3 tonight, he’d had an odd feeling, as though she was a version of herself refracted through a prism, all her colors brightly on display yet none of them fully her. Seeking him out for what was essentially a date did constitute odd these days for Bubbles, but he couldn’t bring himself not to roll with it. It had been so, so long, and he was only human.

He selected a penny from their small pile and rolled it between his fingers. “I wish for no ending at all.”

He tossed the penny in the fountain.

“All stories have endings,” Bubbles said.

“Then why rush to finish? I say enjoy the journey while it lasts. You only get one shot as far as we know.”

What am I doing? She’s going to leave, just like the last time.

But he couldn’t stop. If he’d known then what he knew now, he’d still do it all over again, every heartbreaking, soul crushing, fever-pitched, sweet to the point of fear moment with and without her.

Bubbles picked a penny and held it over the water. Her fingers twitched, prism-fragile. “I wish I could remember us.”

Boomer watched Bubbles’ hand over the water, her wish and his caught between her trembling fingers. He watched that penny drop and splash and sink to the bottom.

“Bubbles,” he said, somewhere distant and pleading.

Her hand was unsteady in his, but her fingers fit between his as easily as if they had never parted. And there she was again, just for a moment. His fingers in her sunflower hair, her weight on his chest, the scent of her perfume, soft, whispering breaths on his cheek.

“I’m—I just,” she choked on her words, and he pulled her tighter.

“I remember.” He kissed her hair, honeysuckle-soft. “Every moment, they’re still here.”

She clutched his jacket, pressed her ear to his heart. “Tell me.”
He pulled her face up to his. “How could I ever forget loving you when I remember it every day?”

She cried, and he loved her tears too. “Boomer—”

He quieted her with a kiss that drowned. Cracked to show her colors and his, there was no stopping the flood bearing down on them, try as they might to stem the flow over the years and the yearning.

“You know, you have to know,” he said as he kissed her and she cried and so did he. “I love you so much I could die.”

Her arms around him, anchored in drowning, but together. “I know, I know.”

“Then please, baby. I couldn’t leave you before, and I can’t do it now.”

God, they had been so young, tough as diamonds. But diamonds make for brittle blades, and they shatter when wielded by untrained hands.

“You’re young and impulsive. You have no idea what you’re doing.”

Maybe not, but he’d tried. They both had. Even mistakes could bring happiness because happiness was people and the people who made him happiest were her and the life they had almost created. But it wasn’t meant to be.

“I love you so much it hurts,” Bubbles said. “It hurts so much.”

The world around them blurred in starlight and tear light, lantern-bright, wishes drowned at their feet and only the two of them left after all was said and done. Boomer’s voice caught in his throat.

“I know it hurts. But I’m here, I’m still here. Please, don’t forget me.”

He remembered that night four years ago. Kept secret from everyone they knew, even her sisters, he’d been afraid of how her father would react, but he knew they had to tell him. They wanted to keep it, young and free-spirited as they were. What greater joy could two people in love give to each other than the chance to pour all that love into a child? They could make it work as long as they were together.

But when they went to Professor Utonium that fateful summer night and asked for his blessing, both for their union and for their new family, he had put the first crack in their dream. They had no plan, no experience, no way to provide for each other. He had always politely tolerated Boomer and his ne’er do well drifter lifestyle, but a proposal? A child? It was too much, too soon, a mistake. They had backed him into a corner, just as they’d backed themselves into a corner.

And then, the unthinkable. Boomer and Bubbles were together that rainy afternoon at his run-down apartment plotting the future they wanted despite her father’s warnings when she got the call from Blossom. There had been an accident. The doctors were doing everything they could.

Boomer didn’t see her for almost two days after she flew out of there too fast even for him to follow. He must have left her thirty voicemails. When she finally picked up her phone, it was to shatter the rest of their dream. She had lost her father, and then she had lost their unborn child mourning him. Boomer didn’t realize at the time that she had lost him, too. But the moment when she flew away was their last. A broken heart could not love.

She never did tell her sisters, and he never told his brothers.
There never seemed to be any point in the end.

“I’m so scared,” Bubbles confessed. “I want you more than anything, but I’m scared I wouldn’t survive it this time.”

Boomer rocked her gently in his arms. “I’m scared, too. But when I’m with you, I know we can survive anything. Even if it hurts. You’ll always have me.”

“I thought I would always have him too.”

He ran his fingers through her hair and bade her look up at him again. “Hey, listen to me, okay? I swear to you I’ll always be here for you. Even if the whole world was against us, and even if I have to spend the rest of my life picking up the pieces, I would do it. Bubbles, you are my wish.”

She burst into tears anew, the full-body shaking, puffy-eyed kind that was flattering on no one. He kissed her all the same. “You’re s-s-so cheesy.”

He laughed through his own tears. “You bring it out of me.”

There was no one around at this hour. He stroked her cheek as they rested their foreheads together, and quietly, he dared to hope.

“Blossom told me something today,” she said.

“How?”

“She said it’s okay to be happy.” Bubbles sniffled and wiped her eyes. “But I don’t think I’ve been happy since I lost my father. Since… Since I lost us.”

“Baby.” Boomer kissed her temple and tasted the sadness on her skin.

“I barely remember us.”

Boomer didn’t know it was possible for a broken heart to break all over again until now. Bubbles was always helping others find happiness and surrounding herself with light and energy and joy. She had become a kindergarten teacher after her father’s death because children possessed a singular kind of joy she thought she would never know again, but that she could at least nurture and protect. But she was wrong, so wrong. No matter how many times he’d tried to reach her, she couldn’t hear him.

But she’d heard Blossom, her sister, her leader. The girl who had come to her broken and at her lowest after all these years, after so many mistakes, only to pick herself up and try again, one small step at a time.

Boomer vowed not to waste this precious chance.

“We can remember it together,” he said. “One day at a time.”

They lingered there a while longer, and he held her.
To be honest, I teared up outlining and writing the Blues in this chapter. They make me so emotional!

Thank you as always to Mordor for his thoughtful editing and general awesomeness helping me whip these chapters into shape.

Next time: Buttercup puts her investigative skills to good use; she just didn’t count on Butch being along for the ride. Blossom gets a not-so-surprising office guest.
Butch watched Buttercup emerge into the precinct lobby looking only mildly irritated for a Saturday afternoon. He waited until her green eyes landed on him to stand up. She was about to say something when her gaze fell to his shorter, better half clutching at his pant leg. And oh, it was worth the inconvenience of having to bring his five-year-old daughter along for his Saturday plans just to see Buttercup look so flustered.

“Oh, um… Hi, Brisa,” Buttercup stammered.

Brisa, uncharacteristically shy around his counterpart like she wasn’t at all shy around Bubbles, braved a small smile. “Hi, Buttercup.”

Butch could barely contain a laugh at Buttercup’s expense. Like the great guy he was, he put her out of her misery with a casual arm around her shoulders like they were two old friends catching up. “Hey, doll. You ready to go?”

That did it. Butch narrowly avoided her instep and the tiny crack it opened up in the tiled floor where his foot was a second ago. He wheezed a laugh, and Brisa dropped to her knees to inspect the little crack.

“Cool!” she said.

Buttercup shoved him off with a glare and hushed words so Brisa wouldn’t overhear. “You’re an asshole.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He winked.

The three of them waltzed out of the precinct toward the parking lot.

“Want to tell me what the hell she’s doing here?” Buttercup demanded.

“Same as me.”

She yanked him back by the elbow while Brisa skipped along ahead. “Are you insane? She can’t come on a ride along. I only agreed to entertain one child today, not two.”

He laughed. “C’mon, BC, it’s Saturday. She doesn’t have school.”

“So get a babysitter like a normal parent!”

“Daddy?” Brisa wandered back to them and shyly looked between Buttercup and him. “What’s
wrong?"

Butch cast Buttercup a quick glance before dropping to a squat to be at Brisa’s eye level. “Nothing, Supergirl. Buttercup was just asking why you wanted to come along today. Tell her what you told me, yeah?”

Brisa beamed, her shyness forgotten. “I wanna catch bad guys!”

Buttercup looked uncomfortable. “Is that all.”

Brisa blushed and looked at her feet. “And, um, well…”

Butch squeezed her little shoulder. “Go on, you can say.”

Brisa bit her lip, squeezed her eyes shut, and balled her fists. “I-I wanna fight monsters and stuff just like you and Daddy and Uncle Brick!” She looked up at Buttercup with big, brown eyes, nervous. “Please can I come? Just this once? Pleeeeeease?”

“You promise you’ll be good?” Butch said.

Brisa gasped. “I promise!”

“And you’ll do exactly what me and Buttercup tell you to do, even if you don’t want to?”

“Yeah, yeah! I promise, anything! Please can I come?”

Butch and Brisa both looked up at Buttercup, Brisa pleading and Butch grinning. “Yeah, please Buttercup?” he asked.

Buttercup pinched the bridge of her nose. “This has to be the lowest you have ever sunk to get me to agree to something.”

Butch laid down on his back on the sidewalk. “How about now?”

People passing them were giving them weird looks, and while Butch did not give a shit what anyone thought of him, Buttercup seemed to.

“Cut it out!” she hissed. “Get off the ground, for fu—uh, I mean…” She grabbed his arm and yanked him up. “I work here, idiot. Don’t embarrass me.”

Butch chose not to respond to that and awaited her judgment. She warred with herself a moment, but he knew he had her when she looked down at Brisa again, who was still weaponizing the Imploring Little Girl Look™ she so often used against him. There was no resisting that look.

Buttercup sighed. “I cannot believe I’m agreeing to this.”

Butch couldn’t quite believe it either. He’d fully planned on dropping Brisa off with one of his brothers that day, but they were both working and he didn’t trust anyone else with her. He’d briefly considered asking Bubbles, but when Brisa heard he was going to see Buttercup, she wouldn’t take no for an answer and insisted on coming along.

“Trust me, you get used to it,” he said quietly.

Buttercup shot him a look he couldn’t quite read.

“Yay! Let’s go, let’s go!” Brisa was so excited that she took off toward the parking lot again.
“Hey, wait!” Buttercup ran after her.

Butch trailed at a slower pace, grinning to himself. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad spending the day with the only two girls in the world who could tolerate him for extended periods of time without completely losing their sanity.

Brisa was over the moon to be riding in a real police car. As far as Butch could tell, it was just a normal black sedan, no sirens or white paint or anything special that would out it as a precinct car.

“This is what all detectives drive,” Buttercup explained as she slid into the driver’s seat and Butch slipped into the passenger’s seat next to her. “No flashy lights, sorry.”

“Do you tie up bad guys and make them sit back here?” Brisa asked.

Buttercup chuckled. “Only with the seatbelt. Put yours on, by the way.”

Brisa obeyed. She was still glancing furtively at Buttercup as she pulled out of the lot, and Butch wondered at her shyness. She’d been so excited to see Buttercup again this morning. He would ask her about it later.

“So, where to?” Butch asked as he reclined in his seat as far back as it would go. Predictably, Buttercup shot him an annoyed look.

“Wright Chalk Factory. It’s just interviews.”

Nothing dangerous.

Butch wasn’t sure if he was relieved for Brisa’s sake or disappointed for his own. Oh well. “Yippee. What about your other case? Bubbles said you’ve been hitting a dead end.”

She kept shooting him annoyed looks. His seatbelt shoulder strap was ludicrously high and all but obsolete while he reclined almost prostrate. “Bubbles should learn to keep her mouth shut.”

She looked like she was trying very hard not to snap at him for his juvenile reclining. Butch let her stew a bit longer as he folded his arms behind his head. “Maybe you just need to blow off a little steam, get your head back in the game. You know.”

You know.

Buttercup slammed on the breaks when another car cut her off, barely saving them from a rear-end collision. “Oh, come on!”

Butch quickly checked to make sure Brisa was okay. Then he glanced at Buttercup. “You seem tense.”

Buttercup shot him a mighty glare. “Shut up. And put the seat up. What are you, fifteen?”

He laughed but put the seat up to a normal reclining position. “You liked fifteen-year-old me.”

“You mean I liked smashing your idiot face into the ground.”

“Yeah, that.”

She took a deep breath and pulled off the freeway toward the industrial district. After a moment, she looked at Brisa in the rearview mirror. “Sorry, kid. Your dad and I aren’t mad at each other. We just…haven’t seen each other in a long time.”
Brisa blinked, curious. “I know.”

“You do?”

“Uh-huh. Daddy only gets mad at Mommy and Abuelita sometimes, and he gets reeeeeally quiet.”

Butch cleared his throat. “Hey Brisa, there’s the factory. See it?”

“It’s so big!” Brisa pressed her face to the window as the Wright Chalk Factory came into view up ahead on the right.

He could feel Buttercup looking at his profile, but he kept his eyes on the road.

They pulled into the huge parking lot and approached the main entrance. The factory was exactly the looming, concrete structure Butch imagined it would be. Even the surrounding industrial neighborhood was depressing and cold. Hard to imagine that this was still Citiesville, the so-called Golden City.

“What’s that icky smell?” Brisa wrinkled her nose.

“Capitalism,” Buttercup deadpanned.

Butch snorted. “C’mon, Supergirl. You can ride on my shoulders.”

“Cool!”

Appeased, Butch carried Brisa inside to the lobby, where Buttercup flashed her badge and spoke to the receptionist. Upon seeing Brisa, the receptionist offered her a mini blackboard and some colorful chalk to play with, which Brisa eagerly accepted while Butch and Buttercup sat in the uncomfortable lobby chairs to wait.

“Don’t say a word,” Buttercup said to him. “You’re not a cop, and you can get me into trouble if you start any shit. This is routine interviews, that’s it.”

“Chill, I’ll be on my best behavior.”

She held his gaze. “I mean it. The only reason I agreed to this was so that you could report back to Brick so I wouldn’t have to deal with him. Don’t make me regret bringing you.”

She was tense, a rubber band wound taut. She’d never say so, of course, but he wondered how much of this was really about her bedridden partner rather than him. Butch had no idea what a detective’s job was like, but he guessed it was shitty enough even with a partner around to help out. And Buttercup, like him, had always been a team player.

“You won’t regret it.”

“I better not.”

“Look Daddy. I drew this for you!” Brisa came over with her little blackboard and shoved it in Butch’s face. It was a crude but cute drawing of a purple pony.

Butch gasped dramatically. “Pretty Puff Pony? For me? You shouldn’t have.” He ruffled her bangs, and she giggled.

Buttercup watched them, baffled.
“Do you like Pretty Puff Pony?” Brisa asked hesitantly.

Buttercup accepted the blackboard and examined it. “Honestly, no. Bubbles always loved her, though.”

“Oh… Well, what do you like? I can draw it!”

“I don’t know. Coloring was never really my thing even at your age…”

Instead of being discouraged, Brisa smiled. “I’ll draw you something cool!”

She gathered up her chalk and got to work on a new drawing just as a tall, thin man emerged from the Employees Only door and approached them. Buttercup got up to greet him.

“Detective, good to meet you. We spoke on the phone. Flint Stone. I’m the general manager.” He held out his hand for Buttercup to shake.

“Mr. Stone, thanks for taking the time.”

Stone’s grey eyes flickered to Butch. “Your partner, I presume?” His gaze lingered on Butch’s casual jeans and hoodie in contrast to Buttercup’s more professional slacks and blouse.

“Emotional support,” Butch said, shaking Stone’s hand. “She’s the boss, I’m just part of the team. Name’s Butch.”

Stone and Buttercup looked at him with varying degrees of bewilderment. She recovered faster.

“Don’t worry, he’s had all his shots,” she said.

Butch tightened his grip on Stone’s hand a little too much to be comfortable and grinned toothily. Stone was all too happy to have his hand back and cleared his throat nervously.

“Ahh, right well… I have the list of employees and contractors you requested.” He handed Buttercup a printout with some twenty-odd names on it.

“And these are all the guys who were absent from work over those two weeks?” she asked.

“Yes. But a number of them are contract workers. They don’t keep usual schedules. Some are not even with us anymore. They finish their contracted work, and then they move on.”

Buttercup nodded and passed Butch the list. Not because she wanted him to read it, he suspected, but because he was standing there like a coat rack. “I’d like to talk to anyone who’s here today all the same. I just have a few questions, won’t take long.”

Stone glanced between Butch and Buttercup and swallowed past his prominent Adam’s apple. Butch repressed a grin. It wasn’t every day a guy stood on the receiving end of both Buttercup and him at the same time without it ending in blood.

“Right, of course.” Stone glanced down at Brisa. “Um, the child…”

“Reliable daycare is so hard to come by these days, you know?” Butch cut in.

Stone looked like he really wanted to object.

“She won’t be a nuisance,” Buttercup said in a tone that indicated that was the last she would hear on the subject.
Stone adjusted his collar, nervous but not dense enough to protest. “Yes, very good… If you’ll just follow me.”

The inside of the factory was a network of moving parts and people. Assembly lines manned by bots performed discrete, menial tasks. Engineers monitored the heavy machinery with iPads and clipboards, taking notes and making adjustments. Unskilled laborers in navy uniforms gathered in groups to move crates of chalk for packing, labeling, and shipping. A hundred things were happening all at once, and Butch could hardly keep up with the pace of it all. Who knew so much effort and manpower went into producing fucking chalk?

Butch mostly kept an eye on Brisa as she walked with them, her head buried in her blackboard, while Stone led Buttercup to the various names on her list. She asked them some questions about their whereabouts around the time of Mojo’s burglary but didn’t give any specifics about why she was asking. Most of the workers were middle-aged men, a bit haggard, blue-collar types.

Buttercup was interviewing an engineer who’d been out sick during the week of Mojo’s burglary when Butch overheard some guys whispering with his Super hearing. He caught the word ‘Powerpuff’ and lost interest. Of course Buttercup would be recognized. He wondered if that meant she wouldn’t get anything out of any of these guys. It had been a long time since Butch had been on the streets and operating in the underbelly of society, but they were in his blood for better and for worse, and he knew those avenues well.

He bent down to Brisa’s level. “Hey, I’m gonna go find a bathroom. You stay with Buttercup, got it? No leaving her side until I get back.”

Brisa made a face. “Number one or number two?”

“Number two. A really big, stinky one.”

Brisa made a show of covering her nose, and he laughed. “Don’t wander off, I mean it.”

“I won’t!”

He discreetly slipped away from their group and shoved his hands in his black hoodie pocket. There were signs for a break room down the hall to the left, so he followed those and came upon a group of guys huddled around the lone, wooden table. Butch grabbed a styrofoam cup and filled it with coffee from the pot. It was burned and bitter, but he didn’t mind.

“Cool if I join you guys?” he asked.

There were three of them—Don, Fernando, and Bill from their embroidered name tags. Don and Fernando were in navy, while Bill wore an engineer’s grey uniform. Fernando spoke for them.

“You new or somethin’? Never seen you around.”

“Yeah, starting tomorrow. Came in for my interview just now. That HR broad’s a real ball breaker,” Butch said, because in every job he’d ever had, there was always that overworked HR lady who wasn’t paid enough to be entirely polite to the menial workers.

Don crowed with laughter. “Francine, right? She interviewed me too. She’s all bark and no bite. And she barks the loudest at the guys she likes. Don’t worry about it, man.”

Bill pulled out the chair next to him. “Coffee’s shit, but it’s hot at least.”

“Thanks.” Butch took the offered seat. “Name’s Butch.”
They introduced themselves and welcomed him to the job. Butch noticed Fernando watching him, straight-backed and severe.

“So what’s up with that cop asking questions?” Butch asked.

“Eh, there’s always cops askin’ questions,” Don said. “Not that it does ‘em any good ‘round these parts.”

“I hear you. My last job attracted them like flies to shit. You’d think they got better things to do than harass guys just trying to put food on the table.” He pulled out a picture of Brisa from his wallet. “That’s my girl right there.”

Bill eagerly pulled out pictures of his own family to share. “This is tough work, but they pay well and got decent benefits. They’ve been good to my family for years.”

“Yeah, Wright takes care of our own,” Don echoed. “Cops or no cops. We got nothin’ to hide, anyways.”

Butch shrugged. “Don’t know why she’s wasting her time here, then.”

“Don’t matter,” Fernando spoke for the first time. “She’s a Powerpuff Girl. Nobody talks to no Powerpuff Girl.”

Bill quietly put his photos away. “Come on, man. She’s probably just tryin’ to help.”

“She’s a cop, *pendejo.*”

“Hey man, nobody’s gonna say nothin’, okay? It’s all cool,” Don said.

*Bingo.*

Butch sipped his coffee. “You know, I used to serve. I had this kid in my squad, shit for brains and ugly as an old boot. A squealer if you ever saw one. Anyway, I had a stash of weed I was savin’ for us, but we had this commanding officer who was a real bitch and a half.”

He paused to make sure they were all listening. Even Fernando was watching him.

“Long story short, she found it, and I guess she was on her period or some shit ‘cause she lost it. Went completely nuts. She had it out for me and my team though, just looking for an excuse to court martial us. And this kid, this fucking kid… He steps up and claims full responsibility for the whole thing. Wouldn’t back down no matter how much she harped on him.”

“What happened?” Don asked, enthralled.

Butch leaned forward conspiratorially. “He took the fall. Big chicken dinner.”

“Bad conduct discharge,” Fernando translated. “I served a while back.”

*Thought so.*

Butch took another sip of coffee to hide his knowing grin. “After I finished my tour years later, I got a job as a private contractor out east. Got to hire my own team and everything. First thing I did was call up this kid and give him a job and a fat pay raise. Nobody in the industry would hire him.”

Don and Bill nodded like this made so much sense, but Fernando watched Butch carefully, knowingly. And Butch knew he had him.
“Loyalty,” Butch said. “That’s what I care about. You’re nothing without the guys who got your back.”

“Así es,” Fernando said. “A man ain’t nothing without his brothers. These administration types, they won’t ever understand that.”

“That’s what I’m sayin’ man, I get it. This Powerpuff cop, she’s not lookin’ out for us and ours. She doesn’t get it,” Butch said.

Fernando grunted. He was shrewd and crude, but Butch had known his type for years and he knew exactly which buttons to press.

“This cop,” Don said, looking around like they might be overheard. “I hear she’s lookin’ for some guy been cuttin’ work. Dealin’, maybe?”

“Robbery,” Fernando said. “Some outside job.”

“Damn,” Bill said.

“You know him?” Butch asked casually.

Fernando looked troubled. “I know he ain’t the first.”

What did that mean? Before Butch got a chance to ask, the door swung open to admit a very short, jaundiced man with a thick, Mexican accent.

“Órale, huevónes! We got that shipment comin’ in and I need bodies out on the floor.”

Don and Bill both got up. “No problem, Boss. We’ll be right out,” Don said.

Butch stared at the very short man, his skin crawling with an eerie sense of déjà vu. Now that the guy had stepped into the break room, the fluorescent light illuminated his sallow face. He wasn’t jaundiced, but sickly. Almost green—

“Who’s this?” the short man asked.

Fernando got up. “Tranquilo, Jefe. Butch’s new, but he’s all right.”

Butch locked eyes with the guy, and suddenly he remembered where he’d seen him before. Beady, dark eyes lingered on him, but there was no hint of recognition in them. He held out his stubby hand.

“Arturo de la Guerra,” Arturo said. “Mucho gusto.”

“Igualmente,” Butch said, taking his hand with no choice.

Nothing, not even the hint of a tell.

Arturo grunted, and he and Fernando followed the others out. “Later, man.”

Butch was left standing there in a bit of a stupor.

Buttercup was losing her patience. Every guy she interviewed told her the same damn story. Yeah, they’d been out of work, but they were sick, or they were taking care of their kids, or they had some family emergency. No one knew anything about any other names on the list. It was so
fruitless that it was suspicious. Buttercup was very familiar with the general distrust of police officers today, especially along racial divides in blue collar circles, and it was entirely deserved. But right now it was fucking annoying. How could she convince these guys she was one of the good guys, that she wasn’t out to bust anybody here, that she just needed a little help to solve a dangerous crime?

Stone remained with her, ostensibly to help track down the names on her list, but Buttercup was no fool. Why hadn’t he simply gathered them all together in a conference room ahead of time? He gave her space to talk to each of them, but he was never quite out of earshot.

Something stank here, and she was determined to get to the bottom of it.

Brisa tugged on her pant leg to show her some new drawings every five minutes. They were all of monsters, smashing and breathing fire and terrorizing the city. And while Buttercup didn’t want to say anything to upset her, she really wanted to focus on her job right now. Annoyed with the entire situation, she turned to ask Butch to take Brisa somewhere else for a bit, but fumed when she found no sight of him.

“Brisa, where’d your dad go?” she snapped.

Brisa looked at her with wide, wary eyes. “Potty.”

“How long ago was that?”

“I don’t know. But he’s pooping, so it’s gonna be a loooooooong time.”

Fucking perfect.

Buttercup groaned. Classic Butch bailing to drop a deuce and shirking all responsibilities to anyone but himself. Buttercup was seriously regretting bringing him along. She wasn’t his fucking nanny.

“Detective?” Stone had approached her, and he was looking at her curiously.

“What? Sorry, were you talking to me?”

“Yes, I was just saying that that’s the end of the list. The rest of the names are either not in today or no longer with the company.”

Buttercup took a deep breath and willed herself not to take out her frustrations on this man. Butch would be a far better (and less breakable) target. “Fine, whatever. Where’s your bathroom?”

She was going to haul Butch out pants down if she had to.

Stone led Brisa and her down the hall, but when they turned the corner, there Butch was striding toward them, hoodie up. Buttercup opened her mouth to chew him out, but Brisa ran to hug him.

“Hi Daddy!”

“Hey kiddo, you have fun with Buttercup while I was gone?”

Buttercup marched right up to him and grabbed his collar. “It was a blast. Let me tell you all about it outside.”

Stone tried to say goodbye, but Buttercup barely heard him as she dragged Butch out of the building. As soon as they were clear, she shoved him.
“What did I say about not making me regret bringing you?” she spat.

But before Buttercup could tell him off properly, Butch materialized in front of her and covered her mouth with a hand. Buttercup was so stunned that she faltered.

“Not here,” he whispered low enough for only her to hear. “Too much attention.”

Buttercup wrenched his hand off her face and glared bloody murder at him. He wasn’t even looking at her, but at the factory and the few uniformed workers running around and driving transport vehicles. Pissed as she was, Buttercup shut up. That serious look on Butch was as unnerving as it was rare.

She squeezed his wrist in a crushing grip. “This better be good.”

Butch glanced down at her. The green in his eyes glowed with power. “The opposite.”

Despite herself, Buttercup shivered.

“Daddy?” Brisa said, clutching her mini blackboard to her chest.

Butch blinked, and the energy left his eyes. He bent down to scoop her up. “Hey, I have a great idea. How about we hit up the park? You feel like going swinging?”

Brisa lit up like Christmas morning. “I love swinging!”

He grinned. “Sweet. Go put that chalk away, all right? I’m right behind you.”

“Is Buttercup coming too? Pleseeease?”

Buttercup studied Butch. “Yeah, I’ll come. Just for a bit.”

Brisa squealed in delight. “This is gonna be so much fun!”

Buttercup drove them to the Yuzu Gardens, a trip that she passed largely in silence as Butch entertained Brisa with a game of I Spy. Brisa practically leaped out of the car when they parked, making a beeline for the jungle gym to join the other children playing together. Butch and Buttercup followed at a more sedate pace, and they settled on a bench with a good view of the playground and Brisa.

“All right, we’re here,” Buttercup said. “Talk. You have ten seconds.”

“I ran into Lil Arturo in the break room.”

Buttercup narrowed her eyes. “So you fucked off to grab a latte while I interviewed all those guys? Real mature, Butch. I knew this would be a waste of my time.”

Why couldn’t she have just said no to him? Police work was no place for a civilian, Super or otherwise. But no, of course not. In the end, she could never say no to him, not in high school and not now. And he knew it.

“Did you hear what I said? Lil Arturo, like, the Gangreen Gang.”

Buttercup rolled her eyes. “It’s a free country. Nothing wrong with him working a steady job. Besides, the Gang’s been broken up for years. Arturo’s been out of the game since we were in high school.”
“No, listen to me. I was talking to some of the guys before he showed up, and they knew something. They mentioned the robbery and the missing guy, something about there being others maybe. I didn’t get more than that before Lil Arturo showed up, and they shut up real fast.”

Buttercup looked at him and realized he was serious. “You’re telling me that I interviewed like fifteen people today and got jack shit, but you grab coffee with a few of the guys and suddenly you’re braiding each others’ hair?”

“You’re a cop. Nobody was gonna talk to you, anyway.”

Her pride and her power flared upon her clenched fists. “I’m also a Super, a good one. People know me, they know I’m on their side.”

“They know you’re not one of ‘em. Trust me BC. Guys like that’ll never crack for someone like you. No good deed, you know.”

She hated the way he said it like he knew everything. This was her job, and she was damn good at it, thank you very much. “But they’ll bend over for someone like you, is that it? Tell me, how far under the bus did you have to throw me to get them to spread their legs for you?”

He made a face. “Like you give a fuck what anybody says about you. It’s all bullshit anyway, so who cares? I speak their language, sue me.”

She didn’t care what anybody said about her, least of all Butch. She’d heard it all before, anyway. “Maybe you should just do my job for me, huh? Since you speak their language and all.”

Butch rolled his eyes. “Will you unclench your asshole for a minute and listen to me? I’m trying to help you. This guy Fernando—he’s a vet, smart, the guy in charge. He was this close to giving me a name, but he shut up like a whipped puppy when Lil Arturo walked in.”

Buttercup held his gaze, but she found no cracks in him. “You’re telling me you really think Arturo is involved in whatever’s going on?”

“Yeah. Or at least he knows something. Maybe he really is out of the game like you said, but he definitely knows something.”

Or he’s protecting someone who does.

Buttercup’s stomach sank. She knew what her next step would have to be now. The factory was a dead end, but if there was one thing she had learned in all her years fighting crime as a Powerpuff Girl and as a cop, it was that there was always another avenue. It was only a matter of asking the right person for directions.

“What?” Butch said. “You look like you need to drop a load.”

“Fuck off,” Buttercup muttered, but her heart wasn’t in it as her mind raced. Would he even agree to meet with her? She wasn’t sure.

“Hey.” Butch snapped his fingers in her face to get her attention.

Buttercup shot out a hand and grabbed his fingers in a crushing grip.

“Ow, fuck!” he yelped.

A couple mothers passing with strollers gasped and shot Butch and Buttercup dirty looks as they
rushed along. Great.

“Grow up,” Buttercup said, relinquishing his abused fingers.

“Just tell me what you’re thinking. You got that constipated look you get when you’re thinking too hard about something,” Butch said.

She made another grab at him, but he avoided her this time and grinned. Buttercup briefly entertained taking him up on his earlier request for a fight. It might do her some good.

But no. She had work to do, so she got up.

“Where are you going?” Butch asked.

“The precinct. I have to run some searches.”

“Cool, I’ll come with.” He grabbed her wrist to stop her from leaving.

“No, you really don’t have to.” She tugged on her hand, but he didn’t let go.

“It’s fine, I don’t have anything else going on today.”

“Yeah, because you don’t have a job. I do. Plus, you have a daughter. Go play with her or something.”

His grip on her wrist tightened. He looked like he wanted to protest, but after a moment’s hesitation he released her. “Yeah, fine. Whatever.”

She watched him a moment, but he didn’t try to stop her again. “Okay,” she said.

“Okay.”

Buttercup rubbed her wrist. It was awkward all of a sudden, and she didn’t know why. “Say bye to Brisa for me, I guess.”

Butch averted his gaze to focus on Brisa playing nearby on the slide. “Yeah.”

Buttercup got into her car to return to the precinct. It would be a long night ahead, but if she was successful in tracking him down, she might be able to convince him to talk to her. Maybe. If he wasn’t still a massive sleaze ball.

Then again, Ace Copular had a particular gift for making sleaze feel like charm. Buttercup grimaced at the sour taste in her mouth thinking about him.

She reached into her bag in the back seat to grab some gum and noticed that Brisa had forgotten her mini blackboard and chalk in her rush to get to the playground. Buttercup rolled her eyes and resolved to give them back to Butch the next time she saw him, but she paused when she noticed the last drawing Brisa had done.

In crudely colorful chalk strokes were Butch and Buttercup standing on a big, red monster carcass posing triumphantly, and Brisa was in between them. Like a happy, butt-kicking, Super family. Buttercup stared, her heart thudding in her chest. She smeared the image with her sleeve and tossed the blackboard in the back seat like a hot potato.

“Focus,” she whispered as she tried to catch her suddenly short breath.
Ace. She had to track down Ace.

Gripping the steering wheel, she pulled out of the parking lot but caught a glimpse of Butch pushing Brisa on the swing set. She was laughing in delight as he pushed her higher and higher.

Buttercup tore her eyes away from the sight of them as she pulled into traffic. She didn’t look back.

Blossom sat in her office at the Swathe Foundation typing out a succinct e-mail, blinds drawn to minimize the glare on her external monitors. Her door was closed while she listened in on a call that Beto had had to duck out of at the last minute. Currently, Simon Swathe was waxing poetic to members of the board of directors about a new joint venture opportunity when Blossom heard a knock on her office door.

She checked to make sure her office phone was muted. “I’m on a call.”

The door opened anyway. Taken aback, Blossom stared as Brick let himself in like he owned the place and closed the door behind him. He was distressingly flattering today in dark wash jeans and a long-sleeved, burgundy henley.

Before she could question his intrusion in her place of work, he nodded at the phone and Simon’s voice still blathering on the line.

“It’s muted,” Blossom said in a clipped tone. “What are you doing here?”

He indicated the black garment bag hooked around his fingers. “I got you a dress.”

“You what?”

He looked around her small but private office and found the coat hook on the wall next to the door. He hung up the black garment bag. “To replace the one I ruined.”

Blossom’s mouth went dry. Of course her mind wandered to memories of their first tryst. The silk collar of her blouse grew uncomfortably warm against her neck. “That’s not necessary. I have other dresses.”

“I told you I would.”

“I think I would have remembered if you mentioned coming to my office unannounced.”

“Huh, must have slipped my mind.”

Yeah, right. She got up and marched around her desk. “I work here.”

“I can see that.”

He gave her a once-over that was a little too lingering to be casual, and Blossom repressed a shiver. She smoothed her knee-length yellow skirt to give her hands something to do that was less rude than shoving him out of her office.

“You can’t be here,” she said, but it sounded petulant even to her.

Something she said triggered a stark change in him then. Where he’d been playful a moment ago, now she got the impression that he was looming over her, weaponizing his height and the clean scent of his cologne that reached her as he stepped closer.
Blossom’s heart was pounding. Her blood pressure spiked. It was Brick, for god sakes. She could handle Brick. She’d done a spectacular job of it the last time they’d seen each other and she’d reduced him to a moaning mess beneath her—

“Beto, is there anything on the compliance side here that I should be concerned about?” asked Simon’s disembodied voice over the line.

Blossom completely forgot about Brick and dashed to the phone to unmute it. “Hi Simon, you’ve got Blossom on the line. Beto had to step out earlier. I sent you a red flags report before this call, but I’d be happy to run through the high level compliance issues briefly.”

She shooed Brick out of her office. Much to her chagrin, he didn’t take the hint and came up behind her. Blossom was explaining assignment clauses in material contracts when she felt Brick’s fingers trace along her thigh beneath her skirt. She tensed and shot him a dirty look, but could say nothing while she was stuck on the phone.

His other hand splayed over her stomach and teased the high waistband of her skirt. Blossom calmly continued her explanation as she caught Brick’s wrist in her super powered grip and wrenched him off her. He didn’t fight her, but he pushed her legs apart with his knee and pressed a kiss to her neck.

Blossom braced herself on her desk and willed herself not to respond to him. This was beyond inappropriate even for him. As she listened to the discussion on the line, she took the opportunity to elbow his sternum, but he was anticipating her retaliation and caught her arm in a vice grip. Red and rose danced where their skin met, electric with their roiling power as each tried to overpower the other. In her distraction, she was too late to stop his wandering hand from squeezing her breast through her shirt.

“I like when you fight.” His smile was as sinful as his words in her ear, spoken softly enough for only one with Super hearing to pick up. “Almost as much as I like when you submit.”

His voice was acid down her spine, pooling low between her thighs where his fingers had wandered dangerously high. Angry and aroused and stubbornly refusing to cede control, she glared at him over her shoulder.

“We have that in common,” she hissed.

Brick’s gaze darkened at her reminder of their last encounter, and he kissed her full on the mouth with an almost violent urgency. It lasted all of two seconds before another question on the line prompted her answer. Blossom tore away from him and spoke confidently and calmly into the speaker. She was a professional, after all.

“Thank you, Blossom,” Simon said. “This is all very helpful. Everyone, I think that about wraps it up for today. Let’s all reconvene again next—”

Blossom hit the hook switch so hard it was a wonder she didn’t break the phone. The line went dead. “We can’t do this in my office—”

Brick flipped her around to face him and lifted her onto her desk without preamble. Before she knew it, he’d fired a red energy blast that completely incinerated her underwear. “Let’s get one thing straight. You and I?” He pressed the heel of his palm between her thighs. His hand still radiated burning power, and Blossom would have cried out in ecstasy had he not silenced her with
his other hand. “We can do whatever the fuck we want.”

He slipped two fingers inside her, and she whimpered against his hand. Through the haze of desire, all she could think was that this was a very precarious line they were walking. Anyone could discover them, and her career—never mind her reputation—would be over. It was that scandalous danger that had her tense and still resisting him just short of kicking him through the wall. The goal was not to be discovered, and Blossom could do frustratingly little to help herself.

Well, except that.

Winter stirred in her lungs and her lips frosted over as she prepared to hit him with her ice breath. Brick sensed it coming and removed his hand from her mouth, only to stifle her with a kiss that was at once hard and soft. Blossom gasped, afraid of what might happen if she actually breathed ice down his throat, Super or no. Apparently, nothing life-threatening because he parted from her and breathed. Frostlings painted their lips and misted their mingled breaths.

Blossom bit her lip. Nothing could have prepared her for the sight of him literally drinking her power like it was his favorite thing about her.

“So that’s what it tastes like.” Brick ran his thumb over his own lip, melting ice crystals with his touch.

“Minty fresh?” she quipped, unable to resist.

He laughed, and for a moment Blossom forgot the ignominy of her situation. He had a nice laugh when he meant it. “That was terrible.”

“You laughed.”

“A momentary setback. Now I’m back to seducing you.”

“What—”

She was suddenly on her back flat on her desk, and Brick was deftly pushing her pleated yellow skirt up and up. When Blossom realized what he meant to do, she tried to swat him away.

“Wait, we can’t do that here—mmm!”

Her protest died on her lips with a moan, which he quieted with a hand clamped over her mouth. His fingers torturously rubbing her just right was nearly overwhelming.

“What did I say about that word?” He slipped another finger in, and she saw stars. “If it’s your coworkers you’re nervous about, then I suggest you keep that pretty mouth shut.” He bent low to kiss her heatedly. “I’d do it for you, but I’m about to be a little busy.”

Blossom tried to keep him close with her fingers in his hair. She succeeded for a few seconds, and somewhere in the back of her delirious mind she acknowledged that he was a good kisser. Or maybe it was just that she liked the way he specifically kissed her. He continued to kiss her lower, along the inside of her thigh and ultimately to her very center, and Blossom bit her thumb to keep from crying out. But his tongue was liquid fire and his teeth were a tease, and some masochistic, wanton part of her wanted to watch. They locked eyes, her barely holding her breath and him on his knees before her, holding her, tasting her, daring her to scream.

Secretly, she thought he wanted them to be caught just to see the look on her face. Poised, perfect, professional Blossom caught splayed over her desk as her lover ate her out with more pride and
satisfaction than she could ever remember experiencing before. As though sensing her awe, Brick hiked her knee over his shoulder and kissed her deeper.

They heard voices pass by just outside, and Blossom covered her mouth with one hand and gripped Brick’s short hair in her other so hard she was sure she was causing him pain. The jerk had the nerve to laugh against her, a low rumbling sensation that brought her so close to the edge she could have cried. She could never recall feeling so mortified and so turned on in her life.

“Brick, I—I’m…”

He yanked her upright and wiped his mouth on his hand. Blossom’s eyes flashed red at the loss of him, momentarily overcome with frustration.

“You’re what?”

This time, Blossom let him see her boiling eye beams threatening to melt the skin off his face. He held her gaze, unafraid of her point-blank power. In fact, he seemed amused by her suffering.

“I was close.”

“Were you?”

He was enjoying this far too much, watching her writhe at his mercy just as he had been at hers. But no, she would not give him all the satisfaction without taking some for herself. She caught him in a bruising kiss and bit his lip hard. A forceful hand in his hair kept him within reach, though she need not have bothered. He groaned into the kiss and leaned her dangerously back over the desk like he couldn’t get close enough to her.

He was touching her again, heat and pressure and speed, and it was too much. Blossom nearly cried out, but Brick cradled her to his chest so she could scream into his shirt. Trembling, she clung to his shoulders like she might lose her grip on this reality if she dared let him go.

It struck her that she must look silly, shivering and clutching at him like a besotted fool looking for meaning in their intimacy beyond the strictly physical. But his breath was warm on her temple when he kissed her softly, gently even, as though to prolong the strange fantasy for as long as she wanted.

“You really are bad,” she murmured against his neck.

“I’m irresistible.”

Coming down from her high, Blossom was inclined to agree that in this very moment, with his arms around her and a smile in his eyes, he was just a little bit irresistible. Before she lost her nerve, she pulled him down for another kiss, slow and sensuous. Hell, but she liked kissing him.

A knock on the door. “Blossom? Do you have a minute?”

Robin.

Her muffled voice broke the spell, and Brick backed off to let Blossom hop down from the desk and compose herself. To her supreme agitation, she was without underwear because he had literally destroyed them. She shot him a dirty look, but he only smirked wickedly.

“Hey Robin, sorry, I’m just finishing up a meeting,” Blossom said through gritted teeth.
Brick snorted, and Blossom prayed Robin couldn’t hear him.

“Oh, okay! Why don’t you swing by mine when you’re done? Not urgent!”

Robin’s footsteps faded with her passing, and Blossom turned her full attention back to Brick.

“You need to leave,” she said, careful to keep her voice down. “And be discreet, please.”

He sauntered over, and Blossom was reminded of a tomcat her law school roommate had owned. He’d paraded around their apartment like he owned the place, imperious and aloof and entitled to the world and all its spoils.

“I just made you come so hard you screamed into my shirt,” he said. “The least you can do is thank me.”

Blossom blushed now of all times. “Why? You didn’t thank me for the last time.”

“We both know that was about you, not me.”

“And this was any different?”

Instead of answering her, he tucked her bangs behind her ear in a surprisingly tender gesture.

“What do you think?”

Blossom wasn’t sure what to think. This was suddenly a bit too…intimate. She took his hand from her hair and squeezed, letting her power leak out between her fingers. “I think I like you better with your mouth full.”

There was that stupid, pretty laugh again. Blossom wasn’t sure how she hadn’t noticed it before, but now she couldn’t help her toes curling in her flats. “That can be arranged.”

“This isn’t over.”

That was what he’d promised her when she left him the last time, and now here they were. It had never been meant to go beyond that first mind-blowing night, but plans could change, couldn’t they? She wasn’t marrying the guy; she wasn’t even interested in him romantically. He was just an outlet for the tension she’d been carrying around for longer than she cared to admit. If anything, Brick was perfect in his role. After all, they could never, ever work as a traditional couple. But for now, for a little while, if it felt good…why not?

“I’m free tomorrow after work,” she said.

“Tomorrow it is.”

He slipped his hands in his pockets and let his eyes roam her figure. It took everything Blossom had not to fidget under his blatant admiration of her. Tomorrow couldn’t come too soon.

“See you, Blossom.”

He unlocked her door and stepped out.

“See you,” she said, breathless.

Pick-up was always a whirlwind time of day. With Pokey Oaks Middle-High School just a block down from the elementary school, kids of all ages poured into the street as parents and teachers
tried to herd the younger ones. Bubbles was reminded of a nature documentary she’d watched recently where a pod of dolphins forced a school of mackerel into a tight ball towards the water’s surface, where dive-bombing sea birds awaited to gobble up any fish slippery enough to avoid the feasting dolphins. She smiled to herself. Maybe a field trip to the Townsville Aquarium would be a fun adventure for her kindergarten class.

“See you tomorrow, Miss Bubbles!” Richie said.

Bubbles looked up at the skinny, bespectacled, blond boy and his au pair who had come to retrieve him, as she did every day. The au pair waved politely to Bubbles, and Bubbles waved back.

“Bye, Richie,” Bubbles said. “Remember, tomorrow is Career Day.”

Richie smiled his watery smile. “I remember. Mama’s gonna drive me to school ’n everything!”

The au pair produced a handful of tissues from her purse and wiped Richie’s perpetually runny nose. He had a “delicate constitution”, as Bubbles had been told. But with his numerous allergies, frail frame, and unusually high rate of absences for doctor visits, Bubbles suspected it was more than that. Somehow, the poor kid managed to be positive and energetic despite his body’s limitations.

Bubbles ruffled his hair and smiled warmly. “That’s wonderful! I can’t wait to hear your mom talk about her job. I’m sure everyone will like that.”

Richie beamed, proud.

“Bye Richie!” Brisa ran up and hugged him a little too enthusiastically. The au pair startled and dropped her car keys, but Bubbles was behind Richie in a flash of blinding blue and supporting him before Brisa could knock him down by accident.

Richie only laughed and hugged Brisa back. “Bye Brisa, see you tomorrow.”

“Brisa, remember what we said about hugging your friends?” Bubbles said in her Teacher Voice.

Brisa flushed. “Soft hugs are kind hugs. I’m sorry! Richie, did I squeeze too hard?” She took his hand in hers.

Richie shook his head. “I’m okay, honest!”

“It’s all right,” Bubbles said. “Now Brisa, why don’t we wait for your dad together?”

“Okay! Bye Richie, see you tomorrow!”

Bubbles held Brisa’s hand as they watched Richie and his au pair climb into the back of a sleek sedan piloted by the family driver.

“Miss Bubbles?” Brisa asked. “Is that Richie’s dad?”

“No sweetie, that’s his driver. Some families have those.”

Some very wealthy families.

Bubbles had rarely seen either of Richie’s parents at school, their busy work schedules preventing them from actively participating in their son’s daily activities. She hoped it was different at home. He was a nice boy with an open heart, and the first to accept Brisa in the class. The two were inseparable since the day Bubbles had sat Brisa at Richie’s table.
“Mine doesn’t,” Brisa said.

Bubbles grinned. “That’s because your dad can fly.”

“Yeah, but I can’t.”

“Well, that’s all right. Your dad can fly you wherever you want to go.”

“I guess…”

Bubbles wondered what Brisa would think of her limited powers as she grew older. Butch had told her that she could manifest a shield, and she had enhanced strength of course, but she lacked the other powers Butch and his brothers possessed. After all, she was only half Super.

Bubbles kneeled down so she was eye-level with Brisa. “You know what I think?”

Brisa shook her head.

“I think the greatest power of all is one you already have.”

“What’s that?” Brisa’s big, brown eyes grew bigger.

Bubbles smiled and poked her chest over her heart. “The power to love other people. It’s right here, can’t you feel it? Yours is really powerful. That’s why everybody likes you!”

Brisa clutched her heart. “Really?”

“Really really.”

Brisa watched her, curiously pensive for a five-year-old. “Does Buttercup like me?”

“My sister? Why do you ask?”

“I don’t think she likes Daddy very much…”

*Oh boy.*

Bubbles booped Brisa’s nose. “I’ll tell you a secret about Buttercup. She acts tough and she doesn’t smile very much, but deep down, she has the same power you have.”

Brisa blinked and touched her heart. “You mean…?”

“Yup. Buttercup has a lot of love in her heart. She just doesn’t always know how to show it. Your dad is just… Well, I think he’s the same way. That’s what makes it hard for them to get along sometimes.”

Brisa nodded like this made perfect sense. “I get it.”

Bubbles just smiled. “Anyway, trust me, there’s no way Buttercup doesn’t like you. You’re amazing!”

Brisa’s laughter was infectious, and that was how Butch found them on the sidewalk.

“What’s the joke?” he asked, grinning.

“Daddy!” Brisa rushed to hug him not at all softly, but Butch didn’t even budge as he absorbed his Super daughter’s immense strength and swept her off her feet.
“Hey, Supergirl. You have a good day at school?”

Bubbles shook her head and rose to her feet…and spotted Boomer right behind his brother. She froze.

“Hey, Bubbles,” he said warily. His hands were stuffed in the front pocket of an old, green hoodie, and she could imagine him wringing them.

They hadn’t talked since the weekend when she broke down and sobbed all over him and then asked for a little space afterwards.

“Uncle Boomer!” Brisa jumped from Butch to Boomer and crushed him in a hug.

“Oof! Hey Brisa, how’s my favorite niece?” Boomer said as he held her up.

Brisa rolled her eyes. “Duh, I’m your only niece.”

Boomer laughed. “Got me there, smarty pants.”

Bubbles watched him with Brisa, and their gazes met over her head as she launched into a breathless explanation of everything she did that day in school. Boomer was only half listening as he held Bubbles’ gaze and smiled softly.

She felt her throat constrict watching them, and placed a hand over her aching chest.

“…and then me and Richie played dodge ball at recess, and our team won!” Brisa said.

“Yeah? Way to go!” Boomer said.

“Who’s Richie?” Butch asked.

“Oh, he’s my best friend. So then, Carina Carlisle’s mom baked cookies and we all got to have one —”

“Your best friend is a boy?” Butch persisted. He glanced at Bubbles for confirmation, but she just shrugged.

“Oh come on, Butch. She’s five,” Boomer teased.

“Five and a half,” Brisa said. “What’s wrong with Richie being a boy? I like him.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m afraid of,” Butch said.

“Huh? But Daddy, you’re not afraid of anything. Except Mommy sometimes.”

Butch flushed and plucked Brisa out of Boomer’s arms. “I’m not afraid of your mom,” he muttered.

“Dude, she has you pegged perfectly,” Boomer teased.

“Ha ha, shove it Boomer. Later Bubbles.” Butch hovered off the ground and peered down at them. “Remember, no sucking face or any other body parts on school grounds, kids.”

Boomer rolled his eyes, and in a flash of green, Butch and Brisa took off.

Alone with Boomer in a dwindling sea of kids and parents making their way home, Bubbles rocked on the balls of her feet.
Why am I nervous? It’s just Boomer!

Just the man she had never stopped loving even after she’d pushed him away. That felt like so long ago.

“Hey, I have to go clean up the classroom before I head home. Do you want to…?” Bubble said.

“Yeah, lead the way.”

They headed back inside now that all of Bubbles’ kids had been safely picked up. They passed a janitor mopping the hall, whom Bubbles waved to.

“Oh, hi Bubbles,” said a voice from an open classroom they passed.

Bubbles stopped to greet her colleague. “What’s up, Bob?”

“Holy—!” Boomer stammered and stopped dead in his tracks next to Bubbles as he gaped at the tall, green, horned *demon* looking down on them from a lofty eight-foot height.

Both Bubbles and Bob shot Boomer concerned looks. Bob recovered first and smiled. “Quite the opposite, actually.”

He chuckled at his own joke. Boomer did not.

Bubbles put a reassuring hand on Boomer’s shoulder. “Sorry. Boomer, this is Bob Green, my colleague. He teaches first grade.”

“Oh, really?” Boomer’s voice came out a bit pitchier than his usual baritone.

Bubbles squeezed his shoulder harder, her fingers sparking blue in warning, *Be nice.* “And Bob, this is Boomer. My, um…”

*Friend? Ex-lover? Current lover?*

Bob saved her the awkwardness of trying to define her relationship with Boomer and merely offered his long-fingered hand to shake. His nails were perfectly manicured, a requirement for this job when any idle swipe of a talon could injure a child. “In any case, he’s yours. Nice to meet you, Boomer.”

Boomer was still stunned to be meeting a literal demon teacher, but Bubbles’ super-powered grip on his shoulder reminded him of his manners and he took Bob’s hand to shake. “Nice to meet you too…”

Bob chuckled. “From the awe you’re projecting, I’m guessing this is your first time meeting a real life first grade teacher.”

Bubbles grinned at the joke. Bob possessed a sharp, self-deprecating wit that never failed to amuse the staff.

“Uh…” Boomer was still in shock.

“Bob actually used to be my substitute teacher when I was in kindergarten,” Bubbles said. “We go way back.”

“The years, where do they go? Am I right?” Bob said.
For an ageless, ancient evil, Bubbles supposed time would be more of an afterthought.

Boomer finally recovered. “Sorry. Just, the only other demon I know isn’t as, uh, kid-friendly as you seem to be.”

“Well, nobody’s perfect,” Bob said, winking the eye that wasn’t hidden behind a black eyepatch. “It was good meeting you. Perhaps we’ll see more of you again soon.”

Bob left his classroom and headed off down the hall, his black robes fading to dark mist that evaporated in his wake.

“Did I really just meet a demon teacher?” Boomer asked.

Bubbles giggled. “Mr. Green—I mean, Bob’s harmless. He just really loves children.”

Boomer shook his head. “Right… No matter how old I get, I always forget how weird Townsville is.”

“Tell me about it.”

They had arrived at Bubbles’ classroom, where she had a little tidying up to do. Boomer automatically moved to help her put away boxes of crayons and construction paper.

“So,” Boomer said. “It’s been two days.”

Bubbles hesitated as she neatly stacked crayon boxes in a cubby. “Look, when I asked for some space I didn’t mean I don’t want to see you.”

She felt him approach behind her. “I know, I’m not upset.”

“I just… I think we should take it slow.”

“Slow and steady wins the race.”

Bubbles sighed and turned to face him. “Really? Because you showing up to my school out of the blue doesn’t exactly feel slow or steady.”

“Okay, I’m sorry about that. But Bubbles—”

He took her hands in his, and they were warm. She loved his hands, how they enveloped hers so easily. Blue eyes searched hers, longing.

“I just really wanted to see you. Hear your voice.” He let out a sharp breath. “This is going to sound pathetic, but I feel like I’ve missed you more these past couple of days than I have for the past few years. Not that I didn’t miss you before. Just, you know, since now we have a shot…”

Bubbles’ heart sank. Had he truly believed since their breakup that there was no hope left? Had she done that to him?

“Oh Boomer.” She took his face in her hands and held him close. “I’m the one who’s sorry. I guess I always just assumed that one day we could try again, but I shouldn’t have assumed you would feel the same way.”

He put his hands over hers and closed his eyes, but the pain on his face was plain to see. “Wish I would’ve known that. Probably would’ve saved me a few sleepless nights.”
Bubbles’ throat clenched again, and she pulled him into a hug. The truth was in his arms as he held her, in his voice that broke with every word. In the end, Boomer was as much a concealer as she was, both of them hiding their pain and their anguish because the world didn’t have time for it. Why was it so plain to see in him and so hard to accept in herself?

“I love you,” she whispered fiercely. “Fast or slow, together or apart, that’s never changed. And it never will. I’m so sorry I hurt you.”

He released a shuddering sigh, and they stayed that way for a few moments until they caught their breaths.

“I’m sorry I didn’t do more back then,” Boomer said. “I could’ve been there for you more.”

“I pushed you away.”

He shook his head. “I let you. I’ll never forgive myself.”

“Boomer…”

“But I promise I’ll do better this time. I swear it. So we can take it slow, as slow as you want. Anything. Just… Just let me be there for you, okay? There’s no problem too sad or too painful that’ll make me turn away from you. Okay?”

Bubbles bit her lip to stifle her unshed tears and nodded. “Okay.”

Boomer rested his forehead on hers. “Okay.”

The moment lingered like a bar of sunlight through the window, warm and soft between them until the clouds shifted and it passed. But that was okay, Bubbles thought. For the first time in a long time, she was sure there would be more moments like it to come, better even than the last.

They pulled apart slowly and resumed cleaning up the brightly colored classroom, and Bubbles was more than a little relieved that it didn’t feel strained or forced. Simply occupying the same space as Boomer, breathing the same air, sharing the quiet together without the pain of the past hanging over them like a thundercloud was a peace she had long gone without. The rustle of nap mats being folded and construction paper being stacked lulled her into an easy, familiar cadence.

“Hey, what’s happening with the monster analysis?” Boomer asked as Bubbles handed him the stacks of organized paper to be stowed in a cabinet.

“Nothing yet. Clara’s been really busy with midterm prep, so she hasn’t had a chance to look at the sample of the Red Monster yet. But she promised she’d get to it this week.”

“Cool, cool… Let me know what she says, yeah?”

Bubbles smiled slyly. “You’re really taking the whole ‘part of the team’ thing seriously, huh?”

“Yeah, sure. I mean, how many people dream of being a Powerpuff Girl and actually get the shot?”

She laughed from her belly, and it felt good. “You’re so silly.”

“I’m your number one fan! Look, I even match your color scheme.” He flipped his bangs dramatically, and she laughed again.

They finished cleaning up the classroom, and Bubbles grabbed her purse to head home.
“Hey, you want to get dinner tonight?” Boomer asked.

Bubbles’ face fell. “I can’t tonight. I’m sorry, I would totally say yes! It’s just that tomorrow is Career Day and I’m meeting up with a few other teachers to put together this whole lesson plan and —”

“Say no more. How about later this week?” Boomer asked. “I’m giving myself Saturday night off.”

Bubbles considered. “All right, I think I can swing that.”

He walked her outside.

“So, Career Day, huh?” he asked. “You sure you want Butch to come in and talk about his career as essentially a hit man for hire?”

Bubbles winced. “Honestly, I didn’t even think of that. I thought he would just talk about his time in the military…”

Boomer snorted. “Better tell him that before he gets up in front of a classroom full of little kids.”

She definitely would. “Thanks for the forewarning.”

He took her hand. “Anytime.”

Bubbles looked up at him and his soft smile and his softer blue eyes. She remembered the way he looked at her holding Brisa, and her heart hurt. Before she could think about it too much, she leaned in and kissed him. His hand slipped under her jaw and held her to him as he deepened the kiss, but only for a moment.

“I can’t wait for Saturday,” he murmured.

Bubbles touched her fingers to his lips. “Me too.”

She watched him fly away, his blue streak bright against the paler, cerulean sky. She clutched her hand over her heart, unable to stop smiling. And slowly, steadily, she allowed herself to indulge the feeling of weightless wonder that came with anticipation of someone beautifully, entirely hers, however undefined.

Chapter End Notes

I have the greatest readers and commenters in all the land. Thanks everybody for your continued support and enthusiasm. If I could hug each and every one of you, I wouldn’t because I’m not a hugger. But it’s the thought that counts, and I think you guys rock harder than Fuzzy in the Beat Alls!

Thanks as always to Mordor for his help editing this chapter and reminding me there’s always room for improvement, so I better improve. 😊

Next time: Brick needs a lawyer, Boomer wins the award for Best Uncle, and Buttercup takes a long overdue night off.


**Green-Eyed Monster**

Chapter Notes

The title of this chapter is a bit of a red herring considering the one who’s the most envious doesn’t even have green eyes.

Terrible color jokes aside, I hope you enjoy this chapter. It kicked and screamed the whole time in drafting, but my way too nice beta assured me that somehow, I write best late at night when I can’t sleep.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Buttercup, that’s great news,” Ty said. “This is the biggest break we’ve had since we got Danny Chang’s case.”

Buttercup frowned up at him where he sat upright in the guest bed at his sister’s condo. “Forensics is still going through everything, but his car was intact and abandoned. They’re running every test they can think of.”

Ty whistled. “Well, I’ll be damned. At the junkyard in Nut Valley? That’s a hell of a ways away from the pizza place he worked at.”

“Yeah, nowhere near their delivery area.”

“Coulda been stolen.”

“It was a 2008 Subaru Outback. The only reason to steal such a piece of shit would be for parts, and the guys picked it up intact.” Buttercup’s frown deepened. “No, somebody moved it. Out of the way, somewhere they thought we’d never look.”

“Then why not have it destroyed? Get rid of all the evidence.” Ty’s gaze was heavy on her profile as she hunched over her knees deep in thought.

Buttercup sighed. “Incompetence? Cold feet? Or maybe they just figured it was enough. It almost was. We only found it by accident. A traffic cop ran the plate when she impounded a different car. She recognized the make and model from the APB we put out and rolled the dice.”

“Well, somebody give Wonder Cop my number so I can thank her in person.”

Buttercup cracked a smile. “Easy there, champ. Her name’s Yza and she’s happily married to a very lucky lady.”

“Who’s lucky?” said Ty’s older sister Melanie, who’d just returned with coffee. As she opened and closed the door behind her, Buttercup could hear the cartoon special her two young kids were watching in the living room.

“Not me,” Ty said. “All the ladies of Citiesville are out of my league, I guess.”

Melanie snorted and flipped her long, dark braids. She was tall like Ty, athletic, and sharp as a tac. “Please. You’ll be out of here and walking Pretzel in a wheelchair soon enough. Ladies love an
invalid at the dog park. You’ll get to play the sympathy card and the cute card at the same time.”

“All for the low, low price of a monster attack,” Buttercup said.

“Hey, if it’ll get me a date, maybe the monsters should drop in more often,” Ty joked.

“A good booty call heals all wounds.” Melanie winked at Buttercup.

Buttercup’s phone buzzed with two new texts.

[Butch: Monster happy hour is happening 2NITE no excuses!]

[Butch: You me and ]

She rolled her eyes. Eight thirty p.m. on a school night and he was thinking about getting wasted. Was she the only one who remembered he had a daughter to look after?

Melanie was helping Ty adjust his back pillows so he could enjoy the cup of coffee she’d brought him. Buttercup watched them talk to each other in hushed, playful tones. After Ty had been discharged from the hospital, instead of going home to his drafty apartment downtown, he’d come to stay with Melanie’s family at their small but cozy home. He had no one else, no wife and no parents and no kids of his own. No one but Buttercup and a few other cop buddies, and lately she’d been so underwater at work that she found herself having to choose between visiting Ty or schlepping it to Townsville to see her own sisters. Tonight was a rare night off, and she’d decided to spend as much of it with Ty as she could.

Her phone buzzed again, and she almost ignored it, but this one was not from Butch.

[Wes: Just left TPD precinct. Where do you want to meet up? Happy to come to your neck of the woods.]

“Yo Buttercup, do I need to call the bomb squad? ‘Cause somebody’s really blowing up your phone,” Ty said.

Melanie was a dog with a bone. “Oooh, hot date tonight? Anybody I know? For your sake, I hope not.”

Buttercup snorted with laughter. “No, just an old friend. We’ve been meaning to catch up.”

“Okay, okay,” Melanie said, smirking slyly like she had a secret. “Well, don’t let this old man keep you too long. He needs to rest, anyway.”

“All I do is rest,” Ty complained. “A man can go crazy in this bed!”

Melanie waved him off. “I’ll send the kids in, then. They can watch their show in here and entertain you. Buttercup, I’ll see you. Don’t be a stranger!”

When she was gone, Ty said, “Hey, how you holdin’ up?”

“Fine, whatever, I guess.”

Ty looked at her pointedly. “You sure you’re not runnin’ yourself ragged on the Chang case?”

“Who told you that?”

“Nobody. I know you is all. Gotta do everything your damn self, and now I ain’t around to give
“You just worry about healing up fast. I’ll be fine in the meantime.”

He smiled, but his eyes were hard. “Hey, I’m serious. You sure you’re doin’ all right? ‘Cause my legs may be shot to shit, but I still got my two ears and my badge. You can talk to me.”

She hesitated. It would be so easy to tell him about Ace, about how she’d been working on getting in touch with him because he could be a major break in the Mojo case and she really, really needed a win right about now. Ty had worked Vice before Homicide, and he had street connections she might be able to use to get to Ace, get him talking. He could help.

The door burst open, and Melanie’s young son and daughter dressed in their matching Mech Animals pajamas ran in and leaped onto the bed. They talked over each other like it was a competition, eager to watch their favorite show and share their Oreos with him. Ty laughed and gathered them in his two tree trunk arms to snuggle up and enjoy the night in.

Buttercup took that as her cue to leave. She said goodnight to Ty and the kids, her eyes lingering on the three of them huddled up on the bed as they talked and fought over who had remote control privileges. She wondered if Butch snuggled in bed with Brisa to watch her favorite cartoons, and imagined it for a moment.

“If I were a bunny I’d hop, hop, hop!” sang Blarney the Sea Serpent on the television.

Buttercup left them to their family night in. It was better not to drag Ty into the Ace thing, she resolved. Bad enough that she would have to deal with the slimy gangster; there was no reason to drag her injured partner into it. He didn’t need the hassle, and neither did his family.

She got into her car and pulled out her phone. Wes’ text was unanswered. She hadn’t even thought about where to grab a drink, but she knew she didn’t have the energy to drive to Townsville.

She pulled up the conversation with Butch.

[Buttercup: Got plans tonight.]

He texted back immediately.

[Butch: Yeah right.]

She glared at her phone and pressed the call button. He picked up after two rings.

“Why is it so hard to believe I have plans?” Buttercup demanded.

Butch laughed. “You called me. Don’t seem all that busy if you have time for that.”

Buttercup did not want to argue with his twisted logic. “For your information, I’m meeting up with an old friend for drinks. So no, I don’t have time to babysit you. Brisa’s on her own there.”

She could hear the muted din of conversation in the background and wondered if he was out somewhere.

“You have friends?”

“Eat shit.”

He laughed again, and Buttercup pictured him smiling on the other end of the line. “So where are
you and this famous friend headed?”

She hesitated. They hadn’t actually decided that bit yet. “I don’t know. Somewhere in the city. I
don’t feel like driving all the way to Townsville.”

“It’s not that far from your precinct.”

“I’m not at the precinct. I was visiting Ty at his sister’s place.”

“How’s he doing?”

Buttercup leaned back in the driver’s seat in the dark and twisted her shoulder-length hair around
her finger. “Well, he’s not running the Citiesville Marathon anytime soon. He plays it off cool, but
I know he’s bored out of his mind being stuck on his ass all day.”

“Yeah, I bet. Fucking sucks.”

“Yeah.”

A pause. She imagined Butch switching ears.

“Come to B-3,” Butch said. “My brother’s bar, you know the place?”

“I know it. But I already told you, I’m meeting my friend.”

“So bring ’em here, whatever. Problem solved.”

There was another pause as Buttercup considered his suggestion. It wasn’t the worst idea, and she
had no other offers for Wes. The bar she and Ty usually hit up with the other cops was bound to be
full of colleagues she’d rather not see on her night off, sick of all their redundant questions about
Ty’s recovery and the lack of progress on the Chang case.

“C’mon, I’ll even keep the seat warm for you,” Butch said.

She bit her lip. “Fine. But the first round’s on you.”

“Yeah, sure. See ya, doll.”

He hung up before she could tell him off for that infuriating pet name.

There was something a bit scandalous about what they were doing.

Logically, there was nothing strange or wrong about Blossom pursuing a physical relationship with
Brick. They were both young, single, attractive, and consenting adults. They were not doing
anything different from what other normal people would do in their situation. Except that they were
not normal, and their association (she refused to call it a relationship, for even the word’s most
benign connotation did not strip it of all the trappings of commitment and feelings and other
intimacies made miserable in the wake of her broken engagement) was inextricably bound up in
their respective Super identities and all the baggage that entailed.

They were not nemeses. They were not even rivals anymore, having left the empty competition of
high school academics behind them as they grew up and pursued very different paths. They were
not quite friends, but they were not merely acquaintances, either. Blossom found that she was more
certain about what they were not than what they were. Perhaps it was that part of their…
association that rattled her the most. In not knowing what he was to her, she could not explain it to
anyone else, either. Not to her coworkers who questioned his brief visit to her office earlier that week and the very expensive gift he had brought her. Not to Bubbles, who (for now) politely kept her curiosity at bay over Blossom’s late evenings spent at ritzy hotel bars and penthouse suites. She always came home and spent the night in her own bed, no matter how late it was.

Certainly not to Buttercup, who was not aware of even the first encounter, and if Blossom had anything to say about it, she would remain ignorant of all of it. It was not that Blossom did not trust her sister, nor that she truly believed Buttercup would judge her harshly for having some fun. Any other guy, and she was sure Buttercup would be treating her to celebratory shots, because thank god Blossom was finally focusing on herself rather than the jerk who’d broken her heart.

But Brick wasn’t any other guy, and Blossom did not know how she would ever explain herself to Buttercup when she and Brick could not even explain it to each other.

“I need a favor,” Brick said as he rolled up his shirt sleeves, having freshly showered in the hotel bathroom.

Blossom was busy combing the tangles out of her shower-damp hair at the vanity, lost in her thoughts. She could partially see him in the vanity mirror in the other room finishing dressing. Behind him, the bed lay unmade, the sheets thrown asunder in their passion. She bit her lip.

“I have work in the morning, so I can’t stay over,” she said. It was what she said every night they’d been together this week. He never brought it up again the way he had their first night together.

She could hear him moving around as she quickly braided her damp hair and let it hang over her shoulder. He found her in the bathroom and his fingers immediately traced down the braid. In the mirror, his reflection pressed his lips in a tight, subtle line.

“It’s easier to deal with like this,” she said, reading his displeasure.

His other hand found her hip and they locked gazes in the mirror. “You could strangle a man with this rope.”

Even as he said it, he tugged lightly on her braid and forced her head back to his shoulder, exposing more of her neck behind the collar of her shirt.

“Is that the favor you want?” Her hand found his on her hip and entwined their fingers. She let some of her power leak and jump between their hands like she knew he liked, and he pushed her up against the edge of the counter.

“Tempting.” He watched her watch him press a sensual kiss at the juncture of her jawline and ear. “But no, it’s something else.”

“Oh?”

He savored her for another minute, dragging his hand up along her waist and kissing her neck while she watched him. His fingers found the base of her neck, but her braid prevented him from curling them around her hair. Blossom once more noted the slight change in his expression and resolved not to braid her hair again when she was with him.

“I need a lawyer,” he said.

Blossom blinked. He still held her, but he’d stopped kissing her and watched her in the mirror. “What for?”
“To review a nondisclosure agreement. Make sure I’m not getting fucked over.”

Blossom turned around in his arms so she could look at him properly. “Who’s it with?”

“A potential new client.”

Brick never talked much about his work. Blossom had asked a few questions in their time together, and while she didn’t think he was lying to her, he wasn’t exactly forthcoming about details. She’d done a little digging out of pure curiosity, but found little of significance. His name popped up in a few articles as a consultant on a merger here, a guest at a high-profile industry party there, but nothing that could paint a clear picture about what exactly he did. The best Blossom could figure was that he could do anything he was asked to do for the right person and the right price. She’d known others in similar roles through her work in Metroville, so-called “special consultants” operating behind the scenes on major deals she worked on and never directly connected to the work itself. It surprised her that Brick preferred such a discreet line of work given what she remembered of his natural inclination toward prestige and recognition for his talents.

And yet, he’d pointed out something similar to her on their first night together. She frowned, not entirely liking the uncanny similarities between them. She never had.

“There are plenty of corporate lawyers in the Peninsula. I could refer you to some reliable names in Citiesville.”

“No, it has to be you.”

Now she was highly suspicious. “Why?”

“Because you’re the only one I can—” He cut himself off before he could finish that thought and ran a hand through his short, damp hair. “Look, long story short, I have a prospective client who wants a Chemical X sample, and one of my conditions was complete transparency and access to her lab. The NDA is supposed to cover that, but I need a lawyer who’s capable and 100% reliable. Someone who understands the significance of it and can make sure the deal’s airtight.”

Blossom narrowed her eyes. He couldn’t be serious. “I don’t think I have to tell you how dangerous Chemical X can be in the wrong hands. I’m surprised you’re even considering something like this.”

“What about in the right hands?”

“What are you talking about?”

He checked his watch. “It’s still early. Have a drink with me downstairs. I’ll explain everything.”

Ten minutes later, Blossom sat across from Brick at a high table in a dim corner of the hotel bar. The soft light of an LED candle between them lent a carmine depth to his eyes that matched the whiskey they’d ordered. She listened, equally fascinated and bewildered, to his story.

“Dinah Swathe,” Blossom said, testing the name out. “You’re the one who warned me about her. And now you want to give her the most volatile compound on the planet?”

“What about in the right hands?”

“What are you talking about?”

He checked his watch. “It’s still early. Have a drink with me downstairs. I’ll explain everything.”

The Professor created Chemical X by accident after years of work. I was the executor of his estate, and it was crystal clear that my sisters and I would be jointly assigned all rights to his
inventions and intellectual property, including Chemical X. He could have donated the formula to the government or a university research lab, but he didn’t because he worried about people who would exploit it. And he… Well, he ran out of time to properly vet anyone outside our family to assign the rights to.”

It had been the Professor’s intention to expand research on Chemical X and its mysterious properties, of course. He’d talked about it all the time with Blossom and her sisters and expressed his sincere hope that brilliant minds the world over would continue to study the substance to better understand it, to find ways to use it to help people. He just hadn’t planned on dying before he had the chance to find a suitable successor. Now, that task fell to his three daughters. Blossom had not given it much thought since the funeral, and she doubted Bubbles and Buttercup had, either.

Brick studied her for a beat, and she wondered how much of her troubled thoughts was reflected on her expression to merit the strange warmth in his gaze. To her immense relief, he didn’t press her on the subject.

“Besides Mojo, who’s a Super himself, how many scientists in the world do you think have the brain power to exploit existing Chemical X, let alone create more using a complicated formula?”

“More than you would think. There was one incident when we were kids. The Professor’s old college roommate, Dick Hardly, stole some Chemical X and managed to reproduce a less potent version of it. It was enough to create fake Powerpuff Girls and traffic them to the highest bidders all over the world.”

Brick looked genuinely disturbed by that. “You’re shitting me.”

Blossom shook her head. She remembered the day she and her sisters discovered Dick’s nefarious plan. “When we found him, he was so desperate to keep his scheme going that he drank raw Chemical X just to fight us off. It ended up killing him…” It had also turned him into an eldritch horror incapable of rational thought. They couldn’t have saved him even if they’d wanted to.

Looking back on it, Blossom hadn’t quite understood the magnitude of what had happened to Dick when she’d been a child. The Professor had put on a brave face and insisted that they move on; it was tragic what happened to Dick, but there was nothing they could do. Now, though, Blossom could appreciate how horrifying it must have been for the Professor to watch his former best friend lie, cheat, and steal his way to a quick buck, only to suffer a gruesome and unnatural death right in front of him and his young daughters.

“So long story short, I’m not thrilled about handing out more Chemical X to anyone.”

“I’m not thrilled about it either, obviously,” Brick said, his eyes darting around the room to check that no one was eavesdropping on them. “Which is why I attached a few strings to the deal. Full transparency and access to her research, her test subjects, everything.”

“And a fat pay check, I’m sure.”

Brick leaned back in his chair and swirled his whiskey, bemused. “You and I are motivated by different things. Or are you saying you wouldn’t want to help a brilliant scientist cure diabetes? AIDS? Hell, even cancer?”

“You don’t know that she can do any of that.”

“I don’t, but I can find out. We both can, if you want.”

Blossom studied him, the casual way he lounged in his chair, relaxed but focused. There was a
time when she could not have named a single redeeming quality in him, when she thought him nothing but a menace, even evil. Now, she wasn’t so convinced. The way he maintained a genuine if unexpected friendship with Princess, the bond he clearly shared with his brothers that ran deeper than mere convenience of creation, the way he kissed her even after they were spent, simply because he wanted to…

She wanted to trust him. She didn’t know how or why, but the moment she had the thought, she knew it was true.

“Brick… Are you telling me the truth? Or just what you think I want to hear?”

He studied her over his glass for what seemed like a long time. Blossom held his walled gaze, and she was reminded of a wilderness—dense trees and shadows, thick and dark, the kind of place she could get lost in and never find her way out. The kind hiding monsters and myths, morbid yet magical.

“I think she’s genuine,” he said at length. “Her history, everything I dug up in her background points to her being the real deal. Look, the money and connections notwithstanding, I wouldn’t mind having a client who actually did something net positive for once.”

Blossom wondered what he meant by “for once”, but more than that, she was struck by the strain in his voice, however muted. Dinah was an unknown, but Brick was telling her the truth. She smiled.

“Look at you, trying to do your part to save the world.”

He snorted. “Hardly. It’s not like I celebrate people getting sick and dying, but it’s also not my problem.”

“Even so, I think it’s admirable.”

His eyes gleamed with mirth as he leaned toward her across the table. “Not so loud. You’ll blow my mysterious bad boy cover.”

She giggled and leaned toward him. “We can’t have that. Think of how heartbroken all your adoring fans would be.”

“Stricken, every one of them,” he teased.

They were close enough to kiss if they only leaned in. She could feel the warmth of his breath on her lips, hear her heart racing in her ears. She wanted him to kiss her, distressingly so. The realization hit her like a hammer to the back of her skull, and she pulled back abruptly.

That wasn’t what they did. They didn’t kiss in public like blissful lovers lost in each other. Brick seemed to have come to a similar conclusion and swallowed the rest of his drink in one gulp. He wiped his mouth, and he didn’t look at her.

“That wasn’t what they did. They didn’t kiss in public like blissful lovers lost in each other. Brick seemed to have come to a similar conclusion and swallowed the rest of his drink in one gulp. He wiped his mouth, and he didn’t look at her.

“Can I bring you two a refill?” said the bartender as she passed by their corner on her rounds.

“No, thank you,” Blossom said. “I was just heading out.”

“Me too,” Brick said unnecessarily.

It was suddenly awkward and tense between them as she checked her purse and donned her cardigan. Unfortunately, they were headed to the same (and only) exit, so they had little choice but to walk together. Unconsciously, Blossom rubbed her left ring finger for the gem that wasn’t there
“So you’ll send me the NDA to mark up?” Blossom said as they emerged outside on the sidewalk.

“Yeah,” Brick said. “Then, we’ll go to her lab and vet her entire operation.”

“Fine.”

“Good.”

“I, um, I should probably head back before Bubbles starts blowing up my phone.”

“Yeah, right. See you tomorrow.”

“I’m sorry, I actually can’t do tomorrow. I’m busy.”

He paused and looked at her like he hadn’t understood what she said right away. “Oh, all right.” They stood there in silence for a beat until a car honked.

“Miss, you looking for a taxi?” asked the hirsute cab driver at the front of the parked line in front of the hotel. He leaned out of his window and watched her expectantly.

“Thank you, that would be great.” Blossom moved toward the cab on autopilot and opened the back door. She remembered Brick then, who was still watching her strangely. “Good night, Brick.”

He showed her his back. “Good night, Blossom.”

In a completely unnecessary burst of power, he rocketed into the sky in a bloody flourish, rattling a nearby trashcan and more than a few skirts and hats.

“Hell, that scared the bejesus out of me!” The cabbie gawked at the night sky, where only a faint trace of Brick’s red streak marked his path over Townsville. “Are you all right?”

Blossom followed his shrinking form in the darkness like the cabbie could not, until he touched down on the outskirts of Citiesville to the south. “I’m fine. Can we get going, please?”

She got into the cab and stared out the window at the passing lights of downtown Townsville that gave way to rows of quaint, suburban houses and manicured lawns.

The whole way home, she couldn’t shake the weird feeling that Brick was annoyed with her.

Buttercup beat Wes to B-3, as expected. To her mild annoyance, Butch was also nowhere to be seen. If the dipshit dragged her here and couldn’t even be bothered to show up, he was going to be extremely sorry.

Muttering curses under her breath, she trudged to the bar and leaned on her elbow. The place was decently busy for a week night with patrons guzzling beers along the oaken bar and at most of the narrow booths along the walls. The Edison lights cast the concrete walls in a burnished copper glow that made Buttercup nostalgic for sweater dresses and pumpkin spice and other Hallmark trash she didn’t even like but my god, this place had an *aesthetiqué* and it was making her a little nauseous.

“You look like you’re contemplating the fate of the universe,” said the bartender, a conventionally attractive woman in a three-piece suit with eyes like coal. “Will we survive or not?”
“The universe will be fine, but my chances are looking pretty slim the longer I stay here absorbing the organic, free-range lighting,” Buttercup said.

The bartender leaned over the bar conspiratorially. “Don’t worry, the chances of infection are low tonight. We only offer the space for knitting and urban beekeeping classes on Sundays.”

Buttercup stared at her, mildly horrified, and the bartender burst out laughing.

“Kidding, kidding! My boss kicked out the beekeepers ages ago.”

“What, did PETA serve him a cease and desist?”

She laughed again, and Buttercup smiled.

“Hey, hipster vibe aside the liquor’s whole milk, and I mix a mean margarita.”

“Do I look like a margarita girl?”

“Everyone’s a margarita girl.”

Buttercup supposed she had a point. She eyed the bartender’s name tag. “Neha. I don’t know how hell Boomer convinced you to work here, but you’re heinously overqualified.”

“In witty banter?”

“I was going to say in personal taste, but that’s a valid take.”

Neha the bartender laughed again, and she passed a cocktail napkin to Buttercup. “Sounds like you know Boomer personally.”

Buttercup sighted the blond in question emerging from a door marked “Private” at the end of the bar and narrowed her eyes. Butch was right behind him. “Oh, we go way back,” she said darkly.

The brothers spotted her and Butch made a beeline for her, while Boomer approached more cautiously behind the bar. Butch sauntered up next to her and leaned on the bar.

“Hey, doll. Did I keep you waiting long?”

Buttercup rolled her eyes so hard she saw stars. “Don’t you fucking start with me tonight, or I’m outta here.”

“Hi, Buttercup,” Boomer said politely.

Buttercup turned her steely gaze on him. Really…she didn’t get what Bubbles had ever seen in the guy to have been with him for so long past high school. He had the personality of a soggy dish rag these days. Growing up he’d been a bit of a class clown, but at least he’d been entertaining. “Boomer. Been a while.”

“Oh—oh, you’re that Buttercup?” Neha said. She was looking at Boomer.

“Bubbles’ sister, yeah,” Boomer said.

Buttercup thought that was a weirdly personal way to identify her. Sure, Buttercup and her sisters were well known Supers, but they kept largely to themselves in their private lives. Unless Bubbles had been here and met Neha personally, but why would she do that? She and Boomer had been broken up for a few years.
Before she could ask about that, Butch grabbed her by the elbow and dragged her away to a booth. “Hey bro, bring us a pitcher, yeah? And a plate of those Sriracha wings.”

“Sure, but I’m putting it on your tab!” Boomer called out.

Butch waved him off, but Buttercup saw a golden opportunity to order whatever she wanted and stick Butch with the bill. Which, considering that it was his fault she was here in the first place, only seemed fair.

“Make mine a margarita!” Buttercup shouted from clear across the room where she and Butch slid into opposite sides of the wooden booth.

She could practically feel Boomer’s eyes narrowed at them as Neha told him she’d handle their order.

Coat stuffed into the corner, Buttercup relaxed on her side of the booth and stretched her back. Her violet sweater was not quite warm enough, but the impending alcohol would help with that. Butch watched her settle in.

“Long day?” he asked.

“Long month.”

She winced at a creak in her stiff neck and rubbed it. Butch was quiet, and she looked up at him. She hadn’t noticed before, but he looked a bit more cleaned up than his usual baggy hoodie and unwashed jeans in a black button up and white undershirt. His muscles were prominent under his well-fitting clothes for once; he had clearly kept up with his workout regimen all these years. His forearms were exposed, revealing the diamond-patterned ends of a tattoo that disappeared under his rolled sleeve.

“When did you get a tattoo?” she blurted out.

Butch blinked like it took him a moment to comprehend what she was asking. He touched the ends of the black ink on his tanned skin. “Military. My whole team got the same one.”

Buttercup tucked a few flyaways behind her ear. “Your team?”

“Yup. They called me the big boss ’n everything.”

“Scratch that one off your bucket list.”

“Yeah, well, it’s not all it’s cracked up to be.”

“The no-homo pet name, or leading your own team?”

Butch bared his teeth in a grin. “Oh BC, don’t ever change.”

“Wasn’t planning on it.”

They watched each other for a beat until Butch leaned forward over the live edge table. “Speaking of leading teams, you ever envy them?”

“Who?”

“The Reds.”
Buttercup crossed her arms over her chest and leaned back. She didn't have to ask him to clarify what she already knew he was asking. “Your brother? Fuck no. Dude’s a sociopath, full offense.”

“He’s not. You just don’t like him.”

“No shit, Sherlock.”

“What about Blossom?”

Buttercup narrowed her eyes. “What about her?”

“C’mon. You can’t sit there and tell me you’ve never been just a little bit jealous of her.”

Jealous of Blossom? Please, they weren’t in middle school anymore. “Blossom does her shit, I do mine.”

Butch gave her a look like he saw right through her. “Suuuuure.”

Before she could question him, Neha appeared with their food and drink orders and Wes in tow.

“Hey Buttercup, sorry I’m late. Couldn’t find parking anywhere,” Wes said, shrugging off his windbreaker.

“No worries. Sorry to make you come all the way here. Someone just had to invite himself.”

Buttercup shot Butch a pointed look, but he just shrugged.

“Okay party people, I’ve got our hefeweizen on tap, an extra large order of our famous Sriracha wings, and one spicy margarita,” Neha said, unloading her tray.

Buttercup leaned toward her. “Hey, feel free to just keep the apps coming. Put ‘em on Butch’s tab.”

“I heard that,” Butch said.

“Congratulations. You and your garbage disposal stomach can thank me later.”

Neha smirked. “Leave it to me.”

Wes slid into the booth next to Buttercup. “Wait a sec, Butch? Is that really you?”

Butch grinned. “In the flesh.”

“Shit man, what’s it been, six or seven years? You in between tours?”

“Nah, I switched to private contracting a couple years ago. On leave for now, though.”

Buttercup perked up. “That reminds me. Who’s taking care of Brisa right now? You know, your five-year-old daughter who definitely can’t look after herself?”

“Daughter?” Wes said, unable to hide his surprise.

“Jesus, chill the fuck out, woman,” Butch said laughingly. “She’s at Boomer’s.”

“Boomer’s here. Are you telling me you brought her to a bar?”

“His apartment’s upstairs. She’s asleep. I was checking on her when you got here. Any more questions, Detective?”
He said it casually, but Buttercup frowned at the moniker. He almost sounded a little defensive. Wes had gone quiet next to her as he watched them argue, and Buttercup decided to drop the subject before she scared him off.

“No, whatever,” she said.

The short silence that ensued was awkward. Butch poured out two tall glasses of beer from the pitcher, so Buttercup tried to ignore the weird tension by sipping her margarita tumbler. She immediately began to choke.

“Whoa, you okay?” Wes patted her back as she coughed.

“Crap,” Buttercup sputtered. “It’s spicy!”

“Huh?”

Having caught her breath, Buttercup took another sip. Now that she was expecting the kick, it was actually quite nice. She’d never liked sweet or fruity drinks, and Neha’s margarita didn’t disappoint. “The margarita. I think it’s got some kind of jalapeño infusion or something.”

“Heh, she did say it was spicy,” Butch said.

Wes lit up. “Oh yeah, like your element! I get it now.”

Buttercup had not gotten it until he said it, and now that she did she wondered if it was supposed to be a joke. Butch took it as one and snorted.

“That’s you, BC. All spice and nothing nice.”

“I’ll nicely shove my foot up your ass.”

His eyes flashed red, and Buttercup felt her pulse quicken on instinct, her body primed to respond to his inherent threat even after all these years.

“You’d probably enjoy that,” he taunted.

“Not as much as you would,” she taunted him right back.

They stared each other down. She could see the muscles in his neck clenching and unclenching as he undoubtedly felt the same instinctual pull to ruin each other as she did.


The gravitational force between Butch and Buttercup fizzled when she tore her gaze from him to look at Wes. His platinum blond hair hung in his eyes, less stylish and more overworked. Her pulse slowed and her blood pressure slowly fell. “Thanks Wes. Ty’s all right, just healing.”

Wes seemed to relax a little now that the situation had been defused. “Recovery’s a bitch. Wait’ll he gets to physical therapy. I thought I’d lose my mind back when I took a bullet in my shoulder.”

Buttercup grinned. “Yeah, I remember you were complaining every second you had to spend with the cute physical therapist.”

Wes laughed. “He was cute, but he was a slave driver!”
“And you made a full recovery. Seems like my kind of slave driver.”

“You got shot?” Butch asked.

“Yeah, four years ago…” Wes launched into the story of the heroic bank heist he’d helped thwart, and the conversation turned enthusiastic and friendly in an instant. Buttercup had heard the story before on several occasions, but Wes was an entertaining storyteller and she was soon absorbed in the conversation.

Neha returned with refills to their drinks and more food, which they all happily consumed as the conversation turned further back in time to high school. Wes and Butch had both been on the football team and part of the same extended group of friends once upon a time. Wes lamented that they’d fallen out of touch, but now that Butch was back, he was looking forward to making up for lost time.

“You should come to poker night,” Wes said. “Not that we do it often, but me and a few guys from high school try to get together every month for a game. Everybody’s so busy and doing their own thing, so it’s easier to just have a recurring thing to keep us all a little connected, you know?”

“Hey, refills incoming.” Boomer appeared with a fresh pitcher of beer and a new margarita for Buttercup. “Wes, good to see you, man.”

“Hey Boomer, great place you’ve got. I’d heard you’d opened a bar. It suits you,” Wes said.

Buttercup sipped her new spicy margarita. She’d have to thank Neha later for the suggestion.

“Yeah, it was Brick’s idea, actually,” Boomer said. “One of his better ones, but you didn’t hear that from me.”

Wes laughed. “Sure, sure.”

Buttercup popped a kale chip in her mouth as she listened. Butch snatched her margarita while she was distracted and took a long, savoring sip.

“Huh,” he said.

“What, too spicy for you?” Buttercup said.

“Like a kick in the ‘nads.”

“Aw, your favorite,” Boomer teased him.

“Depends on the day.”

Buttercup scoff. “No time like the present. I’ll volunteer to assist.” She cracked her knuckles.

Butch set down the drink and leered. “Sure. Handy out back?”

“Oh fuck you.”

“I just said I’m game! You volunteered and everything!”

Boomer and Wes snickered.

Buttercup rolled her eyes. “Ha ha. You writing your own material these days? Or stealing jokes from virgin high school boys?”
“Hey don’t hate on virgin high school boys. You never had a problem with them when I was one.”

The hairs on the back of Buttercup’s neck stood on end at the implication. Joking around was one thing, but this was too far. And the bastard damn well knew it as he watched her like a hawk, smirking like the asshole he was.

To Buttercup’s genuine surprise, Boomer intervened before it could get weird. “If it wasn’t for Brisa, I’d say nothing’s changed. Wes, you met my niece yet?” He pulled out his phone and showed Wes a picture of Brisa, and Buttercup’s sudden and visceral panic was forgotten by everyone present.

Boomer stuck around for a couple more minutes to tell Wes about how Brisa had helped his brothers against the Red Monster using her shield, and Wes joked that she would have been an asset during the Sludge Monster attack on Townsville around the same time. Butch was happy to have a chance to brag about his girl, and Buttercup excused herself to use the bathroom.

She splashed water on her face and studied her reflection in the mirror of the single-use stall. Her eyeliner was a little smeared from the day’s wear, so she spent a few seconds fixing it. Her bun was messy and loose, so she pulled it out and combed out her shoulder-length hair with her fingers to calm herself.

“Get a grip,” she whispered, barely audible.

_It was a long time ago._

In the past, where it belonged. It didn’t matter. It never had, that was the entire point.

She stood there for a couple minutes just breathing, and then headed back out to the bar. She passed Boomer on her way, and they locked eyes. He said nothing, but he nodded discreetly, meaningfully. Buttercup stared after him a moment.

Did he change the subject on purpose? Does he…?

No, Boomer couldn’t know. No one did, _that was the entire point_. She hadn’t even told her sisters. She’d just assumed Butch never told his brothers either. Their siblings had never understood them together in any sense of the word, and they had both always been content to leave it at that.

She returned to the table to find Wes and Butch laughing about something as the former donned his windbreaker to leave.

“Hey Buttercup,” Wes greeted her with a friendly smile. “I’m so sorry, I gotta split. Brikowski just called our team in for an emergency debriefing. It’s bullshit, but everybody knows you get unofficially benched for weeks if you blow him off.”

Buttercup frowned. “For real? It’s like…” She checked her phone and frowned even deeper at the time. “Shit, almost 11?” Where had the time gone?

“Yeah, sucks. But hey, let’s do this again soon! Pablo was telling me Clara and Bubbles have been spending a lot of time together, and he thought about inviting all you ladies over for dinner soon. You can be my plus one.” He winked.

“Yeah, right. If it’s Clara and Bubbles together, you know they’ll find some poor guy to drag into their matchmaking schemes for you. I’d be suicidal to get in the middle of that.”

Wes winced. “Yeah, good point.”
He said his goodbyes to Butch and her and left them to their drinks. Buttercup slid back into the booth. It felt much larger and emptier without Wes there as Butch eyed her.

“You were gone a while,” he said.

“Had to take a shit.”

He laughed. “Figures, you rude bitch.”

She returned his smile, grateful for the levity after the awkward way she’d left it. Her margarita was finished, but there was a clean glass and plenty of beer, so she poured herself a drink and raised it to Butch.

“What are we toasting to?” Butch asked.

She looked around at this hipster-cringe waterhole where she never in a hundred years would have imagined sharing a drink with Butch, of all people. “To irony.”

He grinned, and the light caught on his incisor. “To monster happy hour.”

Ironic indeed. But perhaps not all bad. The beer went down smoothly and the sliders Neha brought them were just what three-drink Buttercup wanted.

“Mm, get in my mouth,” she said as she took a huge bite and nearly finished off her second slider in as many minutes.

“Yeah, see that right there? High school me would’ve flayed you raw for that,” Butch teased.

“But not reformed, Daddy Butch?”

He groaned. “You did that on purpose. Are you trying to get me going?”

Buttercup couldn’t decide whether to laugh or be disgusted. “Gross, you don’t seriously like that shit, do you? Your daughter literally calls you daddy.”

“Hey, that was her choice. I tried getting her to call me Butch for the longest time, but she just kept up with that daddy shit and now it’s completely out of control.”

“You’re her dad. That’s the only situation when it’s not creepy or gross for a girl to call a guy that.”

He shrugged. “Yeah, whatever.”

Buttercup watched him a moment. He’d mentioned before that Brisa was unplanned, even if he’d been crass about it. She wondered. “Butch… Oh for fuck’s sake, it’s your brother.”

“Huh?”

Buttercup glared at Brick, who had appeared at the end of the bar and was sitting alone with his drink and looking at his phone. He didn’t look up at her, but knowing how paranoid he was, she had no doubt that he knew she was here with Butch.

Butch followed her gaze behind him and spotted his brother. “Oh.” He went back to his drink.

“What the hell is he doing here?” Buttercup wondered aloud.

“Drinking alone. Shocker.”
Buttercup pulled a face. “He does that a lot?”

“Just when he’s got free time, which is, like, never. He’s always out with clients or Princess Morbucks.”

Buttercup cringed. As if she didn’t already have enough reasons to dislike Brick. “Gross.”

“I mean, she’s rich and hot. He could do a lot worse.”

“They’re together?” Instinctively, she wondered what Blossom would think about that.

“I don’t know, but they hang out a lot. I think they work together. Probably fucking on the side though. Why do you care?” His eyes widened. “Oh shit, I get it now. You wanna hate fuck my brother, don’t you? That’s why you’re always on about him.”

Buttercup choked on her sip of beer. “Are you fucking kidding me?!?”

“I mean, I get it. He’s a Red.”

Buttercup was so flabbergasted and appalled that she could hardly form a coherent thought beyond, “What the fuck does that mean?”

“What we were talking about earlier, before Wes got here.”

“The envy thing? What does that have to do with anything?”

Butch looked at her like he didn’t quite recognize her. “You know, the whole power and control thing. I used to get so obsessive about it sometimes. I mean, we were made, not born. It’s not like we ever had a choice in who we’d become.”

Buttercup was momentarily at a loss for words as she finally understood what he was trying to tell her. “You think you were jealous of your brother because he was the leader and you weren’t? And you think that’s because you were created that way?”

“Well, yeah. You… You’ve never felt that way? Seriously?”

Buttercup sat back in her seat, stunned. She had never thought about it that way. Was that true? Could it be that the reason she had never been the leader Blossom was, even when Blossom fucked off to Metroville and she was all Bubbles had left, was because she’d literally been created to fill a different role? That no matter how hard she worked at her job, how many cases she cracked, how many criminals she put away, she’d never be the charismatic rallying force her big sister was born to be? All those times when they were kids and Buttercup had demanded a shot at being the leader, and every time she’d failed spectacularly…

Her stomach lurched as she recalled Murray’s face, calm and determined as she took charge of the crisis and evacuated all those civilians while Buttercup fruitlessly pummeled the Red Monster. That face, ashen and open-mouthed in terror as Murray’s corpse lay at her feet, a whole life wasted along with so many others buried under the rubble. Would they have lived if Blossom had been there instead of Buttercup? Would she have done things differently?

And worse still, how many more would have died if Brick hadn’t shown up and taken charge when he did?

“Yeah, thought so,” Butch said softly.
Buttercup stared at him, and she must have looked particularly stricken because his expression slackened in sympathy. But his sympathy was the absolute last thing she ever wanted from him, and somehow he recognized this too.

“Hey,” he said, more firmly, more of a growl. “Don’t fucking cry. I get it, but I never said it was fine.”

That was all it took to snap her out of the sudden but searing wave of anguish that had silenced her. “I’m not fucking crying, you idiot. When have you ever seen me cry?”

“Never,” he said readily. “You’ve never let the bastards drag you down. You never will.”

Angry, stubborn pride swelled in her chest at his scathing praise, because it was him, and because it was her. And it meant more coming from him than it ever had coming from anyone else.

*Weed and Natty Lite, his worn motorcycle jacket under her bare shoulders, the Redwoods standing vigil, and starlight in her eyes and in his, fumbling, snickering, rough hands and swollen lips but their eyes full of stars and each other—*

“I don’t want to fuck your brother,” she hissed. “Hatefully or otherwise.”

“Okay,” he said, and she believed him.

The silence that followed was tense but not entirely uncomfortable. He waited as she collected her thoughts and mustered the courage to look him in the eye.

“I’ve envied Blossom,” she said so softly she almost thought he wouldn’t hear her.

He said nothing, merely watched her.

Buttercup wrung her hands around her beer. “I used to… I mean, even now a little. She can fuck up epically and I still…” She squeezed her eyes shut, but all she could see was Murray’s dead face. “If I was more like her, maybe I could have saved them.”

Butch’s hands closed around her wrists and pried her hands off her drink. Buttercup had rarely seen him look so serious, and it quite honestly scared her.

“Don’t,” he said, barely above a whisper. “Don’t fucking cry. I tried that, and it doesn’t bring them back. Trust me.” He searched her gaze, but it was like he was seeing someone else, someone who was no longer there, someone he couldn’t save. “I envied Brick for years, and I still failed. I failed so many times.”

His grip on her wrists was firm but not painful, and his palms were warm, too warm. She clenched her fists, itching to crush something, maybe him if he’d let her.

“But I realized something out there. I’m not my brother; I was literally created to be different from him. And you… You’re like me.”

It wasn’t the first time he’d spoken to her like this, but it was the first time it came out sounding like a plea rather than demand.

“It doesn’t matter what we were created to do or be. We’re people, human. Better,” Buttercup argued.

“Not when we try to be them.”
Buttercup unclenched her fists. Her fingers brushed his wrists, and his grip on her slackened.

“You gotta let that collateral shit go. It was a fucking monster attack. Of course people were going to get hurt and die.”

“I should’ve done more. I could’ve—”

“You couldn’t. Your partner? He chose to be there just like all the other cops. That’s their job. My buddies who died in combat also chose to be there. It’s a goddamned circus out there, and you can’t save everybody. No one can.”

“So what? That’s your big epiphany? Just take it in stride because that’s life and it sucks?” she spat.

“No, for me it’s my job. I fight, I push, I keep going when there’s no one else left standing because I’m the only one who can. Not Boomer, not even Brick, me. My brother… I think he’s always understood that about us, our roles. And he always tried to spare me and Boomer from the bullshit he deals with all the time until he couldn’t, ‘cause I wouldn’t let him. I just had to go and see for myself…”

Butch regarded her like it was the hardest thing he’d done all day. “At the end of the day when the soldiers have carried out every last order and they’re ready to come home, it’s the general who has to take responsibility for the fallout. He has the heaviest burden because it was his call, so he better be the fucking smartest, coldest, most ruthless son of a bitch in the room or it’ll crush him and everyone under him.”

Pressure curled her fingers, and Buttercup realized his hands had found hers somehow.

“So you don’t have to like him, or your sister, or whatever. But don’t cry about shit you can’t control. That’s their problem to manage. Like you said—” He smiled wryly. “They do their shit, we do ours.”

His hands were rough and calloused, hands that crushed, hands that lifted his little girl into the air to let her fly. Hands that had held her once too, when he’d asked her. And once more, when she’d asked him.

“Why?” he’d asked simply, bluntly.

“Because it’ll never happen again,” she’d responded just as simply, bluntly.

“I can’t die out there, you know. Guns can’t kill me.”

Half in shadow, half in light, he’d stood before her in the door of her mean apartment that the Professor had fought tooth and nail against because Citiesville was not safe for a 22-year-old woman, Super cop-in-training or otherwise.

“No, only I can do that. So get in here.”

He’d left on tour the next morning, and she didn’t see him again until a few weeks ago.

“We’re not a team, you and me,” she said, removing her hands from his.

He eyed her clasped hands across from him but didn’t reach for her again. “Riiiiiight, and this is our not-a-team monster happy hour.”
“By that logic, we should invite Brick to join us.”

“Sure, if you want to sit and be depressed all night.” He glanced back at his brother, who was still nose-deep in his phone. “Who the fuck is he texting?”

“Who gives a shit?” Buttercup sipped her beer.

“Yeah, you’re right. It’s probably porn anyway.”

Buttercup made a face. “In public? Even I think he’s not that fucked up.”

“What, you don’t rub one out on your morning coffee break? With all that stress you’re under?”

“Butch, what the actual fuck.”

“I’m just saying! The hair down is better, but those bags under your eyes just give you this zombie look. A smoking hot zombie who could really do with a quickie in the bathroom. Objectively speaking.”

“You’re deranged, you know that?”

He laughed. “I’m just improvising.”

He watched her, and Buttercup felt her throat plummet to the pit of her stomach. Was he really propositioning her? Of all people, of all times? With their history? He had a fucking kid.

And no. Fuck no, she was not going down this road with him. It was never happening again, as she’d promised him. Once so they could leave their annoying virginity in high school where it belonged, and twice because the first time never counts for ranking purposes. She could think of no practical reason to revisit any of that with him.

“Well don’t, you’re bad at it,” she said.

Something in his expression changed, but she couldn’t quite place it. “Fine. You’re wrong, but fine.”

Before she could argue that, he pulled out a deck of Cards Against Humanity from his pocket and began shuffling.

“Are you serious? I haven’t played this in years,” Buttercup said.

“It’s still early and we have a pitcher to finish. Since you don’t wanna get railed, I’ll just have to kick your ass at drinking games.”

He was focusing on the cards and she could not tell if he was really joking, but she wasn’t about to waste the easy out he’d given her to ignore that can of worms entirely. “This game isn’t even competitive.”

He glanced up at her, a smile in his eyes. “Bet I can make you laugh first.”

Buttercup grinned in challenge. “You’re on.”

He dealt the cards, and for the first time that day, Buttercup felt herself well and truly relax on her night off.
Blossom: That was the cornerstone of arrogance. You could have injured someone blasting off like that.

Brick read her text sent a couple hours later. He’d arrived home in a cab of his own once he hit the city limits and, finding that he was wide awake and restless, headed to B-3 to blow off a little steam.

He had literally spun on his heel to leave when he’d spotted Butch and Buttercup with a couple beers at one of the booths absorbed in serious conversation. Boomer caught him before he could run away, though, and offered him a glass of whiskey already poured, like some kind of wizard.

Boomer was busy tending to other patrons now, but Brick was content to camp out at the corner stool (as far away from Butch and Buttercup as humanly possible) and watch Boomer work. He never said it, and he suspected Boomer never needed to hear it, but there was something cathartic about being in his brother’s presence. Brick felt it more and more over the years, especially after Boomer had opened up this bar, a compromise that kept him here instead of seeing him fuck off to Metroville like some lost hippie trying to find himself.

Brick read the text again. She was busy tomorrow, she’d said. No details, just busy doing something else. Something not with him. What did he care? He didn’t. It was just that they had established something of a routine this week. Brick respected routines, and he knew she did too. Except she was suddenly busy tomorrow.

The time stamp on Blossom’s text read three minutes past. He gave it another two for posterity’s sake.

Brick: You haven’t seen arrogant.

Blossom: I’ve been seeing him every night this week.

He considered her words, imagined her speaking them to his face. She’d be frowning in that way she had, at once put off and a little playful. Always pushy, never wholly satisfied, but eager to make him try.

Brick: Not every night. Heard you’re blowing me off tomorrow.

Blossom: I’m in high demand.

He chuckled to himself and sipped his drink. Now who’s arrogant?

“Hey bro, you want another? Something to eat?” Boomer approached on his way to drop off a crate of freshly washed glasses behind the bar.

Brick put his phone down before Boomer could see the text chain. “Yeah, whatever. You know what I like.”

Boomer glanced at Brick’s red iPhone. “Sure. Were you just texting someone?”

“How is that any of your business?”

Boomer shrugged. “Just curious I guess. You barely text.”

“Just because I don’t respond to your vapid memes doesn’t mean I don’t text other people.”

“Hey, I only send you the dankest of memes. Anyway, you have, like, four contacts on that phone,
and half of us are here. So I guess tell Princess hi for me.”

“I’m not texting Princess.”

Boomer smiled knowingly. “Well then, don’t let me interrupt your late night sexting with Mojo.”

Brick flipped him off, and Boomer returned it in kind before getting back to his work. A bark of laughter drew Brick’s attention to Butch and Buttercup’s table.

_The fuck’re they so happy about?_

He angled his phone and furtively snapped a photo of them, which he fired off to Blossom.

[Brick: BC’s in higher demand tonight.]

[Blossom: You’re with my sister?]

[Brick: No, she’s here with Butch.]

[Blossom: Where is here?]

Brick looked around, satisfied that no one was openly observing him, and snapped another photo of the bar and Boomer bent over the cash register.

[Brick: Boomer’s bar.]

[Blossom: Must be nice not to have work in the morning.]

He scoffed and typed back his immediate reply.

[Brick: The beauty of being my own boss. I set my own hours.]

She didn’t respond right away, so he set his phone aside to eat the food the server brought him. Every few bites, he glanced at his phone, but it didn’t light up. He checked the last text he sent, but it was unread.

Brick checked his work phone for a few minutes, but there were no new emails requiring his immediate attention. He unsubscribed from a clothing store mailing list and closed out of all his apps. People-watching had never piqued his interest given how excruciatingly dull most people were, but he looked around the bar anyway. There were a couple older women at the other end of the bar dolled up for a night out. The curly-haired one caught his eye and smiled. Brick remained stony-faced and looked away. Blossom still had not responded to his text, but the read notification had changed. What did that mean? She was ignoring his texts now? How juvenile.

“Trouble in paradise?” Boomer asked.

“What?”

He nodded at Brick’s phone clasped in his hands like a talisman. “She ghosting you or something?”

Brick narrowed his eyes. “She?”

“Dude, please, you’re clearly texting some chick. Checking your phone every thirty seconds to see if she responded, sending pictures—which you _never_ do, don’t look at me like that. And it’s your personal phone. So QED, she’s a very special lady.”
Brick pocketed his phone. “Congratulations. You want a medal for having eyes?”

Boomer laughed. “Do I get to give an acceptance speech?”

“Moron.”

“I love you too, man.”

Brick scowled. “I’m touched. While you’re feeling the brotherly love, why don’t you bring me a refill.”

Boomer made a show of sighing and took his glass. “All right, all right. I’ll even give it to you for free in exchange for one fact about Miss Phone Sex.”

“That would mean it’s not free.”

“Not without the requested fun fact!” He dangled Brick’s empty glass in front of him. “C’mon, just one little detail? I’m dying to know!”

Brick considered melting the glass right out of Boomer’s hand out of pure spite, but he remembered that stupid fucking ordinance and valiantly refrained. A fun fact about Blossom? Immediately, his mind wandered to their many encounters and how each time he anticipated both the struggle and the surrender that colored them.

*She likes having her hair pulled.*

A particularly gratifying memory made him grin, but he thought better about revealing something so intimate to Boomer, because what the actual fuck.

He thought about the first night, how he’d approached her and Princess’ shared table. Her hair was a dream, her dress a temptation slashed with red. She was looking up at him then, her cheeks as red as the accents in her dress in her fluster, and in that split second he’d decided he wanted to try her just because. And then the wine they’d shared at his place, and the time that blurred to nothing as they talked, absorbed in each other. Surprising her at her office and holding her after. The dress he’d ruined and recently replaced with something far more…more.

“Fine,” he said at length. “One fact about her.”

Boomer leaned over the bar in anticipation.

“She’s gorgeous in red.”

“Huh. High praise coming from Red himself.”

Brick said nothing. Something about the way Boomer was watching him unsettled him, as if anything he said might betray him and Boomer would divine everything. His baby brother, Brick constantly had to remind himself, was far too observant for his own good.

“Don’t you have work to do?” Brick snapped.

Boomer blinked and flashed him an easy smile. “Sure. I’ll leave you to your blue balls.”

*Moron.*

Alone again, Brick crossed his arms and leaned back in his bar stool, brooding. Butch and Buttercup were still absorbed in conversation and enjoying a round of beers. Brick scowled in their
general direction. He’d never understood how a connection built on a mutual desire to beat the
other person to within an inch of their life simply for the joy of it could sustain itself through the
years. It would have made more sense if they were just fucking. That thought put a terrible taste in
his mouth and some extremely unwelcome visions in his mind. He couldn’t be here in the same
room as them just thinking about the possibility, no matter how outlandish.

Brick didn’t say goodbye to Boomer, nor did he acknowledge Butch and Buttercup as he all but ran
out of B-3 and began walking home. Some fresh air would do him some good, even the damp,
exhaust-sodden Citiesville air. He was so focused on not thinking about Butch and Buttercup
hunched over their booth lost in conversation and laughing at each other’s jokes without a care for
who saw them together that he was taken by surprise when he felt his phone buzz in his pocket.

[Blossom: A boss of one. Not the path I imagined you would take.]

Brick took a moment to recall their conversation.

[Blossom: I don’t mean that in a bad way.]

He’d stopped walking to stare at his phone and her latest texts. He imagined her staring at her own
phone, seeing his read receipts, waiting. She was busy tomorrow night, she’d said. She couldn’t
see him.

Brick ducked under a dark store awning out of the way of the sidewalk and pressed the call button.
She answered after four rings.

“Hello?”

“Saturday 8 p.m. I assume you like French food,” he said.

She scoffed. “Is that a question or a command?”

“It’s whatever will get you to say yes.”

A pause, then: “Brick…”

That’s not what this is.

He easily deflected. “I bought the dress, so I should get to see it worn.”

He could practically hear her roll her eyes. “You mean the dress you unilaterally decided to buy
without my permission and then forced me to accept?”

“I remember you being happy to accept a lot more than just the dress that day in your office.”

There was a short silence, and he imagined her flushing madly. She played her ice queen role well
when they were together, but the slightest teasing seemed to get under her skin more than any
heated touch could. There was something oddly endearing about it.

“Why are you really asking me?”

Brick closed his eyes and clenched and unclenched his fist. He itched to blast something just then,
to feel concrete crack and glass shatter. “You’re busy tomorrow. I like planning ahead.”

He heard cloth rustling and a zipper unzipping. “…This dress is much nicer than the one you
ruined.”
Brick imagined her running her fingers down the red satin, just as he’d done when he’d picked it for her. “I have good taste.”

“You like what you like.”

He remembered books and fine wine, a couch and the soft give of a rug under his elbows, and her looming over him, pushing him down. He swallowed. “Just say yes.”

“I don’t take orders from you.”

That was debatable. Still, Brick said nothing.

“All right,” she relented. “Saturday at 8 p.m. Text me the address.”

They hung up, and Brick immediately placed another call to a local chef who owed him unlimited favors after Brick had convinced a certain loan shark to forgive the man’s many debts, enabling him to open up the only three star Michelin restaurant in Citiesville. The dinner reservation was secured in a matter of minutes, no questions asked, and Brick texted Blossom the address soon after.

It didn’t occur to him until after he made it home later to wonder if he had just asked her on a real date.

A date with Blossom.

When Boomer walked into Bubbles’ kindergarten classroom wearing a bartender’s three-piece suit and holding Brisa’s hand, he was a little overwhelmed by all the other parents that had amassed to impart their career wisdom on this most sacred of days. There were people in fancy suits, fluorescent construction uniforms, a pair of doctors in scrubs, and even one guy in a race car driver’s jumpsuit.

“That guy’s a dad? Damn, he’s hot!” whispered Software Engineer Mom to her cute friend, Homemaker Mom.

Lucky for them, they probably didn’t realize his Super hearing picked up every whispered word between them. He chuckled to himself.

“What’s so funny?” Brisa asked, looking up at him.

Boomer squeezed her little hand affectionately. “Nothing. I just don’t think I’ve been around so many moms in my entire life.”

Brisa’s lips curled in a smirk that reminded him eerily of Butch when he was about to suggest some scheme that would be as much fun as it would be dangerous. “Some of them don’t have dads. You should talk to them!”

Boomer laughed again. “Since when are you playing matchmaker?”

“I told Daddy too, but he just made a funny face like—” She scrunched up her face like she’d gotten a whiff of something gross.

Boomer thought of Butch closing B-3 down with Buttercup last night. They’d stayed up until nearly three in the morning playing cards and then various drinking games, even managing to rope Neha and a couple other late-night patrons into their debauchery.
Killing time, that was how Butch had described his “relationship” with Buttercup back in high school.

You know, right.

“Yeah, right.”

“You know, I’m pretty sure your dad’s not interested in making friends with any of these moms,” Boomer said. “He’s got other things keeping his interest these days.”

Brisa looked up at him quizzically, but she had the attention span of a five-year-old (considering she was one) and quickly forgot about it all when she spotted some of her friends and ran off to play with them.

“Boomer? What’re you doing here?”

Bubbles approached him, and he held his breath. She really pulled off the gorgeous professional look in a high-waisted, floral print skirt and a button-up shirt with her blonde curls long and loose. He almost reached for her, but remembered himself and where they were.

“In full costume, no less,” he said with a smile and did a little spin for her.

“I can see that. Very dashing. Doesn’t answer my question, though. Where’s Butch?”

Boomer sighed and nodded for her to join him near the wall away from the prying eyes and ears of the gossipy moms and dads gathered around their children. “Hung over. I could barely wake him this morning.”

“Really? On a school night?”

“When have you ever known my brother to care about school nights?”

She frowned and crossed her arms. “He’ll start caring when he gets a summons for a parent-teacher conference.”

Boomer winced. Bubbles was sweet and compassionate, but she was no pushover. He would definitely not be subbing in for Butch during that meeting.

“Yeah, I thought about telling him to quit early, but…” He recalled Butch laughing to the point of tears when Buttercup bench pressed Neha in honor of their victory at quarters, but in her drunkenness lost her grip and both women toppled to the floor in a fit of laughter.

“But?”

“He was having a good night. Buttercup was there too. I didn’t have the heart to ruin their fun, I guess.”

Bubbles was still frowning, but her expression softened just a bit. “So he finally got her to relax a little. Oh, Buttercup…”

“Miss Bubbles!”

Brisa came bounding over with a scrawny blond kid in tow. He was so skinny that when he stumbled as Brisa dragged him, Boomer was sure he’d snap in half. Bubbles was paying more attention and swooped in to steady him.

“Brisa, you have to be careful,” Bubbles chided. “Richie’s not a stuffed Pretty Puff Pony, he’s your friend. And what do we never do to our friends?”
Brisa covered her mouth and blushed, embarrassed. In a muffled voice she said, “We don’t drag our friends.”

Boomer burst out laughing. Bubbles shot him a withering look. “Sorry,” he said, trying to stifle his laughter. “It’s solid advice, really.”

“It’s okay, Miss Bubbles. I don’t mind getting dragged!” said the twig boy.

Boomer nearly choked on his tongue. How Bubbles could keep a straight face, he had no idea.

“Brisa, please apologize to Richie.” Bubbles stood at her full height with her hands on her hips, very intimidating.

Brisa pulled a face and crossed her little arms, but she complied. “Sorry, Richie. I didn’t mean to drag you so hard.”

“Oh my god,” Boomer said, still trying to contain his laughter.

“’S okay,” Richie said, wiping his runny nose.

“What’s going on here? Richie darling, I turned around and you were gone.” A tall woman in a white designer suit and heels approached, curious but friendly.

“Mrs. Swathe, I’m sorry about that. Brisa can be a bit energetic when it comes to her best friend,” Bubbles said. She put her hands on Brisa’s shoulders and gave the girl a reassuring squeeze—no harm done.

“Brisa? Ah, the one you’ve been going on and on about, I presume.” The woman knelt down to the kids’ eye level. “Hello there. Nice to finally put a face to the name. And such a cute one at that.”

Brisa blinked. “Are you Richie’s mommy?”

The woman smiled, and her ice blue eyes warmed. “I am.” She set her sights on Boomer next. “And you must be Brisa’s father?”

“He’s not my dad,” Brisa said rudely.

Boomer flushed. It seemed Brisa was still a little upset about this morning, after all…

“Oh, I’m so sorry, I didn’t realize,” she said, politely ignoring Brisa’s tone.

“Uncle, actually,” Bubbles said. “Brisa’s father couldn’t make it today, so Boomer stepped in at the last minute.”

“That’s so thoughtful of you to help out your niece.” She held out her manicured hand for Boomer to shake. “Dinah Swathe. I’m Richie’s mother.”

Dinah had a gravity about her that seemed to flatten everyone around her until they were forced to look up at her in all her regal, aristocratic glory. And yet, she didn’t strike Boomer as alienated or stiff even in her pressed Prada and three-inch Jimmy Choos. He wondered if she’d come from more humble beginnings once upon a time.

Boomer accepted her waiting hand. She had a firm grip, confident but not too hard. “Nice to meet you.”

Dinah smiled warmly, like she really knew how. “Richie talks about Brisa all the time, so you can
imagine how much I’ve been looking forward to finally meeting her and her family.” To Brisa she said, “Thank you for being such a good friend to my son.”

Brisa smiled, a bit shy. “Um, you’re welcome.”

The bell rang, and Richie took Brisa’s hand in his. “C’mon, let’s go sit down. Mommy, Mister Boomer, are you gonna sit with us?”

Dinah laughed and shot Boomer a knowing look. “Career Day. Turns out it’s a nice excuse to skip work and spend time with my son. The irony, right?”

Boomer found himself returning her smile, albeit a little awkwardly. “Like rain on your wedding day.”

She laughed at his joke and followed Richie and Brisa to their little table, where extra chairs had been set on either side for parents.

Bubbles nudged Boomer after her. “Go on, I’ll call you when it’s your turn to speak.”

Boomer forgot all about Dinah and whirled on Bubbles. “Oh crap, what am I supposed to say, anyway? I didn’t even think about that part.”

“Whatever you want. It’s Career Day, so just talk about a typical day in the life.”

“I serve alcohol for a living. This isn’t exactly my crowd.”

Bubbles smiled slyly and leaned in a little too close to be friendly. “Then I guess you’ll have to improvise. Oh, and just so you know, I’m grading you.”

“Grading—Bubbles.”

But she slipped away and went to the front of the classroom to explain the way the day would go, scheduled breaks, and a few instructions for the kids to pay close attention and consider what they thought they would want to be when they grew up.

Boomer took his seat next to Brisa at the table she shared with Richie. Dinah, who somehow managed to make sitting in a plastic chair meant for a child half her size look dignified, smiled at him in greeting. He nodded. At least she seemed nice enough.

Bubbles ran the show calling for various parents to stand up and give a little talk about their jobs, how they spent their days, and what they liked best about their work. It soon became clear that the kids were trying to figure out who had the best job, and they were happy to be vocal about their opinions. One dad, a fireman, brought the Fire Department’s resident Dalmatian in on a leash and let the kids pet her. He was the running favorite so far, beating out a defense attorney, a homemaker, a plumber, and a college physics professor.

Boomer’s turn was toward the end, and so he got up and faced a roomful of bored kids and their equally bored parents. He spotted more than a few checking work emails on their phones, and some kids had taken to doodling rather than paying attention. He supposed he couldn’t blame them considering they’d been sitting still for the better part of an hour already.

He cleared his throat. Bubbles sat on her desk and smiled at him encouragingly. “Hey everyone. I’m Boomer—”

“Hi, Mister Boomer,” said the kids in broken unison like trained monkeys.
Boomer rubbed the back of his neck. It was a bit warm in here wearing a three-piece bartender’s suit. “Uh, hi. So I’m Brisa’s—well, she’s my brother’s kid, so that makes me her uncle, I guess.”

Crickets.

“Right, so my job… Well, I don’t know if any of you would actually know about my job considering, you know, you’re all severely underage…”

Someone coughed. Boomer’s Super hearing picked up on a not-so-silent but deadly fart from the insurance receptionist in the fourth row. He bit his lip not to laugh, but felt Bubbles’ warning look and swallowed it.

“So-o-o-o-o, you’re probably wondering why I’m wearing this ridiculous suit,” Boomer said, spreading his arms to show off his costume.

Nothing.

Boomer cleared his throat. “Or not…” he said under his breath.

How could it be this hard to talk about his job?

_Probably because I don’t really like my job._

He rubbed his eyes. _Bad thoughts._ A job was a job. He didn’t hate his job, but it wasn’t what he’d dreamed of doing when he was five years old. What five-year-old dreams of losing the woman he loves, spiraling for a year, and then having his big brother drag him out of that slump by the ankles and force him to get his life back in order because Brother Code doesn’t let anyone slip through the cracks? You wanna be miserable and unsuccessful? Fine, but do it sober and standing on your own two feet.

“Uncle Boomer?”

Brisa’s soft voice drew him out of those dark thoughts. She was watching him with those nervous, brown eyes that had woken him up this morning. She’d been over the moon for Career Day and the chance to show off her cool dad to all her friends, but when Butch was too hung over to get out of bed after the one night he’d had to himself in weeks, she’d been devastated. Boomer knew there was no way he could let her down, even if he was a poor substitute for the one she really wanted to be here today.

“Okay,” he said. “Career Day. Right.”

He began to roll up his sleeves. “What does that even mean to any of you, huh? Who here knows what they want to be they grow up? How about you?”

He pointed to a random Asian kid. “I wanna be an airplane pilot!”

“Oh yeah? Why’s that?”

“’Cause flyin’s cool.”

Boomer cracked a smile. “Fair enough. How about you, in the pink?”

The little brunette girl blushed. “Um, I want to be an astronaut. I’m gonna go to new planets and meet aliens!”

“Cool, awesome. Who else? You know what, just shout them out at me.”
“Policeman!”

“Veterinarian!”

“Acrobat!”

“Princess!”

Boomer laughed at that last one. “Every little girl is a princess, so you’re set.”

“Explorer!”

“President of the United States!”

“Superhero!”

Boomer looked at Brisa, caught up in the game despite her disappointment in him. “Superhero, huh? What a coincidence.”

He let his power crackle in his hands, and in a burst of blue light, an energy bat sparkled to life. A few people gasped in surprise, and more than a few kids squealed in delight. Dinah stared open-mouthed at the impossible display of power, her hand on Richie’s shoulder. But Boomer only had eyes for Brisa as he shouldered his energy bat. “That was my dream when I was your age too.”

Brisa smiled hesitantly, and the other kids and even some parents began firing off questions about his powers, if he could fly, if he could shoot lasers, if he could Sonic Scream like Bubbles.

“Hey, I knew I recognized you!” said flirty Software Engineer Mom. “You’re that Rowdyruff Boy who helped defeat the Sludge Monster!”

“Oh my god, he’s a real hero!”

“So cool!”

“Okay everyone, please settle down!” Bubbles raised her voice to be heard. “Let Boomer finish, and then you can ask him your questions.”

“Thanks Bubbles,” he said, winking.

She rolled her eyes, but he saw her fighting a smile.

Boomer swung his bat lightly, and the raw power jumping from it scattered a few papers from the desks nearest to the front. He let it dissipate in a flurry of blue sparks to a chorus of oohs and aahs. “I really only have one thing to say to all of you. Those dreams you have to become a veterinarian, or President of the United States, or even a Superhero—hold on to them. Because they’re not just dreams. They’re choices to do something good with your life no matter how impossible it might seem to anybody else. Sometimes it does feel hard to make those choices. Sometimes it might even feel hopeless.”

He looked at Bubbles and found her watching him with a weighty gaze. He smiled softly for her.

“But it’s never too late to make the right choice. Even if you mess up on the way, or you’re scared, or it feels like the whole world is against you. Take it from me, a guy who was created to destroy your lovely teacher over there, once upon a time.”

All the kids and some of the parents turned to look at Bubbles. She looked like she was on the
verge of tears.

“It’s never too late to choose to do better than you did before,” Boomer said. “I think that’s what it means to be a real hero.” He approached Brisa’s desk and took a knee before her. “And your dad? He makes that choice every day because of you. Even though it can be hard for him, and even if he sometimes messes up and misses your special day. He never gives up, and he’ll never stop trying for you.”

Brisa’s eyes were watery with unshed tears, and her bottom lip trembled. “Really?”

Boomer grinned. “Really really.”

He wasn’t expecting her to launch across the table and tackle him in a super-powered hug that sent him falling flat on his ass. He barely heard the voices around them or the moving feet as he held his niece close and hoped he could convey even a fraction of the love he knew Butch felt for her more deeply than he’d ever felt anything in his life. And from the way she hugged him back, maybe it was enough for now.

He found Bubbles through the crowd by her desk watching them, her eyes shining. Her smile was a dream, and her whispered thank-you found its way to him with his Super hearing. But it was Brisa, her little arms clutched tightly around his neck, who made his heart soar.

“I love you, Uncle Boomer,” she whispered.

He laughed and held her closer. “I love you too, Supergirl.”

The remaining twenty minutes of Career Day devolved into a free for all with the kids asking Boomer to demonstrate his powers for them, and he was happy to oblige them with shows of Super strength and X-ray vision.

Brisa’s smile never left her face for the rest of the period.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Here there be monsters.
Butch yawned, bored. He’d bothered to show up on time at Brick’s request, mostly because he knew his brother could be a real pain in the ass when things didn’t go as he planned them to, and Butch did not have any desire to drag this out any longer than it needed to go. Touring a science lab was not his idea of a good Friday morning.

He sat in the stark white lobby in an extremely uncomfortable chair he was pretty sure he wouldn’t have been able to pass out in if he was dead tired. Brick, of course, somehow managed to look no more stick-up-the-ass rigid than he normally did. Back straight and legs crossed in a fancy rich person suit with a red tie, he was leafing through a copy of Nature scientific magazine like it was the most engaging thing since porn. Butch rolled his eyes and shoved his hands deep in the pockets of his well-worn cargo jacket, sighing loudly as he slumped in vain to get comfortable in this awful fucking chair.

“When’re we getting this show on the road?” Butch asked.

“When my lawyer gets here,” Brick said.

“We’re touring a science lab. What the hell do you need a lawyer for?”

Brick ignored him.

Butch sighed again and shifted. The receptionist, a prim, uptight, mom type glared at him over her cat-eye glasses. He grinned and winked at her, and she hastily returned her attention to her computer screen, scandalized. Even her predictable reaction wasn’t enough to stave off the excruciating boredom of just sitting here with nothing to do.

He sighed yet again and slumped so deeply in his chair that his head barely breached the low backrest. He could feel Brick’s reproving look, but he ignored it.

With nothing else to do, Butch let his green eyes wander, but there wasn’t much to see. The lobby reminded him of a futuristic psych ward with its bleached walls, Spartan decor (there was only a single orchid plant, also white, on the receptionist’s desk), and pristine, white lounge chairs made to look chic and feel like sitting on concrete. A huge shield was embossed on the wall over the receptionist’s desk, two-toned white and chrome. Underneath it the word “Aegis” was printed in polished, chrome letters.

The sliding doors to the building opened with a soft ding, and the sounds of the early morning work rush came flooding in—car horns, a policeman’s whistle, heels and boots clicking and clacking on the pavement as people rushed across Agora Street to get to whatever bank or law firm or tech office they had to get to here in the Financial District. The doors closed smoothly shut after a woman stepped inside and pushed her thick, red bangs from her face. Butch stared a moment as
she crossed the lobby, her stilettos echoing off the whitewashed walls.

Hot, he thought, because she really was in that sleek, black pantsuit and her impossibly long hair draped over her shoulder in a low ponytail. And there was something so familiar about her—

“Blossom.” Brick was on his feet and halfway to her before Butch could even finish his thought.

She smiled, and her eyes—pink eyes, holy shit it was her—softened. “Brick, I’m so sorry I’m late. There was a traffic accident on the bridge while I was driving over.”

“It’s fine, I just got here.”

“What the fuck?” Butch muttered to himself. They had gotten here a good ten minutes ago, and Brick hated to wait.

Brick and Blossom heard him, of course, and suddenly Butch found himself on the ass-end of a legendary Reds stare-down. He repressed the shiver down his spine that poked his fight or flight response. Jesus, it had been a long time.

“Butch?” Blossom asked, like she wasn’t sure it was really him.

“Uh, hey Blossom.” Butch glanced at Brick like he could not believe Blossom was literally standing right there because he could not believe Blossom was literally standing right there. Brick narrowed his eyes in a warning Butch recognized all too well, but had no idea why. “I honestly didn’t expect to see you here.”

Blossom smiled politely, revealing nothing. “It has been a while, hasn’t it? You look good.”

Butch had finally recovered enough to speak like normal. Brick was still looking at him funny, like he was just waiting for Butch to embarrass him or some shit. He decided now was not the time to ask his brother why he had welcomed the person he disliked most in the world aside from Mojo with such easy familiarity.

“Thanks…you too,” he said.

Before he could ask her what the hell she was doing here, a blond woman in white to match the walls and a grey-haired man who looked like he should be teaching English lit to a bunch of snobby college students rolled in from the sliding doors that led deeper into the building.

“Brick, good morning. It’s nice to see you again,” the woman said.

“Dinah,” Brick greeted, stepping forward and placing himself between her and her colleague on one end and Butch and Blossom on the other. “Likewise.”

“Allow me to introduce Ray Sipsa. He’s the General Counsel here at Aegis.”

Butch ignored the pleasantries in favor of glancing at Blossom. She remained quiet and poised while Brick assumed the vanguard of their odd trio. Butch wondered what Boomer would say if he was here to see this.

“My brother, Butch. You remember I mentioned him at our last meeting,” Brick said.

Butch snapped out of it and peered at Dinah and Ray. He had his hands in his pockets and didn’t offer to return Ray’s handshake.

“Look like you could rip them in half but you’re choosing not to,” Brick had coached him before
Butch didn’t have to ask to know what his scheming older brother’s game was. He was here to key jingle while Brick got whatever information he needed without all the attention on him. Which was not a problem at all for Butch. He grinned in a way he knew made people uncomfortable, and Ray immediately dropped his hand. Dinah, however, maintained her pleasant smile as if she were carved out of marble.

“Very nice to meet you, Butch,” Dinah said.

“Sure,” Butch said.

“And this is Blossom, my lawyer.” Brick stepped aside for Blossom, and unlike Butch she deigned to shake hands with both Dinah and Ray.

So that was it. Of all the lawyers in the Peninsula though, the fact that Brick had ended up with Blossom said something. He wasn’t quite sure what it said, but he was sure there was a carefully considered reason for it. Brick was nothing if not paranoid, and that paranoia had served him well over the years on his meteoric rise from the Rowdyruff Boys’ sordid, low-class roots.

“Blossom, of course,” Dinah said, surprised. Her statuesque reserve faltered, and Butch wondered if this was some dumb Powerpuff Girl celebrity thing. Maybe Dinah was a fan getting her chance to literally meet her hero. “My husband speaks quite highly of you.”

“Thank you, the feeling is mutual. Working with Mr. Swathe at the Foundation has been a deeply fulfilling experience for me,” Blossom said.

Yawn.

“I didn’t realize you and Brick were very well-acquainted,” Dinah said.

“Oh, yes well, I recently moved back to Townsville and I’ve been catching up with a lot of people from my past.”

Dinah resumed her carved smile. “How lovely for you.”

Butch tuned out the rest as Blossom went into professional mode talking about some legal shit with Ray. The next thing Butch knew, she was nudging him with a thin stack of papers to sign.

“So what am I signing?” he asked, taking the papers and glancing at the paragraphs of indecipherable legalese on the counter in front of him.

“Nondisclosure agreement,” Blossom said. “I’ve reviewed it, so you don’t have to read it if you don’t want to.”

“No signing away my soul or anything? ‘Cause I’ve been there, done that.”

Blossom looked genuinely disturbed by that, and Brick, who’d just signed his copy, handed him a fountain pen.

“It just says we can’t talk about anything we see here today with anyone,” he said softly enough for the Normies not to overhear. “In exchange, we can see and access anything in the building. Nothing’s off limits.”

“Shit bro, how’d you swing that?”
“I can be very persuasive,” Blossom said as she signed her own copy.

Brick let out a sharp breath, amused. Standing in between them, Butch got a weird feeling like he was missing the punchline of a joke.

Papers signed, dated, and tucked away in a folder Ray had with him, Dinah led the trio into an elevator that transported them below ground.

The next two hours dragged and dragged as Butch listened to Dinah talk about diseases and drugs and a ton of other science shit that was over Butch’s head as she led them through the three floors of laboratories. Brick and Blossom both paused to ask various employees about what they were working on, how they would be incorporating Chemical X into their work, and what complications and opportunities they saw based on whatever preliminary research and trials they had run. It was all very serious, very lengthy, and very boring. Butch just stood there looking mean with his arms crossed and letting his power leak through his clothes, which earned him more than a few fearful looks as the scientists and lab techs told Brick and Blossom everything they wanted to know. Butch was pretty sure they would have divulged their social security numbers if Brick only asked.

One guy in particular was a real snob about his work and kept rewording Brick’s questions like they weren’t good enough to answer.

“What a pedantic jerk,” Blossom muttered softly enough for only those with Super hearing to pick up on.

It took Butch a moment to realize she was talking to him, but her sly glance askance at him put a manic grin on his face. He’d have to look up “pedantic” later, but just the fact that Blossom—uptight, know-it-all, prim and proper Blossom—was trying to joke with him made this whole bizarre adventure kind of worth it.

He leaned in toward her, only mildly bothered that she was an inch taller than him in those stiletto torture heels. “I bet if this guy had X, he’d just use it to make Super Viagra or something.”

To his immense surprise, she grinned. “It certainly sounds like he’s compensating for something.”

“Brick’s probably the prettiest thing he’s talked to since he moved outta his mom’s basement.”

Behind his back, Brick flipped them both the bird as he continued to talk to the rambling scientist. Blossom covered her mouth to stifle a giggle, but Butch felt no such compulsion and barked with laughter. The scientist paused and glared at him, offended, while Blossom took the opportunity to grab Brick’s elbow and apologize, they just had to move on but thank you so much for telling them about his theories regarding Chemical X’s medical applications.

At the end of it, Butch was pretty sure he’d just wasted his entire Friday morning because he’d contributed practically nothing to this endeavor. Blossom was on the phone in the lobby while Brick and Butch gave her some space.

“So,” Butch said.

Brick looked at him. “So what?”

“Dude.”

“What.”

Butch crossed his arms. “You know what.”
Brick was a cold motherfucker, especially when he was really trying, and right now Butch was getting nothing from him but a general “eat shit” vibe.

“You despise her,” Butch said.

“She’s a lawyer. Everyone despises her.”

“She was late and you said it was fine.”

Brick bristled at that one. “I did because it was. I know this doesn’t come naturally to you, but think about the optics of bringing her here for a second. You’re a military man. Does the phrase ‘mutually assured destruction’ ring a bell?”

It rang a few bells, but probably not in the context Brick currently intended. Butch decided not to poke the hornet’s nest any more than he already had. For now.

“Sure does,” he said, eyeing Blossom again as she finished up her phone call.

_Sure does._

“Hey, so I just let my boss know I’ll be working remotely the rest of the day,” Blossom said when she rejoined them.

Brick nodded like he’d been expecting this. “Are you hungry? I know a place around here. It’s quiet.”

“Sounds great, I could eat.”

They exchanged a look like they’d reached some kind of unspoken understanding, and then Blossom looked at Butch.

“Butch? Will you be joining?”

“Nah, I think we all know my job here is done. I’ll leave you two nerds to it.”

He parted from them outside and watched them head off down the block talking amongst themselves as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

_Huh._

He pulled out his phone, opened the browser app, and looked up “pedantic”.

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Brick drove them to an upscale cafe north of Agora Street in his black Porsche 911. Princess texted Blossom on the way.

[Princess: Oh my god I’ve had the most ludicrous morning and I need a drink. You free?]

“Work?” Brick asked when he heard the chime.

“No actually, it’s Princess,” Blossom said.

“Got her claws in you, has she?”

Blossom shrugged. “I’m not complaining.”

Brick held her gaze a moment, red and intense, and she felt the claws he had in her too. “You want
to invite her?"

Blossom thought about that. From what she knew of Brick and Princess, they were the closest each other had to a best friend. “Actually…yes, I would.”

“Well, she’ll be better company than Butch.”

He averted his gaze, but Blossom noticed the way the corner of his lips curved in a subtle smile. Resolved, she texted Princess the address.

The cafe was situated on a rooftop garden twenty stories high, and Brick led the way to a table in the corner under the shade of a gate covered in creeping white roses. The view was fabulous with the bay to the east and the towering skyscrapers of the Financial District catching sunlight.

“So, what did you think?” Blossom asked once the waiter came and went with their food and drink orders.

Brick shed his suit jacket and removed his tie, getting comfortable. Blossom watched his long fingers work at the buttons on his collar. “I think she and her team have put a lot of thought and effort into how X could complement their existing research.”

Blossom nodded, thoughtful. “I agree. It’s astounding how much progress they’ve made already even without it.”

Brick held her gaze.

“What?”

He shook his head. “You think I should give her the X, don’t you?”

Blossom bit her tongue.

“The blind mice,” he went on. “You asked more questions about them and their treatment than about anything else. I was impressed too.”

Blossom remembered the two scientists who explained to Brick and her their progress in finding a way to reverse total blindness, how advanced their research was and how meticulously detailed their theories and hypotheses were concerning Chemical X and its properties. They just needed a sample to put their theories to the test.

She’d never had the read of people’s true hearts like Bubbles did, but meeting the Aegis team, hearing them talk about their work and all that they hoped to accomplish, made it clear that they were the real deal. They were the smartest people on the cutting edge of science united by their shared passion for the advancement of the human race. She smiled sadly.

“The Professor used to talk like that,” she said, her eyes faraway as she remembered his face, lit up and determined, knowing that progress was only a matter of time and energy rather than a game of chance. “He’d fixate on a goal and I knew it would only be a matter of time before he achieved it.”

Brick let out a sharp breath. “Mojo was the same way.”

Blossom looked up at him, nonplussed. Brick never spoke about Mojo, not now and certainly not when they were growing up. She did not know the details of his relationship with the mad scientist, but she knew it was not the kind of loving, parent-child bond she had shared with the Professor.
“Great minds,” she said, because it was true. Whatever his moral allegiances, Mojo Jojo was without a doubt one of the most brilliant scientific minds alive today.

“Something like that,” he said, more interested in his water than her.

Blossom sensed she’d touched a nerve. It struck her how odd it was to have such a thought—concern for Brick’s feelings? A month ago she hadn’t even thought of him in years, and when she did, it was never with any degree of worry or concern except for the safety of the innocent people who might be unlucky enough to be in his way.

“Brick—”

“I agree,” he said, so softly she may have imagined it if not for her acute Super hearing. He looked up at her. “I think I should give Dinah the X sample.”

They watched each other for a beat, and Blossom realized she was holding her breath. He wanted her agreement. It meant something to him, and that meant something to her, though she did not quite know what.

“Everything we vetted checks out,” she said.

He nodded. “The research they were doing on genetic predispositions—”

“And the experiments to re-code cancer cells—”

“Not to mention the licensing rights and royalties you and your sisters retain as the trade secret owners regardless of where the X comes from—”

“Which means we have the legal right to revoke the license and any derivative works created using it—”

“Or if Aegis threatened litigation, I’d just take it back by force,” Brick said.

Blossom only now realized they’d leaned in close across the table toward each other, absorbed in their conversation, and she could feel his excitement, her excitement. This was the legacy her father had dreamed of but never got the chance to secure. He had created Blossom and her sisters to fill a void in his heart, and he’d sent them into the world to share their gifts with people in need to make it a better place. Now, if all went well with the sample trial, perhaps Blossom and her sisters could make the arrangement more permanent and finally fulfill their father’s final wish.

“By force, huh?” She rested her chin in her hand. “You know there are proper legal channels to settle disputes between aggrieved parties.”

“You know the rich and powerful are above all that.”

“Of course you’re above all that too.”

“Of course.” He curled a long, loose wisp of her bangs around his finger. “So are you.”

Blossom sucked in a breath. His fingers were warm as they brushed her cheek, and her eyes fell to his mouth. The cafe was barely half full and the tables were spread out and secluded from each other, the other patrons more interested in their own conversations than in the two Supers. It would be so easy just to lean forward, meet him halfway, screw the rules.

His fingers slipped under her jaw, tempting.
“Right this way, Miss.”

Their waiter’s voice approaching around the rose stand hit Blossom like a slap to the face, and she immediately pulled back. Brick’s lips twitched in a thin line—annoyed? Blossom was sure she imagined it when he let his hand drop and schooled his expression like he hadn’t been caught up in the moment about to kiss her in public.

“Thanks, and while you’re here, bring me a martini, dirty.”

“Yes, right away.”

The waiter appeared around the corner with Princess Morbucks in tow. As usual, she was glamorous in a Dolce & Gabbana blouse, fitted leather pants, and sky-high heels that could have impaled a man through the heart. She took one look at Brick and Blossom seated opposite each other and sighed dramatically.

“Oh, finally I’m not breathing the same stale air as the plebeians.” She dumped her oversized purse and jacket on the floor cushion next to Blossom’s work satchel and sank into the empty chair next to her.

The waiter smiled thinly and excused himself.

Brick leaned over. “Rough morning, Princess?”

“Not so close or you’ll catch the stupid. I don’t think I got it all off before I left my office.” She made a show of dusting herself off.

He plucked a long, curly hair from her blouse and incinerated it in his fist. “Don’t worry, I’m immune.”

“Oh please,” Blossom and Princess groaned at the same time. They caught each others’ eyes and shared a knowing look.

The waiter returned with Princess’ martini, as well as plates of cheese and charcuterie, a glass of Chardonnay for Blossom, and a bottle of IPA for Brick.

“So what happened?” Blossom asked, amused and quite curious.

“Oh, strap in. I just listened to the worst pitch I have ever heard.”

Brick lounged in his chair and nursed his beer. “There’s no way it was worse than the Toenail App.”

Blossom grimaced. “The what?”

Princess shuddered. “Jesus, Brick, I’m trying to drink here.”

“Sorry,” he said, not sorry at all.

“I have no idea why I attract these morons. Like, what do they think? Because I’m a fabulously wealthy, gorgeous, single lady that I’m some bimbo who’ll just glorify white male mediocrity? What am I, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences?”

“Have you fired Brent yet?”

“Who’s Brent?” Blossom asked.
“The guy formerly in charge of Biz Dev as of this morning,” Princess hissed. “He’s the one who brought me the pitch from hell.”

“I told you he was an obsequious idiot,” Brick said.

“He went to Harvard Business School.”

“Oh,” Blossom said, wincing.

Brick’s grin was cruelly triumphant. “Exactly.”

Princess rolled her eyes. “God, that’s snobby even by my standards. But yes, fine, whatever. I fired his ass and he cried a little. Lesson learned.”

“So what was the pitch?” Blossom asked, fighting a smile.

Princess fixed her with a dead-eyed stare. “It was an app that detects ghosts.”

Brick choked on his beer. Blossom kicked him under the table.

“They literally argued that it could appeal to people whose loved ones recently died so they could, like, download conversations with them. I cannot make this shit up,” Princess said.

“Really? Because it sounds like someone did make it up,” Blossom said, holding back a laugh.

Princess polished off her martini with finality. “I was like, I’m dead on the inside just listening to this, can your app detect that?”

Brick pretended to wipe his mouth with a napkin to hide his laugh. “You’re fucking kidding me.”

“So basically Shazam for ghosts?” Blossom said.

Princess was still pissed off, but that one got a smirk out of her. “Basically. They called it APParition, and I told them to go home and reflect on their sins.”

Blossom couldn’t help it; she burst into giggles. “Wait, that’s amazing!”

“It’s heinous,” Princess objected. “But not as heinous as my empty glass. Hey, waiter!”

Blossom wiped her eye. She wished she could have been there to see Princess’ reaction live. And she had always appreciated a good, cheesy pun. Across the table, she met Brick’s gaze. He didn’t return her smile, but he watched her with a quiet intensity that made her shiver. Self-conscious, she tugged on her ponytail.

The waiter returned with a new martini for Princess, which she traded him for a folded hundred dollar bill. “Just keep them coming.”

His eyes widened, and he eagerly accepted the tip. “Absolutely.”

Alone again, Princess sipped her new drink. “Thank god. So if you two are done eye fucking each other, want to tell me what you were doing before I got here?”

Blossom choked on her Chardonnay.

“Business,” Brick said, cool as a freaking cucumber as he popped an olive in his mouth. “I needed a lawyer.”
Princess scoffed. “Don’t we all. Oh, that reminds me…”

Princess seamlessly transitioned away from the topic of Brick and Blossom’s personal lives, much to Blossom’s relief. She became absorbed in the conversation, and soon she was completely relaxed and enjoying herself. Princess knew everyone in the Peninsula worth knowing, as well as some people decidedly not worth knowing, and she was more than happy to air out a little dirty laundry in between shop talk. Brick contributed a comment here and there, but he was content to listen and let Princess dominate the conversation. Blossom suspected this was par for the course with them. She also suspected it was a tried and true diversion tactic on his part to avoid talking about what he and Blossom had been up to this morning.

Halfway through her second glass of Chardonnay, Blossom got up to use the bathroom. As she was washing her hands, her phone rang. She stared at the name that popped up on the screen, surprised and more than a little curious.

“Hello?” she answered.

“Hey Blossom, glad I caught you. I’m not interrupting you or anything?” Boomer said.

“No, I’m just finishing up lunch. What’s up? Is everything all right?” She wandered back toward the patio but lingered by the glass doors. She had a view of Brick and Princess chatting.

“Yeah, it’s fine. Great, actually. That’s kind of what I was calling about,” Boomer said. “It’s about Bubbles.”

“Oh?”

“ Heard you gave her some pretty good advice. Consider me forever in your debt.”

Blossom smiled to herself as she leaned on the wall. “Don’t mention it. I know how much Bubbles has always cared about you. To be honest, I never really understood why you guys ended things.”

He let out a sharp breath. “Yeah, it’s… Well, it is what it is. I’m not going to screw things up this time.”

She wondered what he meant by that. As far as Blossom knew, they’d sort of drifted apart in the wake of the Professor’s death. She just assumed it was too much to try to maintain a romantic relationship when Bubbles was mourning the loss of their father. Blossom bit her lip, a wave of guilt sending a chill down her spine. She hadn’t been around to support her sisters then as she should have been.

“Neither am I,” she said, willing it to be true. If Bubbles and Boomer were getting back together, Blossom would be around this time to support her baby sister no matter what happened.

“Hey, I know this is kind of out of the blue, but I was wondering if you wanted to, you know, catch up sometime?” Boomer asked. “I mean, I know we’ve never been all that close before, but I figured, you know, I’d kind of like to be?”

Blossom was surprised by the warmth that spread in her chest at his invitation. She watched as Brick laughed at something Princess said. He really did have a nice laugh when he meant it. “I’d really like that too.”

He started to say something else, but the distant sound of screams distracted her. The floor under her heels suddenly split in two, and sentient, green vines exploded from the cracks. Blossom was flying before she could even think about it.
“Blossom?”

Instead of a response, all Boomer could hear on the other line was background noise like an explosion, and then the line went dead. Had she hung up on him? Kind of rude, especially after he’d put himself out there.

Pocketing his phone, he glanced at the wall clock—two p.m. on Friday, and B-3 was slow, but it wouldn’t be for much longer as the office cogs rolled in around four to get the weekend started early. Boomer poured himself a glass of water and tried not to think about how bothered he was that Blossom had maybe just hung up on him when Neha burst out of the bathroom with toilet paper stuck to her boot and her phone in her hand.

“Boomer! What the hell are you doing just standing there?!?” she exclaimed.

“Uh, my job at a normal volume. Maybe tone it down—”

She shoved her phone in his face, and he had no choice but to look at the live Tweet updates and accompanying picture of a mass of spaghetti-like vines demolishing a building.

“You need to get out there right now! These things are apparently popping up all over the city—”

“Whoa, okay, calm down—what am I even looking at?”

A loud crash outside drew the attention of everyone in the bar. A couple patrons got up to see what was happening; a car had crashed into a fire hydrant at the end of the block and people were running in the street.

“I bet that’s one of those giant Gillyweed things!” Neha went for the steel baseball bat under the bar in case of brawls.

Boomer was already halfway to the door. “A what?”

He made it outside before her where, to his horror, he saw a horde of sentient vines unfurling around the block, disrupting traffic, and sending people fleeing for their lives like they’d never been attacked by monsters before. Which, actually, Boomer couldn’t even remember the last time there was a monster attack before the Sludge Monster and the Red Monster attacked.

“The fact that you’ve never read Harry Potter is a deeply upsetting tragedy we’ll deal with another day,” Neha said when she joined him outside. There was a quaver in her voice even as she stood her ground and stared at the mutant vines crawling around the corner like snakes.

“Probably for the best,” Boomer said. His skin sparked blue with power as he instinctively stepped forward, putting himself between Neha and the slow-moving threat just down the street. He took a second to think about how best to intercept the weird monster when— “Fuck!”

A vine snapped up a car and lifted it into the air with the driver still in it, impossibly quick.

Boomer took off to help, ripped the driver’s seat door open, and yanked the terrified Uber driver out of his Corolla just as the vines crushed the car like a soda can. He dashed back to B-3 and all but threw the traumatized Uber driver at Neha.

“Get inside and stay put,” he said, because that sounded like something Brick might say in this situation.
“Your property insurance doesn’t cover damage from monster attacks, so you better lead that thing away from here,” Neha said, letting the Uber driver cling to her and calm like she was born for this shit.

Not top of mind right now, but she made a relevant point regardless. “Remind me to give you a raise after this.”

“A big raise!”

He took off again without a second thought, and fired his laser eye beams at the creature.

“Hey, up here you mutant salad!”

The vines grew back alarmingly fast where he blasted them, which seemed like a really bad thing. Not as bad, however, as the overgrown sunflower that bloomed at the center of the mass of leafy vines.

*Way to ruin a nice thing.*

He blasted his blue energy beams at the sunflower directly, and the plant creature screamed. It completely changed course, abandoning the building it had been crawling over and the cars it had been crushing underfoot to focus solely on him.

“Oh.”

*Shit.*

The roiling, writhing mass launched itself through the air and hurtled after him. Which, while his he’d fully intended to get the thing’s attention, now that he had it, it occurred to him that he was truly alone out here in a way he had never been before against an enemy. Brick and Butch were not here; all he had was his own power and wits to beat this thing and he had no clue how he was going to do that.

But fear and anxiety had nothing on the raw, primal instinct to survive. It had a strangely tranquil, sobering effect as his mind was wiped of all extraneous thoughts and feelings except what his body knew was necessary in this moment. Power crackled in his hands and manifested as a huge, blue broadsword, which he swung hard and true. It cut cleanly through the vines that came at him, and for a second he was winning.

Until the vines rushed him with wild energy and somehow even more numerous than before, and suddenly he was surrounded. “Oh no—”

His arm was caught, then both his legs, his torso, his neck. Boomer slashed with his power sword, but the constriction was overpowering and his weapon fizzled out in a flash of blue sparks. Desperate, he fired blue energy from his palms, and the beams went awry into the sky, hitting nothing. As the vines squeezed him, the sunflower seemed to open like a smiling, yellow-fanged mouth, and Boomer would have been sick if he could actually breathe.

The vines sucked him in, closer to the heart, and he had no idea how he was going to get out of this one.

A rush of air and a searing blast of green flooded his senses, rendering him momentarily deaf and blind on top of suffocating. The pressure on his lungs slackened, and he fell in the fetal position, his body spasming as the Chemical X in his system worked overtime to bring him back from his near crushing. The pavement hurt like a bitch when he landed in a small crater, but it would have
hurt more to die and for that he was grateful for the pain. Coughing and bleary-eyed, he looked around for the plant monster, wondering why it had released him.

He got his answer in the form of the self-proclaimed Toughest Fighter absolutely demolishing the plant monster with so much force that it couldn’t keep up. Buttercup’s attacks were hard and fast and utterly relentless as she alternated blasting the sunflower with her green energy beams and her lasers, cutting the vines faster than they could regroup to grab her. Boomer was momentarily stunned, but this was a fight and she had saved him, however unwittingly perhaps, and he wasn’t about to waste the chance.

With a grunt of effort, he shot into the sky and grabbed one of the vines just as Buttercup grabbed one of her own. They briefly locked gazes, and something primal and unspoken passed between them as they flew in sync skyward and pulled. The plant monster struggled viciously, but Boomer was determined not to let go.

“On three!” Buttercup shouted.

“Three!”

Boomer and Buttercup launched the vine with all their might together. It landed over the bay, where it hit the water with a smack and churned up ten-foot waves that flooded the rocky beach and flipped a few of the smaller boats moored to the docks. But it drowned in the salt water, and soon there was no trace of it left.

Boomer turned to Buttercup as they floated side by side over downtown Citiesville. “Thanks. You’re a lifesaver, literally.”

“I saw your blue blasts. I was in the neighborhood.”

He laughed, even though it wasn’t funny. “Lucky me.”

Police sirens blared as cops raced to every corner of the city in pursuit of the giant plant monsters that had cropped up seemingly at random. Buttercup looked grim as she surveyed the lay of the land at their feet.

“Damnit,” she swore.

Boomer was grateful she was here, but his thoughts were with his brothers. Were they also fighting somewhere right now? Did they need his help?

“Hey, I think we should find my brothers and your sisters—”

Buttercup suddenly took off before he could finish his thought and left him in her dust.

“What the—Buttercup!”

Boomer flew after her green streak. She’d narrowed in on another plant monster, and without hesitation she slammed into it at full power.

“Jesus!” Boomer screeched to a stop in mid-air, aghast as the overgrown fern plant dislodged from the apartment building it had been infiltrating, vines flailing for purchase and finding none.

Boomer dashed to save a woman trying to get her toddler out of his child seat in the back of her car, and not a moment too soon. The plant monster landed in the intersection with a crash, cracking the asphalt and flattening cars people had long since abandoned. The car the woman and her toddler
had been in was at the other end of the block, but the force of the monster hitting the pavement flipped it and it skidded down the street until it wrapped around a telephone pole, totaled.

“Are you okay?” Boomer asked the woman as he handed her back her toddler.

“My baby! Thank you so much!” She was a mess of tears but smiling in relief as she clutched her crying child.

Nearby, Buttercup was slicing up the plant monster with her laser eye beams as it writhed in the street.

“Shit,” Boomer swore. He had to help her. “Lady, get inside or something! It’s not safe!”

He didn’t wait to see her heed his warning and took off to help Buttercup. He couldn’t let her fight alone, no way. For now, he was all she had to watch her back and he would not let her down. Swooping in close, he grabbed vines in both his hands, pulling. The monster screeched in protest, nearly shaking him off with its flailing, and soon it released a translucent spray from its flowery center that stank of overripe fruit and sewer runoff.

“Lift it!” Buttercup commanded.

Boomer’s nose was on fire and he really hoped the Chemical X in his system made him immune to whatever this weird discharge was. But Buttercup powered through like the champ she was and lifted, so Boomer had no choice but to support her. Just like the last time, they carried the creature kicking and screaming and flung it into the bay, where it sank into a salty grave. Unfortunately, now both Boomer and Buttercup stank of monster plant nectar.

“Disgusting,” Buttercup spat.

“Hey, seriously, I think we need to find our siblings. There’s way too many of these things!”

“Yeah, but in case you hadn’t noticed, they’re primarily attacking buildings and the people in them. So if you want to waste time running to Brick, you do you. I’m not about to turn my back on the people who need my help right now.”

She was worked up and angry, angrier than he’d seen her in a long time, and he faltered. “There’s no way I’m leaving you on your own, so you can forget about that. Obviously I don’t want people getting hurt either, but I just think we have a better shot of helping them if we can regroup with our sib—”

“Boomer, shut up and look!” Buttercup grabbed him by his man bun and spun him around.

The Golden Bay Bridge rose over the bay at the northern edge of Citiesville, but its red towers were overrun with more vines reaching out of the water.

“Oh, shit,” he said, his voice cracking. That was lot of vines creeping up the bridge right in the middle of rush hour when traffic was at its worst.

“You want to stick together? Then don’t fall behind.” Buttercup took off again toward the bridge without waiting, and he had no choice but follow.

Blossom’s only thought was of the people who were literally slipping through the cracks all around her. She was a blur of pink vapor as she flew to catch them before the vines did. The waiter who had served her table was among them. He was frantically clutching a martini glass and
spilling the drink all over himself in his hysteria. If the situation was not so dire, she may have laughed at his dedication to earn that tip Princess had given him.

As she flew to the next building over to set down the four civilians she’d grabbed, Blossom’s thoughts immediately turned to her friends, specifically the one without powers who was as much a sitting duck as the waiter still clinging to her sobbing—

“What the fuck is this, Swamp Thing?!” Princess shouted.

Brick carried her bridal style to the rooftop where Blossom had landed and set her down gently. Blossom followed his gaze back the way they’d come and set her jaw.

“Goddamnit,” Brick muttered as he began to roll up his sleeves.

The giant plant thing had taken over the building where the cafe once stood. It was a wriggling mass of vines and leaves, huge and very much reminiscent of a comic book villain. And it was not alone.

Others like it were scattered around the city, crawling and spreading and very likely killing anyone who couldn’t get out of their paths.

“I have to call my sisters,” Blossom said, reaching for her phone. Unfortunately, she’d dropped it in her mad dash to save the people falling to their imminent deaths.

“Waste of time,” Brick said.

“I’ll take that,” Princess said, plucking the half-spilled martini glass from the trembling waiter’s hand and taking a sip. She looked pointedly at Blossom. “Well? Are you going or what?”

Screams reached Blossom’s ears, and she knew she didn’t have a choice. She glanced at Brick again, but he was observing the plant monster and didn’t budge. She swallowed the unpleasant taste in her mouth. Even if she had to fight alone, she would do it. “Stay here.”

With that, she was off and thinking of ways to get rid of the plant monster without sending the whole building and the people in it crashing down. Getting the people out would take too much time. Destroying the plant was her best bet. Drawing in close, Blossom fired off her laser eye beams and severed a long vine. The creature squealed like a stuck pig. The appendage crashed to the street below and immediately began to wilt and shrivel.

“Ahhhhh!!!!” screamed an office worker who’d slipped and was now falling to her death.

Blossom veered and dove after her, but the plant creature fired a hail of thorns at her and the woman she was trying to save. They didn’t pierce Blossom’s skin, but they hurt. And they would shred the falling woman like a cheese grater.

No!

Willing herself to fly faster, Blossom dove for the woman and prayed she’d reach her before the thorns did. A massive heat wave erupted at her back as Blossom caught the falling woman. She was still screaming as she clung to Blossom’s neck and bawled her eyes out, but Blossom could not be bothered to care as she laid eyes on Brick, who had intercepted the thorns with his devastating fire breath that she had seen him use only a handful of times before. The concentrated stream poured from him in a controlled, bright crescendo that instantly immolated every thorn caught up in its path. It lasted only a moment before he was flying out of there to escape the mad vines in search of vengeance. Red eyes scanned the skies until he locked on her, and she shivered with
relief.

_He’s going to help me._

She wasn’t sure what was more surprising: that she was wrong to think he wouldn’t or right to hope he would.

“Oh god, please! You can’t leave me here!” the waiter sobbed when Blossom touched down to release the woman she’d saved.

Princess was still nursing her martini and looking alarmingly unconcerned for a civilian in the midst of a monster attack. “Stop it, Antony. You’re embarrassing yourself.”

Antony the waiter sobbed harder.

“T-Thank you so much!” The woman Blossom had just saved had a bit more grace and got the hell out of Blossom’s way now that she was safe.

“You’re welcome.” Blossom turned to the few gathered civilians. “Everyone, listen up. We need to evacuate this building. It’s too close to the monster, and I don’t know if—”

“Shit!” Princess dropped her martini and scrambled back, true fear in her eyes, and Blossom whirled just in time to see a huge vine careening straight for them.

Without time to whisk all the people here away to safety, she stood her ground and blew a huge puff of ice breath at it. The green vine jerked erratically as it quickly froze solid and slowed long enough for Princess and the others to reach the roof access door. But before Blossom’s eyes, the vine moved and began cracking the ice. She froze where she stood as she stared up at it _fighting back_—

“Blossom!”

Brick fired off his laser eye beams and severed the vine at its base before it could smash through Blossom and the roof. He landed in front of her and took her by the arms.

“What the fuck was that?” he shouted at her. “You just stood there!”

Blossom blinked, still stupefied by the idea that a plant could be intelligent enough to adapt and learn how to defend itself in a fight in real time because that was insane.

But not nearly as insane as the vine Brick had just severed sprouting three new vines and shooting straight for his turned back. Blossom reacted immediately this time and grabbed him just as the vines struck the roof.

High up in the air, they looked down on the crawling plant. It had jumped from the cafe building to the second building as if it was following them. Blossom picked out the other vine she had severed with her laser vision, noting the three slippery, green vines that had sprung from its cauterized stump.

“It’s a hydra,” she said.

“And it’s tracking us,” Brick said, following her line of thought without prompting. “Body heat?”

“I run cold. It would have focused solely on you.”

Unless it was honing in on something far more _chemical_ than body heat…
She looked up at him just as he looked at her, and she could see that he’d come to the same conclusion from the fury in his eyes. But before either of them could voice it, the plant monster revealed its white rose heart. The petals quivered, and a sickly saccharine smell wafted upon the wind.

“Oh.” Blossom covered her nose as her eyes began to water.

A very familiar voice rang out above the cacophony of screams and car horns and writhing vines, and Blossom and Brick both zeroed in on Princess clutching her neck as she gagged on the weird pheromones the plant released. She had remained on the roof instead of escaping with the other civilians, and now she was dangerously close to the thorny vines.

Blossom dove for Princess, and the plant monster instantly reacted to her with shooting vines and a fresh burst of thorns.

“No, no, no!”

The acrid smell of burning mulch alerted her to Brick’s interference as he blasted the plant with his red energy beams to draw its attention, buying Blossom enough time to scoop up Princess before she could become compost.

“Are you all right?” Blossom shouted over the wind.

“Do I fucking look all right?!” Princess shouted back as she clung to Blossom for dear life.

Beyond, Brick was still blasting away. Blossom and Princess both turned to watch as the monster’s heart opened up and shot very thin, very fast vines at him that were quick enough to catch him in their clutches. Brick struggled for half a beat as Blossom changed trajectories and flew to help him, but with a shout he fired his laser eye beams and broke free of the bindings. Plant bile exploded everywhere, viscous and green.

“Watch it!” Princess yanked Blossom’s ponytail like a backseat driver, making her swerve. They narrowly avoided a face full of plant juice.

The plant writhed below, temporarily stunned, and Blossom and Princess regrouped with a livid Brick. His clothes were splattered with plant juice, and he angrily wiped goop from his cheek.

“This was a fucking Hugo Boss suit you son of a bitch!” he shouted down at the creature.

“Hey, dial it back a notch, ’07 Britney,” Princess said from her piggy-back perch on Blossom’s back.

Brick turned his venomous glare on her, but Blossom intervened before he could lose his temper.

“We’ll get it dry cleaned later. More importantly, we need a plan now,” she said, gesturing at the monster that was now nearly twice its original size thanks to Brick severing tens of hydra vines in his escape.

Brick was about to respond to that when a loud crash alerted them even to more mayhem a few blocks over…where another plant creature was wreaking havoc.

“Oh my god,” Princess said, for once humbled.

Some of the other plant creatures that had been scattered around Citiesville now seemed to be converging on Brick and Blossom’s location. The air was thick with the plant monster’s heady
perfume that carried on the wind coming in from the ocean.

“It’s calling them,” Brick and Blossom said at the same time.

“What?” Princess asked.

But Blossom’s mind was racing. “They’re communicating, which means—”

“—they’re all connected,” Brick finished. “Plants have roots.”

“What does that mean?” Princess said.

“It’s a hive mind,” Blossom said, smiling. She knew she was right.

Brick smirked back at her like he knew exactly what she was thinking. “Sever that connection and—”

“—we can take them all out.”

She reached for him in her excitement without thinking, and Princess yelped.

“Don’t drop me!”

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” Blossom fumbled to hoist Princess up higher on her back so she wouldn’t fall.

Princess blew her frazzled hair out of her face. “For fuck’s sake, keep it in your pants until we find the leader plant or whatever, got it?”

The leader, of course!

A hive mind meant some kind of central control directing everything from a distance. Destroy that, and not only could they sever the connection, but perhaps they could take out all the plants at once.

“Princess, you’re a genius,” Blossom said.

“Duh. Wait, why?”

Before Blossom could respond to that, Brick grabbed her and shoved her behind him just in time to intercept a cloud of shimmering, gold spores from the second plant monster covered in poisonous mushroom caps. He unleashed a thick stream of fire that incinerated the deadly spores and caught on the mushroom monster. Chaos ensued as the mushroom monster flailed and crashed to the ground in a burning heap, destroying cars and scorching the building it had been crawling up to get at them.

“Shit!” Princess shrieked, yanking on Blossom’s hair to force her head around.

Blossom twisted just in time to avoid the original plant monster’s deadly vine seeking to impale her and quickly got the hell out of there. Brick swooped after her blasting crimson energy, but he didn’t linger either. The plant monster screamed and gave slow chase as they flew away, and Blossom drifted closer to Brick and tightened her hold on Princess.

“Enough,” Brick said in a tone that should have unnerved Blossom, but now only filled her with a grim determination of her own. “Let’s find the source and exterminate this fucker.”

“Agreed,” Blossom said.
Bubbles was waiting with the last of her kids at pickup when the plant monsters attacked.

“Miss Bubbles? What’s that?” Richie asked.

She followed his pointing finger toward the suburban Cypress neighborhood near the water and gasped. She wasn’t sure what it was, but it was definitely a monster and it did not look friendly.

“Oh no…”

The school alarm bells began blaring, and Richie and some of the other kids covered their ears. Bubbles knew that alarm; the school would be on lockdown on account of a monster attack in the vicinity. All over Townsville, similar alarms were no doubt going off courtesy of the MDS the Professor had built years ago. Good to know it was still fully functional despite so long without regular monster attacks. But this was the third one in just a couple weeks. It was unheard of.

How did it get past the barrier this time?

A question Bubbles didn’t have time to dwell on as other teachers emerged from the school and began herding kids who hadn’t yet been picked up by parents. Bob Green was among them, his eight-foot height and curved horns making him an easy beacon for the kids to gather around.

“This way, children! I know that alarm is annoying, so let’s get inside where it’s not so loud!” He shouted to be heard.

A tiny hand found Bubbles’, and she looked down to find Brisa and a couple other students from her class all huddled around her. “Miss Bubbles? What’s going on?”

“That’s my line. What the hell is that alarm?” Butch had landed on the sidewalk amidst the scrambling parents looking disoriented.

“Daddy!” Brisa ran to him, but Bubbles beat her to it.

“Butch, I’m so happy to see you right now,” Bubbles said.

Butch cocked an eyebrow and grinned. “Whoa, whoa, easy there, sugar. I know I’m hot S-H-I-T, but I’m not the type to go for my brother’s girl. I mean, you know, unless he was cool with it—”

Bubbles grabbed his chin and forced him to look in the direction of the monster plant. “No, you dork! There’s a monster attacking the Cypress neighborhood!”

“Oh,” Butch said.

Kids and parents were running around, spooked by the alarms and frantically trying to get out of here and get home to safety. Bob and the other teachers were doing the best they could, but some of the younger kids were crying over the loud alarm and the tension in the air was rising by the second. A monster attack so close to Pokey Oaks? What were they all supposed to do?

“I wanna go home,” Brisa whined as she clung to Butch’s pant leg.

“Gonna have to hold that thought, Supergirl. Daddy’s afternoon just filled up.” Butch cracked his sparking, green knuckles.

“You’ll help?” Bubbles said. “Because this is serious, and there are a lot of homes in that neighborhood it’s attacking—”

“I’ll handle it. You worry about keeping my girl safe.”
“No wait—”

Butch took off in a blast of green toward Cypress, leaving Bubbles and the kids in his dust. She wanted nothing more than to follow him, but she had a job to do first. She clapped her power-laced hands loud enough to cause a small tremor in the ground. “One, two, three! Eyes on me!”

All her kids, and even a few first and second graders, immediately shut up and looked at her. “One, two! Eyes on you!” echoed the few kids from her own class still on the premises.

Bubbles took a deep breath and tried to tune out that awful emergency alarm. “Okay, lovelies! Everyone take the hand of the boy or girl next to you and form a big conga line! We’re going to follow Mr. Green back inside for coloring time, sound good?”

Some kids looked excited, but most of them were scared and bothered by the alarm. Only their ingrained deferral to authority bade them obey, and soon they had all formed a line with Bob at the head.

“I’m sorry about this, Bob,” Bubbles said as she pulled her loose curls into pigtails out of her eyes. The demon teacher scrutinized her with his one visible eye. It glowed red briefly, betraying his inner turmoil. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of your kids. You worry about taking care of the city.”

She was off not long after that, colorful finger paint smears on both her face and smock T-shirt from the day’s activities and blazing blue with power as she flew south and dialed her sisters. Neither of them picked up; Blossom’s phone even cut straight to voicemail.

“Of all the times.” She tried to ignore the trepidation of going in alone and blind without her sisters’ support.

A searing blast of green energy exploded where the plant monster, nothing but a wriggling mass of pointed leaves and vines, was currently crawling through the sleepy, bayside Cypress neighborhood. Bubbles spotted Butch letting rip with his blasters like he could do this all day long, and despite the torrent of profanity he was shouting at the monster, she was relieved to see him. Even if her sisters were not around, at least she had him with her.

“Get fucked!” Butch shouted as he veered to blast the monster from another angle and ended up blowing up a parked car. Thankfully there was no one in it.

“Butch!”

He paused to look at her, and it was the opening the plant monster needed to take a swipe at him. Bubbles gasped and picked up speed until she tackled Butch in mid-air, narrowly missing the plant’s attack.

Her arms full of Butch, they tumbled over each other through a cloud and came out the other side damp and shivering.

“What the fuck was that?!?” he spat.

“It was going to hit you!”

“So what! You’re supposed to be watching my kid!”

“Wha— I’m not some helpless babysitter!”
A whistling sound reached them, and Bubbles shoved Butch away from her just in time to avoid the lashing vine. Butch summoned a razor-thin shield that he tossed like a frisbee, severing the vine cleanly. Then he turned on Bubbles again.

“You watch over kids for a living! That’s literally what a babysitter does!” he shouted.

Bubbles gaped. “I don’t just watch over them, I nurture their young minds so they’ll grow up to be upstanding members of the community! It’s a really important job!”

“I never said it wasn’t—motherfucker!”

Three more vines came after them, each covered in a glistening cluster of leaves, and Bubbles shrieked as she dodged. Butch, however, was not so lucky and got smacked in the back. More vines shot after him, too many, and Bubbles screamed. She screamed loud enough to trigger a seismic event, and the vines did not like it. Jerking and curling back on themselves, the vines shrank back from her Sonic Scream long enough for her to bypass them and catch up to Butch. He was clutching his ears, his face contorted in pain.

“What the fuck, Bubbles!”

But Bubbles ignored him and used her Super strength to rip off his cargo jacket, which was smoking. He wasn’t helping her and the poison that coated the plant monster’s leaves was fast eating through the jacket, so she incinerated the sleeves with her eye beams and pulled the dissolving shreds off of him, leaving him only in a green T-shirt underneath.

“The hell was that for?”

“It’s poison ivy,” Bubbles said. “Look, three-leaf clusters with pointy tips, that’s a dead giveaway. From the way the poison burned through your jacket, it must be really potent.”

Butch was listening now, his eyes narrowed at the weird plant monster still advancing through the neighborhood below. “Huh. Nice catch.”

“Kindergarten 101: don’t let your kids get poisoned. I know all the dangerous plants that grow around here.”

He let out a sharp breath, amused, but his expression remained grim and troubled. “And Brisa is—”

“She’s safe, I promise.” She touched a reassuring hand to his shoulder. “She’s in good hands back at school, trust me. Please.”

“Okay.” Butch flexed his muscles and ignited with green energy. “Then how about you ‘n me make chop suey?”

Bubbles wanted nothing more than to get rid of the threat, but she also wanted to meet up with her sisters. Did they know what was happening here? Surely they would rush over here in a heartbeat if they could, but waiting didn’t look like a viable option as the plant monster began to overtake a suburban home and a family of four fled outside through the back door.

“Those people!” Bubbles dashed to save them before the mutant poison ivy could grab them, but the vines were vicious and seemed to sense her as she approached. Bubbles yelped as she swerved to avoid one and tumbled through the air before crash-landing in the manicured shrubbery that ran around the backyard like a natural fence. She rolled out of there as fast as she could and looked up in time to see more ravenous vines converging on her. She tried to dash away but they were right on top of her and there was no time, all she could do was shield her face and belly.
The pain and poison never came, though. Butch launched another frisbee shield at the vines coming for Bubbles and sliced them all off, buying her the time she needed to get the heck out of there and scoop up the much slower family struggling to escape to their neighbor’s yard.

“I’ve got you!” Bubbles said as she carried the nuclear family down the block well out of the danger zone and told them to call the police.

Butch grunted in pain, drawing her attention, and to her horror he’d been snared by the vines. Python-like, they constricted around his arms and torso, dripping poison and smoking.

“Butch!” Bubbles took off and fired her laser eye beams at the mutant vines.

Butch let out a guttural snarl, and the vines encasing him exploded in a blaze of green. Neon light emanated from Butch like smoke, disintegrating the blenderized remains of the plants that stuck to him, and Bubbles could help but stare in awe.

Since when can his shield do that?

The energy faded, and Butch was left mostly shirtless, the acid-eaten rags hanging from his arms in tatters that soon disintegrated as his raw power burned them away.

“Heh,” Butch said as he caught his breath. “Never liked that shirt anyway.”

The plant monster screeched where it lay sprawled on the street, only now parting to reveal its center: a cluster of bulbous, white berries that made Bubbles sick to look upon.

“Where’s the weed killer when I need it?” Bubbles lamented.

“I got your weed killer right here, sugar.” Butch held out his hands and manifested two new shields. They grew rapidly, encompassing each of them in their own impenetrable globes. “You know those hamster balls?”

Bubbles nodded grimly. “I do love hamsters.”

They blasted off together, the shields moving with them like armor, and slammed into the plant monster at full tilt. The shields protected them from the poison as they hit the mass like a pair of bowling balls and rolled it down the street. The bay was a straight shot dead ahead, and Bubbles let out a battle cry as she pushed against her shield wall harder, faster, picking up speed and leaving Butch behind.

Bubbles reeled back and punched the shield wall and the monster beyond it with everything she had. It hit the water with a violent splash just as the shield cracked under her knuckles and shattered like glass. The water roared and churned and completely swallowed the plant monster whole.

Butch was waiting over the water and staring at her like he’d just been hit over the head with a blunt force object.

“What?” Bubbles said, panting and trembling as the Chemical X in her veins ignited like a drug, and she felt like a million bucks.

He shook his head. “Dude…you just went total beast mode on that giant weed.”

She grinned. “Buttercup may be the Toughest Fighter, but I’m pretty hardcore too, you know.”
“Uhhhh, noted.” He still stared at her, bewildered.

The sounds of cars crashing and people screaming reached them both, and they spun around in search of the source. What they saw reminded Bubbles of those B-list monster movies Buttercup was so fond of growing up, and which Bubbles forced herself to watch just so she could have an excuse to hang out with her sister.

“Oh no,” Bubbles said.

“Oh yes!” Butch gazed covetously at the Golden Bay Bridge far on the opposite side of the bay and currently being terrorized by more vines rising from the deep like the Kraken. He took off toward it, unable to resist the chance for more violence.

“Wait for me!” Bubbles shot after him. No way was she letting him go off alone in the midst of a crisis when he might need her help.

The bridge was quite sturdy, having been reinforced with an extra durable titanium alloy the Professor had created as recompense for the time Bubbles and her sisters had demolished the very same bridge in an ill-advised attempt to stop a bank robbery. It would take more than a few rogue plants to bring it down now. But the heavy traffic on the bridge was another story entirely, and Bubbles feared for the people trapped in their cars like sitting ducks.

The moment she and Butch reached the bridge, he went straight for the monstrous plants curling around the towers and suspension cables, blasting and punching with abandon.

“Butch, the people! We have to help them!” she shouted, but he wasn’t paying attention. “Damnit!”

Where were her sisters when she really needed them?

With no real plan in mind, all Bubbles could think to prioritize was saving as many people as she possibly could, so that was what she did. She lifted cars full of people, scooped up people who had abandoned their cars entirely, and ferried them as quickly as she could to the Townsville side of the bridge. But for every person she saved, there seemed to be ten more stranded on the bridge, screaming and trying to flee.

One of the seaweed vines made it past Butch and slammed onto the bridge, sending a group of people flying into the air. Bubbles’ heart leaped into her throat as she dashed to catch them before they could hit the ground and splatter. Absurdly, she was reminded of the game Jacks that her kindergarteners loved to play. Too many jacks in the air at once, and their small hands couldn’t catch them all before the ball dropped again.

Please!

Bubbles’ arms ached as she tried to balance seven people on her back and still more were falling all around her. Tears blurred her vision as she foresaw their fates; there were too many and she wasn’t strong enough alone.

“Butch!” she screamed, hoping beyond hope that he would hear her and miraculously show up to help her, but he was so far away—

A burst of green dashed in front of Bubbles, zigzagging as it caught the falling people, and Bubbles cried out in relief through her tears. Her relief turned to joy when she landed safely on the shoreline and saw Buttercup unloading her human cargo.

“Buttercup!” Bubbles shrieked, launching herself at her sister. “Oh my god!”
Buttercup hugged her back amidst the sea of traumatized people they had rescued. Between the two of them, they had caught every single one.

“I-I thought—for a second there—!”

“Not on my watch,” Buttercup said fiercely.

The plant monster screamed, and Bubbles looked up just as Boomer, wielding a blue energy bat, bludgeoned a fat vine that would have flattened a group of people running for their lives around abandoned cars.

“Boomer,” Bubbles said.

“And looks like you found Butch,” Buttercup said. “Good, this won’t take long.”

Bubbles was so relieved that Buttercup and Boomer were here helping that she smiled. “I’m right behind you.”

She and Buttercup took off to join their counterparts, who were struggling to contain the truly massive plant monster trying its best to collapse the bridge into the frothing waters below. Butch was wrestling with a cluster of vines, and Buttercup grabbed one in each hand and peeled them back so he could get away.

“Hey, doll! Here for the show?” Butch taunted.

“In your dreams! Why the hell aren’t you wearing a shirt?” Buttercup said.

Butch laughed, and the Greens converged on the monster with punishing fists and their green blasters in the hopes of dislodging it from the bridge.

Bubbles caught up to Boomer, who pulled her into a bear hug.

“Butch? Man, am I happy we found you and Butch!”

Bubbles was about to respond to that, but more vines came careening straight for Boomer’s turned back, so she shoved him aside and fired her laser eye beams, severing it. Boomer whirled, eyes wide. “No wait—!”

Before her eyes, the vine’s raw stump burst with three new vines, all of which came after Boomer and her. They dashed their separate ways to avoid them and regrouped higher up in the air.

“Yeah, they all keep doing that when we cut them,” Boomer said, teeth bared in a grimace.

Well, that was a big problem. How the heck were they supposed to fight the plant monster if they couldn’t cut it?

“What do you mean, ‘all’?”

Butch and Buttercup were struggling against the vines they had cut, all of which had split and multiplied as well. They’d given up on slicing them as Butch deployed his shield to fend them off, but he got whacked hard and crashed into an abandoned BMW that exploded on impact. Boomer winced, and Buttercup grabbed the offending vine in her bare hands and pulled hard enough to dislodge the wriggling mass from the bridge and tear the vine off at the roots. Of course, three more sprang up where she’d torn it.

“Fuuuuuuuck!” Buttercup raged her frustration.
“There’s more of them,” Boomer said. “All over Citiesville. They keep popping up randomly, no idea why.”

“That’s—” Bubbles cut herself off as the flailing vines snapped up a pickup truck and came hurtling straight for her. Her first instinct was to fire her lasers, but knowing that would only make it worse, she reached for something she could use to defend herself, and that happened to be Boomer’s energy bat.

He was so surprised when she grabbed it that he didn’t even try to stop her, and Bubbles flew to meet the vine and the truck it had scooped up.

“Go away!” she shouted and swung the bat with all her might.

The impact rattled her bones and crushed the truck. Blue energy sparked up and down her arms, electric and warm and definitely not hers. The vine flailed and sank back into the water, dropping the remains of the truck.

Then she remembered the energy bat in her hands, how it should have been impossible for her to wield something made entirely from Boomer’s unique power and yet she was doing it anyway. She grinned.

“Neat!” She tapped the bat against her open palm, shivering at the rush of power imbued in it, like catching thunder in her bare hands.

“Hey Harley Quinn, look alive!” Butch said.

The vines had slithered nearly to the tops of the bridge towers and curled around the suspension cables, snapping some of them like rubber bands. Butch generated a shield to protect against their deadly lashes, and Boomer flew by wielding a sword that cut through the thick metal.

Bubbles found Buttercup still struggling over the water and darted to help her, whacking vines and cables out of her way as she went. White lotus flowers unfurled in the water and pumped out clouds of golden pollen that caught on the wind. How long had they been here?

“They just keep coming!” Buttercup shouted as she fired green energy beams at the weird lotus flowers, destroying them.

Before Bubbles could ask what she meant by that, she heard the screams from across the bridge. More plant monsters were converging on the Golden Bay Bridge in slithering, leafy masses. Her heart sank.

“Oh no…”

“Incoming!”

Boomer’s warning made her whirl in time to see Butch coming in hot to blast through tentacle-like vines and fleshy lotus flowers growing out of the water. But no matter how many he obliterated, more popped up like mushrooms after a hard rain. Police had begun to gather at both ends of the bridge to set up barricades and fend off the killer plants, but Bubbles wasn’t sure how much good they would do.

“This isn’t working,” Buttercup said, regrouping with Boomer and Bubbles as Butch finished his sweep. “If we cut them, they just grow back bigger and stronger.”

“We need a plan,” Boomer said.
Buttercup rolled her eyes. “Wow, really? Why didn’t I think of that?”

Bubbles watched the advancing plant monsters as they joined their colossal brethren on the bridge. “We need Blossom.”

“Blossom’s not here.”

Buttercup had a heavy, dour look on her face that gave Bubbles a chill. She reached for her sister, but Buttercup wouldn’t look at her, and that scared her more than any plant monsters ever could.

“Buttercup—” she began.

But a spray of rose thorns cut her off, and Bubbles gasped and swung her bat. Her whole body ached as they pelted her, too numerous and too fast to avoid, and she was too slow to dodge the vine that smacked her into the water.

It was freezing, and Bubbles only barely managed to suck in a breath before the waves submerged her and the vine that had whacked her. Scrambling and afraid of drowning, she threw caution to the wind and fired her laser eye beams to sever the vine, quick to swim away before the new growths could reel her back in. She didn’t make it far before she saw the thing lurking under the bridge and screamed.

By now, police were crawling all over Citiesville, and a few news choppers were buzzing like carrion flies trying to record as much of the plant-based destruction as possible.

Brick and Blossom—with Princess along for the ride because she insisted that they would be very sorry if they just left her somewhere and Brick was in no mood to deal with her complaining today—had scoured the city in search of the plant monsters’ ring leader, but the creatures they came across all behaved in much the same way. They were eerily able to adapt to Brick’s and Blossom’s attacks, but they were mindless soldiers reacting to external stimuli, nothing more.

“We’ve flown all over the city and still no sign of the leader plant,” Blossom said, frustrated.

“Yeah, I’m officially bored,” Princess said.

Brick rolled his eyes. “You’re the one who wanted to come along.”

“Like I’d let you leave me on some random street corner alone to fend for myself. I don’t even have my phone since it got destroyed back at the cafe!”

“Stop arguing please! I can’t hear myself think,” Blossom said. She shifted Princess’ weight on her back.

“Whoa, watch it!” Princess said. “Your back’s bony enough as it is without you shifting me around back here.”

“You’re definitely not in a position to complain,” Brick snapped.

“Says the guy who’s not carrying me. You know what? Blossom’s a much smoother ride than you anyway.”

Brick’s eyes flashed, and he willed himself not to do something hasty like blast his only real friend sky high.

“Guys really, we need to focus on the plant monsters—whoa!”
Blossom veered and Brick was quick to follow given the police chopper that had cut them off.

“You are in violation of the ordinance banning the use of Super powers within Citiesville city limits! Land now!” came a booming voice from a megaphone in the chopper. Two CPD officers were in the chopper, the pilot and the speaker.

“Jesus Christ, did everyone wake up today and decide to take stupid pills?” Princess said.

Blossom held her ground. “Sir, I understand that there’s an ordinance, but this is an emergency situation! There are giant plant monsters attacking the—”

“I repeat! Land immediately, or we will be forced to arrest you!” the megaphone blared.

Brick felt a migraine coming on just listening to this ludicrous conversation. Leave it to Blossom to try to reason with morons.

“Hey asshole, did you not hear her about the plant monsters?” Princess shouted. “Look around!”

“This is your final warning! We are prepared to use force if you continue to resist!”

Fuck this.

Brick was a blur of red too fast for the naked eye to follow, and Blossom was too encumbered supporting Princess to stop him. He appeared at the chopper’s open door, grabbed the megaphone from the idiot cop, and crushed it in his bare hand. The cop, a middle-aged, balding, white guy packed so tightly into his Kevlar it was a wonder he hadn’t popped from the pressure, gaped at Brick.

“You were saying?” Brick said, and he let some of his power manifest upon his skin to fuck with the guy just because he could.

The cop screamed, which was honestly a bit much since it wasn’t like he was going to kill the guy, come on, but his terror was focused elsewhere.

“Brick!”

True fear in Blossom’s voice chilled his blood, and he whirled, already gathering red energy in his palms to deal with whatever was coming for him only to get smacked in the face by a killer vine. The force was so great and he was caught so off guard and he was ejected clear out the opposite door of the chopper.

Sound and sight blurred for a moment as he clutched his throbbing nose. If he wasn’t Super, he was positive that vine would have lobbed his head clean off. Instead, he had a shattered nose to suffer for the several seconds it would take Chemical X to heal it. Trauma tears stung his eyes, but he ignored them and focused on resetting his nose with a sickening crack before the X could heal it crooked.

Breathing deeply, he looked up at the plant that had just signed its death sentence because now he was fucking furious. Blossom had sliced the vine despite the risk of it multiplying, and the limp, severed end of it was stuck in the chopper, its weight too great for the vehicle to support. It began to bob erratically, and Blossom was too busy dealing with the plant monster to do much about it.

The two police officers were nowhere to be seen.

Just as Brick was about to forget the chopper—no use doing anything about it with the police
officers too dead to care—he heard Princess in the cockpit.

“Come on, come on!” She was at the controls and trying to get the chopper to even out.

Brick moved without even thinking about it. He grabbed the still twitching vine hanging out of the chopper and yanked it out. The force sent the chopper spinning out of control, and Princess screamed.

Brick narrowly avoided what would have been a very painful smack to the head from the propeller and grabbed the chopper’s tail, forcing it to stop. Alarms blared on the control pad as Princess, regaining her balance in her heels like the extremely extra fashionista she was, fought for control of the chopper.

“Princess! Get out of there!” Brick shouted.

“I’ve almost got it!”

Blossom, free of her burden, unleashed her devastating ice breath on the mutant plant, which would at least buy her a little time until it adapted and thawed. The chopper whined against Brick’s strength, but he held on and forced it to remain steady. Blossom punched the plant-turned-ice cube so hard Brick felt the tremor in the air around them.

“Princess!” he shouted again.

Enough was enough. He was just about to let go and pull her out of there when the blaring alarms stopped and the chopper wasn’t fighting him so much anymore. Somehow, against all odds, Princess had managed to get it under control and level it, and not a moment too soon.

Brick abandoned the chopper, satisfied that Princess was safe now, and turned all his rage on the mass of frozen vines steadily regaining their motor skills despite Blossom’s repeated attempts to freeze it.

“Blossom!” he shouted a warning.

She looked up at him and got the message, hightailing it the hell out of there just as Brick took a deep breath and fired. He poured all his anger and frustration into it, at the cops for holding them up, at Princess for insisting on doing things her way, at Blossom for forcing him to step in and fight because she just had to get involved, at this whole situation that he was determined to shut down with as much pain and force as he could muster because no one and nothing fucked with Brick and got away with it. Blossom’s ice breath fired anew, adding to the conflagration.

Fire and ice combined in a whirling storm that completely engulfed the plant monster and drowned out its screams until they came no more. When the smoke and steam cleared, the monster was reduced to a charred, withered mass of spindly vines so fragile they snapped and crumpled on the wind.

Brick coughed, his throat dry and stinging from using his fire so much today, but good fucking riddance.

“It’s dead,” Blossom said.

“You’re goddamn right it’s dead,” Brick said.

“No, I mean, it wasn’t able to resist us both.”
Brick looked at her and felt his fury subside. Her face was furrowed in thought, and he considered her words.

“It couldn’t adapt fast enough,” he said.

“And how could it? Fire and ice are opposing elements.”

He saw it, the moment she drew her conclusion and knew without a shadow of a doubt that she was right, because he was thinking the exact same thing. It burned in her bright, pink eyes, a light he recognized all too well from their youth in moments when she’d figured everything out and there was no force on Earth that could stand in her way, not even him. And he didn’t know why, could not possibly justify it even if he tried, but in that revelatory moment he found her incomparably beautiful.

“Hey! Are you two coming or what?” Princess shouted at them over the roar of the propellers. “I’ve got police comms going on about the Golden Bay Bridge! I think that’s where all the action’s converging, so move it along!”

“The bridge?” Blossom flew level with the chopper. “You’re sure?”

Princess had a headset on and looked right at home in the pilot’s chair. She’d even found a pair of aviator sunglasses to wear. “Positive! Sounds like it’s a hell of a lot bigger than what we’ve been seeing up until now!”

“Then let’s get to the bridge,” Brick said. “Chances are your sisters will head there too, unless they’re living under a rock.”

Blossom nodded, grim. “Sounds like a plan. Princess, you should find somewhere safe to land—”

A short spray of rapid fire bullets erupted from the large machine gun mounted to the chopper. Princess bared her teeth in a grin. “Oh, I’m definitely coming with you.”

Blossom looked more than a little uneasy at the prospect of Princess flying a military-grade helicopter with access to a really big machine gun.

“Leave her be,” Brick said. “It’s not worth the argument.”

With that he took off, and he heard Princess tear after him as fast as the sleek chopper could go. Blossom pulled up alongside him, and he could practically feel her discomfort over allowing Princess to man such a dangerous vehicle. Brick would have laughed that this was where she drew the line, not at piggy-backing Princess all over the city while they fought killer plants, but then he remembered that his custom designer suit was covered in plant waste and a fucking vine had broken his nose and yeah, unleashing a trigger-happy Princess Morbucks was only fair at this point.

The Golden Bay Bridge was a complete shit show when Brick and the girls arrived. Blossom’s sisters were there, but so were his brothers, and everyone seemed to be acting with little regard for anyone else. Both Citiesville and Townsville police officers were on the scene with riot shields, shotguns, and even a few flamethrowers as they tried to contain the monster threat, but the vines that were trying to swallow the bridge were as thick around as houses. Even the small fry were giving the police trouble, adapting as they did to both bullet spray and fire alike.

It was a miracle the bridge had not fallen.

“Buttercup!” Blossom took off without warning to help Buttercup, who’d been snared by a bunch of vines pulling her down to the water’s surface where blooming lotus flowers as large as boulders
were spewing weird pollen and quivering like hungry, baby birds screaming for food. The pollen carried on the wind, that same rancid, saccharine smell he and Blossom had encountered previously.

*A hive mind…*

Brick remained high above the bridge as his eyes surveyed the lotus flowers waiting to devour Buttercup, to the huge, tentacle-like vines overtaking the bridge, to the gathering plant monsters. Lightning fast, a simple but effective plan began to form. He’d need his brothers to pull it off, though.

Boomer burst out of the water, energy bat in hand and flying like his life depended on it. Brick flew to intercept him first.

“Boomer, fly close to those lotus—”

“Brick!”

Brick was momentarily dumfounded at the sight of Bubbles looking back at him, her blue eyes wide and wild. She was dripping wet and inexplicably wielding Boomer’s signature bat and oh god, now she was grabbing his shirt like a crazy person.

“Brick, thank god! We have to stop it!”

He shoved her off him. She was still holding Boomer’s bat, but for now that was unimportant.

“Yeah, I got the memo.”

“No, you don’t understand, it’s under the bridge—”

Vines constricted around them, dangerously close, and the real Boomer came in swinging a second bat at one of the vines that would have flattened Brick and Bubbles where they hovered.

“Out of the park!” Boomer whooped.

“Boomer!” Bubbles caught his attention and he swooped down to join them.

“Hey—Brick! Finally, we could’ve used you, like, an hour ago—”

Brick grabbed both Blues by their collars and turned them around so they were facing the water.

“Less talking, more listening. Smell that disgusting pollen?”

“Is that what that is?” Bubbles made a face.

“Yes, and the plant monsters can smell it too. You two are about to become bait. Following?”

Boomer groaned. “Yeah, and I already hate it.”

Bubbles brandished her (Boomer’s) bat and grinned fiercely. “Stay positive, Boomer. Haven’t you ever played Keep Away?”

She took off in a blur of blue without waiting for an answer, and Boomer sputtered before taking off after her. Brick didn’t spare them a second glance, trusting that they would follow orders without question since Boomer was his brother and Bubbles was not Buttercup.

Speaking of Buttercup, Brick flew around to find the Greens and make sure they were actually doing something useful, only to hear Blossom already barking orders.
“I want this bridge peeled like a banana, and absolutely no cutting the vines,” Blossom commanded.

Butch, shirtless and stinking of sweat and mulch and naturally repellent in most senses of the word, actually looked dead serious for once as he surveyed the bridge. “I’ll take left, you take right?”

Buttercup crackled with power. “Fine by me. Loser pays for the next monster happy hour.”

Butch grinned and popped his neck, a habit Brick had always detested. “I hope you got paid today!”

They split from each other and crashed into the nearest colossal vines with enough force to stun and stupefy. Brick caught up to Blossom.

“Is Bubbles—” she began.

“Key jingling duty with Boomer,” Brick said.

The bridge groaned in protest as Butch and Buttercup systematically blew through vines without actually severing them. Boomer and Bubbles, covered in putrid pollen, were busy buzzing around the smaller plant monsters and luring them to the water’s edge as far away from any buildings and populated areas as possible, while the police re-bolstered their barricades. For a few moments, it looked like everything was under control, and Brick remember something Bubbles had said then, or almost said.

“Listen, I think the leader might be under—”

A piercing shriek made Brick and Blossom stumble in mid-air, and they covered their ears. The waters below began to churn and part as Buttercup and Butch flung vines back into their depths, freeing up the bridge. Brick stared, aghast, as a truly massive plant monster emerged from the deep. It dragged the lotus flowers with it and rose up.

“Oh my god,” Blossom gasped.

The Venus fly trap at the heart of the plant mass opened its poison-slick jaws and shrieked again, ear-splitting. Immediately, Butch and Buttercup abandoned their jobs to converge on the ultimate threat, but Brick dashed after them.

“Leave it and focus on the vines!” he ordered them.

“Are you shitting me?!” Buttercup bellowed.

Brick got in her face and narrowed his eyes to cruel slits. “Do I look like I’m fucking around?”

Buttercup flinched back, and Butch was there with a heavy glare on Brick’s profile. He said nothing when Brick turned his gaze on him, a silent warning passing between them. Buttercup was not so quick to let things lie.

“Tell me you have a plan to exterminate that thing,” Buttercup said.

Brick had no qualms about not answering such an asinine question. He showed her his back. “Blossom gave you a job. Get it done.”

He left them like that, sufficiently cowed, and found Blossom flying alongside Princess, who was still listening in on police chatter.
“They’re talking about bringing in some kind of bomb!” Princess shouted over the wind roar.
“Whatever you’re going to do, you better move your asses and do it!”

Brick bristled. Leave it to Normies to bring a grenade launcher to a fist fight. They’d blow their own fucking bridge for a chance to deploy the big boy guns and brag later about the might and mettle of leaders who were probably all delivering their orders from the cushy comforts of offices far out of the danger zone. Primeval fools, the lot of them. What could they possibly understand about real power? About courage?

“That’s insane!” Blossom said. “Brick, we have to end this now!”

He couldn’t agree more. “Ladies first!”

Blossom dived and blew her ice breath in a devastating wave directly over the Venus fly trap, freezing it solid. Brick was right behind her with fire and brimstone, burning the ice she raised on the monster’s pulpy flesh. The monster’s jaws snapped through the assault, quickly thawing and brushing off the fire like it was nothing but a tickle.

“It’s not working!” Blossom said.

“No shit!”

But that didn’t make any sense. Before, when they had attacked the plant monster together, it hadn’t stood a chance.

Princess’ chopper exploded with gunfire, and bullets flew inches over Brick’s head to pummel a rogue vine that had come up behind him. Shit, the thing had so many tentacles that it was fighting back easily. Butch and Buttercup had cleared the bridge at last, but they were two against a hundred huge vines now free to flail as they pleased. Boomer and Bubbles, having successfully trapped the mini monsters between the water and policemen armed with flamethrowers, were looping back around to assist, but the monster was massive.

Blossom’s hand on his arm pulled him from his muddled thoughts, and he found her looking up at him, a little fearful, a little hopeful. “Last time, we did it together.”

He stared at her a moment as he tried to parse out exactly what she was getting at. Fire and ice… smoke and steam…

With a snarl, he glared down at the horrible plant monster and its waiting jaws dripping with poison. “Fuck.”

She winced. “It’s going to hurt, probably.”

“*Probably,*” he snapped.

And why? Why did he have to rush in and help her back at the cafe? She was a Super, and a few razor-sharp thorns fired at bullet-grade speeds weren’t going to harm her. The woman she was trying to catch was her problem, not his. So why did he have to make it all his problem?

What a fucking bother.

“Brick,” she said, softly enough to drown out in the gunfire and pandemonium, but so, so loud. “*Please.*”

“Is that a question or a command?”
She held his gaze, and he wondered if she’d looked so serious when she’d asked him the very same question over the phone. “It’s whatever will get you to say yes.”

He glanced down at his brothers and her sisters zipping around like headless chickens trying to get the monster under control and failing. A wave of exhaustion hit him like a physical force, and he thought about how soft his bed was. He thought about the dress he’d bought her, how she’d promised to wear it tomorrow night when he took her out to dinner to a place far, far nicer than Boomer’s bar.

Brick slipped his hand around her waist and pulled her close. “Let’s not make a habit of this.”

She wrapped her own arms around his waist until they were chest to chest. “Of course not.”

They moved as one, diving and spinning faster and faster. Her ice poured out of her like mercury, a viscous, arcane flood, and it gave his fire something to burn. The outside world faded, and she faded too. There was only the heat and hoarfrost burning around him, tempestuous, and in a moment of ineffable awe the lonely little boy in him mistook for weakness, he held Blossom tighter to remind him that she was right there with him.

Monstrous jaws swallowed them whole, and Brick blacked out.

When the storm of the century concentrated over and through the giant Venus fly trap subsided, Princess aimed her chopper at the freezer-burned remains and flew low over the water. She hovered the chopper around where she’d watched Brick and Blossom get eaten and scanned the frothing waters. It didn’t take them long to come up sputtering and coughing.

Princess grabbed the support handle over the door and offered her hand to Blossom first, and then to Brick. Sprawled out in two heaps, they took up most of the available floor space as they panted and caught their breaths. Princess loomed over them.

“Well that was fucking dramatic,” she said.

Blossom and Brick, clearly both in a lot of pain as the Chemical X in their systems worked overtime to heal them after that completely over-the-top finale, stared up at her limply.

“Although, I guess that’s par for the course with you prima donnas,” Princess said.

Brick screwed up his face like this was the single-most offensive thing anyone had ever said about him to his face, and Blossom laughed. She regretted it immediately and clutched her belly, but she couldn’t contain the fit.

“L-Look who’s talking,” she wheezed.

Princess’ lips twitched, but then she thought better of it and shrugged. “True.”

Brick just groaned and threw his arm over his eyes.

Princess awkwardly stepped over them and reached for the controls. Better to get out of here before the police showed up asking questions about their missing chopper or worse, the press got a glimpse of Brick.

Also, she was definitely keeping this chopper.
I know this one was pretty long compared to previous chapters, but thanks for making it to the end all the same! We were overdue for a monster fight, and I like keeping them in one chapter from start to finish.

Thanks as always to my intrepid beta, Mordor! He powered through this really long chapter and helped me knock off nearly 1,000 unnecessary words from the first draft. All the awards.

Next time: The Boys and Girls regroup with family after the monster attacks. Reds and Blues attempt Date Night v.2.0.
There were some perks to being a former beloved Superhero of Townsville, one of which was that the local government would defend Buttercup and her sisters’ right to rest and recover in private as thanks for saving the day. Mayor Bellum and Mayor Minor gave a joint press conference just a few short hours after Brick and Blossom fried the mother monster plant, pledging a united front for dealing with the cleanup and reconstruction efforts in both their cities.

“Mayor Minor and I want to express our deepest gratitude to the Powerpuff Girls and their allies for eliminating the plant monsters,” Mayor Bellum spoke behind a truly enormous gaggle of microphones that obscured most of her face from view. “As a sign of goodwill and unity, the City of Townsville will be contributing monetary aid to the City of Citiesville’s reconstruction efforts. And in return, my esteemed colleague Mayor Minor has agreed to temporarily lift the ban on the use of Super powers during the emergency situation and forgive any violations thereunder.”

Buttercup scoffed at the television. Mayor Minor, looking constipated and pinch-faced as usual, stood next to the much taller, slender Mayor Bellum.

“Wish I could’ve been a fly on the wall for that private conversation,” she muttered to herself. Mayor Bellum could be a force of nature when she set her mind to something.

“Not me.” Bubbles plopped down on the living room couch of their childhood home next to Buttercup and handed her a freshly brewed cup of tea. “I’m exhausted! I’m glad we didn’t have to be there for this.”

“Like I already explained, I have no further comment on the other Supers involved. Nothing was pre-planned, and my sisters and I don’t currently have any intention to return as the Powerpuff Girls in any official capacity. All that matters is that we eliminated the threat and—” Blossom cut herself off and listened to the voice on the phone. She frowned deeply and stopped her pacing in the kitchen. “Benny, I said no. I understand that you have a responsibility to your viewers, but that’s all I have to say. If you want to know more, then you’ll just have to reach out to them directly, but personally I’d advise against it. Good night.”

She hung up her phone and slammed it on the counter, spooking poor Cheeto in his tank. Hair long and damp from her recent shower, Blossom sighed, bone-weary, and rubbed her eyes.

“Another reporter?” Bubbles asked, concerned.

Buttercup rolled her eyes. “That Benny Santiago guy is a dog with a fucking bone.”

“I’ll say,” Blossom said. She sank onto the couch in between her sisters and hugged a pillow to her chest. “I know he’s just doing his job, but I just can’t deal with another press call right now.”
Buttercup sneered. “Maybe you should’ve just set him on the Boys’ trail. Teach him a lesson about prying where he’s not wanted.”

“He’s annoying, but I’m sure he doesn’t have a death wish.”

The news cut to footage from the battle at the bridge, which showed police choppers circling the vines and peppering them with gunfire.

“Hey wait, that reminds me,” Bubbles said. “This is going to sound crazy, but I’m pretty sure I saw Princess Morbucks flying one of the police choppers. She actually gunned down one of the vines before it could smack me.”

Buttercup looked at her like she’d grown another head. “You’re shitting me. On what planet?”

“No, it’s true. Princess was there,” Blossom said. “She was with me having lunch before the monster attacks started and— You know what, it’s a really long story.”

“I’m sorry, lunch? What are you, BFFs now?”

Blossom shrugged and turned up her nose in that snooty, defensive way she had when she got called out on her bullshit. “We’re not about to elope into the sunset, but… Yes, sure, she’s a friend I’d like to get to know better.”

Buttercup looked to Bubbles, who merely shook her head like she had nothing to do with this.

What the hell is going on?

The television continued to play commentary by reporters regarding the monster attacks. Civilians were being interviewed in front of totaled cars and crumbling building façades damaged by the plant monsters, all of whom had withered where they lay and turned to dust once the mother plant was finally destroyed.

“That blue one, Boomer I think. He saved me and my baby from the plant monsters,” said a haggard woman clutching a toddler happily sucking away on a pacifier. “I don’t care who he used to be, he saved my life today and I’ll never forget that.”

The reporter interviewing the woman faced the camera. “Well, there you have it folks. It looks like the former Powerpuff Girls aren’t the only Superheroes in town willing to save the day anymore—”

Blossom turned the television off. Buttercup peered at her, suspicious.

“Hey, what’d you do that for?” Bubbles asked.

“Sorry Bubbles. I’m just all monstered out for the day. Do you mind if we talk about something else?”

“Great idea,” Buttercup said. “Oh, I know. How about you and Brick showing up just in time to pull a finishing combo out of your asses like you’d done it a hundred times before?”

Blossom stiffened.

Bingo.

“Of course we’ve never done that before today,” she said.

“Of course,” Buttercup said. “Because for as long as we’ve known them, you’ve never gotten
“They helped us today,” Bubbles said a little defensively. “If they hadn’t, I don’t think we would’ve won.”

“Bubbles is right,” Blossom said quickly. “Whatever our personal differences, they were a big help today, including Brick.”

“I’m not saying they weren’t.”

“Then what?”

Buttercup sipped her tea as she watched Blossom, taut as a rubber band. “There’s something you’re not telling us. Something that has to do with that royal asshole. And don’t tell me I’m wrong, because I know I’m not.”

Bubbles watched their sister curiously, those big, blue eyes a one-way mirror into her thoughts that she chose not to share with the class right now. “Blossom…?”

Blossom sank deeper into the couch. Her curtain of hair hid half her face as she stared dead ahead at the black television screen. “It’s not anything I planned on keeping from you both. I’m just not sure how you’ll react. I’ve barely had much time to digest it myself with everything that happened today.”

Buttercup’s heartbeat pounded in her ears as a sudden, inexplicable wave of anxiety hit her like a cold front. What could Blossom possibly be holding on to that was so hard to say?

“Try us,” Bubbles said, strangely calm and sympathetic and not at all suspicious like she’d been just a moment ago. She tucked Blossom’s long bangs behind her ear. “We’ll listen.”

Blossom closed her eyes. “It’s about the Professor.”

Buttercup was not sure what she’d been expecting, but it was definitely not that. “What the hell does Brick have to do with the Professor?”

“He doesn’t, not exactly. More like he reminded me of something I put off for way too long.” She looked up at Buttercup. “I was with Brick this morning before the monster attacks because we were vetting a new client of his: Aegis Labs. They want a sample of Chemical X.”

“Chemical X?” Bubbles said. “But…why?”

“To cure blindness, to stimulate organ growth, to invent new vaccines for deadly diseases, and so much more. And I think they just might be able to do it.”

Buttercup shook her head. “Wait, back up. What does that even mean?”

To her surprise, Blossom took her hand. She looked so vulnerable, so human in that moment that Buttercup’s heart wrenched. “It means I think I may have found a way to secure the Professor’s legacy the right way.”

Bubbles gasped, and Buttercup was too stunned to pull her hand away.

“I didn’t even know you were thinking about that,” Bubbles said.

Blossom winced. “I haven’t been for the last few years, admittedly.”
Neither had Buttercup. Not because their father’s greatest wish wasn’t important, but it just wasn’t top of mind now that he was gone. That thought filled her with a hot flash of rancor, and she got up off the couch, yanking her hand out of Blossom’s.

“Buttercup—”

“So let me get this straight,” Buttercup cut Blossom off. “You’ve been talking to Brick about our father’s legacy, scheming with Brick to hand over a bunch of Chemical X to random scientists in a fancy lab I’ve never heard of—”

“No one is scheming anything, and I would never just give Chemical X away to—”

Buttercup whirled on her, eyes blazing red with the threat of her laser eye beams. “And you did it all behind our backs!”

Blossom was on her feet so fast Buttercup hardly saw her move. Her pink eyes flamed red as she matched Buttercup’s hostility with her own. “Don’t you ever accuse me of something so vile. You know me, Buttercup.”

Buttercup may have faltered if the very notion of it didn’t piss her off to the point of fearlessness. “Then what? Tell us, what’s really going on?”

Blossom’s power receded, and with it the couch Bubbles had remained sitting on floated back down to the floor. She wisely remained silent. Blossom took an audible, calming breath. “He needed a lawyer to review the arrangement.”

Buttercup barked a laugh. “Oh that’s rich. Of all the sharks in Citiesville, he just happened to ask you—”

“Just like he asked you specifically to look in to the Mojo burglary. I’m the only lawyer with Chemical X in my veins. Buttercup, please.” Fearless, or stupid, Blossom put a heavy hand on Buttercup’s shoulders. If Buttercup’s sparking, green power stung her, she hid it well. “I didn’t expect anything going in this morning, but these scientists are the real thing. They’re changing the world.”

“Says the shitbag who runs errands for corrupt politicians and rich assholes for a living,” Buttercup spat.

Blossom remained placid and unsympathetic. “I’m not interested in talking to you about Brick and his alleged connections. This isn’t about him, it’s about the Professor. It’s about us. Brick may have made the initial introductions, but I saw it all for myself.”

Before Buttercup could lose her temper some more, Bubbles spoke up. “What did you see?”

“Possibility. A chance to do something right for once.”

Her stony façade cracked, and Buttercup felt the wind leave her sails at the sight of her intransigent older sister looking so goddamned sincere. Blossom’s hand fell.

“I failed you both once before,” she said, her voice stilted with emotion. “I’ll live and die with that failure.”

“You didn’t—” Bubbles said.

“You did,” Buttercup interrupted. Heat stung her eyes and clenched her throat, but she looked
Blossom in the eye and didn’t flinch.

“I did,” Blossom agreed. “Never again. The Professor shared us with the world to make it a better place. So that’s what I’m going to do too. Girls…”

She reached for Bubbles, who readily took her hand, and then for Buttercup, who did not. Blossom clenched her empty fist.

“This is the first opportunity of many. Maybe we decide Aegis is the right fit, or maybe we don’t. But either way, I want us to decide it together. If three little girls can save a whole city, then maybe in the right hands, Chemical X could save the whole world.”

Buttercup wanted to hold on to her anger. It had been her constant companion for the four years since the Professor died and Blossom fucked off right out of her life scarcely to be heard from again until now. It was easy to be angry at her for leaving, at the Professor for dying, at Bubbles for accepting it all in that passive, morose way she harbored beneath her blinding smiles. But not Buttercup. She held on with a vice-grip that could crush steel, kept it all right there in her grasp so it couldn’t let go of her either. If she released it, let it drift away with time, who would fade? The memories, or her?

And then what would she be left with?

“I’m not asking for forgiveness,” Blossom said at length. “I’m asking for help.”

Bubbles smiled sadly. “We used to make a pretty good team.”

Buttercup balled her empty fists and wished her sweatpants had pockets to stuff them in. “Yeah, once upon a time.”

“I’m willing to try again if you are,” Blossom said.

Buttercup scowled, but her heart was no longer in it. Exhaustion settled in her bones where her fury once dwelled. There didn’t seem to be any point anymore. “I guess we could see how it goes.”

Blossom smiled even as her eyes glistened and her lip trembled. When she reached for Buttercup this time, she let her. “Thank you.”

The half hug turned into a full one when Bubbles grabbed them both tightly. “I’ve missed us so much.”

Blossom sniffled. “Me too.”

“I know we can’t just forget the past and I’m not saying we should,” Bubbles said. “But maybe, you know, we could try doing more family stuff from now on? Like we used to.”

Buttercup rolled her eyes. “Oh god. Like what?”

“I don’t know, something fun and relaxing.”

“We could watch an old black and white movie,” Blossom said.

Bubbles gasped. “Yes! And do each other’s nails!”

They both beamed at Buttercup, hopeful, and she knew she was beaten. “For fuck’s sake, fine. But I’m getting the wine.”
“I’ll get the nail polish!” Bubbles disappeared in a blue flash upstairs.

The sisters sat on cushions on the floor around a bottle of Chianti and more nail polish bottles than a salon as *Dial M for Murder* played on the living room television. They didn’t talk about the monster attacks or the Rowdyruff Boys or the low chatter of paparazzi still hanging around outside hoping to catch a glimpse of them through the drawn curtains.

Buttercup kicked back with a glass of wine in one hand while Bubbles painted her other hand a shimmery black and Grace Kelly stole every scene she was in.

“Grace Kelly is so classic,” Blossom said. She’d settled on a very dark, burgundy polish.

“You know, I’ve been told I look a little like her,” Bubbles said.

Buttercup snorted. “Please.”

“Hey, I could pull off the sultry noir heroine.” Bubbles pouted her lips and fluffed her hair. “I’m so tired of lying, not knowing what is a lie and what is the truth,” she said in her best impression of a 1940s femme fatale.

Blossom laughed. “Wrong movie, Bubbles.”

“Wrong actress too,” Buttercup said. “Brigid O’Shaughnessy killed it in *The Maltese Falcon*.”

“I know. But all those old black and white movies are pretty similar.”

Blossom shook her head. Bubbles had never been much of a cinema buff like her sisters, but she meant well.

They watched Grace Kelly almost get strangled with a scarf and drive a pair of scissors through her assailant, killing him instead. In a fright, she tried to explain to her husband what had just happened over the phone, unaware that he’d orchestrated the entire affair. It would all come down to a secret key to the garden doors and who did and didn’t know of its existence.

Buttercup thought about Danny Chang, as she often did. Was he still alive? Was he being kept somewhere, alone and afraid? Nothing had come from his abandoned car, no DNA or fingerprints or anything. The kid had just disappeared into thin air, just like the burglar who’d vanished from Mojo’s, and no one could tell her anything about either of them.

No one but Ace, maybe. Did he hold the key? Or like poor Grace Kelly awaiting her execution for a crime she didn’t commit, was he just a scapegoat in something much, much bigger?

“Blossom?” Blossom offered her the bottle of wine to refill her empty glass, but her expression was curious, concerned even. “Something on your mind?”

Buttercup studied her sister, her leader who always seemed to know what to do because she always tried to do *something*. Even now, after years of being gone, she was just trying to do something. Maybe it would pan out, maybe it wouldn’t. But it was a place to start, and that counted for something.

Buttercup held out her glass for Blossom to refill. “Just work stuff.”

Blossom nodded. “Well, if you ever want to talk about it, I’ll be here anytime.”

“Noted.”
They went back to watching the movie and painting their nails, but Buttercup’s mind was far away in the dark alleys and seedy night clubs of Citiesville’s underground wondering what, if anything, she would find there.

B-3 was swarming with paparazzi after the monsters were all put down, but thanks to Neha’s tip-off text, Boomer made sure to avoid it lest some erstwhile reporter accost him for an interview. It wasn’t that Boomer didn’t want to talk to the press; it’d be nice to have something positive to contribute to the papers for a change, rather than pop up in the headlines as a vandal or criminal once again thwarted by the efforts of three perfect little girls. But Brick would not be pleased, and his brother’s particular brand of displeasure was not worth five minutes of fame.

As much as Boomer disliked Brick’s immaculate, cold apartment, he had to admit it came in quite handy with its strict security and high-rise location at a time when paparazzi were salivating over what scraps of information they could dig up on the three Super brothers who had inadvertently made it to the top of Citiesville’s Most Admired list for helping the Powerpuff Girls defeat the plant monsters. So far, the news outlets hadn’t caught Butch’s and Brick’s names, but there were some action shots floating around the Internet picturing them both clearly enough to recognize if someone knew them in real life.

“Did Miss Bubbles really steal your baseball bat?” Brisa asked.

Butch laughed. “She totally did. And she looked super badass doing it.”

Brisa’s dark eyes grew huge at the prospect. “Can I try your bat, Uncle Boomer? Can I ppleaseeease?”

“Oh, even if you physically could, I’m not sure your dad would want you messing around with a dangerous weapon.”

Butch shrugged. “How else is she gonna learn?”

Brick joined them in the living room of his apartment bearing the top-shelf whiskey he usually kept squirreled away from his voracious brothers, three crystal glasses, and a juice box for Brisa. Like his brothers, he was showered and clean in loose-fitting sweatpants and a long-sleeved shirt. He’d insisted on literally burning all their plant monster-soiled clothing, or what was left of it.

“How mysterious.”

Brisa, low attention span angel that she was, came to Boomer’s rescue. “Is that apple?”

Brick unwrapped the plastic bendy straw, stabbed the juice box, and handed it to Brisa. “It’s an organic ginger-apple-carrot blend.”

Butch pulled a face, and Brick narrowed his eyes.

“You said she liked juice, so I bought juice. What’s the problem now?”

“Dude, this is, like, old people vegan juice,” Butch said.
“All juice is vegan.”

“Actually, that’s a common misconception,” Boomer said.

“Oh my fucking god,” Brick muttered under his breath softly enough for Brisa not to hear him.

“I’m just saying, next time just grab some Capri Sun. You know, kid juice,” Butch said.

Boomer handed Brick his drink before he could say something they would all probably regret, and Brick took a long, grateful sip. Brisa did the same.

“Hey, it tastes pretty good!” she said.

Brick polished off his drink and set it down with a triumphant smirk. Boomer promptly refilled it. “It tastes pretty good, she says.”

Butch rolled his eyes. “Lucky you.”

“Thanks for the juice box, Uncle Brick.” Brisa snuggled closer to him on the couch.

Brick put his arm up on the back of the couch so she could lean against his side uninhibited. “You’re welcome.”

The television was playing the news on low volume, which was full of nothing but coverage about the plant monsters and their demise. Boomer’s eyes were glued to the screen as he listened to reporters speculate about the plant monsters’ origins, the damage to both Citiesville and neighboring Townsville across the Golden Bay Bridge, and of course the epic return of the Powerpuff Girls.

The brothers drank mostly in silence for a while as they listened, and Brisa yawned as she dozed between Brick and Butch. Cell phone footage submitted by an anonymous civilian captured Butch and Bubbles absolutely demolishing a plant monster in a sleepy Townsville suburb for a few seconds.

Boomer glanced at Brick, who stiffened as he watched.

“It’s a nine-second video,” Boomer said. “You can barely even see it’s Butch in there with her.”

“Of course you can tell it’s me. The shield is my signature move,” Butch said.

Boomer shot him a reproachful look past Brick, but Butch was too busy kicking back and enjoying Brick’s expensive whiskey to notice.

There was more footage professionally shot on news cameras of the main fight at the bridge. Boomer and his brothers were nothing but splashes of indiscernible color darting in between the suspension cables and around the massive vines. Some lunatic cameraman had actually managed to film the end of Brick and Blossom’s final elemental attack that took out the Venus fly trap in an explosion of smoke and steam.

“Great,” Brick muttered.

“For real, what’s your problem? You weren’t this pissy about the Red Monster,” Butch said.

“My problem is Boomer can’t even go back to B-3 tonight because of the fu—” He lowered his voice and glanced at Brisa clutching her empty juice box and half asleep next to him. “Because of the freaking paparazzi camped out.”
“Right, okay. But they’re not here bothering you.”

The footage cut to an interview with a civilian Boomer recognized immediately because he’d saved her and her baby from being crushed in their car. She had apparently recognized him and even named him. “I don’t care who he used to be, he saved my life today and I’ll never forget that,” she spoke directly into the camera.

Boomer’s stomach clenched like the sensation of free-falling, and he couldn’t help but smile. She sounded like she meant it.

“Not yet,” Brick said. “But it won’t take them long to figure out their new hero has a couple Super brothers.”

“So what?” Boomer said.

Both Butch and Brick looked at him, nonplussed.

“So what?” Brick repeated.

Boomer frowned, whatever delight he’d felt just moments ago hearing the woman’s genuine gratitude gone. “Yeah, so what? Look, I get that your work requires you to stay out of the spotlight, but what’s so bad about getting credit for a good thing?”

“The fact that you have to ask tells me you really don’t get my job at all.”

He really didn’t, if he was being honest. Brick was a smart guy who could work a room if he really put his mind to it. Why not put that natural charisma to work out in the open where it was meant to be seen and acknowledged and followed? Instead of facilitating the careers of big-name politicians and businessmen, why couldn’t he have pursued those avenues for himself?

But of course, Boomer knew why. He and his brothers were not made of sugar, spice, and everything nice, and in this town people tended to have very long memories.

“I’m just saying I’m glad I was around to help out today. It felt good.”

Butch smirked. “Yeah it did. I haven’t gotten a workout like that in a long time.”

Boomer should have just dropped it like he always did, but he didn’t want to this time. “No, I mean, it felt good to help people. To use my powers to—”

“To what?” Brick cut in. “To play the hero? To listen to that Normie fellate you on live television? Is that what you want, a fan club?”

Boomer flushed with anger. “I want to do something good.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s the right thing to do! And because I can.” Boomer let his power manifest on his palm. “What’s the point of having all this power if I can’t do anything with it?”

Brick was eerily silent for a moment. “Are you done?”

No, he wanted to say. He hadn’t even begun to scratch the surface and the fact that his own brother, his leader, his protector couldn’t see it made him rage and writhe like nothing else could.

But rancor went down sweet with a bit of reason to soothe it. A real fight with Brick was rarely
worth the trouble, and weary and trying to keep a low profile after a devastating monster attack was not the best time to pick one. Winning was never the point, anyway.

“Whatever,” Boomer said, and rolled his shoulders to try to dispel some of the frustration built up and giving him stress aches.

Brisa muttered something in her sleep. She was completely passed out now and half lying on Brick. The news was showing Brick and Blossom’s epic combo finale again as the anchors began a debate about the efficacy of Citiesville’s anti-Super ordinance.

“Give me a fucking break,” Brick said softly enough so as not to wake Brisa.

“I mean, to be fair, the whole fire and ice Spirit Bomb thing was flashy as fuck,” Butch said. “Extremely cool, but—”

“Completely extra,” Boomer said as he watched the slow-motion replay. And surprisingly coordinated.

He glanced at Brick, who had completely walled himself off and was unreadable, and then at Butch who seemed weirdly uninterested.

“You know, now that I think about it, you and Blossom seemed pretty comfortable working together,” Boomer said.

“Probably because they’ve been hanging out,” Butch said.

Boomer choked on his drink. Brisa moaned in her sleep and Butch gently pried her off of Brick to cradle against his chest. Her little arms snaked around his neck, but she hardly stirred.

“You’ve been what?” Boomer said after he’d cleared his throat of the burning alcohol.

“She’s my lawyer. We had a client visit this morning. Butch came along,” Brick explained like he’d rehearsed it in the mirror.

Boomer was immediately suspicious. “But you despise her.”

Butch snorted. “That’s what I said.”

“I don’t despise her,” Brick said. He got up and turned on the PS4 to boot up Call of Duty: Modern Warfare.

Butch got up too. “Co-op after I put her down?”

“Yeah, hurry up,” Brick said.

Boomer grabbed a spare controller and signed in to his profile. “So, since when do you not despise Blossom?”

Brick kept his eyes firmly on the screen. “Since I’m not some callow boy clinging to the misbegotten notion that who I am and what I’m worth depends entirely on her.”

Boomer was taken aback at his brother’s brutal honesty. “You really thought that?”

Brick glanced at him askance. “You lived with him too.”

Yeah, but Boomer had never given much credence to Mojo’s insistence on the Boys’ eternal
opposition to Bubbles and her sisters. The older he got, the less he cared about antagonizing the Girls, let alone opposing them. Brick had always been Mojo’s favorite, the protégé and the prodigy, until the day the Boys turned sixteen, became legally emancipated, and moved out on their own. It was around that time that Brick got his first client (and first paycheck) in Oliver Morbucks, Princess’ stupidly wealthy father. Since then, he’d supported himself and his brothers financially until they were able to branch out on their own after high school.

But Boomer had never imagined just how deeply ingrained Mojo’s vision had been in Brick. How perhaps it still was even after all these years despite what he said to the contrary.

“You know, maybe it’s because I was too dense to really appreciate our so-called evil purpose or whatever, but I’ve always been more interested in our similarities to the Girls than our differences. They’re not just our counterparts, and I’m not just saying that because Bubbles and I have a history.”

“Then what.”

Brick was busy selecting the level and mission specs like he wasn’t paying attention, but his grip on the controller was white-knuckle tight.

“Being known isn’t being defeated. I think it’s the opposite.”

Brick didn’t respond to that, and Butch finally returned from putting Brisa to bed in the guest room. The couch dipped under his weight where he reclaimed his spot on Brick’s left. “All right you cum dumpsters, it’s trash day and Butch doesn’t recycle.”

“Jesus Christ,” Boomer groaned.

The level loaded and they gained control of their characters already pre-loaded with guns and grenades.

“Keep talking out of your ass, fuckboy,” Brick said.

Butch sniggered. “You mean this fine ass right here?” He lifted his leg and farted.

“Fuck off.” Brick violently shoved Butch to the floor, but he bit back a smile at his expense. “You’re disgusting.”

“Disgustingly handsome, sure.”

“Aaaaaand guess who just claimed the rocket launcher while you two were braiding each other’s hair,” Boomer said.

“Bitch move, Boomer,” Butch said as he scrambled back onto the couch. “Biiiiiiitch move.”

“Like I need a rocket launcher to smear you both,” Brick said.

The trash talking picked up in kind, as it always did when they played video games together.

“Loser makes popcorn,” Boomer said.

“I’m about to pop your corn right—ohhh!” Butch whooped as his landmine went off right next to Boomer’s character, nearly killing him off. His victory was short-lived when Brick sniped him from a tower before he could finish Boomer off with a shotgun.

“Popcorn’s in the pantry, top shelf. Make sure you add chili powder,” Brick said smugly.
“Yeah, yeah.” Butch grumbled about it, but soon they had a bowl of popcorn and all the low-stakes, video game violence they could ask for on a rare Friday night in.

Buttercup, with her coffee and a toasted bagel brunch, had just snuck into the precinct through the back alley entrance to avoid the few paparazzi lurking about when her cell phone rang. She rolled her eyes at the caller ID illuminated on the screen, but picked up after two rings.

“Unless you’re mortally wounded or offering to pay for an early monster happy hour, I’m not interested,” Buttercup said.

“Easy BC, it’s not even noon,” Butch drawled on the other end of the line. "But it’s nice to know I’m wanted.”

“Only by the FBI and suburban housewives hiring pool boys."

He laughed, and Buttercup shivered up and down her spine. She took a big gulp of piping hot coffee from the styrofoam cup.

“Bet you’d like to see me stripped down to swim trunks, working a pool skimmer for you.”

Buttercup laughed him off even as she inevitably pictured it: Butch shirtless, his diamond-patterned sleeve tattoo exposed like it had been during yesterday’s attack, all toned muscle and tanned skin, green eyes bright and coquettish as he watched her across the water—

“You’re totally picturing it, aren’t you?”

Buttercup flushed hotly and her power spasmed harshly enough to vibrate her desk and send piles of papers falling to the floor. “Son of a—I was not, obviously!”

He laughed again as Buttercup bent to pick up the discarded documents, which were all out of order now. “Woman please, stop lying to yourself.”

“I’m not.”

“Hey, if it makes you feel better, I picture you naked all the time.”

Buttercup paused what she was doing a moment to glare at her uneaten bagel. She imagined it was Butch’s stupid, fat head and fantasized about ripping it in half. “What the fuck do you want? Did you seriously call me for mediocre phone sex? Are you that bored that—”

“Chill! I’m just messing around, you know.”

Buttercup picked up the last of her papers and dropped them on her desk with a heavy sigh. “Look, I have a metric shit ton of paperwork to get through today, so unless you accidentally lit your balls on fire or something, I really don’t have time to deal with you.”

“I’m touched that you care so much about my balls.”

“Butch, I swear to god—”

“All right, all right! It’s about Brisa.”

Buttercup settled into her seat. She was one of a few people in the office right now, as most were out to lunch or taking their Saturday time off, so there was no one to overhear her conversation. Even so, she lowered her voice. “What about her? Is she okay? Did something happen?”
“No, she’s fine. I just need you to run some background checks.”

“What? Why?”

“’Cause I gotta know who I’m dealing with. I can’t just let her spend the day with some kid I don’t even know.”

Buttercup’s expression fell as she realized that this was not a matter of any urgency concerning Brisa’s safety, but something asinine, as per usual. “Are you saying you want me to run a background check on a kindergartener trying to be friends with Brisa?”

“No, obviously that’s dumb. It’s his rich-ass parents I want to know about. What if they’re kidnappers? Libertarians? Instagram influencers?”

She could almost hear his cringe. “Then they’d be like a lot of other rich assholes in the Peninsula. Look, this is obviously a waste of my time, so if that’s all then I’m—”

“Hey, I’m serious here!”

“So am I. What’s the big deal? So Brisa made a friend at school and she wants to go to hang out? That’s literally the point of having friends.”

“Yeah, fine, but this is a boy friend.”

Buttercup slumped so deep into her seat that she nearly slipped out of it entirely. “Oh my gooooood.”

“You know guys only got one thing on the brain.”

“They’re fucking five.”

“So? I was a fucking maniac when I was five.”

Buttercup dragged her ass up and sat properly in her chair. She ran her fingers through her long, loose hair, tugging at it just enough to almost hurt. “You were just some dumb little boy who called me a lame, sissy girl and tried to kill me a few times. Far’s I’m concerned, this kid wanting to be Brisa’s friend already makes him cooler than you ever were.”

He sighed dejectedly, and Buttercup wondered if he was also slumped over. Maybe he was lying on his back on his bed, his hands gripping his hair to give his antsy fingers something to crush just as she was. “Clearly. All she talks about is ‘Richie this’ and ‘Richie that’ and fuck, you’d think the kid shits chocolate bars he’s so cool.”

There was a pause as she listened to him breathing lightly, a little worked up. Buttercup chewed on her newly-painted thumb nail, a nervous habit.

“Please, Professor? Can I pleaseeease go to Mitch’s on Saturday? He’s got a buncha bottle rockets in all kinds of colors and we’re gonna set ‘em all off!”

She’d known she and the Professor were supposed to go play Ultimate Frisbee at the park together that day, but Mitch had invited her and not Blossom or Bubbles because she was cool and fun and Buttercup had never had any friends she didn’t have to share with her sisters.

“All right, pumpkin. If that’s what you want, then of course you can go.”

It was so long ago, but for some reason Buttercup had never been able to forget the look on the
Professor’s face when he told her she could go. She’d never known it was possible for someone to look so sad and yet so happy at the same time.

“He’s her friend,” Buttercup said at length. “She’s going to keep making those the older she gets, boys and girls. But she’ll only ever have one dad, and she’ll always come back to you.”

“Yeah, so long as I don’t fuck it up, right?” He let out a sharp breath that could have been a laugh, but it wasn’t, not quite.

“You won’t,” Buttercup said. “You’re her dad.”

Another laugh that wasn’t a laugh. “Sure about that?”

“You won’t.”

Butch fell quiet on the other end of the line. She listened to him breathing softly and closed her eyes, and they let the silence stretch for a few moments.

“I better go,” he said. “This playdate shit starts in an hour and she hasn’t had lunch yet.”

“Yeah.”

“See you later, doll.”

“Okay, bye.”

He hung up, and Buttercup stared at the dark screen of her phone. It only now occurred to her that he’d called her that insipid pet name yet again and she hadn’t told him off. Whatever. It didn’t bother her as much today, and she had so much crap to do that she didn’t have time to dwell on it.

Maybe the next time she saw him she’d put him in his place. Next time.

“Bubbles, could you please get this zipper? I can’t reach it.”

Bubbles couldn’t help but stare at Blossom, made up and done up to the nines in a silky, red dress like she was debuting a Hollywood blockbuster. The back was low-cut with a delicate, embroidered finish along the edges, high quality and expensive. More expensive than Bubbles imagined her sister indulging in for any reason. Perhaps it had been a gift, but who from? She couldn’t imagine Blossom wanting to wear something Wei had given her.

“Sure,” Bubbles said, reaching for the hidden zipper and careful not to bunch the fabric. The skirt fanned out enough to flare with a step, and the cut was high enough to be tempting yet tasteful.

Blossom fussied with her long, wavy hair she’d tossed over her shoulder to show off the back of her dress, and their eyes met in the mirror. “What?”

Bubbles couldn’t contain her sly smile. “You said you had a date tonight, but you didn’t mention you’d be wearing a Marry Me Dress.”

Blossom flushed as scarlet as her dress. “It’s not like that, I assure you.”

“Okie dokie.”

“Bubbles, really, it’s just dinner.”
“I said okay.”

Predictably, Blossom could not let it go without getting the last word. “I promised I’d wear this dress tonight since he bought it for me, that’s all.”

That was far from all, Bubbles suspected. “You’ve been seeing Mr. Juice Cleanse a lot lately. He must really like you if he’s buying you Elie Saab.”

“I wish you wouldn’t call him that. And yes, we do enjoy each other’s company. More than I thought we would, actually. He’s just…a little dramatic sometimes.”

Yeah, and you love it.

Blossom smoothed down her skirt, no doubt relishing the silken texture. Bubbles had never really seen her sister in lust with someone before. Sure, she’d had boyfriends and paid her dues to the honeymoon phase just like everybody else, but Blossom had always kept a level head. Her boys were usually more in to her than the other way around. Until Wei broke her heart, and Bubbles realized she had given more of it away than perhaps she even knew she could.

It was nice to see Blossom enjoying herself after all that ugliness. But was it more than that?

Bubbles thought of the final attack Brick and Blossom had pulled off against the plant monster. It had been devastating, “crazy, stupid raw” as Butch had put it after the fact when they all regrouped. It had also been stunning, perfect, synchronized, like they’d always known that they were better together.

Well, perhaps they did know if Bubbles’ suspicions were correct and Brick was the same Mr. Juice Cleanse Blossom had been spending quite a lot of time with lately. And Bubbles’ instincts about these things were almost never wrong.

Her curiosity burned at her with an almost overpowering hunger.

“Well? What do you think?” Blossom turned around and put her hands on her hips like she didn’t know what to do with them.

Bubbles smiled knowingly. “I think you deserve a night of fun and romance after yesterday’s monster fight. You look lovely.”

Blossom smiled, small but true. “Thank you.”

“Oh, one more thing.” Bubbles headed for the closet she used as overflow for her own enormous clothing collection and retrieved a thick, black shawl from a hanger. “That dress is gorgeous, but you don’t want to be sleeveless in October.”

They headed downstairs, Blossom in her dress and Bubbles in comfy but cute boyfriend jeans and a cropped, oversized T-shirt, when the doorbell rang.

“Someone’s early,” Bubbles said with a bright smile.

Blossom’s hand on her wrist stopped her before she could answer the door. “Hey, you deserve it too. A night of fun and romance.”

Bubbles flushed, not having expected her sister’s easy candor. “We’re just staying in and playing Breath of the Wild or something. No fancy dresses and dinner dates.”
“It sounds perfect.”

It did sound perfect the moment Bubbles laid eyes on Boomer standing at the door Blossom opened for him.

“Damn, Blossom,” Boomer said, his eyes blown wide. “You look amazing. Is there some kind of Hot People Party happening tonight that I wasn’t aware of?”

Blossom smirked. “You mean you didn’t get the invitation? Tragic.”

“How dare they snub me. I work hard to maintain this world class babyface, you know.”

They shared a laugh, but his eyes soon landed on Bubbles in the foyer. Like her, he was casual but cute in a violet sweater and jeans with his hair pulled back in that little bun she liked so much. She remembered when he’d grown his hair out solely because he’d been too lazy to get it cut for a few months, and how he’d kept it when she said the style reminded her of a fairytale prince the way it framed his boyish face. She bit her lip, but it did nothing to hide her smile.

“Hey, Bubbles. I brought you these.” Boomer handed her a small bouquet of sunflowers, her favorite.

She lit up as brightly as the yellow flowers and eagerly accepted them. “They’re beautiful, thanks!”

“And a little something for Cheeto. Maybe you could work it into his next Instagram shoot?” He pulled a small chunk of oddly shaped driftwood from the pet store plastic bag. “I thought it looked pretty cool.”

“It does look cool! Oh, he’ll love this. It’ll look great against his pretty, orange scales.” She headed to the kitchen to put the flowers in water, but she could still hear Blossom and Boomer talking in the foyer.

“Have a nice night,” Blossom said.

“Should we wait up?” Boomer said.

Cheeky, Bubbles thought, sure that Blossom would not appreciate it.

“I see we’re skipping the intro niceties of our fledgling friendship and cutting right to the shameless teasing.”

“I guess I just have a good feeling about you is all.” There was a smile in his voice, and Bubbles poked her head around the corner.

Blossom was looking at her phone, but she was grinning. “You’re as bad as your brother.”

Intrigued by her sister’s slip—was that intentional?—Bubbles rejoined them.

“That’s my Lyft.” Blossom stepped outside as a car pulled up in front of the house. She shot them a knowing look over her shoulder. “Don’t wait up.”

Boomer chuckled and waved after her. “Some lucky bastard is about to have a great night,” he said once they retreated indoors.

Bubbles watched him out of the corner of her eye, looking for any hint that he might share her suspicions about Brick being that lucky bastard but finding nothing. “If he knows what’s good for him.”
Alone now, Boomer looped his arm around her waist and pulled her to his side. “Fun as it is to speculate about your sister’s love life, I’m a little more interested in ours.”

He smiled down at her, and Bubbles’ skin buzzed at the look of warm adoration in his lovely, blue eyes. Despite herself, she got lost in him for a moment, her hands on his chest, his nose brushing hers, her toes pushing her past her height until there was no space left between them. The kiss was soft and sweet and unsullied by tears. His arms soon tightened around her waist, and her heart thundered in her chest, as if his touch had reanimated something long thought dormant and buried.

Bubbles curled her fingers through the loose hair framing his face and around his neck, deepening the kiss and smiling at the little moan of pleasure he made. Boomer had never been shy about how much he wanted her, and she never tired of hearing it.

His hand slipped under her cropped T-shirt and teased the band of her sports bra. At some point, they had left the ground and floated until Bubbles’ back gently bumped the kitchen wall, and he pressed her against it. When his other hand dipped behind the waistband of her jeans, Bubbles froze and pushed him back. Immediately, Boomer removed his hands from her and broke their heated kiss.

“I’m sorry,” Bubbles said, breathless and barely able to resist the way he held back the unabashed desire in his eyes simply because she asked. “I want to, but it’s just…”

“Too fast?” He wanted her, that much was obvious, but he took her chin in his fingers to look at her properly. “It was too fast.”

Bubbles bit her lip, drawing his eyes back to her mouth. “Yeah. I’m sorry, I know it’s silly—”

“It’s not silly.” He wrapped his arms around her in a hug meant only to comfort and console. “You asked me to take it slow, and we will. I’m sorry.”

She hugged him back, unsure what she had done in a past life to deserve such a powerful, selfless love even after the way she had abandoned him once before. Her eyes watered, but she squeezed them tight and pressed her face to his shoulder, refusing to ruin her makeup before they had even gotten a chance to start their date properly. “It’s okay. I got caught up in the moment is all.”

He sighed and planted a chaste kiss on her head. “To be fair, it was a pretty good moment.”

She smiled and held him tighter. “It was.”

His fingers in her hair had a soporific effect that calmed her racing heart. They stood there holding each other for a few moments as the carnal desire subsided, and eventually he let her go.

“We’ll get there,” she said, because it felt wrong not to reassure him that she was here for him this time, that she wasn’t going to run off again, that she wasn’t afraid.

“I know, baby. I’m not going anywhere, I promise.”

Bubbles could have cried then. She was convinced that Boomer didn’t truly understand how deeply his honest words touched her, but that was why she loved him like she had never been able to love anyone else. He had no agenda, no ulterior motive. His love, like hers, was not fragile. No power on Earth could break it.

She beamed up at him. “Hey, are you hungry? I thought we could cook and then maybe play games or watch a movie if you want?”
He returned her bright smile. “All the above. I’m out at B-3 every night. I can’t even remember the last time I had a real home-cooked meal.”

“Well, prepare to have your mind and your tastebuds blown. I’m making a pumpkin kofta curry that’s totally to die for.”

“My death will be worth it,” he teased.

Bubbles skipped to the kitchen, and Boomer followed to help.

Blossom arrived at Atelier Chen at 7:45 p.m. on the dot. She thanked her Lyft driver for the ride, gathered her skirt, and stepped onto the sidewalk in front of the only three-star Michelin restaurant in Citiesville. Dim, buttery lights cast the plush interior in earthy gold tones, sleepy and sensuous. Blossom tugged on the ends of her side swept, wavy hair, a little nervous at the sight of a tuxedo-clad maître d’ approaching her with a grand smile.

“Welcome, mademoiselle,” he said, extending a white-gloved hand to her. His grey hair was slicked so finely that it shone silver. “Do you have a reservation to dine with us this evening?”

His thick, French accent was professional yet homely, welcoming. Blossom opened her mouth to respond, but she spotted Brick in a tailored, dark suit at the bar quietly watching her. He slipped out of his stool like lava and crossed the room to her side.

“She’s with me,” he said in smooth French.

The air left her lungs as for just a short moment, Blossom believed the fantasy he engendered with every movement, every look, every word. If they were anyone else, she could believe he was a dashing gentleman with every intention of sweeping her off her feet for an evening of romance and intimacy. He had that ability, she realized. Breathed it. But they weren’t anyone else, and she knew his methods as well as she knew her own.

And yet…

What was the harm in indulging for a few hours? Bubbles was right, she did deserve this after yesterday’s monster debacle.

“Wonderful!” the maître d’ gushed. “Chef will be so pleased to see you and your lovely lady, Monsieur Brick.” He turned to Blossom and offered his hand.

She smiled politely and shrugged off her black shawl, revealing the plunging backline of her dress. “May I leave this with you?” she asked in classically trained French, grateful now that she’d kept up with it through college.

The maître d’ and Brick both looked at her—the former with the sincere joy of hearing one’s native tongue on a pretty stranger’s lips, and the latter with conciliatory acknowledgment; he should have known. His smile was subtle, perhaps pleased, perhaps proud.

_he should be._

“Of course, Mademoiselle!” The maître d’ snapped his fingers for a waiter. “Jean, please take the lady’s shawl while I show her to her table.”

Blossom touched her arm, a little self-conscious in such an elegant dress with her arms exposed, but Brick approached and slipped his hand around her waist, pulling her close. His palm was fire
through the luxurious, red fabric. “Show off,” he whispered soft enough for only her to hear.

She ignored the electric sensation of his fingers on her waist and looked up at him through her wispy bangs. “Pot calling kettle.”

“Sure.” He grinned and leaned so close their foreheads nearly touched, but not quite. Those ruthless, red eyes were alive with mirth and something more tempting. “I was right about the dress.”

Every nerve ending in Blossom’s body ignited at his challenge, which she had never been shy to rise to. She leaned in close, and her lips brushed his just barely. “Sure.”

“This way please.” The maître d’ beckoned them deeper into the restaurant.

She pulled away before he could decide to kiss her properly, and they followed the maître d’ through the cozy dining room. He bypassed all eight tables and led them into the kitchen where a single table had been set in the midst of the cooking staff. Smells of truffle, rosemary, and braised wine were a heady concoction that warmed Blossom with every breath, and she couldn’t help but smile. It wasn’t her home, but it felt like someone’s.

“Bon appétit,” the maître d’ said once they were seated.

Chef Gabriel Chen himself greeted them and briefed them on the special menu he and his staff were preparing for them tonight. He also took a moment to personally thank Brick for coming, it had been too long, and it was always a pleasure to cook for him. Brick was all charisma and charm as Gabriel introduced his wife and sous chef, Adele, who also thanked Brick for his patronage and heartily welcomed Blossom. To Blossom’s surprise and relief, neither of them mentioned her sisters, yesterday’s attacks, or even gave indication that they recognized her beyond her role as Brick’s pretty date for the evening.

Adele poured out two glasses of wine that Blossom did not remember anyone ordering, something to whet the palette and pair with the first course. It went down like water, as smooth as crystal. And the food…

“Oh,” Blossom gasped as she sampled the first course. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d tasted food so lovely. “This is a sin.”

Brick also looked quite content as he savored the food and the wine like he was born to taste decadent things. “Hopping off the bandwagon finally, are you?”

“Mm, tonight we’ll be criminals.”

They looked at each other and smiled, it was too good not to. Blossom leaned on her elbow, a bit dazed. The food, the wine, the atmosphere, it was almost like a dream, and Blossom had never been happier to lose herself in it. She only hoped her sisters were having half as lovely an evening as she was.

“You like this,” Brick said, knowing it was true.

“I would be crazy not to.”

“No, just uncultured, something I’ve always known you’re not.”

“You know, you have this tendency to compliment me while putting down every other person on the planet.”
He smirked. “Isn’t that just the definition of a compliment?”

Gabriel brought them their next course and wine pairing, and Blossom lost herself in the experience. They both did. Gabriel explained the origins and inspirations for the various dishes he prepared, and Blossom was enraptured by his stories. She had never been a true foodie, but she loved culture and history, and hearing Gabriel’s was as much a pleasure as tasting his food.

“You are very fortunate, Blossom,” Chef said. “I’ve known Brick for many years. He’s a strong man with a generous heart. I’m happy to finally see him bringing such a lovely companion to my restaurant. It is my honor to cook for you.”

Blossom flushed and forced a smile to hide her surprise. “That’s very kind of you.” When he excused himself, she found Brick watching her. “High praise.”

Brick sipped his wine. “I helped him out of a bad financial situation. He’s just sentimental.”

“Helped him how, exactly?”

He paused, considering. “A loan shark came to collect on a debt and decided he would accept payment in kind from Gabriel’s wife if Gabriel couldn’t pay it himself.”

Blossom paled at the implication. Just across the room, Adele was deftly chopping vegetables with an enormous kitchen knife. “That’s disgusting.”

“That’s human nature.”

Brick watched her with an unreadable expression that chilled her to the bone, but she held his gaze. “You think it’s human nature to resort to violence and pain just to get ahead?”

“The same as you obviously think people are all fundamentally good.”

She narrowed her eyes. “I never said that.”

“Oh?”

She didn’t like his patronizing tone as he swirled his wine glass. “I think people have a choice, and those choices define who we are.”

“What an easy thing for someone like you to say to someone like me.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

His eyes flashed with something she couldn’t name, but she was not going let him say something like that and get away with it.

“Brick.”

He set down his wine and offered her his full attention. “It means that by design, you’re you and I’m me.”

“I’m no more pure good than you are pure evil, no matter how or why we were born,” Blossom said. “You can’t truly believe that after all these years.”

“I believe we’re a product of our circumstances and our upbringing, both of which are inescapable. All people are, so long as we’re lumping everyone together.”
“You’re wrong, and honestly I’m surprised to hear you say that after the way you helped me yesterday.”

He smiled, but it wasn’t kind. “Did I help you? Or did I help myself?”

Blossom narrowed her eyes. “Don’t. Even if some motivation behind your actions was selfish, you still saved countless lives. Qualify it however you want, but we’re not children anymore. The world isn’t so black and white, and neither are you and I.”

“How refreshingly Machiavellian of you. So the ends justify the means so long as net more lives are saved than lost?”

“You know that’s not what I meant. Motivation and justification are not the same.”

“Do you think that’s really true?”

Brick leaned back in his chair, comfortable, as he surveyed her. His question hung between them, more curious than hostile, and she considered it, considered who was asking, and why.

Unbidden, Blossom remembered a grey day years ago. The mortician had chosen lilies for the coffin—classic, elegant, lovely. Just like Bubbles’ pallid face framed all in black, her voice cracking as she called after Blossom, desperate. Stop, perhaps, or wait, or why. Buttercup hadn’t said a single word, and somehow her silence had followed Blossom across the sea as she flew fast enough to outpace the wind, but not that awful, bereft quiet that still haunted her and always would. Why?

Blossom took a sip of her wine to distract her quivering lips. “I think it’s sometimes easier to conflate them than to face certain unpleasant truths about ourselves.”

He watched her, thoughtful but unmoved. “It’s an interesting point.”

She sensed they’d reached a dead end with this particular thread. For the sake of not ruining a nice evening she sorely needed, she should have let it go at that. But she considered it, considered him, considered why, and she couldn’t. It wasn’t enough, not from him, not after yesterday, not in this restaurant, in this beautiful dress, not anymore.

“You said earlier that you helped Gabriel and Adele out of a nightmare scenario. That’s a choice you made, a good choice. Regardless of your…original mandate.”

“And that makes me a good person.”

His sarcasm irked her, but she wasn’t about to rise to it. “I think only a good person would have chosen to help them when you could have just walked away because it wasn’t your problem.”

Brick didn’t answer right away. He shifted in his chair and leaned toward her within striking distance. “Ask me how I helped them.”

Blossom repressed a shiver at the dangerous simplicity of that question. She didn’t have to ask to know what he would say, but she asked him anyway. “How?”

“I cut off the loan shark’s hand with my laser eye beams. The medieval punishment for theft. Right in front of them, right here in this very kitchen.” He pointed to the floor just behind her, where two deep, parallel crags in the concrete foundation had been left unfilled, conspicuous. “Right about where you’re sitting now.”
Dinner was delicious, as Boomer knew it would be. Bubbles had always been a good cook, and she enjoyed it. He had never had the inclination, but he enjoyed it when he did it with her. After dinner, they cleaned up and settled on the couch to play Breath of the Wild, Bubbles’ new favorite game, and spent a solid hour running around trying to find a bunch of chickens.

“I used to play the old Zelda games with Buttercup when we were kids,” Bubbles said. “But I was soooo bad at them back then.”

“I don’t think anyone can be bad at herding chickens,” Boomer said. He had his arm around her shoulders as she leaned against him on the sofa.

Bubbles giggled. “You don’t want to know how many hours I’ve logged on this game."

They traded off, and Boomer decided to fight some monsters. Bubbles was pretty steamed when he hurled a chicken at an enemy and it ended up taking damage.

“How could you do that?!” she screeched.

Boomer laughed. “It’s fine, they can’t die! Did you see how the other chickens, like, went all Hitchcock’s *Birds* on that enemy?”

She huffed. “You know I’m a vegetarian and I consider all animal life sacred, even animated ones.”

He pulled her close and kissed her cheek. “I know, I’m sorry. Hey, what about the plant monsters?”

“What about them?”

“I mean, they were all veggie, but you had no problem beating the crap outta them with my energy bat. Which was super hot, by the way. You can use my bat anytime you want.”

Bubbles didn’t laugh at his joke, and instead seemed to consider his words seriously.

“Bubbles?"

She shook her head. “Those plant monsters weren’t normal.”

Boomer eyed the sunflowers he’d brought her, now resting happily in a painted vase on the coffee table before them. “Uh, yeah. Last I checked, flowers don’t try to eat people.”

“No, I mean… Never mind.”

“Hey, what is it?”

“No, it’s okay. This is our fun date night and I don’t want to ruin it with this stuff.”

Boomer put the Switch controller away and turned to face her. “You know I was serious when I said I wanted to help you figure this out. Talk to me. What’s on your mind?”

Bubbles frowned and shifted to face him on the sofa. “I know you were, it’s not that. Just, I talked to Clara today, sort of.”

“Oh yeah? Did she figure anything out about those other two monsters?”
“Maybe? I’m not really sure. There’s that design flaw I told you about, remember? Well, the thing 
is, it’s an unknown. As in, something she’s literally never seen before.”

“What does that mean?”

Bubbles looked troubled. “I don’t know. Clara thinks it’s possible these are just a new type of 
monster we haven’t encountered before. She said we know more about outer space than our own oceans, and new species get discovered every day.”

Boomer studied her. “You’re not convinced.”

Blue eyes flickered to his, and he knew he was right. “I just think it’s fishy, you know? All this time with hardly any monster attacks, and now we have three really bad ones in less than a month.”

“Tell me about it. Brick said he’d blow up Monster Island personally if this shit keeps up.”

Bubbles got up abruptly, dropping the fleece blanket they’d been sharing. She floated through the living room toward a door next to the stairs. Boomer flew after her.

“Hey, where are you going?” he asked.

The door she’d stopped at looked ordinary, but upon her approach a hidden panel opened up and scanned her retinas.

“Identity confirmed. Welcome, Bubbles,” announced a robotic voice.

The sound of multiple deadbolts unlocking made Boomer wince, and the door swung open. He knew where this door led; he’d been down there once before, many years ago.

“The Professor’s lab,” Bubbles said and disappeared down the dark stairs that led to the subterranean room. “Are you coming?”

Boomer clenched his fist to quell the involuntary shaking.

“Yeah,” he called to her, but he floated down slowly.

Bubbles had turned the lights on, illuminating the stark, white laboratory. Stainless steel tables piled with neatly organized science equipment Boomer could not have hoped to name lined the interior, and an industrial-grade walk-in freezer droned against the far wall. Boomer had no idea what Professor Utonium would have needed a meat locker down here for, or why it was still running now, and he didn’t want to know.

Inevitably, his eyes were drawn to a corner now occupied by some kind of bulky, metal machinery whose purpose was unknown to him. It hadn’t been there before when he’d huddled there, stripped down to his dirty underwear, shaking from fear and humiliation as Bubbles’ father and sisters argued over what to do with him while Bubbles was out posing as him to trick his brothers. It was the first time Boomer had ever been doused with Antidote X, and he had never been more afraid in his life.

It was hours before his brothers finally showed up, the jig up and Bubbles’ cover blown, and they were the longest hours of Boomer’s life spent wondering if they would leave him behind. What use did they have for the runt of the litter, anyway?

“Over here,” Bubbles called to him. She had settled at a desk and was leafing through a large
Boomer swallowed hard and forced himself to turn away from that corner to join her. She was too absorbed in what she was reading to notice how pale he’d gotten, and he was glad of it. Bubbles didn’t need to know about something so insignificant that had happened twenty-five years ago.

He leaned over her shoulder to see what she was reading. It was a log book written out by hand.

*Purple Monster, Bat Monster, Nanobots, Eyeball Monster…*

“It’s the Professor’s monster log,” Bubbles explained. “He kept detailed notes on every monster attack pretty much since my sisters and I were born.”

“Yeah, I can see that.” Boomer was amazed at the level of detail in the handwritten notes. Attacks were recorded chronologically with information about the size, type, and color of monster, along with notes about their powers, weaknesses, and how they were ultimately defeated.

“He meant to transfer all this data to a computer program, but he never got around to it,” Bubbles said. She dragged her fingers over the script slowly, as if to feel the subtle dips and bumps pressed into the paper by the pen used to write them.

Boomer squeezed her shoulder reassuringly so she would know he was here with her. She leaned into his touch.

“Sometimes I come down here and just run my hands over his work notes,” Bubbles said in a soft, tinny voice. “He had such neat handwriting.”

Boomer thought of Mojo then. He also kept handwritten notes about all his plans and experiments and organized them in file cabinets. Growing up, Boomer had often been tasked with retrieving notes for him while he and Brick tinkered away in the lab, since Butch couldn’t be trusted to find the right files without destroying them for the hell of it. Butch used to say how stupid it was to keep notes in handwritten form when computers could automate all that shit nowadays. What was the point of keeping bulky filing cabinets that took up dead space?

“Mojo did the same thing,” Boomer said. “I wonder if he picked up the habit from your dad?”

Bubbles looked up at him. Her eyes shone with emotion, tranquil and understanding. “I wouldn’t be surprised.”

Boomer broke their eye contact first and focused on the log book again. Hashing out daddy issues was not high on his list of priorities tonight. The sooner they got out of this lab, the better. “Who’s Steve?” he asked, pointing at an entry halfway down the page.

“Oh, he’s a Slime Monster,” Bubbles said.

“…Named Steve?”

She shrugged. “It’d be kind of weird if all the monsters on Monster Island just called each other ‘Slime Monster’ or ‘Cyclops Monster’, don’t you think?”

Boomer thought the entire concept of a bunch of monsters living together on a tiny island off the coast of northern California was, in itself, pretty ridiculous, but that was beside the point. “I guess so,” he said instead.

Bubbles flipped the pages further back in the log. “Anyway, the Professor created the MDS to keep
all these guys from wandering onto the mainland, which was pretty successful. See how the attacks start to drop off here?”

Boomer looked at the date. “Yeah, we were what, in eighth or ninth grade?”

“Mm-hm. A few made it through the MDS barrier over the years after that, but nothing like it was when we were kids.”

“And now, all of a sudden three in a month.” That was weird, now that Boomer thought about it.

“Not all of a sudden, actually. Look at this.”

Boomer read the entries she’d pointed out where the monster attacks spiked rather suddenly one after another. “It’s like they all collectively decided to go to town for three or four months, literally.” The dates gave him pause. “Hey, this was four years ago…”

“Yeah,” Bubbles said, a quaver in her voice. “Right around the time the Professor passed.”

Boomer stared at the entries, a chill running down his spine. Years of sporadic attacks when they’d be lucky to see one monster all year, and then an onslaught for a few months, followed by nothing. Until now.

“I come down here to look at his old notes sometimes, but I wasn’t really thinking about the substance of them until you brought up Monster Island,” Bubbles confessed. “And now, well…”

“What do you think it means?”

“I don’t know.”

He heard the hesitance in her voice, felt it in his bones. He didn’t know either, but something in his gut told him it wasn’t good.

“They’re connected,” he said.

Bubbles nodded. “I think we have to consider that possibility.”

But how? If there was something wrong with the MDS, why would the monsters just chill for four years and wait until now to start invading the Peninsula again?

“Hey, maybe we should talk to Clara about this,” Boomer suggested. “It sounds like she knows a lot more about monsters than you or me.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. I feel bad though. I keep giving her all this extra work to do, but she has a full-time job and a family to think about first. I’m pretty sure she wasn’t thrilled when I gave her my stinky monster pollen clothes today to analyze.”

Boomer cracked a smile. “Huh, smart. Maybe I would have thought of that if Brick hadn’t burned all our clothes.”

Bubbles gaped at him. “He did what?”

“Yeah, he was pretty pissed about it too. Kept going on about his designer suit being ruined in the fight, you know.”

“What a drama queen,” she laughed.
“Classic Brick.”

Bubbles closed the log book and got up. “Well, I’m sorry about the morbid detour. I hope I didn’t totally derail our fun date night.”

“Nah, it’s cool. This stuff’s important.”

She nodded as they headed back upstairs. “I just wish I knew what about it was important. I get this feeling like it’s staring me right in the face and I just don’t see it.”

Boomer glanced at the corner of his childhood humiliation and paused. “You just don’t have all the pieces yet. Until then, it’s just…waiting for something bad to happen.”

Bubbles had stopped ascending and watched him watching the corner. Boomer smiled brightly for her and hurried after her, ignoring the questioning glimmer in her eyes.

“Or something good,” he said. “Who knows?”

“Yeah.” Bubbles didn’t question him, and he forced himself not to dwell on it. No sense drudging up old memories that no longer mattered.

Even so, he shuddered in relief the moment he was out of the lab and back on the ground floor. The deadbolts slid into place behind him one at a time with finality, and he breathed.

Bubbles was watching him, and she smiled cheerfully. “Hey, do you want to spend the night?”

Boomer blinked at her. “Like…a sleepover?”

Her smile turned mischievous. “Pillow fights and ghost stories?”

It was so silly that he couldn’t help but return her smile. “Spin the bottle?”

Her laugh was light and warm, and he wanted nothing more than to be near her no matter what they were doing. “We’ll need a bottle for that.” She retrieved two beers from the fridge in the kitchen and offered him one.

Boomer took the bottle, and then he took her. Leaning in close, their noses almost touched. He could count her freckles if he wanted, get lost in those baby blue eyes. “You’re on, princess.”

She grinned and kissed him quickly on the mouth, and they headed upstairs to her bedroom.

Gabriel returned with the next course and fresh glasses of wine to pair. Brick insisted that Gabriel pour a glass for himself and share a drink with Blossom and him, which he happily obliged. Blossom was quiet, but she smiled politely and participated in their toast, ever the perfect date. Gabriel left them to enjoy their food, and they sat in silence while Brick resolved to make her break it first.

A part of him expected her disgust, her judgment, or even her abandonment. He wouldn’t chase her if she got up and left, certainly not. She was free to end this whenever she wanted, just as he was. Still, he waited.

“I wonder what I would have done if it had been me in your position,” she said at length.

“Something with less permanent consequences, I’m sure.”
She looked up at him, and the harshness in her gaze was as unexpected as it was unnerving. “I’m not.”

There had been a time, years ago when they were kids, when Brick remembered being afraid of her. He would never, ever admit it to anyone, hardly even to himself, but there had always been something about Blossom that unsettled him deeply. He’d always thought it was because she was the perfect counter to him, able to reverse the damage he did, meet him blow for blow on the pavement or in a classroom like no one else could match. Ice and fire.

But looking at her now, hearing her honest confession, something in him animated, electrified, and he considered that perhaps Boomer had a point. Perhaps it wasn’t their opposition that moved him, but their uncanny similarity. He believed her, because he had wondered the very same thing that night, in this room, walking in on that loan shark manhandling a defenseless Adele while his goons beat Gabriel to within an inch of his life right in front of her, and Brick made a choice when he could have just walked away and never looked back.

Just because he could.

“Whatever you did, it would be the right decision,” he said, because if nothing else, that much was true.

She smiled, a little wistful, a little sad, and the tension in his shoulders he hadn’t realized was there eased. “I’d like to think so.”

He had the strange urge to touch her hand across the table, she seemed so far away. But he didn’t, because that wasn’t what they did. She wouldn’t have let him, anyway.

The distance that settled between them wasn’t awkward yet, but he sensed that it could be unless he did something about it. “Do me a favor and don’t tell Buttercup. I’m sure she’d love any excuse to flex her power and throw me in an overnight cell.”

Her smile turned genuine at his levity. “She’d probably be the first to congratulate you on one less scumbag getting away with hurting innocent people in her town.”

He chuckled. “Clearly, you don’t appreciate the depth of your sister’s dislike of me.”

“And yet, she’s doing you a favor by looking in to the burglary at Mojo’s.”

“Hm, she told you about that.”

“And you didn’t think to mention it.”

She retrieved her wine glass, more at ease, and he did the same. “There’s not much to mention from what Buttercup’s found out so far. Just some shit about a chalk factory. She’s chasing leads, but it’s slow going. Anyway, it’s not your problem.”

She startled him by touching his hand across the table. “I just meant that you can ask for help. The past is the past, and there’s no reason we can’t cooperate if there’s a problem that affects all of us, just like yesterday.”

Brick’s throat clenched uncomfortably. Her hand was warm on his, and he felt a visceral urge to break their contact—let’s not make this a habit—but he didn’t. “And here I thought we were just sleeping together.”

“And here I thought we could do whatever we want.”
She was smirking now, teasing him, but he wouldn’t be baited. He curled his fingers around hers and leaned forward to brush his lips to her knuckles, as he had that first night. “So tell me what you want.”

Now, at long last, she blushed, but she didn’t pull away.

“I want to continue this,” she said. “Whatever it is.”

“Why?” He hoped she didn’t hear the catch in his voice.

“Because it feels good. I haven’t felt this in control of my life in a long time.”

He brushed his thumb over her bare ring finger. He could hear the din of pots and pans around them if he focused, but it was far, far away and she was right here. “You’re not still in love with him.”

“Not when I’m with you.”

It wasn’t the answer he wanted to hear, but it was an honest one. An absurd one. He might have laughed at her if she was anybody else, but Blossom’s pain had not amused him in a very long time.

“I want to continue this too.”

“Why?”

“Because it feels good,” he said in her own words, because it was true. “And because you’ve probably ruined all other women for me, so it’s all downhill from here, anyway. Might as well enjoy it while it lasts.”

Blossom rolled her eyes. “Now you’re just being dramatic.”

“And yet, you can’t get enough of me.”

“I thought it was the other way around.”

“Both. Once you’ve had the best, you’ll never be satisfied with anything less.”

“Hmm…you like what you like.”

Her words recalled another night in his apartment too long ago. Ruined indeed. His apartment missed her, and so did he.

“Right now, I like you in that dress,” he said, tracing with his eyes the shallow neckline and the bodice that hugged her slim shape just beneath it.

The flash of molten red in her rosy eyes drew his gaze to hers as possibility became reality.

Adele returned to their table to help clear plates and tell them about the lavish dessert sampler. When Brick said he was fine skipping dessert, Blossom was quick to agree. He paid the check, and they slipped into his black Porsche and broke a few speed limits on the way back to his apartment.

Chapter End Notes
Next Time: Buttercup and Butch pay a visit to an old flame friend, and Reds entertain an uninvited guest.
Dead Bodies Always Float

Chapter Notes

I decided to update early! Two reasons. First is that PVRIS dropped this new song and I’ve got Ace/Buttercup on the brain. Second is in celebration of my company FINALLY letting us all work from home so we don’t potentially exacerbate the spread of a global pandemic (how generous of them, ugh). Please stay clean and safe for those around you who may be more at risk than you, and enjoy a little bit of fic while you’re chilling in quarantine.

This chapter got crazy long, so I had to cut it in half. Brick’s meeting with Mojo will be in the next chapter, and so will the Blues. Pretty sure you’ll forgive me given what’s in store in this chapter.

WARNING: This chapter contains mature sexual content. Please read at your own discretion.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Contrary to his ingrained daily habit, at his core Brick was not truly a morning person. And so, waking up naturally to muted sunlight through his sheer white curtains, the softness of a downy pillow beneath his head, and a warm body pressed against his was a welcome sensation compared to his blaring alarm clock and the promise of a full day of work.

Blossom smelled like lavender shampoo and last night’s perfume, and when he pressed his nose to her neck, he found that she smelled like him too. The realization filled him with a carnal sort of pride, and he felt himself stiffen beneath the sheets as he weighed the benefits of waking her up for morning sex against sleeping in a little longer. She stirred with a little hum and stretched against him like a cat. The fact that there was nothing to separate them but the soft sheets made his decision rather easy.

He pressed a soft kiss just below her ear, another along her jaw, let her feel a bit of teeth. Her heart rate speed up and he knew she was awake even though she kept her eyes closed. He dragged his hand over her stomach, and she grabbed his wrist to guide him lower. Brick chuckled, breathy against her soft hair, and she fluttered her eyes open to peer at him. The morning sunlight cocooned them both in a decadent, buttery glow.

“Morning,” he said, shifting behind her for a better angle.

Blossom gasped when he slid in and slowly, very slowly, began to move. It was nothing like their past encounters charged with a potent urge to control and be controlled. This was languorous and indulgent and they were in no rush at all as they simply experienced each other for the sheer delight of it. Brick felt like touching her, and so he did. And when Blossom felt like kissing him, he kissed her back.

They finished in each other’s arms in a warm, sleepy haze. She hummed her pleasure against his lips, and he swore he could taste the sunlight in her smile.

“Morning,” she murmured.
Brick’s limbs were jelly as he lay back on the bed and sank into the pillows. Blossom sat up next to him and gave him a nice view of her back and shoulders as she gathered up her long hair and combed it through with her fingers. He watched as she slipped out of bed, passed her dress from last night on the armchair in the corner, and picked up the white dress shirt he’d worn to dinner. It slipped over her shoulders and hung down to mid-thigh. She was too busy tidying up the rest of her things and his to notice how he sat up in bed.

Blossom wearing his clothes. Padding around his room and fixing her hair. Wearing his clothes.

He cleared his dry throat. “Hey, you want some coffee?”

She disappeared into his adjoining bathroom to clean up. “Hm?”

He heard the sound of running water through the cracked bathroom door, and leaned over the edge of the bed to catch a glimpse of her bent over the sink. Wearing his clothes and giving him ideas.

Brick let out an exasperated breath and got out of bed. He needed some fucking coffee to wake him up from this annoying, horny stupor. He quickly rummaged through the shelves in his walk-in closet for a fresh pair of sweatpants.

Blossom emerged from the bathroom looking refreshed with her hair down and combed and his shirt buttoned up her front. Brick paused to check out her long legs and the hint of collarbone visible beyond the unfastened top button of his shirt, which would have shamed him if he didn’t notice her rosy eyes lingering on his bare chest too.

He smirked. “Yeah, we’re both hot. Old news.”

Blossom flushed prettily, as he hoped she would. “You could put a shirt on.”

He held out his hand. “Sure, give it here.”

She tutted in annoyance, but he saw the smile she was doing a very poor job of hiding. “Haven’t you had enough?”

He closed the distance between them but didn’t touch her. “Haven’t you?”

Her eyes fell to his lips, and holy hell he could practically feel her desire like static electricity on his skin. As wonderfully surreal as their soft morning sex had been, Brick could not deny that he preferred a bit more power in their play. He knew she felt it too when he ran his fingers along her jaw and left dancing, red sparks trailing in his wake.

But he had other needs to tend to first. It was Sunday and they had all day now that they had decided they both wanted whatever this was to continue indefinitely.

“I asked if you wanted coffee,” he said, pulling away.

She blinked. “Oh. Thanks, I guess I could have a cup before I go.”

They both wanted to continue, but they had not really decided what they were continuing. Brick didn’t want to think about it. So long as she was happy with him, that was all that mattered.

“Sure.” He retreated to the bathroom to clean up, while Blossom headed to the kitchen. Wearing his clothes.

Maybe he’d ask her to spend the day with him after coffee. He didn’t have anything else to do
today, so why not her?

When Buttercup told him to meet her in the notoriously crime-ridden Sirloin district of Citiesville, Butch made sure to show up alone. If they were going after Lil’ Arturo and his associates, then Brisa had no business tagging along this time.

He beat her to the taco stand they’d agreed to meet at, so Butch ordered one of everything and figured she could just pick what she wanted of the spread. That is, if she showed up before he wolfed it all down.

There was nowhere to sit, so he hung out near the stand on the corner. He was polishing off a barbacoa taco when he spotted Buttercup round the corner looking more like she was getting ready to go clubbing than like a plainclothes cop on duty. Well, a club in the Sirloin where shanking was more a matter of time and chance, and the combat boots she had on would be well suited to bludgeoning some poor asshole who looked at her wrong. The little black dress she wore under a cropped jean jacket showed off her figure and flared above the knee when she stepped right up to him, snatched his half-eaten taco, and ate it in one bite.

“Thanks,” she said, grabbing a napkin from the generous roll stuffed in the corner of the cardboard tray he held. “I’m starving.”

Butch frowned at her. Were those earrings? She was wearing goddamned earrings. Next to her, he just looked like some greaser punk in jeans and a black leather jacket.

Buttercup tucked her bangs behind her ear and selected another taco from the box.

“Yeah, I can see that,” Butch said, his eyes lingering on the curve of her collarbone just visible above the neckline of her dress. “What’s with the dress?”

Buttercup wolfed down the taco and licked her fingers. “Leverage.”

Butch grinned and leaned into her personal space. “Not necessary, but I’m in to it.”

She grabbed his chin and pushed him away. “Not against you, idiot. Now come on, let’s go.”

She walked away from him, and hell, but Butch couldn’t resist watching that skirt swish about the backs of her thighs as she left. He scarfed the last taco in one go, trashed the empty tray, and headed after her. They were bound for a club, as it turned out, but before noon on a Sunday meant no pounding music or sloshed clubbers looking to let loose and get lucky. In the light of day, the crimson walls were splotchy and peeling in places, and it smelled of tequila and piss. There was a lonely janitor mopping up last night’s bile near the bar minding this own business, but he glanced at Butch and Buttercup when they headed for the door marked “Stairs”. Just before he followed Buttercup through the door, he heard the janitor speak softly into his shirt collar.

The stairs dumped out in a concrete hallway, which opened up into a concrete warehouse basement poorly lit with dusty, temporary construction lights. Butch half expected Jack Torrance to come bursting down the hall with an axe.

“They know we’re coming,” Butch said. “The janitor tipped someone off.”

“It’s fine. He’s expecting me.”

“What about me?”
Buttercup flashed him a look over her shoulder. “You’re a surprise.”

Typical, but whatever. Butch could play the mean muscle type if that’s what she wanted. And compared to Lil’ Arturo, just about anyone was big, even Butch.

The trek was longer than he thought it would be. How much of the Sirloin was connected underground like this? Eventually, they came upon a door with a guard in front. He was huge and barrel-chested, the type whose tough looks alone were often enough to deter trouble. Seeing the way he sized up Buttercup and him, Butch was struck with the intense urge to break the guy’s face. The guy had no idea who he was leering at.

“Ya lost, girlie?” the guard asked.

“I’m here to see your boss.” Buttercup let her hand spark with green power, and to his credit, the beefy guard didn’t flinch. He did, however, glance at Butch over her shoulder.

“Boss didn’t say nothin’ about him.” The guard nodded at Butch.

Before Buttercup could respond to that, Butch let his power leak through his eyes, glowing an eerie, inhuman green. He smiled cruelly. “Sundays are the two-for-one special.”

This time, the guard did falter. His hand gripped the handle of a Beretta, but something in his shifty, dark eyes told Butch he knew it would do him no good. With no other choice, he stepped aside for them and opened the door.

The stench of stale smoke hit Butch like backhand to the face. They’d stepped into an underground cigar lounge. Men in colorful, rumpled suits relaxed on chesterfield sofas smoking, drinking, guns on the table and girls curled up next to them in tiny, tight dresses and huge, hoop earrings. Butch had been in places like this before, a long time ago with Boomer back when he ran errands and took meetings on Brick’s behalf.

“Never go alone,” Brick made Boomer promise.

“I can handle it. I’m Super,” Boomer had argued.

“Try not to be.”

Butch got it, but he didn’t get it, not really. Not then. But now…

A middle-aged woman surrounded by men half her age laughed prettily at something one of them said, and Butch’s eyes were drawn to hers briefly. Red lips puffed around a vintage cigarette holder as she inhaled, her corpse-white fingers bony and bird-like. Her dark hair fell in ropes over her protruding shoulders, undulating.

More eyes followed the two Supers as they sauntered deeper into the lounge, and Butch did his best not to linger on any one in particular. It had been a long time since he’d waded through this shit, but he could already feel his feet begin to drag. Like muscle memory, his face warped in a mean scowl and he puffed his chest out. His steps became slower and more deliberate, louder, as he let Buttercup walk fully ahead of him on her own, and his hands disappeared in the pockets of his leather jacket.

The effects were instantaneous. Glazed eyes landed on him, magnetized, but not a soul called to him—or to the single-minded woman on a mission ahead of him they seemed to have lost all interest in. A quiet, buried part of him wished they would, just to give him a reason to pop those peeled-grape eyes out of their sockets.
He imagined Bubbles chanting the rhyme at her kindergarten class and smirked.

If Buttercup noticed the shift in room’s attention, she ignored it entirely and focused solely on her goal, whose back was to the pair of them as he puffed on a cigar in one ring-festooned hand and held Blackjack cards in the other. Just as Buttercup approached him, he and the others at his table laid down their cards.

“Bada bing, bada boom,” he said, gathering all the chips in the pot toward himself.

The table’s three other occupants—two of whom Butch recognized as former members of the Gang Green Gang, Snake and Lil’ Arturo himself, and one he didn’t—all froze and looked first at Buttercup with a hand on her hip, and then inevitably at Butch looming behind her.

“Uh, Boss?” said the skinny troll across the table Butch didn’t recognize but didn’t need to. “I think she’s here.”

“I thought I felt my balls turnin’ blue.” The man with his back to them turned and brushed his shoulder-length, greasy, black hair out of his face. His grin was casual, but those black eyes were two cold, shrewd pits that reminded Butch so much of Brick he had to repress a shudder. “Hey, Buttercup.”

Butch bristled at the sound of her name in his voice—Buttah-cup.

“Ace,” Buttercup said. “Been a long time.”

Ace’s eyes trained on Buttercup. He had not once glanced in Butch’s direction.

“Not that long,” Ace said, his thin, jaundiced lips curling.

Butch had come across Ace and his gang when he was a kid a handful of times, but they were small fries, barely on the radar. And yet, from the looks of this place, Ace seemed to be doing well for himself these days. If hiding underground like a fucking worm could be considered doing well. He supposed it made sense that Buttercup, on the other hand, would have been more familiar with Ace given her childhood Superhero phase.

“Is there somewhere less crowded where we can talk? This is important,” Buttercup said.

Snake wheezed with laughter. Lil’ Arturo, however, watched Butch like a mouse watches the hawk circling above. So the crafty fucker had recognized him at the factory, after all.

“Sure.” Ace took a last drag of his cigar before putting it out on the table top. Black ashes smeared over the hand-smoothed wood, and smoke curled around his long fingers. “Ain’t every day I get a private audience.”

He rose like smoke himself. The royal blue suit he wore was a Bad Boys costume department reject, shoulder pads and paisley shirt unbuttoned down past his waxed chest and a thick, gold chain around his neck. Despite his lean, tall figure, there was a sinewy strength and confidence in the way he moved that raised the hairs on the back of Butch’s neck.

Snake and Lil’ Arturo rose with him. Buttercup followed them and Butch followed her, only to be
stopped by the third guy.

“Private audience,” he said.

It took Butch a second to understand that this guy was actually trying to get in between Buttercup and him. He was so thrown that he just stared for a moment.

“Déjale pasar, Lalo,” Lil’ Arturo said.

“Yeah, Lalo,” Butch said. “Déjame pasar.”

Lalo snorted. “Que bien chinga, este güey.”

Buttercup noticed the altercation and stopped. Ace and Snake stopped too, but neither of them said a word.

“Butch,” Buttercup said. There was a warning in her tone, but her clenched fists told a different story.

He chuckled. “Hey, you hear that?”

Lalo looked at him strangely. “Hear wha—”

Butch boxed his ears faster than the naked eye could follow, and Lalo crumpled to the ground in a silent scream. Blood ran from his ears, and he clutched them like his head might explode if he let go.

“Esto está medio cabrón,” Lil’ Arturo swore as he bent down to pull Lalo out of the way. “Sorry, Ace. Lemme get this pendejo out of your sight.”

Ace’s reptilian gaze was a cold shiver down Butch’s spine as the guy finally looked at him. “Buttercup, you didn’t mention you’d be bringin’ a guest.”

Butch ignored the slithering sensation of Ace’s unsettling gaze focused entirely on him. Dude wasn’t even a Super, for fuck’s sake. “Surprise.”

“It’s rude to show up to a party empty-handed,” Buttercup said.

Snake hissed a laugh, but one sharp look from Ace shut him up like a kicked puppy.

So you are human.

Butch sauntered to Buttercup’s side. Ace was half a head taller than him, which really sucked, but Butch had learned over the years that size really didn’t matter when he could peel the skin off a guy with his laser eye beams if the fancy ever struck him.

“Right.” Ace glanced between them, but his eyes lingered on Buttercup in her little black dress and tousled hair. “You always were generous with me.”

What the fuck does that mean?

“Can we get on with this? I have shit to do today,” Buttercup said.

Ace grinned. “Sure, whatever you want.”

He held the door open for her, and when she passed through he watched her go like a skeevy uncle
watching the just-turned-eighteen neighborhood girl heading off to high school cheerleading practice.

A sickening thought entered Butch’s head.

*It couldn’t be…*

“After you,” Ace said, once more fixated on Butch.

Butch set his jaw and forced himself to look mean, which wasn’t hard to do anymore. If Brick were here, he’d tell him to grow the fuck up. If Boomer were here, he’d tell him Ace wasn’t worth it.

But Buttercup was here, and she had a job to do, one he’d promised to help her with.

Butch calmly walked past Ace into the side room, holding his breath against the guy’s heavy cologne. Ace noticed, and he snickered softly.

It was only the sight of Buttercup waiting for him, her arms crossed and her bright eyes focused solely on him, that gave him the strength not to punch Ace through the goddamned wall right there.

Blossom had never felt more attractive than she did now wearing Brick’s shirt, sleep-tousled, and without any makeup. Wei had never been too keen on letting her wear his clothes, preferring her in pretty dresses and dolled up.

“No,” she whispered to herself, too soft for even Super hearing to catch. She wasn’t going to think about Wei while she was wearing Brick’s clothes, in Brick’s home, after sleeping with Brick yet again.

“You’re not still in love with him,” he’d asked her last night over dinner.

Blossom wasn’t sure. She didn’t love Wei like she used to, but she hadn’t been able to forget him completely, either. What did that mean? Was it progress, or was she in denial?

“Not when I’m with you.”

It wasn’t the answer she wanted to give, but it was the only one that was true. However she did or did not feel about Wei, it had nothing to do with how she felt about Brick. Figuring out what that was, though, was a different battle entirely, and one she wasn’t ready to fight this fine Sunday morning.

She wondered what her sisters would think if they found out about her ongoing trysts with Brick. Bubbles might be understanding considering her history with Boomer and general open-mindedness, but Buttercup…

Sighing, Blossom checked the cabinets for coffee and a filter, found that Brick had an espresso machine, and set to work prepping it for a fresh drip. She was so lost in thought that she didn’t notice the pair of inquisitive, brown eyes watching her just over the edge of the counter.

“Who’re you?”

Blossom yelped and dropped the espresso cup and saucer she’d just retrieved from the cabinet. Brick materialized in a flash of crimson at her feet and caught the cup and saucer before they could shatter on his pristine kitchen floor. Heart pounding, Blossom barely registered his warm hand
clenched around the back of her thigh as she stared in shock at the little girl covering her mouth and staring back at her.

“What the fuck, Blossom?” Brick snapped, righting himself. “You can’t just scream like that—”

“Brick.” She grabbed his neck and forced him to look at the little girl surreptitiously watching them.

“Brisa? What are you doing here? How did you…” He rubbed his hand over his face. “Goddamnit, Butch. Never should’ve given him a spare key…”

Brisa bravely crept around the counter until she was in full view in her jade, polkadot dress and purple Pretty Puff Pony backpack. She sniffled. “Hi, Uncle Brick.”

“Uncle?” Blossom said, incredulous. Bubbles had mentioned that Butch had a daughter in her class. “This is Butch’s daughter?”

“Yes. Where’s your dad, anyway?”

Brisa blinked her big, brown eyes. “He said he had to help Buttercup catch bad guys. I wanted to go but he said you wanted play with me since today’s your lazy day!”

“Oh did he?”

Blossom heard the underlying threat in his tone and decided it was time to intervene. She took a knee so she was eye-level with Brisa. “Hi Brisa, I’m Blossom. It sounds like you know my sister.”

Brisa lit up. “Buttercup’s your sister?”

“Mm-hm.”

“So you have powers too! Can I see? Can I please?”

“Absolutely not,” Brick said.

Blossom ignored him. “Maybe later. Have you had breakfast?”

Brisa bit her lip. “Um, no…”

“Oh. Why don’t you sit down and I’ll find you something good to eat?”

“Yes please!”

Brisa eagerly clambered onto one of Brick’s Italian leather upholstered barstools and set her purple backpack on the counter in front of her. Brick leaned on the counter and rubbed his eyes. “I’m going to murder him,” he muttered.

“Here.” Blossom had gotten the espresso machine going and placed the recovered cup under the drip. “This will be ready for you in just a minute. Where do you keep your glasses?”

Brick glanced at her askance, but she couldn’t get a reading on him as he studied her. “Cupboard over the sink.”

Blossom retrieved a glass from the cupboard he’d indicated. Then, she opened up the fridge and found a carton of orange juice. She poured out a glass and set it in front of Brisa, who eagerly accepted it.
“I want cereal,” Brisa demanded.

“Cereal, huh?” Blossom opened up what she assumed was the pantry and smiled knowingly at the neatly organized, meticulously labeled cartons of food on the sliding shelves. There was cereal, but not the kind a five-year-old would want to eat. “Let’s see…”

“I like Lucky Captain Rabbit King Nuggets,” Brisa said, her tone hopeful as she leaned over the counter to try to see into the pantry.

“That was my favorite when I was your age too,” Blossom said. “Brick, do you have any?”

Brick made an absurdly adorable sight shirtless while holding his tiny espresso cup in one hand like a proper English lady. “Like I’d ever buy that toxic sugary crap.”

Blossom rolled her eyes. “It was just a question.”

“Well, it was a dumb question.”

Okay, so he was angry that Butch had dumped a kid on his lap without warning on his day off. Blossom could sympathize. But still. Brisa was here, and she wasn’t going to entertain herself. Also, she really did want that coffee…

Blossom sauntered just a little too close to Brick to be friendly and ran playful fingers down his bare chest. “Don’t pout.” It was child’s play to take his drained espresso cup while he was distracted and set it under the drip to refill.

His bloody gaze bored into her, torn between outrage at this ridiculous turn of events and the unquenchable desire that haunted them like a poltergeist.

Blossom ignored him with some effort. “So, no cereal, I’m afraid. How about I make you a hot breakfast instead? Do you like eggs?”

Brisa made a show of looking like she was too cool to care. “Yeah, I guess that’s okay.”

“Okay, great. I’ll just…”

Blossom checked the cabinets for a frying pan, somewhat surprised to find a plethora of dish ware she might use to fry up a good breakfast, when she felt Brick looming over her and radiating heat like a furnace.

“Eggs are in the fridge,” he said, taking the frying pan from her and opening a drawer to reveal a neatly compartmentalized assortment of utensils. He selected a spatula from one of the tubs. “Move over.”

“You cook?”

“Do I look like the type to live off greasy take-out?”

Blossom rolled her eyes. Why did he have to be so defensive about every little thing? But she didn’t press him and went to investigate the fridge once more. She pulled out butter, eggs, sausages, a ripe avocado, and a block of cheddar cheese. Brick snatched the butter and began to glaze the pan for the eggs and meat.

It occurred to Blossom then that she had not planned on staying for breakfast, and that he hadn’t formally invited her to.
“Cheese grater’s in the drawer to your left,” Brick said, not looking at her as he simultaneously whipped the eggs and browned the sausages.

She retrieved the grater, but hesitated. “Hey.”

“What.”

His brow was furrowed as he concentrated on the food. His hair was mussed and fell into his eyes a bit. A splash of freckles darkened his nose and angular cheeks. If she didn’t know him better, she would have thought he was just a normal guy making breakfast for his adorable niece like it was any other Sunday. And it struck her how strange it was to think of him like that, because he wasn’t normal. Nothing about this, about them, was normal.

But then, wasn’t that why they’d decided to continue this?

“Nothing,” Blossom said. “It’s nothing.”

“Are you Uncle Brick’s special friend?” Brisa asked out of the blue.

Blossom moved around Brick and claimed his purloined espresso cup for herself. “Special friend?”

“Daddy says when boys and girls have slumber parties it’s ‘cause they’re special friends.”

“Your dad told you that?”

“Uh-huh. He says special friends share clothes, like you and Uncle Brick. Sometimes they even kiss!”

“Damnit,” Brick hissed. He’d dropped the spatula.

Blossom bit back a grin at his obvious discomfort. “How interesting.”

Brick slammed a plate of food down in front of Brisa with a little more force than was truly necessary. “You better clean that plate, kid. And no blabbing to your dad about my special friend, got it?”

Instead of being intimidated, Brisa just giggled. “Okay. I can keep a secret, don’t worry!”

Brick shoved another plate of food at Blossom.

“Thank you,” she said.

He grunted and served himself the remaining food. Together, the three of them sat at the bar and ate. Brisa tried her eggs and made a sound of displeasure.

“What’s the matter?” Brick said.

“It’s too hot!”

“Here, let me see.” Blossom pulled Brisa’s plate closer to herself and blew out a light, frosty breath. Tiny ice crystals shimmered in the air and upon the eggs, cooling them. “Try them now?”

But Brisa had completely forgotten about her breakfast as she stared at Blossom, starstruck. “How did you do that?”

“My ice breath? I’ve always been able to do it, I guess.”
Brisa scrambled to stand up on her stool, and Brick almost had an aneurysm. “Brisa, you better sit back down before you fall—”

“Please do it again!” Brisa exclaimed, her little fists balled. She looked to be on the verge of tears in her excitement. “Please!”

Blossom could practically feel Brick’s blood pressure rising on her other side as the very air popped and crackled with all the Chemical X he was radiating. “Okay, but you have to sit down first.”

Brisa immediately sat back down, and Brick’s latent power subsided to a dull simmer. Blossom felt the pressure in the air disperse, and she glanced back at Brick. He was glaring a hole in the breakfast counter, taut as a nocked arrow and just as dangerous. She placed her hand over his fist, feather-light. He rubbed his eyes hard, but unclenched his fist enough that her fingers entwined with his and he held her there. Blossom’s breath caught in her throat.

“Please, pleeeeease do it again?” Brisa pleaded. “Pretty please?”

“All right, but only if it’s okay with Brick.”

Her deferral to him seemed to ease some of the tension in his shoulders, and he leaned back in his chair. “Fine, whatever. Just don’t freeze the whole goddamned kitchen.”

Despite herself, Blossom’s temper flared and she glared at him. “I have a little more control than that.”

He grinned. “Oh really?”

As if you wouldn’t know.

She tightened her grip on his hand. He tightened right back. So that’s how he wanted to play? She’d show him.

Blossom wetted her lips, feeling properly motivated. “Okay Brisa, hold out your hands. Yes, just like that. Stay as still as you can, all right?”

Brisa cupped her hands, and Blossom took a deep breath and blew. Frosty fractals tumbled over each other and swirled around Brisa’s palms, lightly dusting them with cold crystals but not enough to burn her. They gathered in a tight mass and expanded slowly into a familiar shape. At the end of her breath, Blossom had blown a large, delicate snowflake to life.

Brisa was beside herself with glee. “Oh wow! Look, Uncle Brick, look! It’s a snowflake!”

“Yes, shockingly I have eyes,” Brick said.

Brisa laughed and hugged the snowflake close, but it was already beginning to melt. Blossom, anticipating that Brick would not be thrilled about water all over his floor, reached for the snowflake.

“Why don’t I put this in the freezer so it stays frozen? That way, you can keep it for later,” Blossom offered.

Brisa didn’t look happy to let go of her newest treasure, but she didn’t want it to melt, either, so she relented and Blossom set the snowflake on an empty shelf in the freezer next to the ice maker.
“This is so cool!” Brisa said. “You’re just like Elsa!”

“Who the hell is Elsa?” Brick said. “And eat your breakfast. It’s getting cold now.”

Brisa gasped. “Who’s Elsa? Are you serious?” She dove for her backpack and pulled out a slim DVD case. “This is Elsa.”

Brick peered at the DVD like it had personally offended him. “Oh, one of those Disney princesses you like so much.”

Brisa scoffed so hard that for a moment Blossom saw a shadow of Butch’s extremity in her. No doubt, she was her father’s daughter, after all. “Duh! Elsa’s not some lame old princess; she’s the snow queen. Just like Blossom!”

Blossom knew it was silly, but she smirked all the same. “I sure am.”

Brick met her haughty gaze with an intensity that had not been there before. It should have made her shrink; she had no doubt that it may have under different circumstances. But now, his challenge only made her swell, radiant.

Brisa was saying something that neither Blossom nor Brick caught as they continued to regard each other like they were the only two people in the room.

“So can we? Please, Uncle Brick?”

Brick blinked. “What?”

“I wanna watch Frozen!”

Blossom and Brick realized that Brisa meant to have them all watch the Disney movie together, and he immediately frosted over.

“I’m not watching that tripe.”

Brisa looked like she might burst into tears. “But it’s my favorite…”

“Too bad kid, I don’t do Disney.”

“Which one is Elsa?” Blossom asked.

Brisa lit up and pointed out the blonde character appropriately wielding a snowball. “That’s her! She’s so cool and strong and beautiful! Plus, she saves the whole kingdom in the end, like a real hero!”

“Way to spoil the ending,” Brick muttered under his breath soft enough for only Blossom to hear.

Blossom smirked. “In that case, I can definitely see why I remind you of Elsa.”

She glanced back at Brick in time to see him roll his eyes. “Oh, please.”

“So you’ll watch with me?”

“Only if Brick agrees to watch it with us.”

Brick snapped. “No way, you’re not dragging me into this.”
“Pleeeeeease, Uncle Brick?” Brisa grabbed his arm and tugged.

To Blossom’s pleasant surprise, he allowed the contact and didn’t try to push Brisa off. “Yes, *please* Uncle Brick?”

He cast her his most scathing Super villain glower, and she had to bite her tongue to keep from laughing at him. Surely he would never agree if she crossed that line.

“Uncle Briiiiiick, come *oooon!*” Brisa whined.

He closed his eyes and breathed through his nose. “…Fine.”

“Yeah!”

When Brisa tried to run off, Brick grabbed her by the scruff of her dress like a misbehaving puppy and forced her to sit back down. “You’re not watching anything until you finish your breakfast.”

“But—”

“You can either eat it off your plate, or I’ll put it in the blender and force feed it to you like a helpless, baby bird. Your choice.”

Brisa ceased her complaining and practically inhaled her food. Blossom wasn’t sure whether to be impressed or nervous that she might actually believe Brick would force feed her. When she finished, Brick took her plate.

“Good girl,” he said.

“Frozen time, Frozen time!” Brisa chanted excitedly. She dashed to the living room, her purple Pretty Puff Pony backpack bouncing behind her.

“I can clean up if you want to go be with her,” Blossom offered.

He regarded her with measured disdain, though whether for her or for this situation, she couldn’t be sure. “Yeah, I can’t *wait* to watch a fucking cartoon musical. Just how I wanted to spend my day off.”

Blossom took the plate from him to join the others in the sink and ran the water. “Disney movies are made to appeal to all ages these days.”

“Sure, if you like your empty platitudes and compulsive heteronormativity served up to you in annoyingly catchy singalong format.”

“You’re not wrong, but you’re not right, either. She wants to watch it with *you*.”

“What difference does that make?”

“She loves you. It makes all the difference.”

He made an exasperated noise and leaned back against the countertop. “This isn’t how I wanted to spend my day off.”

Blossom studied his profile, and despite her better judgment, she found him strangely endearing in his petulance. As if Brick could ever endear himself to anyone.

She finished with the dishes, dried her hands, and dragged her fingers down his chest. “Don’t
pout.”

His sullen self-indulgence morphed into something decidedly more smoldering as this time, and he caught her before she could slip away. Without an audience, he slid his hands around her waist and pushed her shirt (his shirt) scandalously high. Blossom flattened her palms on his chest and tried to push him away, nervous that Brisa might walk in on them like this, but he tightened his hold to the point that she would have to use her Super strength to break free.

“It’s my house,” he said, dangerously close now. “I can do whatever the hell I want.”

He was close enough to kiss, his breath warm on her lips, and oh, but she was tempted. Just one wouldn’t hurt…

“Uncle Brick! Where are you?” Brisa shouted from the living room.

“Demon spawn,” Brick said, though Blossom heard the resignation in his tone.

“You better go,” she said. “Frozen awaits.”

He tightened his grip on her waist. “You too.”

“You want me to stay?”

Somewhere between their raw, carnal magnetism last night and standing in each other’s arms in Brick’s kitchen after the breakfast he’d made for them, something had shifted. There was something untested and unfamiliar in the domestic comfort they currently found themselves in. Blossom felt a bit like she’d slipped into someone else’s skin when she’d slipped into his shirt, someone else’s life. This was not why she’d come here, but it was why she hadn’t yet left.

He released her and ran a hand through his hair. “You’re not making me watch this ripoff fairytale bullshit alone after you encouraged her like that.”

Say no.

Just tell him no.

This wasn’t them.

But…

But.

She leaned in and kissed his cheek. “Fair enough.”

He touched his kissed cheek and looked at her like he was trying to figure out if it really was fair or not. At length, he pushed off the counter and headed for his room.

“Blossooooooooom,” Brisa whined. She’d made her way back to the kitchen still clutching the Frozen DVD. “You’re not gonna leave before we watch the movie, right?”

Blossom’s expression softened. “No, of course not. Here, why don’t we go wait for Brick on the sofa?” Because something told her he would not appreciate either of them messing with his electronics without his permission. Best to wait for him.

“Okay!” Brisa darted back to the living room and landed on the cloud cushion sofa with a whoosh.
Brick emerged from his room then wearing a plain white T-shirt. He tossed a small navy bundle to Blossom. They were boxers. More accurately, they were Brick’s boxers.

“Nice as it is, I can’t have your ass hanging out in front of my niece,” he said.

Blossom rolled her eyes at his crassness. “How thoughtful of you.”

“That’s me, always thinking of others.”

He said it without irony, and Blossom barely stifled a groan. She ignored the rather juvenile flutter of embarrassment at the prospect of wearing Brick’s boxers and slipped them over her hips. They were a bit big, but the elastic kept them in place. Brick’s eyes lingered on her figure, but she pretended not to notice and sat down on the couch.

“Uncle Brick, come sit with us!” Brisa said.

“Yeah, yeah, just a second,” he muttered as he got his Playstation 4 working and playing the DVD.

When everything was ready, he sank down on Brisa’s other side and lounged against the armrest and three pillows. Blossom had no pillows on her side, but she had the blanket, which she spread out over her legs and Brisa’s while the opening song played.

Normally, Blossom was not one for commentary of the live blogging type, but Brisa insisted on explaining who the characters were and why she liked them and where they were going.

“That guy’s clearly evil,” Brick said while Anna and Hans sang their big love song around Arendelle Castle.

“Agreed, he’s a charming redhead, after all,” Blossom quipped.

Brick made a grunting noise that sounded a little like a laugh. “Takes one to know one.”

Brisa sighed dramatically. “It’s supposed to be a surprise!”

“Then it’s bad foreshadowing.”

The peanut gallery quieted down when Elsa ran away from Arendelle and sang her big number as she built her snow palace. Blossom found herself strangely captivated. The animation was lovely and the song was catchy, but something about Elsa’s self-imposed isolation and estrangement from her sister hit a bit too close to home.

She’d shut her own sisters out too. Though unlike the intrepid Anna and her ragtag sidekicks, Bubbles and Buttercup hadn’t managed to bring Blossom home. No, she’d come home on her own when Wei decided to ruin everything they’d built.

Blossom imagined Elsa’s snow palace, the epitome of her power and pride, shattering and falling around her, burying her despite all her efforts, and the thought brought tears to her eyes.

“Let it go, let it go,” Brisa sang even as the song ended.

Why can’t I just let him go?

She rubbed her eyes on the sleeve of Brick’s shirt before her tears could fall. She felt the weight of his gaze on her, but she didn’t look over at him. If she did, he would know, like he always seemed to know. Instead, she got up and offered to get everyone water, and by the time she’d returned to the sofa, the scene was changed and her eyes were dry.
“This Anna girl is an idiot. Who leaves a random guy she just met in charge of a kingdom he isn’t even a part of?” Brick said.

“The same girl who agreed to marry a guy she just met,” Blossom said.

“But it’s true love! They sang a song and everything,” Brisa said, looking between the two killjoys seated on either side of her.

Brick fixed Brisa with a very stern look. “You listen to me, Brisa. Any guy who sings you a song as part of a marriage proposal is a serial killer. Remember that, it could save your life one day.”

Blossom laughed dryly. “You’re terrible.”

“I’m right.”

The movie progressed to its climax, in which Hans was revealed to be the villain all along and Anna sacrificed herself to save Elsa’s life at the last second. It ended as all Disney fairytales do, with everyone together and living happily ever after.

“Well, that was two hours of my life I’m never getting back,” Brick said.

“Did you like it?” Brisa eagerly asked.

Blossom smiled. “Everyone likes a happy ending.”

“I wish I had a sister like Anna and Elsa,” Brisa said. “Or a little brother. That’d be okay too, I guess.”

“Butch really doesn’t need to have any more kids,” Brick said.

Blossom ruffled Brisa’s hair. “Maybe you’ll get a sibling one day, who knows? But for now, you have your uncle Brick to play with you whenever you want.”

Brick shot her a withering look like he would rather eat his own shirt than debase himself by playing with a child, of all the horrible things. Blossom struggled not to laugh at him.

“Oh yeah. Uncle Brick, let’s play Pretty Puff Ponies. I brought all my favorite dolls!” Brisa launched off the couch just as Brick made a swipe for her. A mystical green forcefield crackled at her back and stopped him from grabbing her at the last second.

“Goddamnit,” Brick hissed, shaking out his hand. “No shield in the house, you know that rule!”

“Sorry!” Brisa wasn’t sorry at all as she tore into her backpack to pick out her toys.

It was too much, and Blossom couldn’t contain her laughter any longer at the sight of Brick, former leader of the Rowdyruff Boys, scourge of Townsville, and all-around Tough Guy™ so flustered and at the mercy of a five-year-old girl’s whim.

He looked at her, bewildered and betrayed as though she’d sold him out to his greatest enemy. And he whined. “Blossom.”

It was all the more ridiculous, and she was in stitches as she cackled on the couch. “I-I can’t—your face!”

“Stop laughing!” Brick was on her in a flash and they wrestled on the couch as he tried to get her to
shut up. There were tears in her eyes as she struggled to breathe. “Blossom!”

But he wasn’t angry, not truly, and through her paroxysm she thought she could detect a glimmer of mirth in those pitiless, red eyes.

“Are you guys having a tickle fight?” Brisa asked, eager to join.

“We are now,” Brick said, and proceeded to tickle Blossom mercilessly.

She screeched with laughter, and soon they were on the floor desperately struggling to out-tickle each other. Brisa jumped on them, also laughing, and it became a two-on-one fight with Blossom and Brisa teaming up against Brick.

“What—hey!” Brick cracked and couldn’t contain his laughter as Brisa tickled his sides and Blossom trapped his arms. “Cut it out!”

“Get him, Brisa!” Blossom cheered her on.

And get him she did for all of five magical seconds before Brick struggled free, scooped her up in his arms, and threw her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. “Now, where did I put that rope?”

“No!” Brisa half-heartedly protested as she giggled. “You’ll never catch me, Copper!”

They spent the next hour “debasing” themselves running around the house playing cops and robbers, and for just a little while, Blossom was five years old again and saving the world before bedtime.

Something had set Butch off, and frankly Buttercup had no idea what had kept him from unleashing true violence on everyone around them. The ear boxing had been playful. Buttercup didn’t speak any Spanish, but even she could tell that whatever that thug had said was annoying enough to warrant a smacking.

Now, though, something had shifted, and she suspected it had something to do with Ace. The guy had a lot of enemies, and even his friends didn’t much care for him. That was no surprise to Buttercup, who knew him better than anyone outside his old gang (which, seeing Snake and Arturo around, she suspected was not as broken up as she previously believed, and she wondered if things had changed in the last five years, or if she didn’t know him quite so well as she thought).

Don’t start shit, she willed Butch to hear her as he followed her into the side room.

Mercifully, he stayed quiet and crossed the room to her side.

Ace, Snake, and Arturo followed, and they closed the door behind them. The side room was a small, private bar, well-stocked. Snake headed for it poured out three glasses of Gentleman Jack straight up. He passed them around, and Buttercup accepted hers but didn’t drink.

Ace watched her from the door. He was more Eurotrash chic these days than scrappy hired thug, a change Buttercup should have expected but nonetheless lamented just a little. When they’d been closer, he’d only just joined the ranks of the Stagioni Gang as a low-level enforcer, and primarily to ensure protection for his boys, the only real family he had. Now though, he was middle management with his own club according to the dossier on file at the precinct.

She should have seen it coming. Or rather, she’d always seen it coming and chose to pretend like nothing would ever change. Fat lot of good that kind of thinking ever did her.
“So this is new,” Ace said. He cranked a brow.

“Butch is with me. You don’t have to worry about him,” she said automatically. The last thing she wanted was to give Ace any reason to hone in on him when she was here for one thing only.

“Oh?”

Butch leaned on the bar and sipped the drink Snake had poured for him. “We’re a matching set.”

“That so.”

“Yeah.”

Buttercup shot Butch a glare she hoped would convey how much she really wanted him to shut the fuck up so she could get down to business. The less time they had to spend here, the better. “You said you had some information about a missing guy,” she said, approaching Ace. “I’m sure Arturo told you all about my investigation at the Wright Chalk Factory.”

Arturo nervously chewed his upper lip with his prominent overbite.

“A little,” Ace said. He swirled his drink. “Had a lot to say about you though.” He indicated Butch. “A Rowdyruff helpin’ a copper? This I had to see.”

Buttercup’s temper flared. So that was why he’d agreed to meet with her? Because of fucking Butch? She’d thought bringing him would be good backup. Even a Super cop like her knew never to go poking around the Sirloin’s shadier areas alone. And since he’d been useful at the factory, it seemed counterproductive to cut him out now.

“I’m on vacation,” Butch said, smiling in that skin-crawling way he had when he was playing with his food.

“Your brother know about your little, uh, extra curricular activities?”

Buttercup moved in between Ace and Butch’s line of sight. “Hey, eyes up here. The missing thief, Ace. Tell me what you know, and I’ll forget everything and everyone I saw here today.”

She could feel Butch’s gaze on her back, but she ignored him. No way was she leaving here without Ace’s information, whatever it may be.

Ace studied her face. If she didn’t know him so well, she may have missed the way his pitiless eyes softened like muscle memory. It had been a long time since he’d looked at her like that, since he’d whispered in her ear everything he learned about Giacomo “il Macellaio” Staglioni to help the CPD finally bring down one of the most ruthless murderers in Citiesville history and cement her promotion from street cop to homicide detective. Since he was more than just her silver-tongued C.I.

Water under the bridge, that. Flooded now. Dead bodies always float to the surface no matter how lovely and dark the waters appear from the shore.

But when he leaned toward her, it was hard to shake the lure of the deep and the thrill of the unknown lying beneath. Sadly, Buttercup had a type. “Not everyone, I hope,” he said.

Long fingers reached for her loose hair, they knew the way well, but Buttercup snatched them before they could touch her. Her heart pounded in her ears, fragile like she’d always been with him, only it had been a long time and somehow she’d forgotten the fault lines.
Fuck, but she hated seeing him like this.

Ace didn’t fight her, and he kept his eyes firmly on hers, never wandering. “Nice dress,” he said, and smiled that razor blade smile that could cut through her bulletproof skin, once upon a time.

Buttercup wrenched his hand away and crossed her arms. “A name, Ace. Now.”

His dark eyes flickered somewhere over her shoulder. “Sure, I got a name. A few, in fact.”

He finished off his drink and stepped around her toward the bar. It was awfully quiet in here, the low thrum of the jazz in the other room muted through the walls. Butch was quiet too. His eyes followed Ace’s route around the bar to refill his drink, but they flickered to Buttercup briefly. It occurred to her that she’d hardly ever seen him so quiet, yet so cold. It didn’t feel like him at all.

Whatever, now was not the time to worry about Butch when she finally had Ace focusing on the problem at hand. She followed him to the bar and leaned across it. “What do you mean, a few names?”

Ace shrugged. “It’s a big, bad city, kid. People disappearin’ all the time, you know.”

Buttercup immediately thought about Danny Chang, but she put the thought out of her head. Dwelling would weaken her, and Ace could smell weakness like a piranha smells blood in the water.

“I know I got a guy in the wind after he broke into Mojo Jojo’s lab and stole a bunch of Super DNA,” Buttercup snapped. “A name, I’m not asking again. I know you’ve been recruiting at the factory.”

Whatever tenderness Ace harbored for her evaporated instantly, and he turned his venom on her. “You want names? Johnny Tran, Mickey Dahl, Scottie Moreno, Tina Williams. Should I go on? How’s about I make you a list, eh? Snake, where’s my list?”

“Here, Bossssss.” Snake was as slippery as black ice and just as hard to detect. He materialized seemingly out of nowhere and handed Ace a folded paper, which Ace passed to Buttercup.

“What the hell is this?” Buttercup demanded.

“That’s a list of all the names of the poor saps who gone and disappeared like—” He snapped his fingers.

Buttercup stared at the list. There had to be nearly twenty names on here, none of whom she recognized. “What are you talking about?”

Ace shook his head like a disappointed schoolmarm. “Oh beautiful, we both know you’re smarter than that.”

Butch’s glass hitting the bar top startled her. Snake, who had started sweating down his long, pointed nose, silently refilled Butch’s glass. Still, he said nothing.

Buttercup shook her head. “These are people who’ve disappeared? Why haven’t I heard of any of them?”

“Because you don’t listen,” Arturo said. He remained by the door like he wanted to maintain as much distance between himself and her. “La policía, they don’t care when people disappear.”
“What are you—”

“Undesirables,” Ace interrupted her. “Urchins, addicts, street rats—society’s defective models. Who cares if a few vanish without a trace, huh? Who’s gonna miss ‘em?”

Buttercup was not sure how to respond to that. All the names on this list…were missing persons? And nothing was being done to investigate? Her hands shook. “You should have reported this.”

Ace had dropped all pretenses of power play and just looked at her like she was everything he’d always warned her she would become. “We did, for the first few. When it was clear nobody in your little hero precinct cared, we stopped wastin’ our time.”

“I care!” Buttercup shouted. She crumpled the list in her fist. “There’s gotta be twenty names on this list and you didn’t once think to come to me?”

“Yeah, great idea, ’cause you and me, we’re a fuckin’ Happy Meal.”

Buttercup crushed her glass without meaning to and bared her teeth, feral. “Fuck you. If you think for a second I’d throw you under the bus for any reason, then you never knew me at all.”

They faced off a moment, both caught up in their anger at each other, at the situation, at all the words better left unsaid, and you know what? Screw him. No matter who they became or where they ended up, Buttercup had always believed that the past counted for something, if for nothing else than for the benefit of the fucking doubt.

“Maybe not,” he conceded, spiteful.

Buttercup snarled. She really needed a stiff drink now, but she’d smashed her cup. Without a care, she grabbed Butch’s right out of his hand and downed it in two gulps. It didn’t help much, but it distracted her long enough to smother the urge to rip Ace’s arms off.

Butch hadn’t moved. He watched her, too close for comfort, or perhaps not close enough. In his personal space, all she could feel was the pressure of his power subtly pushing against her own, and it gave her something to focus on that wasn’t her twisted ex for five seconds.

This was not how this encounter was supposed to go. Get in, get the name, get the hell out. Simple. She’d expected Ace to try to drag things out a little because at his heart he was a flim-flam man perpetually in want of a target, but she could handle him.

A soldier, that was what Butch had called himself, called her. It was in their blood.

“You’re like me.”

Buttercup looked up at Butch. He was watching her, his jaw set, coiled to strike if she only gave the word.

But a soldier wouldn’t find Danny Chang or Mojo’s burglar. A soldier had tried, and a soldier was failing. It was time to try something else.

“How long have these disappearances been happening?” Buttercup closed her eyes and breathed through her nose.

“A few months.” It was Arturo who answered her.

She turned to look at him still standing guard at the door. “Witnesses?”
He shrugged. “Not really. They’re careful.”

“They,” Buttercup repeated. “So it’s a coordinated attack.”

“They never leave a trace, so…”

Professional. Discreet. Systematic. Twenty goddamned names on that list.

_Twenty-one, if I count Danny Chang._

Buttercup briefly entertained the horrifying thought that somehow, it was all connected. The mass snatching of people, “undesirables” no one would miss, no one would mourn, no one would believe, until they snatched the wrong guy.

What if Danny was never meant to disappear?

“Jimmy James,” Ace said. “He’s the one you’ll like for the Mojo job, probably.”

“Probably?” Buttercup asked.

“They pay cash, you know how it is. No questions, no details, just a job with no strings.”

“Then how do you know it’s this one guy? You probably get tons of requests like that from deep pockets.”

Ace grinned, but it only gave her the creeps. “This one was different. Too much money for a simple B ‘n E.”

Buttercup glared. “But you made it happen anyway.”

“Man’s gotta eat, sweetheart.”

“Don’t call me that.”

Ace surrendered his hands. “Take the names. See whatcha dig up. I’ll even hold my breath for you.”

“You do that.” Buttercup pocketed Ace’s list, glad this was finally over. “C’mon Butch.”

Butch didn’t budge, and Buttercup followed his glare to Ace, who was a far cry from the slick, smooth talker he’d been when the two Supers first showed up.

“Jimmy James, huh,” Butch finally broke his silence.

“Hey, they don’t tell me what shit’s about, all right?” Ace said. “You tell your brother that. It was just business. He understands.”

“Butch.” Buttercup had half a mind to take his hand and drag him out of there, but something in his posture warned her not to get too close.

“Yeah,” Butch said. “Brick’s a real understanding kinda guy.”

A true flicker of fear passed over Ace’s hard eyes. Buttercup would have missed it if she hadn’t been looking right at him.

This time, she ignored her instincts and took Butch’s hand, yanking him away. A scared Ace was
an impulsive Ace, and right now she did not want to get into a fight with assholes like Sedusa and the Staglioni mafia all lurking about down here.

Miraculously, he let her lead him away.

“I’ll show myself out,” Buttercup called back to Ace, not waiting for a response.

Butch’s hand was tight in hers, and Ace’s list burned a hole in her pocket. She barely saw the crowd through the thick smoke as she dragged Butch out of the lounge and out the door.

Buttercup’s boots echoed off the empty concrete as she marched Butch and herself back through the underground tunnels and basements. Almost as soon as they were clear of the cigar lounge and alone in a deserted jungle of concrete support pillars, Butch yanked her hand back.

“What?” Buttercup demanded. His grip on her hand was firm.

“Really?” Butch asked.

She made a face. What the hell was his problem now? “Breaking the silent treatment finally, huh? What was that back there, anyway?”

His eyes flashed dangerously. “You didn’t say anything about seeing Ace today.”

“You’re the one who thought Arturo was still with his old crew. I thought it was obvious.”

“It was obvious, all right.”

Buttercup narrowed her eyes, not liking his tone. She pulled her hand away. “What crawled up your ass? We got what we came for.”

“And then some.”

His eyes flickered over her figure in the gloom, but rather than shiver, her skin grew hot with fast-boiling rage. “Are you serious?”

“Me? Are you serious?”

Buttercup gaped at him. “Wow, fuck right off. I don’t have time for this.”

She tried to leave, but he materialized in front of her in a blaze of green. “You had plenty of time back there from where I was standing. Ace? Really?”

Livid, she grabbed his collar and pulled him close. “There are people missing, maybe dying out there, and that matters. Are you telling me you almost blew that whole meeting—our only lead in this case—because of a fucking dick measuring contest?”

He curled his fingers around her wrists, and green sparks bloomed where he touched her. “Why are you pissed at me? He’s the sleaze bag. I could’ve turned him inside out through his asshole, but I didn’t because I know it matters.”

Buttercup saw red and shoved him hard into a concrete pillar. The words unspoken hung between them. “I don’t need you. Not to antagonize my C.I. and definitely not to judge me. That was a long time ago and it’s none of your goddamned business, anyway.”

Butch came away from the pillar shedding concrete dust from the impact crack he’d made. Green
eyes, nearly black in the gloom, watched her with a singular, magnetic intensity.

Buttercup took a couple steps back from him.

He pursued.

“Pretty sure he doesn’t think it was that long ago,” he said.

“What do you care?”

“I don’t.”

“Then cut the jealous boyfriend act!”

“Tell that to him!”

They circled each other, sharks in the deep, each searching for an opening to strike.

“Newsflash, we’re not together anymore. And you and I never were at all.”

Butch got in her face so fast she could hardly believe he could move like that. Even though the room was open with plenty of space to escape into the shadows, he seemed to box her in on all sides. “No argument there.”

“Good, because I don’t need your opinion about who I fuck.”

“Fine, then I won’t say anything about what a skank he is.”

She shoved him again, but he caught her wrists this time and pushed back with his Super strength. Her heels dug into the concrete floor. Entangled together, power surged all around them, snapping and snarling in the windowless gloom. If it was a fight he wanted, a fight he would damn well get.

“Say whatever you want. He was a great lay,” she taunted him, feeling mean.

Butch bared his teeth. His breath was warm on her skin as his eyes bored into hers. “You’ve always had shit taste in guys.”

Anger and spite drove her closer, close enough to hurt him because pain was easy, and she liked to watch. “I guess you’d know.”

“Bitch.”

“Chode.”

His grip on her wrists tightened so much that she started imagining cracks. She bit her lip to stifle a moan. Only Butch could pressure her to the point of mortality like this, and hell if her body didn’t rise to his threat like an addict chasing a high, chasing him. It had been a really long time.

Her back hitting the concrete pillar was a foregone conclusion she didn’t have the patience to dwell on right now. Butch was inevitable, that much she had always known, always accepted, and every now and then embraced like she embraced him now. His pants were unzipped and down before she even thought to consider them, not that it mattered when she was so wet it physically hurt and she had to give him credit for not wasting any time at all. Adroit hands lifted her by the thighs, and she locked her ankles around his waist, shackling them together.

Traces of Ace’s cloying cologne clung to Butch shoulders with the persistence of an airborne virus,
so she twisted her fingers in his hair and buried her nose and mouth against his neck like a vampire, bereft and greedy and desperate as he fucked her against a concrete support pillar in an abandoned warehouse basement where no one could hear her gasping for more.

Concrete cracked behind her back with his every demolishing thrust, and she imagined the whole building coming down on top of them, burying them, impossible weight and gravity that wasn’t impossible to them as he floated them off the ground entirely, feverish with her and with longing. His teeth sank into her impenetrable flesh, bruising and ruinous—ruinous, that’s a good one—and all Buttercup could think was how she wished she wasn’t so tough so he could really taste what was trapped inside, between them, let it out somehow.

Something was coming out though, something shattering and real, and she clung to it like she clung to his unbreakable shoulders. Iron and ecstasy, this power and pressure they had only ever been able to unleash upon each other because she was her and he was him, a matching set just like he’d said, but Buttercup was only interested in his cock and her time right now, both of which were summarily occupied, though not for much longer if he kept up his punishing pace. She soared ever higher and closed her eyes to the fall, his name on her lips which she planted firmly against his carotid artery and the heartbeat hammering beneath the surface.

He shuddered and his pace turned frenetic—what is it about guys loving the sound of their own name? Buttercup smiled and dragged her lips over the shell of his ear.

“Butch,” she hummed.

She felt it when he finished, shattered more like, and buried his face in her shoulder to stifle a groan. Panting, his lips were soft as they moved over her skin, tender from his earlier assault. Seconds passed with Buttercup flush against the cracked pillar, her fingers tangled in his hair, his hands shackled around her thighs, literally floating back down to Earth.

When he finally pulled out and set her down, neither spared the other a glance as they focused on rearranging their clothes and hair. Dark fingerprints in her thighs marked her, but they slowly faded under Chemical X’s supernatural healing powers. She watched, fascinated, strangely moved.

When there was no trace of them left, she smoothed down her skirt and eyed the defaced pillar thoughtfully.

Good thing I wore a dress today.

When she finally glanced at Butch, he was also looking at the pillar. The bruising kisses she’d peppered his neck with like bullet wounds were an ugly blueish-yellow now, and would fade entirely in a matter of seconds. Still, she watched them, traced their subtle lines, the contrast with his tanned skin.

“Brisa wants to go trick-or-treating for Halloween,” he said.

“With Richie?” Buttercup asked.

He smiled ruefully. “Who else.”

Somewhere far off, her Super hearing picked up a leaky pipe dripping water. If she focused, she could hear the sounds of Sunday footsteps on the street far above, people headed for lunch with friends, or to the park with their kids.

“You should come along. If you’re free, you know.”
“Yeah,” she said. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

He finally tore his eyes from the pillar to look at her properly. “Yeah. Maybe.”

Buttercup bit her tongue hard enough to taste blood, but the X healed that before it could hurt too. “I should go process Ace’s list.”

“Yeah, okay.”

She led the way back to the empty club and out to the busy street, where bright sunlight hurt her eyes that already missed the empty, quiet darkness down below.

“Think about it,” Butch said before they went their separate ways. “Halloween, I mean.”

“Yeah, I will.”

“Cool.” He showed her his back and waved over his shoulder. “See you, doll.”

She watched him go until he disappeared around the corner.

See you.

Chapter End Notes

Frozen is an A+ Disney movie and I’m not accepting any criticism on that point. Brick already covered it. Savor the Sister Code™, my dudes.

Next time: Stuff happens, and it’s almost Halloween!
The Definition of Insanity

Chapter Notes

WHOA I am guessing it’s the quarantine effect but holy crap, this fic got a ton of new hits since the last update. Welcome new readers!! I sincerely hope you are enjoying our shared dalliance here!

I’m really sorry for the delay on this update. Work for me has actually been crazy busy and I’ve had almost no time to do fun shit. Also, the RE3 Remake came out last Friday so I spent most of what very little free time I did have doing that (i.e., instead of sleeping, a grave mistake; provided, however, that I regret nothing).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Brick parked at the end of the sleepy, suburban block and killed the engine. The moment they drove past Blossom’s house, she directed him to keep going so that two paparazzi lurking on the sidewalk wouldn’t accost her.

“I know they’re just doing their jobs, but I’m so tired of it,” Blossom said.

Brick frowned. “Don’t make excuses for those vultures. It’s Sunday and they have nothing better to do than harass private citizens in their homes.”

She nodded, chewing her lip. “Maybe I should say something to them.”

“Do that and they might print some bullshit about you having an emotional reaction, like the last time.”

Her power spiked with a punishing push. “Don’t remind me.”

“Want me to write them a strongly worded letter for you?”

Blossom rolled her eyes so far back he could see the whites. “Oh god, stop.”

He smirked. “You can’t stop a good thing, babe.”

She shoved him playfully. “Wow, I haven’t heard that atrocious line in a while. If I didn’t know you better, I’d call you cliché.”

He caught the hand she’d shoved him with and pulled her closer. “That’s the single-most offensive thing you’ve ever said to me.”

She smiled up at him through her lashes. “Thanks, I thrive on positive feedback.”

His black T-shirt and gym shorts hung on her smaller frame, baggy and hiding her figure, but aside from this morning, Brick couldn’t think of a moment when she’d ever looked more attractive to him than she did right now, in his car, wearing his clothes after the whole morning spent together just lounging around the house, relaxed like he couldn’t remember being in forever, with her hand pressed to his chest as he pulled her even closer.
“So do I,” he murmured against her lips as he bent to kiss her, slow and languorous. He could taste her smile as she pressed against him, her fingers curled into his windbreaker over his hammering heart, and he was perfectly content to indulge whatever she wanted from him.

“I love the way you kiss me,” she said as she touched her fingers to his lips. “Like you really want to.”

His fingers entwined in her long hair. “I want to.” God, he wanted to, like he’d never wanted anyone else.

She smiled again, and he indulged them both once more. She was soft but confident, like she knew exactly what he wanted and how, and he quietly conceded that he loved the way she kissed him too. For a few moments, he couldn’t remember the logic behind their decision to go their separate ways now that the day was over.

She ended their kiss with a quick peck and a soft thumb over his temple. “I better go. Sorry to make you drive all the way out here.”

He still had her hair tangled in his fingers and pulled her back for one more quick, parting kiss before she could pull away from him completely. “Like I’d want you going out in public dressed like that.”

“Hmm, the heels are a bit much for the look.” She inspected the strappy, red shoes she’d worn last night.

Brick snorted. “Not even close to the point.”

She grinned slyly. “Well, at least I look cute.”

Yeah, the obvious lack of a bra under her shirt was cute, as he was sure the guy jogging across the street would enthusiastically agree. “Just be quick and fly in through your window.”

“With that bulky dress? I don’t think so.”

Brick shot her a look. She was still grinning, and he realized his amateur mistake too late. “Is this fun for you? What do you want me to say?”

“Oh, it’s just fun. Totally harmless.” She grabbed the dress from the backseat and gathered it in her arms. “I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Yes, you did.”

She opened the passenger door and let herself out. “I told you, I like positive feedback.”

She had the gall to wink at him before closing the door.

“I’ve created a monster.

No, I’m just dating one.

Brick followed her pink streak as she dashed to the garage side door faster than any Normie could have hoped to track. Her perfume lingered in the car, subtle but distinctly feminine, and Brick breathed deeply.

His personal phone buzzed.
Blossom: Made it inside unscathed.

Blossom: You can go now if you want.

Christ.

He was really off his game today.

Blossom: Unless you were hoping for an invitation?

He typed back a reply lightning fast in a meager attempt to save what was left of his dignity.

Brick: Next time.

Her text bubbles bounced for what seemed like a really long time.

Blossom: It’s a date.

Brick started up the engine and pocketed his phone, determined not to respond to that one. At least she wasn’t around to see him (poorly) hide a little smile.

Dating Blossom.

Well, there were worse things in the world. Much worse.

Like the secondary reason he’d volunteered to drive her all the way back to Townsville. Two birds and all. Brick peeled out of the Pokey Oaks suburb and took Pier Street along the bay all the way uptown, parked in a covered garage, and walked the couple of blocks to Observatory Park. He was unusually casual today in jeans, a grey windbreaker, and an old, red baseball cap he retrieved from the glove compartment. He pulled the bill down low over his eyes and kept his head down.

The day was overcast, and this late in the afternoon, there were not too many people hanging out in the park. Just as well. No one seemed to pay him much mind when he ducked under the entrance to the volcano-top observatory and quietly climbed the stairs.

Mojo was not quick to answer the door. Brick ignored the cameras he knew were strategically placed around the entrance making it impossible to sneak by unobserved, but he wasn’t trying to hide, not from Mojo at least.

“I would rather not break down your door,” he said, knowing the stupidly elaborate security system Mojo had installed since before he and his brothers were ever created would pick up his soft-spoken words plain as day. “Up to you.”

At last, the many deadbolts slid open and the door swung in, and Brick came face to face with his former caretaker. He looked terrible. Age had not been kind to Mojo, and it had been years since Brick had seen him in the flesh now that his days of running rampant in the streets with his army of Robo Jojos were long behind him. But appearances would not fool Brick. Mojo may be old, but he was a Super genius, literally. Time may wither the body, but it sharpened the mind. In Mojo’s case, to a wicked edge.

Mojo said nothing as he glared up at Brick, who was nearly twice his height, and silently stepped aside to admit him.

Inside was much as Brick remembered it being when he used to live here half a lifetime ago. Everything was meticulously tidy, organized, stacked, and labeled, with not a hair out of place. He
frowned at the skin-crawlingly familiar, comforting order.

He thought of Blossom then. Blossom in his apartment that morning, carefully perusing and cataloguing his things, picking up on his patterns and rituals like she’d been doing it all her life, easy, natural, instinctual. A carefully curated place for everything just as he liked it, including her.

He scowled and swallowed the memory along with the bitter taste in his mouth.

“You have got a loooooot of nerve coming to my place of abode where I inhabit, occupy, and otherwise pass my daily and nightly time in the manner of my choosing, which has nothing to do with anyone who does not inhabit, occupy, or otherwise pass his or her daily and nightly time here, the reason being that this my place of abode and no one else’s, for it is solely mine, and certainly not yours for the last fifteen years since you announced your intention to emancipate yourself. Ergo, the aforementioned nerve.”

Brick waited for Mojo to finish his typically circular speech, tuning him out to look around the living area. It was uncanny, truly, how little had changed. The living room bookshelf was still organized chronologically by the life of the author, the sofas still that ugly shade of violet that was Mojo’s preferred color, an old, vinyl record player perched on the media stand in place of a television. Brick’s eyes were drawn to a framed picture on the bookshelf of himself, his brothers, and Mojo covered in paint and grinning. Right where it had conspicuously been since the day it was taken so many years ago. In spite of himself, his gaze lingered.

“Is this gonna help us defeat the Powerpuff Girls?” ten-year-old Boomer had asked, hesitant.

“Like we need weapons and stuff to take out a buncha lame-o girls!” Butch guffawed.

“Ugh, barf. Don’t mention those stupid sissies in my presence,” Brick said, so over it.

“Quite right, Brick. Those Powerpuff Girls are not to be mentioned on this most sacred and holy of days, for it is Monday, the best day of the week because it is the start of the week when plans begin, commence, and otherwise come to sweet and/or savory fruition! And today’s most excellent plan is to shoot balloons filled with paint at each other, which is to say that it is most certainly not to discuss or mention or even think about whiny little girls who suck the fun out of everything.”

Brick remembered that day so clearly he could still smell the chalky paint, feel the dull ache of the paintball bruises he’d sustained, hear his brothers’ raucous laughter as they pelted each other with abandon for no other reason than it was fun and they had time. All these years, and a picture from a day that meant nothing to Mojo’s grand schemes still sat perched on the bookshelf. Brick averted his heavy gaze. Mojo was a creature of habit through and through. That was all.

The lab entrance would be through the kitchen up the stairs. The industrial refrigerators housing an eclectic cache of chemicals, biological samples, and even certain weapons would be in a walled-off section toward the back beyond the welding workshop, away from the windows and any light sources. He could picture it so clearly in his mind’s eye that he could have found it blind.

He headed for it.

“I’ll be out of your hair shortly,” Brick said tersely.

Mojo scampered after his long strides, surprisingly fast for such an old monkey. “Stop! Where do you think you are—Brick!”

Mojo’s paw clenched in the back of his windbreaker was annoying, but hearing the old chimp use his name rather than some condescending moniker—boy, child, son—twisted a very specific knife
and had him whirling. Red eyes blazed with a threat, but Mojo, like Blossom, had never, ever
flinched at the sight of Brick’s power laid bare before him.

His eye twitched.

Stop thinking about her.

This was no place for her.

“What,” Brick said.

Mojo’s nostrils flared with the small exertion it cost him to dash after Brick. His withered paws
shook, drawing Brick’s eye. “Whatever it is you are here to procure, we both know I cannot
impede you. But somewhere under that ratty cap you insist on wearing indoors—which is
incredibly ill-mannered and you know this—you have a passably sharp mind and also a keen
awareness of social decorum and polity which are the touchstones of civilization and enlightened
thinking, which I, Mojo Jojo, taught you myself, knowing you would retain such decorum and
polity unlike your brothers who lack certain—”

“I’ll get your goddamned tea,” Brick interrupted, fed up. If a cup of tea was what it would take to
walk out of here with the Chemical X sample he’d come for without a fight that would
undoubtedly get physical because Mojo never knew when to fucking quit, then so be it. It was a
small, if annoying, price to pay.

Ten minutes later, Brick and Mojo sat at the modest kitchen table, neither of them touching their
steaming cups of tea. Brick had never actually liked tea, really. But Mojo had his rituals. Everyone
did.

“I need a sample of Chemical X,” Brick said, cutting right to the chase. “I know you still keep a
stash.”

“Hello, Mojo. How nice to see you, Mojo. I am so sorry for not calling in the last three years
because my life is sooooo important and busy and you would not understand despite the fact that
you are a bona fide Super genius who understands a great many things,” Mojo said.

Brick shot him a withering look. “Technically, we spoke last month when you told me about the
burglary.”

“Don’t get smart with me, boy.”

Crimson power popped in the air around Brick and boiled the tea in both of their cups. “Call me
boy again. See what happens.”

Mojo swallowed visibly and quietly pushed away his over-boiling tea. “You have no need for
Chemical X seeing as all your powers are clearly intact.”

“It’s not your concern what my need is.”

“Oh really? And yet, here you are indulging an old man his habits out of the goodness of your
heart.” Mojo narrowed his dark eyes. “Do not insult me.”

Let it go.

The song from Brisa’s annoying Disney movie rang in his head, completely stupid and unwelcome.
It was something Boomer probably would have enjoyed, even liked, sap that he was.
Brick took a sip of the tea he didn’t want. “Why don’t we skip the passive-aggressive banter for once and you can just tell me what I’ve done now to disappoint you. Get it out of your system.” He spread his arms. “Here I am, in the flesh. So say your piece, old man.”

Insolence.

That had always been Brick’s sin when he lived under this roof. Boomer was soft, while Butch was dense. Easy enough to beat the one like putty into the desired shape and direct the other on the path of maximum, thoughtless destruction. But insolence did not compromise, did not cede control, did not listen. Insolence was independence, purpose, and ingenuity, everything Mojo prided in himself and pitied in Brick. We grow to resent our reflections the older we get.

But there was no tantrum, no diatribe. Mojo merely glared at him across the table, weary. “Your desire for power and control has always blinded you to pragmatism. Just like me…”

“What are you talking about?”

“I think you know exactly that about which I am talking. It’s all over the news reports, after all.”

_Tread lightly._

Old alarms crawled under his skin and curled his fingers into fists. He dropped them to his lap, hoping Mojo hadn’t noticed. Of course he noticed.

“I don’t want to live in ruins,” he said.

Mojo narrowed his eyes. “And yet that is exactly what you are doing so long as you cavort with her.”

Brick forced himself to wait a beat before responding to that one. He leaned back in his chair and peered at Mojo down his nose. “Cavorting? That’s bold.”

Mojo wasn’t moved. He was dead serious. “Did you think I would not notice? That level of coordination, the complementary balancing of the elements? Do you think I am a _fool_?”

Brick’s hands burned with power that he smothered in his lap. “I think you’re an old man with too much free time and a penchant for conspiracy theories.”

“Oh puh-lease. Deflection? Do you truly think that will work on me, Mojo Jojo, the inventor of deflection as an extremely effective interrogation technique?”

It was astounding how Mojo could say half the shit he said completely straight-faced.

“I do not know the nature of your association with that girl, nor do I care to know. But whatever it is, it is a mistake and you know that better than anyone.”

“Do I?” Brick was so close to losing his temper he could taste it. “Because from where I’m sitting, it sounds like you know better than me.”

Mojo bared his fangs. “You insolent boy, _listen to me_. I am trying to help you against my better judgment.”

Brick’s eyes flashed with power and he bared his teeth right back. “Don’t compromise your better judgment on my account. I wouldn’t want to tarnish your perfect record.”
The table shook where Mojo slammed his gloved paw down. Tea spilled from their cups, still steaming. “Disgraceful. After everything I have done for you and your brothers, you continue to defy me, and for what? Out of spite? I, your creator and your caretaker, whose unmatched genius led me to conceive of you and thus create and caretake you because I am, as I have mentioned but which merits repeating since it is true, a genius with an unmarred history of extremely good judgment, and yet you continue to defy me?”

“Yes.”

Mojo growled and shook with anger. “Do you truly not see what is happening? How she has corrupted you with her feminine wiles?”

Brick laughed, but there was no joy in it. Why he’d bothered to indulge the old man at all was beyond him. They always ended up here, hopeless, some way or another. “We’re done here. I’m taking the X and leaving.”

“Sit down!” Mojo shouted.

Brick ignored him and headed for the lab. The meat locker had a code, but it was unchanged from when Brick still lived here with his brothers. Classic Mojo, too set in his ways even to update his fucking passwords.

The X was kept in five ounce vials in a locked cabinet, which Brick easily broke into and selected one.

“Brick!” Mojo stomped after him.

Brick considered for a split second, grabbed another vial of X, and pocketed both. It never hurt to have a little insurance. As he left the meat locker, Mojo finally managed to catch up to him huffing and puffing in his anger and exertion. The sight of the old monkey leaning on the lab wall to catch his breath was so out of place that Brick froze and stared openly. Mojo’s hand shook where he leaned on it against the wall to keep his balance.

“Three years since you have deigned to visit me.” Mojo wheezed. “You do not get to say when we are done here.”

“I already did.”

Brick tried to leave.

Mojo blocked him.

“Get out of my way.”

Mojo puffed out his chest. “I am your father. You will not defy me.”

“Father?” Brick spat the word. “That’s fucking rich.”

“Do not swear at me, boy—”

“I’m not your fucking boy.” The furniture in the room began to shake as Brick let his power manifest in angry, red fumes. “You haven’t been a father in years.”

Mojo faltered, but it had nothing to do with the stainless steel tables and computer parts and books beginning to float and rattle. He let his shaking hand fall and fixed his beady eyes on Brick.
“I am trying.”

Brick’s throat clenched painfully. “Don’t bother.”

He released his power in a violent blast, and the furniture fell back to the floor with a clatter. Glass shattered and old robot parts toppled onto the tile, deafening.

*Forget this.*

He had what he’d come for, and it was time to get the hell out.

“How’s that plan been working out for you?”

“You misunderstand me, which is to say, you cannot comprehend the depths of your own willful ignorance. By design, you and Blossom were never meant to co-exist.”

Her name on Mojo’s lips made Brick taste smoke, but even as cinders ignited on his tongue, Mojo would not yield.

“You will destroy each other,” he repeated, hollow and tired, “because it is all you know.”

“That is all you need to know,” he had said that day Brick and his brothers were resurrected and returned to him with no memory of what had happened except that it had hurt. Mojo’s paws were heavy on Brick’s shoulders, the threat of claws, anchoring. “Next time, you will obliterate those perfect little girls.”

Mojo’s presence, as ever, was a looming shadow above and beyond him, as before, so now.

Brick faced the doorway again. “You don’t know a goddamned thing about me.”

He made to leave, to hell with this. Mojo wasn’t worth the X he would expend blowing this place up once and for all.

But Mojo’s voice stopped him one last time. “What about your clients? What do they know?”

Brick tensed. Still, he refused to give Mojo the satisfaction of acknowledgment.

“What will they think when they find out you associate so liberally with those who would expose them?”

With the post-monster pandemonium, his subsequent wariness of reporters, and then all the time he’d spent with Blossom this weekend, Brick had shut off his work phone entirely. He had yet to check it.

“Because even though I am, indeed, a Super genius with no equal, it does not take more than a few brain cells and eyes to comprehend the rather obvious implications behind your final attack against the plant monster.” Mojo’s boots echoed low and loud on the tile as they drew nearer. “I wonder, what will your *loyal clientele* think when they find out?”

“Nothing,” Brick said in a voice like acid. “Because there’s nothing to know.”

“Oh suuuuure, of course. Whatever you say—”
Brick stormed out of there before Mojo could finish his stupid taunt. As the front door swung on its hinges behind him, he could hear Mojo laughing to himself.

Furious, frustrated, and with no recourse to blow off steam lest he draw attention to himself, Brick counted the steps down from Mojo’s Observatory. Acrid smoke burned his throat, but he swallowed it. He was not a child, and he was not about to throw a tantrum on that old bastard’s account.

But fuuuuuuuuck it would feel so good.

By the time he made it back to his car and slammed the door, he no longer felt the overwhelming urge to immolate an entire city block, barely. His temper and his fire settled deep in the pit of his stomach, smoldering but controllable.

The faintest traces of Blossom’s perfume lingered on the leather seats as though it was imprinted upon them. Brick squeezed the steering wheel almost hard enough to crush it.

He tried calling Boomer, but it went to voicemail.

“Hey, you’ve reached Boomer. Leave a message and I’ll get back to you.” The voicemail recorder beeped, and Brick opened his mouth to say something, but all he wanted to do was scream.

He hung up without saying anything.

Silently fuming, he ripped off the old, red cap he could never quite bring himself to part with permanently no matter how old he got and threw it at the dash. Drawing a shaky breath, he ran his hands through his hair and fought the overwhelming urge to rip it out. It was too fucking quiet in here.

He glanced at his phone again, and his thumb hovered over Princess’ contact.

“Mojo’s just some old hack who’s bitter because he couldn’t cut it in the end,” she would say. “Why do you even still listen to him? You know he’s no good for you.”

Brick tossed his personal phone aside without calling her.

Blossom’s perfume was starting to give him a headache. He turned on the engine, rolled down the windows, and blasted the air. Finally, he pulled his work phone out of the glove compartment, powered it on, and checked his many unread messages.

Monday was a great day.

Dinah had just made it home after a long but extremely fruitful day at Aegis spent with her team doing preliminary analysis of the pure Chemical X sample Brick had finally provided. Its potency was like nothing she had ever seen. There was no doubt in her mind that it really could do remarkable things in the right hands.

My hands, she thought triumphantly as she approached the huge, oaken front door to her Ocean Heights home.

For the first time in years, she was light on her feet and unable to stop smiling at the possibility of a future she could almost touch, it was so close, as she looked forward to a glass of Pinot and dinner with her two favorite men in the whole world. After all, she was celebrating tonight, and who better to share her success with than family?
“Hi Mommy!” Richie waved from the kitchen, where he was running around with a green bath towel tied around his shoulders like a cape. On his scrawny frame, the towel was roomy and dragged on the floor behind him, but he didn’t seem to mind.

“Hello, darling.” Dinah dropped her handbag in the foyer and crossed the heated, hardwood floor to the kitchen. “What are you up to?”

“Playin’ heroes with Gina.” Richie grinned toothily and sniffled.

Dinah grabbed a couple tissues from a box on the marble-top counter and bent down to wipe her son’s nose. A quick glance at the oven clock told her it was nearly time for his evening meds. “Oh really? Did you save the city?”

“Not yet. Sir Hero and I lost track of the giant T-Rex that was terrorizing the citizens.” Gina Hernandez, Richie’s au pair, also wore a towel cape as she posed as Richie’s crimefighting sidekick.

“We gotta find him,” Richie declared, worming his way out of Dinah’s arms to confront his dastardly nemesis.

“Well darling, perhaps the T-Rex is taking a break for dinner, just like you should,” Dinah said. “Is your father home yet?”

“Aw, but we were just getting to the good part,” Richie pouted.

Gina laughed. She had a warm laugh and a round face made for smiling. “Mr. Swathe is not home yet, but I put dinner in the oven. It’s a brisket.”

“Sounds lovely, thank you Gina.” Dinah retrieved a bottle of Pinot opened yesterday from the counter and poured herself a glass. “Can I pour you one?”

“Pew, pew, pew!” Richie fired his finger guns, still enthralled by the game.

“Oh, um,” Gina stammered. Usually, she did not drink while Richie was still up and active.

“Please, I insist. Today is a day to celebrate.”

Gina smiled, revealing dimples in her copper skin. “Thank you. What are we celebrating?”

Dinah returned her smile and raised her glass. “The end of an era.”

Gina politely didn’t ask, not that she would understand, anyway. That was all right. Dinah paid her to help care for Richie, and that was all Gina needed to worry about. They moved to the living room, following Richie in his dash around the house in search of the elusive “monster”.

“You are glowing, Señora,” Gina said. “Today was a very good day for you?”

“Relaxing, Dinah shrugged off her white blazer, leaving her in a matching, sleeveless blouse and dark slacks. “Do you know the phrase ‘game changer’?”

Gina sipped her wine. “When something is like a life saver, I think?”

Dinah watched her son running around in his pretend cape with the stuffed T-Rex he had found kicked under the grand piano and was now on the verge of defeating, and a fierce warmth spread in her chest. “That’s exactly right.”
They sat for a few moments just watching Richie entertain himself like he was having the time of his life. Dinah could have stayed like that forever, in this moment with her son. She had never known a more carefree, innocent child than Richie. He had the whole world waiting for him, and soon, he would have all the time he needed to experience it properly. She would make sure of that. It was a parent’s job to make the world a better place for her child to thrive.

“Everything I do, I do for him,” Dinah said with a conviction she felt in her bones. It was a promise she intended to keep.

“You are a good mother,” Gina said, startling her. Dinah had almost forgotten the au pair was still there.

Invariably, Dinah thought of her late mother as she used to be before she was confined to a sick bed. So young, so beautiful, so ruthless. She had to be to keep up with Dinah’s self-centered father on his meteoric rise and fall.

“Everything I did, I did for you.”

Those tired words, a lesson and a warning, were not the last her mother had spoken, but they were the last ones worth remembering.

Family, after all, was everything.

“I’m trying to be,” Dinah said.

“Oh, that reminds me. Today when I picked up Richie from school, his friend invited him to go trick-or-treating with her and her father on Thursday. I told them I would have to ask you and Mr. Swathe first.”

“Trick-or-treat? I guess that’s this week, isn’t it? Well, I don’t have a problem with it as long as you’re able to accompany him. Simon and I will both be working.”

“Of course, it’s no problem. I’ll let Brisa’s father know tomorrow at pick-up.”

Dinah froze just as she was about to take another sip of wine. “Brisa, as in, that Super girl?”

Gina nodded. “Richie’s best friend. She’s so sweet with him, and her father is a very nice man. Not at all like what they say.”

“Butch,” Dinah said, recalling Brick’s gruff brother who had accompanied him to Aegis recently. Nice was not a word she would have used to describe the surly Super. “Yes, we’ve met. He used to be a villain, you know.”

“But that was so long ago,” Gina said. “He is a good man, I think. A good father. It is never too late for people to change.”

Dinah recalled Boomer saying something similar at Career Day, just before he summoned an energy bat mere feet from a room full of innocent kindergarteners. “So I’ve heard.”

“Not so fast!” Richie announced, puffing his little chest out. He clutched his stuffed T-Rex in a headlock and pointed accusatorially at Dinah.

She bit back a laugh and played along. “Oh no, what have I done, Sir Hero?”

“You’re the bad guy.” Richie beamed. “I beat your monster, and now I’m gonna beat you too!”
Gina laughed. “Richie, I think your mom is tired from a long day at work. Let’s let her relax while we get you cleaned up for dinner, *mijito.*”

“Aw, do I have to? Mommy, can’t I play some more? Please?”

Dinah grinned, and Richie was too slow to evade the grab she made for him. Scooped up in her arms, he laughed happily. “You certainly did, you meddling boy! That T-Rex was my favorite city-destroying pet! What am I going to do with you?”

“Noooooo! Gina, save me!”

Gina just laughed and looked on warmly as Dinah spun her son in her arms. After a few spins and before he could get too dizzy, she handed him over to Gina.

“Foiled again! I’ll get you next time, Sir Hero.” Dinah winked.

Richie hugged Gina. His nose was a runny mess again. “The day is saved! We did it!”

“Yes, and now growing heroes need their dinner. Let’s get you cleaned up and out of that towel. It’s also time for your medicine.” Gina nodded at Dinah and trotted off with Richie to his room upstairs.

Still smiling, Dinah topped off her wine and retreated to the master bedroom to freshen up before dinner. Her reflection in the vanity set-up in the walk-in closet was dusky in the muted light, half cast in shadows. She sat down on the pink cushion stool, removed her diamond earrings, and let down her long, blonde hair. Manicured fingers ran over the sides of her painted mouth, the muscles faintly sore from smiling so much. She couldn’t remember the last time she had spent such a pleasing day from beginning to end.

*The end of an era, indeed.*

She reached for a tube of rose lipstick and touched up her makeup until it was perfect. So young, so beautiful, so ruthless. And now, with an invaluable sample of pure Chemical X after all these long years, so ready.

She raised her wine glass to her reflection. “To the beginning of a new era.”

Dinah could hardly wait.

“Oh girl, you *have* to get this one, it’s totally cute!” Robin held up a long, black robe and matching, pointy hat.

Bubbles giggled and ran her hands down the stretchy, black fabric. “But I was a witch three years ago.”

“You were Glinda the Good Witch. This is more wicked and west.” Robin gasped. “We could do a whole theme! Dorothy, the Tin Man, the whole shebang. Blossom, what do you think?”

Blossom poked her head around a display of spooky yard decorations. “Wizard of Oz theme? I guess that sounds cool.”

Boomer eyed her knowingly. He pointed the bony hand of the full-size, plastic skeleton he’d taken to toting around the store, bored. “You totally hate that idea.”

“No, I think it’s fine.”
“But it’s not your first choice.”

She ran her fingers over the rim of a large, black witch’s cauldron. Her eyes flickered to his, knowing. “Not exactly.”

Monday, aka the worst day looking ahead to a full week’s responsibilities and commitments, was usually a closed day for B-3, and that meant balancing the books, supervising cleaning, and other excruciatingly boring yet essential tasks that came with running a bar. Today, however, Boomer was happily procrastinating his duties to spend a few hours with Bubbles. He just hadn’t counted on accompanying her for last-minute Halloween shopping. Shopping with Bubbles could be, well, a lot.

“Oh, what the heck! I’ll try it on.” Bubbles took the witch costume, added it to her truly enormous pile of other costumes she’d already selected to try, and disappeared back into the dressing rooms with Robin.

Which left Boomer alone holding a cheap party skeleton instead of his (official?) girlfriend, and a far too reserved Blossom who, try as he might, would not divulge anything about her fancy date on Saturday. “Soooooo,” he said, crossing the skeleton’s arms as if they were his own.

She’d moved on to a singing Frankenstein’s monster activated by a motion detector, tripped the detector, and quickly walked away from the auto-tuned rendition of Monster Mash. “So?”

Guileless (not), she blinked those pale, rosy eyes at him.

“You know, you’re really good at that,” he said, only half joking. “It’s kind of unsettling.”

At this, she smiled. “What is this, our second friend date? I don’t open up my heart so easily.”

“Technically it’s our third, if you count that first night at my bar.”

She was looking at a wall display of harlequin masks. Most were cheap sequins and feathers, but a few were locked up in a glass case where they kept the good shit. Her gaze lingered on a bright, scarlet domino mask. “Let’s not, please.”

He watched her looking at the mask. “Fine, but you and I remember that night very differently.”

“And how’s that?”

“Well, for starters, you were forthcoming. So there goes your second date rule.”

“And what about you?”

“Me?”

“You’re literally hiding behind a Halloween prop.”

Boomer shrugged the skeleton’s shoulders. “There’s no metaphor here. Don’t think about it too much.”

That got a laugh out of her. “There’s always a metaphor. Usually a dirty one.”

“Be glad Butch isn’t here.”

“Maybe he should be here. Does he have a costume for Brisa yet?”
“I hope so. He says he’s taking her trick-or-treating…” Boomer trailed off, realizing what she had just done. “You know, your deflection game is good, but it’s not that good.”

Blossom headed for the costume racks, biting back a smile. “Good enough to ward off a nosy second date.”

“Third, we already established that. And come on, I’m dying to know about this mystery dude. Bubbles said you’ve been seeing him for weeks and you didn’t say a word on Saturday! As your friend, I feel like I have an obligation to know these things,” he teased.

She had paused to examine a Wonder Woman costume, which was barely more than a leotard with a plunging neckline to emphasize cleavage, and sighed dejectedly at it. “Boomer, you’re dating my sister. I think you have our obligations totally reversed.”

He got a sudden chill. She noticed.

“What?”

He set the skeleton down on a tombstone display. “I think that’s the first time I’ve heard that out loud in four years.”

Blossom looked at him with a completely unreadable expression, the kind Brick would adopt when he was considering something very carefully, very seriously. It did nothing for the chill Boomer felt.

“Um, yeah, my ass looks great in this. Blossom, Boomer, what do you think?”

Robin had come out wearing some kind of assassin outfit as far as Boomer could tell, and yeah, the leather pants did make her ass look pretty good. But not as good as Bubbles looked in the Jessica Rabbit dress she was wearing.

“Uhhhh,” Boomer trailed off as he ogled Bubbles pushing up the bodice.

“I think it’s too subdued for you,” Blossom said, looking Robin up and down. “What are you supposed to be?”

Robin sighed. “If you can’t tell I’m Black Widow, then it’s a hard pass. I like the black though.”

“Me too. Maybe dress it up with something?”

Meanwhile, Bubbles was examining herself in the mirror with a critical eye. “I definitely don’t have the boobs for this.”

“Want me to grab you a smaller size?” Boomer asked. His voice cracked, and Blossom shot him a downright sadistic grin.

Bubbles was not paying attention as she continued to scrutinize her costume. “No, it’s okay. This is way too much red for me anyway. On to the next one!”

It continued in that vein for the better part of an hour as Bubbles and Robin tried on almost every costume in the store, and Boomer and Blossom had little choice but to wait around.

“Are you going to dress up?” Boomer asked in an attempt to ease back into their conversation.

Blossom flipped through a rack of costume dresses. “I have to. Bubbles will skin me if I show up to our Halloween party in a work suit.”
“True.”

“I actually do have an idea of what I want to be.”

When she didn’t elaborate, Boomer laughed. “Gonna keep me in suspense, huh?”

Blossom shrugged. “I think Brisa will appreciate the surprise.”

“When did you meet Brisa?”

She paused to examine a black dress covered in feathers and lit up. “Hey, Robin. I think I found something for you.”

“Toss it here!” Robin shouted from the dressing rooms.

Blossom escaped to do just that. Boomer watched her, suspicious and with no idea why. Just a feeling, but over the years, he’d learned to trust his feelings about people. They were the one thing he was usually right about.

“I take it you haven’t told anyone about you and Bubbles,” Blossom said out of the blue when she returned from helping Robin.

The way she was watching him told him she wasn’t asking about just anyone.

“Butch pretty much knows,” he said.

Blossom selected a feathered, pirate captain’s hat from a shelf and put it on Boomer’s head, scrutinizing. She shook her head like it was a grave error.

“That bad?” he asked.

“You’re more Peter Pan than Captain Hook, I think.” She replaced the hat. “You can’t keep it from him forever, you know.”

Boomer was glad she had her back to him in that moment, lest she see his flush.

“I know,” Boomer said. “I’m not planning to.”

Blossom faced him again. She had her arms crossed over her grey silk blouse, but there was no judgment in her tranquil gaze. “He’ll understand.”

Boomer let out a nervous laugh. “Yeah, Brick’s known for being a really understanding guy.”

“He’s your brother.”

“He’s also my leader.”

She smiled ruefully. “Exactly.”

Boomer wasn’t sure how she’d trapped him in this admittedly uncomfortable conversation when he’d been so determined to put the spotlight on her, but here they were. Unbidden, he recalled that first morning when he and Brick had watched her and Buttercup fighting on live television, how rattled Brick had been.

“For four years or forty, I’ll always be the leader.”
Boomer swallowed hard. “I guess you of all people would know.”

He did not expect her friendly touch his arm, cool through his shirt sleeve. “I do know.”

He wanted to believe her, desperately. But Brick didn’t know…anything. To him, Boomer and Bubbles were just high school sweethearts, on and off again with no plan or purpose in mind, young love grown old and clichéd, as it tends to do. He didn’t know anything, but that wasn’t his fault.

*Isn’t it?* A traitorous voice whispered in Boomer's heart.

*Isn’t it his fault for never caring enough to notice?*

Wasn’t it Blossom’s fault then too?

“You don’t though,” Boomer said. “You don’t know the half of it.”

Something in her look changed then, no longer placid and calm, and it unnerved him. Apprehension was never a good look for Brick, and it was even less so for Blossom.

“Boomer,” she said, barely a whisper as they stood in an aisle filled with brightly-colored jack-o-lanterns and fake vampire teeth and costume grease paint. Her hand squeezed his arm, almost reassuring. “Whatever you’re afraid of, he can handle it, I promise. He’s your leader, like you said. It’s his job.”

Boomer imagined having that soul-baring conversation with Brick. Would he listen? Would he even believe Boomer if he told Brick everything that had happened four years ago?

But that thought terrified Boomer most of all. Things were so good now, so good, and pain, even one such as the loss he and Bubbles carried like a scar, faded over time. Why would he do anything to open old wounds?

He wouldn’t, not even with Blossom weaving her words and peeling back his layers like she was so fucking good at, and he’d let his walls down out of habit. She wasn’t Brick, but she may as well be.

“You have a lot of faith in my brother,” he said with a sigh, tired. He couldn’t exactly say he shared that faith in this particular instance.

She smiled. “I just know him pretty well.”

Boomer thought about the final attack Blossom and Brick had pulled off against the plant monster.

“I don’t despise her,” Brick had insisted when Boomer and Butch questioned him.

Bubbles and Robin were done trying on costumes finally.

“What’d you decide on?” Blossom asked her sister, indicating the misshapen bundle of sparkly clothes tucked under her arm.

“It’s perfect,” Robin said.

“It’s a surprise,” Bubbles said, grinning. “I have to do some DIY to have it all ready to go before Thursday, but I think it’ll be super cute.”

“Well, consider me in suspense,” Blossom said.
Boomer continued to watch Blossom, hardly hearing the conversation between the three women.

“I just know him pretty well,” her enigmatic reassurance lingered in his head.

Could she and Brick…?

“Boomer, would you come with me to the sporting goods store?” Bubbles asked. “I have to get a prop for my costume.”

She’d slipped her hand in his right there in front of Blossom and Robin, who were discussing the feathery, black dress Robin had settled on, and peered up at him.

“What? Oh, yeah, whatever you want,” Boomer said.

No way, Brick and Blossom? Of all the women in this city, in the world even, she had always been the one he loathed most of all. There was no way in hell. And yet…

Bubbles squeezed his hand, and he looked down at her watching him thoughtfully in that deceptively innocuous way she had. Those bright, sky-blue eyes. Head in the clouds, the view from on high was omniscient.

He wondered.

Does she know?

Robin and Blossom were talking about something work-related now as they headed for the cashier. Bubbles tugged on Boomer’s hand.

“Come on,” she said, and leaned in to plant a kiss on his cheek. “Stop staring at my sister.”

Boomer sputtered. “I wasn’t— You know I’m a hundred percent not—”

Bubbles kissed him for real, careless of who saw them, and he choked on his words. Her lips were soft but insistent, pleading somehow, silencing. He shut up real fast even after she pulled away and her blue eyes sparkled with a secret.

“I know,” she murmured. “But your brother might not see it that way.”

Holy shit, she did know.

And the likelihood of them both being delusional was absolute zero.

“Bubbles, bring your stuff so we can finish checking out!” Robin called from the front of the store.

“I’m coming!” Bubbles tugged Boomer after her, smiling brightly with a skip in her step.

Boomer had no choice but to follow on autopilot, reeling.

Chapter End Notes

It occurred to me that, like a moron and a bad friend, I forgot to post a link to this stunning fanart by the typically phenomenal secretie. She previously did just the Reds, but this version includes Blues and Greens too! Go yell at her on Tumblr and check out
her amazing art. She’s fabulous and I don’t deserve her at all.

Next time: HALLOWEEN CHAPTER HERE WE FINALLY COME OH MY GOD

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!