Just A Little Offbeat
by Kharons_End

Summary

You didn't expect life to throw you a bone, but here they were: two tiny Bitties that wrecked your heart and filled your home. Sure, your tiny city apartment didn't have the fancy stuff that others had, but you've always gotten by.

And it was a lot better than what they were used to.

Notes

Hi guys! Thanks for giving this fic a try! So I'm not new to writing fanfiction, but I AM new to writing in second person. I have a few personal challenges I want to complete when writing this fic, so we'll see how it goes!

More tags will be added as I go. I'm not entirely sure which direction I'm going to take this story, but I do have a few general plots that I'm considering. I have a couple chapters worth of time to narrow it down, so please bear with me through this journey.

Thanks for your time! Please enjoy!

Edit: Can't believe I forgot this. Bittybones AU is made by Fucken-Crybaby on tumblr (blog is 18+). Here's her Bittybones AU blog(SFW).
Oh dear heavens, inventory *suuuucked*. 

You started work at five in the morning. Counting the multitude of dresses in the large store was one thing, but boy, did it become another demon once the inventory team hit up the alterations department. And on top of that, sewing the sequins for that one gown that was due tonight was a nightmare amongst all the chaos. Who gets married on a Thursday night? Who does inventory on a Thursday morning?

You glanced at your cell phone, and the screen blared light and the text of seven forty-seven. You’ve been at work for fourteen hours. Despite your boss’s temper flaring at the mess inventory had created, you managed to finish the dress, help tidy up the store, and still kept smile on your face. It was a good thing you were so stubborn. Coffee sounded glorious.

The thundering sky and the patter of your rain boots against the puddles reminded you that a flash flood warning was instated in the county for another three hours. The weather station wasn’t kidding. Heavy drops pelted the streets in waves. If you had a car, driving would have been a nightmare. Thankfully your apartment was only a few blocks away from the subway station, and your umbrella kept you somewhat dry.

Your eyes followed a steady stream of water beside the sidewalk, rushing down to the rusty grate where two moving—what the hell?

Two figures in the current, little skeletons, were fighting the rapids in an attempt to avoid washing down the drain. More accurately, *one* of them was fighting the current. His tiny arms clutched the edge of the concrete with one hand while barely holding onto the ragged bandages of the other unconscious skeleton. His own, shorter body was barely clothed with shreds of what once may have been clothing. He was muttering something to the other skeleton, but you couldn’t quite make out any words. You crept up behind them quietly, unbeknownst to the creatures.

“Bro, come on, you gotta wake up! We’ll drown here! The water is too strong even for me—come on, open your eyes!”

Hearing the smaller one’s frantic pleas, you felt your heart clench as the other skeleton never responded. You quickly slid your boot over the nearest part of the grate, right beside the pair. Water welled up over your boot and altered the flow, pushing the two almost onto the safety of the sidewalk. The shorter one took the opportunity to yank them onto the ridge.

"Are you okay?"

Your voice must have startled him, as he jumped and whirled around to face you.

Yep, you definitely caught the tiny monster’s attention now.

“H-Human! DON’T COME ANY CLOSER! Let us go peacefully and I won’t hurt you!”

He wore an expression that was caught between mortification and fierce protectiveness as he pulled his brother’s body closer. His hand was outstretched and he panted heavily, no doubt from his stressful endeavor.

“I’m not going to hurt you. I just want to help,” you replied quietly. You moved—and the small heads of a couple skeleton dogs appeared from nowhere and shot lasers through your boots. The
stench of burning rubber filled your nostrils as you yelped. Yep, those burns were going to suck for the next couple of days, but he was going to have to do more than that in order to stop you.

“Let me see,” he was forced to let go of his grip as you slowly plucked the skeleton away from him. You expected him to cry out… but instead, you were greeted by sharp bones piercing your skin. The attack avoided the skeleton in your grasp, but the stinging reminded you of the time you accidentally squeezed a filled pincushion. You flinched and grit your teeth, but you didn’t dare drop him.

“UNHAND HIM AT ONCE! DON’T—don’t harm him…!” he begged. His body swayed as he struggled to stand up, his left eye socket wildly flickering blue light. You wedged the umbrella handle between your armpit and scooped up the tiny one, doing your best to ignore the stinging of your hands. The bones dissolved and tiny wells of blood began to surface much to your displeasure.

“It’s dangerous here, and he looks sick,” you chided, noticing the sleeping one’s shallow breaths, “Both of you do.”

Not that you were an expert on skeleton monsters, but maybe that was the point. If you could tell about their condition, then something was wrong.

He feebly pushed against your fingers, “Let us go.”

They didn’t look like they could survive another night, and where would they go in such terrible weather?

“Is your home nearby?” you asked, and he shifted his gaze away.

“We…I WOULD NEVER TELL YOU! AND WE CERTAINLY DO! F-for sure!”

What a terrible lie. But still, you didn’t want to terrify him anymore than you already have. What could you do to prove yourself?

An idea popped into your head. You carefully hooked your pinky finger under the strand of pearls around your neck and pulled them off of you and around the smaller skeleton’s body. Although the strand always looked dainty to you, the necklace looked ridiculously huge on him.

“These are my grandmother’s pearls. They’re my most precious treasure,” you explained, “If I harm either of you in any way, you can do whatever you want with them. Just please let me take you to my apartment until tomorrow.”

The skeleton gripped one of the beads in his hands and peered over to his brother. He took an audible gulp and glared at you.

“Ohay.” he replied, tightening his hold onto the strand. You smiled softly in return.

“Ohay. Thank you for trusting me.”

It was late. Inventory sucked. You were tired. Water was getting into your boots via laser holes and your hands were bleeding from being a pincushion. But if there was one thing you excelled at, it was persevering through the worst of times and still coming out okay in the end.

And that’s what you were going to help these skeletons do.
You Should Have Gotten that Coffee.

Chapter Summary

You brought them home. Now what?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

So between the walk from the curb to your apartment, your umbrella had bid you farewell. The wind wrestled the object out of your awkward grasp and into the night. Normally you'd chase after it, but as you switched your gaze between it and the small skeletons, you decided to let it go. There was no telling how long the monsters would tolerate you, and if you put them down, the smaller one could flee.

On the bright side, he seemed to have grown lax in your hold. Hopefully that was a good sign and not because he was getting worse.

You shifted the sleeping skeleton to your other arm, cradling him to your body as you rummaged through your purse for the keys. The tiny one watched you as you fished the cool metal out of your bag and unlocked the lobby door. You passed the mailboxes and headed up the creaky stairs, the pearls bouncing against your fingers with every step. This hallway always gave you the creeps at night. Maybe it was something about the yellowed wallpaper and flickering light bulbs that set off your nerves. It appeared your guest wasn't feeling to comfortable about it either, as his gaze constantly shifted from wall to wall.

Eventually you passed your neighbors' doors and arrived at your own.

"Home sweet home," you mused, inspecting the peeling paint from the numbers 212. Your companion made a noise at your remark while you fumbled with the lock. The lights flickered on as you stepped in and flipped the switch.

Good, everything was right where you left it. You dropped your purse onto the loveseat and moved straight to the kitchen. You deposited your guests onto the beaten kitchen table, and took a look at your aching hands.

Ugh, smeared blood all over your fingers. You found the substance somewhat disturbing even though it was your own. And if your hands looked like this…

You stole a glance at the skeletons on your table and held back from gagging. Now that they were under the light, you could tell that being on the street took a toll on them. Despite being in a flood, smudges of dirt mixed in with the blood from your hands, and it looked like they had scratches on their bones everywhere. The sleeping one’s bandages did enough to hide some of the damage, but his shallow, stuttering breaths had you concerned. The smaller one appeared to have fewer injuries, but his sluggish movements and swaying form said otherwise.

First thing’s first. You washed your hands, and then filled a bowl with water. After placing it in the microwave you grabbed a couple of dishcloths from the drawer and ducked underneath the sink for a clean sponge.
“What are you doing, Human?”

You glanced at the small one as you snipped the corner of the sponge off with a pair of scissors. He had huddled to his brother during your task and watched you with unease.

“I’m making you a bath.”

The microwave beeped. You took the bowl and dipped your finger in to test the warmth. Finding it to your satisfaction, you carried the bowl to the table and draped a dishcloth over the top for some privacy.

“Here, you can use this to scrub the dirt off,” you placed the sponge snippet next to the bowl, smiling.

The skeleton broke his gaze from the bath to you, and back to the bath.

“I appreciate the sentiment, but…”

This time he directed his grimace towards his brother, gripping the other’s rags in one hand and the pearls in the other. Of course he’d be more worried for his brother. The poor guy probably thought it was a trap.

“May I see him?” you asked, moving your hand towards them. Apparently you didn’t learn your lesson from the first time, as tiny bones materialized before your fingers while the skeleton covered his brother with his body. Well, *that* would be an obvious “no”.

You moved your hand away, slow and steady, and leaned back. The bones dissipated in the air.

“…Look,” you said, quiet but firm, “I can either take a look at him to see if I can do anything, or you can tell me what I can do to help. As long as you have my pearls, I won’t do anything to hurt you.”

More silence filled the room as the skeleton deliberated the choices. He began to unwrap the shredded bandages from his brother’s chest, careful not to jostle him more than necessary. You inched forward. The last of the bandages fell off into a pile and the tiny one stepped away, motioning you to come closer.

“He needs monster food. Do you have any?”

Holy crap. You couldn’t stop from grimacing at the mosaic that was the skeleton’s ribcage. You choked back a cry at the faint glow of magic through the splinters and fractures of his ribs, and it looked like a small part of his bottom right one. His shallow breaths were much more pronounced with the bandages gone, as magic pulsed with the uneven rhythm. How was he even alive right now?

Food. He asked for monster food. You covered your mouth and bolted to the fridge, pulling out a pitcher of Sea Tea. You bought this a while ago since you heard it helped with minor aches and pains, but could it really help with an injury as critical as this?

You started pouring a cup when it hit you that they wouldn’t be able to use it. What were you going to do, dunk him in there? What was small enough…?

Quick, what did the tiny animals always use in those kids books? Doll tea sets, medicine caps, thimbles—thimbles!
You moved over to the living area and tear open the closet door, pulling out the sewing kit and bringing it right to the table. The plastic thimble was right on top of the tray when you opened it, and rinsed it in the sink before dipping it into the pitcher. Droplets splashed onto the table as you gently propped up the skeleton with your hand. You rose the thimble to his mouth and tipped up slowly.

“Did somebody kick him? Who the hell would do this?” you muttered, and the immediate reaction from your acquaintance told you that it might have indeed happened. Nobody needed to be cruel like this. It made you sick.

Some of the tea spilled onto him, but the liquid began to do its work. The cracks mended bit by bit in front of your very eyes, leaving fine lines behind. A sigh of relief escaped your lips as the thimble emptied.

But what about the other one?

“You should have some too,” you refilled the thimble and offered it to him. He took it after a second’s hesitation, brought it to his teeth, and took a gulp. And another. And then he began to chug the drink greedily, drops splashing onto his rags like rain. It would have been cute if it weren’t so sad.

“I have plenty, you know.” you teased, “You can slow down.”

He lifted the empty thimble towards you, “Can I have some more…please?”

“Of course,” you obliged, “This is the first time I’ve ever met a Bitty. Do you have names? Or an owner?”

He seized the refilled cup before answering, “No.”

“‘No’ to an owner or ‘no’ to your names?”

The skeleton took another large gulp and looked over to his brother with an unreadable expression, as if he was reminiscing.

“Both.”

The comment stunned you despite the obvious situation, and you ended up watching him down the rest of the tea. He held out the thimble once more, looking at you expectantly.

“When was the last time you ate?”

“…”

You took the thimble and refilled it again, but returned to the sleeping brother instead. The cracks continued to stitch themselves together, but it looked like the missing part wouldn’t recover. He was still grimy from being out on the street and you holding him, so you took the sponge and cleaned him off as gently as you could. It looked uncomfortable to be sleeping on the table’s surface, so you folded the other dishcloth in half and placed his brother on top of it. Did skeletons get cold? Just in case you grabbed another towel and laid it on top of him.

Now that the tea had a few moments to work its magic, his breaths became steady, and you sighed in relief. Maybe he wasn’t completely recovered, but he sure looked better.

“I’m going to make dinner for us. You should get into the bath before it gets cold.”
As you readied the ingredients for dinner (a frozen chicken patty, some sauce, and a pot of water), you heard the tiny clinks of porcelain and a small sigh from the table. The sound made you smile.

Just as you turned the oven on and set the pot on the stove, you heard the skeleton’s quiet voice.

“Why are you so nice to us?”

Your brain automatically replied with confusion, and you ended up chuckling out of sheer absurdity to the question.

“What?”

“Why are you so nice?”

After putting the tray into the oven, you turned to meet the Bitty’s scrutinizing glare.

“I don’t think I’m particularly kind,” you waved your hand dismissively, “I just know how hard it is to live with no one to help you. It sucks, and I wouldn’t wish it on anyone.”

You turned away again to set the timer on the microwave, and the events of the day finally caught up to you. The stinging from your hands remained. The rainwater seeped into your clothes, making your skin cold and clammy. And your rain boots too; you slid them off next to the garbage can, mourning the loss in your head. Yeah, you had that rubber glue to mend cracks, but that wasn’t going to fix the gaping holes those magic laser dogs created.

“I liked those too,” you muttered under your breath, peeling off your soaked socks and wiggling your toes. Ah well. Now you had an excuse to buy another pair.

“I’ll be right back,” you glanced at your guest and flash a tired grin before heading to your room. There you changed from the delicate blouse and dress pants into a simple tee shirt and shorts. You caught a glance of yourself in the mirror, where the bags under your eyes seemed even more pronounced with your damp hair. You snorted at your appearance and started to leave for the kitchen—

And then it occurred to you that your guests had nothing else to wear but the sopping shreds they came in. That wouldn’t do.

You dug through your closet for some old tee shirts. Here was a red one from a charity marathon. Oh, you’ve had this grey shirt since high school. And you never used this blue one anymore. You took all three and hauled your own sewing machine back to the kitchen, where your footsteps alerted the tiny skeleton.

Maybe one day you could get a coffee table, but for now you were going to have to do this on the floor. The sewing machine would vibrate the table, and your guests would not appreciate it. Your noisy downstairs neighbors, however, could suck it.

You took your measuring tape out and measured the brother first, then stole the scraps of the other’s clothes for curiosity’s sake.

“Hey! What are you doing?!”

“Um…” you faltered, realizing that you just stole a bathing person’s clothes, “Sorry. I promise I’ll give them back.” That is, if he really wanted them back. They wouldn’t have lasted another day.

You measured what you could and set to work in relative silence. As you wrapped your mind
around the patterns needed and how best to hem the tiny seams, your guest had slipped out of the
tub and wrapped the dishtowel around him like a cloak. He peaked over the table's edge, watching
as you manned the machine in an odd position.

After a few minutes, you pieced together a simple tank top. Since the patterns were so small, you
had to hem all the edges first before sewing them together, so a few seams didn’t exactly match up.
It was at least something for now, but you definitely wanted to fix it. Next were the pants.

You reached for the elastic string from your sewing box—

And found a skeleton instead. A shriek erupted from your mouth as you jumped in place, in turn
scaring your tiny guest literally out of existence. Seriously, he just blipped out in a second of
darkness, as if you blinked…

You heard scratches of something scraping on the table, and you whipped around to see your
frightened acquaintance, towel cocooned around him, as he stood in front of his brother with your
pearls in his arms. The pinpricks of light disappeared from his sockets as he watched your every
move, tightening the strand taut.

“Sorry! Sorry, I was just startled,” you said gently, raising your hands in a non-threatening gesture,
“How did you do that?”

The skeleton lowered the strand by a fraction, “My magic.”

Duh. They’re Bitties. Of course they were magic.

“Oh. Okay. I’m going to turn around and finish what I was doing.” which you did, nice and slow.
Your heart still pounded in your chest as you focused on making the tiny pants instead.

A few more minutes passed by with nothing but the humming of the sewing machine and the
sound of boiling water filling the air. The moment had passed, and you began to feel at ease. You’d
have to make his brother’s clothes later, but for now…

“Done,” you exclaimed whilst holding up the outfit. A little grey top and some blue pants. You
turned around and placed the clothes onto the table in front of him. “Here, you can change into
this.”

For privacy’s sake, you turned back to the counter to finish cooking dinner. You dumped some
noodles into the boiling water and stirred the pot occasionally, letting your mind go blank. The
smell of the cooked chicken patty made your stomach rumble, and you found yourself taste-testing
the noodles until they were to your liking. You prepared two plates—one small one for your guest
and one for you, cut a bit of the chicken patty for his serving, and piled it on top of the noodles.
You poured the remaining sauce and a bit of cheese for good measure, and grabbed a fork.

The Bitty remained still when you brought the plates over, now properly clothed. The pants must
have been a little long, as he rolled the hems up enough to let his feet poke out.

“Sorry, I’m not the best at making tiny clothes. I usually work on human-sized ones.”

A light blue color dusted his cheekbones as he looked away from your stare, “IT’S NOT A
PROBLEM!”

“Still…oh, wait a second. They may not be great clothes but you probably don’t want to get them
dirty,” you grabbed the scissors and a scrap of the blue tee, and cut a square out of it. You offered
it to him.
“Here’s a handkerchief. I don’t have any silverware your size, so…” Should have thought about that when you made dinner.

He snatched the cloth out of your hand and tied it around his neck. The ends looked like a giant bow, and you smiled at him, finding it pretty cute.

After pouring yourself a cup of Sea Tea, you pulled up a chair and stuffed your face with a forkful of noodles and chicken, humming in appreciation at the taste. After a few more bites, you checked to see how your guest was faring with his own meal.

“…Aren’t you hungry?”

The skeleton peered at the Chicken Parmesan for a second before his eyes went blank and his hands slammed onto the side of the porcelain.

“HUMAN,” his voice boomed louder than expected, and you sat up straight in your seat. You were about to ask if he hated it, but he glared at you before the words came out.

“We’re not naïve. Generosity comes at a price, yes? So what do you want from us?”

His stare made you nervous at an instinctual level. That alone was scary.

“I don’t want anything. Really.”

“I owe you my brother’s life. Surely you must want something?”

“No. I mean it. I just want to help.”

“I’d like to believe that, I really do. But we’ve dealt with enough humans to know how it really works.” As terrifying as he was, you saw it: the desperation of clinging onto hope before despair. “Just as long as it doesn’t harm my brother, I’m willing to do anything you ask. Such hospitality deserves at least this much.”

“There really isn’t—“

“D o n ’ t l i e .”

Chills went up your spine.

It was obvious that whatever these two had been through, it had been enough to throw any trust of humankind out the window. “No” wasn’t an answer, which meant that you did have to lie. Lie like your life depended on it.

“…You’re right. I do need something.”

His head lowered, almost like he just accepted a death sentence. Your heart panged at the sight, but you had to keep it together.

“You’ve seen the sewing machine, right? The needle to that machine is hard to thread, and my eyesight makes it hard to see the hole properly. It needs maintenance too. I’ve got a lot of projects coming up and it’ll be a pain to do it myself, so I need an assistant.”

Pinpricks of light returned to his eyes as he looked at you, frowning.

“Anything else?”
“Yes. You can stay in my apartment for as long as you need, but you have to follow my rules. And I get to name you while you’re here. As reassurance that I will not harm your brother, you get to keep my pearls until you leave. Understood?”

The skeleton nodded slowly, “What will you call us?”

You didn’t know the skeletons for more than a few hours, so you couldn’t give them any particular names. You glanced to the steady rise and fall of the sleeping brother’s chest to the melancholy of the tiny one before you, and the names just spilled into your mind.

“Your brother’s name is Rhythm,” you picked up your fork again, “Your name is Blues.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for the comments, kudos, and bookmarks! I’m amazed that so many people have given this story a chance, and I hope you will continue to stick with me for a while!

Just so you know, updates for this story are going to be kinda sporadic. I work full time and it takes me a while to write a chapter. Trust me though. If I'm not writing at home, then I'm writing during my lunch break and vice versa. Thanks for your patience and understanding!
Rhythm wasn’t waking up.

It’s been three days since you found them in the rain. Blues mentioned that Rhythm tended to sleep for long periods of time, but the fact that he hadn’t moved an inch rattled you. And today, as you opened the apartment door, you caught sight of Blues’ worried face as he watched his unconscious brother.

“Hi Blues. Still nothing?”

“No. His energy just isn’t recovering at all…” he sat straight up with his hands on his hips, huffing with indignation, “he’s just being a lazybones about it so he won’t have to do any work!”

You chuckled despite the worrisome subject and lifted the bag of takeout in your hands. “How about we have some dinner?”

You kicked off your shoes and headed to the kitchen, retrieving a soy sauce dish and a sampler spoon for your tiny guest. You nabbed a couple of dishes from a nearby shop yesterday night, and while the dish still looked big in comparison to the Bitty, it wasn’t humungous like your regular dishes. You scooped a couple of spoonfuls of fried rice onto the dish and set it onto the table.

Now for your guest. You offered your hand to Blues, who carefully wrapped his arms around one of your fingers once he stepped onto your palm. The Bitty had gained a semblance of trust towards you over the past couple nights, though he still jumped if you moved too quickly. You pet Rhythm’s head as a sort of greeting and moved to the kitchen.

Once Blues sat in front of his own plate, he began to inspect the pile of rice with wide eyes and a smile. The happy sight was infectious, and you found yourself grinning at him.

“Never had fried rice before?”

“Not like this! We always have it cold, and we have to collect it bit by bit from the metal bin. Mmmh…id tathes dewitful!”

Metal bin…?

"You mean the refrigerator?” you pointed back to your fridge with your thumb.

Blues shook his head and swallowed the grain in his mouth, “No. I bet you’re confused because yours is plastic.”

He bit into a pea without hesitation as you sorted what he was talking about. It wasn’t the fridge. It
wouldn’t be the microwave because it would have been warm. You turned to look at whatever appliances you had in your kitchen when you spotted the trash can.

“…Did the metal bin have other things in it?”

“Yup. Gunk. Clothes. Boxes. Wormies. We get confused between the rice and wormies sometimes.”

You looked at your box of takeout and covered your mouth. They’d been living in the dumpster. It shouldn’t have surprised you, but he just mentioned it like it was nothing. And he did it with a smile on his face. It made your heart heavy.

Sure, you’ve had some hard times. You’ve had days where instant noodles and water was your breakfast, lunch, and dinner. You remember when you had just a broken futon to sleep on. But literally living in a dumpster…how long have these guys been staying there?

Before you realized your actions, you had cupped your hand behind Blues and started to stroke his back in a soothing manner with your fingers. Blues froze in place, sitting ramrod straight, as he stared at you with tiny pinpricks of light in his sockets.

“Hey,” you murmured, “do you…” Asking him to stay was right on the tip of your tongue, but it died out the moment you realized how crazy that would have been.

Instead, you shook your head and retracted your hand, giving him a sad excuse for a smile. Good job, you. This was the first time you had physical contact with Blues besides picking him up, and you scared the daylights out of him. Way to go.

“Nevermind. You’re pretty strong, you know that?”

The Bitty took an extra second to relax as he smiled back.

“…Of course!” he exclaimed before resuming his meal. You returned to your own food, willing the terrible image of “wormies” away and ate it with a profound appreciation.

After the two of you had your fill, you put a dish of water out for Blues to clean his hands in and cleared the table.

“Is it time to work?” he asked as he wiggled his fingers around in the water.

“Not today. I do have something planned for tomorrow though.” And that something came in the form of fleece blankets for the two of them. “Today we’re going to rest and watch TV. Wanna take care of Rhythm?”

He nodded as you filled the thimble with Sea Tea and placed it next to him. As soon as Blues finished cleaning himself off, he hopped into your awaiting hands and the two of you made it back to the loveseat. The brothers had taken residence on the left cushion, seeing as how you often used the kitchen table and your room was off-limits. You had set up two mattresses by separating an old pillow into two long mats. Rhythm still had the washcloth as a blanket, but you managed to make a tee and some shorts out of the red shirt. The remaining scraps went to making a quilt for Blues.

As per your agreement, Blues aided you in threading the machine and traditional needles, and even went as far as retrieving you items that you asked for while working. It reminded you of something straight out of a fairy tale, like Cinderella and her animal friends. And it was adorable.

You fished the remote from under your cushion and turned the TV on to a random channel for
background noise. Blues made his way back to his brother, thimble in tow, while you took out your laptop for some research.

Someone was bound to know a thing or two about Bitties on the Internet. Maybe.

About an hour passed by as you scrolled through a bunch of forum posts about Bitties, looking for any information that could help you care for the brothers more. You only had the most basic of knowledge: Bitties were small, Bitties were monsters, and Bitties could use magic. You had no idea there were so many types, or their preferred food, or, well…anything. The worst part was that since Bitties only hit the market a year ago, most people only guessed about what was best for them. It meant vets couldn’t help much, and no one knew if a “Bitty Specialist” even existed.

You did, however, find an adoption agency in the city that most people consistently praised. The website held a ton of useful information and claimed to have experience with Bitties of all backgrounds. And they had a phone number listed!

You leaned over to the side for your phone—or you would have if something hadn’t pulled your hair.

“What…” you mumbled as you ran your fingers through the strands, only to hit the snag.

You had been so busy absorbing all the information that you failed to notice that Blues had left his brother’s side. And he just so happened to be on the top of the loveseat. Behind you. With his bony fingers entangled in your hair.

“H-HUMAN!” he spluttered with a nervous smile, “I JUST WANTED TO KNOW IF YOUR HAIR IS AS SOFT AS IT LOOKS! W-WORRY NOT! IT IS!”

Despite the jerks of pain from the pulling, you snickered at his odd compliment and began to untangle your hair. Your hair looped and weaved around the knuckles of his phalanges, so you had to loosen a few strands at a time.

“Geez, I never thought I’d have to do this in my life,” you mused with a smile, “I gotta hand it to you Blues, you’re just full of surprises."

An audible groan left from Blues’ mouth as he covered his face with his free hand. “You. Did not. Just say that.”

“What’s that? Sorry, I’m a little bone deep in doing this right now.”

“You. DID NOT. JUST SAY THAT.”

“Hehehe, okay, I’ll stop. Didn’t know that puns were a hairy subject with you.”

“MWEEEEH—!!!” WHACK.

Just as you freed his hand, he smacked you on the shoulder in one swoop. It felt like a small tap, but Blues had frozen on the spot. He lifted his head, slowly, with an expression that screamed, “oh shit, my bad” to you.

“Pffhht, ha-hahahaha!”

You turned away from him, trying to stifle your laughter. “So three is your limit, huh? Sorry, I really will stop now!”
“This is YOUR fault!” Blues threw a pointed look to the slumbering skeleton as his cheeks burned blue. You bit your lip as you held back another joke, relishing the fact that he stayed within close range of you. It was progress.

You hoped he was starting to enjoy your company like you felt with them.

Chapter End Notes

Blues is finally starting to loosen up, but we still have a little ways to go~

Thanks again for reading another chapter and sticking with me! I don't have much to say this time besides the fact that I should be sleeping right now, but you know :) I really enjoy hearing from you all, so if there's anything you wanna share, please do. See you next chapter!
You have a heart-to-heart with the sleeping Bitty on your couch. 

Thank goodness you had tomorrow off, because you could not fall asleep no matter what you did. You tried switching positions. You tried daydreaming. You tried burying your head in the pillow until near-suffocation. It felt that if the Sandman himself smacked you in the face with a whole sack of his magical sand, you wouldn’t even bat an eye. Ugh.

Every time you got to a lucid state, your mind wandered over to Rhythm’s condition. If Blues’ initial reaction to food and his anecdote tonight had any indication, then the two of them must have been living on scraps for a while. All sorts of vitamin deficiencies happen when humans don’t eat properly. Why would Bitties be any different? His coma could’ve been just the tip of the injury iceberg. There could be a dying Bitty on your loveseat right now.

And if you were in his position, what would you have thought? You wouldn’t know if your sibling was surviving without you, or if he even lived at all. You wouldn’t know if someone even gave you a second glance, let alone offer any help. Starving, kicked around, and helpless would be the last memories you had. It would be just…terrible.

You needed to get him help. Blankets and Sea Tea could only go so far. He just needed to hang on until at least tomorrow, and you didn’t even know if he had that.

He needed to know.

Ahh, to hell with it. You weren’t sleeping anyway.

You slipped out of your bed and put on your glasses, the warm breeze from your open window hitting your limbs, and opened your bedroom door. You pushed it open, bit by bit, grimacing at the creaking that followed after. The carpeted hallway helped soften your steps as you crept over to the loveseat, assessing the situation.

Blues’ loud snores filled the living room and you breathed an internal sigh of relief. Typically he’d be wide awake and vigilant every time you had seen him in the mornings. Maybe it was from his survival instincts and habits from living on the street, you didn’t know. The Bitty didn’t sleep for long, but when he did, he was out. Something you were grateful for at the moment.

You hovered over Blues and cautiously scooped your hands underneath Rhythm, mattress and all, and lifted him off the couch. Blues snorted and you froze for a second, but he merely turned over. This conversation was better held at a further distance.

You tiptoed over to the kitchen table and laid his mattress in front of you. His hand fell out from under the washcloth, and you nudged your finger underneath his palm, noting how delicate the bones felt. Who would ever want to harm someone so small?
“Hey”, you murmured, “I’m sorry this happened to you. Whoever did this should get their asses kicked.” Okay, this wasn’t exactly where you wanted to start. You ran your free hand through your hair thought for a second.

“Anyway, I wanted to tell you that your brother misses you. I haven’t known him for long, but I can tell he loves you very much and he’s worried. He’s a hard worker too. Every time I give him a job, he does it with such energy and gusto that I get inspired when I just think about it. Even though he doesn’t have to do it. I gave him stuff to do because I thought it’d ease him up a bit….but I'm sure he found me suspicious. I just want to make sure you’re both all right.”

You paused again, feeling your anxiety bubble out, “I’m human, so he doesn’t trust me. You probably won’t trust me either. But I want you to know that I’m worried too. I want you to wake up.”

Your thumb rubbed over his knuckles in small circles, “I want you to know that whatever sad excuse for humans you’ve met, I’m not like them. I want you to know that I care. Even though you don’t know me and I don’t know you, I will do everything that I possibly can. Even if you attack me. Even if you hate me. I’ll take everything you throw at me as long as both of you know that you’re loved. Live one more day and I’ll find a way to get you help. Or if you can, please wake up soon.”

Your heart ran out of things to say and your body felt light. The skeleton didn’t move an inch as a yawn finally emerged from your throat. Maybe Mister Sandman brought an extra ton of sand as backup.

“Better put you back before your brother finds out. He’d be really Blue if couldn’t find you, heh heh.”

With that, you cradled him into your hands and placed him back to his rightful spot, next to his brother. The worry was still there, but it now idled in the back of your mind.

“Night Rhythm. Night Blues,” you whispered affectionately before moving back to your room.

You failed to see Blues peering at you as you closed the door.

…

And the next thing you knew, it was morning. The sunlight brought a humid, sticky breeze with it along with the blaring car horns outside. You groaned as you squinted at your phone, which read 8:52 a.m.. There went sleeping in. You could blame part of it on your habit of waking early for work, but today there was no such excuse. But there were the Bitties, and that was a good enough reason to get moving.

After brushing the tangles out of your hair and putting on your glasses, you drug yourself to the kitchen where Blues awaited.

“Mornin’ Blues.” you mumbled as you laid your head against the table. This wasn’t being productive. Sweet, sweet sleep was still calling your name.

“Good morning, Human!” the Bitty chimed, patting your arm. His cheery voice piqued your curiosity and you lifted your head to see him standing with his hands on his hips, grinning. “Are you leaving for work today? You look rather…unprepared to sew, seamstress!”

“No work today.” No wedding gowns to rip apart and sew back together, thank god. You enjoyed sewing, of course, but sometimes you just needed a day to relax or to work on something else.
“But we have other work to do, yes?”

“The blankets? Later.”

“You’re just like this because you haven’t had breakfast yet! Come, human! We must feed you!”

Blues blinked out of sight and you heard small scuffles from behind you. You turned to see the most adorable sight yet. Your small guest threw every ounce of strength he had to pull against the fridge door, grunting with each attempt.

You resisted cooing over his efforts and reached for the handle. A faint blue glow took over before you could touch it, and the door cracked open by itself. The brief wave of cold hit against your leg as the fridge light came on.

“Aha!” Blues exclaimed, dodging out of the door’s path. He scrambled into the box and started scaling the bottom shelf.

“You’re awfully eager today,” you noted aloud. Blues managed to hoist himself onto the bottom shelf and hung from the wrung of the second one.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he huffed as he swung himself onto the second shelf. His feet precariously balanced onto the thick grate, and you watched as he stepped over to huddle against the milk carton.

“Cereal again? Here, lemme get that.”

You picked him up and grabbed the milk carton, pushed the fridge door with your foot, and moved to the counter. Blues watched as you made quick work of breakfast. You had gotten used to the ritual of making the meal for the two of you that it seemed like a habit now. By the end of it, you had two soy sauce dishes—one with milk and the other with cereal, and one regular bowl for you. You moved everything to the table and Blues followed.

Of course it didn’t take long for you to finish your meal. You drank the last of the milk in your bowl and carried it to the sink for rinsing. Blues wasn’t far behind, and he teleported by the sink, saucers in hand, as he offered them to you.

“Thanks,” you took them and began washing them with a small smile on your face. You don’t know what had gotten into him this morning, but it was a welcome change.

Just as you set the cleaned dishes onto a towel, Blues called your name.

“Human!! I just…um…” his sights darted to the countertop, flitting side to side. “I wanted to say that—that—“

He stood straight and balled his hands into tiny fists, yelling as loud as he could muster.

“—THAT I APPRECIATE ALL THAT YOU’VE DONE FOR US AND I APOLOGIZE FOR ANY HARM I’VE CAUSED!!!”

You fought for control of your laughter, barely holding it in with sheer willpower. You bit your lip to refrain from smiling and took a few seconds to compose yourself.

“…Now that I think about it, those bones really did sting. Oh, and those laser dogs too. I have a scar now, you know?”
You lifted up your leg and pointed to the tiny marks on your shin. Honestly, the scars would fade away in a few weeks time, but this was the best time to tease the little skeleton.

Blues made a noise of horror and flailed his arms, “I’M SORRY!!! WILL YOU FORGIVE ME, HUMAN?”

“Oh course,” you replied smoothly, “But on one condition.”

“Umm…sure?” he squeaked, confusion written all over his face before shrugging it off with bravado, “LET ME HEAR IT!”

“Let’s be friends.”

Time skipped a beat and Blues looked at you like you asked him to explain human physiology.

“You will forgive me…but I have to be your friend?”

Oh crap, when he puts it that way—“I—I mean, if you want to?” Now it was your turn to fidget, “I’ll forgive you either way really I just thought that, uh…”

“Friends,” he grabbed his chin in thought, “Friends?”

Another second passed while you wanted you bury yourself back under the covers of the bed when he finally gave you a wide grin.

“OF COURSE WE CAN BE FRIENDS! MY VERY OWN HUMAN FRIEND!! MWEH HEH HEH!”

Blues grasped your finger as he beamed at you, “I WILL NEVER FORGET THIS PROCLAMATION OF FRIENDSHIP!”

You laughed with him, feeling your cheeks warm from how embarrassing the moment was, but nonetheless you were glad. A genuine smile crossed your face as the two of you shook hands.

“Yeah,” you replied. This was indeed the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

Chapter End Notes

This....isn't the long chapter after all. That's the next chapter. I keep cutting parts of one draft to save for later chapters and it just so happens that the next chapter is where it all fits. I apologize for the longer wait!

This also happens to be one of the busiest times of the year for my work, so I've been pretty tied up with stuff. I should have more free time later on in August and September, but again, please forgive me for the slow updates!

As always, thank you for all the responses! I've read all of them even if I haven't replied and I appreciate them. I don't know what it is, but I tend to be internet shy and it takes me forever to think of replies.

One more thing! What kind of domestic shenanigans would you like to see happen in the future? I'd like to get started on a few prompts and I'd love some input!
Thanks again!
Time to Own Up

Chapter Summary

You run to Mama Cry’s.

Chapter Notes

Update 8/30: Edited for some minor mistakes :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After washing the dishes, giving Rhythm his dose of Sea Tea, and getting cleaned up for the day, you gave Blues the fleece materials for his daily project. You had already cut the edges into strips, and once you demonstrated the process, Blues started his own method to finish the job.

It was your best idea yet. Watching him was cuter than playing with puppies or giving kittens yarn. The strips were as long as his body and as thick as his hands, so he had to fold the top strip over, loop the bottom strip around it, and then pull the top one while stepping on the bottom strip. It was as if he worked on a ship, tying sails to the masts. Every time you went back to your own task of finding that adoption website, you’d get distracted by his tiny grunts and watch him again.

Meanwhile, in your own hands, was Blues’ fleece blanket that you completed about five minutes ago. You entertained the thought of offering your help, but you had the feeling he would refuse anyway. Or maybe that’s what you were telling yourself to keep the adorable spectacle going. Eh.

And look, you found that website listed on the third page of results. If anyone would know where to find a doctor for Bitties, it had to be an adoption center, right?

You grabbed your phone and dialed the number, placing the fleece blanket beside Blues before you stood. The ringtone repeated itself once, twice, and once more as your nerves started to kick in.

Someone picked up. “Hello, you’ve reached Mama Cry’s Bitty Adoptions! This is Mama Cry. How may I help you?”

“Uh, hi,” you introduced yourself, and found yourself at a loss for words. It took you a second to regain your thoughts and started again. “This may be a strange question, but do you know where I can find a Bitty doctor?”

A noise of something shifting over the receiver greeted your ears before Mama Cry responded.

“A Bitty Doctor? Not one in the city. Most humans don’t know how to take care of magical beings here. Is it an emergency?”

“I’m not sure,” you looked over to Rhythm, unresponsive as ever, “I found a couple of Bitties around three days ago and one of them hasn’t woken up yet. I’m really concerned.”

“Do you know what type of Bitty they are?”
“Um…no. Lemme ask his brother. Hold on a sec.”

You paced over to the loveseat where Blues finished tying the last strip of Rhythm’s blanket, and sat in front of them. He held the blanket to you as he grinned in pride.

“LOOK FRIEND! Isn’t it gorgeous?!”

“Yeah,” you smiled, patting him on the head, “Hey Blues, do you know what kind of Bitty you and your brother are?”

“Of course, human! We’re skeletons.”

Whelp, you couldn’t argue with that. “I mean, what type of skeletons are you?”

His smile fell into a thoughtful frown.

“Not exactly. We’re…fighting skeletons…?”

He wasn’t wrong, but Mama Cry certainly didn’t take that as a sufficient answer.

“Could you describe him to me? Are there any kind of defining features, like a tail?”

“He’s at least five and a half inches tall, kinda lanky when you compare him to his brother. Part of his ribs are missing, and Blues said that he does like to sleep, just not this much.”

A pause over the phone as you heard pen scratching on paper, “Are his canines sharp, like fangs?”

“No.”

“You said it’s been three days since you found them. Was he awake when you picked them up?”

“No. “

“Do you know why they were on the street? What were they doing?” A little forceful this time, as if she was trying to hold back her temper.

“No. I was trying to keep them from washing down the drain.”

“What about the other one? Does he have any injuries?”

“He was exhausted when he came here, but he’s doing a lot better…” you paused to look at Blues, “You are doing okay, right? You’re not hurt anywhere?”

Blues shook his head but fell quiet, peering at your phone. “Who are you talking to?”

“Yeah, he’s fine.”

“Were there any other injuries? How have you been taking care of them?”

Your hair stood on end as you rubbed the hem of your shirt, “I—I gave them some Sea Tea, and I’ve been watching to see if there’s been any changes. He had cracked ribs, but they look like they’ve healed up now…except for the missing part.”

Mama Cry sighed and you heard faint tapping in the background.

“I was hoping you’d describe a Softy or a Teacup. They’re known for sleeping at odd intervals. But it sounds like neither of those types fit the description. You might have a case of Magic Deficiency.
I see it a lot in abuse cases. It’s like…”

Something shifted again, like papers rustling around. “It’s like how humans need to eat a lot to survive. If you don’t have the energy, your body shuts down. If Bitties don’t have enough Magic, their bodies can’t hold it together. They end up Falling Down.”

“Falling down?”

Another pause on the phone. “It means they’re dying.”

“Oh god,” you blurted as the horror of the situation settled into your skin, “What do I do?”

“I may be able to help you if you come to the adoption center. We’re open ‘till 7 today, and we’re closed tomorrow. I’d suggest you come as soon as possible. Once Bitties start Falling, it’s almost impossible for them to recover.”

You reached out to Rhythm and caressed his arm through the washcloth. “Okay. If I take the first train there, I should be there about…an hour. Is there anything that I need to take with me?”

As per Mama Cry’s instructions, you dug out a messenger bag to carry the Bitties and a winter sweater for some padding. You moved to the kitchen and stuffed a pack of crackers inside and buried your wallet under the sweater. After bidding a quick goodbye, you shoved your phone into the back pocket of your shorts. And for good measure, you filled a water bottle with Sea Tea and slid it into the side pocket.

Now for the hard part. Blues watched your every movement this whole time, and when you sat in front of him, eye to eye socket, you found Blues clinging to his brother’s washcloth with trepidation.

“Let’s go to Mama Cry’s. She says she might be able to help your brother.”

“What’s ‘Mama Cry’s’?”

You sucked in a breath before continuing, “Hear me out, we’re only going to get medical help for Rhythm, but it’s an adoption place. She said—“

“No.”

That dangerous look on his face—dead sockets, low voice, the way he sat perfectly still—he robbed any kind of thoughts you had just from looking at you. You shivered.

“Why not?”

“If we’re really friends, you won’t bring us there. You don’t know what it’s like at those places. Those dirty cages and no light and so much screaming, don’t take us to that place—“

Blues had been clinging to Rhythm’s blanket like a lifeline, and his grip was only getting tighter. He wasn’t looking at you anymore, but rather looking through you at a distant memory. Blue sparks of magic flickered in his left eye and you weren’t sure if he could even recognize you at the moment.

“Woah. Okay, no Blues, hold on here,” you hushed, rubbing his back. “I’m definitely not taking you anywhere near that kind of place, and from the looks of it Mama Cry’s isn’t like that. But Rhythm needs help more than I can do.”
He leaned into your touch. “You’re not...you’re not going to leave us there, are you?”

“No way in hell. If it looks shady, we’ll run outta there faster than they can blink.”

You cupped Blues in your hands and brought him to your chest in a kind of hug. His tiny palms rested on the fabric of your shirt, and you could feel his fingertips pressing through.

“It’ll be okay,” you soothed.

“...We go in and we come right back out.”

“Yeah, that’s the plan.”

“We don’t leave each other. Don’t let them separate us.”

“Not for a second.”

“I trust you, friend.” Blues pulled away enough to look you in the eye. “I’ll protect you if you protect us. I won’t let them lay a hand on any of us.”

“I hope it won’t come to that, but okay. Come on, we’ll be late for the train if we don’t hurry.”

The Bitty nodded, and you hoisted him up to your shoulder, where he steadied himself by grabbing onto your locks of hair. You took Rhythm and placed him in the sweater-lined bag. You snatched your keys hanging by the door and went through your mental checklist of items you needed. You counted on your fingers as you whispered what you had.

“Okay, ready?”

Blues tugged a little on your hair. “Ready.”

You locked the door behind you, and headed downstairs, through the lobby, and onto the sidewalk. Like you have done almost every day, you walked down a few blocks to the station, the humidity sticking to your skin through your t-shirt. You passed by a few other pedestrians, most of who minded their own business or gave you a brisk nod as you crossed paths.

Your heart beat faster as you moved down the stairs to the terminal, careful not to jostle the precious cargo in your bag, and slowed your pace once you made it to the bottom.

“You okay?” you asked Blues, who had been quiet through the trip so far.

“I’m okay. Things look different from up here. Where are we?”

“The subway station. I think we have to take the other line. Let’s go look at the map quick.”

You moved to the wall, where a plexiglass-framed map of the routes displayed the outline of the city and the train lines. One red line and one blue line snaked perpendicular to each other as they listed the stops the trains made along the way. The city was small compared to the major cities in the country, and it just completed the project for the east/west line. You pointed to the district where you lived.

“This is the station we’re at.” you swept over to the northeast and tapped at a different point. “That’s where we need to go. We’ll have to switch trains midway.”

You took the time to fish out your wallet as carefully as you could without disturbing Rhythm too much and pulled out your metro card.
“Here, Blues. I’m gonna put you in the bag. Pe—Bitties are allowed on the train as long as they’re in a carrier.”

You were seriously going to say “pets”. Whoo boy, that was a whole issue by itself, and you didn’t want to go there just yet. What did you classify as a pet versus a friend? Intelligence? Preference? Was Blues going to get mad at you?

Blues, however, said nothing of your slip up as you moved him from the perch to the bag, and you continued to the turnstile, swiped your card, and boarded the waiting train.

Since the lunch hour hadn’t hit yet, the train car still had plenty of space on the seats. You grabbed one near the end of the car and rested the bag onto your lap. You flipped over the flap to give them some air. The conductor gave his final call for any last minute passengers, and then the train started pulled with a lurch.

“How’s he doing?” you whispered as Blues pushed back the pack of crackers from his view.

“The same,” the Bitty looked as if he fell into a trance again. It was a habit you noticed him doing from time to time back at the apartment. “Maybe a little worse.”

“Oh no, really?” You couldn’t tell as you touched Rhythm’s head, but that didn’t mean anything. “Hey now, Rhythm. It’s just a little longer. Come on, pull it together.”

You would have poured all your will into him if you had the ability, but you had to settle for rearranging the sweater to make him more comfortable.

“Do you think more tea would help?”

“It wouldn’t hurt.”

You took the cap of the water bottle off and clumsily filled it, handing it to Blues.

“Sorry, I don’t have a good place to put this. Can you do it?”

“Of course!”

The rest of the train ride passed by as Blues gave Rhythm occasional sips from the bottle cap and attempting not to make a mess. Meanwhile you refilled the drink and pressed Blues to have some for his energy. When you switched trains, you looped the bag around your neck so the Bitties would be in your sight. This one didn’t have an empty seat like the other, so you stood closer to the doors, doing your best to ignore the other passengers around you.

Finally the train pulled to a stop and opened its doors, and you moved with the crowd out onto the platform and right out of the station.

The skyscrapers towered over you as you reached the top of the stairs. You pulled Blues out of the bag and placed him back on your shoulder.

“It’s one of the business districts. We just have to turn right on that street over there and we should see it.”

“I’ve never seen buildings this tall…” Blues’ voice carried a hushed sort of awe. You smiled despite the situation.

“The center of the city has taller buildings than this. Maybe we can stop on the way home.”
Following the storefronts down the block, you turned the corner to where the smaller shops resided. You ducked under the shaded area where concrete pillars held up parts of the jutted out buildings, creating a building awning. The smell of food from the nearby restaurants assaulted your nose and you looked at the signs along the windows.

“Here it is.”

The small shop had two glass windows framing the door with “Mama Cry’s Bitty Adoptions” sprawled along the top. Several Bitties of different sizes and shapes played along the beach-themed containment in the pens that lined the glass. Some of them looked at you and waved. Others just stared or paid no attention to you. Almost half of them were skeletons like the brothers.

“What do you think?” Putting your hand behind Blues’ back, you could feel him tense against your touch.

“Be careful,” he simply said. You sucked in a breath and pushed open the door.

The bell announced your presence as a chorus of “Hello!” welcomed you into the tidy shop. The pens displayed out front turned out to be connected to two larger plexiglass containments against the walls. Each wall partitioned into smaller, apartment-like containers and a few flights of stairs for the higher areas. All of them had tiny beds and various items, and some Bitties were pacing around or sleeping in the cubes as you watched.

“Hi,” you greeted back, trying to take in all the smiling faces. A few Bitties crowded to the edge of the pen, some offering their tiny beach balls and sand buckets as an invitation to play.

“Wow.” You whispered aloud. If you didn’t know any better, it would have looked like a Bitty resort to you. Blues huddled closer to your neck and you offered your fingers as something to hold onto.

“Welcome!” A lady’s voice greeted you, and the first thing you noticed were her long, large ears that perked up from bright red hair. Her black and red eyes met your gaze as a polite smile settled on her short muzzle.

“Ah, Hello,” you grinned nervously, “Is Mama Cry here?”

“I’m Cry,” she replied, and then noticed Blues, glaring at her from your shoulder. “How can I help you?”

“I called about an hour ago. I’m the one with the sleeping Bitty,” you opened the messenger bag to reveal Rhythm, carefully wrapped in the sleeve of your sweater. Mama Cry peered into the bag and her smile faded.

“Ah, yes. I’m glad you came. Let’s go to the back. But first,” she honed in on Blues again, leaning a little closer to you. You froze on the spot as Blues clung closer.

“Hi Sweetie, what’s your name?”

It took a second, but he answered in a sharp tone, “Blues.”

“I heard your brother’s having trouble waking up, so we’re going to do everything we can to help him. Do you want to talk with the other Bitties while we check him out?”

“No.”
You felt your neck chill, and it wasn’t because of the air conditioning. Mama Cry, however, looked unfazed.

“Would it be okay if I bring another Bitty with us?”

He must have nodded, because the lady smiled and took a step past you towards one of the playpens.

“Ketch,” she called to the pen, and the Bitties all looked towards the one pretending to nap by the fake palm tree. His eyes opened and he teleported in front of her.

“Hey Mama.”

He looked just a little taller than Blues, and his lazy grin and lidded eyes definitely set him apart. He rubbed the sand off of his shorts with one hand and held a tiny ketchup bottle in the other.

“Want to keep us company? Things might get a little rough.”

The Bitty glanced at you, trailed his sight to Blues, and finally landed onto the bag where Rhythm slept.

“Yeah. I’ll go with ya.”

He teleported to Cry’s shoulder and received a quick nuzzle, and shortly after, Mama Cry motioned you to follow her. That wasn’t comforting at all. Your heart picked up the pace as you walked past the small shelves of merchandise and past the swinging doors of the back area of the shop.

The back room looked much like a small vet’s office, with a clean white countertop in the middle of the room, a few cupboards lined on the top of the walls, a sink, and a few, clear, solitary pens on the opposite side. The florescent light beamed from the tiles above onto the single mat and pillow lying on the counter.

“Go ahead and put him there, dear.”

“Okay.”

You scooped Rhythm up as gentle as you could and laid him on the mat. In an instant, the weight on your shoulder lifted as Blues teleported to the counter with him, refusing to take his eyes off of the pair.

“You said part of his ribs are missing?”

“Yeah,” you reached over and shifted Rhythm’s shirt up, exposing his ribs. The cracks were barely noticeable thanks to the Sea Tea, but a definite chunk of his lower rib was absent. Mama Cry clicked her tongue as Ketch whistled.

“That’s definitely not good. You did w—“

As she reached over to the Bitty, Blues conjured his slew of bones to pierce her hand. Before you could shout, another set appeared and clashed into them, setting the slivers off course and onto the countertop.

“Sorry friend, not in my house.”

Ketch had moved to the counter as well, his arm outstretched and his eye glowing blue.
“DON’T TOUCH HIM,” Blues growled, and Ketch responded by merely putting his hands into the pockets of his shorts.

“Chill. Mama’s a good person. She’s not gonna kill him.”

“It’s fine,” Mama Cry assured, “Would it be okay if Ketch did it instead?”

“That sounds like a lot of work,” Ketch complained.

“Please, Ketch. What if I sneak a little brown sugar into dinner tonight? Just for you?”

The Bitty closed his eyes for a second and grinned. “How can I say no to a sweet deal like that?”

He looked to Blues, “Waddya say?”

“Do it. But if you hurt him, I will e n d y o u.”

If Blue’s death stare intimidated Ketch any, then he put up one hell of a front. “Gotcha.”

Blues shifted away just enough to give the other Bitty some space to work. He started by exposing the rest of Rhythm’s ribcage, tracing the fine lines leftover by the cracks with his fingers.

“I can tell just from here,” he muttered, “but doesn’t hurt to look.”

He made a grabbing motion towards Rhythm’s chest and a small, grey heart phased into the air above him. A faint glow of light emitted from it, but something about it felt off. The hairs on your arms stood on end as you gaped at the object Ketch held.

“What is that?”

“His soul,” Mama Cry replied, “Everything alive has one. Monsters and Bitties are especially dependent on it, so if something bad happens, we can usually tell by looking at it like this.”

“Yep, it’s Magic Deficiency all right. Haven’t seen one this bad since that Edgy came in here a couple months ago.” Ketch let out another low whistle, “This guy’s barely hanging on.”

You gritted your teeth as you looked to Mama Cry, who also happened to grimace at the diagnosis. She turned around to the cupboards and pulled out a small vial. The bright pink liquid also had a glow to it, and the substance sloshed around in the cup like it was cooking oil.

“This is an extremely low dose of DT, about 1/100th of a recommended portion for an average-sized monster. It would be like having a piece of chocolate for someone of my size.”

“It’s a catalyst for magic, “Ketch continued for her as he pushed the soul back into Rhythm’s body, “It stands for—“

“Determination,” Blues finished. All eyes were on him, and Mama Cry raised an eyebrow.

“That’s correct,” she said, but her voice carried more suspicion than praise.

“Let me give it to him.” Blues replied as he stretched out his arm. Mama Cry and Ketch exchanged glances before she handed him the cup.

Before you could even move, Blues rose the cup to his mouth and took a swig of the concoction. Flames of magic erupted from his eye in a puff and floated up like embers.

“Blues!” you chided, pressing up against his back with your fingers.
“It’s okay, friend,” he smiled at you, but you didn’t find any comfort in it. “I had to make sure they were telling the truth. Don’t worry, this is nothing to me.”

Ketch snorted, “Heh, you’re pretty ballsy for a Blueberry. You know what that stuff can do, right?”

“Of course,” he replied as he gave the remaining dose to Rhythm. Tiny rivulets of pink trailed down the side of the sleeping skeleton’s mouth.

You, however, didn’t have a clue. And you weren’t sure if you wanted to know.

“This will make him better, right?”

“I’d say it’s a 75% chance that he’ll make it through. Maybe a little more. The Sea Tea you fed him helped lessen the decay….Actually, I have a few questions. Would you mind stepping outside for a bit?”

Blues looked to you in alarm, and you put your hands up. “Sorry, I promised I wouldn’t leave them alone. He’s a little nervous about being here, if you couldn’t tell.”

Mama Cry sighed, “Fair enough. I expected as much.”

Her ears flickered and folded back, an obvious sign of displeasure, as she grabbed a notepad and pencil from the other counter.

“Blues, sweetie, do you have a guardian?”

“...Do you mean if we have an owner? No.”

“I heard your friend picked you and your brother up from the street. Have you always been living that way?”

Blues wiped the excess liquid from Rhythm’s mouth with the hem of his shirt. “What does it matter?”

“Has someone given you DT before?”

Blues met her question with a glare and nothing more. She turned to you instead, tapping her pencil against the pad.

“How much do you know about Bitties?”

You found it hard to meet her gaze.

“Not much. I read up about a few of the basics, but that’s it.”

“Blues is kind of Bitty called a Baby Blue, or a Blueberry. Typically they are loving, energetic, and they love to help around the house. And while they do have different skills in magic, teleportation isn’t a skill they develop without extreme training. Most cases are from abusive situations. Has he ever hurt you before?”

Dread crept into your chest as you recalled a similar conversation from pet rescues. You’ve heard of “aggressive” animals being put down without much of a fight. The image of watching vets forcing Blues to fall into a death coma set off all sorts of alarms in your head.

“I know he doesn’t seem like it right now, but Blues really is sweet! He doesn’t attack unless he feels threatened,” you exclaimed and shifted closer to the counter, closer to the Bitties, “I’m sure
“I’m not worried about his disposition so much.” Mama Cry lifted Ketch from the counter and the Bitty grasped one of her fingers.

“Bitties who have had past instances of abuse or neglect are not recommended for first time guardians. You seem like a sweet person, and I hate to suggest this considering how much he trusts you, but would you consider letting us take care of them?”

Your heart sunk. She was right. You had no experience prior to your encounter with the brothers, and Rhythm could have died under your watch. It would be irresponsible and selfish of you to say —

“No.” you and Blues replied at the same time.

“Are you sure? Quite frankly, Blues the most aggressive Blueberry I’ve met so far. And you haven’t even seen his brother’s personality yet. Lil Bros are protective by nature, and you could get seriously hurt if he lashes out.”

“I’ll make sure that doesn’t happen. Teach me everything I need to know, and I’ll do it.”

“They aren’t pets. If you change your mind and you abandon them, they’ll remember it. I’ll remember it.”

“She won’t do that,” Blues retorted as he stood between you and her, shifting Rhythm’s body onto his back. His brother’s tall body practically blanketed him, but he managed to hold him somehow. “She’s not like those other humans.”

“I promised that they could stay at my place as long as they wanted, and I know Blues doesn’t want to stay here. So yeah, I’m sure.”

Mama Cry took a good moment to ponder what you said, and then motioned you to follow her back to the shop. “If you insist, then I’d like to see you interact with some of the others first. I can give you some useful information while you’re here.”

You scooped up the brothers, and once Blues untangled himself from Rhythm, he blinked back to your shoulder. “Think you can handle a little company, Blues?”

“Yeah, I can do that.” His voice was quiet, but lighter.

“Thank you so much,” you told the woman, “How much do I owe you?”

“We’ll wait on that until you’re ready to leave. You might want to buy some things while you’re here. Like socks and shoes. Trust me, shoes are hard to find in Bitty sizes,” she winked at you she pushed past the swinging doors.

You caught the sight of Blues’ bare feet in your peripheral vision and blushed.

“Uh, yeah…”

Chapter End Notes
Thank you for your patience, guys. I'm still smack dab in the middle of a high peak season for work, so next update may take a little while. It'll be a regular chapter, but I'm a little torn between two scenes. It's a special chapter after all ;)

I'm still brainstorming for some low key situations to put the brothers through, like discovering the bathtub or cleaning. Please feel free to suggest something! Thanks again!
And You Thought Poison Ivy Was Bad

Chapter Summary

Shopping at Mama Cry's. You regret not having a basket.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Aaand, you're going to need this." Ketch commented as he placed the small bottle on your already precarious pile in your arms. "Calcium bath for the big guy. It'll strengthen his bones."

You glanced to Blues, who was currently scribbling in the sand with another Blueberry and a Grillbitty in the pen. He met your stare with a nervous one of his own before jerking his attention back to the duo. The two of you made a small strategy to comply with Mama Cry's wish—you'd go shopping with Ketch in the tiny shop while he interacted with the other Bitties. The key was to be in sight of each other at all times, never farther than half the room away. It wasn't too hard; the aisles ran perpendicular to the entrance and were low enough that you could see overhead.

And either Mama Cry and Ketch had a really good scheme to cash in on high risk, first time Bitty guardians or they really did believe you enough to give you a fighting chance. This stuff wasn't exactly cheap.

Speaking of the adoption center owner, Mama Cry was currently explaining some basic knowledge of Bitties to another customer who had walked in a moment ago. Every so often she would sneak a glance your way or at Blues, but continued her conversation with the new person with a passion. It was easy to tell how much she loved her job and the creatures she cared for, and it made you a tad regretful that you came in making such a fuss.

As Ketch blipped to the next aisle over, you shifted the pile ever-so-slightly for balance, and followed.

"Now this is the best invention ever. It's a bathtub for Bitties. There's a water bottle fill the tub, a nozzle to control the flow, and a hot plate underneath to keep the water warm. They'll never wanna leave this thing."

Ketch grinned at the box with adoration, and with the snap of his fingers, it wedged its way between the lower items of your pile. The cargo shifted and you did a little dance to regain the balance. By the time you deemed it safe, Ketch had already moved down the shelf to some plush toys two shelves down.

"Do you do this often?" you asked as you eyed the familiar skeleton dog-head plushie, "You seem to know your way around the place."

Ketch shrugged as he pondered the selection before him.

"Ehh, every once in a while. One or two of the others know the merch better than I do. We kinda have to since Mama's Bitty goes missing," he pointed over to the plastic tree where he was napping before, only this time another skeleton Bitty was curled on top of its leaves. "He's my napping
buddy. Likes to fall asleep in weird places. I've gotten good at scouting him out."

Ketch tossed the heart plush to the side and prodded the dog one beside it. "Hey, they got any decorative stuff for their space? Think they'd like the Gaster Blasters, or am I barking up the wrong tree?"

"Uhh, they don't, and that'd be fine, but can I put this on the counter before we get any more? It's a little doggone much for me to carry."

The Bitty chuckled and waved his hand, "Yeah pal, sure."

You thanked him and glanced over to Blues, motioning that you were going to the counter for a moment. He nodded and you smiled in return. The register was just past the aisles, and you shuffled your way to the counter with a slow and steady pace. Once the weight was out of your arms, you stretched a little and flipped the messenger bag flap over to reveal Rhythm, still sleeping. He shifted around, something he never did before the DT dose. Relief blossomed in your heart every time he moved or made a sound.

"Hey," you cooed as you gently patted the bottom of the bag.

A clatter jerked your attention to the pile in front of you. The calcium bottle was missing from the top, and you leaned around the counter to see where it had fallen.

Odd, you could have sworn it was steady. But there it was, tottering on the floor.

You knelt to pick it up when a new voice caught your attention.

"'Hey' yourself. What are you going to do with all that crap anyway?"

You looked up to see one of the enclosures, much longer and closed off from the others, partially hidden by the counter. It was on the lowest level, only a foot and a half from the floor, and decorated much like a terrarium. The UV lights cast a low glow onto the small plant life and mulch that covered the bottom, and for a second you thought it was empty. Something started to slither around the petrified wood in front of you. Your eyes followed the trail of leaves and thorns that buried themselves into the dirt, and two large, thick and spiny leaves framed the orange petals of a wide-eyed flower, sitting still.

And then it moved. You stared like a deer caught in headlights.

"Yeah, you idiot. It's me that's talking."

"I'm sorry," you stuttered, feeling goosebumps trailing up your arms, "I didn't realize—"

The flower sneered at you and rattled its leaves at you like a cobra, "Whatever. You gonna answer my question or gawk all day?"

"I'm getting some stuff for my new Bitties. I don't have much at home and I want to make them comfortable."

You didn't remember seeing any pictures of this kind of BItty, but you did read a few comments about a rare flower type that was recently discovered. He must have been one of them.

"You sure you want to spend all your money on stuff you're going to return later?"

You narrowed your eyes, "And why would I be doing that?"
“Because they’re defective, and I’m not talking about the merchandise,” he smirked, edging closer to the glass. A bolt of anger struck your core as you knelt eye-level to him.

“What’s up with everyone saying that to me today? I won’t—“

“I won’t return them because I’ll love them and keep them forever!” he taunted in a higher pitch. His face contorted to a sickly sweet mockery of your own. The flower then cackled, morphing into a terrifying image of a demon’s face while your stomach lurched at the sight.

“That’s what they all say. You know how many people come in here claiming the same thing? How many people come back just a few days or weeks later? Do you think you’re special or something?”

“I’m a hell of a lot better than that,” you hissed in a low voice, “If I wanted to abandon them then I would have done it the first night. Don’t assume you know everything about me because you’ve seen a few bad humans.”

A flash of confusion crossed his face before settling into a sneer, and his barbed vines slithered out of dirt, writhing across the compartment floor.

“Then why don’t we find out what kind of human you really are? Come closer to the cage.”

By all means, you had no intention to get closer to the creepy plant, but your body crawled to the terrarium of its own accord. The messenger bag dragged beside you on the floor, and you finally noticed the green tendrils of magic snaking from your legs and up your torso.

“What are you doing to me?” your voice grew softer as a fog clouded your mind. The fear and anger dulled from your heart as your eyes grew lidded, and you struggled keep what sense you had.

“I—“ wanted to do something, but what was it again? The flower was calling, and the sound was so enticing, so soft, and you had to get near him. You had to. He was calling your soul close, closer, yet closer still.

“That’s right! Just a little more,” his voice, so calm and sweet, lulled you further.

With your fingers pressed against the glass, the smaller threads of ivy crepted through the breathing holes and around your arms, scratching your skin as it trailed upwards. Wafts of wildflowers entranced you as all sense of feeling faded away…

Bones collided against the glass and pierced through the vines holding you captive. You gasped and fell back as the flower shrieked in pain, wriggling his appendages against the enclosure. You panted as the sweet smell nearly made you double over from the intensity. The severed vines burned in your skin as the small brambles dug deeper with your movements.

“This isn’t how you make friends, friend,” A new voice commented towards the enclosure.

You didn’t have a chance to see who your savior was before Blues appeared before you in a panic. His gaze trailed up your arms and to your chest, where the ivy had crepted over your clothes and dangerously close to your heart. His left socket flickered with magic as his hands curled into fists.

“Who did this to you?”

“I’m okay! It’s okay,” you hacked as you began peeling off the plants. The flower groaned, catching Blues’ attention.
“Great, the other piece of trash showed up. You two might as well get comfortable. It’ll just be a matter of time before she brings you in and I can have just a little taste of her soul!” His voice grew from disgust to a disturbing sort of joy, and you didn’t have to look up to know he was smiling that cruel grin. You were going to have nightmares tonight. Blues sucked in a breath, probably to rip him a new one, but was cut off.

“If I were you, I wouldn’t bite off more than I can chew,” the newcomer remarked. You gained the courage to glance over towards the voice, and your eyes widened at the lanky Bitty standing in front of the cage, wearing a simple t-shirt and shorts, staring at the flower with a relaxed grin and a glowing orange socket.

“Rhythm,” you breathed.

And he turned to you, smiling.

“Yo.”

Chapter End Notes

Hi guys, sorry for the late post again. I have this SUPER intense work week to get through before I go on vacation, so I’m going to do my best to get another chapter out soon. Work has been crazy, but I’ve been writing bit by bit.

I have to admit that I’ve been struggling with writing too. You should see my notebook. It's got tons of pages that have different scenarios for the same plot purpose, ideas that need fleshing out, just all sorts of stuff. Remember last chapter when I said I was torn between two ideas for this chapter? This is number three. I can use most of it later, but for now I'm only half a chapter ahead.

But Rhythm's awake! Yay! Now the real fun can begin!

Anyways, thanks for sticking with me. If you have any comments or suggestions, then please feel free to tell me!
The moment you realized that he was indeed Rhythm, and he was acknowledging you, was the moment that any coherent thought you had fled. Blues had taken a spot in front of his brother, energy cackling and ready to pounce at any given moment.

“You did this,” Blues growled at the flower in contempt, “You won’t get away with it as long as I’m here.”

“Blues, no—“

“Aww, playing the hero? Let me guess. You’re here because you couldn’t even protect that dimwitted brother of yours—”

A bone slammed right across the flower’s face in the hardest kind of backhand you’ve ever seen, silencing the rest of his thoughts in an instant.

“Don’t test me.”

The plant’s leaves rattled again as he stood straight with rage. His teeth came in jagged spines as the ivy shot through the holes in the glass, reaching for his desired victims. You tossed yourself over the two and curled into a ball, shielding them.

“Human!” Blues cried, touching your cheek. Rhythm pushed a lock of hair away from your face.

“We’ll take care of it. Let us out.”

“He’s someone’s Bitty, guys. You can’t fight him,” you replied, wary of the vines wrapping around your armpits and above your chest, “Ha, this feels like the backscratcher from hell.”

“You can’t hide forever! I will *rip* you apart! I’ll take everything you love and turn it to dust, just you wait—”

“SEYMOUR,” a booming voice erupted from above you. You pushed yourself up to see Mama Cry, whose glare could rival even the fiercest of mothers. Ketch hung back on the countertop above you, motioning a slashing motion across his neck.

The plant shrunk away from the glass, flailing his vines across the dirt.

“What!? Don’t get mad at *me*! They hit me in the face!”

“I wonder why?” she deadpanned as she peeled the severed ivy off your back, “Oh my god, I am so sorry. Are you okay?”
“I was saving you the extra time! I’m only doing your job, Crybaby!” Seymour retorted, clearly offended.

“Then let me take care of it,” she snapped, “We’ll talk about this later. Behave yourself.”

Seymour grumbled a “whatever” before turning around, and you took this as a chance to scoop up your friends. Rhythm didn’t flinch or shy away much to your surprise, and the brothers took a quick glance at each other before Blues moved to your shoulder. He untangled a few more vines from your hair and leaned in close to your ear.

“Can we go now?” he whispered.

“Yeah.”

Mama Cry moved to behind the counter as you situated yourself, putting the bag strap over your free shoulder and the bottle back onto the counter. Rhythm leaned up against your fingers and appeared to be dozing off again. He probably still felt exhausted, especially after that fiasco. Hell, you felt exhausted and you were just a meat shield.

“I am so sorry about that. Seymour’s a rare Venus Flytrap Bitty and he likes to scare newcomers. Do you need anything? Band-aids? I have a friend who’s good with healing magic,” The shop owner looked over the injuries on your arms with apprehension.

You gave her a reassuring smile, “Just a few scratches. I’m fine. I take it he isn’t too friendly with people?”

“He came from a bad situation. I’ve been working with him for a year now and he’s gotten better since then, but he still has a long way to go,” she peaked over the counter at your hands as you paid, “I’m glad that your friend has woken up. Wish it could have been under better circumstances, but it seems his temper isn’t out of control. That’s a good sign.”

“I’m really glad too,” you smiled down at Rhythm’s napping form, “Thank you so much for helping us. I know we caused a huge ruckus, and you’re trying to help other customers…” you trailed off, glancing around for the other person Mama Cry was helping before. She shook her head.

“Don’t worry about it! Most people right now would be threatening to sue me if they were in your shoes. If anything, this proves you’ve got enough gall to roll with the punches when need be. Please, you three can come back any time. ”

She stuffed some pamphlets into the plastic bag along with her business card, and Ketch waved you a halfhearted farewell as you put Rhythm in your messenger bag. You grabbed your stuff, and with another chorus of farewells, left the store.

Phew. That was over.

“Let’s go home,” you said to Blues, who once again clung to your hair. He said nothing, but you felt him nod against your cheek. You smiled.

The station bustled with people in prim clothing and fancy bags, much more so than your initial ride here, and you clung tighter to your possessions to keep the waves from knocking them off your person. Most people didn’t spare you a glance as usual, but every now and then, you’d get a judging look from the little tears and red spots on your shirt.

You just had to bear it until you got home. How many of them have gotten attacked by killer plants
The train ride home was painfully quiet for you, even though the second train gave you more room to breathe. Blues’ light snoring tipped you off as to just how tired everyone was this morning, and you didn’t have the heart to wake him up. He still clung tight to you even in his sleep, and you had minimal trouble reaching your apartment even when trudging up the stairs.

You entered and set the bag onto the kitchen table, and then made your way to the loveseat, where you gently untangled Blues from your hair and laid him on his mattress. Rhythm was next, although he stirred when you picked him up from your bag.

“Hey there,” you smiled as you whispered, “You probably have a ton of questions, but you’re still tired, yeah? You’ve got a bed here, and if you need me I’ll be at the table. I won’t attack you in your sleep or anything, so don’t worry about me.”

He blinked at you, sleepiness still dominant in his expression, until he smiled and clambered out of your hands.

“Thanks.”

He crawled underneath his new blanket and passed out, and you were left sitting there in bewilderment. They were like night and day, these brothers.

To make true of your word, you moved over to the table and started organizing your pile of stuff.

Two pairs of Bitty shoes. One of them was a pair of replica Starverses while the other was a set of carpenter boots. Ketch picked them out, claiming that he knew the shopping patterns of particular types of Bitties. You had yet to see if he was correct.

A few sets of clothes. Two hoodies, one in grey, another in red. A pair of cargo shorts, complete with working pockets. Another t-shirt, blue. Socks, and their size made them instantly adorable.

Two packs of boxers. You weren’t sure about that last one since the point of underwear was to cover your naughty bits and skeletons kind of lacked that, but what the hell.

On the larger scale of things, you picked up two doll-like bed frames. You weren’t sure if the mattresses you made fit, but it wouldn’t be hard to redo them. Pillows were easy too, so you didn’t bother to pick them up, but you did get the dog head skeleton plushie for something they could relate to. There was the bath, and a set of dishware specifically made for Bitty sizes.

And then there was the calcium bath supplement for Rhythm, the pamphlets and business card from Mama Cry, and a hefty receipt.

Ouch. Right in the wallet.

On the bright side, she didn’t charge you for the DT, and she even gave you a little discount. And Rhythm wasn’t in a coma anymore, so it was worth it.

You went to your room and changed into another shirt, inspecting the small gashes on your back, neck, and arms in the mirror. Your blazer would cover most of it up at work, thankfully, and maybe you still had that fancy collar you could use for your neck. The cuts stung a little, but none of them were too deep for you to worry about. You still had some of that Sea Tea, right?

Sighing, you moved back to the kitchen and sat at the table. The pamphlets she gave you weren’t going to read themselves, and you didn’t want to bother those two with noise from the TV, so you
picked up the first one and began reading.

Your eyes were drooping, and you made yourself more comfortable by using your arm as a pillow and holding the pamphlet in the other. You flipped the page.

And you closed your eyes for just a bit.

…

And that was when Rhythm woke up from his extended nap. The warmth of the day settled into the apartment and light shone through the windows from across the unfamiliar room. He couldn’t remember the last time he woke up on a soft surface.

Except for your bag, of course. That cozy sweater felt like he had died and gone to heaven.

He rolled over and caught sight of his brother, “Blues” you called him, laying quietly on the other bed, turned away from him. He looked okay, and earlier he had seemed fine. Mad, but safe.

Rhythm pushed the blanket off and climbed onto the arm of the loveseat, peeking over to see your sleeping form at the table. Your hair covered your face, and a pamphlet lay discarded just out of your hand.

In a flash, he teleported to the table surface and stumbled in front of you. Dizziness hit him full force as the act sapped more magic than he should’ve used. Dammit.

He took a few steady breaths and willed the dizziness away, opting to sit cross-legged in front of you rather than to stand.

“You’re an interesting one,” he said to your sleeping form, “Didn’t go back on your word. That’s a first for us. Treated us with kindness and even got yourself hurt to boot. You going for a record or something?”

He reached over and felt the scratches on your arm as gently as he could.

“Even though I’m a Bitty and you don’t know me. Even though you’re a human and I don’t know you. Heh.”

“What are you doing?”

Blues glared, tapping his foot against table as he stood over him.

Ah shit. Here it comes.

“Hey brother,” he offered a grin as he pulled away from the human. “Am I late for dinner?”

“Three days late, yes. Do you have any idea how much you scared me?”

“Uh…”

“A LOT. You didn’t even move an inch! Do you know what would have happened if she hadn’t picked us up that day? We’d have drowned! We’d be alligator food! We would have DROWNED first and THEN we’d be alligator food!”

“That would have been a shitty experience.”

“DON’T START, BRO. I’M ANGRY ENOUGH AS IT IS. THE NEXT TIME YOU SCARE A
HUMAN OUT OF THEIR DINNER, THINK TWICE. YOUR BIG BROTHER ISN’T GOING TO FISH YOU OUT OF THE SEWER.”

“Brother—“

“DON’T ‘BROTHER’ ME! ARE YOU EVEN LISTENING?!”

“Yep.”

“THEN WHAT DID I JUST SAY?”

“You asked if I was listening.”

That earned him a strangled scream of frustration from his dear brother as well as a harmless slap, which was one he’d gladly take.

“TAKE ME SERIOUSLY WHEN I LECTURE YOU! DON’T EVER DO ANYTHING THAT RECKLESS AGAIN!”

“Okay.”

“NOT JUST ‘OKAY’, SAY ‘YES MY MAGNIFICENT BROTHER WHO OBVIOUSLY KNOWS BEST FOR ME, I’LL NEVER DO IT AGAIN’!!”

Rhythm chuckled, “Yeah, brother. That.”

“I MEAN IT! I—I thought you were…” Blues sniffed, tears pricking at the corners of his sockets.

“Come here, brother.”

His brother nearly tackled him to the ground in a hug, wailing as Rhythm lightly pat him on the back. He was such a softy at times. But, if the tides were turned and he was the one to fret for three days, he would've been the same.

Your sniffling caught his attention and he caught your watery gaze, surprised. Two people crying? Now he was at a loss.

“Sorry, don’t mind me,” your voice cracked as you failed to keep the cheerful façade, “I’m really, really happy everyone’s okay, haha, I’ll just go over here now,” you sniffled as the tears rolled down your cheeks, and the chair protested your movements by screeching against the linoleum.

“Wait,” he said, and you stopped in your tracks. “Thanks. For everything.”

You smiled at him through your tears.

“You’re welcome.”

Chapter End Notes

It's vacation time for me, guys! This chapter is up, and I want to work on the next chapter enough to post it by the end of the week. Thank you guys for the positive feedback from last chapter. A bunch of you were excited for Rhythm waking up (as am I), and soon our lovely little household will have relative peace for the next few
chapters!
As Rhythm comforted his brother on the table, you decided to take residence on the loveseat to give them some privacy. It broke your heart to hear Blues cry, but it was happy crying and the poor guy needed to have some time alone with Rhythm, judging from the stern lecture he gave.

And you didn’t meant to eavesdrop, but you had awoken to something brushing your arm. And then you heard Rhythm speak to you…

Maybe it was a coincidence. It was possible you two just think alike, right? And you could blame your red cheeks from the crying, and not because you definitely heard a paraphrased version of your speech from last night. Right?

The snot coming from your nose called for a trip to the bathroom, and you were more than happy to oblige. You took some tissues and blew your nose, and washed your face to rid yourself of the last few tears. You looked into the mirror and sighed. Look at those bags under your eyes and puffy cheeks. It was a good thing you didn’t have to go out again today. You patted your face to jolt yourself out of your thoughts, and moved back to the living space.

Blues’ cries had subsided and you caught them rummaging through their stuff on the table. They spoke in hushed tones as they inspected the purchases, with Blues inspecting the boxes and Rhythm rummaging through the clothes.

“You okay, Blues?” you asked in a hushed voice as not to scare them. Blues turned towards you with a huge smile while Rhythm looked on, amused.

“Never better, friend!” he exclaimed, though the dried tear tracks on his cheeks hadn’t faded away. Silly guy. You took the last tissue from your pocket and motioned for him to come closer.

“You got something on you,” you wiped his face as gently as you could, and when you pulled back, his cheeks turned a light blue.

“Mweh heh, th—thank you!”

You began to move away when he caught your finger.

“Your wounds!” His gaze trailed up your arms and a worried frown replaced his smile. “Wait right
You were going to protest, but Blues had already flashed out of sight and reappeared with the water bottle that you had been using for Sea Tea. He tipped the bottle towards him enough to unscrew the cap, and offered it to you.

“I’m sorry, friend! Even though I told you I’d protect you…”

You took a swig from the bottle and wiped your mouth. A few of the scratches started to fade and you turned your arms to show him.

“Don’t worry about it, I’m okay. I was more worried for you guys. Besides,” you looked to Rhythm, “if it wasn’t for you, that flower would have done something terrible to me. Thanks.”

Rhythm waved it off, “No prob.”

Your stomach grumbled, and you suddenly realized how late in the day it was. You skipped lunch due to the excitement of today’s earlier events, and Rhythm was probably starving.

“Uh, do you guys want to have dinner early?”

Blues jumped in place, “Are you going to use the stove again?!”

“Yeah, for a little bit. And I’ll make something a little easier for you to eat this time!”

“Anything’s good, as long as it’s food,” Rhythm replied.

“Okay, leave it to me. You two can do whatever you’d like while I make the meal.”

“Would it be okay to give my bro a tour?” Blues asked.

“Yeah, of course! I’ll call for you whenever it’s done.”

As the smaller brother pulled Rhythm’s arm and teleported out of sight, you made your way to the fridge. You rummaged through a few containers to pull out a container of cooked ground beef, and then moved to your cabinet for the taco kit. You were going to save this for when your cousin came over next week, but this felt like a celebratory kind of night.

As you poured the beef, seasoning, and some water into a frying pan, you thought of what you could do to make the place more comfortable for your little guests. The bathtub looked great, but it wouldn’t do well in the kitchen, and you had banned Blues from going into the bathroom for safety’s sake. And their beds couldn’t stay on the loveseat forever; you liked curling up and napping on it at times, or at least sprawl out on it. Your bedroom would have been the best place, but your closet was cluttered to the brim, and the only empty space was underneath your bed.

…but maybe you could make those places work! You just had to do some moving around and have a bit of creative thinking, and you’d be able to make your place Bitty approved! You just had to think small. What would you like to have if you were as tiny as them?

You popped a couple of the hard shells into the oven and a few soft shells in the microwave. The spices wafted in the air and filled the area with an alluring smell as the meat cooked. You diced a tomato into small bits in the meantime, and took out the shredded cheese.

As the meat simmered, you decided to put their clothes into a neat pile and work on setting up the Bitty tub. The instruction manual had just a few pages, and you filled the water bottle and attached
it without any problems. Out of curiosity, you plugged it in and flipped the switch. You turned the little knob that lifted a panel for water flow, and the tub filled at a slow pace, similar to a plant feeder. The bottom of the tub warmed, and you stuck your finger in to test the temperature.

It reminded you of a cross between a coffee pot and one of those cat water fountains. Rhythm and Blues swimming in a coffee pot. It was both cute and disturbing. The image was conflicting enough to quirk your mouth into an odd smile.

You returned to stirring the meat, deeming it finished once the water had evaporated and left the mouthwatering sight of stewed meat. You cut off the heat and took the shells out, and retrieved a clean pair of scissors. You took the soft tortillas and cut them into smaller strips, using your thumb as a measurement.

It was the best time to try out the Bitties’ new dishware, so you unpacked the plates and filled each dish with the tortilla pieces, small tomato bits, cheese, and meat. You took a few paper towels and laid them on the table, and then filled a plate of your own.

“Guys, food’s ready!” you called, peeking around the corner.

“WE’RE ON OUR WAY!” Blues yelled back, clearly excited. In a moment, the two appeared onto the chair next yours, and then to the table. Blues huffed a bit, happy, but a little out of breath, while Rhythm tugged on his handkerchief.

“I told you, you gotta take it easy,” you heard the taller brother mutter while Blues shrugged him off.

“It’s not a problem for me! You’re the one who needs to watch it.” he argued, a little louder.

You fake coughed, grabbing their attention, and smiled. “Ready to eat?”

“Yes please!”

“Love to.”

You took one soft tortilla off your plate, and showed it to them. “Okay, so I’m going to show you how to make a taco. Take a tortilla piece like this, and then add some meat and whatever else you want in the middle, like this.”

You spooned some of the meat from your plate, and then the tomatoes and cheese with your fingers.

“And if you want some of the sauce, I can pour it out for you. It’s in this packet here,” you squeezed the taco sauce on top and folded the tortilla up, “and there you go!”

The brothers looked at each other, and then took some tortilla pieces from their own plate. As they constructed their dinner, you noticed Blues sniffing the meat and staring at it with wide eyes.

“Is this…?”

Rhythm bit into his taco first, chewing at a moderate pace, and then shoved the rest of it into his mouth, still chewing as he started on another one. Blues, on the other hand, took a bite of his taco, chewed, and then stopped to look at you with watery sockets.

“Is it bad?” you asked, hesitant. You thought they came out pretty standard, but maybe Bitty tastes were more sensitive?
He swallowed the bite as his pupils turned to star shapes, much to your surprise.

“IT’S PERFECT. I’VE BEEN LOOKING FOR THIS EVER SINCE WE…”

Large tears spilled from his eyes as he devoured the rest of his taco to quiet himself. Rhythm, who downed his second helping, rubbed the top of Blues’ skull with a nostalgic smile.

“Yeah, your right, brother. It’s the first thing we ate once we were free.”

“How did you know, friend?”

“I didn’t. Lucky guess?” you replied, unsure of whether you should feel happy or sad at this moment. You didn’t want to ask about their past, but today made it crystal clear that these guys went through hell. You pushed the thought away and made another taco instead.

“A real good guess,” Rhythm said as he took a shard of the hard shell for himself. What did that mean?

“The best kind of guess!” Blues cried, humming in appreciation as he bit into another concoction loaded with tomatoes. The tears had dried and left only the stars in his eyes, and you took a second to memorize how happy he looked.

“I’m glad, then. You can have as much as you’d like.” you offered. People said at times that serving your cooking could fill you up, and maybe this feeling was what they meant. You didn’t do anything special, but it was special to them.

“Anyway, Rhythm, I’m sure by now you know this place is my apartment. Is there anything you want to know about me, or how you got here?”

“I do want to know a few things,” he stated as his gaze met yours. The intensity of his stare reminded you of that first night with Blues, and you sat straight.

“Okay, ask away.”

“When did you give us names?”

“Ahh, the first night I brought you here. Blues told me you didn’t have any, so I made some up…I hope that’s okay.” you confessed. You didn’t even ask Blues what they wanted to be named, and Rhythm wasn’t even conscious.

“It’s cool. They’re catchy,” Rhythm gave you a half lidded grin, alleviating some of the guilt.

“How did you know your name earlier today? You responded to me when I said it at the pet store.”

Rhythm scratched the back of his skull, “Kinda heard you say it while I was sleeping, not sure when.”

You rose an eyebrow. “While you were sleeping? You could hear me while you were in a coma?”

Oh, but that definitely meant…

Blues had taken this time to insert himself into the conversation, his expression turned into an amused smile.

“We Bitties are more in—tune with souls. We can hear other people around us if they’re loud enough. Sometimes, friend, you are REALLY loud.”
Your face reddened with each word as you bit your lip, eyes widened.

“Then, uh…you heard what I said last night?”

“Loud and clear,” Rhythm confirmed, grinning, “You’re right. You’re nothing like the other humans we’ve met.”

“Even I heard your soul, and I was all the way across the room. You didn’t have to whisper at all,” Blues seconded.

Oh god, now it all made sense—the reason why Blues warmed up to you so suddenly, and why Rhythm protected you without a second thought was because they heard you. And no one so incredibly cheesy could ever pose a threat. You covered your face with your hands.

“I can’t believe this,” you muttered.

“There’s no need to be shy! We don’t think any less of you!” Blues tried to comfort.

“Yeah,” Rhythm agreed, though his voice carried more of a teasing tone, “I’ve never had anyone give me such a genuine heart-to-heart conversation before. You must be heaven-sent, Babe, ‘cause it was like talking to an angel.”

“Did you really just say that?” you deadpanned. What have you gotten yourself into? “Let’s just stick to the questions!”

“I dunno, you really are the answer to our prayers,” he continued, thoroughly enjoying your reaction. You squeaked. Could your face get any warmer?!

“Bro! You’re gonna break her!” Blues scolded.

“Sorry,” he wasn’t sorry, “Lessee, did you buy all this stuff for us?”

You lowered your hands but couldn’t bring yourself to look at him just yet.

“Yeah, I thought it’d be nice for you to have some stuff while you’re here. Ketch suggested a lot of it though, so you can blame him if it’s not your style.”

“We don’t have to pay for it?” Rhythm half joked. Your eyes darted to him, surprised.

“No, of course not! Ah, actually…”

You gathered your courage and breathed in, feeling your heartbeat race against your chest. Sensing the change of atmosphere, the brothers watched you with fixed gazes.

“Do you two…would you like to stay here? Like, make this your home?”

A silence fell over the table as the brothers traded glances. You fidgeted in your seat.

“Is that why you gave us names?” Blues asked, firm but quiet.

“I don’t understand.”

“Do you want to keep us?” Rhythm replied with an even tone.

That was such a loaded question, because that was the problem. You did. You wanted to keep them because you liked them, and you got all this stuff because you wanted them to be happy with you.
You knew they were intelligent, unique, incredible beings. You wanted to eat breakfast with Blues smiling at you every day, and you wanted to know more about Rhythm, and not through a coma. The city had so many dangerous people and animals outside, and now that you had them in your life you would worry to death if they ever left.

But who were you, to want to govern when and when they couldn’t leave? Like they were pets. You felt ashamed for even thinking about it.

“I think we get it,” Rhythm spoke, “that's more than anyone else has thought about us. ‘Pet’ is actually a step up.”

You bowed your head in shame, realizing your soul was loud again. Son of a bitch.

“I’m sorry,” you mumbled. You really weren’t a better person. You just thought you were. And Blues was going to be so upset with you—

“That’s enough, human,” the smaller Bitty had teleported to your shoulder and was brushing his hand against your jawline, “You asked us. That’s what’s important. You gave us a choice.”

“Blues,” you cupped your hand behind him and leaned in.

A few seconds passed until Rhythm took one long look at the place, and shrugged.

“What do you think, brother?”

“You know what I think,” Blues replied, “Plus, she gave us tacos.”

“Okay then, it’s settled. We’ll take you up on your offer.”

Rhythm winked at you, and your heart fluttered as the thought of having your new housemates settled in. Your smile turned into a full-fledged grin, and you picked up Rhythm in your excitement.

“Thank you,” you said as you nuzzled him against your cheek. You were going to make this the best damn place they ever lived in. “Welcome to your new home, guys.”

Chapter End Notes

It's the end of vacation for me. I'm gonna miss it. Lucky for me though, I'll have another free period relatively soon, so yeah! Again, thanks everyone for reading and being patient with me. You guys are great! We'll see what Reader does with the place in the next chapter!
Were Rules Usually This Hard to Make?

Chapter Summary

Rhythm takes a bath and you make a list of house rules.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As soon as the three of you finished dinner, Blues once again assisted you with dish duty while Rhythm picked off the fallen scraps on the table. At first you thought he was simply collecting them, but when you glanced back at the table a second time, you noticed that his hands were empty and he was chewing on the sliver of cheese that had laid in front of him before.

“Are you still hungry?” You asked as you wiped your hands dry. Rhythm swallowed and shook his head.

“Nah, I’m stuffed,” he said as he picked up the last tomato bit.

“But then, why…”?

“It’d be a waste when it’s this fresh.”

Ah. This went back to the dumpster scavenging thing, you supposed. Every time you ate with Blues, all the food you made was always picked clean, or you had wiped the table down before he could attempt it. Hell, the first night he was probably too scared to even eat in his typical manner.

You couldn’t say this surprised you anymore, but damn did it make you reflect on your lifestyle.

You looked to Blues as Rhythm polished off the last scrap. He dried the last Bitty dish in his hands while returning your gaze.

“If I made something that you two didn’t like, would you still eat it?”

“It’s food, yes? Of course we’d eat it!” Blues answered with a casual smile.

“Even if it was burnt? Hardly edible?”

“It’s food,” Rhythm replied. “Why wouldn’t we?”

You were hesitant to say it, but you felt it needed to be said. They weren’t going to live that life anymore, not if you could help it. If you couldn’t stomach it, they shouldn’t have to either.

You set the frying pan onto the drying cloth and gave yourself one deep, slow breath.

“I set the bath up over there. You guys wanna try it out? I’m going to make some new rules for the house.”

You moved away from the counter to retrieve some pen and paper, and then the thought occurred to you that they weren’t asked to help you with cleaning up, but they did anyway.
“Thanks for helping me clean, too.” you said as you turned back to them, feeling a little shy.

Rhythm tilted his head just a fraction while Blues stared, wide eyed.

“You’re welcome,” they said in unison. But Rhythm had bowed his head a bit to hide the blush creeping onto his face while Blues’ smile widened into a grin.

You darted to your bedroom for the stationary, and stayed an extra few seconds to work the embarrassment out of you. Yep, you’re gonna drop that moment out of your head and pretend that you can function like a proper human being. You only said thanks. You’ve said that plenty of times. There was nothing wrong with thanking someone!

After you finished glaring at your cluttered bookcase, you gathered the notebook and pen and headed back to kitchen table. The TV had popped on, alerting you to one of the brother’s presence, while splashing noises from the counter meant that the other had taken to the tub.

“Holy shit, this thing is awesome,” you heard Rhythm muttur, and you covered your mouth to hide your smile. Thank you, Ketch. You sat down in the chair and uncapped the pen, content.

The only problem was, you quickly realized, was that you forgot to give him the calcium supplement that laid in front of you. He was already in the bath, and you felt it would be a bother to put it in now, but the nagging sense of urgency pushed you to think otherwise. Better to start the habit now.

“Hey, sorry, Rhythm,” you said as you shuffled out of your chair, “I should have put this into your bath first. Could you get out for a sec?”

You uncapped the bottle, took a spoon from the drawer, and glanced to where the skeleton was relaxing, unresponsive.

“Rhythm?” you repeated, noticing his closed eyes and small smile. You pushed his shoulder with your finger and shook him as gently as you could.

“Mmm?”

“Don’t fall asleep in the tub, silly,” you chided, though the danger of him drowning was less than your own tub. The basin was deep, but only wide enough for Rhythm to sit in it with his legs partially folded. His arms sprawled across the rim of the tub and his eyes were closed, like a poster image of pure happiness.

He opened one eye and paused, “Do I have to?”

“Well…” you measured a small bit onto the spoon and faltered, “if I dump this in here, you have to mix it up real good, okay?”

“Kay.”

You sifted the small dose of powder into the water and watched as it sank to the bottom.

“There you go,” you said, and waited.

And waited. Just a few more seconds, you were sure he was going to mix it around!

“...Rhythm.”

“Yeah?”
“The only thing that’ll work on is your butt if you don’t mix it up.”

“That’ll be bad. Don’t wanna be a hardass .”

You snorted despite yourself, “Come on, I’m serious.”

“Kay.”

He gave his foot a weak push, shifting the minerals a little, but not enough to dissolve.

“If you don’t do it, I will.”

He finally gave you his attention, a rebellious smirk crossing his face as you stared him down.

“Go ahead .”

You weren’t quite sure what was going on inside his head. Whether this was some kind of assertion of dominance or just plain laziness, you figured you’d have to stand your ground on it. This was his medicine, after all, and it wasn’t going to do its job just sitting there.

You shrugged, “You asked for it.”

You stuck your fingers in the water and swirled around the edge, trying not to brush up too much against Rhythm’s legs. The Bitty said nothing as you swished a little closer to the middle for the stubborn particles, and you did your best to ignore the intruding thoughts about Bitty anatomy and why you were getting a little flustered over this. An agonizing few seconds later, the last of the powder dissolved from your sights, and you pulled your fingers away.

“There,” you sighed before biting your lip. That wasn’t so bad!

Rhythm looked down at the water before addressing you again with a sly smile.

“If you wanted to get in the bath with me, you could have just asked,”

You uttered something that was a mix between a laugh and a wet cough, half grinning, half pouting, as your hands flew up into the air.

“Sir, I don’t even know what to…” you turned away, deciding to grin at the ludicrous flirtation, “I’m going to work on these rules. You enjoy your bath. Without me.”

Once you took your rightful spot at the table once again, you uncapped the pen and wrote in large letters “House Rules” on the top line. You tapped the pen against the notepad and began to filter through the basic rules of the house. You wrote down the first few that came to mind, and then your thought process trickled to a halt.

What was there, though? Aside from cleaning up every once in a while and respecting each other’s boundaries, the rest seemed trivial. You thought of when you roomed with your cousin, but the both of you were chill enough with each other that the two of you barely needed any rules.

As you sat there, absently fiddling with the pen, your attention diverted to the fantasy drama on the television. You had no idea what was going on in the show, and actress’ heated monologue made no sense to you, but the dramatic music playing in the background was enough to give your brain a little break.

Blues popped into your view, appearing on the top of the loveseat with your pearls in his arms.
You hesitated for a moment before asking, “What’cha doing?”

The next second Blues was in front of you at the table, struggling to keep himself balanced while the pearls tangled around his whole body. He grunted as the string fell in front of his face and he nudged them aside to get a good look at you.

“HUMAN! I’VE BEEN THINKING ABOUT HOW YOU--oof--PUT A LOT OF EFFORT--oww--FOR US TO TRUST YOU, AND--could you help me out for a second?”

You grinned and began to untangle the beads from Blues’ body until the strand released its grip. You coiled the necklace into a pile in front of him and offered him a loose strand. He cleared his throat and took the pearls, standing straight.

“YOU PUT A LOT OF EFFORT FOR US TO FEEL AT EASE, TO THE POINT OF INJURY. IN RETURN, I WANT YOU TO TRUST IN US. WE WILL NEVER BETRAY YOUR FEELINGS, FRIEND. AS SUCH, YOU MAY RECLAIM THESE.”

He thrust out the pearls as offering and smiled at you in full confidence.

You reached for them, but paused. “Are you sure?”

“PLEASE.”

Your breath hitched as you carefully lifted the pearls from his arms, feeling the weight of the necklace and the smooth finish of the familiar beads. You’ve had them for a little more than two years as a momento of your sweet Grandma. She loved these pearls so much, almost as much as you loved her.

“Thank you,” you whispered as you scooped Blues to your chest for a hug, “This really means a lot to me.”

“I knew they were precious to you, but I didn’t know…!” Blues exclaimed against your collarbone. You hummed in response, smiling.

“When I was little, my grandmother told me stories of how she got these. She used to live near the beach, and she said one day she befriended a mermaid who would give her a pearl every time they met. I used to think she was making it up, but now I wonder if they’re true.”

She always had such an excited look on her face when she told those stories, even when her age and sickness caught up to her. When you got older, you listened just to humor her and she knew it, but she smiled every time. You should have taken her more seriously.

“Anyway, even if you had broken them, I think my Grandma would have been happy to know I was using them for a good cause.”

You set Blues down and wrapped the pearls around your neck, relishing in the feeling of its presence before getting back to the task at hand.

“So, rules. You listening, Rhythm?”

“Yep,” Rhythm leaned onto the tub edge towards you, looking on with curious eyes. You tore off the paper from the notepad and pinned it to the fridge.

“The first rule is that you must eat a good meal at least twice a day. I’ll make the food, so don’t try to cook anything. If I’m at work I’ll leave something for you on the counter, like sandwiches,”
You looked to Rhythm and then to the floor, “You don’t ever have to eat scraps again, if you don’t want to.”

Something clicked for Rhythm, as his neutral expression changed the slightest, though he said nothing. Blues looked as if he were about to say something, but fell quiet. You took a breath and continued.

“I’m going to make your own bedroom of sorts, underneath my bed. It’ll still be off limits for a day or two until I finish cleaning it, but once I have it set up, it’s yours. I won’t touch it unless I have your permission. All I ask is that you keep it quiet when I go to sleep. Same goes for the TV. “

“You’ll let us into your bedroom?” Blues asked, bouncing on his heels. “More places to explore?”

“That and the bathroom. I’m putting your tub under the sink. You can use it any time except when I’m in there in the mornings. You can’t go into the big tub or near the toilet, either. I’m worried that you can fall down the drain.”

Blues pumped his fist into the air, grinning, the cutie. He was probably starting to get stir-crazy in the apartment.

You glanced to the next rule and hesitated.

“No going...no, wait, nevermind. We’ll figure out that one later. Just, if you decide to leave the apartment, don’t use the door. You can’t lock it on the outside without a key. There’s a fire escape attached to the bedroom window if you need to use it.”

You grabbed the pen and crossed out the rule “no leaving the apartment”, biting your lip. Out of everything, this one was the most worrisome. And you still haven’t solved it.

“One last rule. Don’t open the door for strangers. Not that you’d want to anyway, but just to be on the safe side. I’ve had my share of strangers looking for the wrong people. And that’s it! If there are any more rules you want to add, we can put it on this list. What do you think?”

It was quiet for a bit, and then Blues folded his arms and nodded.

“These are more than acceptable, friend. If anything, they border on too lenient.”

Too lenient? As in not strict enough?

“They’re good,” Rhythm agreed, “I like ‘em.”

“What happens when we break the rules?”

“Um, well. If you break enough rules, I’ll kick you out. I guess.”

That was laughable, considering it would take something almost unforgivable to change your mind about them. How exactly were you supposed to punish someone who had already been through the worst? Maybe super weird, harmless but unusual punishments?

Rhythm snorted at the remark and Blues shot him a warning glare before putting his hands on his hips.

“Rest assured, we won’t be breaking any rules! But Friend, what do we do when you break them?”

You blinked and scratched your head, looking at the list. “That’s a good question. Suggesting my own punishment isn’t very effective, so...come up with one?”
The devilish smirks on the brothers faces made you regret your statement.

“Please don’t go overboard!” you exclaimed, glancing from one to the other, “If you kill me, no one will be here to pay rent!”

They laughed. Despite being the bigger one, Rhythm’s quiet chuckles were almost drowned out by Blues’ louder, but deeper chortles.

“We’ll find something, don’t worry.” Rhythm replied once they had calmed down.

“Just be on your best behavior, Friend!” Blues wagged his finger at you and winked. You grinned and stepped away from the fridge.

“Yes, sir.” You responded, giving him a mock salute. Honestly though, how many rules could you break?

As the night wound down, you and Blues collaborated to make some shower curtains for their tub, while Rhythm had clambered his way out of said tub and watched the sewing machine. You spoke to them about your plans for redecorating for their space, and though you were more concentrated on manning the machine, you’d look up to see their sockets lit with sparks of excitement.

And you were excited too. Really, really excited.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for sticking with me, guys! As soon as I got back to work, we had pretty much two weeks of crazy preparation for a visit from the higher-ups. All of us were kicked into overdrive, which meant that some days I’d come home, sleep, wake up, and head back to work. I apologize if this chapter is as not up to par with some of the others, too. For some reason I felt that something was off with it and couldn’t figure it out.

On the bright side, I have another break! Yay! Now excuse me while I cry over the new episodes of Digimon and catch up with the other fics I’m reading...
Annoying Habits are Hard to Break

Chapter Summary

You and the brothers have an incident before going to work.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Another day, another dollar, you thought as your alarm chimed from underneath your pillow. You groaned and disabled the alarm by pure habit. Five more minutes. The phone chimed again. Damnit. You dragged yourself to the closet, retrieved your clothes, and stumbled into the shower.

After you finished cleaning up and stopped regretting being awake, you tip-toed out of the bathroom and headed to the kitchen to make breakfast.

But it looked like someone beat you to it. The lights were on, and while you peeked over to the loveseat to see Rhythm still resting in his bed, Blues was nowhere to be found.

“G-GOOD MORNING, FRIEND!”

The Bitty greeted you from the table with sopping wet clothes and a nervous smile, “I’M MAKING A SURPRISE FOR YOU AND IT’S NOT A BAD ONE, SO YOU SHOULD DEFINITELY NOT TAKE A STEP FURTHER!”

“Why are you all wet?” you asked, noting the drops of liquid falling from his clothes. You leaned closer and caught a distinct, sweet smell, “You smell like milk.”

It only took a second to piece together the incident once you stepped to the side. Milk flooded the kitchen floor as the carton laid abandoned on its side, empty of its contents.

You looked back to Blues.

“IT’S NOT COOKING!” he squeaked, “No fire was involved!”

You sighed, and then giggled, covering your mouth and turning away to muffle the sound. This was the first time he tried to make breakfast for you, and his efforts, though it was a failed attempt, made your heart swell.

“You’re not wrong!” you replied as you calmed, “but we gotta clean this up.”

“I’m sorry!”

“I’m not mad, Blues. There’s…” your mouth turned into a mischievous grin as you finished your sentence, “No use in crying over spilt milk!”

“I’M NOT SORRY,” he remarked, but teleported to the dish sponge regardless. You leaned over the mess as best you could for a dishcloth but ended up stepping in it anyway. Ick, the cold milk felt odd against your toes, and soon you knew it’d become sticky. You tossed the carton into the trash and started mopping up the milk. While you covered a large area, Blue was able to get
underneath the refrigerator easier, pushing the sponge across the floor with his whole body.

You wrung out your dishcloth and Blues’ sponge a few times before giving the floor a quick rinse with water, cleaned your toes, and put Blues back onto the counter.

“I’ll have to wash your clothes when I get back,” you smiled, giving him a wet washcloth to wipe himself down. He peeled off his shirt while you went to the couch for cleaner clothes.

You picked up the only other pair of shorts and the tee, and starting ripping into one of the packets of boxers when Rhythm sat up from bed.

“Morning,” you greeted with a smile. It was actually kind of nice, since this was the first time you’ve seen Rhythm wake up on his own accord and with no interruptions. He looked cute, looking all dazed and sleepy.

“Morning,” he looked down at your small pile of clothes and tilted his head.

“Blues needs a change of clothes,” you explained, freeing a pair of boxers from the pack and started on the socks. “I have work today, so I’ll make you two something for lunch while I’m still here. Ahh, look at these cute socks!”

You fawned over the tiny knitted fabric and headed back to the counter, where Blues finished cleaning himself. Light blue dusted over his face when you returned. His shirt and pants laid in the pile beside him, and the washcloth laid over his lap as he waited.

“THANK YOU,” he exclaimed, reaching for the new clothes.

“You’re welcome!” you said as you turned back to the real task: breakfast. Cereal was out of the question now, which meant toast was your only other option.

You dropped bread into the toaster and took out the peanut butter when you heard a clack against wood. It was as if something heavy dropped something on the table, and in the corner of your eye, you saw Blues flash out of sight.

“What did I say?!” the smaller brother’s voice rang out against the silence.

That didn’t sound good. You whipped around to see Rhythm on all fours on the table with Blues as his side, rubbing his back.

“S’okay,” Rhythm wheezed, “Just misjudged the distance.”

Blues’ concerned gaze switched a second to irritation, “That’s not what I’m talking about! The next time, you call for me when you need to teleport!”

Teleportation must have been more taxing than using bone attacks, since he seemed to do them with no problem yesterday. You dropped the butter knife onto the counter and moved closer to the brothers in concern.

“Are you okay?” you asked as you reached for the skeleton. His gaze locked onto your fingers and he jerked back, smacking you away. Flickers of orange escaped his socket as you watched his whole body tense, his face contorted in a taut frown and wide eyes.

You stepped away from the table in an instant, holding your fingers against your chest. That stung more than you expected, and you weren’t talking about your hands.
Rhythm’s panicked expression faded, leaving him looking at you with guilty frown.

“Bro! Apologize!” Blues whispered, but the worry in his voice overran any irritation he may have felt, “Come on, you didn—”

“He doesn’t have to,” you snapped, the words sounding harsher than you meant. You softened your voice, berating yourself for their startled expressions, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you like that.”

You turned back to the counter, glaring at the toast that popped up. Real mature, you. He’s only consciously met you within 24 hours, so what did you expect? They weren’t going to get over their trauma just because you gave them a place to stay and said a few kind words.

While you wrestled down your emotions, you slathered the slices with peanut butter and cut one slice into eight pieces, carefully putting the sides together to make four sandwiches. You stacked them onto the tiny plates and put them on the table.

“Friend,” Blues called for you.

Your cell phone alarm beeped, signaling your time to leave.

“Oh crap, I gotta go! Umm,”

You pulled out your old lunchbox and stuffed the cold pack from the freezer inside, slapped a piece of ham between two bread slices, and sealed the sandwich in a bag.

“Here, this is for lunch or whenever you get hungry,” you dropped the sandwich into the lunchbox and placed it behind them, and picked up the pamphlets instead, “Sorry it’s not much, I’ll make a big dinner when I come home! Bye!”

You shoved your toast into your mouth and the pamphlets in your purse, unlocked the chain lock, grabbed your keys, and ran out the door. You shoved your key in to lock the bolt, and once you gave the knob a little jiggle, flew down the hallway and stairs.

You slowed your pace after reaching the sidewalk, trying to quell the grumbling of your stomach and the burning frustration of your own disappointment by munching on your toast. What a morning. You had to do better than this. So what could you do?

While you boarded the train, you changed your alarm to thirty minutes earlier to make proper meals. You weren’t the best cook, but the Internet could help you with that.

The other issue was that you had to slow down.

They needed time and space, and you weren’t giving them a chance to have either. You were just treating them like pets again, and if you had any sort of respect for them, then you needed to stop.

The daily commute came to an end as you reached the storefront. This season’s gorgeous wedding gowns dominated the windows with lace and tulle, while the matching heels and clutches were displayed on small pedestals beside them. You knocked on the double doors and caught sight of your boss moving towards the door.

“Good morning! How was your day off?” your boss asked as she opened the doors. You greeted her with a smile.

“It was fine, thanks. Was it busy yesterday?”
The beads strands of her hair ornaments clacked as the two of you walked further into the store, creating background noise as she talked about sales.

“We had an entire bridal party come in for measuring, so you and the others will be busy for while!”

She returned to her office while you moved to the alterations room, pulling back the curtain entrance and peeking in. One of your coworkers had already taken place at his station, reviewing the alterations tickets for one of the orders as well as photographs of the clients.

“Morning, Frank!” you gave him a wave and set your purse down by your desk. His cotton body stretched and expanded to a human shape and gave you a nod.

“Morning. Morning! MORNING!”

“Good morning! how’s everyone doing?” Bethany, the head of the department, popped her head in and smiled, “We’re going to have a quick meeting and get down to business. Ready?”

You and Frank followed Bethany to the sales floor, where the rest of the team gathered into a huddle. The sales representatives chatted amongst themselves over the soft music playing on the speakers, and you mingled in with the familiar faces as the boss waltzed in, clipboard and all.

“Okay everyone! Results from inventory are going to take a few more days, so I’ll update you when they come in. What I can tell you is that we did go over hours last Thursday, so I may send a few of you home early over the next week.”

Hushed whispers erupted from the floor as one of your coworkers gave you a knowing look, which you returned with a smirk of your own. Sometimes it was nice to have a short day, though the pay would be missed. The boss clapped her hands to silence the crowd.

“Remember! Those who sell more will get the hours versus those who sell less. We’re still in the slow season, so every sale counts! Make sure you offer matching accessories and send them to alterations if they need anything done! Now, in other news…”

The boss went on to explain the new shipments expected to arrive and other details about the store, and finished the meeting with only a minute to spare. The team dispersed into positions as she went to open the double doors, and you retreated back to your desk to start on the day’s projects. Frank had hopped into his own position, readying the fabric with his floating material hands, and Bethany took the third desk in the corner, ready to make fitting appointments for the completed orders.

“So, how’s the little ones you picked up?” Frank asked in a low voice, raising a bushy, felted eyebrow at you as you glanced his way. You smiled and gave a quick thumbs-up before taking a dress from the holding bay, inspecting the ticket.

“Good! I took them to a place North Side, and they woke the other one up with some medicine. They’re…” you paused, biting your cheek, “I think they’re okay, just need some time to get used to things. I don’t think they came from a good place.”

“You’re doing a good thing. I know plenty of people who woulda not even looked twice at ‘em. If you hadn’t got ‘em when you did, they might of Fallen.”

That was nice to hear, even though it pained you a bit to think of what might have happened. You flashed him a smile and thanked him, and then focused on ripping out the stitches on the side of the dress in front of you. Bethany soon finished her phone calls and took her place at the desk in front of you, picking up another order that you had seen her working on a few days before.
“So I heard you talking. Are those Bitties still staying at your place?” the older woman asked, turning to look at you before resuming her own task. You knew she was asking more out of curiosity than anything, but she could be a little set in her ways.

“Yeah. I’m still preparing the apartment, but they’ll be staying with me.”

“Have you gotten them checked out for any diseases, like Rabies?”

You had to fight back the initial reaction of asking if she was serious, and that they were skeletons for crying out loud. And Frank, dear goodness, the monster, rolled his eyes and spluttered as you regained your composure.

“I don’t think they can get Rabies,” you replied, careful with your tone, “Can they, Frank?”

“No,” he remarked. Bethany threw her hands up before threading the serger.

“Just making sure! You don’t know what kind of things they’re carrying if you picked them off the street!”

“Don’t worry though, Beth. I went and got them checked out.” you said to reassure her. You patted Frank’s back as you passed by him, motioning to the lady and shaking your head. He puffed and returned to cutting fabric.

“That’s good, sweetie. You’ve got to be careful, you know. I once got a dog...”

The conversation steered itself away as the day went onwards, eventually falling to silence at times as the three of you worked on orders throughout the day. You read through the pamphlets during lunch in the meantime, in which you learned that human food wasn’t supposed to be the normal nutrition source; monster food replenished their magic supply and made digestion easier for their bodies to handle.

And that meant, as you bid goodbye to your coworkers for the day, that you needed to go on another shopping trip.

Your favorite international store was just a few more blocks away from your work, and so you picked up some ground monster meat, bread, and a few other staple items in their selection. You also picked up a small snow globe with a little town in the center and a tomato pincushion for their room.

If Rhythm couldn’t teleport, that meant either Blues had to help him around, or he’d be stuck trying to climb onto everything. You had seen small ladders available at Mama Cry’s, but you hadn’t thought it was important until now. There had to be something you could make for him.

You took a look around and saw the popsicles in the freezer section, and then the idea sparked. You scoured the store for a bit and eventually found a bag of popsicle sticks. Contented, you checked out and started to make your way back home.

You caught the next train and made it home with bags in tow, feeling butterflies in your stomach as you unlocked the door.

“I’m back! Sorry I’m late,” you called out, slipping out of your shoes and moving to the kitchen. The lunch box you put earlier was tipped over and crumbs littered the top of the empty sandwich bag. That’s right, you promised them a big dinner. Did you cook monster food the same as human food?
As you put the groceries away, Blues made his presence known by appearing right in front of the bags, relief evident on his face as you greeted him.

“Where were you?!” he asked as he gripped the sleeve of your blazer.

“I went grocery shopping after work. Needed to get actual food for you guys,” you smiled, gently prying his grip off with your fingers to finish the chore. “I bet you’ll feel a lot better with this stuff than what I’ve been feeding you. I was thinking of meatball sandwiches. Did something happen?”

The Bitty gave you a blank look before grinning and taking a step back.

“NO, FRIEND! NOTHING!”

You had left in such a hurry earlier this morning that you only just noticed the clothes Blues wore. They fit him a little better than your handmade pair, and the socks made your heart melt at how much cuter they looked on him.

“I gotta remember to clean your clothes. But I was right, you’re adorable,” you commented, about to poke him. He anticipated your fingers, his hands ready to catch them as you pulled away last second. Seriously, when were you going to learn?

Blues frowned at you as you turned away, and his hands fell to his sides.

“I’m going to go change quick. Where’s Rhythm?”

“In the bathroom. I’ll help with dinner when you come back!” he hollered after you.

The bathroom door was open when you passed, but you decided to change into more comfortable clothes before checking in with Rhythm. You hung up your Blazer and tossed your blouse and skirt into the hamper, where the pile collapsed after its new additions. Tonight you were going to work on picking up your room, and maybe you could get to the fun part by tomorrow.

You sighed and moved to the hallway to peek into the bathroom.

When you moved their tub to the bathroom, you had stuck it underneath the sink, where the only outlet was located in the whole room. You stuck the curtains on a wire you had bent from a hanger, which hung from the pipe. They were drawn back while wisps of steam rose and hit the porcelain, and you followed the trail where Rhythm was leaning over the tub. In his hands were Blues’ stained clothes.

You cracked the door open and he whipped his head to see you. His shoulders relaxed as he recognized your face, and smiled.

“Yo.”

“Hey,” you replied, quiet, “Can I come in?”

“Yeah.”

You pushed the door in all the way and sat on the floor, looking in at the tub. Blues’ pants were soaking on the bottom, while Rhythm swished the shirt in his hands around in the water. They must have stolen a sliver of bar soap, as a piece of it floated at the top.

“You didn’t have to do that,” you mumbled, “but thank you.”

“No prob. We’re not kids, we can do this much.”
You curled your hands up in your lap, “You’re right. Sorry.”

A few seconds passed by as the warmth of the bathroom soaked into your skin and clashed with the cold tile under your legs. Your mind was blank, and you weren’t sure what you came in to do other than to see if he was okay. But you didn’t want to leave just yet, either.

“I have some stuff to make ladders. I thought it’d be easier on you if I made some and put it up around the house. It’s hard to teleport right now, right?”

He hummed in response, but said nothing else. You fidgeted in place.

“I’m sorry about this morning. I have a habit of being handsy with stuff, and I don’t really think about it. I didn’t mean to yell either. I’m going to do my best not to do it again.”

Nothing. He let the shirt sink and pulled up the pants from the bottom, and you were left wondering about how much you fucked up earlier this morning. This was the part where you needed to leave him alone.

“I’m going to go make dinner now. I’ll have Blues to come get you when it’s ready.”

You started to get up.

“Wait.” You stopped in place as Rhythm dropped clothes and clambered away from the tub. He extended his hand towards you.

“Gimme your hand.”

“What?” you asked. Soft tendrils of magic had beaten you to it, as he pulled your hand to him. You moved closer from the movement as he cradled your fingers and leaned into your touch, staring at you.

“I know you’re not dangerous,” he said quietly, “I’m...bad with surprises.”

You didn’t know what to say, or if you did, you didn’t know how to articulate it. Thankfully, Blues’ voice carried down the hallway, calling your name.

“I gotta go,” you spluttered, and he released your hand in response.

“Ohkay.”

You bolted up and swung the bathroom door open, feeling your heart pounding against your chest as you moved towards the kitchen. Wow. Okay.

As you returned to the counter, you spotted the bottom cupboard open with a wiggling cookie sheet on the floor. You picked up the pan and met with Blues’ wide gaze.

“It’s still not cooking!” he squeaked.

Chapter End Notes

A day late, but it's longer than normal. Happy October! I want to make a Halloween chapter in time for this month, and that means I have to ramp up updates. I'm gonna do
my best, guys! Thanks for hanging with the story!

I feel that I should warn you about the direction of the story right now. My current plans are to put romance with Reader and the Bitties, and though it will be a long while before it fully develops, I want to ask if I should put in the tags for it now. Thoughts? Also, I know there may be some people who enjoy the story without any romance, and I apologize for leading you this far and giving you the news now. I debated about this subject with myself several times, and when it comes down to it, it's what I want to write.

Err...also, what exactly counts as graphic violence? How graphic is graphic?

Oh! For anyone who is writing a Bittybones fic or is planning to in the future, I made a small list of items that Bitties use or can use! It's here on my tumblr.
Cleaning.

Chapter Summary

Time to clean out the bedroom.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

You grunted as you pushed the mattress into the hallway one more time, effectively giving you space to move around your room again. Granted it wasn’t much space, but you could move. Your bedframe was a simple, metal fold-up base, so you could easily reach underneath it.

Aww. You have never regretted your poor room-keeping skills as you have right now. Look at all the junk piled underneath your bed! As if the closet wasn’t enough!

It was a good thing you got dinner out of the way before attempting this. Thanks to the Internet and Blues’ moral support, dinner passed without a major incident. You gave Blues the job of forming their own meatballs while you manned the oven, ensuring that any misfortune was just a minor inconvenience and not a life-threatening mistake. Blues fell into the mixing bowl once and ended up squished in the meaty mixture, and you had to pluck him out and remove the meaty bits from his body. It was a messy affair, but at least the end product tasted good.

Although this current predicament left him in the only clean hoodie and boxers, so there he was, wiping down the table while Rhythm took another stab at doing Bitty laundry in the sink. And just imagine, this time last week, you were just chilling on the couch and surfing the net. Life had a funny way of working.

Hey, you found your cousin’s shoes; she asked about those a couple months ago. Random fashion and sewing magazines littered a good corner of space, and your old phone charger peeked out from an abandoned blouse that you lost about a year ago. You also saw that this is where your socks migrated to when you weren’t looking. Wait; was that Sir Pidgeon near the wall? It was!

You stepped in between the openings of the frame and pulled the pigeon plushie from its hiding spot. It uttered an off-key coo as soon as you approached it, and you smiled.

“Your batteries still work? Hot damn, Pidge, you’re tough.”

Sir Pidgeon here had been a present from your cousin, mostly as a gag gift for your birthday. She pressured you to once play a ridiculous dating game with birds, and while it sounded over-the-top and nonsensical, you enjoyed it enough to have a favorite character. She must have gotten him over the Internet, because you never saw these at any store.

This guy, even though he was stuffed, helped you get through your first few years of living alone. Maybe it was crazy, but you talked out loud to him about your stress or how your day went. Of course he’d just coo from the motion sensor, but somehow it made you feel less scared. Over time you just got used to being by yourself, and Sir Pidgeon must have slipped to the depths of underneath your bed.
“Sorry for leaving you down there, dude. I’ll make sure you have a seat of honor on the bookshelf.”

You set him aside and began picking up the rest of your belongings. The blouse and socks went to the hamper with the rest of the dirty clothes, and you moved your cousin’s shoes to the hallway. The magazines went into your already-cramped bookshelf, and anything that wasn’t worth keeping went into the trash bag.

The last thing you picked up was the shoebox. This was the only thing you willingly kept down there. A light layer of dust collected on top of the lid, and you brushed it away with your hand.

Now wasn’t the time for looking at this. You had other things to do.

You set it on top of your bookshelf, cleared your thoughts, and turned back to the bed. Right, now you had to put in the risers.

Since the frame was light enough, you slipped the cones underneath the legs with little difficulty. There! That should give the Rhythm enough room without hitting his head on the lights!

You took a moment to rearrange the decorations for their space. Looking at it now, you wished you had picked up a plush mat for a carpet, or made a couple beanbags for them to have a place to sit. For now, you arranged the pincushion and the snow globe near the middle, and took the emptied desk organizer and put it on the opposite side.

Their beds still sat out in the living room. You glanced at the cluttered hallway, planning a path through the hall of pillows and the mattress against the wall. Here goes nothing.

Sir Pidgeon guarded the hallway. You eyed the small bit of floor between pillows and the rest of the carpet. Just take a hop right there, and~!

Dexterity wasn’t your strong suit. You tripped over the wad of blankets, shrieked, and fell face-first into the floor of pillows. The mattress wasn’t ready for that kind of movement, and you struggled to move aside for the falling object, only to have it stopped by the other wall.

Blues appeared in front of you. His socket blazed blue as he climbed over the pillow and reached for your face.

“Are you okay?!”

“I’m fine,” your muffled voice came from the pillows. He brushed away the stray hairs from your sights as you peeked out from the fluff. He smiled, and soon he started chuckling, leaning against your forehead.

“Are you stuck?” his voice reverberated against your skull.

“I don’t think so,” you said, reaching out to keep the Bitty stabilized while you shifted to see him better.

“This kind of gives me an idea though. How about a sleepover in the living room? I don’t have work tomorrow, so it’d be like a trial run.”

“Sleepover?” he tilted his head.

“Yeah! I’ll just sleep on the floor in front of the TV. I can put on a movie and make popcorn, and we can just hang out until we wanna go to sleep. I just gotta do a few more things for your room
Blues scratched his head and frowned, looking to the side with a puzzled expression for a moment before he consented.

“I’m okay with it, but you want to sleep on the floor for fun?”

“Well, yes,” really, there was no better way to explain it. That’s just what happens at sleepovers. “But the fun part is because I’ll be with you guys. The floor’s not so comfy, but that’s what I have pillows for.”

You picked Blues up from the pillow and set him back onto stable ground, and then pushed up against the mattress with your back. It settled back onto the wall, and you stretched your muscles to get rid of the small pains. You looked to the floor.

The moment your eyes met Blues, he turned away to face the living room, whipped the hood over his head and yelled, “I’LL ASK MY BRO!” before teleporting out of sight.

You were going to the same place anyway, but if he felt that strong about it…?

After a few seconds of picking up a couple of pillows and stalling for time, you walked to the living room and plucked the brother’s mattresses off the cushion and the bedframes from the floor. It looked like Rhythm had laid Blues clothes out on the counter to dry and had been inspecting the toaster to pass the time. Blues stood next to him, mumbling something in a hurry.

“I’m going back to the room if you need me!” you announced. The brothers looked your way, with Blues adorning a larger than normal grin, and Rhythm halfheartedly waving his hand.

“‘Kay.” Rhythm replied.

With the necessary items in tow, you moved back to the bedroom to finish up your project. You unpacked the bed frames and placed the mattresses on top. Blues’ mattress was just a little shy of filling the whole space, but it wasn’t terrible. You laid their blankets over and placed their beds facing the opening.

The hard part was going to be the lighting. You dug up an old string of Christmas lights and started tying the strand to the metal rungs of your bed frame with yarn. Starting in the middle of their area, you tied the lights up bit by bit until the string had just enough length to reach the surge protector. Once you finished tying, you shoved the mattress back onto the frame and ducked underneath.

They looked like fireflies, or stars. It made for some sweet mood lighting.

You were excited to show them, but you still had some cleaning up to do. For now you made a beeline for the living room and scouted the brothers out. They had moved from the counter to the top of the loveseat, watching TV.

“So what do you think about the sleepover, Rhythm?”

“I’m good with it. You really wanna sleep on the floor though?”

Him too? “Yes.”

“Not even on the couch? Not that I’m complaining.”

“It’s nice for naps, but not for the whole night. I’d rather take the floor.”
Just like with Blues, something about what you said didn’t register with him. He just stared at you with a blank face.

“Did...did you guys want to take the floor instead? Or do you really want me to sleep in my room? ‘Cause you don’t have to go with it because I suggested it.”

“That’s not it!” Blues piped up, “You’re just, just funny for a human?”

“How so?” you asked as you crossed your arms.

He fidgeted in place, looking as if he were caught in a harrowing situation, “You want to be on the floor! It’s—it’s kind of reversed? YOU EXPLAIN THIS!”

He prodded Rhythm with his elbow, who grunted from the light impact. The taller brother widened his stance and stared at you dead in the eyes, smirking.

“We’re just wondering who’s the pet and who’s the owner here.”

Blues smacked his own face and pulled Rhythm to the side, though not by much.

“HE MEANS THAT IN LESS INSULTING WORDS.”

Laughter bubbled out and you rested your hands on your hips, leaning closer to them.

“Everyone’s slept on the floor before. Anyone who tells you different is lying.”

As you prepared the arrangements for the sleepover, the horizon began to change colors from blue to gold. The smell of popcorn filled your apartment as you gazed at the outlines of the clouds from your kitchen window. You allowed yourself to breathe and enjoy the scenery in relative quiet before the microwave beeped.

As you were filling up the popcorn bowl, Rhythm and Blues were scrolling through the various movies on the video streaming site. You returned to the mess of blankets and pillows just as they stopped on an anime movie about a human family that were the size of Bitties.

“This one is based off of an old book. Wanna watch it?”

Blues nodded while Rhythm shrugged.

“Can humans be as small as us? I’ve never seen them our size,” Blues asked.

“I don’t know,” you pondered the thought for a moment, “Maybe there are tiny humans, and we just don’t know about them yet. There’s still a lot of places people haven't discovered in Monster territory. I don’t see why it’s not possible.”

You placed the popcorn bowl onto the couch along with a pillow and blanket for the brothers. Instead of curling up on the cushions, you bundled up in one of the lighter blankets and sat on the floor. The pillows did a good job of making your spot more comfy, and feeling content with your sleeping situation, you started the movie.

“Wonder what they’d be like,” you heard Rhythm say as the orchestra started playing with the appearance of the title screen.

You wondered about it too. Or, more accurately, you wondered what it was like to be small like them. What would you do if you had to scale your counter for food every morning, or if your favorite animals would become terrifying if you met them face-to-face. And unlike your new
housemates, you didn’t have magic to help you from place to place or to defend yourself. The life expectancy rate would be terrible.

Rhythm had buried himself under their blanket during the course of the movie and was watching with a sleepy gaze from under the covers. Meanwhile, Blues watched the screen with unwavering vigilance, as if he’d miss something important if he were to look away. You were more interested in their reactions than what was going on in the story since you had seen this movie several times. The popcorn dwindled away during the course of the movie (which was mostly your doing, but you caught Blues stealing a kernel here and there), and you started to succumb to the pillows below.

The credits began to roll with soft music playing in the background, and you closed your eyes and relished the warmth from the blankets.

“Friend!” the sound of Blues voice interrupted the song as something touched your hand. You opened your eyes halfway and smiled.

“Hey, how did you like the movie?” you asked, voice thick with sleep, “You can watch another one if you want.”

For a second he didn’t move, and he gazed at you with a neutral expression. He then smiled in return and shook his head, squeezing your finger for just a second, “It was amazing, friend, but no thanks. Sleep well.”

“Goodnight,” you replied, closing your eyes once again. You heard him shift away and back onto the loveseat to join his brother, and you allowed yourself to drift off into the world of dreams. Dreams of tables that were too tall and stars lying underneath your bed.

Chapter End Notes

Not much going on in this chapter. Just a little bit of housekeeping!

Thanks for the advice and suggestions about the tags! They're updated now with Relationship tags and an additional Hurt/Comfort tag because there's a lot of that in this fic. Again, my apologies to those who felt like they were being mislead.

Not much else to say right now, other than to expect another update next Sunday. Thanks guys!
The day started out good, and just...

Morning arrived in the form of muted rays of sunlight piercing through from your kitchen window. The loveseat tried in vain to stop the onslaught of light, but to no avail. Your back ached with a dull pain from sleeping on the floor, and you opened your eyes against your better judgment. A sticky, uncomfortable feeling of something plastered on your eyeballs made you hesitant to close them again, but you wanted sleep more than the ability to see anyways. Sleeping in contacts always sucked.

Sleep wasn’t going to accept you back, it seemed. You tried drifting off again, but as the minutes passed by you realized it wasn’t going to happen any time soon. Accepting defeat, you sat up and stared at the blank TV screen, rubbed your eyes, and stretched. The silence was nice; you didn’t want to think about anything right now.

“Good morning, friend!”

You turned to Blues and buried your head between your arms on the other cushion, humming in acknowledgment. Why did this feel more comfy? Whatever. You weren’t complaining. Just a little more sleep.

Small shuffles broke the quiet, and you felt tiny, bony hands tangle into your hair and scratch your scalp.

A small huff, “Honestly, the two of you.”

“Morning,” you mumbled, smiling. Aww, you could never ignore this guy.

“The morning isn’t going to take care of itself! What shall we have for breakfast?”

He tried to pull away, but just like the last time, his phalanges made the perfect trap for hair.

“Oh no,” he muttered while trying to detangle himself from your locks. He was able to pull away just a bit before something snagged, and the small jolt of pain shook you awake. You wanted to move your head, but he was too close to the roots that you would have gained a Bitty hair accessory instead.

“If it’s just a few strands, I’ll just--” you groped around to find Blue’s fingers, and earned a deep squeak as you gently squeezed against his rib cage.

“Sorry! Are you okay?!”

“I’M FINE! JUST SURPRISED!” he exclaimed in a strained voice. You trailed your fingers down his arms, much softer this time, to find the knots.
“That's a little more hair than I’d like to lose. Do you think you can loosen just a few of them?”

“UM. YES!”

He jerked his hands back, and you yelped from the stinging of your scalp.

“SORRY! SORRY!!!”

“I’m okay. Just, maybe not so rough?”

Blues muttered to himself as he carefully planned his movements, and you gently picked at the loops while another voice joined the fray.

“I wanted to ask what was going on, but I see you’re both caught up in something.”

“NOT FUNNY.” Blues retorted, “COME OVER HERE AND HELP US!”

“Please?” you added.

Rhythm chuckled, and you heard his footsteps as he reached closer.

“How can I say ‘no’ to that?”

Soon another pair of hands reached between your fingers and picked at the strands, loosening them a little at a time. The two of you pulled free after a moment, and you rubbed the sore follicles to ease the pain.

“Morning, Rhythm. Thank you.”

“Mornin’, Babe. You two were more twisted together than a Pyrope hyped up on monster candy.”

You didn’t know what a Pyrope was, but you smiled regardless. Blues scoffed, but he turned away to hide a grin.

“Yes, thank you for the assistance. Not with the jokes.”

“Aww. Come on, brother. You know you like ‘em.”

“Hmph.” But he still smiled.

Watching the scene before you filled your heart with warm, fuzzy feelings. With another stretch and a plan in mind, you stood and gave the brothers some space.

“I’ll go make breakfast.”

Your breakfast plan for today consisted of pancakes for you and Cinnamon Bunnies for the Bitties. As you mixed and poured the batter onto the griddle pan, you searched the cupboards for the syrup bottle and turned up with nothing. Looks like honey would be your alternative for today.

You popped in the Cinnamon Bunny into the microwave for a few seconds while the pancakes finished cooking, and soon your apartment smelled like a tiny bakery. The cinnamon wafting in the air smelt more delicious than you had anticipated, and you found yourself eying the microwave on occasion. To take your mind off of it, you plated your own breakfast, grabbed the honey, and set it onto the table. You tore the monster food into halves and set it onto the brothers’ plates.

Blues popped onto the table with Rhythm just as you retrieved everything and took a seat.
“Here you go,” you slid the plates towards them and sat down. You took the honey bottle and poured it over your pancakes. Boy did that cinnamon smell so good. Clearly you picked the wrong thing. Perhaps you could curb your craving if you just sprinkled some cinnamon over your pancakes?

Blues had sat cross-legged to enjoy his breakfast while Rhythm rolled up the sleeves of his new hoodie.

“Babe, if you want it that badly, you can just ask.”

You hadn’t noticed that you were staring again until Rhythm’s voice caught your attention, and you pushed your chair back from the table.

“No! No, you need that!” you laughed to try to cover up your embarrassment, “I know what to do about this. You go ahead!”

“You can have my share!” Blues offered as you turned back to the cupboards.

“No thanks! I’m good!”

You pushed around what few spices you owned for the cinnamon and turned back to your breakfast.

Well well, it looks like you weren’t the only one having breakfast envy. Rhythm looked up at you with a small bit of pancake in his hand, and was right in the middle of dipping it into the pool of honey that collected onto your plate. Blues looked between you and his brother, munching on his breakfast.

“We’ll do a tiny trade, just this once,” you admitted, tearing off a small part of his cinnamon bunny and popping it into your mouth. “You need monster food more than I do, so this is it!”

You savored the monster pastry bit and decided to coat your pancakes with cinnamon in the meanwhile.

“Oh, he said after downing the pancake piece. You bit into your own pancakes and found the taste of cinnamon mixed with honey to be satisfying enough.

“Bro!” Blues chastised as Rhythm took his pastry and turned to dip it on your plate again, “That’s rude!”

“It’s okay. I don’t care.” you replied. Actually, you found it somehow uplifting that he was willing to come close to you. Or your food. Something. “It’s the honey you like?”

“Yeah. I’ve never had this before. You wanna try, brother?”

He gulped but turned his face, “We have our own food right in front of us!”

“Here, just a taste!” you said as you put a drop of honey onto your index finger. You offered it to him.

“I-IF YOU INSIST!” he exclaimed, scraping it off with a piece of cinnamon bunny. He nibbled on the pastry and gave it a critical look before forcing the rest of the piece down.

“It’s very...sweet.”

“You don’t like it?”
“It’s not bad! It’s not good, either. It’s edible?”

You chuckled as you licked the rest from your finger, “That’s okay. There are foods I don’t like either.”

Breakfast continued as usual, with Rhythm soaking up the excess honey from your plate with his pastry and Blues trying a bit of your pancakes. You saved the extras for another time and the three of you cleaned the kitchen together.

“Give me a few seconds to tidy up, and you can check out your room! Just wait here,” you said to them at the table. You picked up your bedding and rushed to your room, smiling as Sir Pidge cooed on your way in. You hoped they were excited about having a space of their own, and you took a little more time to properly make your bed. You glanced around the room for any last minute tidying, and satisfied with your inspection, you went back for the brothers.

“Ready? I’ll carry you there!”

You offered your hands to them, grinning.

“LET’S GO!” Blues cheered as he clambered into your hands. Rhythm shrugged and followed after him, and the two looked up at you expectantly. Your heartbeat rose as your fingers cupped around them.

“It’s your room, so you can do whatever you want with it. Just make sure the lights don’t touch my mattress, or you might end up with a grilled human!” you explained, “Oh, and there’s going to be a noise when we enter, Rhythm. It’s just Sir Pidge. I can give you a tour of the room later!”

You zipped back through the hallway. Rhythm leaned his back against your fingers while Blues clung to them and peered through the spaces towards your room. As expected, Sir Pidgeon announced your arrival as you rushed passed the bookcase and set them onto the floor.

“Let me get the lights, aaand, there!”

As you flipped the surge protector on, the Christmas lights illuminated underneath your bed and guided the way for them. You sat cross-legged and motioned them to enter.

Blues went first, and Rhythm trailed behind him into the space, leaving you to wait for any indication of acceptance or otherwise from the pair. You distracted yourself by tracing the patterns on your bedspread, trying to ignore the beating of your heart and the plethora of ideas for decorating that came a little too late. The quiet continued after what felt like forever. You fidgeted in place and debated whether to look inside or to come back later.

“Friend,” Blues called out for you as he poked his head out from the entrance. Stars were in his eyes as he moved, placing a hand over your leg and looked to you.

“Thank you.”

He didn’t say it loud, but his tone sounded so sincere that you felt it straight through your core. You leaned forward a little and stroked his back lightly before remembering yourself and pulled back your hands.

“Is it okay? Not too dark? Is it tall enough for Rhythm?”

“It’s just right,” Rhythm chimed in as he made an appearance, “But, uh, it’s not gonna fall on us, is it?”
You frowned as a newfound worry wormed its way into your head, “It shouldn’t. Let’s test it. Just stay here and you can tell me if it’s going to be a problem.”

The height difference with the risers was something you weren’t used to yet, so you had to hop a little to climb onto the mattress. You guessed the spot where their beds laid underneath and sat on it, feeling a little more comfortable as the bed frame stayed perfectly still despite your movement.

“How is it?” you asked as they judged their new ceiling. God, you hoped it was okay. It was horrifying to think what would happen if the bed collapsed on them.

Rhythm gave you a thumbs-up, and you breathed in relief.

“Good. Wanna come up here and see the room?”

You hoped that Rhythm agreed, because as soon as you asked, Blues had teleported the two of them right beside you.

“PLEASE GIVE US THE TOUR!”

“Oh, well,” you started, just a tad taken back from his enthusiasm, “This is my bed. I sleep here, obviously. There’s the window and the fire escape outside, if you wanna go out.”

You bit your tongue on bringing up the subject, as the brothers hopped onto the nightstand to get a better view.

“We’re that far up?!” Blues exclaimed, pressing against the glass. It was only the second floor, so to you, it wasn’t that high. Then again, you weren’t three inches tall. Once you gave them a few seconds to admire the view, you scooped them up and headed to the closet.

“Here’s where I keep all of my sewing supplies and some of my clothes. It’s messy in here, so it might be dangerous for you guys to explore.”

“Woah.” Rhythm mused as you opened the door. A pile of shoes and folds of fabric cuttings took the majority of the floor, while bags of supplies and various knick-knacks lined the walls. And this was after you cleaned it out. The only tidied area was your rack of clothes for work.

“Yeah. It’s a work in progress,” you said as you pushed the door closed with your elbow. “And the last stop is my bookcase—”

When you swung the bedroom door shut to reveal the bookcase, two things happened. The first was a slew of bones that cut through the air, past your fingertips and straight towards your small collection of decorations on the top shelf. The second was Sir Pidgeon’s dying, pitiful squeal as the magic tore him to shreds.

It took you a second, “Guys, what the hell.”

Both of them tensed in your hands, Blues frozen in place, while Rhythm dug into your palm with his fingers, panting lightly. Your fingers twitched, which caused Blues to jerk into action, gripping onto Rhythm’s arm and teleporting to the top of your bed at lightning-fast speed, the two of them watching your every movement as you gave them an irritated glance. You stepped over to the bookcase and took the remains of Pidge into your arms, sweeping off the stuffing from the shoebox and opened the lid to inspect its contents. Phew. Perfectly fine.

“WE’RE SORRY. IT WAS AN ACCIDENT,” Blues pleaded, his grip only tightening around his brother’s arm.
“‘It’s my fault,’” Rhythm added, pulling Blues a little behind him, “He didn’t do anything.”

“THAT’S NOT—HE DIDN’T MEAN ANYTHING BY IT!”

“You can punish me all you want, just don’t hurt him.”

“PLEASE DON’T HURT HIM, HUMAN. PLEASE. I DON’T WANT TO FIGHT YOU.”

As the two covered for each other, your irritation dyed out in favor of a mixture of pity and sadness at the situation. As you held Pidge in your arms, you waited until the two fell silent, the lights in their sockets just tiny dots filled with vigilance and fear.

“Do you really think I’d hurt you over this? Pidge is— was a stuffed animal. Even if you ruined my mementos, I wouldn’t hurt you. I’d be pissed, but nothing that warrants causing physical pain.”

Blues eased his grip, and Rhythm relaxed his posture a little, but you could tell they weren’t totally relaxed.

You shifted your mouth into a small smile, “I’m gonna make Rhythm’s ladders today, so if you want to join me, I’ll be in the living room. If you want to be alone, that’s fine too. I’m not going to force you into anything.”

They didn’t say anything, nor did they move from their spots, and you turned to your dresser to grab some fresh clothes before heading out of the room. You took a pit stop to the trash can in the kitchen and gazed upon the shreds of your stuffed animal.

“Aw, Pidge. I’m sorry, man. They’re just not used to this place yet. We had a good run though, didn’t we? Thanks for protecting my stuff. Rest easy, dude.”

You dumped it into the trash can and went straight to the shower. As the warm water hit your skin and washed away any remnants of anger, you started to feel pangs of guilt rise up for causing them to be in a state of frenzy. Did you just ruin all of your progress because you got upset over a stuffed pigeon? And right after you promised not to yell. You weren’t THAT angry, but it happened so suddenly and you didn’t know how to react!

You finished showering and slipped into your clean clothes, cursing the fact that you had to drop off the dirty ones in your room. You nudged open the door, and upon seeing that they were no longer on top of your bed, threw the clothes into the hamper, grabbed a ball of yarn from the closet, and promptly turned back.

Time. They needed time, and you needed to give it to them. And that meant you needed a distraction.

The popsicle sticks laid on the table in their packaging, and you took out your trusty sewing box again to grab a darning needle. You turned on the TV for some background noise and measured the height of the table, jotted down notes on a scrap piece of paper, and begun to work. You wanted to poke holes through the sticks, so you pressed the needle down and tried to dig into the wood.

The keyword here was try. Just when you thought the wood relented, snap! The stick cracked clean through the center. And so did the next one. And the one after that. It became crystal clear that poking holes through the wood without a drill wasn’t going to work.

So instead, you knotted the yarn around the sticks and started to string them up. You tied the knots extra tight and tested the weight by pressing down with your fingers. You even broke out the glue
gun (the terrible, terrible glue gun) and reinforced the ladder rungs by adding another popsicle stick to each side.

A couple of first degree burns later, and you had a tiny ladder.

It was...okay. Not what you had in mind, but it would work. Two of the ladder rungs were tilted up or down just a bit, and you did your best to even out the globs of glue on the edges. It was like looking at middle schooler’s project.

During all of this, you hadn’t noticed the time passing into the afternoon, just in time for lunch. Now that everyone had time to calm down, you felt like you could face the brothers about this morning. You heated up some of the meatballs and put them on their plates, took a deep breath, and moved back to your bedroom.

“Guys,” you called softly as you entered,”It’s lunch time. Can we talk?”

Not a sound. The traffic outside was the only noise in the air. You placed their lunches in front of the bed.

“Please?” you crouched down, and told yourself to wait, to be patient.

Nothing.

“Even if you don’t want to talk, you can at least eat your food.”

Screw it. You bent down and looked underneath the bed, scanning for any sight of the brothers and came up short. They weren’t here.

Son of a bitch.

Chapter End Notes

Heeey, so did I say Sunday? I meant Tuesday. I had an unexpected visit during the weekend (it was more like a party, feels like everyone came over!), and my schedule was switched around a little. I hope everyone's doing well!
Blues and Rhythm take a trip outside.

“How long do you think it’ll take her to notice?”

“How not too long, I think. She tends to pay attention to small details.” Blues replied as he helped his brother off the last metal beam of the fire escape. Rhythm grinned and prodded his shoulder, pointing back and forth between the two of them.

“Small details like us?”

Oh brother. He groaned and shoved him lightly, “NOT NOW.”

Looking back up at the daunting architecture, it seemed like the apartment was only one of at least a dozen, as the metal staircase spiraled further up another two floors. The building still blanched in comparison to the never-ending skyscrapers that you had shown him during the emergency outing to that...shelter. Speaking of which.

“Are you going to be all right? We can’t stop along the way.”

Rhythm shrugged, “I’ll manage. Feeling better now that the monster food’s kicked in. You know we’re a team anyways. You going to be okay with that thing on you?”

The washcloth, he meant. Blues had doubled it up and wore it around him like poncho, which was secured by a forgotten pin he had stolen from their bedroom. The sun already started doing its job by warming the fabric, but it was nothing he couldn’t handle.

“Naturally!” he boasted, “There’s no hindrance in my movement, and we’ll be in the shade soon enough. Make sure you keep up with me!”

“Whatever you say. Lead the way, brother.”

Blues smiled and patted his brother’s arm, feeling more in their element than in the last week. In a way, the city noises and smells brought him a sense of freedom despite its danger. Of course, every time Human mentioned them leaving the apartment, he could just feel the worry radiating off of her. He didn’t even need to read her soul to know how much the topic upset her.

Only, she was already upset because of their survival instincts.
But in her defense, she didn’t know how many months him and his brother have lived out in the open city. The seasons changed at least twice since they had escaped, and he could feel nature changing, slowly, into the third. They knew how to survive well enough, and they only reason she caught them was a stroke of terrible luck on their part. The “dumpster” had been emptied that day before they could secure any monster food, followed by the rain that washed anything useful down the street grates, and that nasty human had kicked his dear brother right to the curb.

If he ever saw that guy again…

They moved from the alleyway and trailed close to the walls of the buildings. Only the occasional human was out on the sidewalks, and most of them paid no mind to the two of them slinking past their feet as they crossed the street amongst the small crowd. Rhythm always excelled at this; although he was the more noticeable between the two of them, his lanky stature and quiet, effortless movements made blending in with the surroundings look like play. In comparison, he looked more like someone dodging lightning bolts in a temperamental thunderstorm.

The crowd dispersed in different directions as they reached the other sidewalk, and once again the brothers took to the walls. Blues gazed upward to assess his whereabouts, and recognizing the familiar awnings of the windows, tapped Rhythm’s arm and pointed.

The more open streets weren’t much of a problem. They’d continue down the sidewalks, pause to look at their surroundings, and adjust their direction. Blues scratched corners of the sidewalks and walls with a sharp rock in the shape of a star while Rhythm kept watch. He knew they were going to the right path, as the following buildings became more unkempt with peeling paint and rusted, stained stairwells, and chipped and broken concrete became more common along their path. Many humans and monsters didn’t like to come this way, he noticed, and the ones that did had a certain edge to their souls: guarded, nervous, and determined.

And it made sense to him. After all, the closer they got to that place, the more they needed those traits to survive. He hated to think that they were backtracking anywhere near the very place that they wanted to get away from, but it couldn’t be helped. If he had known that they’d be away for so long, then they would have taken their stuff!

They were about to round the last corner before Rhythm pulled back on his poncho.

“Looks like we got company,” Rhythm whispered as they switched positions and pressed himself against the wall. Blues took watch of the street while Rhythm peeked around the corner into the alleyway.

“Dog, medium sized. Looks hungry.”

He turned back to give Blues the waiting signal, and with a flash of orange, summoned a pair of bones above his fingertips. He gave it a second and waved the projectiles towards his target.

The metal bin rang a loud, hollow note as the frenzied barks joined it from the other side.

“S’gonna be one of those dogs.”

Of course it’d be one of the annoying ones.

“Ready?” Blues asked, taking a firm grip on his brother’s arm. Rhythm nodded.

“He’s closer to our side.”

“Roger.”
He channeled his magic through them and cut into space, landing them halfway to the dumpster. The dog snapped his head to them. He teleported again, just before the crack between the bin and the wall.

The dog caught wind of them. Blues shoved Rhythm into the crack and was greeted with long, sharp canines at his face. He teleported again, this time onto the rim of the dumpster and steadied himself.

As big as the dog was, he was scrawny enough to try and barrel through the space that Rhythm occupied, snarling and barking, his claws scraping the gravel. Suddenly he let out a high-pitched whine, and Blues could see the bones embedded into his snout.

“Brother,” Rhythm called, and he heard his soul, ripe with concern.

“HERE.”

Their guest wasn’t finished yet. The dog pawed off the attack and lunged again, and this time Blues leapt from the edge and landed onto the dog’s back, grabbing a fistful of his fur and pulled himself up to in between the dog’s shoulder blades. The dog twisted around to snap at him, and with one fluid motion, Blues pulled the pin from his poncho and stabbed him in the nose.

The dog gave a sharp series yelps and flipped over, almost crushing him underneath. Rhythm pulled his body away just in time using their blue magic to pull at his soul, and he teleported in front of him within the next second.

Behind them were two of Rhythm’s Gaster Blasters, each as big as the dog’s head, “I don’t wanna fight, but you better run.”

The dog was being spared. With a series of whines and short barks, the dog backed away a few paces, and finally turned tail and ran. Sensing the situation had been neutralized, the Gaster Blasters’ deep growls subsided and turned into small whines, as Rhythm patted them both before sending them back to the void.

Rhythm hunched over to catch his breath as Blues steadied him, also panting from the exertion. They couldn’t just drop their guard in the middle of the alleyway, so he threw his brother’s arm around his neck and half dragged him to the dumpster.

“Thanks, brother.”

“Don’t mention it,” Blues smiled as Rhythm leaned against the metal, “Wait here.”

Blues slid between the crack of the wall and the dumpster, dragging his foot underneath the bin until his shoe connected with a plastic object. Ah, found it! He maneuvered himself to grab the bottle cap and drag it out, where their only possession sat in neat folds. The dusty cloth hadn’t been touched since they left.

“Hi dad,” he greeted and hugged the container to his chest, slipping back out to where Rhythm waited. He passed the bottle cap to his brother and retrieved the forgotten washcloth.

“Hey dad,” he heard Rhythm say, “Sorry, we’re getting into trouble again.”

“There’s just one more thing, and we’ll be on our way,” Blues said as he tied the washcloth around his neck, like a cloak. His brother looked at him in mild surprise.

“Yeah? What’s that?”
Blues flashed him a wide grin and pointed upward to the planter hanging from the second floor of the adjacent building. Rhythm’s confusion turned to a low key worry as he looked at the only pathway available.

“Are you serious?”

“NATURALLY.”

He pinched the bridge between his sockets and sighed, shrugging. “Just take it easy, brother.”

Blues gave him a thumbs up and readied himself. The ledges on the windows were just wide enough for him to land on, and he concentrated on the space. Pop!

He breathed a sigh of relief as he reached the first window in safety. Now for the planter. He gathered the energy to his chest, thought of the position above him, and moved.

The dangerous part about window-hopping was that, sometimes, other animals were sitting on the ledges, or the curtains were open and pets would alert the people inside. Sometimes humans were already at their windows, looking at the scenery or at other people.

Sometimes, Blues thought as he fell into the small bush of blue flowers, humans came to the window in the most inopportune moments.

“Just wait a damn second! Jesus,” a creaking noise of wood clashing against wood and a man’s deep voice shook Blues’ body to the core. He grabbed one of the longer stalks and propelled himself over the side of the planter, leaving himself dangling just below the surface. He looked in Rhythm’s direction, whose hands were clenched around the bottlecap and looked ready to move into action.

STAY THERE! I’M ALL RIGHT.

Bullshit, Rhythm’s soul retorted, I’ll catch you, just fall. It’s not worth it.

Oh, dear brother, but it was. He had it in his grasp, and the human would leave eventually. It was just a matter of time.

Tobacco wafted in the air, and Blues grimaced at the pungent smell. Heavens knows how much he hated that smell, and if he wasn’t so close to his goal, he’d have dropped right there. The human sighed and Blues heard him tapping his fingers at the wooden surface. The irritation from this man’s soul ebbed away as he took another drag.

And then it flared right back up. Blues felt the stalk shake as the man meddled with the flowers, and he clung tighter to the stalk as it sprung around. The leaf that supported his bottom hand started to bend under the pressure, and he didn’t have to look at Rhythm to know that he was two seconds away from blowing their cover.

“Aww, those fuckin’ pigeons, messin’ with my Gentians again. Shit,” the man muttered, and in a muffled voice, “Louise! We’re gettin’ that wire fencing, I don’t care if it the neighbors got a problem with it!”

The shaking stopped, and the planter shook one last time as the window shut. Blues counted, slow and steady, to five. Humans usually never came back after that long.

He exhaled and began climbing the stalk back onto the planter, reassured by the palpable feeling of relief that flowed between him and his brother. He took only a second to inspect the plant, and
deciding on a particular fully bloomed stalk, summoned a bone fragment and sliced just above his head. He undid the washcloth and secured the flower in it before tying it back around his body, like a sling.

**Is the bottom window clear?**

**Yeah. Still cl—**

He should have been asking about the current window, because the window jerked open in an instant, and he whirled around to meet the shocked and livid human who was here a moment ago.

“You motherfuckin’ rat!” the man spit as he shot his hand out towards him. Blues instincts kicked in, and he leapt back, off the planter and into the air. He teleported just in time before momentum gained the upper hand, and landed hard onto the concrete of the first floor window.

Rhythm met him there in a millisecond, the cap with Dad’s cloth tucked under his arm.

“We’re leaving,” he announced, grabbed Blues’ arm, and the next second they were clear out of the alleyway. The man’s screams could be heard just as clear from several yards out.

Rhythm teleported again, this time to their last marking almost a block away. The human’s voice echoed now, and Blues just regained his senses as they teleported again, to another marker across the street. He almost did it again before Blues ripped his arm from his grasp.

“STOP IT, WE’RE SAFE!”

He was panting again, much harder than when they fought the dog, and Blues could see his legs straining to keep him up.

“That man wanted to kill you,” he huffed through his gasps, quiet.

Blues had forgotten about it for just a second: how dangerous humans were to them. People didn’t think about their lives at all.

He didn’t say anything, and pulled Rhythm’s head to rest on his shoulder.

“I’ll give you a long break, Bro. Only one.”

Rhythm gave a weak chuckle and completed it with a loose hug, “Thanks. You’re the coolest, Brother.”

“Don’t you dare close your eyes, got it? It’s a rest, not a nap!” the fear of him Falling was very real last time, and Blues never wanted a repeat of it again. Ever. “I’m going to ask you a question every minute, and if you don’t answer, I’ll shake you! Understand?”

“...”

The worry doubled in him, and to stay true to his word, shook Rhythm’s shoulders, “Understand?”

“Yeah,” Rhythm wheezed.

A minute passed, as he listened to his brother’s shaky breaths and ignored the sticky heat, “Do you mind if I move that water-globe thing to the back of the room? It freaks me out.”

“Do it,” he replied after a second.
Blues patted his back lightly as praise for complying and sighed. He counted to sixty.

“What do you want to do when we get back?”

“Sleep.” An instant reply, and he expected nothing less. Blues grinned and shook his head.

“Don’t you want to do anything else, lazybones?”

“t’s not a minute yet. Don’t gotta answer.”

Another minute passed, and Blues spotted a human walking their way. He took hold of the bottle cap and Rhythm and teleported, within three separate jumps to the next area. His magic was starting to run low, and he was starting to feel the exhaustion creep in.

“I’m good, brother. Let’s book it,” Rhythm tried to pull away, but he refused to let go.

“I think you’re just trying to get out of your break! Are you?”

“Brother, come on.”

But Blues kept him firmly locked in place and refused to budge. The minute passed in their new hiding place behind a stoop.

“Do you think she’ll forgive me?” Rhythm asked in almost a whisper.

“...I think so,” and he hoped so much that she didn’t handle it the way other humans did, “But you have to properly explain it to her. She doesn’t understand a lot of things.”

“She’s so damn weird. How can she have so much affection for us? She doesn’t even know half the shit we’ve done.”

“I don’t know,” he admitted, and then paused, “But it’s addicting, isn’t it? It’s scary how addicting it is.”

“It’s fucking terrifying.”

It truly was. She didn’t know how much power she held over them, and yet she treated them with such care that Blues found it hard not to trust her. And it wasn’t for a lack of trying. He spent the first night looking for any reason to keep his resolve, to figure out what kind of terrible hell this new human had for them. It confused him to no end when she listed a few simple chores. He knew that humans always, always came with a hidden price.

She hadn’t mentioned that her very presence was addicting.

That every day they stayed with her made the past feel like years ago instead of months. That every time she smiled for him, it was like the world wasn’t a cruel place. And whenever she thanked him for something, however menial it was, Blues felt like he finally did something right with his life.

She didn’t mention that when they disappointed her, like this morning, it would feel like she had ripped the floor out from under their feet, and they should have never left their cages because they were useless unless they destroyed everything, that they didn’t deserve names until they earned them…!

“Break’s over,” he announced, shaking himself out of his thoughts. Rhythm’s breathing had steadied enough to continue on foot.
They took their time getting back, as the excursion sapped some of their stamina and Blues always wanted to be prepared for anything. The flower made it harder to fit into tight spaces, considering that the stalk was easily three times Rhythm’s height. They cut another few inches off around halfway through their trip to make it easier.

And in what felt like forever, the brothers made one last jump back to the apartment’s bedroom window, where Blues pried the window open by shoving a bone between the cracks and praying that she hadn’t locked it from when they left.

The apartment was quiet when they entered. Rhythm looked at him and shrugged, opting to jump from the nightstand to the floor, looking for any signs of disturbance.

“Maybe she’s sleeping on the couch? I’m gonna put Dad in the room.”

He disappeared underneath the bed, leaving Blues to explore the living room by himself. The bathroom door was wide open when he stopped to place the flower in their bath tub, and frowned when he made it to the empty living room.

Where did she go?

The kitchen had no answers for him except for two, wrapped plates of leftovers from last night that he took back to the room for him and Rhythm.

“She’s not here,” Blues mentioned as they sat on the floor in their new bedroom. The meatballs were lukewarm from sitting out, but he didn’t pay any mind. They still tasted just as good, and he could feel his magic pool regenerating

Rhythm didn’t say anything, but the concern between the two of them didn’t need to be said.

“Whelp. I’m gonna take a nap. She’s gotta come back sometime.”

After stacking the plates and brushing the crumbs off his hands, Rhythm crawled into bed. Admittedly, a nap sounded like an alluring idea, but the nagging concern was too fresh in his mind.

Instead, he moved the water globe thing to the corner of the room, where the lights didn’t reach it. He took the plates back to the kitchen and placed them in the sink. He thought about washing them, but so far his track record with kitchen chores wasn’t the best, and it was best to not cause another scene for now.

He inspected the crude ladder that hung on the side of the table, finding the contraption effective enough, if not a little wobbly. He saw the splintered and broken sticks on the table, and he wondered if she was bad at handling wood, or if she was just that angry.

From the table, Blues could see the remains of the stuffed animal in the trashcan, and an idea sparked. He fished the bits of stuffing and material out of the bin and stole a needle and spool of thread from her open sewing box. He took one of the dish towels hanging from the oven to swaddle the bits and dragged the whole project back to their room.

He had watched her enough to get the basics down! It couldn’t be that hard!

As always, Rhythm had perfect aim, as told by the severed wings and shredded backside, where the spine would be on a real bird. He picked the largest gap to close first, and pierced one side with the needle.

The needle was just as long as the pin he had used on the dog, so he had to treat it more like a
sword than a sewing object, and he found that aiming for the opposite edge proved rather difficult for just himself. He managed one or two stitches and pulled with all his might to gather the fabric together.

He was on his third just as the heard the door click from the living room, and he jabbed the needle into the bird and went to shake Rhythm awake.

“Someone’s here.”

Rhythm yawned and sat up, more than reluctant to get out of bed.

Blues tapped his foot. “Come on, we have to make sure it’s her.”

He took a moment to move, and with a sigh, shuffled out of bed, “Yeah, okay.”

Blues patted him on the back and smiled, though he was feeling more nervous than ever. He took Rhythm’s arm and teleported them halfway down the hall, opting to walk the rest of the way to the living room. The carpet muffled out their footsteps, which gave them an advantage over any intruder that wasn’t paying enough attention.

But it was her, back turned to them as she inspected the plates in the sink.

He gathered up his courage and called out to her, “Human.”

She zipped around, startled as she caught sight of them.

“Blues,” both her soul and her voice combined, causing an echo that he was still trying to adjust to hearing, “Rhythm!” Overwhelming and bittersweet, the tone of her voice left him dazed for a second.

She moved around the table, but didn’t approach them like he thought she would. Instead, she crouched to the floor and curled her hands into fists.

Where did you go?! Was what her soul was asking, but her jaw was clenched as she stared at the space between them. Nervousness. She was afraid they’d run off again if she asked.

Did she go to look for them? Was that why she was so upset?

The room was quiet as Blues tried to sort out how to bring up the subject of this morning, and was surprised when his brother was the one to speak up.

“I’m...I’m sorry,” Rhythm spoke softly, staring at the carpet below his feet. “I didn’t want to ruin your stuff. I just...panicked.”

“Because of the sound?” she asked.

“No. No, it’s...”

His brother hated talking about the terrors they went through, and it was a miracle that he gave a sincere apology in the first place.

“It’s because it’s a pigeon,” Blues picked up for him, “Birds can be the worst for us. We can distract cats and dogs easily enough, but birds,”

Both Rhythm and him shivered, pushing down the memories that threatened to surface.
“Birds are quiet enough to catch us off guard.” Rhythm explained, “They want our bones for their nests. Some try to eat us. They don’t want anything else until we’re gone. Even then…”

“We know we upset you,” Blues interrupted, “We’re just used to...you—you’re not like that—we don’t know how to…”

He couldn’t find the words, and this was much, much harder than what he expected.

“Can I get closer?” she asked.

He looked to Rhythm, who shrugged. He nodded.

She crawled to them, her moves deliberately slow, until she sat in front of them.

“Can I pick both of you up?”

This. This is what was so terrifying. She could kill them in their most vulnerable moment, so easily. They could turn to dust in her hands.

But the reward was worth the risk. “Yeah,” he heard Rhythm say, and he seconded soon after.

She scooped them up from behind and gently brought them to her chest, right underneath her collarbone. He could feel and hear her heartbeat through the cloth of her shirt, and the comfort of the warmth surrounding him.

“I’m sorry too. Thank you,” her voice hitched as drops splattered onto the carpet, “Thank you for coming back.”

He buried his face into her shirt and breathed.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys, sorry. I've had a rough first part of the week. It's a long chapter though, and things are looking better! Thank you for being patient with me! I still want to do a Halloween update, though I may be late with it. I love holidays, especially Halloween!

Also, yeah, tags are updated again to include animal fighting and a few OCs here and there.
The Wheels on the Bus

Chapter Summary

You take a bus ride to the shopping center.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I’m back!” you announced as the door closed behind you, kicking off your shoes and bounded to the kitchen table to put down your purse. You smiled at the lone flower sitting in the glass and felt its velvety petals with your fingertips. Unlike the typical flowers you’d seen around the floral shops, the blooms of this flower had a trumpet shape, and the tips of the petals spread out to the shape of a star.

Blues presented it to you a few days ago, right after they had come back from your fight. It was a present to make up for ruining Pidge, he said. At that point you didn’t care about Pidge so much as what kind of scuffle made Blues’ shirt rip like that, and how Rhythm’s form seemed to sag against your fingers. You loved the flower, though. It was the first time you ever received flowers from someone other than your cousin.

You sent her a picture, half because you were curious, and half because she loved flowers.

“That’s a Willow Gentian! It’s rare that we see any come to the Greenhouse. Where did you get it?”

“My Bitties gave it to me,” you had texted back.

“Really??? Lol, interesting! It has a bunch of different meanings, from intrinsic worth to ‘I love you best when you are sad’.”

“What kind of person says that through a flower?!”

You doubted that flower meanings had much to do with their choice. Blues had told you that it reminded him of you in some way, and that thought was sweet enough to give your own meaning to it.

That fight was more terrible than you thought it was. The moment you realized they weren’t in the room, you had checked every nook and cranny in the apartment in hopes that they were just hiding. Once your fears were confirmed, you set out to the streets and searched the nearby areas, calling out to them and asking the occasional passerby.

The only reason you returned home was because you wanted to keep some monster food handy in case something happened to them. You had explored everywhere within a three block radius with the exception of the west side. And if you were going there, then you needed backup. Thank the sweet heavens above that they came back.

But due to the whole situation, two new rules were added to the list. Whoever left the apartment must tell the others where they were going and when they’d be back. You urged Rhythm not to leave again until he was fully recovered, seeing as how he almost slept through dinner that night,
but he shrugged and retorted with “you miss my company that much?”. You never did get a clear answer.

The other rule, scribbled in with Blues’ unsteady penmanship, consisted of three words: *Trust each other.*

“Hey, Babe. *Flower* you today?”

You turned to Rhythm, who just climbed off of the ladder and onto the table. Your mouth quirked up into a smile as you let go of the petals.

“Just *rosy*, thank you very much! How about you?”

“If my brother would *leaf* me a chance to sleep, I’d be better, but it’s been a good day.”

You grinned as you placed your hand near him, and he grasped your index finger, smiling back. This was your kind of greeting now, something not so intrusive as picking them up, but still enough contact that you wouldn’t have to fidget with your hands.

“What has he been up to today?”

He scratched his head and looked to the side, “Maybe you should just *posey* over to the bedroom, heh.”

“Well, shall we?” you offered your palm, and Rhythm clambered onto it without hesitation. You needed to change out of your work clothes anyway.

The two of you travelled down the hallway and to the bedroom, where Blues awaited on top of your bed. He stood in front of a suspicious-looking lump that was covered with a towel, arms crossed and grinning like a cat that caught a canary.

“MAIDEN,” he proclaimed, and you were caught by surprise at the new nickname, “BEHOLD!”

He ripped off the towel in a grand display, and your eyes fell on…?

Oh sweet Grandma in Heaven, that abomination was Pidge.

You shifted Rhythm to one hand and covered your mouth with the other, stifling your laughter before you accidentally offended them.

“Oh Blues, you shouldn’t have!” your mouth quirked up into a devilish smile, which was why you hadn’t taken away your hand yet. You could see the tension of the bright red thread straining to bind the ripped material together with large, uneven stitches. His wings were horribly crooked. You were sure that Pidge’s beak hadn’t been ripped off in the initial carnage, but somehow it had been sewn back on lopsided. Frankenpidge sounded like a good name to you.

“I would like to take credit for all the work, but I wasn’t the only one. Both of us worked on it together!”

You looked down at Rhythm, who shrugged.

“I just held the pieces together.”

“What do you think? Do you like it?”

Blues looked up at you as the lights in his sockets danced around. His words were a smidge quieter
than his usual, boisterous voice.

After the shock factor wore off, you found Frankenpidge sort of cute in a broken-but-still-good kind of way, even with some of the stuffing threatening to spill out of him. You placed Rhythm beside his brother and picked up the plushie to inspect it all around.

“Both of you did pretty well,” for what skills they had, anyway. It was the thought that counted here, “Thank you very much. You guys are the best.”

You brought your fingers close to them, where Blues grasped your knuckle while Rhythm patted your index finger, both of them smiling. This was comforting to you, too, seeing them at ease with your presence. Moments like this made the difficult times worth it.

“I’m gonna change, and then we can go,” you spoke softly while pulling your fingers away. The brothers let go, Rhythm a little more quick than Blues, and climbed down the comforter and into their bedroom.

Heh heh. The first time you changed into different clothes, you didn’t even think about how your company felt. You weren’t a very shy person when it came to changing in front of others, so when you peeled your shirt off in front of the pair, you received some funny reactions. Blues’ face had turned a bright shade as he stuttered your nickname, while Rhythm had diverted his gaze straight to the floor and refused to look up. From then on, you warned them beforehand or moved to the bathroom to change.

You changed into more casual clothes and grabbed the messenger bag, smiling, “I’m ready! Let’s go!”

The brothers appeared, now adorning sock and shoes, and you scooped them up and deposited them on your shoulders. You took your wallet, cell phone, and keys out of your purse and stuffed them into your bag on your way out. This time you were taking the bus, so the Bitties didn’t have to go into your bag until the store.

“You are certainly excited to go, Maiden,” Blues remarked as you bounded out of the apartment building.

“It’s my favorite store. I could spend hours in there if I had the time. By the way, what’s with the new name?”

“He’s been watching that show on TV. The one with pointy-eared humans, knights, and wizards,” Rhythm explained.

“You mean the one with the super dramatic music?”

“IT HAS A COMPELLING STORY! The knights have a unique way of fighting,” Blues defended, and you could practically feel the embarrassment rolling off of him. You bit your lip for a second to keep from grinning.

“So you heard it from there?”

“I thought it suited you,” he admitted, tugging at your hair, “Do you dislike it?”

Out of all of the nicknames people gave, “maiden” was one of the least common you’ve heard. Actually, you haven’t heard it used at all in real life. But somehow the fact that it was Blues calling you “maiden” made it fitting.
“I like it. Thank you, Blues.”

“It’s my pleasure, Maiden. Mweh heh!”

“Should I call you my little knights?” you teased, and Rhythm snorted at the idea.

“I don’t think I’m knight material.”

“No? You don’t think so?” You tilted your head a fraction towards him, causing Blues to adjust his hold.

“Maybe if he was a Night Knight,” Blues replied, “but the armor would be dashing on us, Bro!”

You had occasionally seen the Royal Guard, the monsters who protected the King and Ambassador, hanging around during important political events, decked in formal armor and doing their job by being rather intimidating. What struck your attention the most about them were their royal purple capes that draped behind their pauldrons, embroidered with the symbol of the monster kingdom. You imagined what Rhythm and Blues would look like in such armor, and Blues had a point.

“No thanks, Brother. That stuff suits you more. I’mma stick to more comfortable clothes.”

The bus stop contained just a few people lounging around the pole, and the brothers fell silent as their grip on your locks tightened. Unlike Blues’ tense and rigid body, Rhythm seemed ready to pounce at any given moment, sinking his digits into your shoulder and releasing them every few seconds. They felt more like claws to you, and you cringed at the stinging sensation each time he dug in.

“Rhythm,” you whispered as not to scare him, “That kinda hurts.”

“What? Oh shit, sorry,” he muttered back, releasing his hold. You offered your fingers instead and he took them to balance himself.

“Not used to crowds, huh?” You half teased in an attempt to lighten the mood. Though no one paid any mind to the Bitties on your shoulders, you could feel the two of them fidgeting in place. The bus was due to arrive in just a few more minutes, but it felt like the more you waited, the worse their movements became. At this point Rhythm had a death grip on your fingers, and the hum of magic filled your right ear from Blues’ chest.

“Are you two going to be okay? We can go home, and I can go by myself some other time.”

It took a moment for either one to respond.

“No. We want to go,” Blues whispered into your ear. The sharp tone in his voice did little to convince you.

“Babe, you…” Rhythm let out a frustrated sigh, “Dammit.”

“What is it?”

Before he had a chance to respond, the bus turned the corner and into sight. All four people gathered to where you stood on the sidewalk to prepare a line. The brothers froze in place at the sudden swarm of people around you, and you bit your lip as Rhythm’s digits dug into your skin again.
You dug out the bus pass from your wallet with some difficulty, seeing as Rhythm wasn’t letting go anytime soon, and fell into line behind a little old lady who was rifling through her own oversized purse.

“It’ll be okay. Trust me,” you soothed, and both of them squeezed your shoulders in response.

“What did you say?” the elderly lady asked, turning to eye you down while still fumbling with her bag. The bus had pulled up to the sidewalk with a hiss of its breaks, and the door swung open to let the passengers inside. She stayed her ground as you watched the first and second person board.

“Oh, nothing ma’am,” you hated situations like this. Did you really speak that loud? How do you explain to this lady that you were talking to the tiny skeletons on your shoulders?

Looked like she didn’t believe you, as a “hmmm?” erupted from her throat, and her scrutinizing stare fell to the Bitties. You could hear the ringing of energy echo in your ears as the bus driver threw you a dirty look. A barely audible growl came from one of the brothers, though you weren’t sure which one.

“Um...I can pay! Your fare, I mean! You look like you’re having trouble finding your pass so I wanted to offer!” you rambled, hoping she’d take the bait and for the love of all things holy, just get on the bus!

Her confusion turned into one of delight as she smiled and patted your arm, much to Blues’ great displeasure.

“BACK OFF—” he snarled, and you flew your hand up to block him from her sight. If she heard him, she didn’t seem to care.

“Oh, sweetie, you don’t have to! I’m sure it’s in here somewhere!” she resumed digging through her bag, and the person behind you had taken the moment to cut ahead of the two of you.

“Are you gettin’ on or not?” the driver called out to the two of you.

“It’s okay, really ma’am, I insist! You can find it while we’re on the bus!” you ushered as kindly as you could, banking on the customer service skills you picked up from work.

“Oh, if you don’t mind! I just know I have it on me.”

She turned around and hoisted herself onto the steps, and you followed close behind, swiping your card twice in the machine for your unexpected guest. As she finally moved to the aisle, the bus driver blocked you with his arm. You barely had time to keep Rhythm from skewering his flesh with an onslaught of bones as you cupped your fingers around him.

“No pets allowed without a leash.”

Oh for crying out loud!

“They’re not going to move from where we sit,” you pleaded. Great, now people were staring, and you could just feel the energy from the Bitties pooling around you. The driver, however, seemed not to care.

“Doesn’t matter, lady. No exceptions.”

“Come on, really? I already paid!”
The elder lady stood from her seat, just three spots away, “What’s the matter, sweetie?”

“If you can’t put ‘em on a leash, then you’re gonna have to leave,” the driver snarked, pulling the lever to open the door.

It sucked that you caused a scene for nothing, but judging on how Rhythm and Blues were ready to jump the next person who came into contact with you, it looked like your best option. This was not exactly what you wanted for a first impression of a day out.

“What are you talking about?” the lady interrupted, “They’re my service animals, and I have their leashes right here!”

Your mouth fell open as she pulled out two long strands of red yarn from her purse. You glanced back at the driver who gave the elder a withering expression.

“I find that hard to believe, ma’am,” he deadpanned.

“Why not? Do you want to see my papers? It’s my right to have my service animals with me at all times!” she remarked, her voice rising in volume as she went on. Poor guy was just doing his job despite being a stickler about it, and you didn’t expect her to bluff either.

“No ma’am, that’s not necessary. But—”

“I’m going to call your boss about this! Don’t think I won’t! I have the number right here!”

She pulled out her cell phone and you inwardly cringed. Oh, the dreaded “who’s your manager” bit. You glanced back to the driver and put your hands up.

“I’ll just get off the bus.”

A flash of panic crossed his face before he sighed in defeat and glared at you, “Just, go sit down!”

You weren’t going to argue with that. You took the seat next to the elder and gave her a smile.

“Thank you so much, ma’am,” you said as you gently pried the brothers off of your shoulders and into your lap. Poor Blues, the lights in his sockets had gone out as he stared down the elderly lady beside you, while Rhythm had taken to summoning a bone and was flipping it around in his hands, like a knife.

“Oh, don’t mention it! Here, you better take these before we get into any more trouble,” she laughed as she handed you the string. Her bag laid partially open on her lap, and you could see the skein of yarn and knitting needles poking out.

You fashioned a loop at the ends and slipped them onto your pinky fingers and was ready to loop the other ends to the brothers’ wrists, but something about it felt wrong. The question lodged in your throat when you met their gazes, and mild disgust pooled in your heart.

“Here guys, hold on to these,” you said as the strings dangled from your fingers. “It’ll only be for the bus ride. I’m really sorry for all this.”

They had looked at you for a moment before taking up the yarn. Rhythm slipped one loop over his wrist while Blues had simply gripped the other end.

“Maiden,” Blues called as he tugged on your clothes. His gaze flitted from the lady and the empty space behind you before settling on staring at you with laser-focused intensity.
“What’s up?”

Even your voice startled him as he jumped in place and made a shushing motion with his fingers.

“Do you have something to write with?” He asked, slow and quiet while Rhythm took watch over to your left side.

“So they can talk,” the lady mused, earning two very on guard skeletons glowering at her.

“Yeah. They’re pretty shy though. Really defensive,” you replied as you felt around in your bag for your cell phone. You brought up the notepad app and laid it carefully onto your lap. Maybe she’d get the hint not to touch them. You didn’t want to pay for any medical bills today.

“Are they Bitties? I’ve got a little fire one who likes to make hamburgers for me. My grandson dropped him off on me while he’s in college,” she chuckled, stuffing her yarn skein back into the bag.

You shot her a surprised glance, “They are! We’re headed to the craft store to get clothing patterns for them, actually. I’m not used to sewing clothes this small.”

The lady’s eyes lit up in understanding as she clasped her hands together and smiled, “I used to sew clothes for my daughter’s dolls. It takes some practice…”

The two of you chatted as the bus continued its route, and she gave you tips on how to tailor the brothers’ clothes while trailing off about her everyday life. While she dug around her purse for her missing card, you glanced back to your lap. Rhythm and Blues continued to tap away at your phone during the ride, more calm with the distraction, though they still gave the death stare to anyone who approached among the stops.

Finally you had reached your destination: The Pillars strip mall, where several department stores vied for the attention of precious customers with flashy banners and mannequins in the windows. You scooped up your cell phone and carefully placed the brothers in your bag, much to their displeasure.

“This is my stop. Thanks again, ma’am. It was nice talking to you,” you said, giving her a small wave as you stood.

“Thanks for entertaining this old lady,” she laughed, “You be careful out there, sweetie!”

As you left, the bus driver gave you a dirty look and glanced in the mirror at his remaining passengers.

“Ma’am, isn’t this your stop?”

“No! What, are you saying you don’t want me on your bus!? Just because I’m old doesn’t mean —”

The bus door shut behind you, and you stomped down the small bit of guilt with the prospect of shopping for new fabric.

Chapter End Notes
I'm alive...for now! Thanksgiving/Black Friday is a week away, and Christmas is right on its heels. If any of you have had the pleasure of working retail in the States, then you know that this time of the year can just drain the spirt right out of you. There's so much stuff to set up and tear down, customers tend to get testy and downright malevolent when they don't get what they want, and same ten Christmas songs play on the speakers while you try to keep a pleasant smile on your face during all of it. It leaves for very little time to recoup due to the extra hours, and by the end of it, your body and mind feel as empty as the sales floor at 3 AM on Black Friday morning. It can be exhilarating, dangerous, entertaining, and incredibly stressful.

My point is that my updates could be few and far in-between for the time being until past holidays, or, conversely, I may make short chapters to fill the time gap between the major points in the story. Just some little daily shenanigans, something not too vital to the plot but still fitting at the current point in time! Again I want to give my thanks to all of you sticking with the story. Seriously, thank you!

I used a variety of websites to find the flower meaning of Gentians, but the main source is from *Flora's Dictionary* by Kathleen Gips, a dictionary composed of flower meanings listed by both flower AND intended message. Quite helpful and fun to read!
The Things You Learn While Shopping

Chapter Summary

Blues is a terrible liar. Rhythm's a smooth talker. And you have a one-track mind. You'll get through this somehow.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Evening had hit by the time you arrived at the strip mall, and with the lowering sun came the more pleasant temperatures of late summer. The restaurants wedged in between the department stores attracted the dinner crowd. The smells wafting through the air made your stomach growl as you passed them by, beckoning you in. You shoved your hunger out of mind and focused on your destination. If you had any leftover cash to spend after your shopping trip, then maybe you could stop by the Mexican place later. Blues would love it, especially since your cooking skills bordered on a middle schooler’s level.

They must have smelt the food too, as your bag rustled and Blues’ head poked out from under the flap. He gave a quick glance from side to side before turning to you.

“Maiden,” he called in a quiet, urgent voice. You glanced to him and smiled.

“Hey, you’re hungry too, right? Do you wanna eat now and shop afterwards?”

“Look at your phone first.”

You gave him a curious look before stopping to open your bag, “Okay?”

It looked like Rhythm wasn’t finished with your phone yet, as he grabbed hold of your fingers while he tapped the screen a few more times.

“Uh...good luck, Babe,” he said while letting go.

“With what?”

Your question was answered the moment you saw the wall of text on your screen. The phone’s terrible auto-correct tried its best to make sense of the garbled mess, but it only partially succeeded in choosing the correct words. You could tell that the brothers took turns by the shifting of capslocks versus the lowercase lines, and the words “attack”, “defense” came up several times in the conversation.

You admitted defeat to the word puzzle and opened your bag, looking at the brothers with confusion.

“This is what you wanted me to read, right?”

They both nodded.

“Your spelling and grammar are terrible,” you replied bluntly, “I have no idea what you’re trying
to tell me.”

“How bad? About as bad as your survival skills?” Rhythm retorted.

“Maiden, you leave yourself wide open for anyone to come up and attack you,” Blues said as he looked around, “You’re doing it right now!”

You looked around at the other shoppers whose attentions were focused on either getting in or out of their cars and not much else. True, there was the occasional shoplifter, but the strip mall had their own security guards to contain those situations. Their worry would have been justified if you were walking in an alleyway in the middle of the night, but upon watching a middle aged man in a suit drop his wallet and shopping bags on the ground to reach for his cell phone, you deduced that this wasn’t the case. You were going to have to teach them how to chill.

But then you noticed the warped fabric on the hem of Rhythm’s hoodie from where he was twisting it. And for Blues, his eye socket sparked with blue magic every so often when he thought something passed by you, coupled with a startled jump.

“Hey,” you called. They both jumped in place and glanced at you as the familiar humming of magic echoed to your ears. Blues couldn’t focus on you for more than a few seconds before shifting his gaze wildly around your surroundings, while Rhythm began clawing at the lining of your bag and stared past you with a blank expression.

They weren’t just dealing with worry—they were having some kind of anxiety attack!

You moved to the side of the building and leaned against the brick surface. Once the sidewalk traffic slowed, you crouched down and sat the bag before you, leaving the strap looped around your arm just in case.

“What are you doing?!” Blues cried, practically scrambling over your wallet to climb out of the bag.

“Can I pick both of you up?”

“Now?! This isn’t the time!”

Rhythm had frozen in place, looking more terrified than before. On the other hand, Blues had already climbed onto your thigh and into your palm.

“It’s okay if I can’t,” you assured, “Just listen to my voice.”

Maybe this would work, maybe not, but you pushed your doubts to the side and focused on pushing the calmness you felt into your heart and voice. You coddled Blues to your chest and waited for a couple seconds for him to stop fidgeting.

“It’s not safe here! We don’t have time for this!” Blues argued as he clung to your shirt.

“Yes we do. Trust me. No one is going to harm you while I’m around,” and that was a promise, whether they believed you or not. Blues’ sockets were completely dark now, his breaths shallow and uneven, as he conceded to being held in your hands for the time being.

“Take in a deep breath,” you followed your own advice and held it for a second, “and let it out, nice and slow.”
It took Blues a couple seconds to gain control, but he eventually took in a proper breath and exhaled. You glanced down to see Rhythm clutching his heaving chest, as he struggled with your instructions. Biting the inside of your cheek, you rubbed his back with your index finger in the lightest of touches.


Rhythm’s breaths stuttered as you whispered words of encouragement, and soon enough he was able to draw in a deep, slow breath. Blues followed suit, and you took another breath right after. The three of you exhaled at the same time.

“That’s it, you got it. Just one more,” you urged, smiling. Rhythm sank into your touch to the point where it was easier to pick him up, and so you had two Bitties cuddled in your arms as the sun dipped further past the horizon.

“...Better? We can still go straight home if you want. I should have started you off with a smaller trip, like the grocery store or something.”

“We’re not Babybones,” Blues snipped, although he clung tighter to your shirt, “We’ve been in a ton of situations worse than this.”

“We can navigate this place just fine,” Rhythm added.

“Then what was that all about?”

It was almost comical how they gave you pointed looks at the same time.

“Me?” you replied, standing, “I admit that I’m not a pro-wrestler or anything, but I’d go down swinging. At least it’d give you enough time to run away!”

“That’s what we’re afraid of,” Blues huffed and turned his back towards you, “Don’t make us spell it out for you! It seems we’re bad at spelling anyways.”

“I’ll say it,” Rhythm replied, and he locked gazes with you, “Hey Babe, we actually enjoy your company. So, uh, can you not try to get yourself killed? It’s a little hard to drag you to safety when you’re ten times bigger than us.”

Your brain clicked two and two together, and suddenly it was like the world made perfect sense.

“Ohhh, you were worried about me! Aww, guys, that’s really sweet. Thank you!” You laughed, nuzzling your cheek against them for a brief second. Blues’ face turned the brightest blue as he scowled at his grinning brother, who in turn turned a light shade of orange.

You resisted the urge to tease them and settled for smiling instead, “But seriously, don’t worry about me. I’ve been to this place a ton of times before. Here, let’s get going before it gets dark.”

The store was only a few more yards away, but still enough to cause Blues to worry, “Umm, Maiden, could you move closer to the walls? Yes, just a little closer, a little more!”

“I’ll run into the walls if I go any closer,” you chuckled, propping them onto your shoulders, “We’re almost there, just hold on.”

As you reached the glass doors, you scanned the small door decal with the words “Monster Friendly” plastered above the delta rune, the insignia of monsters. The sunlight had bleached the color to a pastel blue over its duration, and you held your breath for a moment as you pushed
the doors open. One of the reasons you chose this as your first trip out was because of their tolerant policy, and you figured that as long as the brothers behaved themselves, then no one would bother you about bringing your “pets”.

You moved past the front doors and onto the sales floor, where tall shelves filled with knick knacks and holiday decorations laid out in rows beside you. A few cashiers manned the registers in the lanes on the other side, and you spared them a quick glance to see if they spotted you. Nope. You took this chance to slip into an abandoned aisle filled with vases.

“Oh, we’re here. If anybody asks you, you’re normal monsters and not Bitties. Most people probably won’t say anything anyway,” you murmured, “Fabric section first.”

“UNDERSTOOD,” Blues tried to whisper in your ear, and you only felt a slight shift on Rhythm’s side. You gathered your courage and stood tall for a second before moving out to the main aisle.

With today being a weekday, the store only had a handful of customers scattered amongst the place as you walked a brisk pace to the corner of the store. The brothers stayed quiet and relatively still as you moved, although the way they hid in your locks of hair tugged at your scalp.

The bolts of cotton and fleece came into view, and you smiled at the prospect of making a whole new clothing line for your Bitties. Fall was coming soon, and that meant you could make scarves and jackets, little mittens, hoodies, Halloween costumes, anything you had an excuse to try, really. You made a beeline to the wall of cotton and broadcloth and brushed one of the bolts with your fingertips.

“What’s your favorite color?” you asked quietly, “Both of you.”

“Out of all of these?”

"It doesn't have to be super specific, just a general color."

It was quiet for a minute before Blues piped up.

"I like the color of the sky when it's sunny outside."

Sky blue, not too far off from the color of his magic. The picture of a sunny sky fit his personality, and you began imagining designs for outfits and the patterns you could use.

"What about you, Rhythm?"

"I dunno, Babe. What do you call the color of your eyes?"

You and Blues snorted at the same time, "Okay Casanova, what is it really?"

Rhythm’s weight lifted from your shoulder and the next thing you knew, you were looking up at the skeleton who was sitting on a bolt of dark red broadcloth.

“This one,” he said, looking down at the cloth, “I dunno why. Never had to think of it before.”

Knowing your favorite color wasn’t high on the list of survival skills, you figured. You offered your hand to Rhythm, who slid off his perch and onto you.

“You don’t need a reason to like a color,” you replied as you smiled at him, “I think most times people choose their favorite because they can.”

You brought Rhythm close to your chest and rubbed Blues’ back for a second before moving away
from the fabric and over to the small station littered with pattern books. This time you were going
to try to keep this session brief for their sake, but you were apt to spending at least an hour pouring
over the different patterns and styles and weighing them against your initial concepts. “Stubborn”
and “perfectionist” were the common terms amongst the friends who watched you perform your
hobbies, but it didn’t bother you as long as you were satisfied with the results.

“We’re gonna try to find some patterns,” you explained as you put both of them onto the desk.
Since the station was tucked away in the corner, not many people were apt to bother you here with
the exception of other seamsters. You cracked open the catalog book labeled “MTT Designs for
Monster and Humankind” and opened to the table of contents.

When it came to body type categorization, humans had it easy. There were tall, short, plus size,
slim, and average. Kids, teens, and adults were the enveloping categories, and miscellaneous items
had their own section, like accessories. The main benefit of humankind to someone who made
clothes was that, for the most part, humans had a standard body shape. Monsters didn’t even have
that. For the longest while, clothing patterns for monsters were almost impossible to market, and
only specialty shops run by monsters themselves sold monster garments. Mainstream stores were
getting better about it, but progress was slow. With so many different types of monsters, some
humanoid, animalistic, or even amorphous, fashion designers had to get creative.

So when it came to categorizing the diverse selection of patterns, many brands decided to follow
the leader’s example in Monster fashion: by how many legs your model had. This particular
catalog ranged from none to over ten. Scrolling your fingers across the text, your curiosity piqued
at seeing the plus 10 category and you flipped to the section for a quick glance.

“What the hell~” you singsonged under your breath as you gazed at the picture. You expected
maybe a squid-like monster, but this was literally just a ball of legs. How were they supposed to
even put on clothing?

Rhythm leaned over the pages, glancing at the sketch, “Looks like they’re all feet.”

“We’re not going to have to wear that, are we? I don’t have the figure...or the appendages.” Blues
questioned with a pained look on his face. You grinned and flipped to the bipedal section of the
book.

“Rest assured, that is not going on your body. Not if I can help it.”

It turned out that the patterns in the bipedal section were further divided into whether your models
had human or animal legs, or if you wanted the MTT EX-clusive pattern series for this year.
Finding the exclusive series to be a little more...avant garde for your tastes, you stuck to the more
common patterns in the book.

“Is there anything you guys like?” you asked as you flipped through the pages. You already
scratched down the numbers to some of the patterns that could be useful, albeit too big for them,
but the general shape was what mattered to you. Maybe monsters also thought Bitties as pets, as so
far you hadn’t seen anything for their size.

Never mind. Lo and behold, as you turned the next page, “Patterns for Bitties and other small
monsters” labelled the corner of an illustration of different Bitties. A few of them you recognized,
but most were unfamiliar to you, and you flipped through the next few pages to see what was in
store.

“You’re really excited about this,” Rhythm remarked, stopping you at a design of a tiny, suited
skeleton.
You looked at him sheepishly, “I guess it’s not hard to tell. It’s fun when I don’t have to worry about a deadline. And your stuff shouldn’t take nearly as much time as gowns do. Wanna see what I work on during the days?”

Before they had a chance to answer, you were already picking up the standard human catalog and flipping the first few pages to the evening gowns section. You stopped on a wedding gown pattern and pointed, “Like this. I don’t make the whole dress—usually—but I do have to sew back on sequins and appliques, tear them apart and put them back together again, replace panels, all sorts of stuff. There’s so many shapes and details, and sometimes we work on dresses for other special events.”

“They’re beautiful,” Blues gaped, “Why don’t you wear one? Surely with your skills you could make one for yourself!”

You laughed, “They’re wedding gowns! I don’t have a fiancé, and chances of me finding one are slim to none! If you want to see me in one, you’re going to have to marry me yourself...unless I do a halloween costume version. I could go as the corpse bride I suppose.”

You leafed through the small section of wedding gown patterns, entertaining the thought before settling on making your own. You didn’t need anything fancy since you’d rip it up anyway--and you needed to focus on the boys first!

“We’re not here for that though, so unless you want me to spend the next three hours looking over these books, I suggest you pick something out that you’d like! One outfit each!”

Overall, Rhythm had picked a pattern for a pair of cargo pants that could be altered for shorts, and a hoodie that featured thick sherpa lining in the hood. Blues settled for another t-shirt, trimmed with his color of choice, and plain, roomy pants. Pretty tame for what they could have chosen, and relatively easy. You fished out the patterns according to their numbers from the cabinet (and you couldn’t miss them either. The MTT design logo was plastered so large against the drawer panels that it could have been unrecognizable if you stepped to close) and went right to the materials.

Now armed with fabric suggestions, you went to work at collecting the right bolts for the job. The brothers had perched on your shoulders again as you scavenged through the remnants section first, praising your luck at finding a scrap half-yard of sherpa and a few cotton pieces that caught your eye. After that, you carefully balanced a few bolts of cloth in your arms, doing your best to match their favorite colors with the right materials and dropping them onto the counter. Now came the moment of truth.

“Ready, guys? Remember, you’re normal monsters,” you muttered as you rang the bell. It was quiet for a moment as you glanced around, and you moved your hand over the bell again until you heard distinct tapping of hooves against the tile. The familiar, blue apron of an employee came into view, and you recognized each other solely on the amount of times you’ve visited before. Well, that and the fact that she was a six foot minotaur with a pink bow tied around her ear.

“What’ll it be today?” she asked as you pushed the bolts across the table to her. She was always so cordial when the two of you spoke, but that didn’t make her any less intimidating. You hadn’t broken any of their rules until now.

“I just need a half-yard of each, please,” you smiled despite the prickly feeling down your spine. The monster took her time cutting the materials to your specifications, and you felt the brothers jittering in anticipation. After what seemed like an hour, she wrote down the prices and lengths on the slip and pinned it to the neatly folded pile.

“Here you go, dear,” she said as she slid the fabric to you. Just when you thought you were in the
clear, she locked gazes with Rhythm and paused. Then she looked over to Blues. Oh boy. You steeled yourself against the oncoming confrontation and stood tall.

“Who’re your friends?” she asked slowly, her mouth turning upwards into a smile. You reached up behind them and gave a small, reassuring tap with your fingers. Rhythm relaxed for a second and cleared his voice.

“Name’s Rhythm. You’re looking simply bovine today, ma’am.” he replied, and you pursed your lips to keep from laughing. She chuckled.

“Thank you, but don’t let my husband catch you saying that!”

She looked over to Blues, whose whole body locked up at her gaze.

“N-NO, OF COURSE NOT! NORMAL MONSTERS LIKE US WOULDN’T DREAM OF ANGERING YOUR HUSBAND. AND WE ARE ABSOLUTELY NORMAL MONSTERS. TOTALLY NORMAL. ISN’T THAT RIGHT, BRO? WHO ALSO HAPPENS TO BE A NORMAL MONSTER.”

"Yep. That's right, brother."

You bit your lip, but it wasn’t enough to stifle your laughter, so you clapped your hand over your mouth and held your breath for a couple of seconds. What kind of train wreck was this situation?

“His name is Blues,” you introduced for him once you regained your poise.

She retained her smile, and instead of commenting further, she backed away from the counter, “It’s nice to meet you.” and then looked to you with a twinkle in her eye, “Nice to see you again. You all have a good day now.”

“Thank you. You too,” you replied, and as you watched her walk away and into an adjacent aisle, the three of you breathing a sigh of relief.

“That wasn’t so bad,” Blues chirped into your ear as you gathered the items into your arms. Your mouth quirked into a grin.

“Yeah, that could have been worse.” Especially since she let Blues’ blatantly obvious fib slide. Either way, the encounter gave you more courage to explore the other aisles with less fear. You started down the main path again, excited to show the brothers the wonders of the craft store, when you felt your stomach grumble. You turned to the yarn section and ignored the irritation.

“What’s that sound?” Rhythm asked while you assessed the options before you. Would they care what kind of yarn you chose?

“It’s just me. Forgot that I skipped lunch today,” you replied offhandedly, feeling the texture of one of the chunky skeins near the bottom shelf. Nah, it’d probably swallow them up. The baby yarn was also soft and much thinner, but they only came in specific colors. You peered down at your fabric cuttings and held your arms out to the yarn.

A moment passed. You balanced two small skeins of matching yarn onto your pile. Should have grabbed a basket.

“You didn’t eat breakfast either,” Blues commented in a neutral tone.

“I suppose you’re right,” you said, turning the corner into the next aisle, “Hey, is there anything
you guys would like to see? I bet they have actual dollhouse furniture here. I can’t spend too much more, but we can always save up for stuff, you know? Wanna check it out?”

“I think we have enough, Babe. How about we grab some grub?”

“Yes, and discuss your punishment for when we go home,” Blues added. You paused as you grabbed a bag of wooden beads and shifted your head towards him.

“Wait, punishment?”

“For breaking the rule: ‘At least two meals a day’. Worry not, Maiden. We’ll go easy on you for your first offense!” he patted your jaw lightly and smiled.

Oh. Oh boy.

Chapter End Notes

I'm still alive! It's the last stretch before Christmas, so I hope everyone's gotten their Christmas gifts and can spend the holidays with their loved ones they way they want to! Work for me won't slow down until mid-January, but I'm working on the chapters slowly but surely. I'm going to go through the previous chapters to correct some grammar/spelling mistakes, then work on the next chapter. Thanks for sticking with the story so far and happy holidays!
You were sitting at the dining table, watching the horrifying concoction being made right before your eyes. Your stomach was already full from the burrito you ate, and the sight of Blues mixing in soy sauce from a packet into the small cup turned you off from wanting to eat anything. Rhythm had dumped in ketchup and mustard just before, and currently he was spooning out the salt from the shaker for added flavor. So far they were making a cocktail of condiments similar to what your cousin would do for homemade barbeque sauce. And that wouldn’t have been so bad...until they added the rest of the pitcher of Sea Tea.

“Remember that I have to go to work tomorrow,” you tried to hint at them as Rhythm drug the half-pint of milk out of the fridge. He unfolded the carton and tipped it over, spilling the milk into the cup. Some of it splashed onto the counter as the cup overfilled, making Blues yelp as he tried to step around the mess. The shorter skeleton was armed with a spoon this time around, and he dumped it into the cup and stirred.

“Hmm,” he hummed as he sampled the concoction, “It’s still missing the cheese.”

“Got it,” Rhythm replied, teleporting in a flash to the table. He gave you a devilish grin before passing right by you and climbed down the ladder to the messenger bag you had dumped onto the floor.

“What kind of cheese are you going to find in there—I didn’t even order queso! How did you get that?!”

“We have our ways,” he replied evenly before moving back to the cup. He took the lid off and scooped up bits of the now-solid cheese into the mix. Oh god, did Blues just pull out the mayo and the jam?

He was now slurping out some of the milk/tea and tipped the jars over enough to scrape large chunks of each condiment into the cup. He counted on his fingers in silence, and seeming content, he wrestled with the bread bag and retrieved a slice with a look of satisfaction.

Oh no, please don’t put it in….and he did. Half of the slice, ripped up and slowly sinking to the bottom of the mixture. He stirred again, and you could tell by his forceful movements that the ingredients were as thick as it was disgusting.

“IT IS DONE!” he announced, and you gulped at the several containers littered upon your counter. He teleported with the cup to the table and looked up at you with a grin.

“Maiden! Unbeknownst to you, I have begun to study the culinary prowess that humans and monster love so much! BEHOLD! THE MASTERPIECE THAT HOLDS ALL SEVEN FOOD
GROUPS! Surely this will replenish the nutrients that your body craves from missing your meals today!

What worried you more? The fact that Blues began to study cooking, or the fact that he considered all of these ingredients to be healthy?

Bits of solidified queso and jam were swirling around at the top. Your stomach begged you not to look at it. You looked to the Bitty with pleading eyes.

“You must have ALL of it!” Blue commanded as Rhythm appeared right beside him.

You wrapped your fingers around the cup, silently thanking the heavens that it was only eight ounces worth and not a coffee mug. You were going to regret this. But rules are rules though, and you made them for crying out loud, so you brought the cup to your lips, gave them one last look, and downed the mixture as fast as you could.

The milk and tea poured into your mouth first, and you could taste the tang of ketchup and mustard without even reaching to that part. The soggy bread spilled in with it, coating your teeth and tongue, and the queso bits with jam followed after. The thicker ingredients, like the actual ketchup and mustard, along with the honey and mayo, chased the initial liquids down, quickly gaining in viscosity and speed as you tipped your head back. It took you every ounce of will not to gag at this part, and once you couldn’t bear it any longer, slammed the cup back onto the table. You swallowed the last of what was in your mouth, coughed, and looked back with dread.

“Is that good enough?” you asked, looking at the brothers instead of the cup. The two peered over its rim and looked at each other.

“You did pretty good, Babe,” Rhythm commented, giving you a thumbs up. Blues took another look, and nodded his head.

“That’s acceptable,” Blues critiqued, “Now for your punishment!”

You couldn’t help the mortified look on your face, “That wasn’t it?”

“No, silly!” he laughed, “That was just for preparation! We’ve decided that since discipline is the issue here, there’s no greater way to start than with physical discipline! EXERCISE! WITH A SOUND BODY COMES A SOUND MIND AND SOUL!”

After he announced that, his grin faltered for a split second before changing it to an unusual smirk. Blues put his arms behind his back and stood straight with his legs shoulder width apart.

Your stomach was doing it right now it seemed, as it flipped in protest at both the concoction and the news it received. Dammit, he looked adorable with that little tough guy attitude he had going on.

“We’d have to go to the basement to exercise,” you replied, “Unless it’s like pushups and sit ups. I can’t do much jumping or running here, or the downstairs neighbors will rat us out.”

“Ah,” Blues faltered, “No matter! We shall simply split your punishment into two! Twenty-five sit ups and twenty-five push ups now, and half an hour of dodging magic attacks later!”

“Right now?”

“Right now!”
The Sea Tea must be doing a miraculous job of refraining you from vomiting on the spot. You gave a shaky breath and nodded.

“Okay.”

And so, as you moved to the hallway floor and started your impromptu exercise session, all you could think of was how lucky they were that you liked them so damn much.

Chapter End Notes

It's just a short, quick chapter this time. The punishment may not have been as grand or exciting as you were expecting, but I hope you enjoyed it nonetheless! Again, happy holidays and Merry Christmas to everyone!
Chapter Summary

The average human has about eight pints of blood. You have a little less than that now.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next day after work, the three of you resumed your punishment in the basement. You had checked beforehand if anyone was using the washers or dryers, and finding them all empty, drug a load of laundry down. The washing cycle was going to be the timer for your torture and the perfect excuse for you to be in the basement in the first place.

“Are you sure this is enough space?” you asked as you eyed the small, outdated lounge. The laundry machines whirred as background noise while Rhythm and Blues assessed the area from the beaten coffee table and lone couch. It was twice the size of the apartment and certainly more spacious, though the low lighting from the escape windows gave the area a dingy feel. The faded linoleum and chipped paint of the walls didn’t help any, though you didn’t expect anything less from your stingy landlord.

“This is perfect!” Blues grinned.

“Ready? If you got any questions, now’s the time,” Rhythm warned.

Why did you need to learn how to dodge in small spaces? You never got to ask. As soon as you opened your mouth, Rhythm’s hand rose up and summoned half a dozen bones. They came flying towards you, and you threw your arms up to shield the rest of your body. As soon as they came into contact with your skin, you braced yourself for the pain...and felt nothing.

“Huh,” you looked at your arms in confusion. There weren’t any scratches, but you felt the contact for sure. It was like being hit by nerf darts. You looked back to the brothers.

“Of course I’m not gonna hurt ya, Babe,” Rhythm replied with a smirk, “it’s all about the intent. Can’t hurt anybody unless I want to.”

In other words, this was a glorified, bone-shaped dodgeball session. You smiled.

“This sounds kinda fun—” you were cut short by another bone narrowly missing your face and Rhythm smirking at you.

“Might wanna pay attention,” he goaded.

You got the message loud and clear, and so you stopped talking and focused on your movements instead. It was a steady pattern at first, where Rhythm would target either your upper or lower body and you’d move accordingly. As expected, you weren’t great at the game. The Bitty would tag you more often than not, and unless you were the farthest away from the middle of the room, you were almost always guaranteed to get hit. After you managed to dodge two hits in a row, Rhythm paused.
“Well, you could have no reflexes. It’ll take some time to get closer to our level.”

“It is worrisome,” Blues admitted, holding his chin in thought, “Perhaps we should start holding training sessions on a regular routine. It’s a miracle that you haven’t Fallen yet.”

“Hey, I’m not totally defenseless,” you huffed, “I know a couple of self-defense moves. And part of living is knowing when to choose your battles anyway!”

Something about what you said struck a chord with them, as they froze and gave you stunned expressions. They looked to each other for a second, seeming to have a silent, intense discussion, and then back to you with unsettled eyes.

“That is...sound advice,” Blues said, his tone light but his face looked as if he tasted something bitter, “but it is better to be prepared for nothing than to be caught in a situation you are unable to handle.”

“Just humor us, Babe.”

He wasn’t even going to take the obvious pun. You frowned and stepped forward.

“Are you upset with me?”

“No,” they both replied at the same time, and looked at each other again.

“Ah,” this time Rhythm gave you a smile, “We’re just hung up on some stuff, s’not your fault. Let’s pick up where we left off. Ready for round two?”

“This time we’ll make it harder. If you catch me and not get hit within ten seconds, then your punishment can end early!"

You braced yourself, “Okay.”

You’d do it if it made them more at ease. You’d spend all your time dodging anyway, so what was there to lose?

“Some advice, Babe: it’s good that you’re trying to read our actions, but you just don’t have the skills yet. Just make yourself a hard target from the start.”

So instead of being reactive, you just had to be proactive. With that thought in mind, you moved away from the center and watched as Blues teleported out of sight.

“Right here,” Blues called from behind you.

Your first instinct was to turn around, but one glance at Rhythm made you change your mind.

“No way. You’re not getting me with that.”

What you didn’t account for was that Blues was more than capable of performing his own attacks. No sooner had you said it that he tapped your back with a set of bones and teleported as you whipped around. Rhythm tagged you right afterward.

“We won’t fault you for that one, Maiden,” Blues teased from a yard away.

“So that’s how you’re going to play,” you growled playfully. You dived for Blues and came up short, as expected, but moved away just as Rhythm shot another attack. The bones dissipated as they hit the floor beside you, and you felt the adrenaline start to seep through your veins.
“Nice one, Babe. That’s it,” he complimented.

“BUT STILL TOO SLOW!” Blues called out from somewhere behind the couch. You scrambled to your feet and darted across to the other side, where Blues gave you a quick wave and teleported out of sight. You crouched behind the couch where Rhythm couldn’t see you and remained still. If you could get a clue where Blues would appear, then maybe you’d have a chance.

“Not much of a hiding place,” Rhythm retorted as you looked above. He locked gazes with you with a grin, as his left eye socket flickered with orange magic. A set of bones floated above his fingertips.

“I guess not,” you admitted, smirking as you shoved the back of the sofa with your shoulder. You darted out from under him as he regained his balance. Blues caught sight of your stumbling form and moved to the wall.

You didn’t waste any time charging towards the Bitty with serious force, which was a mistake with your eyesight. Depth perception was still a thing, and you had forgotten that even with corrective lenses, yours was awful.

Blues had teleported out of the way when you slammed your face into the wall. The adrenaline kept the pain from immediately setting in, leaving you dazed for a second, followed by another familiar sensation from your nose.

_Drip. Drip._

You kept crouched as you leaned closer to the wall, not wanting to alarm the brothers from the blood streaming down your face. The drops splattered onto the linoleum as you pinched your nose.

“Um, hold on a moment guys.”

“Maiden, that sounded—!” Blues happened to pop up beside you, “YOU’RE BLEEDING!”

“Just a nosebleed. It’ll stop,” you replied. You cupped your free hand over your nose to keep any more from spilling onto the ground, and by that time, Rhythm had already moved to your shoulder.

“Babe?” He pulled the hair away from your face and tucked it behind your ear.

“Here,” Blues pulled off his shirt and held it out to you, “Maybe this can stop it!”

You took the cloth and shoved it underneath your nose as quick as you could. Aww, wait, no. _Blues’ shirt._ Another one ruined!

“I’m gonna have to make you a ton of clothes for your wardrobe,” you muttered.

“That’s what you’re worried about?!”

“You’re losing an awful lot there,” Rhythm commented, but his words were rushed together and unsteady.

You tried to smile until you realized it probably looked terrifying, “It’s not as bad as it looks!”

To prove it, you moved over to the utility sink near the laundry machines and washed the blood away. Some of it was still trailing from your nostrils, but the flow had lessened, and Blues’ shirt was doing a better job than you thought at absorbing it.

“We just gotta wait a few minutes, and then we can go back to exercising.”
“No, Maiden,” Blues said as he teleported to your other shoulder, “I think you’ve had enough for today!”

You frowned.

“Are you sure?” Now it just felt like you were copping out of your end of the bargain.

“You just bled out half of our bodyweight,” Rhythm remarked, “We’re sure.”

You scoffed, “Please, I’ve donated more blood than this. I’ll be okay.”

“But we didn’t plan to draw blood on the first try! We’ll...WE’LL JUST SUSPEND THE REST OF YOUR PUNISHMENT FOR LATER! Without walls.”

And so, you ended up waiting a few minutes longer for the washing cycle and your nosebleed to stop. A washcloth was sacrificed to the floor to clean up your mess. Once you washed Blues’ shirt as best you could (A useless endeavor. You just tie-dyed his shirt in blood), you switched the laundry over to the dryer and gathered a few of your supplies.

“Let’s go back upstairs for a while,” you said as the brothers took to your shoulders again. It wasn’t so bad to have exercised. Actually, it felt nice to move around, and despite your injury, you were in a pretty good mood.

Until you ran into your neighbors from downstairs.

They must have entered the building just as you reached the top of the first floor, as you could hear their heated argument even before they opened the hallway door. You froze for a split second, surprised by the sudden noise as the volume went from low to blaring as soon as they entered.

“Just leave me alone! God, you’re such an asshole!”

“If you’d listen to me for once we wouldn’t be in this fucking mess!”

Nope. You didn’t want any part of that. You turned the corner, fully prepared to sprint up the stairs when your neighbor glared at your sudden movements and barked,

“Hey, whatever your name is!”

Oh, son of a motherfucker. It was better to just get this over with.

You turned around and clenched your teeth, looking at her with the most neutral expression you could muster.

“My name—”

“Yeah, whatever. Could you stop stomping around all day? It’s driving me crazy! Other people live here besides you, you know!”

You weren’t even home all day, and you doubted that Rhythm and Blues could make that much noise unless they were dropping random things onto the floor. And seeing as your apartment wasn’t trashed when you came home, you had little proof to believe otherwise.

You didn’t want to start a fight. You just had to deal with it, “Sorry. I’ll try to be more careful.”

You felt Rhythm shift forward on your shoulder, as if he was preparing to jump.
She wasn’t done with you yet. In fact, she squinted her eyes and moved towards you despite her boyfriend’s pleas.

“What are those on your shoulders? Ugh, gross.”

So were her pitiful fucking relationships, but hey, who was keeping tabs?

You glared daggers at her but said nothing otherwise. You couldn’t start a fight and risk being kicked out. You couldn’t risk not going to work because of bruises. But damn, she was making it hard.

“Leave her alone,” Blues growled. You hadn’t noticed the buzzing of magic by your ears until he spoke. Suddenly fear struck your nerves, because you felt their intent to attack—and that couldn’t happen, you know what happens when aggressive pets attack people—

“They’re alive? That’s disgusting—”

You dropped the cleaning supplies in your arms and flung your hands over the brothers, ignoring the burning stings and stepping down to meet her face to face, furious.

“You listen to me,” you hissed, staring right into her eyes, “You stay out of my business, and I stay out of yours, understood?”

She backed away with a startled look on her face, which quickly turned to anger as she took a step forward again, and stopped as she caught sight of blood dripping onto the floor.

“What the fuck,” her boyfriend exclaimed, “Come on Sweetie, just drop it.”

“Stay the hell away from me, you freak!” She gave you one last withering glare before retreating with her boyfriend down the hallway.

You looked at the bleeding lacerations on your hands from where you had blocked the brothers’ attacks, and sighed. With the adrenaline gone again, the pain started to seep into the flesh around the cuts, and you hissed as you picked up the detergent and dryer sheets from the floor.

“Maiden,” Blues called so quiet that it was almost a whisper.

You didn’t say anything. You climbed the stairs and went down the hallway to the apartment, where the keys slipped out of your grasp and you cursed under your breath. Your hands were throbbing as it took delicate, precise movements to pick them up and unlock the door.

Once safely inside, you dropped your belongings onto the table and moved to the bathroom where the peroxide was waiting. Rhythm and Blues had moved off of you and onto the floor.

You twisted the cap off and braced yourself, then poured the peroxide onto your left hand.

Holyfreakinghellsonofabitchithurts

The cuts foamed as the peroxide disinfected your wounds, and you blinked tears away and held your breath. You repeated the same for your other hand and clenched your teeth. If their magic was based on intent, then they really meant to hurt her.

The dressing was in your emergency kit, and you barely managed to get the roll out before dropping it. The gauze rolled and stopped at their feet.

You gulped and knelt onto the tile. You couldn’t look straight at them, and the ache when you
moved your fingers was agonizing, “Can you help me?”

Both of them had begun pulling the roll as you placed the cotton onto your wound, and silence reigned over the bathroom for a few tense moments.

“I’m sorry,” you started, “I should have defended you. She said those stupid things, and I didn’t say anything.”

Rhythm tugged at the dressing, and you were forced to look at them.

“What’re you saying?” He was angry.

“What do you mean?”

“Why didn’t you just let us attack?! You were just going to stand there and take it?”

“Because if I let you, she’d tell the landlord you’re aggressive!”

“What does that matter?” Blues snapped, “We already know that! She was going to hurt you and you weren’t going to fight!”

“I’ve dealt with their shit before, it’s nothing new!”

“Dammit Babe, this is why we’re worried about you! Stop putting yourself in harm’s way!”

“If you had hit her, she could’ve called the landlord or animal control and they would’ve killed you, and I am never going to give them a chance to do that!”

Silence. You finished wrapping your other hand despite the pain.

“Are we really that important to you?” Blues asked as he looked up at you.

“Of course you are,” you replied.

Rhythm grabbed your finger and pressed up against it.

“You are to us, too.”

...But the troubles didn’t stop there.

A few days later, on your next day off, you were doing some light cleaning when you heard someone knocking on the door. You set the broom aside and peeked into the hole. Your heart dropped.

You turned around and locked sights with Rhythm, who was folding the throw blanket on the loveseat.

“You have to hide,” you mouthed. Fear swelled up as Blues appeared in a flash, and you repeated to him, “Hide. Not under the bed, not in the kitchen. Don’t make a sound.”

You sprinted to the kitchen and shoved the Bitty dishes into a container, and then into the fridge. You unhinged the ladder from the table and shoved it between the couch cushions.

“Just a minute!” You called and ran to the bedroom, where you stuffed a bolt of fabric from the closet under the bed.
When you returned, both of them were gone from the living room. You took a deep breath and opened the door.

Your landlord stepped in.

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Years everybody! It's not a happy chapter to end the year with, but it's gotta get worse before it gets better! I have some extra time, so I'm going to be working on chapters twice as hard. Haha, next chapter might be a Halloween chapter. I hadn't anticipated time to move so slowly within the fic, but I'm going to do my best to catch up.

I hope everyone has a great New Years!
Shit, It's the Landlord!

Chapter Summary

Your landlord came to visit. Isn't that nice?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Afternoon, sir. What brings you up here?” you asked as your internal panic siren was screaming at you. The landlord only came to personally visit when one of two things happened: someone wasn’t paying their rent, or someone was being forcefully evicted.

The middle-aged man scratched the exposed part of his belly and gave you a toothy grin. You maintained eye contact to keep you from staring at his missing teeth and stepped away from the door.

He stepped inside.

“Hey there Sweetheart, how are ya’ doing? Your brother doing well?”

He always mentioned your brother when you saw him. They must have been on good terms when your brother lived here.

“He’s fine, thank you. Do you want something to drink?”

You rushed to the fridge without giving him a chance to answer. Using your body to block the view, you pulled the rule list away and folded it up to put into your pocket. You hid the paper in the palm of your hand as you took out the pint of milk.

“I don’t have much. Milk, tea, water.”

“No no, I’m all right. Bi-annual Inspection have been bumped up, so I’m just gonna take a look around. You been havin’ any problems with leaks or the appliances?”

“No, sir,” you said as he moved right to the kitchen, “Usually you give us a note and the maintenance workers come. I’m a little surprised.”

“I could’a sworn I put it in your door. Ya must’a missed it. The guys are busy workin’ on the roof, so I’m doin’ ‘em,” he replied.

You didn’t miss any note; it simply didn’t exist. But you knew better than to argue about it. And from the way he was snooping in your cupboards, you knew he wasn’t just doing a maintenance inspection either.

The smell of smoke invaded your nose as he stepped to the sink, and you took another two steps backwards. You liked to keep a good couple feet away from him at all times whenever you had the chance. And now that his head was under the sink, it gave you ample time to look around the kitchen to avoid his obvious butt crack issue.
Did you get everything in the kitchen? There wasn’t much, right? The dishes were safe in the fridge since the container was opaque. Eating monster food wasn’t unusual nowadays. The list was in your pocket now. The ladder was between the cushions. The sponges were in the bathroom—and so was the Bitty tub!

Your heart thudded against your chest as the landlord pulled his head out from under the cupboards and gave you a look, “Ya okay there, sweetheart? What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. Um...excuse me while I go to the restroom for a moment.”

You turned heel and walked through the living room and hallway, glancing around to see if either of the brothers were in sight before moving into the bathroom. You closed the door behind you and knelt down to untie the shower curtains hanging from the pipe. The tub was next, as you unplugged it and dumped out the water from the containers, and then shoved the whole device into the laundry hamper. You threw a towel over it, flushed the toilet, and ran the faucet for a good moment before leaving the bathroom.

You almost jumped when you turned the corner and met the sight of your guest.

“Ya good? I gotta check pipes here, too.”

“Yeah, go on ahead,” you gave him a false smile as you motioned to the door. Was he just waiting for you to get out, right in the middle of the hall?

“Jesus sweetheart, what happened to your hands?”

Fuck, “Ah, it was a work accident. Had a newbie trying to change rotary blades for the first time.”

No one who worked with fabric would believe such a lie, and you prayed he hadn’t picked up quilting as a hobby. And although the miracles of monster food had prevented you from going to the hospital for stitches, the wounds were too deep to heal for what you had available in the apartment. The large bandaids on your palms must have stuck out like a sore thumb.

You clasped your hands together as you watched him look around every nook and cranny in the small room. He even pulled the shower curtains aside to look at your tub. He seemed slightly disgruntled as he searched, and it looked as if he was about to open the medicine cabinet until he flashed you another glance, and must have thought otherwise.

“I’m guessing you have to check the fire escape?” you asked. You just wanted to get this over with. He didn’t have much left to check. You just had to hold out a few more minutes.

“Yeah,” he said as if you had given him an idea, “Yeah, Sweetheart. You know the drill.”

The door was already open, and he gave your room a good long look around before actually going to the window. His foot caught under the Christmas light wire, and feeling the tug, he looked down at it.

“What’s this for?”

“They’re lights for under the bed,” you replied quickly, “I thought it looked neat, and I don’t have to pull everything out to see under there.”

“Ain’t that a fire hazard?”

To your dismay, he bent down and looked under your bed, reaching underneath for whatever he
could grab. Your heart stopped for a second as he pulled on the bolt of fabric, and then reached his arm in again to find something else.

“Do you really have to do that?” you asked as you fidgeted in place.

He caught something, and pulled a red object out from underneath. You held your breath—

It was the pincushion you bought.

“Just checkin’ for bugs,” he grunted as he stood. “I guess it’d be okay if it’s just Christmas lights.”

He moved back to the window and pushed it open. As his attention was diverted, you turned around and scanned for any last minute items to hide.

You caught a glimpse of Blues peeking out from the far corner of the bookshelf. Somehow he wedged himself between the wall and the case.

Blues, you screamed in your head, If you can hear me at all, for the love of God, hide further in!

You opened the door as wide as you could to block any view of the bookshelf, and you stood guard in front of the remaining gap to be on the safe side. You could hear the tiny scratches from Blues trying to shift his body, and you watched as the landlord slowly shifted his body back into the room.

He’ll hear you, you warned. You picked up one of the magazines from your shelf and pretended to leaf through the pages. The scratching stopped.

With a groan, the landlord righted himself and turned to face you.

“Well, that’s all, Sweetheart. Ya sure there ain’t nothin’ you need me to fix? No pest problems or anythin’?”

“No, sir,” you replied, smiling. Your heart was going a mile a minute as he looked you over for a moment, and then passed by you.

“Well, if ya need anythin’, ya know where to find me!”

“Yessir.” You followed him down the hall and into the living room.

“The pest control guys are comin’ sometime next week to spray the place, so keep a lookout for ‘em.”

“Okay, thank you.”

He paused at the front door. He was reaching for the knob. He stopped.

“Ya know,” he said in a suspiciously light tone, “I heard a little birdie tell me somethin’ interestin’.”

You froze, “What’s that?”

He bent down and picked up two sets of tiny shoes by the wall, and your eyes widened like saucers. No. No no no. You were doing so well!

“She told me you were keeping Bits here. Where are they?” he turned around and took a giant step towards you, shoving the shoes in your direction. You couldn’t talk your way out of this, and you
couldn’t intimidate him like you did with your neighbor. He wasn’t stupid. And he was easily twice your size and he owned the building you live in. You had to pick your battles and this wasn’t one of them.

“How many are there?”

You planted your feet and glared at the floor, “There’s two.” And right now you were begging them to stay in their hiding spots. What would he do if he saw them?

“What kind of Bits are they?”

“Skeletons.”

“How long have ya had ‘em?”

“About a week,” you lied. In reality, it was more leaning towards three. The less he knew, the better.

“A week, huh? Not too shabby. They hurt anybody?”

You gave him an indignant glare, “No!”

“How long were ya gonna keep ‘em a secret, Sweetheart?”

Chills ran down your spine. You kept quiet.

The Landlord stepped back and folded his arms, seeming satisfied with his interrogation, and placed the shoes on the loveseat.

“Ya ain’t listed for havin’ pets. It’s gonna be five hundred for the deposit and another hundred fifty added per month. Nonrefundable. Gonna have to sign the papers, too.”

You gaped at him, “That’s three times the usual rent for pets! Even the North Street apartments don’t charge that much!”

“Don’t like it? Move,” he replied, smiling as he moved towards the door, “I need it by the first of the month.”

That seriously cut into your budget. The deposit was going to eat most of your savings alone.

“...Fine. I’ll have it to you as soon as I can.”

“Great! I’ll be seein’ ya.”

“Oh, wait a second. Before you leave,” you remarked as he stepped out of the door. No doubt he had seen the cross look on your face, but kept a neutral expression.

There was no way you were going down alone. You warned that bitchy, sorry excuse of a neighbor, and she didn’t listen, “Do you want to know something about the little birdie you spoke to? She’s been stealing the quarters out of your vending machines for the last year.”

A flash of irritation passed the landlord’s face as he grabbed the handle, “Is that so? Thanks, Sweetheart.”

And just like that, he left. Gone. Now a different horror was playing out in your brain, and it was an image of you on the streets, eating garbage and sleeping in a cardboard box because you
couldn’t afford rent. Goodbye, ambitions. Goodbye, comfortable life.

You took a seat at the table and held your head in your hands. And in the very next second, Rhythm appeared before you, reaching for your jaw.

“Are you all right?” he asked in a hushed voice. You lowered your head and nuzzled him with your cheek.

“Yeah,” you replied. Your heart was slowing to its normal pace as you sighed. How could you have forgotten their shoes? They were right in plain view!

Blues popped up in front of you and tackled your face into a hug.

“MAIDEN, YOU DON’T HAVE TO SCREAM! ANY BITTY WITHIN THE WHOLE BUILDING COULD HAVE HEARD YOU!”

“Sorry, Blues. I was freaking out a bit.”

“YOU SCARED ME TO DEATH! IF YOU HAD SCREAMED ANY LOUDER, I WOULD HAVE COME OUT TO MAKE HIM LEAVE!”

You gently pulled him away and cupped your hand against his back.

“I’m glad you didn’t. Thank you for staying hidden.”

You smiled to ease the distraught expression on Blues’ face, and took a deep breath. Somehow you avoided the worst possible outcome for the time being, and now it was time for the next step.

The brothers seemed a bit reluctant to part from you when you stood up and went to retrieve your laptop and purse. You dug out your checkbook flipped the pages to see your current balance for your account, and got to work.

“I can’t believe he tripled the pet fees,” you muttered while listing the bills on a spreadsheet. Both Blues and Rhythm watched the screen from either side as you typed away.

“Let’s see, if I start packing lunches again and use that food money as part...ah, but monster food is more expensive even though we don’t need much. Electricity and water aren’t going to be too much more. I’ll put half of the rec money into it. Huh, maybe a little more than that…”

You were going to have to make some unpleasant phone calls. If you cancelled holiday plans with your family and picked up the extra hours at work, you’d be fine. Otherwise you were going to get acquainted with that dumpster real soon.

“Whelp, that settles it. I guess it’s time to start selling myself on the streets. Think I’d go for a good price?” you joked.

Both of them gawked at you.

“You’re not serious,” Blues deadpanned.

“No. Not yet anyway.”

“Heh, with us around, no one would be able to touch you,” Rhythm added.

So now the image of you alone in the dumpster became an image of you in the dumpster being guarded by two pissed off Bitties.
“That’s sweet in a dangerous kind of way, so thanks? But for now, I think we’ll be okay as long as nothing major comes up. I can pick up double time if they let me work the Black Friday sale. Ugh, that’s gonna be a day.”

Looking at your plan eased your worries, and you’d take screaming, needy customers over the alternative. You pressed your fingers against their backs, maybe more for your comfort than for theirs, and thought of any loose ends you’d have to address.

“I guess I should put back your stuff,” you laughed half-heartedly.

Blues asked as he grasped your finger, looking at you with a guilty frown.

“Is there anything we can do about this? We ARE the reason this is happening, and it shouldn’t be your burden to bear alone.”

“It’s fine,” you smiled again, but they shifted gazes made you think they were unconvinced, “In all honesty, I’m surprised we lasted this long undetected. We haven’t exactly been covert about it. I should have prepared for this ahead of time.”

Rhythm bowed his head and put up his hood when you looked at him, and Blues’ tiny arms gripped your finger tighter.

“Seriously guys, I know I’m complaining about it, but it’ll be okay. We’ll make it through this,” you said as you gathered them into your hands. “You’re not going back to the streets again. I won’t let that happen.”

“We know, Babe,” Rhythm mumbled, “You’re too good for us.”

You laughed and shook your head, “I’d say I’m just about right.”

Once the three of you calmed down, together you put back most their belongings in the proper places. The brothers saved their bedroom for last, as you had knocked over half of their setup from shoving that fabric bolt underneath. Meanwhile, you came back to the kitchen for your cell phone. You took a deep breath, bottled your emotions as best you could, and scrolled through your contact list for your cousin’s name.

You tapped it. It rang once, twice, and on the third time, like clockwork, your cousin’s soprano voice answered your call.

“Hey,” you said in a perfectly passable even tone. “About Grandma’s anniversary...I can’t make it.”

Chapter End Notes

You know, I every time I talk about a Halloween chapter, I end up delaying it. Let's see what happens if I don't mention anything about one -_-.

Anyways, since my update schedule is so inconsistent, I wanted to give a quick shoutout to a gaming marathon charity that starts soon. GamesDoneQuick is a video game speedrunning marathon that happens twice a year. They raise money for several organizations like the Prevent Cancer foundation or Doctors without Borders. I love watching this marathon whenever it comes on, and the reason why I'm mentioning it
here is because they're doing an Undertale speedrun on the last day. Check it out if you have the time! It starts this month, January 8th and runs through the 15th, nonstop. They usually have a livestream up on their main page and on Twitch.

Last thing, since we're on video games and I'm particularly chatty this time, what's your favorite video game? Undertale excluded! If I absolutely had to choose and was honest with myself, it'd be Kingdom Hearts II (and then there's the part of me that's screaming Final Fantasy IX!).

Again, thank you all for reading!
Days Like These.

Chapter Summary

The days go on.

(A chapter of small moments throughout their weeks)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Moment like these always passed by in a flash. Nevertheless, the following days passed on with memories that you’d like to keep for a long time.

You had come home from work, put together a cheap boxed dinner meal with some MTT Glamburger meat for the brothers, and called it a day. Something about hand sewing three hundred Swarovski crystals into a veil made your brain shut down. After changing out of your work clothes, you curled up onto the loveseat, threw the fleece throw over you, and closed your eyes.

You must have dozed off, because you awoke to something brushing your knuckles.

You cracked an eye open and caught Rhythm tracing your knuckles with his fingers, sliding down the tendons and to your wrist. He brought up his other arm and pushed up his sleeve to examine himself, and then drew a circle on your skin with his index finger.

“So soft,” he muttered. Your heart fluttered as he continued tracing tiny circles on your wrist, looking as if he was mesmerized by it.

“What are you doing?” you croaked quietly. He jerked his hand away and shot you a panicked look.

“Nothing. Sorry.”

He looked ready to jump off the cushion and teleport away when you lifted yourself up a little, “Wait.”

He complied as you drug him closer to you, and you settled back down. If anyone your size had done that, you would have freaked. But this was Rhythm, and maybe it was your weird pet views kicking up, but you didn’t care right now.

“Let’s take a nap,” you replied, closing your eyes again.

“Okay,” he squeaked, a sound you weren’t used to hearing from him. He shifted in your hands to make himself comfortable.

Silence reigned over the room again as you rested your eyes. Curiosity did get the better of you though, “So what were you doing?”

Quiet. He either didn’t want to answer or was already asleep. You weren’t going to open your eyes to check.
“...The structure of our bones are the same,” Rhythm answered, “How are we so different, but so alike at the same time?”

You let the question sink in for a moment, “You know, I heard someone say that they think humans are descendants of skeleton monsters. Dunno if it’s true…”

A chuckle, “Maybe.”

“Could I ask you something?”

“You already did.”

“Haha,” you opened your eyes again to study his face. “But really. Do you like it here? I just picked you up and pushed you to stay, but did you two have something you wanted to do? Some place to go?”

“That’s more than one something.”

“Then pick one.”

He shifted to his side to face you, “We heard stories of a Bitty village somewhere in the mountain. Legend says it was the test site of the magic used to suppress monsters before the Barrier was put in place. I guess you could say we were aiming for that, but really we just wanted to get away…”

Again, that far off look made its way onto Rhythm’s face and your heart felt a twinge of pain. You curled your fingers around him and closed your eyes.

“Don’t feel bad, Babe. This is our village now,” he mumbled as he traced patterns on the pad of your pinky finger, “Food. Shelter. Warmth. All we ever needed.”

You smiled but said nothing. The two of you drifted off to sleep.

Small crumbs and bits of leftovers tended to collect over the floor in the kitchen, and you had enough of it one day when you felt a layer of the junk stick to your bare foot. Ick.

So, as the morning went with the usual police sirens and honking in the background, and accompanied by your coffee pot working its magic, you armed yourself with the broom and dustpan started sweeping. You shivered a little from the cooler air of the morning, but your stubbornness kept you from throwing on something warmer. Your mind wandered as you worked your way from under the table to around the counters. You leaned over a bit to shove the bristles under the fridge when something black darted out from underneath.

S-spider! You shrieked the moment your brain recognized what kind of hellspawn was in your kitchen and jumped away. Oh god, it was moving towards you!

“No, you stay right there!” you pleaded with the monstrosity, to no avail.

In a flash, Blues appeared on the countertop, eye socket blazing blue as he looked down at your balled-up form on the floor.

“MAIDEN?!”

You pointed to the spider in the middle of the kitchen.
“Kill it!” you cried, unable to articulate anything else other than those words. The spider moved again, closer, ready to complete its plans of exterminating you, and you squeaked in terror. You seriously could not curl up any tighter to the counter!

Blues appeared before it, blocking its path to you, and enveloped it with his magic. The spider began to float beside him, and he looked back to you with an amused expression.

“You’re scared of the spider?” he motioned to it. The spider wiggled its legs and you shuddered.

“Blues, be careful! That thing is as big as your face!” Oh no, what if the spider bit him? Could Bitties get poisoned? Even non-lethal spiders would have enough poison to kill a Bitty! He was in danger—

He was laughing at you!

“Maiden, you would fend off people much more dangerous than you, but you can’t handle a spider?”

“They—they’re evil! Just get rid—NO BLUES, DON’T YOU PUT THAT THING NEAR ME!”

“Shut up!” came a muffled, high pitched voice from the linoleum.

“FUCK OFF!” you screeched back without thinking. Blues’ laughter followed.

“SINCE YOU ARE SO DESPERATE TO HAVE ME RID OF THE CREATURE, I SUPPOSE I WILL LEND YOU MY AID! IF...” he paused.

“If?”

“IF YOU MAKE TACOS TONIGHT!”

Your Bitty was extorting tacos from you. What has the world come to?

“Yes, Blues, I will make tacos tonight, so please get rid of the spider!”

“AND...”

“And?!”

“AND LET ME HELP WITH COOKING THEM!”

You let out a whine of frustration, “Gahh, yes, you can help me make the tacos! Blues, please!”

His triumphant grin and the extra sparks in his eyes told you that the deal had been made. In a heartbeat, he had teleported to the windowsill, pushed the window open, and threw the spider out.

You sucked in a breath and shivered, allowing your muscles to relax again. Blues had reappeared in front of you, smiling.

“Could you pick me up?”

You did as asked, bringing him to chest level.

“Thank you,” you mumbled as you leaned your face towards him. He brushed his fingers near the edge of your eyes, wiping away the small tears that had formed.
He looked at you with affection, “You’re welcome, Maiden.”

“No, Maiden! I cannot possibly let you fall!”

“You must! For if one of us must be sacrificed, then let it be the traitor of her family than the hero of the Kingdoms!”

You flipped the page of your novel as the violins crescendoed in the background. Blues small cries of protest were drowned out as the character’s voices spoke over the music.

“Kingdoms be damned! It it meaningless without you by my side!”

Sounds of rock crumbling made you look up.

“Listen well, Knight! Travel back to the castle with the spell, and all will be saved. I...I will always love you!”

You caught sight of the scene as the mage pried her hand away and fell into the ravine in slow motion. The Knight screamed in agony, muted by the whole orchestra reaching its climax. The screen cut to black in sudden silence, and credits started to roll.

“Wow. It sucks to be them,” you noted. You curled up against the loveseat again and repositioned the throw on your legs.

“NO!” Blues protested as he thrust his arms out, “THIS IS THE LAST EPISODE ON THE LIST! IT CANNOT END THERE!”

You glanced over to Rhythm, who somehow managed to stay asleep through all of the noise. He passed out on the armrest behind you while you read, and some time during your reading session, Blues came to sit beside you to watch the drama.

“It looks like the end of the season. It’ll be a while until they put the new season up.”

“BUT HE STILL HAS TO GET TO THE CASTLE! AND HIS LOVE JUST FELL INTO THE RAVINES OF LORIA!”

“I guess you’ll have to find something else for the time being. Here, do you want me to read to you?”

He climbed onto your stomach and peered at you from underneath your book, “I SUPPOSE.” a sigh, “It will have to do for now.”

“What’re you up to?” Rhythm yawned. So all it took was his brother’s screaming to wake him? Not the blaring symphony?

“Blues’ drama ended on a cliffhanger,” you replied, thought about it, and smirked, “A real cliffhanger.”

Rhythm laughed.

“MAIDEN, I AM DISTRAUGHT ENOUGH AS IT IS. Even if you are right.”

“Anyway, I’m gonna read out loud. Is it going to bother you?”
“Nah. Go on ahead,” he said, repositioning himself to lean his back against yours. Ever since your nap together, he tended to be much more at ease with being closer to you.

You smiled, “Okay. I’ll start over again so you know what’s going on.”

As you flipped to the first page and Blues made himself more comfortable, you relished the warmth coming from your heart of the company you had, and the world melted away to a picture of fantasy.

“This legends always told us that whoever wandered deep into the forest may never return…”

You quickly realized that Rhythm had a knack for pranks when you found him swimming in your cereal bowl one morning.

“That’s rude, Bro,” Blues commented as Rhythm knocked a cereal puff away from his eye socket. You snickered as milk poured out of his ear holes while maintaining a stoic expression for the whole endeavor.

“Just getting my extra calcium.”

“In my breakfast?” you laughed, “Get out of there, you weirdo! Aww, and your clothes!”

You pulled at his milk-saturated shirt, and he mock pouted.

“Babe. We haven’t even gone out on a date yet!”

“Please, I’ve seen you with your shirt off! Try again, Romeo!”

You spooned some of the milk and poured it over his head. He flung a cereal puff at you.

“CHILDREN,” Blues exclaimed.

“I gotta go to work in ten minutes. If you don’t get out of there, I’m going to eat around you!”

“Is that a promise?”

“You better believe it!”

You prove your mettle, you scooped up a spoonful and stuffed it into your mouth, all the while keeping direct eye contact with him.

He whistled. “I guess you got guts, yeah? This isn’t over.”

And true to his word, a day later when you had tucked the incident back in the corner of your mind, he struck again. You had just gotten ready for bed. The three of you had said goodnight when you climbed onto your mattress, crawled under your sheets, and rested your head.

Your pillow farted.

“What the?” you peeled the pillowcase away to reveal a whoopee cushion lying underneath.

You heard snickers from underneath the bed, and you chuckled a couple times before hanging over the side of the bed and looking into the brother’s room.
“I’m onto you.”

You threw a mock glare in their general direction and began to formulate countermeasures. But there was one factor you had to clarify before putting anything to motion.

The next day, when Rhythm was in the bath, you asked Blues about their telepathy.

“It doesn’t work quite like that, Maiden! We can’t automatically read your mind,” he chuckled as he carefully twisted a lock of your hair into a curl, “As great as I am, even I don’t have the capacity to know your every thought!”

“But I don’t even have to talk sometimes, and you and Rhythm already know what I’m doing.”

“It all depends on how strong a person feels it in their soul. For us, emotions are the easiest to read, and intent is the next easiest after that. Words are the hardest, and there are times we only pick up pieces. The more intense a person feels about something, the easier it is for us to hear!”

“Then why did you think I was lying to you when we first met? About why I picked you up?”

He paused in his ministrations and held his breath.

“...Because people can train themselves to guard against it. Bitties learn how to control and block against reading each other naturally. Humans...I think humans have a way to block us, but I don’t know how.”

His careful tone served to heighten your suspicions about what kind of humans they came in contact with during their lives. You pushed lightly against his side with your knuckle.

“So I won’t be able to prank Rhythm easily, but it’s doable?”

“OH, A PRANK! CERTAINLY WITH SOME EFFORT, YOU CAN DO IT! I’LL BE ROOTING FOR YOU!”

It was settled. The next morning you woke up extra early, tiptoeing around the room and to the kitchen to make pancakes. You were a little worried that they were going to be too heavy, so you thinned a portion of the batter and set aside the thicker ones for you and Blues. Once your revenge was cooked to a delicious golden brown, you plated two of the thin cakes on a normal plate and set it on the table. You sat the jar of honey, lid unscrewed, beside the plate for preparation.

You entered the bedroom with stealth and crouched to the floor. Blues’ gaze met yours, and you put your finger to your lips in a shushing motion. Rhythm was still asleep, like usual. Good.

Carefully, oh so carefully, you pulled Rhythm’s bed out and made your way to the kitchen table. You could hear Blues trail behind, and you watched for any sign of disturbance on Rhythm’s face. Now came the tricky part. You shifted one pancake to the side, pulled off Rhythm’s blanket, and as gently as you could, slid Rhythm’s body onto the pancake below.

“Ngh...Babe?” He groaned as you slid the other pancake on top of him. You took up the honey and held it upside down over the stack.

“Good morning, Rhythm,” you greeted with the best sugary voice you could muster, “It’s breakfast time!”

With the full force of gravity working behind it, the honey poured onto the stack at just the right time. The liquid ran over the edges and covered Rhythm’s head, and you started to snicker as his
confusion morphed into shock.

“Revenge is sweet, isn’t it?” you laughed.

“YOU GOT HIM!”

The two of you shared a victory high five (in which you held out your finger and he slapped it) and watched your victim for his reaction.

Rhythm poked out his hand from the pancake blanket and taste-tested the honey that pooled on the bottom of the plate.

“This is fine,” he mumbled, shifted around, and started to snooze.

“What? No, you can’t be serious!” You cried, pulling the pancake blanket away. The honey had soaked straight through and stuck to Rhythm’s clothes and bones, but he looked determined to sleep through it. You nudged his foot.

“Five more minutes.”

“You’re a honey-covered pancake sandwich! You’re okay with this?!”

Rhythm finally looked at you with half lidded sockets, slowly drenched his forearm in honey, and flashed out of sight. A weight shifted onto your shoulder and with belated horror, you felt honey smear onto your neck.

“Rhy-Rhythm! Augh, that feels gross!”

“Don’t dish out what you can’t take, Babe. Didn’t you break a rule anyway? I don’t recall giving you permission to go into our space.”

“Not true,” you defended, “Blues gave me permission!”

“Et tu, Brother? I’m hurt!”

Blues scoffed, crossing his arms, “THIS IS NOTHING COMPARED TO THE TIME YOU STUFFED MY PANTS WITH WORMIES!”

You made a face and tried to pluck Rhythm off of you, only to discover that the honey made an excellent trap for your hair. Yet again, your scalp claimed another Bitty victim. You were going to have to put your hair up in a ponytail more often.

“Well, I thought something like this would happen. I guess we’re just gonna have to take a bath together,” you said as you shrugged.

“...what did you say?”

“You know, a bath,” you repeated as you took your time unfastening the top button of your nightshirt, “I can’t possibly go to work with this honey all over me, sweetie. I’m just taking you up on your offer from a while ago, remember?”

“Oh. Uh. Yeah. N...not yeah as in ‘okay let’s take a bath’! But yeah I remember stop undoing your shirt please—”

“U-UM, WHAT ABOUT BREAKFAST?! THE MOST IMPORTANT MEAL OF THE DAY?! IT’S GETTING HOT—ERR, COLD!!!”
“It’ll only take a few minutes,” you smiled at Blues, who was turning the brightest shade of blue you’d ever seen him. They were already so flustered despite you only undoing the third button of your shirt, and when you couldn’t contain your composure anymore, you shoved your head under the faucet while supporting Rhythm’s weight.

“Don’t dish out what you can’t take!” You laughed as the water splashed onto you both. You began separating your hair from Rhythm as he sat frozen in place.

Blues muttered something about dangerous japes as you finished cleaning up. Rhythm’s clothes and your night shirt became necessary sacrifices for the cause, so you went to change after serving breakfast for real. Today was a off to a good start.

Maybe the best part about it was that Rhythm couldn’t look at you for more than a few seconds for the rest of the morning.

Another morning was a little odd. You woke up to scratching noises and loud thumps from downstairs. The noise didn’t matter, but what put you off was the bedroom door being shut. You were the last one to go to bed last night, and you made it a point to open it at least a crack just in case the brothers needed to get out. Why would they close it?

You groped the nightstand for your glasses and slipped out of bed.

“Rhythm? Blues?”

At least one of them would have answered by now. You opened the door.

“Rhythm? What are you doing there?”

He must have been leaning on the door, as he was lying on the floor looking at you.

“Hey Babe, morning. You don’t have to go to work today, right?”

“No—”

“Then go back to sleep. We’ll wake you up later.”

“Where’s Blues?”

He righted himself and stared out into the hallway.

“He stepped outside for a bit. Trust me, Babe. Go on back to bed.”

Maybe it was something in his tone that made you hesitate, or maybe it was the fact that you hadn’t had an ounce of coffee yet. Either way, you turned around and climbed back into bed.

And this time, when you awoke, it was to Blues patting your face.

“Good morning, Maiden!” he greeted with a large smile. You smiled back.

“Hey, where did you go?” you mumbled, cuddling him to your chest. He squeaked in protest but didn’t make much of an effort to get away.

“The neighbors won’t bother us anymore. They moved out today.”
That got your attention. You cracked an eye open and looked down, “How do you know?”

“There’s nothing left but trash in their apartment. They moved out all of their furniture.”

“Did you go into their apartment or something?”

He gave you a guilty look before breaking his gaze, “I wanted to make sure.”

“That could have been really dangerous. Did you need to know that badly?”

The lights in his sockets went out for a brief moment, and he clutched the fabric of your night shirt as you stroked his back. Uh oh.

“They didn’t hurt you, right? Are you okay?” you asked as you sat up with him. He snapped out of his trance and let go, flailing his arms.

“NO, I’M FINE! WE JUST WANTED TO GIVE YOU SOME GOOD NEWS FOR THE MORNING! WORRY NOT, MAIDEN, EVERYTHING IS OKAY!”

The door cracked open and soon Rhythm joined you on the bed, grinning.

“Hey there, Sleeping Beauty. I thought you’d never wake up.”

“Says the one who told me to go back to sleep,” you poked him lightly. “Anyway, if you say you’re okay, Blues, then I’ll believe you. Thanks for the good news.”

You still needed coffee to function, and the brothers didn’t have breakfast yet, so together the three of you went to the kitchen to start breakfast. You had just finished mixing the sugar in your coffee when a pebble hit the kitchen window.

The brothers moved to the sill first, despite you being closer. Their left sockets flared with magic as you heard distant screeching from the alleyway. You peered outside to see your neighbor picking up another rock and tossing it awkwardly at the building. She screamed again in frustration before noticing you.

“Hey, bitch! This is all your fault! If I ever see you out on the streets, I’ll fucking tear your ass apart!”

You were less than impressed. You took a sip of sweet, sweet coffee and flipped her the bird before turning away. Rhythm was pushing against the window to open it, but you set your coffee down and pulled them away before he could succeed.

“Don’t worry about her. Want some muffins for breakfast?”

“I thought she was gone,” Blues growled. His sockets were pitch black again, unlike Rhythm’s still glowing left socket.

You shook your head.

“That’s what she wants. I’m not going to give it to her. Besides, if she makes enough racket, the landlord is bound to get pissed.”

You heard a loud thump: an indication that she threw something much heavier this time as her screeching carried on. You jumped at the noise more than anything, and the brothers gave you a look.
“Just wait a few more seconds. If she doesn’t go away, then we’ll do something about it.”

She had such an annoying voice, “You’re dead! I’m gonna—”

“What da hell d’ya think yer doing to my building?!”

Ah, there he was. You grinned to the brothers and shrugged.

“Yeah. So, muffins?”

Night time. The nights were getting colder as the days went on, and your worn comforter couldn’t keep as much warmth in as you would have liked. Thus the throw was splayed out onto your bed, and for extra measure, you gave the brothers another set of fleece squares for themselves. Tonight you decided to do a few word searches in bed before going to sleep, so you buried yourself under the covers and rested the puzzle book onto your pillow.

You hummed to yourself as you struck through the words one after another. It was nice to have some time alone for a little while, and you let your mind wander as you performed the menial task. The theme of this particular search was fairy tales, and every time you found a word you imagined a picture in your head.

Broadsword. You thought of Blues in a set of shining armor, struggling to lift a sword that was easily his height. You grinned and struck through the diagonal word.

Castle. The classic, mote-and-drawbridge, dirt path, green meadows kind of castle. Blues yelled at the sentry guards to lower the bridge, and they complied.

Dark knight. Much more underdressed than Blues’ full suit of armor, Rhythm’s black hooded tunic had simple chainmail overlaid on top. He greeted his brother while riding a giant skeletal dog, grinning like usual. Blues looked less than pleased.

Sorcerer. Crown. Intersected. Cries were coming from the throne room, and the brothers halted their bickering to rush inside. There, your mother, the wizard queen, had you trapped between two gigantic spiders bent on eating you.

“Come to Thanksgiving!” She demanded.

Treasure, spelled backwards. “I can’t afford it!” you cried.

Dragon. Rhythm’s steed fired a laser that cut straight through the rear spider’s body, and it disappeared into a puff of smoke. Blues had teleported in front of you and guarded against the spider’s venomous fangs with his sword. You took the opportunity to dodge around and tackle your mother to the ground.

Tower. Using her scepter, you somehow teleported to the tallest annex in the castle. You scuffled against the floorboards when she pulled out a glowing purple potion.

Curse. Vertical. Pinning you to the ground, your mother pried open your mouth and spilled the contents in. You coughed as you were forced to drink the poison, but in a last ditch effort, you spit some of it back onto her face. She screamed as the poison burned her skin, and she disappeared in a puff of smoke. Retribution, spelled backwards and diagonal.
Unable to fend off the burning sensation and its magical effects, you climbed atop the stone altar and succumbed to your accursed sleep. Dungeon. The last word on the list.

Well, this story didn’t end too well.

“Maiden?” Blues voice called, and you broke your concentration to look over to the doorway to see him and Rhythm inch inside. You smiled to them.

“Hey,” you replied, “What’s up?”

Rhythm gave him a shrug when Blues gave him a questioning glance. He turned back and smiled.

“Nothing! What are you doing?”

“A word search. I just finished. Wanna do the next one together?”

“Sure, why not?” Rhythm stuffed his hands in his pockets and teleported to your pillow. Blues followed suit and shuffled between you and the book.

“These ones have secret messages in the leftover letters once you solve them. Let's see…”

As per the directions, you searched for the secret words and wrote them into the blank spaces below.

“What magic spell trumps all?” You read the question aloud.

Huh. Maybe this story didn’t have such a bad ending after all.

Desperate, two knights busted through the wooden trap door and lamented at what they saw. In one last attempt, they clasped the fallen maiden’s hands and delivered true love’s kiss.

Chapter End Notes

Whoooo, call me Kraft because I just wrote the cheesiest chapter yet. I didn't even realize until the last bit that I had a theme kinda going on, so here's one to you, brain!

Anyway. GDQ is over now, so I can concentrate again. Thanks for replying with your favorite video game! Even if I didn't reply, I really enjoyed reading your answers. I hope everyone else felt the same!

Next chapter will be in the regular format again. Hope you enjoyed some fluff for once; these guys deserved a break! As the new year (and school semester for many of you I imagine) goes on, I hope you remember to take some breaks every once in a while and take care of yourselves!
“Get ready to go at seven,” your coworker said over the phone as you bounded up the apartment stairs. Your apartment key tugged at a string from your sweater, and you mentally cursed as you unhooked the thread.

“Oh, I’ll see you then. Thanks again for paying for me.”

“No sweat. I owed you for last time anyway. Bye!”

“No!”

As the line disconnected, you smiled as you rushed down the hall. It had been a while since you last went to the club, and the fact that it was a Halloween party made it all the more exciting. It’d be a nice change of pace from the monotony, and you’d be able to relieve some stress without thinking too much. As much as you loved living with the Bitty brothers, you needed a break every once in a while. They probably didn’t care much for Halloween anyway.

You shoved the phone into your purse before opening the door to your apartment, and greeted Blues, who was armed with a darning needle and some elastic string.

“WELCOME HOME!” Blues greeted with a warm smile, “TONIGHT IS HALLOWEEN, CORRECT? SHALL WE CELEBRATE?”

To emphasize, he lifted up the knotted spider web. Of course he would make spider webs. And of course he had that adorable hopeful look on his face. And of course you had to dash those hopes right down the drain.

“Um…” you hesitated, gripping the handles of your purse, “I just made plans with my coworkers tonight. I’m sorry, Blues.”

“Oh,” he replied, lowering the web. His smile fell as he glanced down at the table.

Guilt reared its ugly head and you scrambled to find something cheerful to say. You dropped your purse and moved to the table, admiring his handiwork, “These are great! How about we put them up after dinner? It won’t take me long to change. I don’t leave until seven!”

Blues chuckled as he grabbed your sleeve, smiling again, “Maiden, it’s all right.”

“I’m sorry!” you repeated.

“I’ll accept your apology,” he said, pulling your hand down to brush against your fingers, and huffed, “Though, you have no need to apologize in the first place!”
Rhythm chose this exact time to appear beside Blues, covered in a scrap piece of white cotton with two holes cut out. You found some humor in the irony of a skeleton masquerading as a ghost.

“I guess the party’s off?” he asked.

His costume made you smile despite the guilt hammering at your resolve, “You two can still have fun without me. Ahh, I should have made you costumes after all. If I get started on dinner right away, I might have enough time for something quick.”

“No need, Babe.” he replied as he revealed another sheet, folded neatly in his hand, and tossed it over to Blues. Did they plan this while you were at work? “But don’t worry about us. Just go have some fun.”

“We can do something tomorrow, if you’d like.” you offered as he pulled away his costume. Blues visibly straightened and beamed at you.

“OF COURSE!”

Once the matter was settled, you made a simple dinner of hamburgers and barbecue chisps (At first you thought the company had misspelled their own product name, but to your surprise, it was completely intentional. Monster junk food had its own eccentricities, you noticed), and once you scarfed down your own portion, you rushed to your closet to dig out the ideas you had been thinking of all afternoon.

The small collection of costumes you had hung in the corner of your closet with a few packages of accessories and props that you had bought over the years. You altered or replaced just a few parts of each, such as the red cloak that you pulled out. The cheap velvet was easy to come by, so you had lengthened it to just shy of hitting the floor with a few ruffles. The same couldn’t have been said about the short dress, but it had its own charm. Nothing that some tights couldn’t fix.

You slipped into the costume, lacing the in-sewn corset with some red ribbon and straightening out the tulle that bunched up from under your skirt. For a second you entertained the idea of carrying a basket, but it would only get in the way. You settled for a small satchel instead. The finishing touch was a pair of fingerless satin gloves that reached your elbows, and a pair of short, black boots.

You moved back to the living room, where the brothers had just finished putting their plates into the sink.

“Tada,” you joked, spinning around once for good measure, “Little Red Riding Hood, at your service.”

Rhythm whistled, “Looking good, Babe. Right, Brother?”

He tapped Blues on the back, who looked at you with the blankest stare you’ve ever seen. “...”

“Brother?” Rhythm nudged him again, a little harder. You could tell from his grin that he was holding back laughter.

“Is it that bad?” you frowned, looking down at yourself. It had been a couple years since you wore it. You thought it still fit well, but it might have been your imagination? You could switch outfits if you did it now.
“NO!” Blues blurted as he snapped out of his trance, “IT MATCHES YOU VERY WELL!”

He muttered something indistinguishable while slapping his hand over his sockets in embarrassment, and Rhythm chuckled before looking back to you.

“Where did you say you’re going?”

“Dance club. There’s a party going on tonight, so a ton of people are going to be there.”

“Will it be safe?” Blues asked, giving you a quick once over.

“Yes, mom,” you teased, earning an indignant squawk from the smaller Bitty, “My friends and I are pretty good at covering each other’s backs. So unless wolves try to come after me, I think I’ll be okay.”

You dug through your purse to retrieve your license and some extra cash, and in turn missed the conflicted look that Blues threw in your direction. And just in time, your phone beeped with a text message from your coworker, Ashley, notifying you that she was waiting in the cab in front of the complex. You shoved your phone into the satchel and grabbed your keys before moving to the door.

“I gotta go. None of the kids here trick-or-treat at the apartment, so nobody should be knocking on the door. I should be back by midnight. Bye, guys!”

“Bye,” Rhythm called, and you waved before locking the door behind you. Excitement was getting the better of you now, and you hummed a tune as you began your way down the hall.

Unbeknownst to you, the brothers made plans of their own. The moment you closed the door, Blues tugged on Rhythm’s arm, forcing him to move along.

“Let’s go,” Blues ordered as they teleported off the table and down the hallway. While it wasn’t unusual for his brother to scout out new places, Rhythm had an inkling that this wasn’t the typical trip.

“We’re really going to follow her, huh?” he asked, lazily following along. Blues moved them to the window sill and summoned a sliver of bone to jack the window open.

“We’ll be late. Help me with this!”

Rhythm shrugged and summoned a few bones to wedge in between the tiny gap his brother created. With a snap of his fingers, the bones lengthened to push the window up just enough to let them pass.

“This good?”

It must have been, because Blues was already moving outside. Rhythm followed suit, and his magic dissipated soon after. The window sunk down, but not enough to fully close. The cold from the concrete ledge seeped into his feet even with his socks on, and the sensation surprised him more than he expected. Heh, apartment life was spoiling them.

The chase wasn’t over yet. “Ready, brother?”

Rhythm clasped his brother’s shoulder and concentrated, building enough energy and cutting into the air, arriving at the bottom of the fire escape without having to even touch the bars.
Blue’s turn. He cut through space, and this time they were at the edge of the alleyway.

“Which one is it?”

Right on cue, you bounded out of the apartment with a smile on your face and your cloak fluttering behind you. Rhythm didn’t know what Little Red Riding Hood was supposed to look like, but the way that dress clung to your waist-accentuating your hips as that skirt flared out—he was all for it. And to his brother? It was like you walked right out of a dream.

You opened the door to the yellow car in the street, and Rhythm took advantage of the moment to move them underneath the vehicle.

He jumped to catch the lip of the underframe and pulled Blues up after him. Even though the cab was stopped, the hum of the engine reverberated through the frame and passed through his bones. The fans were pulling heat from the motor and blowing it underneath, creating a pocket of warmth from the outside chill. Even with all the noise, Rhythm could hear your muffled voice along with another human’s.

And wow, he didn’t realize how excited you were. The cab driver seemed more than ready to get on with wherever everyone was going, though, and the change in gears had Rhythm holding tighter to the metal. Cars weren’t the easiest things to hitch a ride on.

His brother’s nervousness wasn’t about the ride, as he was glancing above them at the backseat area.

So, worried about the “wolves”?

Blues flashed him a warning glare. Rhythm shrugged and grinned.

Can’t blame you. Not too keen on them either. Heh, maybe this time we’re the wolves.

His brother’s glare faltered and instead sighed in frustration.

Perhaps that’s some of it, but I think it’s more simple than that.

They just wanted to be near you. Plain as day, no tricks involved. And yeah, you could take care of yourself despite their worries, but he found that, regardless if you were doing something together with them or not, just your presence around the house was enough to make him more at ease.

Plus, what were you like when you weren’t around them? How did you interact with people you knew? You never had any company over, and Rhythm wasn’t sure whether you didn’t care, or if you kept to yourself because of their unsavory track record with meeting new people.

The car made several stops along the way, and there was one unfortunate moment where the taxi had run over the carcass of a squirrel, before stopping at tonight’s destination. The brothers caught sight of your cape draping over the side of the car, and Blues motioned to move while they had the chance. Rhythm took his arm and and teleported between the cloth and your boots, forcing them to keep up a steady pace to avoid being stomped on or exposed.

“Are they already inside?” You asked your friend as you reached the sidewalk. Rhythm had less trouble hopping the edge of the curb, but he had to keep from laughing at his brother’s overeager jump to do the same, almost ramming his face into the back of your heel.

“Yeah. Frank says they’re at the bar.” Rhythm heard the clicking of heels behind them, paired with an awful lot of chiming sounds like coins tapping against each other. You started moving again and
the noise followed you.

You moved so much faster than when you were at home. Rhythm hadn’t realized how long your strides could be until he was practically jogging to keep up. He caught sight of a few other people dressed in costumes: an alligator monster in a short dress and cat ears, a human in a tuxedo and armed with roses. They seemed to be going to the same building, and as they got closer, Rhythm could hear the muffled thrums of the bass and feel the minor vibrations from the concrete.

**It sounds louder than the cage fights!** Blues shared, giving him an incredulous look.

*Woah.* Forget about cage matches. As soon as your friend paid for the tickets, the receptionist buzzed the door open and the music berated the tiny room. Rhythm didn’t have the time to adjust, as you walked straight into the noise without pausing.

The dim lights did nothing to help him recognize his surroundings, but the forest of other people’s legs gave him a pretty good indication that this place wasn’t exactly meant for anyone his height.

“**WE HAVE TO MOVE UP**”, his brother screamed over the music, echoing the suggestion in his mind.

He was right. Even though you were moving at a slower pace now, your footsteps became more erratic to avoid the other bodies. But besides your hood, Rhythm could think of only one other place.

**The rafters. Ceiling’s pretty high. We’ll have to double jump.**

Blues nodded and ducked towards him. Rhythm stopped in his tracks, allowing your cloak to brush past them, and took up his brother’s arm. In a flash, he teleported them as far up as he could see, suspending them in the air for half a second before Blues teleported them again to the support beam overhead. The overpowering music still rung through his skull, but at least it was a few decibels quieter than their previous location. Not a napping place, that was clear.

“**OVER THERE**,” Blues pointed as they followed the metal grid that led to the bar area.

Now that he had a better view, he could see you and your friend cutting through the last of the crowd to make it to the counter. Three others waved to you, one of whom was a monster adorned with a top hat and a mask. Interesting.

The friend who rode with you quickly took a seat near the monster, eagerly chatting away while you took to the opposite end. The human you sat next to- a woman with rabbit ears and a bright blue vest-struck up a conversation with you.

Rhythm tried to filter through the sea of souls to hear yours. Tried. The moment he let down his guard, all he could feel was a hundred different thrums of souls, humming with a nervous sort of excitement to the beat of the music.

Blues looked below them at the mixture of monsters and humans on the dance floor, and he sighed.

“They look harmless enough,” he remarked, “Even with all these grating sounds. I suppose I shouldn’t have been so worried.”

“Might as well live it up while we’re here, right? Wanna do some trick-or-treating?”

“What do you have in mind?”
Now having caught his brother’s curiosity, Rhythm smirked and looked to a small group of three: two humans and a rabbit monster huddled around a counter near the bar area. A fresh batch of mozzarella sticks lay guarded in the middle of the table. Those babies were calling his name, “You ever wonder if we need to work on our people skills?”

Blues gave him a quizzical look, “Admittedly, our skills leave much to be desired.”

“How about, first Bitty to get a treat, wins? No getting caught by our Sweetheart at the bar.”

The spark of competition had been lit, and he could see it in his brother’s grin.

“DEAL, WITH THE CONDITION THAT WE MUST MEET WITH OUR SPOILS UNDERNEATH HER CHAIR. LOSER MUST TELL HER WHERE HER CLOTHES HAVE BEEN GOING.”

“You’re on, brother.”

Blues thrust his hand out, and they gave a firm handshake, “Ready? GO.”

They broke off their handshake and parted ways instantly, with Rhythm teleporting to the nearest stool of his target. He thought about taking the shortcut at first—teleport in, grab a cheese stick, and move along—but where was the fun in that? If anything, living with you made him curious about how other humans acted, and this was the best time.

From a quick assessment, one of the girls constantly fidgeted underneath the table, tapping her heels to the beat of the music. The monster had a snake’s body and was curled around the barstool, preventing him from reaching any sort of appropriate place to tug. Their voices mixed in with the rest of the club, but at least he was able to sense their mood.

The last girl, bearing spiked heels the size of him, felt the most at ease. He sucked in a breath and tugged on her netted stockings. Whelp, here goes nothing.

Nothing happened at first. He tugged again, feeling his nerves rise.

Finally, the barstool shifted away, and he backed away a step as a waterfall of black and pink curls fell into sight.

“Somethin’s caught on me!” she told her companions, and Rhythm caught a glimpse of false fangs in her teeth as she spotted him.

“Uh, Hey there! You got a nice pair of,” he hesitated, “shoes!”

Nailed it.

The lady stared blankly at you, and then busted out laughing.

“Haah! Come ‘ere, little buddy!”

Not that he had a choice, she scooped him up and placed him in the middle of the table, right next to his prize.

“Look at you,” the snake woman cooed in a high voice, dangling a glass from her scaled fingers, “I could eat you right up.”

“Dunno if you wanna do that. I’m all bones,” he joked, shoving his twitching fingers into the pockets of his hoodie. She was kidding. It was a joke. No harm no foul.
The woman who picked you up howled with laughter, “What’s your name?”

The question caught him off-guard for a second, “Rhythm. Nice to meet ‘ya.”

“That’s a good name, Rhythm! I’m Sunny, and I like you, little guy! Heh heh, shoes.” she slurred.

“You’ll have to excuse her, she’s had a few drinks already,” the snake lady teased, “I’m Khione, and the quiet one over there is Reyna.”

As if to prove a point, Reyna smiled and waved.

“Not much of a talker?”

“She’s keeping her voice for the karaoke contest. Girl’s competitive.” Sunny quipped, smacking the girl on the back. Her feathered half mask slipped down her nose, and she readjusted it with a fleeting glare to her companion.

“Anyway Rhythm, what brings you our way? Just coming to flirt with the pretty ladies? We don’t see too many Bitties come into the club often.”

“Since you asked,” he said, eyeing the mozzarella sticks, “I was wondering if you could help me out. I have this bet with my brother going on,”

“Go on,” Khione spurred.

“That I can’t make friends as easy as he thinks.” he half-lied, “So if I show him something I’ve gotten from a new friend, I win.”

“That’s some bet! Way to show him up, little buddy!” Sunny cheered, “What’dya need? I got some lipstick in my purse, some change….”

Rhythm grinned. Right where he wanted them, “I don’t need much. This cheese stick will do.”

Khione made a noise of discontent, “Is that all?”

Reyna shook her head.

“If we’re gonna eat together, we’re gonna drink together! We gotta make this official!” Sunny slammed her palm on the table, jolting Rhythm. His magic sparked as he fought to control his initial reaction to attack, tightening his fists further. Excitable. Just like you were when he was getting to know you.

“Noo~okay,” he said as he watched her dump out the marinara sauce next to the cheese sticks and clean out the remainder with a napkin. She poured part of her drink into the container, spilling the amber liquid onto the table in the process.

Sunny rose both glasses up, “Cheers! To friends!”

“Here here,” Khione purred, and Reyna rose her glass as well.

And before he knew it, Sunny had him hugging the strong smelling liquor to his chest. He didn’t sense any malicious intent, and he had seen her drink from the glass earlier, so this was all up to him. Throwing caution to the wind, he tilted the container up and took a long sip.

And whoa boy, the way the drink warmed him up from the inside felt as nice as it was strong.
“What is this?”

“Rum. Contrary to popular belief, little friend, it is not always gone.”

He had no idea what she was talking about, but took another sip in an attempt to discern the flavor. How could something so smooth burn so much?

“This is pretty good stuff,” he relented. Heh. With the light overhead, he could see his reflection in the liquid. Damn was he thin.

“Never had it before? What do you usually drink?”

“Water?”

“Noo, I mean what kind of alcohol!” Sunny laughed.

“Never had it.” Not until now, apparently. He was missing out.

“What? Never? You’re kidding me! You ain’t underage or anything, right?”

He laughed out loud, finding the action much easier than usual, “Nah, just never had the chance.”

“Then welcome to the party, friend! Hahah, cheers to first times!”

“Cheers,” he found himself saying with Khione, and rose the container. “Hey, you guys are pretty great.”

“We try,” Khione purred.

Rhythm took another sip, feeling pleasantly lightheaded, “So, what are you guys here for?”

Somehow time got the best of him as his newfound buddies chattered away about their lives. Sunny kept his cup refilled in one way or another, and at some point, all three girls and him started dancing around the table. The burning sensation from the rum became more of a dull, numb feeling after a cup, and now all he could taste was the sweet and spicy flavor that reminded him of honey. He laughed often and freely, barely recalling a time that he had this much fun in a night. Or much of anything for that matter. What was he doing again?

“Hey, hey, Reyna’s up!”

“Whaa?”

“Shhhh, the karaoke contest, remember?” Sunny slurred, plopping into her seat again as she jabbed her finger toward the stage.

“Oh yeah.”

“Okay everyone,” the DJ announced, “We got another one here, singing the theme from Phantom of the Opera! Y’all get ready to get blasted away with some sweet singing!”

Reyna walked onto the stage, standing in front of the microphone with her sparkling ball gown and feathered mask, waiting for the music to start. A few whistles and hollers filled the air as the intro started, and maybe he was easily impressed in this state of mind, but the moment she opened her mouth, it was like a chorus of angels singing from heaven.

“Holy shit,” he exclaimed not too quietly, and Sunny nodded.
“That’s my girl!”

All eyes were on her, and even the people on the dance floor had stopped moving to appreciate the singer on stage. Even though the track was meant to be a duet, and the men’s part was just part of the recording, she outshone the previous few participants as she continued towards the climax of the song. The crowd roared with approval as she reached octave after octave higher, and humans and monsters alike rose their fists in the air as she hit the top note, reverberating throughout the club.

The applause was deafening, and she gave a quick bow before retreating off stage. Sunny and Khione were still clapping as she came back to the table with a proud and exhilarated smile.

“Thank you,” she rasped.

“I pity the poor soul who comes after you,” Sunny exclaimed, “Good job! We’re not gonna have to pay for a single drink for the rest of the night!”

Reyna sighed and shook her head, “You’ve had enough.”

“Do I hear my liver dying of shock? No? Well then, we gotta keep going. How about you, Rhythm?”

“Oh ho ho, you hold up well, my skeletal friend. If you can still care about counting, then you haven’t had enough. Urp,” she belched, “‘Xcuse me. Ha ha…”

“Next up we got a sultry little number, give it up for Little Red Riding Hood, singing I Put a Spell on You!”

The moment the DJ announced your costume, Rhythm looked up to find you standing on the stage, fiddling with the hem of your skirt and your cloak draped over your shoulders, waiting for the music to cue. He heard your coworkers cheering you on from the bar area, and he found himself holding his breath.

The short, repeated notes of the piano began to play, and he saw your chest rise and fall with the deep breath you took. It might have been the alcohol playing tricks again, but the beat hypnotized him as the guitars and bass snuck in, slow and tantalizing, and now he was aching to hear your voice.

And then you started singing. Gods, you started singing, and you weren’t just doing it with your voice, you were singing with your soul, so quiet and so loud at the same time. And as you sang, you began to creep out of your guarded shell, and laid your feelings out for everyone to see. He burned your smile into his memory as you sang out your stress and frustration, and when you reached to the midpoint of the song, his soul pulsed in his rib cage as you cried out the lyrics.

“I love you, I love you, I love you anyhow. And I don’t care if you don’t want me, I’m yours right now!”

Even the rum couldn’t dull the way you made him feel at that moment. For the first time in his life he wished he was big, so he could wrap you in his arms and hold you against him. It felt like your soul acted as a siren, and it took all his willpower to stay rooted to the table.

The song was short compared to Reyna’s, as you repeated the chorus once more before the instruments harmonized on the last few notes, and then came to a full stop. The performance ended
with another round of applause and whistles from the crowd, and you smiled and waved back to your coworkers before leaving the stage.

“Not bad, I’ll give her that. No one beats Reyna though, right Rhythm?” Sunny remarked, “Whoa, hey there little buddy, you gonna be alright?”

He hadn’t noticed the shredded container in his hands until he looked down.

“Yeah, uh,” he replied shakily. “Think I had too much.”

Reyna poked Sunny’s side and pointed to the bar area, where you reclaimed your seat.

“Oooh, did Little Red over there grab your attention?” she poked his side, and he made a poor attempt to smack her finger away.

“She never sings like that at home.”

“You know her? Introduce me sometime,” Khione giggled.

“No,” he snapped, whipping around to Khione with unsteady feet, “You can’t have her, she’s mi—”

“AHEM. LITTLE BRO.”

He was yanked down by the collar of his hoodie, where he came face to face with his brother.

“Oh, heeey,” he slurred, “I made some friends! Look, they even gave me...uh,”

His proof now obliterated in his hands, Rhythm shrugged and dropped the plastic.

Blues looked at him with mild disgust, “You smell awful.”

Sunny gave an apologetic smile, “That’s my bad, I spilled a little rum on him earlier. It’ll wash out!”

“Thank you for taking care of my brother,” Blues replied stiffly, “But we have to go now.”

A chorus of whines came from the table, and Reyna frowned.

“Oh, okay,” Sunny relented, “See ya around, little guys!”

“Yes, don’t be shy,” Khione added, eyes glinting at the two of them with a playful smile.

Rhythm gave them a lazy wave as Blues took his other arm and teleported down to the floor, and again to the tiny cave that your cloak made out of the barstool.

He had half a mind to climb the fabric and curl up onto your shoulder, but when he gripped the end of your cape, Blues smacked his hand away.

“You can’t even walk! What makes you think you can climb? Besides, she—”

His brother was right. What was Rhythm thinking? The easier solution was just to get her attention, “BABE. BABE, CAN YOU PICK ME UP?”

He tugged on the corner of your cloak as hard as he could before Blues tackled him to the ground.
“BRO, ARE YOU CRAZY?! SHE’S GONNA NOTICE! REMEMBER THE DEAL?”

“I’ll tell her about the rags when I get up there,” Rhythm drawled, “You know I won’t go back on my word.”


“Really?”

“Really. It'll be easier to go home anyway.”

What a thoughtful gesture. He always had Rhythm’s best interests at heart. “I love ya, Big Brother.”

Blues’ mouth quirked upward as he snickered, “I love you too, Bro. Here, I’ll even help. Make sure to yell so she can hear you.”

Blues climbed onto the lower bar of the stool and tugged at the cloak several times while he pulled himself upright.

“BABE. HEY. DOWN HERE,” he yelled, leaning against the stool leg for support.

The fabric shifted as he finally got your attention, and he smiled as you squinted your eyes at him. Recognition fluttered onto your face as you shifted your weight off of the stool.

“Rhythm?!?” you called, sparing no time to gather him in your hands, “What are you doing here?!”

“Babe,” he grinned as he grabbed your thumb and pressed his head against your skin, “Nyeh.”

“Are you okay? Your clothes are all wet.” You rose up to sit in the stool proper again, and he gripped tighter to your thumb to combat the vertigo. The taste of the rum still lingered in his mouth despite not drinking for a while. It was a while ago, right?

“S’okay, what’s-her-name said it’ll wash out,” He always thought you smelled so good, and today was no exception.

You brought your face closer to his, and he took advantage of the moment to admire your eyes. Your nose scrunched up, but you smiled anyway.

“Been swimming with the Captain, huh?”

Rhythm grunted, “Dunno who the captain is, don’t care about ‘em. But you, Babe, you sang and I heard you, and I’m here…”

He couldn’t have said it any simpler, and you still didn’t get it. It only earned him a chuckle and a gentle rub to his back.

“You’re plastered,” you told him with amusement laced in your voice, “Where’s your brother? I imagine he’s not too far away.”

“Under the chair,” Dammit, why didn’t you understand? “Oh, wait, wait, I gotta tell you—”

“Who’s this little guy?” your coworker chirped in suddenly. He ignored her and continued.

“—That we took some of your panties to clean the house. You got a ton of ‘em, so you don’t mind,
right? The washcloths don’t cut it and they work well on the windows—hey, why’re you covering your face?”

“I am not drunk enough for this,” he heard you mutter as your coworker chortled.

“Don’t laugh at her. You’re making her upset,” Rhythm growled, shooting the intruder a warning glare. You tapped him on the back with your pinky.

“She’s not the one who cleaned the windows with my panties. Come on, it’s quittin’ time.”

Rhythm held his head as you ducked beside the stool again to retrieve Blues.

“UM. TRICK OR TREAT?” Blues sputtered.

You shook your head, “You guys are ridiculous.”

After a few moments where you introduced them to your coworkers, none of which Rhythm could remember, he dozed off as you held him against your sternum. The thrum of your heartbeat and the warmth of your skin was more than enough to lull him to sleep. It was a comfortable end to a hectic night.

And in the next day…

“Punishment time.”

He had just gotten over the Bitty version of a hangover, where teleportation was more of a disorienting guessing game than a form of transportation and the buzzing in his head rivaled that of the music from the club. He warily looked up at you.

“For what?”

“Panty situation aside, it’s for following me to the club. Didn’t I tell you not to worry? You have to trust me.”

“Ehh…” he looked to Blues, who was also at a loss for words.

You sighed.

“So, punishment. This little treasure here is our Halloween movie for tonight,” you spun the DVD case around with the tips of your fingers with a mischievous expression, “You’ll each have to answer five questions about the movie to prove you’re paying attention. If you can’t answer all of them, we watch the movie again.”

“What’s so bad about that?”

You opened the case and popped the movie into your laptop, “Have you ever heard of weather predictions for man-eating fish raining from the sky? Trust me, this’ll hurt me as much as it’ll hurt you.”

And thus, Piranhicane became Rhythm’s least favorite movie of the year.

Chapter End Notes
Remember, Captain Morgan will be your friend for only a couple of shots! Please drink responsibly!

I apologize for the longer wait on this one! I haven't been feeling too well for the last few weeks, so I had a harder time writing this one out. But look at that, a Halloween chapter right in time for...Valentines day!

For those of you who have watched *Hocus Pocus* you might recognize *I Put A Spell On You* from the party scene where Winifred is casting a spell at the party via song. Reader's version is an older, not Disney one, that has also been redone for *Fifty Shades of Grey*. This song has quite a history of covers! It also happens to be a *da dum* Rhythm & Blues song at heart. It's not a happy love song by any means, but Reader's singing it more to fit the party theme than anything!

Also, I don't say it enough. Thank you, thank you, thank you for the comments and kudos. It makes my day whenever I hear from any of you, even if it takes me forever to reply. And breaking 1000 kudos is incredible to me. So, thank you!
Why were you up right now?

Oh, that’s what was interrupting your sleep. Pain: the world’s worst alarm clock. Not unusual, even though it was a few weeks overdue. And because you thought you could brave it, because the warning cramps weren’t that bad this time, you didn’t take the painkillers before you went to bed.

Mother Nature came back to kick you in the uterus and laugh at your suffering at two in the morning.

You tried sleeping it off, but the waves of pain increased. You reduced yourself into a ball and buried your head in the pillow. You already knew this was a losing battle. It wasn’t going away, and the last thing you wanted was to clean up blood from your sheets. And if that wasn’t enough motivation, your body slipped in some nausea that came as the cramps intensified.

Finally, you had enough. You gathered the will to leave the warmth of your covers, threw the throw over you, and stumbled blindly to your dresser for a fresh pair of panties. You mumbled a curse under your breath as you stumped your toe on the corner, and with the grace of a badger, hobbled to the bathroom.

Would You Rather was a game nobody wanted to play in real life, but sometimes it snuck a couple of rounds in for kicks. The bathroom light blinded you as it flickered on, and you were forced to make a choice. Sit in front of the toilet and wait to throw up, or chance it to keep from bleeding everywhere? Mmm, fantastic options.

You could risk it. You cleaned yourself up and changed into your new pair with a fresh pad. The sleepiness still fought to keep you rooted to the toilet, and the pain was doing an excellent job of supporting that notion. The nausea eased up just enough to give you some semblance of relief, and you mentally tracked where you last kept your painkillers.

And if you remembered correctly, they were in your purse. In the living room. Not here. You
whimpered.

You took the discarded throw and wrapped yourself up in it before trekking to the living room.

You didn’t bother with the light. You fumbled around in your purse for the bottle, pushed on the cap so hard that bodybuilders would cry in shame—fucking childproof caps—and ripped out the cotton to get to the pills. For a second you debated taking them dry, but with your luck they’d get stuck in your throat. You could handle fumbling through the kitchen.

You grabbed a cup and turned on the faucet.

“Maiden…?”

You downed the pills and chased it down with a couple of swigs of water.

“Hey,” you mumbled to Blues, who maybe was on the table? You barely saw a silhouette of a tiny figure, but that could have been the salt shaker. Anyway, screw going back to the bedroom. The loveseat was right there.

You curled into a ball on the cushions, taking even breaths and waiting for either sleep or the painkillers to kick in. You closed your eyes. And the next thing you know, tiny fingers were caressing your cheek.

“You’re hurt.”

“I just wanna sleep,” you half-begged. Explanations could happen tomorrow about why nature hates girls. “Please go back to bed, Blues.”

“No.”

You ignored him and tried anyway. He gripped a bit more of your flesh and pinched you.

“Maiden, I said no.” he demanded in a pained, biting voice.

You opened your eyes and glanced to him. His sockets sparked bright blue in the dark, illuminating the fierce look on his face as he watched you.

"Why not?"

“Sleeping through immense pain is a sign of Falling. Do. Not. Sleep.”

He was forgetting that you weren’t a monster. He was sweet for worrying, though.

“This happens every month. Nothing much you can do about it.” you mumbled as you pulled him closer, hoping to coax him down.

“Every month?! You feel like you’re dying,” Blues remarked hotly as he wrapped his arms around your fingers, “there must be something I can do.”

The sound of rustling and a small clack near the armrest, and then skeleton fingers were in your hair.

“Gods, Babe, what the hell happened to you? Where are you hurt?” Rhythm’s voice urged. You groaned.

You know they were just concerned, but the lack of sleep and the pain made you more irritable
than usual, and you grit your teeth to keep your temper in check.

“I’m not dying. My uterus may be shredding itself to pieces right now, but I’m not dying. Can’t we talk about this in the morning?”

Blues flinched from the tone of your voice, but he held tighter, “Something isn’t right. This much pain is wrong.”

“You can’t tell us you’re okay right now,” Rhythm added.

If you wanted sleep, you were going to have to quell the frightened skeletons who had no earthly idea what your body was doing. Come on, you could do it, just had to sit up…

“So…the internet is going to explain why I’m curled up in agony right now.” you sighed and reached for your laptop beside the couch. You didn’t trust yourself to give them the facts without being overly sarcastic. There had to be one video that parents use to shirk the responsibilities of describing puberty, right?

The light blinded you for a moment as the computer booted, and you squinted at the screen as you typed in the search bar.

“Here you go. Enjoy, boys.” You said as you clicked on a promising result. “Everything you need to know. If you need me, I’ll be right here. Sleeping.”

You sat the laptop on the floor and gently placed the Bitties on before it. Blues held onto your fingers a second longer before letting go, and Rhythm shifted his attention between you and the screen, uncertain. You hit the spacebar, and once the elevator music started to play in the background, you curled up into yourself, huddled against the couch, and began to doze off. The medicine worked its magic through your system, and you fell into a deeper sleep.

You woke up to two skeletons dozing against you.

Rhythm had nestled up beside your wrist with one arm draped against you. You twitched your fingers and quickly discovered Blues cradled in your other palm, resting against your chest. Their soft breathing made your heart flutter as you tried to remain as still as possible. These damn skeletons were too cute for you.

So, you laid there and relished the moment. The cramps were gone, leaving only a sense of heaviness in your stomach and warmth from the throw. Actually, there was more warmth than what the blanket and your body heat provided. Odd. You rose your head to see a blurry patch of the blanket resting over your torso. A wire snaked down from a corner and past the TV stand to the wall.

A heating pad. You gave your heating pad to your cousin last time. She hadn’t returned it yet.

“Mweh...Good morning, Maiden,” Blues yawned and gave you a sleepy smile. You pulled him a fraction closer to your chest.

“Morning,” you whispered back. He grasped at your nightshirt and hid his face in the fabric before speaking again.

“You sound better. The pain is gone?”

“Yeah. Sorry for being a jerk last night. I know you were just worried.”
He shook his head, “I may have...overreacted about the situation. Human bodies are more complicated than I imagined.”

“Still, thanks for checking up on me. Where’d you get the heating pad?”

Blues glanced to Rhythm and then back to you, giving you that nervous smile. He sat up against the palm of your hand.

“WELL, WE DIDN’T WANT TO GO TOO FAR IN CASE YOUR CONDITION WORSENED, SO I, UH, SCOUTED OUT A FEW PLACES. DID YOU KNOW THAT NEW NEIGHBORS ARE MOVING IN DOWNSTAIRS?”

Rhythm groaned and shifted to bury his face closer to your arm, “Brother, could you keep it down? She’s still sleeping…”

“No?” you replied to Blues as you lifted an eyebrow, and you pulled your arm away from Rhythm, “And no, sleepyhead. You have us mixed up.”

The sleeping skeleton frowned as he halfheartedly reached for your wrist again and whined, “Noo, come back.”

You smiled despite the sneaking suspicion that they didn’t exactly ask for the heating pad.

“How did you get in?”

“The window’s unlocked. It was easy enough for the two of us. And we were in luck, as it seemed our new occupants haven’t arrived yet.”

Leave it up to your housemates to be tiny, professional burglars.

Blues fidgeted and frowned, “Um...Maiden? Are you not upset?”

You laid your head down again and closed your eyes, shifting the brothers closer to you. Blues squeaked as Rhythm made a noise of contentment.

“It’s too early in the morning to be upset,” you mumbled, “Let’s just enjoy the peace while we can.”

You managed to fall asleep again, with Rhythm and Blues snuggled up to you and the heating pad keeping your torso warm.

Thunk!

Yep, right on cue. That was the sound of peace leaving you in the form of your new neighbors dropping heavy furniture. Usually that sound was accompanied by loud, expressive swearing and groans of pain.

…

No? The furniture either missed or the neighbors were saints. That kind of gave you hope, considering that you’d have to return their “borrowed” property.

With a small groan, you sat up and wriggled your limbs out of the Bitties’ grasps. Light filtered through the apartment at a stronger rate, and you pushed away the blanket and stood to stretch. Rhythm was still asleep, sprawled out on the cushion and lightly snoring. The surprising part was that Blues was too, and he was usually awake before anyone. How long did it take them to get that
heating pad?

You showered, changed into some clean clothes, and put on your glasses. Thank heavens you didn’t have to work today. At least Mother Nature gave you that. Breakfast was going to come later. Right now, you just wanted to get the awkward, upsetting apologies out of the way.

You picked up the heating pad and your keys when Blues called out to you.

“Are you going out?”

“Yeah,” you blinked, raising the object in your hands. He shook off what drowsiness he had and stood straight, putting his hand on his hips.

“Let us accompany you. We’re the ones who took it, so we should be the ones to return it.”

“Okay,” you replied, tilting your head, “You might want to change first.”

Blues looked down at his worn t-shirt and boxers and blushed.

“OH, YES, OF COURSE! MWEH HEH…”

He pushed Rhythm no-so-gently to wake the sleeping skeleton, and Rhythm barely replied with an irritated groan before Blues teleported them down the hall.

These guys were so worth it. A lot of inconvenient—sometimes dangerous—things have happened since they’ve been living with you, but life would be way less exciting without them.

“READY!” Blues reported a few minutes later, fully clothed and dragging a half-asleep Rhythm behind him.

“Meh,” Rhythm uttered as you picked them up. You shook your head and placed them on your shoulders before heading out.

The trip downstairs was uneventful, though the foyer doors were propped open with a couple of cinder blocks. The cold air brushed past you and pricked at your skin, seeping even through your sweater, and you shuddered at the temperature drop. It still followed you as you turned back into the lower hall, but you were more worried about who you were going to face than the chill.

There it stood: apartment 108. Old, deep claw marks on the corner of the door and peeling paint at the bottom gave the apartment a unique marker from the rest. Rhythm must have sensed your nervousness, as he sat up straight from leaning against your head. Blues, having prepared himself beforehand, sat in pensive silence. You took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

A small pause, followed by the sounds of someone stumbling. A male’s voice, and footsteps that thumped closer until it reached the other side of the door. The peephole went dark. The chain lock rattled and the door bolt clicked.

A man about your age opened the door just enough to show himself and gave you a neutral smile.

“Hello, can I help you?”

“Hi,” you greeted him with a practiced smile, “I’m your neighbor from upstairs, in 212. Nice to meet you.”

He blinked, and then fell into a more relaxed smile as he opened the door wider. He was about a head taller than you, and a faded tattoo of a farm landscape and animals peeked out from
underneath the sleeve of his t-shirt.

“Oh, hey! Good to meet you! Hold on a sec and you can meet my fiancé. Honey!” he called out into the apartment, and you heard the echo of his voice bounce off of the walls.

Another couple. Okay, that was all right. Not all couples were neighbors from hell. This guy seemed friendly enough. You just had to play it smooth.

“I don’t want to take too much of your time. I’m sure you’re busy settling in and everything.”

“No, no! You’re good! Do you wanna come in? We haven’t gone grocery shopping yet, or I’d offer you something to drink.”

He wasn’t from here, judging from his southern accent. That, and the fact that he was inviting a stranger into his place on a whim.

“No thank you. I don’t want to intrude. Actually, I’m here because—”

Blues tugged on your hair and laid a hand against your jawline, stopping you.

“IT'S OUR FAULT, SIR. WE TOOK THIS WITHOUT YOUR PERMISSION. PLEASE DO NOT BLAME HER FOR OUR ACTIONS.”

You offered up the heating pad. He scratched his arm and took it from your hands, inspecting the controller, and then looked to Blues.

“Yep, that’s mine all right. How’d you get it?”

“I’D ADVISE YOU TO LOCK YOUR WINDOWS IN THE FUTURE. YOU NEVER KNOW WHO MIGHT SLIP IN.”

“Ah, duly noted. But I don’t think we’ll have that problem. Actually, we were coming to see you after we unpacked,” he gave a short laugh as he looked to you, “It’s cool we get to meet the other neighbor with the Bitties. The landlord was telling us about the new Bitty policy and how some people already lived here with them, and uh…”

At that point, a girl appeared behind him and glanced at the three of you.

Rhythm shifted, “Oh, hey. Funny meeting you here.”

“Rhythm? Which means,” she pointed to you, “Little Red Riding Hood?”

Both you and her fiancé looked at her in surprise.

“You know each other?” he asked.

“It’s Reyna, right?” Rhythm replied. She nodded.

“I’m surprised you remembered. You had about seven cups before you left.”

You weren’t irritated, but you weren’t outright amused either. A little possessive? You weren’t sure how you felt, and for that reason you decided to stay quiet.

“What are the chances? Anyways, my name’s Will, and this is my fiancé, Reyna, as you already know.”
You smiled again and introduced yourself first, “And this is Rhythm, and Blues here is his brother. We’ll try not to cause more trouble for you.”

Will and Reyna exchanged looks.

“We should be the ones saying that. Uh, let me introduce you to Charlotte.”

Will scurried back to the bedroom area, leaving you and Reyna standing amongst yourselves.

“You sang well in the contest,” Reyna started, “not many people can correctly time the pacing of Blues during karaoke.”

You laughed and waved your hand, ignoring the sudden grip of Blues’ fingers against your skin, “Thanks, but I’m not that great. I just grew up listening to a bunch of songs.”

“Blues’?” Blues echoed with a hint of suspicion.

“Yeah,” you tried to hide your smirk, “That’s the name of the music genre. Rhythm and Blues.”

There was a small pause, and then a groan and laughter filled your ears.

“Really? REALLY, Maiden?”

“Wow, Babe.”

You chuckled patted their backs as consolation before returning to the conversation at hand, “Anyway, the girl before me was amazing. There’s no way she didn’t win the contest, even with those funny drunk guys singing Thriller.”

Reyna’s mouth quirked into a smile, “Thank you, but Thriller won. I was runner up by two votes.”

You gaped, “That was you? It’s no wonder you look familiar. It’s a shame you didn’t win.”

Reyna opened her mouth when Will popped up beside her again, carrying a Bitty of their own.

Dressed in a burgundy jumper, the tiny Bitty was in between Blues’ and Rhythm’s height if you included the large bun on her head. Small, lavender fuzz covered her body as her six arms clung onto Will’s fingers. All five of her black eyes blinked at you as she smiled.

A spider Bitty.

Your blood ran cold as she greeted you.

“Hello, new neighbor.”

“Hello,” you greeted stiffly. You were not prepared for this.

“Charlotte is a sweetie when you get to know her, but she can be kind of intrusive at times. And she’s taken a liking to the fire escape outside, so you might see her every so often,” Will explained as he patted the top of her head, to which she affectionately accepted.

“Oh, okay,” you lied. No. Nothing about this was okay. “Well, it’s nice to meet you, but I should be going now.”

They could read it on your face as plain as day, as they frowned in concern.
Will started, “I swear she’s not—”

Reyna pulled on his arm and shook her head, then gave you a reassuring smile.

“It’s nice to meet you. Please visit us any time.”

Silently thanking her for the easy out, you waved and quickly moved through the hallway, increasing your pace until you were almost tripping up the stairs to get to your apartment. Shivers rolled down your spine in waves as you fumbled with your keys to unlock the door. You pushed your whole bodyweight against the surface to open it and once you were inside, pressed your back against it and slid to the floor. You were trembling.

“Maiden, breathe!” Blues urged, and you sucked a breath in.

“A spider Bitty,” you giggled hysterically as you pulled the brothers off of your shoulders and brought them into a hug. Tears gathered at the corners of your eyes as Rhythm reached to touch your cheek.

“We’re here,” Blues said, placing his hands over your pounding heart, “Don’t be afraid.”

You choked out another laugh that turned into a sob. Easier said than done.

Chapter End Notes

**TL:DR** The skelebros stole a heating pad from the new downstairs neighbors. They go to return it. Surprise surprise, they have a Bitty too. A spider Bitty. Reader's not thrilled.

I hope everyone's had a nice Valentines day and is doing well! I don't have much to report this time other than that we're going to get into some backstory soon. Again, thank you all for reading and keeping up with the story!
Preserverence

Chapter Summary

Talking to your Bitties about your fear fills you with...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You were home after a long day of drowning in tulle; something par for the course when a bride wanted poofy dresses for her bridesmaids, but a nightmare to cut and keep in place. This time you welcomed the frustrating task to keep your mind busy. Home, though, was a different matter.

“Wanna talk about it?”

Home had two particular brothers watching you do every chore possible as if your life depended on it.

“Talk about what?” you asked as you soaped up the dirty plate with your sponge. Rhythm looked over to you.

“Your fear of Charlotte.”

You bit your lip and held your breath, keeping your stare fixated on the plate below you. Damned spot wouldn’t come out.

“You slept on the couch again,” he continued as he started drying the next plate, “You haven’t slept well in the last three nights. At first I thought you had more cramps or hormones or whatever, but it’s not. You’re beyond scared.”

You opened your mouth and found that you couldn’t protest. You closed it.

He knew the truth, and you knew how stupid you were being. As much as you tried to calm down, nothing could stop the prickling fear of something creeping behind you to crawl against your skin and inject you with deadly poison. Worse yet, you’ve done a deep clean of your entire apartment and still jumped when something brushed your skin. There were no spiders here, but your brain refused that as a fact.

“I can’t help it,” you mumbled, “I know there’s nothing here, but I can’t get over it. I just…”

Freeze. Panic. Distract yourself to the point of exhaustion, only to start the cycle over again when you run into another spider. All of the above. You were all too aware of how pitiful you became during an encounter, and now one was permanently living underneath you.

“Fear isn’t something that should hold you back. It’s something that should move you forward.”

You looked at him, but he was focused on pushing the towel around the plate, his back towards you.

“We’d be long gone by now if fear stopped us. We wouldn’t be here at all.” He paused and rubbed
the back of his skull, “And you don’t have to take big steps either. Little steps are just as fine. As long as you can move forward, you can survive.”

You let the words sink into your heart for a moment, finding comfort and warmth from his advice like a blanket during a cold winter’s day.

“You’re right,” you softly replied as you smiled. You could find your way a bit at a time. Your new neighbors were here to stay, and you didn’t have the energy to stay afraid forever.

You rinsed off the suds from the last plate and laid it onto the drying cloth. Rhythm had just finished drying the other one, so you picked it up while keeping an eye on him.

“What?” He asked when he noticed, giving a wary chuckle at your gaze.

You leaned down to be more at eye level with him, affectionately grinning, “You’re such a smooth talker.”

“You know, gotta keep my human happy,” he relied in his usual casual tone, though a light blush dusted his cheekbones. The wording of his statement didn’t go unnoticed, but you decided to take it at face value. The idea didn’t sound too bad after all. They were your Bitties, so why not the other way around?

You poked at him just to tease before putting the clean dishes away. Blues appeared on the counter a second later, clutching a neatly folded piece of pink stationery in his hands.

“I’ve returned!”

“Welcome back. Where did you go?” You asked lightly, eyeing the paper in curiosity.

He studied you a millisecond before unfolding the note, revealing a somewhat lengthy url in neat, tiny handwriting.

“I went to the neighbors to negotiate territory of the fire escape when Charlotte gave me this. Though I’m ashamed to say that I’m unable to read it at all.”

Blues stared at the note a fraction longer before something in his thoughts startled him and looked up at you in panic, “BUT I SWEAR TO YOU THAT I WOULD NEVER FRATERNIZE WITH THE ENEMY WITHOUT A PURPOSE!”

You gently took the note out of his hands and nudged him, “I’m not worried about that at all, silly. You can be friends with her if you want to.”

Chills ran through you as you pictured Charlotte balancing tea and snacks with all six arms while chatting with the brothers, and you grimaced by default. You needed to do some research. You hoped spider Bitties didn’t eat other Bitties, though Rhythm and Blues were pretty much guaranteed to put up a fight.

Curiosity rose in you the longer you looked at the note, and Rhythm, who had just finished drying the last dish, glanced at the paper and shrugged.

“What does it say?”

“It’s a website address. We’ll have to find out.”

After putting the last of the dishes away, you slipped the note between your fingers and took Rhythm and Blues into your hands. The laptop had already been set onto the table and in the midst
of cycling through a playlist of popular hits, so you opened another tab to search the url.

The web page loaded in a second. The large title caught your attention, and the irony of it all struck you like a lead pipe.

“So Charlotte gave this to you?” You asked as you scrolled down the numbered list of steps to overcome arachnophobia.

“Yes?” Blues replied, looking to you and then back to the screen, “What is it?”

You made a noise of discontent as you tapped your fingers against the laptop, “This is the first time a spider is telling me to get over it.”

But maybe this was what you needed. You could use the energy you’ve been wasting on the constant fear and use it to fuel your motivation. Use it to move forward a little at a time.

A little bit at a time...

Chapter End Notes

I really apologize for such a short chapter and long wait. It's been a bad few weeks for me, so I haven't been able to concentrate like I normally do. I'm hoping things will get better in the following weeks so I can properly think!

Thanks again for staying with the story, everyone! Rest assured that I'm working on chapters bit by bit!
Wars of Kingdoms

Chapter Summary

You had fallen into the Ravines of Loria while escaping the bandits. Knight isn't going to leave you there.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Plate armor was not meant for scaling cliffsides.

In fact, he had stripped himself of most of it part of the way downwards. The narrow, jagged edges of limestone made for uneven footing, and Blues found himself struggling to catch the footholds as the metal hindered his reflexes and slipped against the rock, making teleporting down the ravine all the more difficult. Nevertheless he continued downwards in small increments and paused only for a second to catch his breath. He had already wasted precious minutes to find a more suitable path down—one that went from impossible to barely less so.

The ravine from above looked endless. The afternoon sun casted long shadows across the ravines that played tricks with his sight. Thick mist arose from its depths like a blanket that blocked the view of his destination, and the only clue of his proximity to the ground was the growing sound of trickling water. The noise heightened his anxiety as he dared to scale the rocks twice the distance in a single bound. Legends varied about the stream that cut into the Ravines of Loria, though a common theme amongst them included death. It meant that time was of the essence, and every moment he spent dawdling put your life in danger that much longer. The thought did little to comfort him as he continued further and further down.

He thanked the gods above when he took sight of the bottom. Although the stream still cut through the ravine with steady rapids, it had long since subsided in its girth, leaving large dusty banks at its sides. The moment his boots touched solid ground, he bounded towards where you fell.

“Maiden,” he called through the mist. His voice bounced off of the walls along with his footsteps and the water. No reply. Blues pressed onwards. He refused to believe you would give up so easily. He refused to let you go a second time.

He scoured the banks a section at a time for any clue until at long last, a glint of metal flashed as a beacon high up against the rock walls. It was your dagger embedded in the stone, wrapped in frayed strands of rope made of your magic. Blues halted his breath as he followed the trail to the ravine floor.

“Maiden! Maiden!”

His soul ached when he saw you. Your body laid still despite his frantic calls. Your cloak covered your form like a blanket, tattered and stained from your ordeal. The rope you conjured coiled around your arm and refused to dissipate.

He rushed to your side and carefully pulled you into his embrace, pleading hear your heartbeat, to feel your breath, anything at all.
“Please,” he begged quietly against your ear as he held your head against his shoulder, “Maiden, please!”

He took hold of your arm and you let out a sharp hiss of pain, and heavens above, he had never heard of anything so relieving in his life. He sighed into your hair as the feeling swept through his soul.

But now wasn’t the time for this. Your injuries needed attention, and what little sunlight they had would quickly leave them to the darkness of the ravines. At the very least, he could perform a light healing spell to stop the bleeding, but your dislocated shoulder had to be set in place the hard way.

“This will hurt for but a moment,” he warned, holding you upright, “please endure it.”

He steadied himself, grasped your arm, and popped the joint back into place. A sharp gasp and an agonizing scream erupted from your lips as the pain jolted you awake. You struggled against his hold, confusion clouded in your eyes.

“It’s me, shhh, it’s all right,” he hushed.

You stilled, “...Knight?”

The sound of your voice was like sugar to him. “Yes,” he replied as you grasped his tunic. Without thinking, he threaded his fingers between yours and brought your palm to his cheekbone, “You gave me quite a scare.”

Your eyes welled up with tears as you clenched your teeth. Your fingers slipped away from his, only to grip the back of his tunic as you hugged him.

“I told you to leave me,” you whispered against him.

Blues’ breath hitched as his own tears formed at the corners of his sockets. He held you close and gripped your cloak, choking down his overwhelming emotions. “I told you I never could.”

Never, ever, would he leave you behind. He would bring down the world if it meant to hear the sweet melody of your voice, to feel your soft, warm skin against his body, to smile at him like he was the only one around.

You pulled away after a moment. He wiped away the trails of tears on your face with his thumbs, noting the pink tinge on your cheeks, and smiled.

“I love you, Maiden. Please never do that again.”

“But, I...,” you breathed. Amazing how your eyes shone even in the fog. Your parted lips taunted him.

He leaned forward and kissed you.

Skeletons had no lips, but his soul pulsed at the softness of your lips against his teeth. You returned his affections by pressing back and taking hold of his arm to steady yourself. Gods, to think that he could have lost you!

You parted for air. Your eyes were half lidded as you gazed at him, and he found that he wanted to feel you more. But no, you were still injured, the sun was quickly yielding to the moon, and the Ravines of Loria must have had its ominous reputation for something other than the drop. He held his desire at bay. You were alive, and that was more than enough for now.
“Blues,” you whimpered and pressed your lips against him again. Caught off guard by your sudden forwardness, his teeth parted enough for you to slip your tongue into his mouth. His magic formed a tongue in a mimicry of yours, and he moaned as you pressed your body closer—

_Click!

Blues looked up from the table, where you laid down two shortened pencils and notebook paper in front of him.

“It took me forever to find a pencil! Here, will this be too long?”

You brought one of the utensils to him, and he wrapped his hand around the pencil in silence. Thank heavens you couldn’t hear thoughts like Bitties.

“Blues? You okay?”

He glanced up to your curious gaze and immediately looked away.

“YES, PERFECTLY FINE, NOTHING IS WRONG!”

“Okay?” you hesitated, “Hey, I said this was a test, but it’s nothing to be worried about. It’s more for me to understand where to start you guys than to grade you. Have you thought about what you’re going to write?”

He did. And seeing as where his mind took him, he decided it was best that he didn’t.

“NO.”

“Oh. Well, you could always write about that drama you like. A lot of people write fanfiction nowadays.”

You smiled at him and rubbed his spine with your pinky, and he let out a small “mweh” in response.

“M-Maiden,” he stuttered in embarrassment.

“I’m going to track down your brother. I’ll be right back.”

Blues watched as you trailed down the hall before burying his head in his hands.

Chapter End Notes

Happy April Fools!

Thank you all so much for the heartwarming comments and suggestions! Things have gotten better over the last couple weeks, and ultimately everything is looking up for the long run! Just pray that I keep my patience for the next two months of work -_-.

I’m going to try doing smaller chapters in the meanwhile to keep the story going. By the way, remember that word search puzzle that I said I made in chapter 19? Here it is! Offbeat Days is going to hold all of the extra snippets and stuff that happens during the main story. Check it out if you’re bored!
“Like this,” you said as Blues watched you scrawl his name onto the paper below him, “You were almost right, but there’s an ‘e’ in it. As for you, Rhythm...well, your name would be hard to spell out by sound alone, so it was a good effort.”

You wrote Rhythm’s name above his side the other column and took a step back.

“If you want me to read a word for you again, let me know.”

As the brothers started to copy the list of words from your laptop, you grabbed your phone to look up gift ideas. You’d better start saving now if you wanted to get everything in time for Christmas. Since your budget has been cut for this year, you’ll have to think of some creative gifts to give to your family, plus two.

You started with cousin’s gift since you had an idea in mind. She’s had that worn, ratty apron for a few years now, and you’ve patched it several times from where her garden trowel poked a hole in the pockets. You’d have to plan out shopping for fabric as well. Her favorite pastel colors would look cute for a garden apron, but the dirt and mud would stain easier. Not that she was picky like your brother.

Actually, it was hard to pinpoint what your brother really liked. He was always trying new things, and his job had him running around the city nonstop. And if he didn’t like something, he’d let it be known. His boldness was something you admired growing up with him. It got him into a hell of a lot of trouble, but he would laugh to you about his endeavors with little sign of regret. Like the time the two of you snuck out of the house with mom’s money to get waffles at midnight.

...Mom. Screw it. You were getting her a gift card this year so she couldn’t complain about how “chintzy” your gifts were. She could pick out her own damn present. Who was next on the list?

Ah, what about the brothers? Unlike your mother, Rhythm and Blues seemed to appreciate anything you gave them. In fact, now that you think about it, nothing really stood out in your mind because it would feel like every other day. Time to do some tactful questioning.

You prepared a not-so-suspicious question and took a breath, looked away from your phone, and—what were they doing?

Just as you were preoccupied with your gift hunting, they were distracted from your gaze as Blues moved his fingers in a rapid succession of signs while Rhythm nodded in understanding. It wasn’t any kind of sign language you had seen before. Not that you were an expert, but the frequency of two particular movements paired with the occasional foreign sign reminded you more of morse code than anything.
Rhythm motioned with his palm—”stop”, you easily recognized—and picked up his pencil. The scratching of the graphite against the paper took place of the quiet, and Blues nodded as Rhythm continued to write. Once finished, he gave his brother a thumbs-up, and they went on to the next word.

Curiosity sunk into you as you remained as quiet as possible, just to see if they were going to do it again. You pretended to play with your phone as they scribbled down the next word. Blues scratched his head and tapped Rhythm’s forearm.

There it was. Blues pointed to the list on your computer and began to sign, moving from one signal to the next with little pausing, and Rhythm followed his movements with an intense concentration.

You had to know, “What are you doing?”

They both jumped inches into the air and snapped their gazes to you in shock. The audible sighs from them amused you a little more than it should have, and Blues chuckled while Rhythm thudded his fist against his chest.

“Heavens, Babe!” he breathed, exasperated but not angry. You smirked as you leaned towards them.

“I didn’t mean to scare you,” you laughed.

“YOU DIDN’T SCARE US! IT WAS MERELY OUR INSTINCTS PREPARING US FOR BATTLE!” Blues huffed, gripping the pencil like a spear.

“Battle? Against me?” You smiled and gently pulled his makeshift weapon out of his grasp, “Well, I have been stabbed with a pencil before. I guess I came underprepared. What’s gotten you two so ‘battle ready’?”

Blues sighed and opened his mouth-

“It’s nothing,” Rhythm replied. You caught Blues shooting him a glare, but he blatantly ignored it by staring straight at you.

Your eyebrow lifted, "If you say so. Still, you were signing, right? Where’d you learn to do that?"

There was a second’s pause as Rhythm's gaze shifted to the side before answering.

"Just, you know, on the—"

"Our father taught us," Blues interrupted, "Or rather...we watched him speak in hands and made up our own. He had difficulties trying to teach us properly."

“What kind of difficulties? I imagine it’s like learning another language.”

Blues shook his head, “We had to keep the guards unaware. They’d take our cage away as soon as they’d notice.”

You were confused as to why they were in cages in the first place until it hit you that Blues was talking about what you dubbed “the mill”. The only other time he had mentioned the place was when you took him and Rhythm to Mama Cry’s. The streets were no problem for them, and if you asked, they’d tell you. Not the mill. And here Blues just slipped it in as if you knew all along.

Just as you were about to pry a little more about their father, you noticed the brothers trading some
dire looks. Rhythm’s face was pulled into a mixture of anxiety and irritation, while Blues rebutted with a firm scowl and an equally intimidating stance. You bit your lip as the silence gave way to a thick tension. What was up with this?

Rhythm took a step forward. Blues kept his stance. Their magic flickered from their sockets, and your unease turned into panic.

Without thinking, you wedged your hand in between them to make a barrier.

“I…” You started, faltering under their shocked stares, “Whatever this is about, don’t fight each other over it.”

Rhythm clenched his teeth and looked away. Blues squeezed your index finger with his hand with a death grip. The lights in his sockets went out for a brief moment, but then returned as your fingers twitched.

“We could have hurt you,” Blues spoke softly, “Surely you know that by now?”

You smiled, not knowing how to respond otherwise. It’s not like they would have killed you for being concerned, right?

“How about we take a break? Want something to drink?”

Blues mumbled a small “no thank you” and took up his pencil again. On the other hand, Rhythm barely managed to give you a response. He shook his head before stalking off of the table, not once sparing you a glance as he climbed down the ladder. Okay, they just needed time to themselves. Perfectly acceptable.

Only that it really wasn’t. The rest of the night somehow kept some of that tension regardless of what you were doing. Whenever Blues entered the room, Rhythm would tell you he’d forgotten something and leave without so much of a glance towards his brother. But when Rhythm returned, Blues would shoot him an icy glare and then move away in silence. A fight like this had never happened since they had lived in your apartment—only minor, lighthearted squabbles. And it left you at a loss of how or if you needed to butt into the situation.

You ended up going to bed that night with an unsettling flutter in your stomach.

The next morning, you stumbled through your usual routine with as much energy as you could muster (which, suffice to say, was the bare minimum), hardly giving a thought to the situation until you served breakfast.

“Rhythm sleeping in again?” you asked as you sat three plates of peanut butter toast onto the table.

“He is,” Blues replied, pulling his plate closer. Usually he’d go to drag his brother out of bed at this point.

But no, not today. He just popped a slice of toast into his mouth and that was it.

You tilted your head slightly, “Should I go get him?”

He looked at you, then looked down to his plate.

“No...I think you should let him sleep in today. I shall ensure he eats his breakfast later.”

Was that a small hint of defeat in his voice? Nuh-uh, none of that bullshit needed to be in your
cheerful little skeleton. You had come to depend on his energy to get you through the mornings, and now was the time to repay the favor.

You scooped him up and hugged him to your chest, earning a squeak from the Bitty.

“Maiden!”

“Blues!” You parroted, “Sorry, but you’re just going to have to accept my hugs.”

Blues leaned into your chest, stiffening his body and gripping onto your shirt as he buried his head into the fabric, "Nhu mhk ths hrd," he mumbled.

"What was that?"

He pulled away and gave you a long, hard stare.

"You," he started, and then stopped.

"Me." You teased, “What?”

Blues sighed, “You must go to work today?”

“It’s too late to call off now,” you affirmed as you rose an eyebrow. Where was this going? “Was your fight with Rhythm that bad?”

“No, we’ve resolved our differences after you went to sleep last night,” he dismissed, shaking his head, “Really, it is of no consequence.”

You tilted your head, “This is the first time you’ve ever asked me to stay. Are you sure nothing’s wrong?”

“Trust me, Maiden. Frankly speaking, I just wish to spend more time with you.”

Okay, that sounded fa—wait a second. This was a prime opportunity.

You smirked. His face paled with a familiar blue hue.

“THAT REALLY WAS TOO BOLD OF ME! PLEASE FORGET I EVER SAID ANYTHING!”

“Wow, you and Rhythm really are brothers. That’s the smoothest pickup line I’ve heard yet.” you teased. He shook his head furiously.

“BUT IT’S THE TRUTH! I ONLY WISH FOR YOUR COMPANY—ER— MEAN TO SAY—”

“I know what you mean, Blues,” you laughed, brushing against his side with your thumb, “But I’m honestly surprised you haven’t gotten sick of me by now. We see each other every day!”

Blues placed his hand on your palm and flashed you a soft smile despite the blush covering his face.

“I won’t ever get sick of you, Maiden!”

Your heart skipped a beat as your cheeks grew warm, and you shifted your gaze to the unique patterns of bread crumbs lying on your plate. Ah, yes, toast. You should probably eat that.

You couldn’t deny that hearing that made you happy, though. Even if he was just saying that out of
“Eat your breakfast, silly!” you retorted, putting him down by his plate. You shoved your own breakfast into your mouth and checked the time.

“I’m gonna put Rhythm’s breakfast in your room. I’d at least like to see him before I leave.”

Blues nodded as he munched on his toast, and you took the tiny plate into your hands. Your day couldn’t start unless you saw Rhythm, conscious or not.

You took a trip down the hall and got on your hand and knees to peek inside their room. Soft snores emitted from the huddled mass under the covers, and you grinned as you placed his breakfast just outside bedframe.

“Rhythm, I brought you breakfast,” you called softly.

Not even a twitch. You received snoring in response.

“Yeah, that’s what I figured. You’re making me jealous here,” you teased, resisting the urge to poke him. “Bye! I’ll see you when I get home!”

Just on cue, your phone’s alarm rang from the kitchen, and you sprang up to get on with your day. Blues waved you goodbye as you gathered your things and left the apartment.

As you reached the bottom of the stairs, you caught sight of Reyna stepping into the foyer. It turned out that Reyna had a similar work schedule as yours, and since settling in, the two of you had been walking to the station together.

She must have heard your footsteps, as she turned around and smiled in greeting.

“Good morning.”

“Morning,” you replied, “Just another day, huh?”

“A cold one, for sure,” she mused as the two of you stepped outside. Puffs of condensation escaped your mouth as you breathed the frigid air. You shivered at the sudden change of temperature and exhaled.

“I bet it gets awfully drafty in that theater of yours. I know the back room of our shop freezes during the colder seasons.”

“Oh, it does. No amount of space heaters can make up the difference. But we’re used to it by now. I can’t take Charlotte with me though. The cold puts her right to sleep,” she mused.

Your heartbeat sped as you Charlotte’s name, but you took a big breath and pushed away the unease.

“Is that so? Like hibernation?”

“Yes, in a way. It’s not healthy for her to be out for long since Spider Bitties are cold blooded. What about yours? I’ve always wondered what kind of conditions Skeleton Bitties endure.”

“Uh,” you looked down at the pavement, “I’m really not sure. I’ve been making winter clothes for them, but I don’t know if they’re affected by the weather or not. They haven’t complained yet, but this’ll be our first winter together, so…”
Reyna gave you a surprised glance, “Your first winter? How long have they been with you?”

“Only a few months. I hadn’t planned on taking Bitties in, so there’s a lot I don’t know.”

“How did you end up with them? If you don’t mind me asking.”

You recounted the first few days with the brothers as you walked to the station, watering down a few of the incidents for the sake of brevity. Reyna listened to your story with a quiet attentiveness, nodding occasionally or covering her gasps as you mentioned the more gruesome details.

“I can’t imagine life without them now,” you finished, smiling to yourself, “What about you? How did you find Charlotte?”

The two of you had just past the turnstiles and had joined the crowd awaiting the train.

“Will already had Charlotte when I met him. He’s told me that he found her in his parents’ barn one weekend when he went to check up on the cows. She was wary of him at first, but he said that they bonded quickly after a few days. When I had first met Charlotte…”

Reyna looked away briefly before looking at you with a calculated smile, “She and I had taken a little longer to befriend each other. Once we cleared away a few misunderstandings, we got along fine.”

“Oh, wow. What kind of misunderstandings?” you asked, and then mentally slapped yourself for your lack of etiquette, “I mean, if I may ask? I don’t wanna pry.”

“No, it’s quite all right! It’s all in the past now,” she giggled, dismissing your statement with a wave. “She assumed…”

She looked out at the tracks as you stared at her expectantly.

“She had been convinced that ‘no self-respecting lady’ would ever accept her as a part of Will’s life. She thought she’d be thrown away as soon as Will had a proper girlfriend.”

“That’s awful. Because she’s a Bitty?”

“No. It’s because she’s a spider. In retrospect, the fact that she’s a Bitty may have saved her life.”

The weight of Reyna’s words settled in you, and you couldn’t mask the guilt that rose up.

“Oh…”

A beat of silence passed and Reyna turned to you with mild panic evident on her face, “No, no, please don’t misunderstand me! A lot of people have a fear of spiders, and it’s something Charlotte has come to understand as an exaggerated survival instinct and not an act of hate!”

“Ha ha, it’s okay. No offense taken. It certainly puts things into perspective…” you chuckled, forcing yourself to push away the conflicting feelings. “So, how did you and Will meet?”

Reyna seemed to welcome the change of subject and began to explain her story as the train arrived. The two of you huddled into one of the cars, and you continued chatting until the train came to Reyna’s stop. She bid you a goodbye as she made her way off the car.

Now alone (or, as alone as you could have been in rush hour traffic), your thoughts drifted to Charlotte’s past situation. Spider or not, what kind of asshole would say that to another living being? How many people had reinforced such a crappy outlook? Had Blues and Rhythm been told
something similar before?

If you hadn’t met the brothers that night, would you have been that kind of person?

And maybe it was because you didn’t want to be that kind of asshole that you took out your phone and began to search for exposure therapy apps.

Chapter End Notes

Look at this, an update!

I know it’s been a while, but I’m not giving up! I’ll have a lot of free time after next week, so I’m going to do some catching up with the story. Many thanks to those who’ve waited patiently! I seriously wouldn’t have had the motivation to continue without you. I’ve read through the comments, and though I haven’t replied, I appreciated every one of them.

On a different note, I’ll be running two panels at Anime Blues Con 7 in July. If anyone happens to be there, please stop by to say hello!
Chapter Summary

You knew something was up. You just didn't know *what*.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When you arrived home from work, it was Rhythm who greeted you from the kitchen table.

“I’m back,” you smiled at him as you shrugged off your coat and laid it on the loveseat.

“Welcome home,” he greeted warmly.

“You didn’t sleep the whole day, did you?”

He shoved his hand in his pockets, “*Not all of it.*”

You grinned as you slipped off your shoes and went to nudge his arm with your fingers. He retorted with giving you a playful push, to which you poked him on the side with your pinky.

“Did you at least eat breakfast?” you asked, pulling away.

“Yeah.”

He pointed to the sink, where his plate laid on the drying cloth, clean. Good. At least he’d have two meals as per the rule. They were probably getting tired of sandwiches to really care about lunch. You were gonna have to change that up somehow.

You picked up the dish and set it in the cabinet with the others before opening the fridge. “What do we want today? Ah, I should have set out some beef to thaw this morning…”

“...What’d you call it again? Chicken Parmesan? The spaghetti with the chicken patty.”

You looked to him as you rose an eyebrow, “Yeah, Chicken Parmesan...kinda. You want it?”

“Yeah,” he said, and then looked away, “...please.”

“...Okay. I gotta see if we have sauce, lemme check.”

Did he ever say “please” before? He never really offered dinner suggestions either. And as you rummaged through the cupboards, you wondered if this had anything to do with Blues’ odd behavior from this morning.

“Aha, yep, we’ve got some. Chicken Parmesan is a go. I hope Blues is okay with it.”

“He is.”

Oh, well, okay then. Maybe he requested it and Rhythm just relayed the message. You took out the large pot and turned on the faucet.
“Listen, Babe…” he called over the rushing water, just loud enough that you could hear the heavy tone in his voice. That didn’t sound good.

You shut off the faucet and turned around.

“I’m sorry. About yesterday,” he said, “I panicked. I’m sorry.”

You sat down in front of him and held out your fingers, “It’s okay, you didn’t want to talk about it, right? I’m not angry or anything,”

He didn’t take them. “I know that, I just—ugh, after dinner. I’ll-we’ll tell you after dinner.”

“Rhythm,” you reached for him and he dodged. Ouch, that stung your heart, “What’s going on?”

But instead of answering you, he turned away.

“I’ll go see what my brother’s doing,” he said and blinked out of sight.

He had to be joking if he thought you’d be calm after that little discussion. You ended up hovering over the stove, watching the chicken patties cook in the oven and stirring the spaghetti noodles constantly, wracking your brain over what the hell might have happened in the time span of a day. Was it something you said? Something you did? Something you didn’t do?

Oh no, were they going to try and leave again? Wasn’t this similar to the last time they left?

No, back up just a minute there. They wouldn’t leave for mentioning their past. They knew you wouldn’t pry too deep unless they wanted. That was your unspoken rule. You didn’t ask, they didn’t tell. Rhythm said they’d explain. You could wait after dinner. You could wait. You could do it…

“It’s—“ your voice caught in your throat as you called, “It’s supper time!”

You heard your heart thud against your chest in the second of silence that followed. You glanced down the hall.

Blues appeared with Rhythm a second after. You breathed out.

“Coming!”

Before they could make eye contact with you, you twirled around and set the table as if you were in a race to determine the fastest server. You filled their plates with their portions, set the table, and went to make your own plate.

And as you stared down at the pot of noodles, you found that you weren’t that hungry. You took one large scoop of spaghetti and split the chicken patty in half.

When you turned around, the brothers were already seated in their usual spots on the table.

“Maiden,” Blues called, sending you a look of concern.

“I don’t feel like eating too much right now,” you replied. Rhythm looked away.

And that’s how the meal started. The atmosphere was so thick that it would have broken the tension disks of your sewing machine.

“How,” Blues started, cutting through the silence “How was your day?”
You jumped at the abrupt change and smiled weakly, “It was good.”

The room fell quiet again. Maybe he was expecting you to continue, but your brain wasn’t having any of it. What the hell did you do today?

“THAT’S GOOD,” he replied. Silence again.

…Good god, this was awkward and awful. But he was trying to make you feel better, and dammit, you were going to reciprocate that effort.

“I downloaded an app today. It’s supposed to help me get over my fear of spiders.”

He perked up, “Oh? How does it work?”

“I look at a picture of a spider everyday on my phone,” you explained, “It goes from silly cartoon drawings to high details pictures over the course of a month or so. It’s called exposure therapy.”

Rhythm spit out his food and coughed violently as the two of you looked to him in alarm.

“It’s—“ he coughed again, looking at you with mild panic “—called what?”

“Exposure therapy,” you repeated with a bit of hesitance.

Blues patted hard against his back.

“Babe, you’re not gonna dunk yourself into a tank of spiders, are you?”

You cringed at the thought, “No! Ugh, I am never going to do that! That’s not exposure therapy! That’s torture!”

Rhythm gave a humorless laugh and wiped his face with his sleeve.

“…Yeah.”

The air fell silent again, and you forced yourself to eat another forkful of spaghetti. You hit the wrong topic. Try again.

“Um, how was your day?”

“IT WAS GOOD! WE GOT MORE ACQUAINTED WITH CHARLOTTE TODAY,” Blues exclaimed, “SHE AGREES NOT TO TRESPASS ON OUR TERRITORY UNLESS IT’S NECESSARY, SO THE FIRE ESCAPE AND YOUR WINDOW IS SAFE!”

“Oh! Thanks,” you replied. They probably felt your unease about looking out of the bedroom window recently. How did you get so lucky with these sweet little guys? “So, how was she? Did you make friends?”

“SHE’S…formidable?”

Interesting choice of words there. Blues looked to Rhythm with a questioning glance.

“She’s not bad,” Rhythm seconded, “Too early to tell though.”

“We also found that Charlotte’s human is a—what was it? Pair a medic?”

“Paramedic. Will is?”
“Or in training to be one.”

You hummed, “He’s in the right area. The ER has no shortage of patients here.”

Blues’ face scrunched into concern, “Then I’m glad they moved here. If something happens to you, then he can take care of it.”

…what?

“Why would something happen to me? Don’t get me wrong, we live in a pretty crappy area, but I’ve lived here for a few years now and nothing awful has happened.”

“Because something could happen. And if we’re not here to help you, who will?”

“Why wouldn’t you be here?” you blurted.

Silence again. Screw dinner. You wanted answers now.

“We know,” Rhythm barked, “Fuck, I shouldn’t have said anything. This is hard enough as it is.”

“I was hoping we could have one good meal together before all this,” Blues admitted, sighing. “But we want to be honest with you. You don’t know the kind of monsters you took in.”

“And we don’t...we don’t wanna hurt you, Babe. Even though we did some brutal things in the past, they’re something we don’t wanna repeat.”

They were acting strange all day because they dreaded telling you about their past. It made sense now.

“Okay,” you said, sitting up. “I trust you. Tell me.”

Chapter End Notes

Starting with a fresh chapter for the beginning of the month! It's a double update this time, so hold on to your seats, folks.
Should Have Heard the Storm Coming (part 2)

Chapter Summary

Now you know.

Chapter Notes

**Warning:** The violence ramps up a bit. Not extreme, but it's there. Just...general abuse.

Edit: It's a little less confusing now. Sorry about that!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Again.

His father’s gaze was boring into his skull as he stretched out his hand and exhaled. The magic sparked in his palm as it stitched together slivers of blue, bit by bit, until it took the shape of bone. This one felt lighter than his normal attacks, but the energy pulsing through his limbs said otherwise.

Blues threw the attack through the rusted bars, down to his father’s feet.

*Good,* his father said, bending down to inspect the final result. *Keep practicing. You musn’t take that long in a real battle.*

*Yes, Dad,* he replied, looking down. It was best he mastered it now, or else they’d make him learn the hard way. Just like what they were forcing his little brother to do right now.

“He’s not gonna get it, ya old bag. Ya think they’ll just let him off the hook ‘cause he can do one more measly trick?”

That stupid Edge. Just because he won the practice match, suddenly it makes him an expert.

“Yer damn right I’ma expert, you lil’ shit. Can’t even quiet your little peabrain mind of yers. You ain’t gonna last a month. Yer lil’ bro won’t last a week.”

“*Shut your mouth.*” he warned as he glared at the cage across the room.

*Ignore him,* his father ordered.

“Yes, listen to yer daddy.”

He growled under his breath, but said nothing otherwise. His brother was going to be okay. For now he needed to concentrate.

Once more he channeled his magic to his hand and knit the energy together…
The door screeched open and slammed shut as the Trainer walked into the room, and every Bit except him scurried to the back of their cages. The plastic container in his hands rattled with his brother slumped inside.

*Bro,* he called out, his soul thumping inside of his ribcage. He didn’t dare pull at the bars to reach for him. The last time the Sleeper reached out of the cage while the Trainer was in, he got his arm snapped off.

“You’re not dead yet,” the Trainer remarked, shaking the container as he reached for the padlock keys at his hip. His brother glared through the container but said nothing. Instead, he pulled himself up to the side to prepare for the rough landing.

The Trainer unhinged the lock from above and swung the door open, where he overturned the container and dumped the skeleton inside, “Out.”

His brother landed onto the bars with a hollow *thud,* but no one moved. No one said a word.

“Tomorrow’s the big day, boys. First real blood. You better rest up while you can, ‘cause you’re in for a hell of a time.”

Smirking like he always did, the Trainer flashed them a toothy grin before locking the cage and turning away. He flipped off the light switch and slammed the door behind him.

*Son,* his father called, helping his brother onto his feet. The musty smell of shredded newspaper wafted up as their steps crunched the paper beneath them.

*I’m okay, Dad. The other one’s not. Think I might’ve…*  

Rhythm’s guilt weighed on the words he didn’t say.

*It is inevitable here. You cannot spare everyone.*

His brother scoffed, *It still blows.*

“Cry me a river, beanpole. You think they just let fodder go after you toy with ‘em? Lettin’ them rot is just like puttin’ them in a cage and torturin’ ‘em yourself!”

“You dirty human sucker. Just you fucking *wait.*” his brother’s temper flared as he snarled against bars.

“What’d you call me, you sack of shit?! I’ll fuckin’ dust ya *right now.*”

*“Enough, both of you.”*  

A rattle from the cage below them echoed as the Undyne growled loud enough to give them chills. Any louder and the humans could be alerted.

“There’ a match tomorrow. Save your shitty grudge for later. *For now, go the fuck to sleep.*”

You swallowed the lump in your throat. This wasn’t a breeding mill they were talking about. Oh no. This was much, much worse.

“What’s ‘fodder’…?”
“It’s the word we used to talk about the…the animals we’d practice on. Sometimes it was weaker Bitties.” Rhythm explained, pulling on the rim of his hood. “If we didn’t fight them, whoever oversaw us that day would torture them in front of us ‘till we couldn’t take it anymore.”

“They’d scream so much,” Blues added, “After a while you just want it to stop, and that wasn’t possible until you fought them yourself…or they’d die after hours of torture.”

“We tried to keep them alive enough to give them a chance to escape. We saw them throw the bodies outside one time, and we thought it might help their chances if we knocked ‘em out. Except the Bitties. We couldn’t fake the deaths of other Bitties…”

“Because they turn to dust.” you assumed. Rhythm nodded.

“Yeah…”

The floodlight overhead was blinding. Monsters and humans roared in excitement around the chicken-wire enclosure as they forced the stench of alcohol and tobacco out of their minds.

A large, muscular horse Bit and a blindfolded dog Bit stood before them, sizing them up. He can smell us, his older brother warned as they slowly circled around the pen. He can hear us move. And the big one was no laughing matter. The horse Bit snorted as his lower half-something akin to an eel’s tail—writhed underneath him. They’ve never seen Bits like this before.

“Skeletons are all the same,” the horse goaded, “You snap apart so easily.”

They knew better than to take the bait.

“Bet your bones are tasty. I’m starving,” the other growled. Even with his blindfold, the dog followed them with his head. He took a step forward and started to dig into the floor with his claws.

“Come try some.” Rhythm taunted. He looked down at his brother and gave a brisk nod.

The screams and hollers of the crowd were getting louder, irritated. He stared down their opponents and charged up his magic, feeling his soul hammer in his chest, his thoughts going blank…

And slipped through space to appear behind them. The dog turned around first as he deflected a hit with his own magic—a crude shape of a dagger. His long snout reach towards his face and snapped in front of his skull as he retracted.

He slammed his magic to the floor and sent fragments of bone jutting up to impale his opponents. The dog dodge his attack with little effort, but failed to see his brother’s attack snaking from behind. He howled in pain as the shards stabbed at his paws.

The horse got the better of their efforts, as he wrapped his body around a larger spike to avoid the others. His arms reached out and managed to swipe the side of his brother’s body, sending him crashing into the wire. Blues grunted from the impact, but took the momentum of the push to propel him back onto his feet.
brother, you okay?

Of course—dog!

The dog swiped at him again, bounding up as if the pain in his feet never existed. He stepped backwards and conjured up another bone to deflect another attack. The dog expected that, as his other arm moved to stab him closer to his ribs. He twisted his body to the side and slashed the dog’s bicep clean across.

His small accomplishment went uncelebrated when he got backhanded hard enough to hit the ground. The dog was on him in an instant, pinning him down with his entire bodyweight. Shit! He needed out!

He glanced at the blinding light through the caged ceiling. Then it dawned on him.

The dog bit into his collarbone and he muffled a scream, concentrating his energy as much as he could before teleporting.

Right against the wire of the cage’s ceiling. Gravity did its work as the dog lost his bearings and let go. He scrambled to hold onto the wire as he watched the dog fall onto the mess of sharp fragments below him. The bone pierced through the dog’s side as he whimpered out and shuttered in pain.

Heaving, he let go of the wire and teleported down to his brother, who had the horse’s soul pinned to the floor with a blue bone.

“Don’t move. Just admit defeat,” His brother warned, panting.

The horse moved, and both of them could hear the tearing of his soul.

“STOP.”

But he wouldn’t. He just kept struggling.

“My partner’s dust,” he grunted, “I’m dust! It doesn’t matter!”

“he-he’s not—!”

But the horse was right. Only a pile of fine powder and rags remained. His soul stung as his mind fell blank.

And just as quickly as the match started, the horse Bit struggled a final time before collapsing into ash. The crowd deafened any thoughts they had, and all they could do was stare at each other.

“It’s funny. We can talk about it now as if it wasn’t a big deal.”

“Now it feels kinda…hollow.”

They chuckled, but there was no merit in their voices.

You tugged at the hem of your shirt underneath the table. “What happened when you, um, didn’t finish the job?”
Spring again, which meant another year passed since fighting in the rings. He could feel it because the night air passing through the cages became less biting. His bruised ribs and collarbone were screaming with each bump the pickup truck flew over. Still, he cradled his younger brother’s head in his lap and felt wind.

“I’m sorry. I fucked up,” Rhythm croaked. The hairline fractures that lined the left side of his ribs gleamed with his body’s magic.

“It’s okay.”

He laughed, “No it’s not. He’s gonna kill both of us.”

“We won’t go down without a fight, Bro. If we fall, we’re gonna do it together.”

“…Dad will be bonely without us.”

Blues chuckled and winced from the shooting pain, “Please, not now. If I smack you, you’ll die.”

“What do you take me for? A baby bones?”

“Yeah,” he laughed, “My little baby bones brother. Did you know that when you were little, you cried when I spun you around?”

“The hell I did!”

“You did! You thought I was going to let go and you would crash into the bars!”

“Did they hit you in the head too? You gotta be making this up.”

“I’m not,” his chuckles turned into coughing, “You started getting taller though, taller than me, and soon I couldn’t pick you up. I swore I would be strong enough to protect the both of us…”

And look what happened.

“I’m sorry, Bro.”

“Don’t say that. I never woulda let you do this by yourself.”

The truck slowed to a stop. They were back.

“No matter what happens, I’m here for you Bro.”

His brother reached up and squeezed his wrist.

“I’m here for you, Brother.”

The empty cages around them rattled as the tailgate fell forward. Even in the darkness of night, he could see the outline of the Trainer’s arm, grabbing their cage and dragging it against the truck bed.

“What a fucking night,” the human muttered as he hauled them inside.

This wasn’t the hold. This was the back room of the other building. He all but threw the cage onto the steel table, turned around, and grabbed a stool.
He sat in front of them and pressed close to the cage.

“You lost today,” he said in an even tone. Calculated, like a hunter watching his prey, “You had such a great run going on. Fuckin’ amazing, really. Best winning streak for a doubles match I’ve ever had. You know I was thinking of giving you names today? Make you something worth being alive, ’cause you’re not worth anything right now.”

The air filled with silence. The Trainer shifted his eyes to his little brother.

“You’re afraid of birds? You’re shittin’ me, right? A fucking chimera monstrosity with teeth for a head is no problem. But a bird Bit is out of the question?”

And ever the respectful one to authority, his brother coughed out, “Maybe ‘cause they remind me of your fuckin’ nose.”

The Trainer didn’t make a move. His emotions ran as a steady, low hum in the back of their heads.

“We’re gonna fix that. Did you know there’s a pigeon coop out back? Kept it as a hobby. I bet you and your brother would love to keep them company.”

He unlocked the cage and reached inside. His gloved hand went to swipe for his brother.

Without thinking, Blues hurled a shard of bone straight through the leather and pierced deep into the human’s hand. He watched blood trickle out of the wound and onto the floor of the cage, and he rushed to stand in front of his little brother as the human’s hand retracted.

“Don’t touch him.”

The human’s pulse of anger surged through them as the Trainer bared his teeth…and then laughed.

“See? This is why you work well together. Haha, I appreciate the sibling bond you have. It gives you some extra incentive to get through your shitty existence, yeah? I can respect that.”

He took the cage and threw it to the floor, and the brothers cried out in pain as their bodies slammed against the metal.

“But maybe you need time to grow as individuals. Let’s see how you feel about it after tonight.”

Horror struck through his soul as the Trainer gripped Rhythm's body and squeezed. His brother’s cries of pain echoed in the room, and just as he found the strength to reach for him, the cage door slammed shut.

“BRO, I’M HERE! FIGHT! FIGHT!”

His body crashed into the bars again as the Trainer kicked the cage into the wall. He was screaming against the pain for his brother, but he lost sight of the pair the moment the human walked out the door.

I’M HERE. I’M HERE! He screamed through his mind, desperately searching for contact, DON’T LET HIM WIN! DON’T YOU DARE FALL!

The quiet hurt him more than the wounds. It was so still and quiet for so long that it felt like it was crushing him, and he couldn’t breathe more than a few shallow gasps at a time.

…
The Trainer came back, empty-handed.

“As for you,” he took the cage and slammed it back onto the table, “Playing white knight isn’t gonna get you anywhere. So we’re getting you and your Pops to play a game.”

Blues’ sockets went dark as he trailed off. You looked over to Rhythm, whose blank gaze dropped to the table.

You opened your mouth. “…”

“That’s the night Dad died.”

Blues looked to Rhythm with a hint of hurt on his features and took a deep breath.

“After that, we had to bide our time to make a plan. The Trainer went easier on us once he thought we were broken in, so we followed along until the right opportunity…”

They don’t know how many seasons passed now. He’s lost track, and the only real progress he could determine was the time and energy it took to wipe out their next opponents. And there were so many faces he couldn’t remember turning to dust in his hands that they all blurred together in his mind.

They took their time gaining some of the Trainer’s trust. He put them in the cage by hand now. After all, every strain and scratch counted since they were in the higher ranks, and he didn’t dare lose his bets on something so easily preventable.

And that suited them just fine. It meant that they had a two second time lapse to teleport out of the cage and into the crowd when he reached back inside.

Blues clutched his forearm, which was wrapped in the rags of his father’s shirt.

Ready?

Always.

As they stood amongst the piles of dust in the arena, the Trainer smirked from above him as he lifted the bar to the cage door.

And then they disappeared.

“Fuck! Quick! Find them!”

But the crowd’s voice overpowered his commands as the two weaved their way through the sea of bodies. Rhythm teleported them to the floor, where they latched onto the pant leg of one of the participants. It wasn’t far enough. He grabbed his brother’s arm and moved them further towards the exit, where the bouncers guarded the door.

“Son of a bitch, I lost money again. Fucking ridiculous.”
“What’d I tell ya?”

“Hey, I’ma take a piss and grab a drink. You want something?”

“Yeah, rum and coke.”

“Gotcha man. Hey—what’s goin’ on over there?”

He had cracked open the door an inch and a half. Just enough to slip through.

Blues clutched his brother’s arm tighter, “Let’s go.”

“It was the first time we were glad to be Bitties.”

“And the streets were like heaven. It wasn’t easy living, but we could live, you know?”

“And we didn’t have to worry about humans trapping us as long as we were smart about it…until.”

This entire time they had avoided your gaze, but now they were looking at you with the most vulnerable expression you’d ever seen them give you.

“Why are you crying?” Blues asked.

You reached up to your face and wiped the tears that tracked down. And you weren’t stopping either.

“I don’t know.” you choked. “…What made you tell me all this?”

“Because if we need to leave, we have to do it now. The connection between Bitties and their owners are stronger than we thought.”

You whimpered and covered your eyes, “You do want to leave?”

Rhythm’s voice cracked, “We’re murderers. You don’t want us.”

“Don’t I get to decide that?!”

“Haven’t you even been listening?! Why would you want us?!”

You pressed your hands against the table and stood, leaning over them.

“Because I love you both, dammit! So stay if you want to stay!”

It took a second for your statement to sink in, because their blank sockets started to fill with tears.

“THEN WE’LL STAY!”

“Good!” you cried, “Then it doesn’t matter what the hell happened, and everyone’s okay, and I’m going to clean up dinner and stop crying and you’re going to watch TV and not think about fighting to the death, and tomorrow we’re going to continue your reading lessons because I have off! Deal?!”

“Got it,” Rhythm laughed, crying. “We love you, you freakin’ weirdo. And now you’re gonna be stuck with us forever.”
You failed to keep up your glare and ended up chuckling, “I’m glad! Now if you’ll excuse me!”

You rounded up the dishes, dumped them into the sink, turned the faucet to full blast, and rubbed your eyes.

But dammit, your tears kept falling.

Chapter End Notes

Double update! The boys tell the gist of their time at the Mill. They skimmed over a lot of the heavy stuff, but it may pop up later...;_;

Thanks for keeping up with the story and being awesome! I do have one more chapter I'm working on for Offbeat Days, so expect that soon!

Also...should I tag the story with Graphic Violence? Are there any other tags I should include? Let me know!
A week and some odd days had passed since that night, and somehow the time slipped by as if it were only a few moments. Your routine hadn’t changed much, but now you woke up feeling like every day was going to hold something special. After the argument, a small string of tension unraveled itself in the back of your brain—something you didn’t even realize you had until the pressure was gone. It made interacting with the brothers much easier. And it seemed like you weren’t the only one to think that way.

Blues took to waking you up after your first alarm with a kind smile and morning greetings, and when he spoke to you, he held a certain soft undertone in his otherwise boisterous voice that warmed your soul. He started complimenting you on little things like your hair or your cooking, and sometimes scare the hell out of you with surprise hugs. At one point he teleported onto your shoulder while you were washing the dishes, and you jumped so quick that he almost toppled into the sink. Quick warnings before hugs were established afterwards.

As for Rhythm, while he still wasn’t as talkative as his brother, he doubled up on his affection with his actions. He’d sit on your shoulder as you forced yourself to stare at the eerie pictures of spiders during your mini therapy sessions, and throughout it he’d brush your hair back and mutter simple words of encouragement. He’d sit with you while you read and lean against you as he napped. They were slight touches, but now he came to you more often than you came to him.

In a way, all of this affection was kind of spoiling you. And because of that, you felt the emptiness of the apartment more than you thought it would upon arriving home. Their text had said they’d be back in time for supper, but in the few minutes you had been here, it was apparent that you beat them to the punch. To be fair, you hadn’t started making anything yet.

Just as you started searching through your cabinets for inspiration, your phone rang. You whipped around to grab your phone, hoping to heavens that they weren’t in trouble only to realize that their phone was still on the table. Duh. What were they going to do, strap the damn thing on their back?

You shook your head as you willed the thoughts away, focusing on reading the name that flashed on your screen.

Oh, it was your brother.
“Hey, person,” you greeted, curiosity slipping into your tone. “What’s up?”

“Hey, Sis. What’chu been up to?” He replied, his tenor voice ringing with affection. You turned back to the kitchen to resume foraging for ingredients.

“Nothing much. I just got off work, about to make supper. How’s landscaping going?”

“You know, slowing down. Not so bad though. I’ve got enough to get through the winter.” You heard him shuffle around and the rushing of cars nearby. “Tell me why you can’t go to Thanksgiving again?”

“Money.”

“Yeah, I got that. But what’s the deal? I don’t go to Thanksgiving for Mom’s cooking, you know.”

You smirked, “At least the cooking’s better than Mom herself.”

He snorted into the receiver before replying, “Come on, you gonna tell me? If it’s just the cab fee, you know me or Sweet Pea would come to pick you up.”

“That’s not it. I need the overtime. I used up all my vacation for Mom’s wedding this year, and I would have been okay, but the Landlord up’ed the rent, so…”

A small pause, and then he deadpanned “.Why?”

“I took in two Bitties, and he tripled the deposit and pet fee. It’s no big deal. I just have to work a little more this year, and next year I should be okay again.”

“Why do you put up with that shit? I know exactly what he’s doing, Sis. He’s fucking price gouging you.”

“It’s not like I have the money to move. I just have to tough it out. I’ll be fine.”

“Still, next time we get together, I’m gonna...ah, shit, wait. That’s not why I’m calling. Listen, do you know that Mom’s coming to your place?”

You froze.


“That’s what I thought. She told me she was gonna visit you and asked me when you got off of work. Thought you’d like a warning.”

“Did she say when? What does she want?”

“Take a guess.”

Before you could ask about which he was referring to, there was a knock on your apartment door.

“Shit,” your brother voiced your thoughts, “Whelp, good luck. Love you, Sis.”


The thuds repeated again as you hung up your phone, and you braced yourself to deal with who you’d find through the peep hole.
“I know you’re home! It’s your Mother!”

You unlatched the chain lock and opened the door, clenching your teeth for a good second as you spotted the carry-on luggage by her hip.

“Mom,” you called out softly, “What are you doing—”

She pushed past the door, brushing you away as she positioned her luggage by the loveseat, and took a look around before settling on you.

“I was in the area. You’re not coming to Thanksgiving, so how else am I going to spend time with you? You never call, and then when you do, you tell me you can’t make it!”

That was because whenever you did, she’d ask why you were calling in the first place. And then she’d dismiss you when all you wanted was to talk to her. But no, of course it was your fault.

You closed the door and breathed in, “Mom, I do try sometimes.”

But you might as well not had said anything in the first place.

“Honestly, when are you going to get a real home? You need to get a better job,” she huffed, pulling her gloves off and stuffing them in her coat pockets. “This little hovel looks even worse than before. You know your brother is doing so well these days. Don’t you think you should get out of tailoring and into something more worthwhile?”

You glared but said nothing. She just got here. You had to choose your battles.

“I was just about to make supper,” you explained, opting to walk past her for the sweet distractions of the kitchen.

“Good. I haven’t eaten since breakfast. What are we having?”

“I was going to make soup and sandwiches. That okay with you?”

She came and peered over your shoulder as you opened the fridge.

“Is this all you have?”

She looked as if there was something more to that statement, but she must have seen the look on your face and closed her mouth.

“Mom,” you warned. She backed away and crossed her arms.

“What? Okay, okay, I won’t say anything. I’ll just put my things away. I can pick up some meals tomorrow.”

You gripped the sandwich meat in your hands a little tighter.

“How long are you planning on staying?”

“Only a day or two. I shouldn’t stay any longer than that. Lyonel will be waiting for me.”

You spent eighteen years of your life with her. What was two days?
“I have work tomorrow. Maybe if you called…” you trailed off, hoping in a last ditch effort that she’d change her mind.

Your mother waved her hand and smiled, “Oh, honey, that doesn’t matter. I have to spend time with you somehow. I know we didn’t have much of a chance when I was with Richard.”

You bit the inside of your cheek and turned to the counter. You didn’t want to think about that right now.

“How about you go put your stuff away while I work on this?” you offered instead, priding yourself on how even your tone sounded.

“All right.”

You heard her footsteps and the rustling of her bags move down the hallway, and you let out a deep sigh. You leaned onto the counter with your elbows and pressed your hands against your face. This wasn’t a big deal. You just had to tough it out.

After taking a few seconds to prepare yourself, you dumped a couple of cans of chicken noodle soup into a pot and stirred. Yeah, you had this under control. Supper was gonna be fine. There wasn’t much to the day left anyway. Work was gonna take up most of tomorrow, too. You got this.

And then your mother screamed bloody murder from your bedroom.

You dropped the ladle and rushed to the bedroom, gripping the edge of the doorway while your mother was frozen in shock.

“Mom, what the hell?!”

Your mother, the brave one that she was, turned and grabbed you by the arms. With her face contorted in horror, she shoved you inside while she cowered behind you.

“What are those things?!?” She exclaimed, shoving her finger in the direction of the nightstand.

There stood Rhythm and Blues, decked out in their newly made winter clothes and looking rather perturbed. They must have just come in.

“It’s okay.” You threw Mom a small smile and began to step further in. She grabbed your arm and pulled you back.

“Don’t be stupid! They might bite you! Oh my god, where’s my phone? I’m calling pest control—”

“Seriously Mom. It’s fine,” you pried her arm off and went to the nightstand.

Rhythm’s eye socket was flickering with magic as his jaw set in a hard line, staring past you at your mother. Blues was looking at you, but the lights in his own sockets were tiny pinpricks. You picked them up carefully and brought them to your chest.

“Welcome home, guys.”

Rhythm teleported to your shoulder, brushing your hair back and pressing against your neck with gentle, calculated touches, while Blues took to your other one and leaned to your ear.

“Are you all right?” he whispered.

“I’m fine,” you chuckled as you turned around. “She gave you quite a scare, huh?”
You mother stared at you with her mouth wide open, and you held back a smirk.

“Mom, these guys are Rhythm and Blues. They’re Bitties. Guys, my mom.”

It took a second, but Blues coughed and made his best attempt to greet her.

“HELLO, HUMAN MOTHER. I APOLOGIZE FOR STARTLING YOU. Even if this is our room, that you, a stranger, has barged into…”

“Oh god, they talk?!”

“Yo.”

“They live here with you?!”

You smiled as you brushed against them with your fingers, “Well, yeah. Oh, I gotta get back to the kitchen. You made it home right on time, guys.”

As you moved out of the room, your mother gave you ample space to pass through.

“You didn’t tell me you got little monster pets. What were you thinking?” she uttered, trailing behind you.

“They’re Bitties,” you corrected, “Don’t be rude, Mom.”

“It’s okay, Babe. She can call us whatever.”

You missed the dirty look your mother sent Rhythm.

“Don’t call my daughter ‘Babe’, you little pile of—of bones!”

Whoa, time out. You turned to her and rose an eyebrow, “I like his nickname for me, so he can call me that all he wants. At least it’s not ‘Sweet Cheeks’.”

She spluttered as her face went red. There was a pause as you reached the stove again, and the brothers took the opportunity to move to the counter. Rhythm looked to you with a dire expression.

“You do have those too. I dunno. It’d be accurate.”

You sent him an incredulous look as you blushed, laughing, “Rhythm!”

“BEHAVE YOURSELF, BRO. WE HAVE COMPANY,” Blue chastised. “AS ATTRACTIVE AS HER CHEEKS MAY BE.”

“Blues, no!”

“I guess you’re right, Brother. I don’t want to butt into any family affairs.”

“Guys, please! Mom, they’re, um, not used to talking with other humans.”

Blues looked to your mother, who had sat down at the table and was staring at the scene in unabashed shock.

“TELL ME, HUMAN MOTHER, IS THERE A NAME YOU WISHED TO BE CALLED?”

“Not Sweetcheeks. Got that down,” Rhythm remarked. Blues shoved him with his elbow and awaited her answer.
“...I need a drink,” she moaned.

You fought a chuckle as you stirred the soup. “Sorry Mom, I don’t have anything. Will ham sandwiches be okay?”

“It’ll have to do.”

You took to making enough for everyone and set the plates on the table. The soup came next, and soon all four of you sat around for dinner. Your mother couldn’t take her eyes off of the brothers, who pointedly ignored her by eating as if it were another night.

“So, what were you in the area for, Mom? Last I checked, Lyonel’s house is still in the country.”

You took a bite of your sandwich as she glanced down to her soup bowl and back to Rhythm’s plate.

“Mom,” you called.

“What?”

“What are you doing in the city?”

She snapped her gaze to you in surprise before stirring the noodles around with her spoon.

“Oh, I heard the designer I like was having a sale.”

“Oh huh. And did you get anything?”

Silence again as she watched Blues slurp a noodle down with more attention than you’ve ever seen her give to anything.

“Mom.”

“I…” she tore her concentration away as she dropped her spoon in the bowl. “I can’t do this. Don’t you see what’s wrong here?”

You narrowed your eyes. “No. Enlighten me.”

“They’re on the table.”

“Yeah. Where else are they going to be? Bitty chairs don’t exactly reach normal table heights.”

“On the floor, or in a cage of some sort!” She cried, pointing to linoleum and looking at you like you were crazy. “This is just unsanitary! You know better!”

Oh ho ho, no she didn’t.

“They aren’t dogs,” you growled.

“Don’t take that tone with me! It’s disgusting! You’re going to get sick!”

“When did that ever matter to you, Mom? I’m the one who has to deal with it. It would be my fault, so it has nothing to do with you, right? I’ll take care of myself. Like I’ve been doing.”

She stood up from the table and gestured around. “You call this taking care of yourself?! You’re two blocks away from the ghetto and you can’t even come to Thanksgiving because you can’t pay
for it! You eat a bunch of crap, and your dirty little pets are eating on your kitchen table! If only you did half of the things your brother—"

You slammed your hands on the table, causing the the plates to clatter. Soup spilled onto your hand, but you were too angry to care.

“I don’t want to hear about my brother! What are you here for, really? Let me guess,” your mouth twisted into a scathing smirk as you stared into her eyes. “Are you afraid Lyonel will dump you once he finds out you have such a poor daughter? It must be so hard being rich. Keeping up appearances and all. And then you’d have to go find a new sugar daddy to take care of you.”

A fierce look crossed her eyes, “I married Lyonel because I love him.”

You barked out a loud, humorless laugh.

“Yeah. Just like you loved Richard and his goddamned inheritance. Loved him enough that you’d throw out your kids. What is it this time? Lyonel’s house? His money? His job? Don’t worry, I won’t cause any trouble for you or your little boy toy—”

You really should have expected it, but you were caught by surprise when her hand struck you across the face. Her wedding band connected with your cheekbone, and the pain settling in had been the first thing to draw you back to reality.

The second thing was the loud crackling of magic, and two skeletons standing in the middle of the table, hovering a slew of bones all pointed towards your mother.

She withdrew her hand slowly, eyes watering as her voice wavered, “I’m going to bed.”

You said nothing as she walked away. You must have stood up some time during the argument, because you sat back down, exhausted.

Blues and Rhythm turned to you. Their attacks had fizzled out, and now all that was left was the splatters of chicken noodle soup and soggy sandwiches on the table. A heavy silence filled the air.

“I’m sorry,” you said quietly, rubbing your eyes. “That was a mess.”

“Maiden, look at us.”

You shifted your gaze from your spilt soup to the brothers. Rhythm stretched out, offering you his hand as Blues gave you a simple, comforting smile.

“We are always here for you.”

You swallowed the lump in your throat and nodded.

Chapter End Notes

Backstory for Reader! That was wild, wasn't it? Mom's not the best. Hey, if you need a pick-me-up and haven't read how the skelebros got their cell phone, how about reading chapter 2 of Offbeat Days to tide you over? Reader holds an impromptu birthday party for them!
For those who skipped: Mom comes to the apartment in an impromptu visit. She and Reader have an argument over Reader's lifestyle, including the "pets" she took in. Reader loses her temper, which results in her getting slapped.

The next chapter shouldn't be as heavy (I hope)!
“I’m going in with you.”

With the table cleaned up and the dishes drying on the counter, Rhythm hooked his fingers into your blouse as you reached for him on your shoulder.

“I’ll be okay.”

You said that, but the dull ring of confliction in your soul said otherwise to him. He clung tight as your fingers tried to gently pull him off your shoulder.

“I’m staying. No amount of moving me will change that,” he stated. If you really wanted to get him off, you’d have to ruin your blouse in doing so, or strip. And he was cool with either of those options.

“Blues?” You pleaded, looking down at the counter. His brother shook his head.

“If you don’t take him, Maiden, then I’ll go with you instead. But we won’t let you go alone.”

You shook your head. “All I need are my clothes for tomorrow. I won’t be long.”

You tugged weakly at his body once more.

“Then we won’t have any problems,” he countered, digging into the soft material. “Come on, Babe. Please.”

You held your tongue and slumped your shoulders in defeat. “...Cheater.”

As you released your grip, he straightened himself up to push a few locks of your hair behind your ear. He grinned to himself and gave his brother a thumbs up.

Be careful, he warned through their link. Rhythm nodded.

“Might as well get it over with. Is there anything you want from your room?” You asked.

Yeah, but it was more of who he wanted out. “No.” They replied.

“Okay. Be right back.”

You drew in a deep breath as he felt your muscles tense, and you started walking to the bedroom. The prickles of unease radiated from your heart, but your face remained neutral. Rhythm pressed his hand on the side of your neck in reassurance.
You made it to the door. He could see the lights seeping through the cracks of the frame. You must have seen it too. As you stared at the bottom of the door, you clenched your teeth and mustered up the will to knock.

The thought that flashed through your mind—that at worst, she’d slap you again—served only to piss Rhythm off more.

Not if he could help it. If your mother even looked at you the wrong way, he was going to give her a damn good reason to be afraid of him.

“Mom,” you called softly through the door. “Are you awake?”

She was. He could feel the immense irritation and frustration even here. A small bit of remorse, even. She wasn’t trying to hide it, and that made it all the more easier to gauge her. But she didn’t say anything.

“I’m coming in.”

You counted to three before opening the door. The lights were on, and Sir Pidge made his weak, garbling sound as the door swung open, but otherwise the room was still. Your mother had buried herself under your blankets, curled up and facing the wall. He had the urge to shove a fire via Gaster Blaster under her ass, but he had the feeling you’d disapprove.

You must have sensed his magic, as you stroked his back gently to reassure him.

“I’m just getting some clothes,” you whispered, but he wasn’t sure if it was to him or for yourself.

You opened your drawers first for your pajamas and a clean set of undergarments, and then shuffled to the closet for tomorrow’s work clothes. You took care not to move your shoulder too much so he could keep ahold of you. Just as you retrieved some dress slacks, the two of you heard the sheets shift around. He felt you tense up and still.

But she said nothing, and after a second, you took advantage of being in your closet to steal a spare blanket before leaving the bedroom. Rhythm used his magic to pull the door shut behind you, and you let out a sigh of relief as you moved down the hall.

“See? All good,” you said to him as he moved to the loveseat. You dumped the blanket onto the cushions and hung your work clothes on the back of the kitchen chair.

He shrugged, “Yeah, I guess.”

“I’m going to go change.”

“‘Kay.”

And you headed down the hall again, pajamas in tow. Blues watched from the kitchen sill, and then made his way to the loveseat as well.

“Did she try anything?”

Rhythm shook his head.

“I would have liked to have given her the benefit of the doubt,” Blues said, looking down the hall. “I’m sure you could feel it too. As if her mind couldn’t connect with her heart.”

“Still wanna give her another shot?” Rhythm asked as he clenched his fists.
His brother’s eyes blackened. “No.”

“Yeah, I didn’t think so.”

She may be your mother, but that didn’t give her the right to touch you. No one should ever hurt you like that. And tomorrow she was going to know about it.

But if there was a silver lining to this whole situation, it was the form of you, retreating back to them on the loveseat, smiling softly as you buried yourself under the blanket.

“We still have a few hours,” you said, peeking out at them. “Wanna watch a movie?”

“YES!”

Blues skidded down to the cushion where your laptop laid and flicked his palm forwards to open it. As you turned to help him scroll through the suggestions, Rhythm took the opportunity to assess a prime lounging spot. It looked like you spared some room near your torso, and you barely paid any mind as he teleported near your stomach. Kind of a shame how the padding of the comforter made a buffer between the two of you, but he leaned against you and enjoyed it for what it was worth.

“Uh, Blues, that’s a movie about strippers. We could if you want to, but I think I can only take so much of banana slings swinging around on the screen.”

“OH...DO THEY CARRY REAL BANANAS?”

*Heh.*

“No. No they don’t… or at least not in the literal sense.”

“How unfortunate.”

The vibrations of your quiet laughter moved through his bones despite the blanket. He smiled out of reflex and closed his eyes. Too bad he couldn’t share this feeling with you yet.

“Rhythm, is there anything you want to watch?”

He looked up to meet your gaze. There was that soft, curious look in your eyes, and the corners of your lips were turned up in a simple smile. His soul pulsed at the sight.

“Nah.” Because the movie would just distract him from you. Not that you’d believe him.

“You sure?” You asked. Just to prove his point, Rhythm slouched further down and offered you a lazy grin.

“Yeah.”

Your smile widened, and he resisted the urge to grab onto your fingers as you gently brushed against his side. “Okay.”

You went back to filtering through the movie selection as he gazed at your fingertips, contemplating moving further towards your arms. But no. He wasn’t getting up from this.

It took another minute for you and his brother to decide on a movie, but once everything was set up, you snuggled into the loveseat and pressed play. Blues claimed a spot on the armrest, right by your head. Though the movie did its job in pulling his attention away, Rhythm could see his brother’s fingers lacing through your hair. A soft smile was on his face, and for a second he looked
at peace before glancing in Rhythm’s direction.

The brothers shared a moment of understanding, an agreement that didn’t need to be said. Blues broke his gaze away to peer down the hallway, and then brought his attention back to the TV.

Rhythm dozed off just when the rabbit was thrown into jail, comforted by your slow breathing and the warmth at his back.

And the next thing he knew, his brother was nudging his shoulders, eye flickering blue against the darkness with a tired frown.

It’s your turn.

Funny how spoiled he felt, knowing that if this were just another night with you, then he could have gone back to sleep. They hadn’t done sleeping shifts since they got off the streets, and he could tell by the rare scowl on his brother’s face.

Okay, he replied. Rhythm pushed himself up and away from you, and he already wanted to go back. Satisfied, his brother climbed over your arms and huddled under the crook of your neck.

Wake me up if you see her.

Rhythm waved. Yeah.

He stood in place for a moment, mustering the willpower to move to where he needed, glaring at the hallway in the meanwhile. For all he cared, taking away his sweet napping spot was strike two against your mother. And unlike his brother, who chose the armrest to give him some form of coverage and therefore the element of surprise, Rhythm opted to take the top of the loveseat so he could give your mother the best damn death glare she’d ever have the privilege of looking upon.

That was, if she had the lady balls to come out.

Time passed. Rhythm traced letters into the fabric of the loveseat with his index finger, practicing the words you taught them over the past few lessons. He made sentences that got lost into the loveseat, and when that became boring, he drew patterns that he’s seen so many times. Bricks. Bars. Drops. Hearts. He signed his name after his invisible work and grinned.

More time went on. The one difference that irked him about night shifts here was the lack of sky. The change in temperature and the gradual lightening gave him clues outside, but this wasn’t outside and it was dragging. Everything remained eerily still, and it gave time that impression as well.

He summoned a bone to his hand and started tossing it into the air. And then another. Then he started practicing how to juggle. Maybe he could use it one day for practical purposes. And it was extra incentive to be quick, because he didn’t want to have to explain why there would be holes in your cushions—oh, whoops, he dropped one. Sewing might have to be a mandatory lesson now. That’s cool; he could learn to wield a pin like his brother somehow picked up. Maybe give them some street cred.

You shifted in your sleep, and he wondered for a moment if you knew he wrecked your property before you curled up again.

“My bad,” he whispered.

You, of course, said nothing.
He went back to glaring at the hallway until your cell phone’s alarm finally went off. At that point he was on the verge of dozing, and the abrasive noise jolted him enough to stand.

Blues also awoke with the noise and started patting your face.

“Maiden.”

You wrinkled your nose before cracking your eyes open, “Blues. Morning.”

Your hands groped for the phone and shut it off with a swiftness held only by pure muscle memory. And then you sat up.

“Hey, Babe.”

You turned to him and looked with half-lidded eyes. “Rhythm...you’re up early. Couldn’t sleep?”

He shrugged. You frowned, and then the next thing he knew, he was cradled in your hands. You curled up into yourself with him pressed to your chest. Rhythm could hear his brother’s confusion as he squeaked your name in surprise. You had gathered both of them to your body now, as if you were going to go back to sleep.

He for one appreciated the new spot. So did his brother, but he was too busy denying it.

“You have work today!”

“I know,” you mumbled, pressing them a fraction closer to you. Rhythm placed his hand over the fabric of your shirt, feeling for your heartbeat.

You were tired, and worried. For them.

“You didn’t eat much last night, Babe. Come on, get some breakfast.”

You sighed. “Yeah. All right…”

With great reluctance, you sat up again and placed them on the cushion. You stretched, and Rhythm shivered as he heard your bones pop.

“I’m gonna go grab a shower.” you muttered, dragging yourself off the loveseat. You stumbled to the kitchen for your clothes, then made your way to the bathroom.

Rhythm turned to his brother. “What’s the plan?”

“This is our territory, so we’re going to protect it. If she wasn’t Maiden’s mother, I’d say we would drive her out.”

That kind of sucked. He was looking forward to pushing her out of the apartment. Maybe through the window. Ah well.

“So?”

“So, she’s in our apartment, and she’s already broken a rule. She deserves to be punished for it.”

Because she took your bed. The bottom was theirs, but the bed itself was yours. As far as they were aware, she didn’t ask for permission.

“What a bad house guest,” he drawled, smirking. Blues shared a similar glimpse of mischief before
slipping away to help prepare breakfast, and Rhythm nestled into the corner of the loveseat to catch a few z’s.

He woke up to your gentle touch as you cupped him in your hands, frowning.

“Hey, did you get any sleep?” you asked, scratching at his back. The smell of soap invaded his senses as he yawned.

“Yeah, I did.”

Your fingers curled around him in a light hold. “Breakfast is ready.”

You brought him over to the table, where his brother was already munching on a piece of spider donut. He dunked a bit into the saucer of milk before taking another bite.

You sat down on the other side and picked up your own donut, your eyes glossed over in thought.

“I can’t take you to work,” you muttered, but Rhythm could tell it wasn’t for them.

He took a chunk of his own pastry and bit in. Had a cinnamon taste to it, not bad.

Blues looked up at you and smiled. “We know.”

“I’m sorry,” you relented, reaching for Blues. “Please be careful. I think Mom will just ignore you, but I don’t know. I’ll call you during lunch to check up on everything.”

“We’ll be all right,” Blues nuzzled his head against your fingers. “Now, eat! You have another busy day!”

Your mouth twitched up into a small smile as you did as you were told. The rest of breakfast went by quickly, and before long you were headed out the door. Your gaze lingered on them for a few seconds longer, and Rhythm smirked.

“What, Babe, can’t get enough of us?”

Your lips pursed as you turned around, chuckling. “Okay, bye.” And out the door you went.

Now it was just them. And her.

First thing he did was clean their dishes. Just because she was here didn’t mean he could let up on chores. Maybe he could get his brother to pick up his sock today. It was just the one, but it’s been there for the last three weeks, lying by the corner of their tub.

“I’ll get to it,” his brother retorted, distracted by reading over the house rules.

So while he was drying off the dishes, his brother had taken the initiative. With a black, permanent marker in his arms, Blues teleported out of the kitchen and down the hall. A faint “click” of the doorknob signaled that his brother made it inside. Silence followed.

He knew that his brother could take care of himself, but Rhythm still wanted to be there for backup. And he was curious as hell.

He set the last plate onto the drying cloth and followed.

Your mother’s snores irked him the moment he stepped into the doorway. Why was she the only one to get a good night’s rest? Would you get too angry if he set the bed on fire?
He heard something else: the sounds of his brother shifting around on the pillow. Rhythm moved to the nightstand for a better view.

That was a work of art, right there. Blues had drawn a large, lopsided smiley face on her right cheek and colored the bags under her eyes solid black. He was working on whiskers at the moment, and Rhythm gave him a thumbs up.

An improvement, he shared. But I think I can spruce her up some more.

He disappeared into the closet, only to return with a vial of gold glitter in his arms. Rhythm popped off the cap and moved to the pillow, just above her head.

“Welcome to the makeover of your dreams, Sweet cheeks.”

And then he dumped that shit all onto her forehead. The glitter spilled into her hair and down her face like a waterfall, and Blues stepped back to avoid any collateral damage. She coughed as some of it got into her mouth, and they took that as their cue to go.

Rhythm grabbed onto his brother’s arm as he teleported them deep underneath the bed, to their room. The christmas lights shook as her coughing fit became deeper and she finally sat up to clear her throat.

A moment of silence.

“Oh my god,” she shrieked, high-pitched and broken by another hacking fit. She whined a long, despairing wail and swung her legs over the bed. Rhythm watched as gold fell to the floor in her tracks.

He looked to his brother, who was smirking just as big as he was.

They followed right behind her as she took to the bathroom, moaning the entire way. And then she caught sight of herself in the mirror.

Both Rhythm and Blues were caught off-guard by the ear-piercing scream that followed.

“OH MY GOD!”

“KEEP YOUR VOICE DOWN!” Blues snapped at her. She shot them a hysterical glare, noticing them for the first time.

“You got something on your face. Better clean that up.” Rhythm tapped his cheekbone to make a point. This was glorious. He should have taken the phone with him to take a picture for you.

“YOU DID THIS!”

She lunged forwards, and they blipped away in different directions.

“Careful now,” he warned. “I think your face is falling off.”

She made an attempt to lunge for him again, but he retreated to the top of the loveseat, towering over her crouched form. His socket flickered with magic as he sneered down at her.

“You okay with keeping that marker on? People might mistake you for a monster.”

“Little freaks of nature!” she uttered in a voice that echoed your own. He chuckled despite the unsettling flutter in his soul.
“Maybe. Wanna find out?”

He summoned a sharp bone to his hand and tossed it up into the air. Her gaze fell to the object, and she scowled.

“You don’t scare me. You abominations are going to get what you deserve.”

But she didn’t approach. Instead she turned heel and retreated to the bathroom, fury rolling off of her in waves. Just like the glitter.

A few seconds later she had locked herself in the bathroom with the shower running, and Rhythm slipped off of the loveseat to rendezvous with his brother. Blues met him in front of the bathroom door, inspecting the glitter now stuck to the bottom of their feet.

“That...may have been a bad decision on our part,” he contemplated, looking down the shimmering hall.

Rhythm shrugged. “Worth it.”

“At any rate, we will have to wait for her move. There’s nothing we can do while she’s in there.”

They moved back to their room for the time being. His brother paced right below the rim of the bed, where the light from the window separated the floor with the bed’s shadow. Rhythm took advantage of the downtime to find his bed and chill.

A light tapping on the window made them both jerk their heads to the sound.

Blues made it to the nightstand first, being the more vigilant between the two of them. Rhythm followed after, feeling a pang of annoyance at the sudden intrusion.

Charlotte came to pay them a visit, peering through the window with a frown. Her gray sweater dress and tights stood out against the faded window sill, and her small breaths left a trail of vapor rising in the air.

His brother jammed the window open enough to let her inside.

“Good morning, boys. I’ve come to see if your human was dying.” she remarked with a sour note in her voice. All five of her eyes blinked as she looked between the two of them.

“She’s at work, thankfully.” Blues replied. “You must be referring to the screaming, yes?”

“Indeed. Even Will woke up to that banshee noise. Is there an actual banshee in your home?”

“Eh, hard to tell.” Rhythm joked.

His brother merely shook his head, “My apologies, Charlotte. Maiden’s mother is an unpleasant guest that we’re dealing with at the moment.”

Something clicked in Charlotte’s mind as she held her tongue. “I see. That’s unfortunate. Either way, please try to contain her from making those dreadful sounds. Like you, I get protective of my guardians, and Will has a hard enough time catching sleep as it is. I would like us to get along, so please be respectful of the noise levels.”

He wasn’t sure of what Charlotte went through in her past, but Rhythm knew a survivor when he saw one. Every movement she did was calculated and graceful. She was in a constant state of awareness. And while somewhat friendly, she hadn’t let her guard down even in passing.
And that deserved a certain amount of respect.

“Gotta.” he replied.

“We’ll try to be more careful,” Blues agreed.

The spider Bitty seemed content about their answers and gave a more comfortable smile. “Thank you. I appreciate it.”

And as luck would have it, the human of the hour walked in wrapped in nothing but a towel. While she had somehow gotten rid of the majority of marker marring her skin, the remnants of glitter had travelled down her entire body. She made a strangled noise of frustration as she spotted the three of them.

“Oh, disgusting,” she spat when her eyes laid on Charlotte.

And Charlotte, without missing a beat, retorted with an equally venomous statement.

“I’m sorry, Miss. You’ve mistaken the window behind me for a mirror. Perhaps you should go to the optometrist?”

“My eyesight is just fine,” she snapped. A smirk played on her lips as she reached into her purse and retrieved her cell phone. Something was off.

“Better go, Charlotte.” he warned, “You don’t gotta get caught up in this.”

Charlotte seemed to like the idea of getting caught up in their business, seeing as her attention zeroed in on your mother with a pointed glare. She relented as Blues guided her towards the window.

“All right,” she said. “...But if you need assistance, we may come to an arrangement of sorts. You know where to find me.”

He leaned on the window frame as she stepped out. “Yep. See ya.”

“We’ll talk again soon,” Blues added, “Goodbye for now.”

Charlotte disappeared underneath the railings just as your mother began talking on the phone.

“Yes, is this exterminators at fifth street? I have an emergency situation, and I need someone to come down here. They’re rodents. Yes. Uh huh. Yes, I can text you the address. An hour? Great. I’ll see you here.”

He wanted to wipe the smirk off of her face by slamming it to the floor, but using his gravity magic would only be enough to weigh her down, not move her. Fucking exterminators were coming.

She knew it bothered them, too. “You won’t be a problem for me or my daughter anymore. So go ahead, stay and see where it gets you.”

He guessed she wanted the last laugh, because she just sneered and grabbed her clothes before leaving the room. The door closed behind her, leaving the brothers to themselves.

Rhythm shoved his hands into his hoodie pockets. “Well, shit.”

His brother said nothing as he slipped off of the nightstand and under the bed, only to come back with Dad’s cloth bound around his forearm.
“Just in case,” Blues said to him. He nodded.

“We need our phone.” And it was no better time to do it while she was distracted.

He moved off of the night stand and moved to the door, where he used his magic to turn the knob. The old, loose metal didn’t require much effort, and the door squeaked open enough to get through. His brother followed right behind him as they walked into the hallway and passed the bathroom.

And damn, she must have just thrown her clothes on, because she swung the bathroom door open and trailed right behind them. Rhythm took his brother by the arm and teleported to the top of the loveseat. He had only one more jump to get to the kitchen table and they’d be good.

As he prepared for it, Blues jerked him back to avoid the wadded shirt that landed in their previous spot. He muttered a curse underneath his breath as she shortened the distance between them. Blues tightened his grip as he shot a glance over to the table, and they jumped.

They made it. The cell phone sat in front of them. Rhythm reached for it.

And then something heavy collapsed around them. The force knocked him and his brother to the surface, and his mind went into a frenzy from the instant darkness. Immediately he pushed up against the surface, noting the dampness covering his bones. The bitch threw her towel on them!

A long scraping sound came from in front of them, and then a clicking noise.

“This is yours? What was she thinking?”

Rhythm growled as he concentrated his energy into making a sharp bone in his hands, and he stabbed the cloth and began to rip at it with as much strength as he could. The next thing he knew, the towel swept its way under their feet and suddenly they were tumbled upside down, trapped.

He panicked, feeling the damp towel brush against him as if it were alive, and he clawed at the ripped material with a new kind of desperation. Their new prison was stronger than he thought, because the material wasn’t budging as much as he needed.

“Just wait until the exterminator comes,” she boasted.

Fuck her, no one was waiting for the exterminator, they were going to get out of here, they had to get out of here—

…

And it was now noon. You had been eyeing the clock every ten minutes for the past hour, trying to calm your nerves. You should have called in today, but you were so caught up thinking that the money was more important that you came in anyway. They weren’t even that busy.

Frank brushed past you as you moved to the break room, eyeing you suspiciously.

“What are you gonna be okay?”

You smiled at him, “Yeah, I’m sure I’m overreacting. I’m gonna make a call real quick. Be right back.”

With your purse in hand, you walked to the corner and fished out your cell phone. No one had tried to call, that was a plus. You tapped on the brothers’ contact info and called.

Ring, ring, ring, click!
“Hello?”

Ice went through your veins as you heard your mother’s voice. Maybe she just picked it up because it was in plain view. She was nosy like that.

“Hi, Mom. Umm, how are you doing?”

“Much better. I had some food delivered to your apartment, so you don’t have to worry about my lunch, honey.”

You didn’t care about her lunch, but she seemed to be in a better mood. “Oh, okay. How are the guys? Did they eat?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You know. Rhythm? Blues? The Bitties?”

You heard her sigh over the receiver, “Honey, you don’t have to worry about them anymore.”

Your chest tightened as you gripped your phone harder.

“Why?”

“You can tell your landlord to take off that awful pet rent, and you can come to Thanksgiving with me. Lyonel will be so happy to see you. We can have our first holiday together.”

Thank god the entrance to the back alley was in the break room, because the moment you looked up, Frank was giving you a nervous gaze. You pushed the door open and let yourself out.

“What did you do?”

“Don’t talk that way to me! I’m only trying to help—”

“What did you do?!”

“I hired an exterminator!”

There was a pause between the two of you, where you felt your heart cracked. The crisp air stole your breath away as you came to understand the meaning of those words.

“I—”

Click!

You bashed the call end button on your phone and shoved it into your purse before heading back inside.

“How’d it—woah, not good?” Frank asked, his cloth hands wringing.

“I’m sorry Frank, I really have to leave.” you replied, “I’ll go tell the boss.”

“Okay, be careful out there.”

You took your coat and went to your boss’s office, explaining that a family emergency popped up. Seeing as how you rarely ever missed a day, she didn’t ask too many questions and let you go early.
You debated about taking a taxi home, but since the lunch hour tended to clog up the streets, you took the subway back instead. All the while you stared at the phone and felt the rapid beating of your heart.

They were smart. They knew how to hide. They’ve been through worse things. You kept telling yourself that they were fine, and your mother underestimated them.

But the logical side of you knew things too. Exterminators were trained. They knew the hiding spots no one else ever looked for. Their jobs took them to the worst of places, and they probably knew their way around a one bedroom apartment.

It was a constant swirl of thoughts in your head, and you had gripped the straps of your purse so hard that it was making indents in your skin. And you didn’t care.

The moment your train landed at the station, you pushed your way out through the traffic, hustled up the stairs and onto the sidewalk, and bolted. Your muscles were screaming from the strain and you ignored it until your lungs couldn’t take it anymore. You slowed only to take a breath, and by the time you reached the apartment building, your body had felt numb.

Oh, but your very soul was on fire.

You climbed up the stairs and made a beeline for your door. The knob barely gave any resistance as you turned it, and you marched inside.

You mother was looking up at you from the loveseat with surprise.

“Honey, what are you doing here?”

“Where the fuck are they?”

Your mother balked, and she stood up with a scowl on her face.

“Don’t you start with me! Look at you! you’ve wasted all this money on a couple of pests when you can’t even afford things for yourself! When are you going to come to your senses?”

“They aren’t just things, Mom! If you had given them more than two seconds worth of your time, you would have realized that!”

“They’re little demons is what they are! If you had even seen what they did this morning, you would have realized that!”

You fought the urge to wring her neck. “What the hell did they do to deserve for you to kil—”

You choked on the word as tears sprung up in your eyes, and you held them back as you bit your tongue. A deep sense of bitterness had jammed its way into your heart, and you dug your nails into your palms. She didn’t say anything yet. They could still be alive.

Instead, your mother pointed to the shredded towel that laid on the table with a grimace.

“I don’t know for sure if they’re dead, but the exterminator put a bunch of traps around to catch them. Don’t be so dramatic.”

You ignored her and went straight to the cupboards.

“Blues? Rhythm?” you called. Nothing responded. You peeked around every corner and crevice and collected the rat traps as you went through the cupboards.
You went to the bathroom next and checked the medicine cabinet, the tub, the back of the toilet. Nobody was there.

The bedroom was your last place, and your nerves were getting the best of you. They would have come by now, definitely, because your soul had to have been screaming at this point.

“Guys, please be here,” your voice broke as you entered the bedroom. The tears were streaming down your face as you plugged in the Christmas lights. The underside of the bed lit up, but the brothers were nowhere in sight.

You turned to the closet. “It’s me,” you sobbed as you shifted the bolts of fabric and piles of junk. “Don’t scare me like this, come on!”

But no matter how much you pleaded, nobody came.

Until you heard a few taps on the window.

You had never seen a better sight. There they were, scraps of towel hopelessly tangled in their bones, looking at you with concern.

Someone had locked the window. You flipped the latches and shoved the window open.

“Babe, you’re home earl—oof!”

You pulled them to your chest and curled up against the side of your bed, too choked up to say anything. And you stayed that way for a while until your sobs resided.

“Geez Babe, you’re killing us here.” Rhythm teased fondly.

“That’s not funny,” you laughed, finally pulling away to see them properly.

“Are you feeling better?” Blues asked.

You spared a glance to your mother’s luggage and stood.

“I will in a minute.”

With a quick scan of the room, you gathered your mother’s belongings into a neat, transportable pile. You laid her coat and purse on top of the carry-on and opened the door. The brothers had taken their spots on your shoulders as you rolled the luggage to the living room, where your mother was waiting.

“What are you doing?” she questioned, nervous. Her eyes flitted to the Bitties before looking at you.

You smiled. “Mom, here’s your stuff. Get out.”

“Honey, this has gone way out of hand.”

You eyes narrowed. “Did I stutter? Get the fuck out.”

“I’m trying to help you! Listen to me!”

You paused, and then you shrugged, and made your way to the door, opened it, and started down the hall. Your mother followed.
“What are you doing?! This is embarrassing!”

“You think this is embarrassing? You’re lucky that they’re alive. I would have thrown out all of your stuff into the dumpster, for starters.”

You started your way down the stairs, where the carry-on thumped and echoed on every step.

“Fine! Fine! Give it to me, for Christ’s sake!”

You made it to the bottom before she ripped the luggage out of your hands.

“How could you treat your own mother this way?” Her voice cracked as tears welled in the corner of her eyes. You looked at her, unimpressed.

“Have you ever heard of karma, Mom? Try looking it up some time.”

You watched her shrug on her coat and walked out to the foyer, sniffling. You’ll probably feel bad about this later, but right now, you were just numb.

So, you turned away and walked back upstairs.

Chapter End Notes

This is a long one! Not much else to say than that! Next chapter is definitely gonna have more fluff. I think it’s safe to say everyone’s deserved it :)

As always, thanks for reading!
Chapter Summary

It's the rest of the day.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

To say that their human was in an emotional state was an understatement.

While they took refuge in Charlotte’s kitchen, untangling threads from their bodies and talking about the strange habits their humans liked to do, Blues had felt a stabbing pain pierce through his soul out of nowhere. One look to his brother, and he could tell he was not alone. Even Charlotte paused mid-sentence to gaze at the ceiling.

“Oh my…”

She couldn’t have said it any better. At first he had thought that the woman in their home had gotten violent and started looking for them again. Perhaps she found that he had stolen one of her blouses and tore it apart for the material. Or maybe she had called animal control after all, since the exterminator refused to do the job.

But then voices started to filter through the walls, and that’s when he started to believe otherwise. It sounded like you, and if your mother was the one who felt so strong about hurting something, then it was a possibility that you were in danger.

Then things got quiet. And then his heart just ached when the anguish you felt trickled down to them. His breath hitched as the sensation passed through him, and his thoughts took him to the worst places about what she could have done to you.

So they left the refuge of Charlotte’s kitchen through her window and scaled up the building back to their own home. Blues attempted to wedge the window open, but the locked had been flipped and the wooden frame refused to budge.

“Look,” his brother pointed to the your purse abandoned on the table. It only served to confirm his suspicions, and the venomous glare your mother gave when she spotted them was the icing on the proverbial, terrible tasting cake.

Blues’ magic sparked to life as he glared back, looking every bit of intimidating as he felt angry. His brother took a more diplomatic approach by flipping her the bird.

“Let’s go to the fire escape,” he said, turning away from the muffled screeching that came from inside. Rhythm nodded.

They moved down, past Charlotte’s window to the alleyway, and around the building to the back street. The cold had seeped into the metal of the rusting staircase, but Blues ignored the jolting sensation as he and his brother took turns teleporting up the steps. Finally they made it to the small ledge of the bedroom window, and he pressed up against the glass hoping to find you.
The feet poking out from behind the closet door clued him in, followed by an onslaught of a rushed mantra filling the air.

Where are you where are you where are you—

Was that what you were doing? Looking for them? Blues looked up to his brother who held a pained expression.

“What did that lady say to her?” he muttered, also putting his hands to the window.

Blues shook his head in response and began tapping on the glass. “The only way we’ll know is if we ask her.”

The noise got your attention after a few seconds, and he watched you scramble out on your hands and knees, your nose red and tears spilling down your cheeks as you looked in their direction. The relief that flooded through was staggering, almost to the point where he wasn’t sure whose feelings they were, until you stumbled to the window sill and attempted to jerk the frame up. The wood creaked against your strength, and he heard you curse as you fumbled with the locks before making another attempt. The window slid up without resistance this time, and before Rhythm even had time to finish his question, you had scooped them up into a hug.

You sobbed as you huddled up against the bedframe with them, and Blues’ soul ached as he felt the vibrations run through your chest. He never envied other monsters and humans for their size before, but now he wanted nothing more than to wrap his arms around you and promise that everything would be okay.

But for now he’d make the best of what was given to him. He pressed close to you and whispered to your heart about how beautiful you were, even when your hair was mussed up and you were half asleep in the mornings, about how much happiness he felt whenever you smiled at him, about how the world got so much brighter when you walked into their lives. He knew you couldn’t hear him, but he poured every ounce of feeling into his convictions in hopes that your soul might hear them and be quelled.

You were going through all of this because you thought they had dusted. He never thought that besides his brother, anyone would cry over him. But here you were…

Your crying slowed and your heartbeat steadied. And then his brother cracked a terrible joke. You laughed, despite telling him otherwise, and Blues groaned internally. He followed up with a more appropriate question.

“Are you feeling better?”

He expected a “yes”, because whether you were really better or not, you usually put on an act until it was, but instead you glanced over to the luggage cluttering up the bedroom before answering.

“I will in a minute.”

You put them down and began to collect that awful woman’s things. This was more than some housekeeping; you had a plan in place, and he watched in silence as you shoved her belongings together. Your feelings had settled from relief to a hollow, stinging sort of irritation, and by the time you finished piling everything on top, your emotions came through clear. You were tired, you were furious, and you were going to do something about it.

With a nod to his brother, Blues and Rhythm teleported to your shoulders. Even if this was your battle, they weren’t going to give your mother another chance to hurt you. Come hell or high water,
Blues wasn’t going to see a repeat of last night. If it happened again it’d be over *his pile of dust.*

You took the luggage to the living room and told your mother to leave. Clearly the demand shocked her, her eyes flitting to him and Rhythm for a second before attempting to coax you into retracting your order.

You refused. He had never been prouder.

And she didn’t budge. It was a stand off. She was challenging you, sizing you up, just like so many opponents had done to them in the cages. His instincts were kicking in, urging him to be the dominant presence or to be subjugated to the pain that followed, and he growled so low that the noise didn’t register with either of the humans.

But you knew what she was doing. You didn’t flee. You didn’t fight. You weighed your choices and came up with a third option.

You escorted her things, rather loudly, out the door and down the stairs. Your mother buckled and followed you out, clearly shocked at the outcome. You had forced her hand, and you won.

When you gone back upstairs and into their apartment, you turned around and locked the door—both the deadbolt and the chain.

You sighed and covered your face with your hands.

“I never should have left you here with her,” your voice sounded tired, but firm. “It’s not gonna happen again.”

“It’s not your fault,” he replied.

“He’s right, Babe.”

Your breath hitched. And then, quietly, “I’m so glad you’re both okay.”

The way you said it struck his heart in such a way that it stunned him. His words died and there was a moment of silence, where you reached for them and brushed against their cheek bones and their backs with gentle, clumsy touches. Blues leaned in to the touch, fighting the unexpected tears that made their way from his sockets.

After he had a good grip on his emotions again, Blues coughed to get your attention.

“MAIDEN. AS MUCH AS I ENJOY THIS, THESE STRINGS ARE CHAFING MY BONES.”

You paused for a second before gently pulling him and Rhythm off of your shoulders and into your hands. He tugged at the thread that wrapped around his clavicle and neck vertebrae to make his point, and his brother lifted up his hoodie to reveal the threads tangled in his ribs.

You bit your lip, trying to keep your laughter in.

“How...exactly is that even possible? You’re wearing clothes for heaven sakes.”

Rhythm shrugged. “Just did.”

Blues felt his spirits lift as you broke into a smile and walked to the kitchen table, holding them close.

“Let’s get you guys cleaned up. Good thing I know my way around thread.”
When you sat them down, Blues caught sight of the pile of rat traps sitting on the counter. The two glue traps stuck together and had adhesed to the bottom of one spring trap. The other two spring traps sat next to each other, undisturbed.

You looked back, curious at what he was staring at, and frowned.

“Oh, yeah.”

You took a detour to the silverware drawer and took out a fork. With slight trepidation, you pressed the small plate in the middle of the wooden contraption, and snap! The metal bar came flying on top of the fork, causing you to flinch.

You pulled the fork out of the trap with disgust, and then repeated the actions with the other.

“Absolutely unforgivable,” you muttered to yourself. The third spring trap had been already activated, but he watched you press the plate anyways before rounding them all up and throwing them in the trash. You washed your hands before sitting down at the table.

“Well,” you started, “Who would like to go first?”

Blues looked to his brother, who in turned looked at him.

“*He does,*” they exclaimed at the same time.

“You are more tangled than I am,” Blues offered. Honestly, he wanted to be last anyway, so you could take your time.

But his brother wasn’t going to let him off that easily. “All the more reason you go first, Brother.”

“No Bro. I INSIST.”

“Aren’t you chafing though?”

“NOT AS MUCH AS YOU MUST BE.”

“Okay, guys. Not all at once now,” you teased, “If this is something you want to do yourselves, then I can step out. I just thought I could make your lives a little easier.”

No! He didn’t want to lose the opportunity all together! Even though you often had physical contact with them, it was rare that you actively sought cuddle time. He’d be damned if he missed his chance today!

“I’LL GO FIRST,” he blurted while rushing closer to you.

“Okay then. Can you take off your shirt?”

He did *not* expect this kind of development. You were only trying to get at the strings. It was a completely innocent request. You’ve seen him without his shirt on before! This was nothing!

“Um. Blues?”

“RIGHT! SHIRT! IT’S COMING OFF! NOW!”

Blues rushed to pull the sweater over his head when he heard his brother speak up.

“Wow Babe. You didn’t even take him to dinner.”
Your lips quirked into a smile and you were about to say something, then hesitated. And then you took on a sly expression, leaned in, and lifted Rhythm’s jaw gently with your pinky.

“I don’t know, Rhythm. Maybe I’m just that good.”

Rhythm skull radiated orange from the magic rushing to his head, and you held a contented smirk as he yanked his hood up. His poor brother never stood a chance. Blues would take his revenge.

“But YOU ARE.”

You looked at him and blinked, as if processing the information. And then a quiet giggle escaped your lips as a blush crept onto your cheeks. Ahh, yes. The most satisfying of revenge.

“Okay, back to business. What do we have going on?”

You started to scan his body for the bits of string, and Blues flushed. This wasn’t a new process. There were plenty of times he had been poked and prodded, stripped of clothing and inspected for any foreign objects or traits. He didn’t care back then.

But this was you doing the inspection. You, using your delicate touches against his bones, leaning in close enough to see his reflection in your eyes, pulling on a stray thread just enough to determine its hold on his body.

“At least it’s not my hair,” you quipped.

“YEAH.” Though the thought of being tangled in your hair sounded strangely alluring.

You went to work on the thread wrapped around his clavicle, gently pulling on the string bits at a time until it came undone. He helped you unlodge the remainder from his neck vertebrae, as the ends had caught in the crevices in between. Once that was finished, you moved to his right arm. This one had snaked its way through his right forearm and tangled at his wrist, so much so that it hindered his movement. He started at the easier end as you took up his hand with your finger.

He could only do so much with one hand, and when he tried to use his magic to move the threads before, it only resulted in more of a mess. By the time he untangled half of it, you had barely moved.

Blues looked up to see your eyes half lidded in thought. Whatever you were thinking about was drowned out by a flood of mixed emotions, and he tightened his grip on your finger.

“Maiden?”

His voice snapped you back to attention.

“Oh, sorry. I’m gonna get some clippers for this.”

You broke off contact and took off towards the bathroom, leaving him mildly confused.

“She probably needs time to cool down.” His brother said, pulling at the thread in between his toes.

“If Dad had treated us that way, I don’t think we ever would have made it.”

“Yeah.”

“We should have just forced her out. I apologize, Bro.”
And they would have. Blues doubted that woman had a great sense of fighting prowess in her, much less the LV that the other humans and monsters had at the ring. If they hadn’t been afraid of hurting you, today would have gone differently.

His brother shook the apology off. “Nah. We did the right thing.”

You came back with the nail clippers and made short work of the rest of the string. Your mood had lifted somewhat by then, and Rhythm had taken to telling you lousy jokes while you worked on the rat’s nest that inhabited his rib cage.

“By the way, what happened to my bed? And the hallway? It looks like a Las Vegas night show with all the glitter.”

“About that…”

They had explained their day as you finished freeing his brother of the last of the thread, and together the three of you moved to the bedroom to gather the sheets. Blues mentioned the part where they created a masterpiece over her face, and you snickered.

“It’s no wonder that she got angry. She always said that her face was her bread and butter.”

Together the three of you headed down to the laundry room. You hesitated around the landing near the foyer, looking around the corner to see if their unwelcome guest was still here, but the coast was clear and you continued on. Once the washer was filled and running, you sat down and listened as they went on.

“We wanted to get the cell phone, but she caught us. Looks like we ended up worrying you anyway,” Rhythm added.

“Did you know that she answered your phone? She told me about the exterminator, and I rushed home as soon as I could,” you sighed. “My boss might have me make up for the half day later this week.”

Blues frowned. “We’re sorry.”

“No way. If anything, I’m sorry that this all happened. You could have died today. How are you guys so calm about this?”

Blues looked to his brother, and they both shrugged.

“This isn’t...NEW to us.”

“Yeah. This time was actually kinda fun. ‘Xcept for that last part.”

“Fun,” you repeated and brushed your fingers against them. “That’s crazy.”

“But it’s true. And it’s over now, so you don’t have to worry anymore!” Blues tugged on your finger and gave you a stern look.

You smiled. “Okay.”

You chatted as the laundry finished, and you vacuumed what you could of the glitter on the floor. After dinner, you had settled into the loveseat and read to them one of the older novels in your collection. Before he knew it, night time came and you were preparing for bed. Both he and his brother had slipped into the fuzzy pajama pants you made for them, and you returned from the
bathroom in your own pajamas with a tired smile.

“I guess we’ll see how much glitter is still here when I wake up tomorrow. I pity the next person who gets the washer I used.”

Rhythm offered her a guilty smile and a shrug.

“Seemed like a good idea at the time.”

Blues thought it brightened that woman’s complexion, but at that point, anything would have.

You crawled onto your bed and sighed. “What a day. At least tomorrow none of us will have to worry about someone dying.”

He smiled as he watched you bury your face into the pillow. You did the cutest things sometimes. But that was their cue to leave, and he prepared himself to jump to the floor.

“GOODNIGHT!”

“Night, Babe.”

“Wait.”

You peeked out from your pillow and looked at them with a shy expression.

“Do you…” you trailed off, but the strength of your words rang through to his soul.

“How do you want to sleep here with me?”

“We’d love to, Maiden!”

“We thought you’d never ask,” Rhythm smirked.

“I didn’t want to be creepy!” you defended, though a smile spread across your face as you buried yourself under the covers. Once you were situated, his brother took part of the pillow beside your head, close to the wall. Blues opted for a spot near your shoulder. He grasped the fabric of your nightshirt as he settled in and breathed in the scent of the clean, warm sheets and you.

“Goodnight,” you whispered.

“Sweet dreams,” he whispered back.

Perhaps they should get into more harrowing situations more often.

Chapter End Notes

Are their Bitty beds ever going to be used again after this? Who knows!

I broke my update streak -_- But I beat Tales of Zestiria! That counts for something, right?! No? Oh.
Oh, you had them in your clutches. Blues was sweating as he shifted nervous looks between you and Rhythm before lifting a card from his hand and smacking it down on the pile. The cushions of the loveseat softened the blow.

“ACE.”

Rhythm lowered his cards. “Nope. Can’t beat it.”

You smirked as you flipped the last card in your hand towards them.

“Sorry, boys. President. I’m going for a third term here.”

You tossed the last ace onto the pile, earning you a groan from the smaller skeleton.

“I WAS SO CLOSE TO USURPING YOUR THRONE!”

“Oh, my little skeleton friend. I am as cunning as I am ruthless,” you snickered, clearing away the pile. “It’s time for you to duke it out with your brother. Have at it.”

As Blues threw a Jack down, you did your best to shuffle the tiny pile of cards in your hands. The convenience store just happened to have a mini deck as a novelty item, and you picked it up the moment you saw them. They were still bigger for the standard size for the guys, but they were playable, and the moment you got a chance, you taught them how to play a few games.

It turned out that it was a good training exercise for all of you. It brushed them up on numbers, and it gave you a way to feel out how keep your thoughts down. War had been the first game you taught and had gone easily. Then you switched to Cheat, and it was pretty obvious after the fourth round that you may as well been announcing your cards, because they called you out every time. Rhythm looked as if he thoroughly enjoyed it, while Blues had a mild confliction about lying for his turn.

You were getting them back, slowly, with Presidents. All familial ties ended at the table with this game. Your climb to the top and iron rule were absolute. Your kindness matched only with your cruelty! You laugh at remorseful sight of those who oppose you! Bwa ha ha—

Someone knocked on your door. You tugged on the sleeves of your sweater before standing up.

“I wonder who that is?” you muttered.

The brothers put their cards down and shifted their attention to the door. You shuffled over to it, and looked through the peephole.
And then you shoved the chain lock open and twisted the bolt lock, swinging open the door as fast as you could manage.

“Sweet Pea!”

Your cousin tackled you with enough strength to push you to the ground, laughing.

“I didn’t think I pushed that hard! You’ve been eating, right?” her voice carried, giggle. Her messy braid tickled your nose as you squeezed her back.

“It’s those muscles you’re getting from the greenhouse!” you teased.

She snorted while untangling herself from you. “You can thank all the pumpkins and gourds I moved for that! Oh…”

Sweet Pea’s attention was caught by something towards your left, and you shifted your head to see two skeletons looking ready to pounce. Whoops, she caught them by surprise. Better to call them off before they start flinging bones at her.

“Oh! Guys, this is Sweet Pea, my cousin!”

“That’s what everyone calls me,” she explained softly, smiling at them. “It’s nice to meet you! Bells told me so much about the two of you!”

Clearly confused, Blues’ magic flickered as he looked to you. “BELLS?”

You threw her a pointed look. “She means me.”

“Her nickname is short for Blue Bells, but she doesn’t like it because it sounds too much like Blue Ball—meep!”

You poked her side, and she immediately squeaked out a laugh.

“Anyway!” You interjected. “This is Rhythm, and he’s Blues.”

“HELLO, SWEET PEA. PLEASE REFRAIN FROM SURPRISE ATTACKING OUR HUMAN IN THE FUTURE. SHE DOES NOT HAVE GOOD REFLEXES.”

“Hey!” you chirped, feigning mock hurt. Sweet Pea laughed.

“She sure doesn’t! I’ll be more careful next time.”

Rhythm gave her a cool stare before shrugging.

“Yeah. We’ll see.”

You frowned at him, but decided to keep quiet. He just didn’t know her yet, and the whole fiasco with your mother was still fresh on everyone’s minds. So far it had not been a great start to meeting your family.

Sweet Pea caught his tone as well, shifting her tone to a more quiet one as she looked at you.

“Auntie came to visit you after all, didn’t she?”

You lowered your gaze. “It’s that obvious?”
“Your brother told me that she planned to, but I didn’t know if I caught you before she did...I must have been late.”

“She came here last week,” you affirmed. “Is that what you’re doing here? But you hate driving in the city!”

“I was worried, and I missed you! The big bad city won’t scare me away that easily!” she smiled, though the corners of her lips twitched. The empty roads of her small borough had nothing against the crowded, unruly streets of the city. She wasn’t the best driver either. You must have frightened her somehow to brave the four hour trip.

“Oh Sweet Pea. I missed you, too. Here, have you eaten yet? You need anything to drink?” you asked, nudging her arm.

“I ate on the way here, but may I have some water?”

You smiled. “Yeah! Coming right up!”

While you were retrieving her drink, you overheard your cousin speak to the brothers in a hushed tone. Though the sound of the faucet overpowered her voice, you felt comfortable enough to know she wouldn’t upset them.

“You wanna sit at the table? Or should we just sit on the floor?” you teased.

She smiled as she looked at you, and then made her way to the table.

“Thank you,” Sweet Pea said as you handed her the glass. “Do you have work tomorrow? Or did I come at a bad time?”

You shook your head. “Luckily I have the next two days off. What were you going to do if I wasn’t here?”

She flashed you a sheepish grin, “I would have tried again later, I guess? I know I should have called, but I wanted to surprise you since I have the week off for Grandma’s anniversary. If you want some company, I was thinking about checking into the hotel a couple of blocks away.”

You took a quick look at the calendar on your phone. Ah, you knew the date was close, but you were trying to put it out of your mind. Where did all the days go?

“I didn’t realize,” you mumbled. It was on Saturday. You had work. “Are you doing the usual this year?”

“I thought maybe we could do something different,” she replied. She was as easy to read as ever, looking at you with a hesitant sort of concern.

“Like what?”

“What if we went out to the park and set up our own memorial for the day? I have an extra picnic blanket, and I brought my guitar, and we can come back here for supper. I’ll cook something up just like we were at home!”

“Sweet Pea. You live down the street from the graveyard. Don’t tell me you’re doing this because of me.”

“It’s not the same without you,” she countered softly. “Please? I think Grandma would be happier
knowing we’re together.”

Dammit, how were you supposed to say no when she looked at you with those puppy dog eyes?

“You aren’t doing this because you feel bad, are you? I know how you can get,” you pressed. Sweet Pea would drop her needs to help anyone out in a heartbeat. Her job at the greenhouse paid her well enough, but not enough to warrant staying in a city hotel for a week on the fly.

“I promise. I’m here because I want to be. You don’t want to?”

“It’s not that. I just don’t want to drag anybody down because of my problems.”

“But you’re not! I know I sound selfish for this, but I look forward to Grandma’s anniversary now because I get to see you! I still love Grandma, but…”

“I know what you mean. I feel that way too. I wish we could stop feeling so guilty about it,” you smiled, but the irony of feeling bad for not feeling bad weighed on your mind.

“So, what should we do?” Sweet Pea asked as she fidgeted in her seat.

“Well, the first thing is that you’re not going to stay in that dirty motel.” you grinned. “You know how many drug dealings I see walking by that place? And I heard they have bedbugs, too.”

Sweet Pea’s face scrunched up at the sound of bed bugs, though she put a valiant effort into keeping her smile. “Oh.”

You shifted your attention to the bitties on top of the loveseat, who had been listening to your conversation with a hefty amount of concentration.

“Is it okay if Sweet Pea stays here with us?” You asked.

Blues tilted his head as he stood straighter. “IT’S OKAY? WHY ARE YOU ASKING US?”


Rhythm shoved his hands in his pockets as he gave a long look at Sweet Pea. He shrugged.

“Yeah. I guess.”

You smiled, taking a mental note that you’d have to thank him again later. But for now, you had a cousin to settle in!

“Thank you so much,” she said, looking at the brothers. Blues scratched his skull. Clearly this wasn’t a common practice with humans other than yourself.

“UH, YOU’RE WELCOME. AGAIN.”

What’s that about “again”? Oh well, if it was important, they could tell you.

“You can take my bed if you want,” you offered. A few more days in the living room wasn’t going to be bad.

“No, I’m fine on the loveseat! You have work the rest of the week, too!” She protested, waving her hands. Rhythm was also throwing you an incredulous look, though he said nothing.

You frowned. “You sure?”
“Yes!”

“Okay then. Let’s go get your stuff!”

You waited for Sweet Pea to stand before going to the door. “You guys watch the place for a second. We’ll be right back!”

The brothers exchanged looks before Blues gave you a grin, standing straight.

“WE SHALL GUARD OUR HOME, MAIDEN! PLEASE BE CAREFUL IN THE DARK!”

“Maiden?” Sweet Pea echoed to you, her eyes twinkling. You pushed her out the doorway, grinning back.

“Come on, you!”

The two of you headed downstairs and out of the foyer, right to the sidewalk. You spotted her well worn jeep with mud-encrusted tires and faded coloring lined next to the curb. It didn’t quite fit in with the rest of the cars parked along the streets, but at least it wasn’t a fancy new model that every car jacker and their mother would want to steal. Sweet Pea unlocked the passenger side door and leaned in.

“Here’s this, and I’ll take this, and I need my backpack,” she mumbled to herself. “I brought you some pickles from home!”

You peered inside the plastic bag she handed you. Yep. Those were pickles all right. Delicious, homemade pickles packed in three mason jars. Bless your cousin.

“Also, if Rhythm or Blues isn’t averse to drinking, my coworker gave everyone some homemade hard cider from his orchard! Want to try it out?”

She pulled out a huge, unmarked bottle and turned to you with a smile. Bless your cousin indeed.

“We can crack that open tonight,” you nodded. She slid the bottle back into its paper bag and passed it onto you. With a little rearranging, she shrugged her backpack on and slipped the handles of a few more bags onto her arms before crawling out.

“I think that’s everything,” she replied, juggling her keys to lock the door behind her. “Oh, can we go grocery shopping later? There are a few new recipes I want to try out, and they all require monster food. I wish they’d open up a shop closer to town!”

“Maybe with that new road they’ll open up some businesses? It’s funny though considering we’re just on opposite sides of the mountain.”

“Right? Isn’t that strange? But they’re all on your side.”

You started trekking back up to your apartment with the precious cargo and Sweet Pea following behind.

“We can go tomorrow. The international store has some things, and we can look up some shops.”

“Great! Are the bitties picky eaters?”

“The opposite, actually.” Though you texted Sweet Pea about how you found them and the occasional story or two, you didn’t go into depth about what they disclosed to you about their lives. Sweet Pea didn’t pry all that much, but you could tell she was curious about them.
“I hope I can make something they like.”

“Sweet Pea, you can make anything taste delicious. I don’t think you’ll have much of a problem.”

You opened the door to your apartment, where you were faced with Blues standing on top of the kitchen table with his arm partially raised. He gave you a smile as he relaxed.

“WELCOME BACK!”

“Thank you! Guess what? Sweet Pea is gonna cook for us!”

He gave your cousin a curious look. "IS THAT SO. DO YOU COOK OFTEN?"

She smiled back as she set the bags in the chair in front of him. “It’s my hobby,” she professed.

“And she brought alcohol too!”

Rhythm’s feet popped into your side view as he teleported to your shoulder. “Oh yeah?”

“We’re gonna have a small party tonight,” you remarked. You stuffed the pickles in the fridge and gave the paper bag a second look.

“Hey, you wanna just open it now? It’s already late,” you called to your cousin, who was shrugging her coat off.

“Sure!”

You brought a couple of glasses to the table as well as the bitty cups. Sweet Pea dug through her backpack for the corkscrew, and soon you wedged the cork free from the bottle. The smell of apple wafted through the air as Sweet Pea began pouring the glasses, and soon the four of you sat at the table with cups in your hands.

You took a sip, and the sweet taste of apple invaded your senses along with the bitter aftertaste of the alcohol that followed. Not bad.

Blues begged to differ, as somehow his face scrunched up and–was that a tongue?–stuck out from his mouth.

“This is more tolerable than other things I’ve tasted, but it’s still lacking.”

“I don’t see a problem. It’s pretty good,” Rhythm remarked before taking another gulp.

“I should get another cup out for you guys so you can refill easier,” you noted, getting up to retrieve a small teacup.

“I have an idea! Would you like to play a game?” Sweet Pea asked the brothers, lacing her fingers together and smiling kindly.

Rhythm looked up at her evenly. “What kind?”

“We all write down a list of nouns on a piece of paper and whoever’s turn it is rolls a pair of dice. Whatever number that person gets tells a story about the noun that corresponds with that number. When they’re done, we have to determine whether it’s a true story or not. If we guess right, that person drinks. If we guess wrong, we all drink instead.”

Before you had a chance to warn her about the special abilities that bitties were born with, the
competitive streak in Blues’ and Rhythm’s souls sparked.

“WE’RE IN.” Blues replied with a certain spark in his sockets.

Whelp. She wanted to get to know them better. Good thing she wasn’t a lightweight.

“I’ll go get a piece of paper. Bells, do you have any dice?”

“I’ll have to look up a dice roller on my phone. Shouldn’t be hard. Remember where the paper is?”

“Yep!”

You watched your cousin disappear behind the hall before you looked at the brothers.

“Go easy on her,” you teased. “She has no idea what you two are capable of.”

“Babe, I’m hurt,” Rhythm exclaimed in mock offense.

Blues didn’t offer any better support. “Are all your family members this easy to read?”

“It’s never something we really had to worry about,” you remarked. Oh, the sass of these skeletons.

Sweet Pea came back a few seconds later, carrying a sheet of paper and the same innocent smile on her face. Poor soul.

“Ready?” She asked, setting the sheet down in the middle of the table. “Bells, is there a pen nearby?”

“I’ve got one,” you replied as you opened the junk drawer. You pulled out a pen and handed it to her.

“Great! We just need eleven nouns.”

She made a list from two to twelve, and all of you took turns filling in the blanks. You found a random dice roller program on your phone, and soon the game was underway.

“I’ll go first,” Sweet Pea offered. She hit the roll button on the screen, and two dice faces popped up.

“Seven,” she announced, sliding her finger down the list. “Oh, it’s ‘tomato!’ Okay! So, I’m going to roll the dice again to see if I tell a true or false story. Evens are true, odds are false! Here I go!”

She picked up the phone and pressed the button, and this time, she set it face down.

“I keep a garden in the backyard of my home,” Sweet Pea started, looking at the brothers. “I grow all kinds of vegetables. Cucumbers, peppers, lettuce, and of course tomatoes! I like to give them out to my coworkers and my neighbors when it comes harvesting time. This year, though, I started noticing some of the produce go missing.”

She glanced over to you and continued. “I didn’t know it at the time, but a new family moved into the house near the old railroad tracks. You remember, the ones on the other side of the hill?”

“Oh, yeah. The one in the woods.”

Sweet Pea nodded. “I thought it was a raccoon at first, but usually if it was an animal they would
leave traces of vegetables behind. Well, one day after work, I head outside to the garden, and there’s this little kid staring up at me with a tomato in his hands! His eyes were as wide as saucers, and he looked like he was going to cry at the sight of me!”

She laughed at the supposed memory, and you could picture it in your head. A little boy with dirt smudged all over him, staring at your cousin in fright.

“I asked him, ‘Where did you come from? Are you the one taking my vegetables?’, and he said ‘Please don’t eat me!’”

She imitated the child’s voice in a high pitch and giggled afterwards. “I said, ‘Why do you think I’ll eat you?’ and the kid, he started crying, tomato in his hands and everything. He said ‘Because you’re a witch!’ and ‘I took the witch’s vegetables!’”

“Are you a witch?” Rhythm asked.

Sweet Pea shook her head, still smiling. “The rumor around town is that my house was a witch’s house a long time ago. The house has been in our family for a while now, so maybe one of our great great grandparents were? But I’m not.”

“Grandma passed the house down to Sweet Pea. She used to tell us stories about sorcerers and magic when we were little.”

“She told us the best stories. I always liked the mermaid one.”

“We should go to the beach some time and go pearl hunting again.”

“We never find anything though!” Sweet Pea grinned. “Anyway, I calmed him down enough to explain that I wasn’t a witch coming to eat him, and I walked him home with some extra tomatoes to bring to his family. It turns out his older sister kept daring him to take something from the ‘witch’s house’. And that’s the end!”

“That sounds true to me.” you replied. Sweet Pea did own a vegetable garden. You’ve received a ton of produce from her over the years. And it wasn’t hard to imagine a kid sneaking food from her garden.

“I think it’s true as well,” Blues affirmed after second of silence.

“Same.” Rhythm added.

Sweet Pea most likely expected it, as she took a long sip of her drink. She flipped the phone over to reveal a pair of fours. “It’s your turn, Blues!”

“OKAY!”

Sweet Pea placed the phone in front of him, and he hit the button. A five and a four.

“NINE. THAT’S… ‘BUILDING’. FAIR ENOUGH.”

Magic slipped past his phalanges as he tipped the phone onto its side to keep from prying eyes, keeping a diligent watch on Rhythm, who was subtly trying to sneak a peek. Sweet Pea’s eyes widened at the sight of magic, and you hid your smile behind your hand. Did you look like that the first time they used magic in front of you?

He tapped the button, then pushed the phone down.
“MY BROTHER AND I SPENT A LOT OF TIME ON THE STREETS. AND BECAUSE OF THIS, WE HAVE TRAVELLED THROUGH MANY BUILDINGS. MANY OF THEM WERE OLD, OR THEY HAVE BEEN ABANDONED WITH A FEW EXCEPTIONS SUCH AS PEOPLE SUCH AS OURSELVES. IT WAS WINTER, AND THE FALLING SNOW MADE OUR TREAK IMPOSSIBLE TO CONTINUE DURING THIS PARTICULAR NIGHT. WE STOPPED AT BROKEN DOWN BUILDING WITH A SINGLE, OUTSIDE LIGHT TO GUIDE OUR WAY INSIDE.”

It sounded like the beginning of a horror story told during camping. You imagined them in the rags they came in, trudging through the snow to find shelter inside of a collapsing, molded building. Even if this wasn’t a true story, your heart was already going out to them.

“When we went in deep enough, something began to drip all over us. We couldn’t see well enough to determine what it was, but it was thick, and warm. And then we heard long, deep breaths. We could feel the ground vibrate as the creature above us speak. Needless to say, we ran outside to find safer shelter. The only clue we had to the mysterious stronghold were two words printed on the faded sign above. ‘Food factory’.”

A large dog in an abandoned food plant? All of it sounded plausible.

“I remember that night.” Rhythm said, rubbing the back of his neck.

“So it’s true?” Sweet Pea asked.

“If you remember it, the it has to be true,” you said, convinced. “Is it true, Blues?”

Blues took a second to look at you, and then gave a triumphant grin as he flipped the phone over. Odds.

“FALSE.”

You poked Rhythm lightly as he smirked.

“Really? We were on the same team!” You chuckled.

“I didn’t lie. We did go into an abandoned building in winter.”

“And we did get slobbered on by a giant dog. But they were two separate occasions. Now drink up!”

You sipped your drinks and Rhythm started his turn. This time the word was “waffle”. After rolling the dice a second time, Rhythm shrugged and put the phone down.

“I never had waffles before. Babe here stacked me between two pancakes before, but I guess that doesn’t count.”

“You’ve never had waffles before?” Sweet Pea gasped. “Tell me you’re lying!”

“No, I think that’s pretty true. I don’t have a waffle maker, so I’ve never made them in the apartment.” You admitted.

“We are going to rectify this, starting tomorrow!”
“It’s the lack of waffles that get you? Not that I shoved a bitty into my breakfast one morning?”

“I don’t like to question people’s tastes!”

You were sure she meant “taste” in a less than pure sense.

“WE COULD HAVE TASTED SOME ON OUR JOURNEY THROUGH THE CITY! I SAY THAT’S FALSE.”

“Nah Brother, it’s true. Can’t call’ em waffles if I don’t know what it is.”

As proof, he flashed the screen upwards to reveal a pair of fives. He chuckled.

“I’ll take a drink anyway. You guys are having all the fun.”

Another round down. The effects of the drink were starting to fog your head.

“Which means it’s my turn,” you smiled, picking up the phone. “Four. Jewelry. Okay.”

It was a shame that Sweet Pea would also have to drink, but you wanted to win this round to get back at the guys. Which meant that whatever you were about to roll, you had to tell your story like it was true no matter what...and not be a bummer for the game. The only jewelry you had worth telling stories about was the pearls, and you considered death to be sort of a party foul.

You tapped the button. And then you breathed out nice and slow.

“So, Sweet Pea, remember that awful blind date I had last year?”

“Umm, I think so. Chad?”

“Or Chaz, or something. The guy who insisted we go to the ‘top-rated establishment this side of the city’. “

Sweet Pea’s eyes lit up, “Yes! The one you said had a golden cap on one of his back molars, and he kept opening his mouth real wide to show them to you?”

“Yeah, that guy!”

“You had to dress up in that evening gown! You looked so pretty, I remember! I think I still have that picture on my phone,” she said, patting her pockets down.

“AN EVENING GOWN? AS IN A PAJAMA DRESS?”

You laughed at the sudden image of you, wearing an old lady’s nightgown in the middle of a high class restaurant with your hair done up and your pearls around your neck, sipping wine as your date goes on about the importance of investing stock. That would have been entertaining.

“No, it’s a kind of fancy dress we wear for special occasions,” you clarified, bumping against his shoulder. “Like my wedding gowns. Only they aren’t for weddings.”

“AND YOU HAVE A PICTURE OF THIS?” Blues turned to Sweet Pea edging a little closer to her.

“I should! I just have to find it,” she replied, eager to help out.

“It’s not that special or anything,” you protested, “I dressed up because I had to. The dress code for
that place was ridiculous.”

“I think you’re beautiful no matter what you dress up in,” Rhythm slipped out before taking another drink.

“You!” You eloquently retorted before covering your cheeks for a moment. These gentlemen would be the death of you.

Sweet Pea said nothing of the comment and instead gave you a playful smile.

“So, what about this date?”

“Right. Well, the date went as awkward and as horrible as I told you before. This guy,” you looked to Rhythm and Blues “I think he only went on this date because he couldn’t find anyone else. When I told him I preferred to go to a more casual setting, he told me that the restaurants I chose were too low class. When I showed up to the restaurant, he said that the color of my dress was ‘eccentric’ for the season we were in. When our menus came, he told the waiter to keep them, and he ordered for me!”

You looked off, remembering the suffocating atmosphere of the restaurant combined with the awkward tension between you and your date. You laughed about it the day after when you told the story to Sweet Pea, but at the moment, it was just awful.

“He started talking about all sorts of stuff. How his startup was going, his clients, how much money he expected to rake in. Honestly it was interesting the first couple of minutes, but he just kept on about it. And then, while we were waiting for our food, he said ‘I thought this might be an appropriate gift. Here, take off those cheap pearls you’re wearing’!”

Even thinking about it today still riled you up.

“I said ‘Excuse me? These are my late grandmother’s pearls,’, but he opened up this fancy jewelry box with this diamond necklace inside, and he said ‘That’s okay, but I think this will look much better on you.’”

“He really went too far,” Sweet Pea commented, shaking her head.

“I told him that on a general note, I didn’t accept extravagant gifts on the first date, and he goes ‘What, do you not like diamonds?’ No dude, I don’t like pushy jerks. Anyway, the rest of the date goes on and we part ways never to meet again. Thank god.”

“I hope this story was false if only for your sake,” Blues exasperated quietly. “Please say he didn’t treat you like that.”

“You think I’m lying?” you said, eyebrows waggling.

“I distinctly remember her telling me those awful details,” Sweet Pea admitted. “I think she’s telling the truth.”

“Rhythm?”

He was in the middle of dipping his cup into the refill bin as he gave you a good, long look.

“It’s true…?”

Whether it was the alcohol taking effect or your efforts paid off, you smiled as you proudly
displayed the dice roll of five.

“What part of it was false?” Sweet Pea squeaked as she leaned in, “I thought all of that happened!”

“I guess it’s a technicality, but he offered me a diamond bracelet instead of a necklace. He did tell me that he’d get me a matching necklace to go with it so I could ‘ditch those cheap pearls’, but it wasn’t exactly the same.”

“Boo,” she pouted, but took another swig anyway. Blues made another face as he took a sip, and at this point, Rhythm was drinking because there was an ample supply.

“My turn again,” Sweet Pea announced as you handed her the phone. “I’m gonna win this time!”

The night went on as you played the game, and by the time the bottle had been emptied, you were pleasantly buzzed and in need of a potty break. Blues, the majority winner and therefore the least inebriated, had fallen into a pleasant conversation with Sweet Pea about the basics of cooking, while Rhythm, who stopped caring whether it was his turn to drink, had emptied the reservoir cup in its entirety.

“You gonna drink that?” He asked you, eyeing the last of your glass. You rose an eyebrow.

“I am now.” Gulp. Gone.

He frowned. “Aww.”

“You may have a problem, sir,” you countered, stealing away the cups. “How about you take a second to catch up with all the alcohol?”

He looked disappointed for a moment, only to look back at you with a lazy smile. “Okay.”

You piled the cups into the sink before announcing your trip to the bathroom.

“Okay,” Sweet Pea acknowledged.

Satisfied, you went to do your business. And when you were finished, you came back to the tail end of a completely different conversation.

“Still, thank you,” Sweet Pea said to the brothers, who both had their attentions concentrated on her.

Curiosity got the better of you, so you decided on the direct approach. “What are you talking about now?”

While the brothers looked off in different directions, Sweet Pea just looked at you with a smile.

“You’ve picked up some wonderful friends.”

You blinked, and then you smiled.

“Yeah. I did.”

Chapter End Notes
This turned out to be a long chapter for nothing important going on. But it was a relaxing break for these guys after the last visit!

Thanks for reading, as always! I hope everyone is okay, especially with the recent natural disasters going on. Stay safe!
Chapter Summary

You learn some things.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

No alarm to worry about this morning. Quiet. Comfy bed. A good morning.

“Something smells delicious,” you mumbled, nuzzling your pillow.

The skeleton tangled in your fingers gave you an equally intelligent response. “Yeah…”

Unable to resist the light filtering through your eyelids, you gained enough willpower to peek at Rhythm bear hugging your thumb, trying his best to stay in dream land. You smiled.

“Hey, thanks.”

There was a second’s pause before he shifted just enough to look at you.

“...For what?”

“For letting Sweet Pea stay. You didn’t want her to, right?”

Rhythm lowered himself back to proper cuddling position and closed his sockets again.

“She’s not so bad. Makes you happy.”

You hummed in response, bringing your other hand up to stroke his back in slow, gentle motions. Your eyelids closed as you repeated the action, content to sit in peace.

A moment passed.

“Babe.”

You had almost fallen back asleep, but the way he called your nickname—firm, laced with need — made your heartbeat race as you opened your eyes.

Never had anybody looked at you like Rhythm was at that moment. Flickers of his magic pulsed in his sockets as he sat up, gazing at you.

“Show me your soul.”

Um. You don’t know what you were expecting in the first place, but it definitely wasn’t that.

CRASH. The sound of pots and pans ringing against the floor travelled to your bedroom.

A weak moan followed after. “Owww…”
A flash of pure irritation passed on Rhythm’s face as he glared at the door, and you concerns for your cousin’s possible injuries overrode your curiosity.

“We should probably check that out,” you offered, sitting up. He clambered off of your fingers and breathed out a deep sigh.

“Okay.”

You slipped out of bed, shivering slightly as the chill bit into your skin. Rhythm moved to your shoulder, and you put on your glasses before heading into the kitchen.

And as expected, you caught Sweet Pea on the floor, stacking the pots and pans back into the cabinet.

“You okay?” you asked, looking her over.

“Yeah, I’m sorry! I didn’t know about the rat trap!”

You looked to her side, where a now-deactivated spring trap sat a few inches away. Your nose scrunched up.

“I thought I found all of them,” you hissed, moving to pick up the abomination.

Sweet Pea gave you a prying glance, but kept quiet. Once you moved the trap to the trash can where it belonged, you let out a breath and let the thought of mailing it to your mother go.

“GOOD MORNING, MAIDEN! BREAKFAST IS ALMOST COMPLETE!”

Blues stood near the stove, covered in cinnamon? You brushed your thumb against his cheekbone and licked the substance. Yep. Cinnamon with sugar.

It made sense, seeing as there was a plate of rolled french toast sitting behind him and several more cooking on the stovetop. The mixture trailed all about the counter with tiny skeleton prints marking where Blues had stepped.

“Good morning,” you smiled. “You and Sweet Pea made breakfast?”

“YES! THE PERFECT COMBINATION OF SUGAR AND SPICE HAS NOW BEEN ADDED TO MY GROWING LIST OF CULINARY SKILLS!”

You forgot to tell Sweet Pea to keep Blues away from the stove, but seeing how proud he was (and that the kitchen wasn’t on fire) kept you from calling him out on it. Instead, you picked him up and carried him to the table, where the plates had already been set. Rhythm lingered on your shoulder a few seconds longer before joining his brother. Blues gave him a curious glance.

“I would have used brown sugar if we had any, but I think regular should be okay,” Sweet Pea said, distracting you from watching the brothers have a mental conversation.

“I’m sure it’s fine. You don’t have to make breakfast if you don’t want to, you know. This is supposed to be your vacation.”

Your cousin stuck her tongue out, brandishing the turner in her hand before turning back to the stove.

“You know I want to. You can’t stop me!”
Yeah, you knew you couldn’t stop this cooking machine even if you tried. This was the same girl who had dreams of flipping bacon at night. Why she didn’t go to culinary school was beyond you.

You spaced out for a moment as Sweet Pea brought the last of the cinnamon rolls to the table along with a couple of cups of coffee, and soon breakfast was underway.

The mixture of butter and the cinnamon sugar mixture melted in your mouth as you bit into the pastry, and you hummed in appreciation.

“This is good,” you complimented.

“Blues worked really hard on mixing the ingredients and rolling the bread together. He’s a great helper,” Sweet Pea replied as she mixed some sugar in with her coffee. Blues didn’t say anything about the comment, but you could tell he took the comment to heart as he radiated pride while tearing apart his roll.

You brushed your knuckle against Blues’ side and looked at Sweet Pea. “Well, thank you both for making breakfast.”

“You’re welcome!” she beamed.

Breakfast went by fast as the four of you made quick work of the cinnamon rolls. You offered Sweet Pea the shower first, opting to use the time to pick out what you were going to wear today. In the meanwhile, Rhythm’s odd demand made your brain itch with curiosity. And since he was still in the kitchen, finishing up the rest of the dishes, you decided to ask Blues.

“So, how exactly do humans take out their souls?” you asked, filing through the closet.

Blues’ voice came from underneath the bed. “THE SAME WAY MONSTERS DO. BUT I HEARD THAT HUMANS HAVE MORE DIFFICULTIES BECAUSE OF THEIR HIGHER RATIO OF PHYSICAL MATTER. WHY DO YOU ASK?”

Was it okay to tell him about your little conversation this morning?

“I was curious. Monsters do that to check up on their health, right? Can you do that to a human’s, too?”

“IN THEORY, YES. THERE’S MORE TO REVEALING YOUR SOUL THAN JUST MAINTAINING YOUR WELL BEING.”

“Like what?”

“ONE FACTOR IS THAT IT IS THE PUREST FORM OF COMMUNICATION. DAD TOLD ME THAT BEFORE LANGUAGE, MONSTERS COMMUNICATED TO EACH OTHER DIRECTLY THROUGH THEIR SOULS.”

Oh, that was cool. Maybe it would be similar to how bitties used their telepathy?

“Is that something monsters can do with humans?”

“I WOULDN’T KNOW. I HAVEN’T SEEN IT HAPPEN.”

Yeah, you wouldn’t think they’d even think to reveal their soul to their tormentors. But what about other humans and monsters? Humans and bitties? Was there something you were missing out on that wasn’t covered in the basic pamphlets you’ve read?
At that moment Blues appeared, balancing on the makeshift shelf of your hanging clothes, looking straight at you with a stern expression.

"BUT EXPOSING YOUR SOUL IN THIS DAY AND AGE TO EVERYBODY IS DANGEROUS, SO ABSOLUTELY DO NOT DO IT UNLESS YOU TRUST THE OTHER PERSON TO NOT ATTACK YOU! IF ANYONE FORCES YOUR SOUL OUT, DO YOUR BEST TO RUN AWAY AND YOUR SOUL WILL FOLLOW."

"Why? You’re just talking, right? What’s it gonna do?"

"IT’S YOUR VERY BEING, AND IT’S VULNERABLE TO BOTH MAGIC AND PHYSICAL ATTACKS! EVEN AS A HUMAN, A BAD ENCOUNTER COULD BE ENOUGH TO KILL YOU!"

That was easy enough to grasp, but…

"But if I show my soul to you guys, it’d be fine."

Blues blinked, and then looked down suddenly. "YES! WE—WE COULD! THAT WOULDN’T BE A PROBLEM! THOUGH IT’D BE EASIER FOR US TO SHOW OURS…"

You lowered your head, trying to see his face. "Blues?"

He still wouldn’t look you in the eyes, but he rose his head up enough to reveal the brilliant blue hue that stained his cheek bones.

“It should be fine, as long as only one of ours is out at a time,” he mumbled.

You had a feeling you knew where this was going. “Because?”

“THE PROCESS OF JOINING Our Souls to—together is how we, uh, *mate*…” Blues said as he finally glanced at you, changing deeper hues by the second. “You...ah, don’t...want that…?"

That last bit caught you off guard, as now you *did* kind of wonder how soul sex felt—on a purely objective standpoint! Haha, no weird thoughts about your bitties here! No strange feelings of intimate affection slowly piling up in the back of your messed up brain for *two monster brothers* who’ve wormed their way into your life! Who used to be considered your “pets”! What kind of fucked up love triangle that would be! Crisis averted!

Hahaha…shit.

“No, I’m good. Just curious about everything, that’s all.” you told Blues, who happened to be peering at you like a hawk.

But you both knew that you were lying.

Chapter End Notes

For those of you who didn’t want romance in this story and came before I put the official tag in, I apologize again. As promised, anything explicit will be put in Offbeat Days and marked. However, I feel "SoulMating" is an important plot point in the story, so I will keep it here and tag in the start of that particular chapter so you know.
For those of you who are anticipating the romance, GET READY FOR THE EMOTIONAL ROLLER COASTER OF LOVE I'M TAKING TICKETS YALL AND IT'S GOT AT LEAST ONE GOOD LOOP-DE-LOOP I PROMISE.

This does bring up two important topics! Number one: **There are archive tags I can put in that are/will be major spoilers.** I can tell you for a fact that Non-con is **not** one of them. Should I put these tags in now? Or can I wait until the end of the story? I'm saying all this, but there is a possibility that plot changes off course and might not need it anyway. Still.

Two: I'm torn between two outcomes. How much do you want a happy ending? (Not the massage kind). It's gonna take a while of course, but we are at least halfway through the story. Keep in mind I may end up with the opposite of what you guys say, but I do want to take your opinion into consideration.

That's it! Thanks to everyone as always!
A Trip through de(n) Aisle

Chapter Summary

Grocery shopping has never been so interesting to you before now.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Are you okay?”

You snapped out of staring at the shelf of cookie wafers to glance at your cousin.

“Oh, yeah! I’m fine,” you replied with a convincing smile. “I’m just spacing out. It’s cool.”

Sort of. Not really. You’ve been attempting to quell your mixed up feelings about the kind of relationship you wanted out of the brothers. Normally you would try to think it out, but seeing as how your potential love interests—*god, plural*—could read your mind if they worked at it, you had clammed your inner monologue shut for the time being until you were in a safer place.

Kind of hard, considering you lived with them. So for now, you were opting to forget about the whole ordeal until a better chance popped up.

Sweet Pea’s frown subsided, but she still kept her eyes on you. “Okay. It just looked like you were stressed about something.”

“Too many flavors,” you joked, motioning to the shelf. “How are you supposed to pick just one?”

“Just like *this!*”

She clapped her hand over her eyes and groped for the shelf. Her fingers grappled the first product it landed on: coconut sprinkled chocolate wafers. She glanced down at the packaging and flipped it around for display in her best showman’s behavior.

“Our experiment for the day!”

You offered her a slow clap as she tossed the cookies into the small cart.

“Next on the list! We’ll get ice cream last, so that means...let’s go to the produce section!”

Sweet Pea led the way as you pushed the cart, smiling as you saw Blues poke his head out of your purse to see the grocery aisles. This was the first time you’ve let your purse sit in the cart and not connected to your body. With the bitties lounging inside, it would be like sticking their hands into an undead bee’s nest. Whoever wanted to steal your bag was in for a nasty surprise. Hah. You loved these guys.

That was safe to say, right? You told them that before, and you knew you loved them at least as much as family. Some family. More than friends? Ugh, nope, it was best to drop it again.

“Hey,” you blurted to Blues in a willful attempt to change the subject in your head. He looked up.
“Is there anything you want while we’re here?”

He hummed aloud. “No, there’s nothing.” The flap of your purse shifted as his head disappeared under the flaps, and you heard his muffled voice.

“Bro, is there anything you want?”

“Nope.”

Again, Blues’ head popped up as he grinned at you. “We’re fine, Maiden!”

“Okay.”

That was fast. Quick, another diversion!

“Sweet Pea, is there anything you want do while you’re here?”

She had just dumped a package of tortillas into the cart when she glanced back. “Not that I had in mind. Is there anything you wanna do?”

Your budget made it hard to do anything exciting, like the zoo, the club, or some hardcore shopping. The park was already planned.

But you did have enough money to go see a movie. How long had it been since you went?

“I wonder what’s coming out in the theater?”

“That’s a good question! I dunno,” Sweet Pea chirped. “Look it up?”

Hell yes you would look it up. Anything to get out of your head. “Sorry guys, hold on a sec. I gotta get my phone.”

You opened up the flap to reveal the brothers looking up at you. While Blues had been hooked to the side for viewing purposes, Rhythm had been napping on top of your cell phone. How did he find that comfortable?

“I kind of need that,” you nudged him lightly. For a skeleton he was surprisingly cemented to his spot.

He stretched out further, smirking. “Do you now?”

“Rhythm,” your mouth quirked up in amusement. Not this again. “Please?”

“I’m pretty comfy here. What are you gonna do about it?”

“JUST GET OFF OF THE PHONE,” Blues snipped, kicking his brother’s foot. “NOW IS NOT THE TIME FOR FLIRTING!”

You decided to ignore the last part of Blues’ outburst. “Thanks?”

If Rhythm had any irritation about the order, it didn’t show. Instead he complied by rolling over to allow you access. You took advantage of the opportunity to scoop up your phone before he changed his mind, trying your hardest not to brush up against him by accident.

“YOU’RE WELCOME, MAIDEN!” Blues exclaimed while throwing Rhythm a look.
You closed the flap of your purse to avoid any suspicions of the employees and set to work on your task. Sweet Pea gently guided the cart as you pushed behind her and scrolled through the list of new movies.

“We’ve got some choices here. ‘Love from Another Time’, “The Thanksgiver”, ‘Adrenaline Rush 3’, um… ‘Fruit Salad Sally with her sidekick, Cherry Pit’. They’re really reaching for kids movies nowadays, huh?”

“It might be cute!” Sweet Pea laughed. “What’s ‘The Thanksgiver’ about?”

“It’s that stupid horror movie with the possessed killer turkey.”

“That one. Let’s go see that one.”

You rose an eyebrow. “Are you serious?”

“Why not? It might be so bad it’s good!”

The other options weren’t much better, maybe with the exception of Adrenaline Rush 3, though you hadn’t seen the first two movies.

“How does that sound to you guys? Have you ever snuck into the movies before?” you whispered into your purse.

“‘A killer’ what now?” Rhythm asked as he sat up.

“A killer turkey,” you repeated. And then you realized what a stupid decision you’ve made. “Oh, shit. Yeah, you wouldn’t like that at all. We can see something else?”

He shook his head. “Nah. You don’t gotta worry about me. I can chill at home.”

“I would rather not be surrounded by strange humans in the dark,” Blues added. “I’ve seen the previews. Humans screaming and throwing popcorn. No thank you! Why not have some bonding time with your cousin?”

“If you’re sure,” you hesitated.

And as if they had rehearsed it, the brothers gave you a simultaneous thumbs up.

This could work. It’d give you a little bit of away time to calm your thoughts during a girl’s night out. You smiled and looked back to Sweet Pea.

“Want to go see it after supper tonight?”

“Sure!”

So with plans in mind, you redirected your thoughts to the groceries again. Sweet Pea picked up a bunch of monster vegetables as well as monster ice cream, and you helped pile the goods into the back of her jeep. You could tell the traffic had picked up just from the sounds outside of the parking lot, and the nervous frown on Sweet Pea’s face said it all.

“You gonna be all right?” you asked as you climbed into the passenger seat. The ride here wasn’t too bad since you had beaten the rush hour traffic. But now, oh, now the time had come.

She nodded, albeit too quickly for your liking. The first sign of a rocky ride ahead.
“Yes! I needed the practice, so this isn’t a bad thing!”

That was debatable. Sweet Pea’s driving tended to get aggressive when she was nervous. It was like switching a fan from low to “fuck physics” if fans had that kind of setting.

Blues climbed out of your purse and into your lap, taking a moment to look at his surroundings. He gripped onto your shirt to balance himself.

“This is different than the taxi,” he mused. You wished that you could give him a proper warning. He was about to experience a whole different level of driving, but you couldn’t say that without making a jab towards your already jittery cousin. Instead, you pushed him closer with your fingers and hoped for the best.

“Here we go,” Sweet Pea stated, turning the key and setting the car to reverse. She backed out just fine and proceeded to the street exit.

You pressed against Blues a little closer, and sensing your anxiety, Blues squeezed your fingers back.

And then Rhythm chose to crawl out of his napping spot. “Hey Babe, why so nerv—”

You pressed your finger against your lips in a shushing motion as your eyes darted to Sweet Pea. Thankfully she must not have noticed.

Poor soul. He was better off in the purse. You forwent your bag in favor of gripping the brothers to you as a makeshift seat belt. Anything was better than nothing, and if you happened to crash headlong into the windshield—because if you remembered correctly, Sweet Pea’s passenger seat had a loose buckle—at least you’d have a better chance at surviving it versus the two tiny brothers who’d splat right into it. Maybe.

“What?!” Blues hissed a little too late, as your cousin made her move. She had a yard of space between the shiny red convertible and the SUV that appeared to be packed with children. The light down the street just turned green. You watched the cars crawl forward like time had slowed just for you.

She floored the gas pedal.

Then you blocked the next twenty five minutes of your life out of your mind.

When Sweet Pea parked in front of the apartment building, you reached for your purse with shaky hands and two bitties clinging onto your sleeves with an iron grip. You weren’t sure if the shaking came from them or you, but nonetheless you took it as a sign that you were indeed alive, and that exiting the vehicle would be the best course of action for your survival.

“That wasn’t so bad!” Sweet Pea chirped.

You pushed yourself out of the jeep a little faster.

With the groceries divided between the two of you, you made it back up to your apartment with no casualties. Blues had hugged the kitchen table while Rhythm stared off into space, patting the ground every so often. You had shrugged off the stupor of the event, being more acclimated to your cousin’s driving, and helped put the groceries away.

“Should we go see the movie tonight?” Sweet Pea asked as the two of you settled onto the loveseat. “Go after supper?”
“Sounds good to me. Then we can go to the part tomorrow if that’s okay with you. I’d like to do it Saturday, but by the time I get home it’d be closer to dark.”

“Yeah, that’s fine! I was thinking about that too.”

Now that the schedule had been settled, you killed the time by chatting with her about life back in town. Sweet Pea mentioned how your uncle and aunt were rearranging the furniture in their house, how a new cafe opened downtown. She showed you pictures of the dining room table she bought from the consignment shop, and how she might tear down the old wallpaper in the kitchen.

“That wallpaper is still hideous,” you mentioned as you caught sight of it in the background. “I don’t know what Grandma was thinking.”

“It grows on you after a while.” Sweet Pea said, looking at it with a fond smile, “But since it’s peeling off real bad, I’ll just have to replace it somehow. It’s the same way in her old bedroom.”

“Isn’t that a pain? Are you gonna do it by yourself?”

“Bay said he’d help me. I have to give him a call.”

Bay, the nickname Sweet Pea gave to your brother.

“That’s nice of him,” you commented. He wasn’t as close to her as you were, but he wasn’t a stranger either. It was just hard for him to stick around in one place, so often times you’d only see him once every couple of months. He had a good heart, though. Never could stand to see you or Sweet Pea in trouble.

“He wasn’t happy when you told him what happened,” she replied. “He called your landlord a dirty cheapskate.”

“He’s not wrong.”

“Maybe the guy is going through a hard time?”

“I doubt it. Or if he is, he’s probably done it to himself.”

Sweet Pea frowned. “I hope it’s just a temporary raise.”

“It’ll be okay. Things are tight but it’s not unlivable, you know?”

“If something happens, you know you can come to me, right?”


You softened your gaze as she looked down. “Okay. I know you can take care of yourself. I just worry. Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize!”

“Sorry!”

You sighed, but a smile spread on your face. You poked her side and she let out a giggle.

“What did I just say?”

“Sorry!” she laughed, pushing your tickle attacks away. But Sweet Pea was a fighter despite her
humble personality, and so she countered with a jab of her own, forcing you to squirm away from her reach. And soon, the two of you were wrestling against each other in a tickle war that threatened to bust your loveseat apart.

Meanwhile, the brothers had taken to different rooms. Troubled by his lack of emotional control from earlier this morning, Rhythm sank into the bathtub to clear his head. Likewise, Blues moved into the bedroom beside Pidge, resting his head against the plush with a blank stare and replaying the feelings you unwittingly transmitted during that awkward conversation.

This...was going to be difficult.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who commented! There's an overwhelming response for a happy ending, so I'll take that into consideration when we get to the final chapters. I think for now the tag situation is going to stay the same (I update as I go), but if there is a tag I should put in or remove, please don't hesitate to tell me!
Supper was delicious, if not a little quiet. Maybe because Sweet Pea made kickass monster fajitas that everyone was too busy stuffing their faces to talk, but you had that inkling in the back of your mind that there was something more to it. Still, you pushed the feeling aside with an almost violent sort of effort and took your time to just enjoy the meal. Once everyone finished, you and Rhythm took to the dishes like usual.

“It’s almost time to go,” you mentioned as you sat the last plate down to Rhythm.

Sweet Pea looked up from wiping down the kitchen table. “We can take the jeep again.”

The horrified look Rhythm shot you was amusing. Just as much as the simultaneous “NO” that both the bitties uttered.

“We’re going to take the subway this time,” you said, biting back a smile at Sweet Pea’s bewildered expression. “Which means we have to walk a few blocks. You ready to go?”

“Yeah.”

Blues blinked into sight, taking place beside his brother as you turned back to them. “I don’t think the movie is too long. We’ll be back later. Have fun, okay?”

“Be careful,” Blues replied, crossing his arms together.

“I will.”

Your fingers twitched as your hand rose to touch them, but you ended up pulling it to your chest instead. A twinge of *something* passed through their sockets, but you turned around too quickly to see their full reactions. Ugh, you were just being stupid now. Splendid. But the right words weren’t coming to your head, and the train wasn’t going to wait for anybody, so you left it at that. You rushed to the closet for your coat, and once Sweet Pea was out of the doorway, you announced a quick “bye!” before locking the apartment door behind you.

“Bells,” your cousin hushed as you walked down the hall.

You hoped to god she wasn’t going to ask about them. Even you didn’t know what was going on in your head. How were you going to explain it to your cousin?

She fiddled with the end of her braid as you looked at her. “Is...is my driving really that bad?”

You couldn’t contain your smile. “Not *all* the time. Just when it matters most.”
“What does that mean?!”

“You’d be great at a monster truck derby.”

“That’s not a compliment!?”

You chuckled, seeing the mock-indignant look on her face. “But you’re not horrible, seriously. I mean, you just have to keep practicing.”

Bantering with Sweet Pea helped you forget your dilemma as you reached the subway. People were either rushing home or to supper, and it took a few minutes for Sweet Pea to get a metro card before boarding the train. The northeast quadrant. If you thought about it, the adoption center wasn’t too far from where the theater was located. You held onto that thought as the two of you boarded the train and then walked a few more blocks to the theater.

The good thing about this theater was that it was in the better part of the city. The clean, smooth cement and LED lights across the awning gave it a classic hollywood feel. The plexiglass of the ticket booths had only a few posters neatly taped to the surface, and the teenaged attendants looked as if they kept their drug usage to a minimum. A small line of people were already lined up at each side, so you joined the queue.

“I bet you everyone here is getting in for Adrenaline Rush 3. I don’t even think The Thanksgiver will have half of a crowd,” you quipped. Sweet Pea stuck her tongue out at you.

“That means we have more seating options! Or do you want to see Fruit Salad Sally instead?”

“No thank you.”

The two of you carried on as the line dwindled, and once you got your tickets, headed inside. Sweet Pea took the few spare minutes to buy a tub of popcorn, and soon the two of you were plopped down in the middle section of the room. You managed to save the popcorn and accidentally kick your purse when another couple scooched down the aisle, but as you expected, only a handful of people were here to experience this special occasion. The lights dimmed and the chatter died away, leaving you to watch as the commercials faded out for the movie previews.

“FROM THE MAKERS OF PIRANHICANE AND THE GRINDING,!”

You shot Sweet Pea a sarcastic smirk as you nodded your head to the screen. “Great.”

“You know you love it,” she jabbed back.

The rugged actor on screen swung open a dilapidated door. “There’s this legend about a witch that lived in these parts.”

“Yeah? I ain’t scared of some fairy tale.”

“I hope not. You’re buying her house.”

The scene panned to an old, unfurnished house with ivy overtaking the porch and siding.

“COMES THE BIGGEST THRILL OF NEXT HALLOWEEN.”

“Get me the salt!”

“Daddy, I met a new friend!”
“Don’t look into her eyes!”

A woman wrapped her arms around a child, curled up against a broken set of crates came into view.

_Creaaak....SNAP._

A high pitched scream filled the theater as the scene cut to black.

“**WITCH’S HOUSE, COMING NEXT HALLOWEEN.**”

A split second of a dark and looming figure filled the screen before the hashtag “WITCHHOUSE” made a final impression.

If that was any indication on how the feature film was going to go, then you were in for an...experience.

The opening credits panned in on a turkey slaughterhouse and already you could feel your interest waning. If _Piranhican_ce was any template, you knew that the action would pick up about twenty minutes into the movie. You’d hold your judgement for now, but as the main character talked to one of his coworkers about vacation, you felt your mind slip into more interesting topics.

Like how you’ve been unknowingly warming up to the idea of dating your bitties—if that was what you were even feeling. Society was going to _love_ that. Monster and human relationships were just starting to get off the ground, but monsters that weren’t even considered full fledged independents makes things ten times worse. And normally, you weren’t one to care too much about those rules as a whole, but something about this made you nervous.

Maybe because if you thought about it, you couldn’t choose one over the other. It was a trifecta of bad: two bitty brothers. And what would they think of you if they found out?

You tried to recall any sort of knowledge about monster relations. They were more accepting of differences as a whole, so maybe that same kind of logic applied to relationships as well? You didn’t think they’d outright hate you, especially since they were convinced about that special connection between bitties and owners. The pamphlets you received _did_ mention it, but just barely.

Maybe...maybe you were getting confused. This whole connection deal might have messed up your emotions because it’s a monster thing. And you couldn’t think about this at home since they’d be likely to hear you, so it just made you extra sensitive about it. You just needed more information.

Satisfied with your course of action, you brought your attention back to the movie. Just in time to watch a chef shove a bunch of stuffing into a bird.

...An hour and a half later, and the male lead shoved a pot of scalding oil onto the creaky rafters of an abandoned farm. He threw down a thin rope where the female lead was backing away from the grotesque undead turkey-monster. The child cowered behind her as they brushed past the string and against the wall.

“**NOW!**”

The woman jerked the string, and the oil and pot came crashing down on top of the turkey’s head. They took the chance to dart out of barn.

“**Come on!**”
The male lead came dashing out of the barn not a moment too soon, for as soon as he gained enough space, the whole barn splintered apart in an explosion.

“GET STUFFED!” The child screamed.

Really. Okay, the pun was acceptable. You had no right to judge.

But then.

“It was time for him to quit…cold turkey.”

You snorted, which was covered up by a mixtures of groans and hysterical laughter. Sweet Pea laughed into the popcorn tub, and for the remaining five minutes, all you could think about was how you hoped the actors got paid for their efforts. Once the credits started to roll, you and Sweet Pea made your way to the exit.

“I didn’t expect the turkey ghost to be his twin brother. That was a twist!” she commented as you exited the theater.

“Remind me to get a copy of that for bad movie night.” you retorted. “I think the turkey is just unbelievable enough for Rhythm to be okay.”

“He’s afraid...of turkeys?”

“Birds in general.”

As the two of you trekked your way back to the subway, you landed near a familiar intersection.

The adoption center was just down the road from here, and at this point any information was better than nothing. If you hurried, you could make it there before closing.

“Hey,” you called out to your cousin, “Do you mind if we stop by somewhere before heading home?”

“I don’t mind. Where are we going?”

“It’s an adoption center and shop for bitties. I’m hoping they have a book or something I can pick up.”

“Sure. Lead the way!”

You and Sweet Pea made your way through the crowded skyscrapers and streets to Mama Cry’s. The storefront windows that held the beach scenery on your previous visit had been modified for the colder seasons. A fluffy green carpet had been laid over the sand as makeshift grass, and the fake palm trees had been replaced with small pines instead. Silk autumn leaves scattered across the pens. The bitties were absent from the scene, probably since it was near closing time. You could see Cry’s head pop out from between the shelves in the back, and you held your breath.

You pulled open the door, and like last time, a chorus of greetings met your ears.

“Oh, wow.” Sweet Pea whispered behind you.

Cry stood straight and looked your way, holding a box of merchandise. “Welcome to Mama Cry’s. How can I help you?”

For a second you wondered if she remembered you, but seeing as how it had been months since
you’ve been here, you doubted it.

“Hi. I wanted to know if you had any books about bitties?”

“Books,” Cry repeated, “Are you looking for something specific or for general information?”

“Um…” Okay, how did you need to word this to not sound like a creeper?

You glanced back at Sweet Pea, who had already stepped away from you to look at the bitties moving about in the cubby holes in the wall. And with her distracted, you moved closer to the monster in hopes to keep this fiasco limited to only one person.

“Like...I don’t think I understand this whole connection between bitties and their guardians. What kind of relationship it is? Or..err,” you hesitated, “If I have a healthy relationship between my bitties and me?”

“You don’t happen to have an Edgy, do you?”

“What? No. Blues is a Blueberry and his brother’s a Little Bro.”

A flash of recognition crossed her face, as she leaned in closer.

“Wait...you brought them in before, haven’t you? For magic deficiency.”

Ah, so she did remember. You nodded. “Yeah. That was Rhythm.”

“How have they been doing? And you? Again, I’m so sorry for Seymour attacking you like that.”

“We’re good. It’s fine,” you held your hands up. “Those pamphlets helped a whole lot, but I think I don’t understand anything about this whole ‘special connection’ thing.”

Cry tapped her jaw and hummed. “Unfortunately the most material you can find on the subject are either scientific journals or pamphlets that just skim over the topic. Usually it’s something I cover when someone adopts a bitty from me.”

She glanced up at the clock on the wall, and then to you.

“We have a few minutes. I can give you specifics if you tell me more about your situation?”

“Yes, please,” you said, feeling the embarrassment run right to your cheeks. This was going to be an awkward conversation. Ho boy.

You followed Cry over to the cash register, where she pulled a stool out for you to sit. You glanced to the terrarium for a split second, determining whether you’d have Seymour hear your every word, and breathed a small sigh of relief when you found the pen empty.

“So,” Cry started, “This special connection we’re talking about is called ‘Bonding’. It’s not hard to imagine why. There’s a symbiosis that establishes between the bitty and the guardian in a short period of time. I’ve heard humans say that it’s close to how a pet and an owner establish a bond after a few days, but that’s wrong because we aren’t talking about pets. It’s common for humans to mistake bitties for pets partly because of their size and the fact that Bonding exists.”

“But they’re really monsters, right?”

Pleased with your answer, Cry’s voice lightened. “Yes! Monsters who adopt bitties have a much easier time understanding Bonding because they know that bitties are as sentient as the rest of us.
On the other hand, humans sometimes take longer to understand it, but once they do, their Bond with their bitties becomes much stronger.”

“Then why do they still allow pet shops to sell bitties?”

“The Ambassador has been working with the human government to establish laws, but it’s slow going. Like I said, it’s a symbiotic relationship. Bitties are able to live on their own, but their bodies are constructed to depend on another being. People take advantage of this and treat them as domesticated animals under the guise that ‘they can’t take care of themselves, just like pets’.”

You could tell how irritated she felt about the subject by the way her tail was beating against the leg of her chair.

“That’s awful,” you quipped. You wondered how many assholes she’s had to encounter expecting to get a “pet” only to leave angry and empty handed. “So what makes ‘Bonding’ so special?”

“There are a few perks, like picking up on emotions much easier with each other, or sensing their presence nearby. You also may have noticed that you feel close like family in just a short period of time. I’ve heard that that’s uncommon for humans.”

“It is,” you replied, “Is that why they all call you ‘Mama’ Cry? Do all bitties look to their guardians as parents?”

“It’s typical. Guardians do provide food, shelter, and clothing to their bitties, so it’s not hard to imagine them as your children. Many do. I’ve heard children call their parents’ bitties as their siblings, even.”

That sounded very different from the relationship you felt with them. Maybe the awful stinging in your chest showed on your face, because Cry looked at you for a moment longer than what you found comfortable.

“...It’s not always a familial relationship though. Again, we are talking about monsters. Bonding goes only so far as to establish a connection. What kind of connection is up to both of you. And I say both because certain types of bitties are more apt to push for different kinds of relationships more than others. Don’t pressure them, and don’t let them pressure you into something you don’t want. Establish some boundaries. Take some time to think about what you’re aiming for.”

Solid advice. You let out a deep sigh without even realizing you had been holding your breath in the first place. “Thank you. Do have any advice for not being a loud thinker? I’ve been told that they can hear me sometimes.”

Cry lit up in understanding. “That’s common, too. The trick is to stay calm while sorting out your thoughts and pretend to whisper. It’s not totally foolproof, but it should help.”

“Okay,” you nodded, “Thank you so much, Miss Cry.”

The monster gave you a genuine smile as the two of you stood. “Any time. That’s what I’m here for.”

You made your way back to the front of the shop, just a few feet behind where your cousin stood. She appeared to be chatting with a fire monster dressed in a sweater vest, but you caught her stealing glances at a familiar-looking skeleton napping in the leaf pile. He might have known, as he stretched, winked at her when he caught her looking, and resumed sleeping. Huh.

“Sweet Pea, ready to go?” you asked, stepping to her side. Her face looked red as she bade the fire
bitty goodbye.

“Yes, let’s go!”

“Okay,” your smile threatened to turn into a mischievous grin. “Let’s catch the train back.”

You left the shop after saying goodnight to Mama Cry, and made it halfway down the block before you realized out loud that you forgot to text the brothers about your pit stop.

“Crap. I should have done this after the movie,” you muttered, digging around in your purse. You felt your wallet, your keys, crumpled receipts, a pen, and no cell phone. Oh no. It had to be here. You had it with you at the theater!

You searched the front pocket. The inside pocket. The pocket you barely ever used. Despite your pleading to the heavens, it just wasn’t showing up.

“I must have dropped it,” you groaned.

Already reaching for hers, Sweet Pea asked, “Want me to call?”

You nodded. She tapped her screen, and you waited with baited breath for the ringtone.

Riiiiiiing. Riiiiing. Click.

Your heart sunk.

“Maybe the battery died?”

“Let’s go back to the movie theater,” you said, turning the opposite direction. Sweet Pea quickly matched your steps, holding up her phone in her hand.

“Do you know Rhythm and Blues’ phone number? I’ll call them for you,” she offered.

You shook your head. “I remember a couple of digits but that’s it. This sucks. They’re gonna be so mad.”

Sweet Pea patted your back. “I’m sure they’ll understand. You didn’t mean to lose it.”

You managed to give her a half smile, and the trip back to theater ended in silence. By the time you reached the ticket booth the sun had been long past set, and the streetlights illuminated the sidewalks in its place. The stonefaced booth attendant stared at you from behind the plexiglass as you reached the counter.

“Hi. I was at the five-thirty showing of The Thanksgiver, and I think I lost my phone in there. Did anybody pick it up?”

The teenager perked up a minimal amount as he ducked out of sight for a moment, only to rise with a small cardboard box and a clipboard.

“What’s it look like?”

You went on to describe your phone with every defining, minute detail you could think of, right down to the scratches and nicks that it picked up over time.

“This looks like it. The battery is dead,” he lifted the suspect to the glass.
You sighed a breath of relief as a weight lifted from your chest. “Yes, that’s it. Thank you so much.”

He passed the clipboard through the opening for you to sign, and once again you had possession of your phone. You tried to start it in hopes that you could get the bitties’ phone number, but the charge only lasted enough to get through the loading screen before shutting off again.

“Well, let’s go home,” you declared in defeat. ‘I’m sure if I explain what happened they’ll go easy on me.”

“No do want to take a taxi? We won’t have to wait for the train. I have some extra cash,” she offered, but you shook your head.

“I’m not spending your money. Come on, I’ll be fine,” you gruffed. Literally she’d be paying for your mistake, and that didn’t sit well with you. You could be a big girl, and it was time to put on your big girl britches.

So, with your big girl britches on, you and Sweet Pea hopped onto the next train ride home. The ride was quiet, and the two of you had plenty of room to sit. And it gave you time to settle on what you knew.

You liked your bitties. You loved them. It wasn’t just a family type of love either. And you knew that for certain, because you sure as hell did not want them to call you ‘mama’, or ‘sister’, or even ‘cousin’. And that left you with what?

You didn’t know.

And what did they want? Again, you weren’t sure. Rhythm had always flirted with you since day one, and Blues, although he complimented you on a lot of things, hadn’t said a word about relationships until today.

Did this have to be solved right away?

...

...

No.

In fact, what the hell were you worried about? You were happy with the relationship you had with them right now. You didn’t know what exactly that relationship was exactly, but what did it matter? As long as they were okay with it, then so were you.

“Fuck it,” you muttered to yourself.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

The train pulled into your stop, and the two of you made it out with no problem. You never did like walking to your place during this time of night, but it seemed like the cold did a good job of keeping stragglers off of the sidewalks for now. The light through your apartment’s lobby shone like a beacon.

Once you fumbled with the keys, you and Sweet Pea made it inside and up the stairs. You bit your
lip as you undid the lock to your door, and steeled yourself for Blues’ scolding.

“We’re back,” you called a little wearily. Neither bitties were in the living room this time, and it was quiet for a few seconds as you shrugged off your coat and dropped your purse onto the floor.

A flash of blue caught your eye from the hallway, and soon you were looking at Blues standing on the kitchen table.

“You’re home,” he said, crossing his arms.

“I’m sorry we’re so late. I lost my phone and we had to backtrack.” you started. You took a few steps closer to the table. Blues’ stoic frown remained.

“I was worried.”

He was being unusually quiet. Was it because Sweet Pea was here? Did he really get that upset this time?

“I didn’t mean to. I even tried to call after, but the battery’s dead.”

He wasn’t saying anything.

“Are you mad at me?” you mumbled, reaching out to him.

Blues breathed a deep, low sigh as he took your fingers and nuzzled against them. A flash of pain crossed his features as he met your gaze, smiling. “No. I’m glad you are all right.”

Somehow his actions made you feel like an ice pick stabbed straight in your heart.

“Hey, are you okay?”

“Yes. I’m tired, so I’m going to bed early. Goodnight.”

He let go of your fingers and turned away.

“Okay. Goodnight…”

You watched him disappear down the hall with a frown, rubbing your fingertips that had gone cold.

“That didn’t seem so bad,” your cousin piped up from behind the loveseat.

You weren’t sure about that.

Chapter End Notes

Cell phones, am I right? A special thanks to Goatmom, who came up with the last few lines for The Thanksgiver!

Also, hey! If you’re looking for some good fanfics on the fly, here’s a UT fic rec blog! They take suggestions too, so if you know a fic that needs some love, you can suggest it to them! Undertale Fanfic Suggestions
Chapter Summary

When you had prepared for bed and entered your room, you found Rhythm sound asleep in the middle of your pillow. Blues must have decided to sleep in his own bed tonight, much to your dismay. You had just gotten used to the two of them cuddling up to you, and now you were missing one tiny body. Maybe tomorrow would be better.

You spared a fleeting glance at the foot of your bed before climbing in.

“Rhythm,” you whispered. You scooped him up into your hands as you shifted underneath the blankets. He jolted awake at the movement, his magic blazing in his left socket before letting out a long, shaky breath.

“Babe.” he sighed, relaxing in your hold. His voice still carried some sleep. “You okay?”

“Yeah. Didn’t mean to wake you. Sorry for being late.”

“’s okay. You’re home.”

“Goodnight,” you smiled, brushing your thumb against his cheekbone. Rhythm responded by latching on and hummed, satisfied.

You fell asleep a short while after, with the sounds of his soft breathing to fight against the hollow ache of missing Blues.

...You woke up to something patting your cheek.

“Maiden,” Blues whispered. Your eyes fluttered open to the dim light of your room and the older bitty standing right in front of your face. He made a shushing gesture and retreated to your fingers, where Rhythm typically was. Said skeleton was just a few inches away, splayed out and still snoozing. Snoozing like you should be at the moment. The grogginess of your mind made it impossible to figure out what was going on, and it was further proven pointless to try when Blues pulled out a small, grey, heart from his chest cavity.

Even though you had seen this before—when Rhythm had been to Cry’s—your instincts started beating down the proverbial door, telling you that it wasn’t normal for his soul to be out. You shifted to try and sit up properly, but Blues motioned you to stop. He glanced over to his sleeping brother, and then back to you.

And then he took one of your fingers and pressed his soul against your skin.

...Good morning.
You didn’t hear the words. Blues didn’t utter a sound. But you felt it. You felt his voice and every nuance in it, the tentativeness mixed in with the syllables, his hope tangled in the vowels, the energy of his very being passing through you like a current.

The shock made you pull away in an instant as you gasped for breath and sat up halfway. Blues held his ground, holding out his soul as he watched you with a carefully guarded expression. A second, two seconds, three passed by…

You reached out, oh so delicate as you brushed your fingers against the surface of his soul again. It was warm to the touch and pulsed with tiny subtle movements. In a way it reminded you of a caterpillar or a kitten—something about it felt like the essence of life itself. The very essence of Blues’ life.

Relief ran through the current this time. Blues gave you a moment more to adjust before starting again.

Maiden.

He was testing out the sound of your nickname through his soul. He loved calling you that. You shivered.

I didn’t want to startle you, but I thought this would be the best time...

“Bl—”

A surge of anxiety hit you midway through.

You don’t need to speak. Just listen right now. Please.

You nodded and sunk back down into the bed.

I should have talked to you last night. Instead I left like a damned fool.

Blues grasped your finger in his hands, pressing you against his soul further. Your breath caught for a second. Was it too much pressure? Weren’t you going to hurt him like this? You tried to pull away, but the surprising strength in his grip caught you off guard.

I was worried about you!

A shout, but not, and so filled with emotion that all you could do was process it as heartache. You clenched your teeth as your eyes began to water.

I’ve seen so many things happen out at night. Humans—monsters—people do unimaginable cruelty in this city. It was already dusk when you had left, and when you didn’t come home, I thought the worst happened to you! To think that you could have been— you could have been—I...

Pain. You felt actual pain in your chest as Blues had paused, trying to rid himself of the thought. It wasn’t memories flowing through the current, but impressions of them, like the afterimage of staring into light for too long. Not enough to see, but you knew what he was talking about.

I couldn’t handle it if you were hurt and I wasn’t there to help, and if you…!

His sockets welled up with tears as the thought caused him to cut himself off. You felt the weight
of what it meant to Fall Down through his feelings alone. And as quick as that, his thoughts shifted to a narrow sort of aggression, sharp and biting, as if he was combating the pain by hunting it down.

**I may be small, but I’d rather die fighting for you than idly sit by. If I was able, I’d always keep you with me and fend off anyone who would dare to stand in my way.**

And again he forced himself shift his thoughts. A flicker of panic, and then the emotions he fed through the current were a reluctant sort of resignation.

**But...but you’re not a babybones. You’ve lived in this city well before we met you. I trust you, Maiden. I do trust you! I love you. I don’t know what to do...**

You recognized that feeling. That’s the feeling you get when they smile at you. When you brush your fingers against them. When you come home and the first thing you hear are their voices welcoming you back. The list went on. At this point it could have been either of your emotions, and you wouldn’t have known the wiser.

“Is that everything?” you whispered. He nodded, and the moment you let go, he pushed his soul back into his rib cage.

“I didn’t mean to make you cry,” he mumbled. Blues turned away, as if he aimed to move off the bed, and you scooped him up before he had the chance to go far. With Blues coddled to your chest, you wiped your tears and curled up underneath your covers.

“Hey,” you breathed. “I love you. I’m sorry I made you worry so much.”

“I know.”

“I’ll be more careful from now on.”

Blues gripped your nightshirt. “It was a simple mistake. I’m being overprotective again. I’ll try harder to be better.”

“We’ll both do better, together,” you smiled. “But for now, let’s just go back to sleep.”

“All right.”

You stayed there for a few minutes, relishing in the moment before settling down again, this time with both of the brothers nestled against you as it should have been.

**Chapter End Notes**

I was dead set on getting to Grandma's memorial for this chapter, and then Blues goes and dashes that right out of the window. So instead, you get this short chapter full of feels!
Chapter Summary

You go to Grandma's memorial.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Click . Squeak.

“Wakey wakey, I’ve got eggs and bac-ey!”

Dammit, Sweet Pea.

Although you felt both Rhythm and Blues jolt awake, you just pulled them to your body and groaned. You didn’t even bother to open your eyes.

“I made coffee!”

You opened your eyes.

The light streaming through the window meant that it was at least eight or nine, and the mouthwatering smell of bacon and eggs intruded into your room like a swat team of breakfast with Sweet Pea as the leader. From the looks of her damp hair and fresh new sweater, your cousin looked as if she had been up quite a while. She even had her apron on, speckled with faded stains from her previous culinary endeavors.

“Don’t make me climb in there! You’re lucky you have two little bodyguards with you now, or you’d get the treatment!”

“I’m up,” you drawled, willing yourself to sit upright. “Give me a few seconds.”

“Okay. Don’t be long or the food will go cold!”

You opened your eyes.

She turned and left, closing the door behind her.

“Good morning, Maiden,” Blues said quietly, squeezing your pinky as he looked at you, smiling. You brushed against his cheekbone and smiled in return.

“Morning,” you replied. You looked at the skeleton in your other hand. “Morning, Rhythm.”

“Babe,” Rhythm mumbled. He leaned his back against your fingers, ready to doze off again, and you gently poked against his spine.

“None of that. If we don’t get out there, Sweet Pea really will come back.”

“She isn’t coming in here to attack you, is she?” Blues asked.

You snorted. “No way. She’ll just come in here and tickle me until I concede.”
“When did you get here?” Rhythm asked, turning towards his brother.

You glanced back to Blues, who looked rather interested in the pattern of the comforter.

“Let’s go eat,” you declared, depositing the bitties onto your shoulders and throwing on your glasses. “Have you had bacon before? I think you’ll like it.”

Sweet Pea was impressed by how quickly you had joined her at the table, and soon the four of you were relishing in perfectly cooked bacon and eggs. You went over the itinerary one more time, hashing out the details of what to do in the day, before cleaning up, packing, and hitting the shower. Afterwards you picked out some warm clothes and retrieved your pearls from the dresser. Then a thought occurred to you.

You took a good long glance at the shoebox that Pidge sat upon. Yeah. You should bring that too.

“Good work, Pidge. You poor soul.” you joked. Pidge’s dying, garbled wail replied in kind as you moved him aside to pick up your box of momentos. And with this, you were ready to go.

You joined Sweet Pea back in the living room, who was rearranging the clothes in her backpack to make room for grandma’s picture. Rhythm watched her with a passive stare from the table while Blues dried his hands off with a kitchen towel.

“Ready to go?” You asked. Sweet Pea smiled as she zipped up her bag and stood.

“Ready!”

You turned to Rhythm.

“We’ll be waiting,” he replied. You blinked.

“You’re not going?” you looked over to Blues, “Are you?”

“Wouldn’t we be intruding?” he asked, teleporting next to Rhythm. “This is a family matter, is it not?”

“It is, but…” Duh. They didn’t know your grandma, and you never asked if they wanted to go. You just assumed that they would out of what, reflex?

You smacked your cheek lightly. “I forgot to ask. I’m sorry, guys. That was stupid of me.”

“Nah, Babe. It means you want us. Not complaining about that,” he replied with an affectionate smirk.

“It would be an honor,” Blues added. “But what about your cousin?”

They looked over to Sweet Pea, who smiled in return. “The more, the merrier! I’m sure Grandma would have loved to meet you.”

“She’s right. Grandma would have been overjoyed. But I don’t know what you would have thought of her,” you chuckled. “So, how about it?”

The brothers exchanged glances before Blues replied.

“Of course we will.”

“Great! Go get ready and we’ll head out. We gotta catch the downtime before rush hour kicks in.
Sweet Pea’s driving us to the park.”

A look of horror flashed on their faces as they blinked out of sight, and you hid your smile for a second before turning back to your cousin.

“Is it really okay with you? You don’t have to say yes just because I want them to go.”

“Bells, it’s absolutely fine. To be honest, it’s a little relieving.”

You tilted your head. “Why?”

Sweet Pea glanced away, smiling nervously as she picked at the end of her braid.

“I don’t have to worry that you’re alone now.”

“I have plenty of friends here.”

“I know!” She put her hands up, shooting you a panicked expression, “But you don’t talk about them much, and I know how you are sometimes with people. And I know what it’s like to come home to an empty house, but now it’s like you have a family here! And that’s good!”

“Sweet Pea…”

“And if they’re family to you, they’re family to me, and that means they’re more than invited to see Grandma. I’d like to get to know them better, too.”

Her words alleviated a small weight from your heart. You hadn’t noticed how nervous you were about how Sweet Pea felt regarding the brothers until now.

“Thank you. That means a lot.” you breathed. You clasped your hands over her shoulders and looked her straight in the eyes. “But are you okay? You don’t feel alone, do you?”

“No! No, I have plenty of interaction at home!” she laughed, though a little too forceful to your liking.

“You can call me whenever you want. You know that, right?”

“Yes, I know!”

“Okay then,” You let her go. “Let’s get ready. It’s supposed to be extra cold today.”

You retrieved your coat, along with your pair of gloves and a scarf. Sweet Pea bundled up in her coat and boots, and the brothers came back, decked in their new winter jackets. Rhythm looked kind of silly, still wearing his cargo shorts with his big parka, but you weren’t about to question his fashion choices now. Blues however looked every bit ready for the cold, with his jeans tucked in his carpenter boots and the navy military jacket you slaved over buttoned up to the top.

“Ready, guys? Let’s go.”

Now that everyone was prepared, you grabbed the shoebox and your purse, and everyone piled into the jeep. The morning rush hour had just died down, and the car ride was filled with nothing but the sounds of the radio playing and the hum of the engine. Blues had settled into a semi-relaxed state, loosely grasping your fingers while Rhythm kept to your shoulder. You zoned out by watching the city scenery thin out bit by bit until you reached the highway, surrounded by trees.

“This is crazy,” Rhythm mumbled.
“What is?”

“How much land there is,” He leaned against your neck. “We wanted to cross all this.”

You imagined Blues and Rhythm stumbling through the wilderness, dodging cars on the highway, and fighting off the cold. A chill went down your spine, and you reached up to press up against him.

“How have you ever seen this much?”

“Not really. He kept us under a tarp most times if we went anywhere. Saw the sky, though.” Rhythm whispered. He dug through the material of your gloves, as if he were trying to get to your skin. “Brother, you see all this?”

Blues sat upright, craning his body to get a better view. You picked him up and sat him near the ledge, and he watched in silence. At first he looked surprised, but a somber, distant look overshadowed his features.

Was he imagining the same things you had? How the dirt would have clung on to the scraps of their bandages and tattered clothes. How they’d be scavenging for any food they could find, pitted against wildlife that knew nothing but to kill or be killed. That if they had even been able to make it out of the city, this wilderness could have been the rest of their lives. It was still better than their previous conditions, no doubt. You were sure they would have taken anything over whatever torture they had been through at that mill.

But it also seemed cold and empty to you. Maybe because you would have never known them.

“Hey,” you whispered, nudging the brothers. You felt Rhythm shift closer to your ear, and Blues snapped out of his thoughts to look at you. “I’m glad you’re here with me.”

Seeing Blues smile so honestly, and feeling Rhythm press gently against your cheek, filled you with warmth.

The rest of the car ride went on just as before, though the sky filled with gray the further you travelled towards the base of the mountain. Sweet Pea drove through the entrance of the Mt. Ebott state park entrance, where the pines and oaks towered over you instead of skyscrapers. The gravel popped underneath the tires as your cousin pulled into the empty parking lot, and you took a second to relish the jeep’s warmth before preparing yourself for the cold.

“We’re here!” Your cousin announced, shutting off the engine. “We have a small hike before setting up, so I hope you’re ready!”

“Are we going up to the picnic area?” you asked as the brothers took their places on your shoulders. You felt the scarf shift around, and Sweet Pea grinned as she retrieved her cell phone.

“We are,” she replied, and you heard the clicking sound from her camera. She flipped the screen to reveal Blues’ and Rhythm’s heads poking out of your scarf. “Can you grab the blanket so I can get my guitar?”

“Yep.”

The two of you shuffled out of the jeep and collected your things. Sweet Pea slung the backpack over her shoulders while cradling her guitar case in her arms, but not before setting the picnic blanket into your hands and balancing your shoebox on top. The last of the jeep’s warmth died out as she closed the trunk door, and soon you were headed for the trails.
The air smelt so much sweeter out here, even during the colder seasons. The mix of spruces and oak trees gave off a unique scent that reminded you of Grandma’s—Sweet Pea’s—home, and the green and brown blended together into a peaceful landscape. The fallen leaves and needles crunched underneath your shoes as you followed behind your cousin’s steps.

“Maiden, there’s a lot of magic here,” Blues said as he huddled closer to you.

“Magic? Is that possible?”

“It occurs naturally, but I’ve never felt this much at once.”

“What’s that? Magic in the air?” Sweet Pea teased, turning to you while waggling her eyebrows. You stuck your tongue out at her in return.

“IT’S IN EVERYTHING, NOT JUST THE AIR,” Blues corrected, and you bit your lip to keep from laughing. Ah, you’d have to brush them up on idioms some time.

Sweet Pea smiled, “Oh, did you know that people still believe this place is cursed? I ran into one of my older customers the other day, and after I told them about our plans, she warned me not to go up here again.”

“CURSED?”

You hummed in response, “You know, the one where people who climb the mountain never return?”

“No.”

“Oh. Well, there’s that. But it’s been disproven for decades since monsters were freed from the Underground. It was really a rumor to dissuade people from investigating the barrier.”

“Mostly a rumor,” Sweet Pea corrected.

“Mostly. There were a few dead kids.”

“Several.”

“It’s in the past.” you clarified. “And the Ambassador came back alive, so that just proves it’s false.”

“We’re not going to the top anyway. Mt. Ebott is huge. It’d take us a few days to hike to the top!”

“THAT’S...COMFORTING TO KNOW.”

You chuckled. “We’ve been here plenty of times. It’s safe.”

“It’s quiet,” Rhythm added. “No one’s around.”

That was a good thing for today. Lucky, even. Setting up a memorial in the park might have been considered a tad unorthodox, but adding Grandma’s last requests to the dossier made it straight up weird. You’ve come to embrace it though.

“It won’t be this quiet when we get started, promise.”

The trail wound upwards and had narrowed since it’s beginning, and on one occasion you stumbled over a root, but finally the small clearing revealed itself from behind the branches. The alcove held
a few splintered picnic tables that faced a beautiful view of the mountain base. You spread the blanket over the nearest table while Sweet Pea set her bag down.

“WHAT CAN WE DO?” Blues asked as they moved off of your shoulders. You shook your head.

“Nothing, really. Just wait till we’re done setting up and join in afterwards. That is, if you want to.”

“It’ll be just a second,” Sweet Pea added. She pulled out the picture frame of Grandma and handed it to you before digging into her bag again. Next came a small candle and lighter, then a thermos, and a small journal after that. You arranged the items in a neat fashion and opened your shoebox for your own offerings.

“Oh, you kept it,” Sweet Pea noted as you pulled out a dried goldenrod stalk. You slipped the stem underneath the portrait to keep the breeze from blowing it away.

“Yep, and the sheet music too. Not that we need it,” you replied, pulling out the folded papers. Your hands brushed the small photo album next, but seeing as there was a much better picture already up, you decided to leave it in the box.

Instead, you reached around your neck and took off your pearls, placing them before the picture. Sweet Pea lit the candle, and the two of you took a step back to admire your work.

“That’s it. I guess we’ll get started. You wanna go first?”

“Sure,” Sweet Pea complied as she threw her guitar strap over her. She gave an experimental strum that broke the quiet and cleared her throat.

“Hi, Grandma. It’s another year. We’re in the park this time. You know, the one you took us to every once in a while? It’s a nice view. A little cold, but that doesn’t bother us,” she said, glancing at you with a smile.”So, what’s my new favorite memory for this year? Hmmm.”

Sweet Pea shifted her weight as she deliberated on the subject for a moment. “Out of all of them, I think my best this year is repainting the living room. It was a lot of work scraping off the wallpaper, but now it looks so much brighter. I was really proud to do it by myself, and dad came over to visit for a little bit. He’s doing really well now. I think you’d be proud of him! He’s been sober for about four months.

“But the worst thing that happened this year was...I think it was when Joe had a heart attack in his home. He’s doing much better, but it was touch and go for a few days.”

Not-so-affectionately dubbed “old man Joe”, you remembered his firm frown and blunt attitude as he stood in front of his farmhouse down the road from Grandma’s. He was never one for company, but Sweet Pea always helped him out when he needed it.

“Um, the garden is doing well, and the greenhouse is as fun as ever. But that’s it for me. Here’s Bells.”

“Oh. Hey, Grandma. The city hasn’t killed me yet. The rent’s been kind of high, so Sweet Pea came up with this idea. I hope you’re not mad.”

You paused, and nothing but the chilled breeze replied. Not that you were expecting one in the first place. But pausing meant you had a moment to push away your bashful tendencies for the next statement.

“It’s not really a favorite memory so much as a favorite event. It doesn’t matter right?
You imagined your grandmother’s pointed look, telling you to get to the point.

“I found two bitties in the summer. They were pretty messed up, so I brought them in with me and we’ve been living together since. The apartment doesn’t feel empty anymore, and they’re always so lively and exciting. I guess that’s what it was like with me and Sweet Pea at your place all the time, huh? I think you’d really like them. They’re brothers. Rhythm and Blues.”

The cold was doing a great job at camouflaging the blush on your cheeks. And you didn’t dare to look anywhere but Grandma’s portrait right now; You could just feel their gazes on you.

“Now that I think about it, I wonder if you saw bitties instead of fairies. Your descriptions of them sound similar enough.”

“Do you think so?” Sweet Pea interjected, “Different shapes and sizes, and never the same type. Some could fly and others couldn’t. Maybe she did?”

“I guess we’ll never know for sure,” you replied. “Either way, you’d be ecstatic, Grandma. Mom wasn’t as receptive though. My worst memory this year is thanks to her for trying to kill them. It was awful. I was terrified. She even made it sound like they were already gone. I should’ve known better though. They’ve got a few tricks up their sleeves. Isn’t that right, guys?”

You allowed yourself to meet their gazes as they smirked back from the picnic bench.

“That’s right, Babe,” Rhythm said, winking at you.

“SHE’D NEVER GET THE BEST OF US.”

“And that’s it,” you stated. “Other than that, it’s been sewing wedding dresses, working on my arachnophobia, and trying to keep my rent from going up any further. I hope you’re partying it up wherever you are.”

Silence reigned for another second before you gave Sweet Pea a short nod, and she strummed a chord before starting into Grandma’s favorite song. The upbeat intro gave you just enough time to take a deep breath and settle into the beat.

“Hey everybody, let’s have some fun!
You only live for once, and when you’re dead you’re done!
So let the good times roll. Let the good times roll!
I don’t care if you’re young or old, oh no no, get together and let the good times roll!”

The song was simplified since it was just you and Sweet Pea performing, which led to a calmer tone than what you heard from the vinyl records that your Grandma played. Still, you gave it your best shot, burying your embarrassment underneath the catchy tune.

“Don’t stand there moaning, talking trash!
If you wanna have some fun, you’d better go out and spend some cash!
And let the good times roll! Oh let the good times roll!
Don’t care if you’re young or old, get together and let the good times roll!”

You repeated the second stanza before Sweet Pea strummed the bridge, adding a few licks in as you hummed along. Out of the corner of your eye you saw Blues tapping his foot to the beat, while Rhythm nodded his head. A breeze stirred up the branches and added to the tune as you began again.
“Hey mister landlord, lock up all the doors!
When the police comes around, tell ‘em we ain’t coming down!
And let the good times roll! Let the good times roll!
I don’t care if you young or old! It’s enough to let the good times roll.”

You sang the chorus once more, and Sweet Pea closed the song with a few strong chords, letting the final notes carry off into the wind. A small round of applause came from the brothers as you took another deep breath.

“And now for drinks,” Sweet Pea announced, slipping the guitar strap off of her shoulders. You dug into your purse for the bitty cups as she opened the thermos.

“Here you go, guys,” you said, handing them their mugs. “You don’t have to drink it if you don’t want to, but I thought you’d want to try.”

But first, Sweet Pea filled the thermos cup of the clear soda and handed it to you.

“The first one’s for you, Grandma. Your favorite drink.”

You poured it onto the ground, right in front of the picnic table. The liquid pattered and sank into the dirt as you watched it with a mute sort of satisfaction. You took the thermos and refilled, this time giving the cup to Sweet Pea.

“Bottoms up,” you commented.

Sweet Pea’s mouth tightened as she took the cup, but she took a large gulp before passing it back to you.

You hid your grimace as half the cup remained.

“Here you go,” she retorted.

You clicked your tongue before downing the rest as if you were taking cough syrup. It still tasted like black licorice gone wrong, but it wasn’t the worst taste in the world.

You filled the cup up again and held it in front of the brothers.

“What is it?” Blues asked as they scooped some into their cups.

“It’s an old-fashioned soda. It’s kind of strong, so you might want to take only a little.”

Too late though, as their mugs were filled to the brim, and it seemed that your skeleton companions liked the idea of a challenge. Rhythm had downed his first, and then turned away and coughed afterwards, looking mildly disturbed. Blues took a large gulp of his own and stuck his tongue out, glaring down at his cup like it had betrayed him. He ponied up for the last mouthful before looking back up at you.

“This is…”

“Terrible. We know,” you smirked, pouring the last of the thermos cup to the ground. “When we were little, we’d ask for soda all the time, and this is the only one Grandma ever bought.”

“We drank a lot of water at Grandma’s,” Sweet Pea seconded. “I think your brother kept asking for it because he thought he’d be cool.”

“Like there’d be a prize for winning over the bad taste,” you mused. “We only drink this once a
year now.”

“I SEE.”

Sweet Pea drained what was left from the thermos into the earth, and the two of you recited a few poems from Grandma’s journal before ending the ceremony. In between poems, you laughed about some of the memories that you shared with Grandma. Some of them were happy, trivial moments like switching her sugar with salt on April Fools. Other times were more fond now than in the past, like the time she yelled at you for slamming the door when you were angry. Although the brothers remained mostly quiet, sometimes they would intervene by asking simple questions, and it led you or Sweet Pea to another memory that had been locked away.

And this year you were able to smile through all of them.

The breeze picked up again, biting at your skin as it threatened to dishevel the memorial that you and Sweet Pea created. Blues grabbed ahold of the goldenrod stalk and Rhythm caught the sheet music before the wind carried them away. The candle flickered wildly in its fight to stay lit, and the sea of clouds pushed closer to the mountain by the second.

“Maybe we should call it a day,” Sweet Pea suggested.

You nodded back to her as Blues offered you the flowers.

“Yeah. Let’s go home.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your words of comfort and consolation! For those of you also going through the loss of a loved one, you have my sympathies and love. For those of you who can hold onto your loved ones a little longer, I hope you have the best times during the holidays and can make great memories! I did delete the author's note, but I've taken all your words to heart!

I'm sorry if the formatting comes out a little odd this chapter as well, as I've had to post this using my cell phone (with bad reception, on top of a mountain!), but I wanted to post before Christmas. Happy holidays to everyone!
Some Food for Thought

Chapter Summary

You have to go to work, and that means Sweet Pea has a day to herself with the brothers.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Call me if anything happens. I have an hour lunch at noon, and I should be able to reply to texts in between projects. Okay?”

Sweet Pea smiled as she watched her cousin double check her phone. Bells only got like this whenever she had something on her mind. If she had to guess, Auntie’s last visit must have terrified her.

“We’ll be fine! Go before you’re late!” she laughed in reply, making a shooing motion with her hands.

Bells smiled. “I’m going! I’m going!”

But she glanced down at Blues and opted to pick him up, instead.

“Try to go easy on her! And make sure Rhythm knows too!”

The way Bell’s voice softened, it almost sounded like she was talking about a cherished memory or a private joke between close friends. It made Sweet Pea whirl around to the kitchen counter, oddly aware of her own presence.

“We’ll try, Maiden,” Blues replied with just as much mirth and as there was warmth. Her cousin chuckled softly, and then sighed.

“Oh then. I’m off! Have a good day! I’ll be back around six!”

“Have a good day!” Sweet Pea called out to her in conjunction with Blues. She caught sight of the door closing shut, and her cousin’s footsteps faded from the hall.

Blues’ face still carried a wisp of softness in his features as his gaze lingered on the door before turning around to face her. And then it was gone. The subtle shift of his sockets made his expression sharper, though he still smiled. Polite. Guarded. Cold. This was the expression Sweet Pea grew accustomed to during her short stay, and today seemed to be no exception.

“SWEET PEA. WHAT DO YOU PLAN TO DO TODAY?”

“Oh, I’m…” She was nervous but not dismayed. As long as she followed the rules and treated them with the same respect that everyone deserved, it was fine. “I wanted to do some cooking. ‘Do you want to help me?’”

Blues’ put his hands on his hips as he watched her for a second, and nodded.
"I MUST NOT LEAVE YOU UNATTENDED. INDEED I WILL HELP YOU COOK."

"Thank you," she replied with a smile. "I’ll get started after I take a shower, if that’s okay with you?"

"YOU’RE THE GUEST."

She took that as an affirmation. "I’ll be right out."

Sweet Pea gathered her fresh clothes and darted into the hallway. She had knocked on the bathroom door just in case, and hearing no reply, entered. She closed the door behind her and sighed.

Of course she knew it would take time for them to warm up to her. Bells had told her bits and pieces about the brothers when she first found them, but only enough to deduce that they’ve had a rough past. And the aggressiveness towards humans too—Sweet Pea didn’t know what to expect at first, but the way Bells talked about them made her think they weren’t too objectionable to strangers as long as they weren’t threatened.

But hearing about them and being with them were two different things! Blues trailed her actions from a short distance at all times. He seemed to be doing that even as they cooked together, and while he did look more at ease with an immediate task, Sweet Pea felt like she was being quietly judged for her actions every time he glanced her way. And Rhythm—he wanted nothing to do with her. Bells had told her once that Rhythm liked his space. But short of hiding, he kept away from her as far as possible. The closest he’d get would be when he was with her cousin, and from there it was nothing but cold stares and clipped replies.

And maybe this was what it was like for Bells at first. The way she dealt with people was like a slow cooker: slow, steady, and persistent. If she wanted, even tough people like the brothers would turn soft over time. But Sweet Pea was more like a frying pan. If she paid enough attention to detail and didn’t burn through her chances, she could make friends fast. It just so happened that her ingredients were better suited to a slow cooker than a frying pan…

Still, she wanted to try no matter how resistant they were. They were a part of her family now, and they made Bells so happy. And they weren’t bad monsters; they were just uncomfortable because they didn’t have any positive traits associated with her. After all, their current experience with family was with Auntie. And Sweet Pea had a much different personality than her.

She could do it! If only she had a common interest that they could all share..!

She continued with her shower until the water ran cold, coming marginally close to a solution. When she returned to the living room, Blues was waiting for her on the top of the loveseat with a neutral expression.

"I WAS STARTING TO THINK THAT YOU DROWNED," he quipped.

"Did I take that long? I’m sorry!"

However long she took, it was enough that Rhythm had woken up and was now flipping through one of Bell’s old magazines on the floor. Sweet Pea mustered her courage and greeted him.

"Good morning, Rhythm!"

"...Morning," he muttered, not bothering to look up from the pages. That was a start!
“I want to make banana’s foster today so we can have it over ice cream for dessert tonight!” she blurted back to Blues. “I thought you’d might like to see it since the way we cook it is flashy!”

Intrigue slipped onto his face for a moment. “THAT WON’T BE UNTIL NIGHTFALL. YOU DON’T INTEND TO DO IT NOW?”

“I want to practice first! Test out the recipe,” she replied, “I haven’t tried this one yet and I want to make sure it’s right. It’s Bells’ favorite treat!”

That last part seemed to grab his full attention, as he stood contemplating for a second before unfolding his arms.

“IF THAT’S THE CASE, THEN SHALL WE GET TO WORK?”

“Yes! Let’s do it!”

Sweet Pea scrambled over to the cabinets, pulling out the ingredients and measuring cups for the recipe as Blues teleported to the counter. She braided her hair and grabbed the recipe before washing her hands, and with a skill she had honed over the years, measured the cinnamon, sugar, and butter into separate cups with a swiftness that seemed to impress the small skeleton.

“IS THERE ANYTHING I CAN ASSIST WITH?”

“The bananas need to be cut longways and then in half,” she replied automatically. “Here, I’ll peel them for you—”

“NO NEED.”

Sweet Pea watched as a sharp bone splinter appeared out of nowhere, slicing into one of the bananas as she described before disintegrating into the air. Blues took ahold of the peel and began to tear away.

Yikes, she did not want to cross him.

While he was slaughtering—err, cutting up the bananas, she had carefully poured the rum and amaretto into cups of their own. These were the new ingredients she was so excited about: monster liquor. When she had heard that the first monster restaurant used this brand for their famous flambé, she knew she had to try it. The sweet taste of the strawberries combined with a hint of rum made her mouth water.

She turned on the stove and started to melt the butter in the skillet, watching in anticipation as the slices slid across the pan.

“What’s this?”

Not expecting Rhythm’s voice so close, Sweet Pea’s sights jerked back to the counter, where the taller skeleton stood over the cup of rum.

“YOU CAN’T HAVE ANY,” Blue retorted, shoving his brother rather roughly.

Only he shoved him a little too hard, because Rhythm had toppled head first into the alcohol.

For a second Sweet Pea panicked, but she breathed a sigh of relief the very next second when Rhythm flashed to the kitchen table, coughing harshly.

“Not cool, brother,” he rasped before standing up, rum dripping from his clothes. And then he
teleported again only an inch away from where he stood.

Then he fell on his skeleton-butt. “Oh shit…”

And then he passed out.

And that was when Sweet Pea panicked.

“Oh shit…!”

Of course there was no response. She turned off the burner and whipped around to the table, where Blues already stood in front of him with a scowl.

“AGAIN?!”

“That rum was overproof! Blues, do bitties get alcohol poisoning?!”

“ALCOHOL... poisoning ?”

The way his sockets narrowed and lowered tone of voice told Sweet Pea that she had better choose her next words carefully.

“It only happens if you have way too much! We should go see a doctor! Who do you go to?”

“This again…” he muttered with an agitated sigh. “I’m sure everything will be all right. He has slept through such endeavors before.”

“But—"

“**We are n o t going to the doctor with you.**”

That was an entirely new tone, and it was the most intimidating sentence she had ever heard in her life.

“Isn’t there anything I can do?” she squeaked, hovering over the table. Bells was going to *kill* her when she found out, but only if Blues didn’t do it first!

Although still irritated, the look on Blues’ face softened enough for her not to fear immediate bodily harm.

“I APOLOGIZE. WE ARE NOT ACCUSTOMED TO MANY HUMANS, AND YOU HAVE GIVEN US NO REASON TO SUSPECT YOU. STILL, MY STANCE REMAINS THE SAME.”

“May I at least call?”

He blinked—something that Sweet Pea still had yet to figure out *how* — and pondered the question for a moment.

“**IF YOU FEEL THAT STRONGLY, THEN I SUPPOSE.**”

Sweet Pea dove for her phone quicker than a kid on birthday cake and began searching for a monster doctor. She tapped on the first relevant clinic listed and held her breath as the dial tone rang. And rang. And *rang*. She began pacing back and forth within the kitchen.

*Click!* “Hello, West Side Monster Clinic.”
“Yes! Hello! I need to know if bitties are susceptible to alcohol poisoning! He just passed out and I don’t know what to do—”

The gurgly voice interrupted her. “Did you say ‘bitty’?”

“I—yes?”

“We’re not equipped to handle bitties here. I’ll give you the number for Mama Cry’s and she can answer for you, okay?”

“Okay…” She couldn’t blame them for being an average monster clinic, but a twinge of disappointment hit her as she took down the number. After the receptionist wished her luck, she took a deep breath and tried again. Blues continued to watch her in silence as she listened for her queue.

“Momma Cry’s Bitty Adoptions! This is Cry, how may I help you?”

The familiar voice caught Sweet Pea off guard for a second, enough to lose her cool. “My cousin is at work and her bitties are with me, and one of them passed out after falling into a cup of rum! Is he gonna be okay?!”

It took another few seconds for Miss Cry to respond. “He ingested too much alcohol is what you’re saying?”

“Yes! Do bitties get alcohol poisoning? Liver failure? Do we need to go to a bitty hospital?”

“What kind of bitty is he?”

This question also caught her off-guard, as she darted a look back to the brothers.

“Um...a skeleton bitty?”

Sweet Pea could feel the sigh coming from the phone.


“I don’t know. Um...let me check.”

She covered the speaker with her hand and leaned towards Blues.

“What kind of bitty is your brother?”

Maybe it was her imagination, but there was a certain mirth that Blues held behind his expression, as if there was a private joke amongst all this chaos. “I BELIEVE THEY REFER TO HIM AS A ‘LIL’ BRO’.”

“A Lil Bro,” Sweet Pea repeated. What a funny name, considering that Rhythm was the taller of the two.

“And he was healthy before this?”

“Yes.”

“Then you have nothing to worry about. Lil’ Bros have a natural tolerance to foreign substances. He should be fine by tomorrow.”
“Are you sure? I was using overproof monster rum. Like, over 120 proof!”

“Monster alcohol is better for him, actually. Like I said, he should be fine. If you’re worried though…” There was a small click and the sound of a drawer pulling out. “I do have a monster smelling salt and hangover remedy here at the store.”

Yes! That way her cousin wouldn’t come home to this disaster and Sweet Pea could forget that all this happened.

“Okay! How do I get there?”

Sweet Pea scribbled the address down as Blues gave her a suspicious glare.

“Okay! Thank you! I’ll be there right away, bye!”

She hung up and began to plug the address into her phone’s GPS. “The store says they’ve got a remedy so I’m going to go pick it up! I hope it doesn’t take me too long...do you think you can lock the door behind me?”

“YES. YOU’RE LEAVING RIGHT AWAY?”

‘Yeah, is there anything you need while I’m out?”

Sweet Pea caught him shaking his head just as she was about to go out the door.

“NO. SAFE TRAVELS.”

And just like that, she was out. He listened as her footsteps faded, and then took the door ladder to push the bolt lock down.

Blues returned to his brother, giving himself a moment of quiet before he nudged his side. “COME ON, LAZYBONES.”

Rhythm groaned and rolled over, pushing himself into sitting position as his clothes dripped with rum, adding to the puddle beneath him.

“She’s gone though. We can finally take a break.”

“Sweet. I’ma go take a bath.” He slurred. Rhythm braced himself and stood up, only to promptly trip over his own feet and fall face first back onto the table. “Son of a bi—“

Blues sighed.

“COME ON, BRO, LET ME ASSIST YOU.”

~~And after a short while~~

Sweet Pea had found an empty parking spot not too far from the address. It was no wonder the lady’s voice sounded so familiar; this was the same place that her and Bells visited after the movies. And unlike the last time, the glass display was filled with bitties of all shapes and sizes. A few of them waved vigorously as she approached, and she couldn’t help but smile and wave back. What a bunch of little cuties!

And this time, the sound of the door bell was drowned out by a huge chorus of “Hello!”
“Welcome to Mama Cry’s! I’ll be with you in a moment,” the monster from before had announced from the end of the shop. Sweet Pea squeaked a small “Okay!” before shuffling off to the side.

When she had come here last, most of them were settling into their pens for the night, and now seeing them so active had her mesmerized. One of the skeletons, who looked a bit like Blues, was muttering to himself as he stacked popsicle sticks on top of each other, as if he was making a cabin. In the other pen, a tall and mean-faced skeleton was bossing around one of the others to meticulously arrange a leaf pile. She heard him scream “DO IT AGAIN! AND RIGHT THIS TIME!” loud and clear despite the already bustling volume. This shop seemed like it was more of a small community than a “pet” store.

“Couldn’t keep away, huh?”

Sweet Pea looked down near the corner of the nearby pen, where a familiar skeleton looked back at her with an aloof smile.

“I didn’t mean to stare at you, I swear it!” she blurted immediately, “I just noticed how comfortable you looked, and I thought it looked nice to sleep in a pile of leaves. I didn’t mean to be rude!”

“Heh, no worries lady. I’m a leaf it be kind of monster. But if you’re here for Firo, he’s been adopted out.”

She would have expected as much, considering that the little flame monster had told her about a family that was interested in him before her prior visit.

“Oh, no, I’m here for some medicine. My cousin’s bitty got into some overproofed rum, so I came to pick up a remedy.”

“Ah, the phone lady. Mama’s gonna have to get that from the back room.”

Sweet Pea glanced over to Cry, who was in a deep conversation with a particularly frazzled-looking customer.

“Do you think it’ll be a while?”

“You might wanna get comfortable,” the bitty acknowledged, taking a sip from the ketchup bottle in his hand. “Last time that customer was here, Mama had to repeat herself for an hour.”

“I guess there isn’t enough room on that leaf pile of yours?” Sweet Pea joked. He chuckled.

“Nah. But there’s a chair near the register.”

She blinked, and he went from standing in the pen to sitting on its edge. He pointed towards the counter that sat across the store.

“Oh, okay-”

And then both of them watched the customer shuffle onto the stool as Cry stood in front of them with a thinly-veiled smile.

“Whelp. Early bird gets the chair.”

She was somewhat happy about the intervention, much to her surprise. “I don’t mind! I’m used to walking around all day anyway.”

“That makes one of us,” he replied. “The name’s Ketch. And you’re Sweet Pea? Heard your friend
say it the other night.”

“My cousin, actually. That’s her nickname for me. It’s nice to officially meet you!”

Sweet Pea stuck out her hand, and he shook her index finger after a second of deliberation.

“Same,” Ketch grinned.

She fidgeted in place, sensing that their conversation had just come to an end. “I guess I’ll take a look around now.”

“Kay.”

Sweet Pea turned towards the aisles and took only a few steps before Ketch called out for her. “Hey.”

“Yes?” she turned to look at him.

“Your cousin. She only has the one bitty?”

“No, she has two.”

“She didn’t adopt them from here?”

“She found them on the street.”

“One has a missing rib, and the other’s really ballsy, right? Brothers?”

“Yes,” Sweet Pea confirmed, albeit wearily. She never considered to use “ballsy” as a term to describe Blues, but in a sense, she supposed he was right. “Why?”

Ketch drank another squirt of ketchup before answering. “How about I give you a tour instead? You can put me on your shoulder and I’ll show you around.”

“Oh, um, okay.”

Sweet Pea scooped him up and placed him on her shoulder, where he nestled into a comfortable position in her coat hood. “She’s not in trouble, is she?”

“Naw. Last time she was here with them things got a little dicey. I’m gonna keep you company just to nip any problems in the bud.”

Torn between asking about what he meant and letting it go in fear of the answer, Sweet Pea mulled on the question as Ketch instructed her where to start.

They began near the individual pens that lined the wall. Sweet Pea waved and said hello to some of the more sociable ones while Ketch introduced her, and then they moved into the aisles with the merchandise lined in neat rows. Most of it seemed like she had stepped into a doll furniture store, with neat little swings, soft couches and beds, and sets of clothes in various sizes. There was even a small dressing room, complete with an “empty/occupied” sign hanging from its door.

“There’s Mama’s Softy,” Ketch remarked as he pointed to the pajama-clad skeleton draped on top of a rack of clothes. Said skeleton gave him a lidded glare before shoving his nightcap over his sockets.

“Sorry!” Sweet Pea whispered. They moved into the next row.
“So Sweet Pea, got any bitties of your own?” Ketch asked her as she inspected a plushie carrot.

She shook her head. “I don’t. Most of my experience has been what my cousin has told me, and here. I don’t see bitties too much in my town.” Or at all. Since over half of the town consisted of the elderly, the community held a lot of superstition and outdated myths about monsters. It wasn’t as welcoming as she would have liked it to be, but it was her home.

“What do you think of us so far?”

“Everyone I’ve met has been so nice,” she replied automatically. “Even Rhythm and Blues. I know they’re just tolerating me until I leave, but I see how much they care for my cousin, and I can tell they’re good people.”

“‘People’,” Ketch repeated.

She panicked, glancing at him as best she could. “I’m sorry! I should have said ‘monster’!”

“‘People’ is fine. Don’t sweat it,” he chuckled, giving her a pat. “Your cousin’s bitties are an exception. Most bitties are more receptive than they are. Well, they are here. I bet you just gotta give ‘em some time.”

Sweet Pea hoped they would have become friends with her within the limited time she had, but so far that hadn’t gone pleasantly. Maybe Ketch was right.

“Have you been here for long?”

“A few years at least.”

Was that a common time for bitties waiting to be adopted? What did that feel like?

“It’s not bad here,” he continued. “Mama gives everyone all the care they need without going overboard. Can’t get too attached, y’know?”

Sweet Pea held her tongue as a mixture of pity and worry passed through her. She couldn’t say anything to that.

And luckily, she didn’t have to. The moment she looked up from the plushies, Cry came walking towards her in a brisk, incredibly determined pace. The customer she had been talking to was distracted by the products on the opposite wall, and Sweet Pea could only assume that Cry took the first possible opportunity to get a moment’s reprieve.

“I’m sorry about the wait. How can I help you?”

“It’s fine! I didn’t wait long,” Sweet Pea chirped, “I’m looking for a hangover remedy?”

“The one who called, yes. Just follow me to the counter and it’ll be just a second.”

Cry motioned to where the register sat, and Sweet Pea moved as per her instructions to wait. The monster slipped past the swinging doors and left her and Ketch alone once again. A glimpse of green and brown caught Sweet Pea’s eye.

“Is that a terrarium?” She piped, leaning over the counter for a better look. The small ferns and grass lined around the sides of the tank, leaving a large patch of rich soil exposed in the middle. The fluorescent lights did well to illuminate the tank much more than the others.

“Sure.” Ketch scoffed.
“Do bitties go in there often?” She asked, though no tracks or signs of use stood out to her. The soiled looked freshly laid, not yet packed down by the weight of creatures. The scenery could have done with some nice flowers in her opinion.

“Trust me lady, nobody wants to. Including you.”

She frowned, but she got the hint and leaned away from the counter. It wasn’t long after when Cry returned, carrying a small bottle of thick, brown liquid.

“Here we are. It’s strong, and they’ll most likely want to throw it away, but it should do the trick. You wanted some monster smelling salts too, right?”

“Yes please,” Sweet Pea replied, taking a last, fleeting glance at the terrarium. Ketch took this opportunity to jump off her shoulder and onto the counter and offered his hand.

“Nice sittin’ on ya.”

A twinge of sadness pricked at her, but she was grateful for their short meeting all the same. She shook his hand and smiled. “Thank you for the tour!”

“No problem,” Ketch grinned.

Cry packaged the items into a small bag, and Sweet Pea dug into her bag for payment. Her phone must have gone off some time in between her leaving the apartment and now, as the screen flashed with a message from Bells: “How’s everything going?”

“Oh shoot!” she exclaimed under her breath, passing her cash over to Cry. Once the monster handed her the change, she grabbed the bag and thanked them once again before moving towards the exit.

“You’re welcome,” Cry called after her, “Come again some time!”

Once outside the store, she texted back that everything was fine. Because it was—or it was going to—as soon as she got back. Fibbing wasn’t her best skill, and the act of it caused her a load of guilt, but she didn’t want her cousin to freak out only a few hours into her shift.

“It’ll be okay,” she mumbled to herself on the way back. “Everything will be fine.”

Her nerves reached a peak when she arrived back at the apartment complex, standing in front of the door. The whole hall was quiet. She had knocked lightly at first, and after a few seconds of waiting, knocked louder.

“Bluuuuues, it’s Sweet Pea! I’m back!” she called with an awkward half-whisper.

A few more seconds, and she could hear scratching on the door. Ca-click! It was the sound of the bolt unlatching.

“Bluuuuues, it’s Sweet Pea! I’m back!” she called with an awkward half-whisper.

A few more seconds, and she could hear scratching on the door. Ca-click! It was the sound of the bolt unlatching.

She waited just a moment more for the door to open.

“YOU CAN OPEN IT NOW.”

She smacked her head with her hand. Right! Size difference. Blues was going to think she was an idiot!

“I got the hangover remedy and smelling salts!” Sweet Pea squeaked as she entered the room.
“GOOD JOB.” Blues replied.

“Who is this?”

Sweet Pea looked to the table to find not two bitties, but three. Rhythm was awake and looking no worse for wear, staring at her with a lazy grin, while Blues sat cross-legged opposite of him. Between them was a new bitty, looking at her with five eyes and a polite, fanged smile.

“CHARLOTTE, THIS IS SWEET PEA. SWEET PEA, CHARLOTTE. SHE’S OUR NEIGHBOR FROM DOWNSTAIRS.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Sweet Pea greeted, trying her best not to stare at her six arms. How fascinating!

“Likewise,” Charlotte replied with a hint of amusement. “Arachnophobia doesn’t run in the family after all, I see?”

Sweet Pea giggled, thinking of the over-the-top reactions of her cousin. “They tend to help me more often than not.”

“What a refreshing answer,” she admitted, and then placed a card onto a pile. “It’s your turn, Rhythm.”

He looked at the sets of cards that laid out before him and scratched his skull. “Geez.”

“Are you feeling better?” Sweet Pea asked as she approached the group. She glanced to the kitchen counter and was surprised to find that this morning’s mess had been cleaned, complete with the dishes drying on a towel by the sink.

“Yeah.”

“You don’t feel sick? Have a headache?”

“Nah.”

Sweet Pea glanced down at her bag and set it on the table. She was relieved more than anything, but she also felt...disappointed? A little frustrated? Maybe she did burn out her chances and now she finally caught on to the hints.

Rhythm threw out a three of a kind before he spoke again, still concentrated on his cards.

“Heard you went out and got me medicine, so thanks for that.”

The bad feelings evaporated in an instant.

“You’re welcome,” Sweet Pea smiled. Bells could use this stuff for later if she needed it. She shrugged off her coat and turned away, intending to leave them to their game.

Blues coughed. “SWEET PEA, WOULD YOU LIKE TO JOIN US?”

She turned back to them with a bigger grin than a kid in a candy store.

“I’d love to!”

Chapter End Notes
Wooo, okay! An update! I hope I can get back onto a schedule again and into the swing of things, especially since I've placed a deadline for the story. Thanks everyone for waiting and leaving comments despite me doing a horrible job of replying! I'm in some need of motivation, and hearing from all of you helps a bunch.

Speaking of which, what kind of things do you fellow creators do for motivation? I'd like to hear!
The Laundry Room Isn't The Only Thing That's Cold

Chapter Summary

You've been working nonstop, but the laundry isn't going to do itself.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The last two days passed by faster than you could recount. It was Sunday morning as you stood in the living room with Sweet Pea in front of you, packed and ready to go.

“It’s supposed to snow more later on today, so be careful,” you warned. “Call me when you get back home.”

“I will!” Sweet Pea laughed. The two of you shared a solid hug before she looked over to the loveseat, where the brothers stood.

“Take good care of her!”

“ABSOLUTELY,” Blues declared, offering out his hand. You smiled as Sweet Pea shook it.

“See ya.” Rhythm waved once, and he reciprocated in kind.

“Yeah!”

“TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF, SWEET PEA.”

She gave them a thumbs up and returned to you, standing straight.

“There’s one more thing…” she hesitated as she dug into her bag and produced a plain envelope, bulging from the contents that it carried. She passed it onto you and continued.

“I know you’re okay, but I thought this could help you in a pinch with the rent increase.”

Your mouth fell open as you flipped through the stack of twenties within the envelope. There had to be at least three hundred bucks in here!

“No, Sweet Pea. This is way too much,” you pushed the envelope back into her hands. “Isn’t it the slow season now? You need this!”

“I started helping in the florist shop this year, so I’m fine!” she protested, trying to stuff it in your pockets. But you weren’t taking “no” for an answer. Instead you snatched the money and shoved it down the back of her jacket as she squealed.

“Bells!”

“You take that money Sweet Pea, and you spend it on something you want! You’re not gonna use it on us!”

“Rhythm! Blues! You’d take it from me, right?!” she cried, trying to fish it from her back.
You shot them a warning glance.

“Uhhh…”

“We appreciate the thought…” Blues started as he shifted hesitant looks between you and her, “…but we cannot simply take it.”

“Now come on, or it’s gonna be late before you get home.” You grabbed onto a few of the bags filled with Sweet Pea’s special ingredients and lightly pressed against her back. She moved towards the door in defeat, sighing as she took the rest of her things.

“Okaaaay. Bye guys!”

“I’ll be back,” you told them as you slipped on your boots. Rhythm nodded as Blues echoed a confirmation, and you followed Sweet Pea to her jeep. Once the two of you stuffed the trunk with her spoils, you fished the envelope out of her jacket to properly return it to her. You stole another quick hug before she climbed into the driver’s seat.

“Love you, be safe!”

“I will! Love you!”

You stepped back onto the sidewalk, and with a fleeting moment of contentedness laced with sadness, watched your cousin’s old jeep trail down the road and out of sight. You sucked in a deep breath of cold air and exhaled, nice and slow.

You needed this visit. It was only a shame that you couldn’t spend the whole time with her.

You trudged back into the building and into the apartment, where the brothers had split to do their own thing in the living room.

“Welcome back,” Blues called as soon as he saw you. Smiling became a reflex to his greeting by now, and as soon as you shrugged off your boots, you made a beeline to the loveseat. Curling up against the seat’s arm, you sighed again as he sat on your shoulder and nuzzled your neck. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah.” It was the only thing you could really think to say.

Rhythm joined you, sitting on top of your knee. “You sure?”

“Yeah. Thanks again for letting her stay.”

They hummed in appreciation as you brushed your fingers against their backs.

“You’re not too lonely?” Blues suggested quietly against your ear.

“Not when I have you guys,” you replied with a playful smile. “Is there anything you want to do today? It’ll be the only day I have off for a while.”

“Don’t care. As long as it’s with you, Babe.” Rhythm teased. Despite the obvious flirtation, he had a point.

“Well, if you’re okay with doing nothing, then that’s what we’re gonna do for a bit.” You simply wanted to relax.

And boy, you sure were glad that you had the chance, because Thanksgiving week was hell.
You ran a full twelve days of work to start. Holiday weddings were popular for the obvious reasons, and that meant a whole lot of dresses being sent to alterations. When the ticket rack began to be just as stuffed as the sample racks on the floors, all of you knew that impending dressmageddon had come.

Your hours were extended from the regular eight hour shift to ten hours a day, and for the most part you were confined to the machines. You dreamt in chiffon, swam in silk, and at one point tripped over a bolt of taffeta. Frank, being the best damn mannequin monster he was, changed silhouettes so often that you caught him on several occasions trying to remember what his original shape had been, then backing you up with delicate work meant for hand sewing. That left Bethany in charge of the constant flow of fitting appointments and schedule-keeping, picking up any quick alterations in the downtimes.

And that didn’t account for the floor, where the rest of your coworkers were running—literally running—for their clients. Watching them was like watching a chaotic and awkward ballroom dance, with wedding dresses being swung and twirled around, fluffed out, tried on, and tucked back into their vinyl garment bags in a matter of minutes. You were lucky enough to have a lunch break. The floor workers sometimes didn’t.

Suffice to say that everyone was exhausted. The boss was generous enough to provide free sandwiches and drinks to help through the week accompanied by a pep talk of the day. But the real bonus was the sweet, glorious overtime.

And today was the last day of your work marathon. The Thanksgiving night sale. Holiday pay on a half day was the best. Exhausted but grateful to come home, even though it was at one in the morning, made you overly satisfied to be staring at the peeled paint and faded numbers of your apartment door. You leaned your head against the surface and sighed in contentment. Obviously you’d be more comfortable once you were inside.

When you entered, you were greeted with a rare sight of a tired but otherwise smiling Blues sitting on the loveseat. The hushed sounds of your laptop playing out an episode of his favorite drama filled the silence.

“I’m home,” you half whispered.

“Welcome back. I’m glad you’re safe,” he replied as he teleported to your shoulder, nuzzling your neck.

“Where’s Rhythm? Asleep?”

“He left for bed a few minutes ago.”

“Wanna join him? I know I do.”

“Very much so,” he yawned.

And with that, the two of you shut off the lights and trudged down the hall to the bedroom, where Rhythm had taken his usual place on the pillow. You changed into your pajamas and not-too-gracefully dove into bed with your skeleton roommates. Ahh, yes. This was the life…

You drifted off to sleep within minutes.

When you awoke the next morning, it was to Rhythm flipping through your old paperback dictionary at the foot of the bed. He moved to your side the moment you sat up.
“Hey Babe. Missed you last night,” he greeted as you reached for your glasses, “How was work?”

“It was busy, but Reyna stopped in. That was fun. Apparently she can’t find good dresses to fit Charlotte for her wedding, so I told her I’d help her out.” you commented. It was kind of amazing that Reyna was able to sneak Charlotte into the store without the managers noticing. You’d have to ask her about it later.

“You’re okay with her?”

“I’m getting better,” you admitted, smiling. “Taking measurements will be the most difficult part, but talking to her has gotten easier.”

The warmth in his smile spread to your chest.

“You got this.”

You brushed your fingers against his back lightly. “Yeah.”

Just then it occurred to you that the sunlight was awfully strong for morning time. You probably slept till noon!

“Crap. You guys are probably starving.”

You motioned to get up. The next thing you knew, Rhythm countered by pinning your wrists down to the bed. The stream of his magic circling against your skin felt like a live current, but instead of shocking you it felt like a gentle contact.

“Nope. You stay there. I’ll be back.” he said with a playful grin.

“Okay…?”

Satisfied that you weren’t leaving your spot, Rhythm retracted his magic, and moved off the bed into the hallway. And it made you curious as hell. You rubbed your wrists and peered past the door as best you could.

That wasn’t the first time you’ve touched magic, but it was certainly the longest. At most they would use it to pull you in a direction or secondhand when they were on edge. Most times it would be too quick for you to get any tangible feeling other than the force that came with it. Rhythm did say that it was based on intent, so maybe it would have felt different if he had meant to hurt you? You weren’t exactly dying to test out your theory. And you doubted neither of them would be willing to try it out on you either. The subject did pique your interest though, and you began to think about what other wonders monsterkind held.

It wasn’t too long before the brothers appeared in small blinks. It looked like Blues had been hauling around a food container, while Rhythm trailed behind him, hugging your thermos.

“ONE...MORE...TIME!!!” Blues hollered, and you watched as they piled the thermos on top of the container before blinking out of sight and reappearing onto the nightstand.

“Are you guys okay?” you asked, reaching over to catch the thermos before it rolled off the table.

“GOOD. MORNING. MAIDEN!” Blues huffed between breaths as he leaned against the container. Still, he smiled at you as if he didn’t just haul twice his bodyweight across the apartment. Rhythm seemed no better, opting to grin even though you could plainly see how much he was trying to
control his breathing.

“Breakfast,” he stated.

“For me?”

Both of them nodded. The container was warm to the touch, and the moisture fogged up your glasses the moment you popped off the lid. The smell of eggs hit you first. And when the moisture evaporated, you were left looking at a batch of fluffy scrambled eggs and toast.

You looked over to them.

“You made this?”

“YES.”

“Both of you did?”

Rhythm shrugged.

Blues untied the fork and washcloth from his body and offered them to you. “TRY THEM.”

They looked normal. There wasn’t anything off about the smell. Just in case, you wiped the slate clean of what you thought scrambled eggs should taste and took a moderate sized bite.

You were pleasantly surprised when you tasted perfectly average eggs.

“It’s good,” you commented.

Blues pumped his fist in the air, grinning like a maniac. “YES!”

You were even more surprised and equally elated to find coffee in your thermos. Truly they loved you.

“Have either of you eaten yet?”

“We did when we first made the stuff.”

“You’ve been exhausted lately, so we thought we could make a meal for you for once,” Blues said as he made his way over to the bed.

“Thank you,” you murmured, “This is the first time anyone’s given me breakfast in bed. Are you sure you guys don’t want any?”

“It’s all for you, Babe.”

Given that it was almost lunchtime anyway, you’d make it up to them after you got up. “Okay.”

“So, uh…” Rhythm started as he scratched the back of his skull. “We’ve been looking for a way to get some extra cash these past few days.”

Oh? This was news to you.

“Cash for what?”

“WE WANT TO START HELPING YOU PAY FOR LIVING EXPENSES. IT’S THE LEAST WE CAN DO.”
“But you guys barely take up any room. Hell, I’d say living here was an inconvenience for you. You know, with everything being human-sized and all.”

Blues put his hands on his hips and gave you a stern look. “IT’S NOT AN INCONVENIENCE. PLUS YOUR RENT WENT UP A SUBSTANTIAL AMOUNT, YES? THAT SHOULD BE OUR RESPONSIBILITY.”

You couldn’t argue with that, and instead took another bite of eggs.

“Problem is, finding work is kinda tough for a bitty,” Rhythm continued.

“That’s okay. I really don’t mind. It’s tough getting a job for anybody, let alone monsters.” And it was doubly so for bitties, who didn’t even have rights.

“But we do mind,” Blues countered. “So we’re going to continue searching until we find something. In the meanwhile, could you keep a watchful eye for us?”

“Yeah, of course I can,” you smiled. “So what brought this about?”

“We’ve been thinking about it for a while now, and well...seeing Sweet Pea try to give you that money was kinda a blow to our pride.”

You chuckled. “I’m sure she didn’t mean to do that.”

“Regardless, it was a good opportunity to scout out our chances.”

“You can take your time, okay? We should be fine with all the overtime I just put in as long as nothing crazy happens.”

“You should be careful too, Maiden,” Blues stressed quietly. “Don’t work yourself to exhaustion.”

“I’m okay,” you replied. You were tired as hell, but you weren’t about to drop dead.

Silence filled the room as the pair gave you pointed looks. You averted your eyes to the nice cup of coffee you just poured yourself.

“I do have to do laundry today. And Charlotte may be coming over this afternoon,” you muttered before taking a sip.

Rhythm slapped his hand over his face while Blues sighed.

“Uh huh.” Came Rhythm’s skeptic reply.

You shrugged, hiding a grin behind your cup, and continued with your breakfast.

After you got out of bed and officially started the day, Rhythm had informed you that while you were in the shower, he took the liberty of rescheduling Charlotte’s fitting to tomorrow.

“Just chill today,” he said. But that wasn’t going to get you any clean underwear, so you insisted that you would do the laundry.

“The hardest part is dragging stuff up and down the stairs. It’s literally one of the easiest chores I can do,” you countered. “Don’t you guys have laundry too?”

“We did it a few days ago.”
“Really?”

“Even dried it under the lamp in the bedroom,” Rhythm explained, smirking.

How did you not notice that? Shit, maybe you were reaching your limit. But that didn’t mean you were giving up.

“That’s great, but I still need to clean mine, so that’s what I’m gonna do. I’m coming back up anyway. It’s too cold to sit down there.”

Rhythm shrugged. “Suit yourself, Babe.”

“I will, with clean clothes thank you very much!”

“Don’t let me tie you up.”

“I just wanna dress the issue while I can, you know?”

“Yeah, I understand.”

“MAIDEN GO.”

Laughing, you retrieved the laundry soap and clothes and headed down to the basement. Just as expected, the winter had seeped into the room without much of an effort. You were pretty sure the only reason the landlord kept the lone kerosene heater in the middle of the room was to keep the pipes from freezing. And because of that, you stuffed your laundry into the washer and proceeded to hightail it back upstairs.

It was only when you came back for the drying cycle that you noticed a cage wedged between the machines and the wall.

At first you didn’t think anything of it; the cage had been draped with a faded, ragged towel and the room was quiet, save for the machines. But when you accidentally slammed the dryer door, something within the cage rattled. Curiosity got the better of you. You tip-toed to the corner and crouched down, listening for any noise that could give you a clue. It hadn’t moved. You gave it a few more seconds and still nothing.

That’s when you decided to lift up the towel, just enough to give you a good peek of what was inside. You held your breath as a bitty stared back at you with a blank expression that quickly turned to annoyance.

“... Who the fuck are you?”

You would have answered faster, but you were distracted by how incredibly messed up he was. Knicks and cuts everywhere on his yellowed bones. Dirt smudged on his face and his torn jacket. Were his teeth sharpened or did they grow that way? To top it all off, a dog chain locked onto his ankle bone trailed across the cage floor and connected to the bars.

“Are ya fuckin’ stupid?” he snarled, flipping the bird with both his hands. His right pinky finger was missing. “Whadd’ya want?”

“Nothing,” you replied automatically.

“That’s not how you scrimp. Yer lettin’ the warm air out.”

You brushed off his blatant rudeness as his way of self defense. “You look like you’ve seen better
days. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Yer the one who got hit by the ugly train. Now get outta my space.”

“Who put you down here?” you asked. His “owner”, whoever it was, gave him the bare minimum in the cage. The smell of smoke clung to everything, even the metal. Some musty newspapers lined the floor along with a half-eaten bowl of pellets and a hamster water bottle hooked to the side. A small padlock kept the door bolted shut.

“None of yer’ goddamn business, bitch!” he spat as he lunged at the bars. The familiar spark of energy lit his left socket, glowing a bright red.

Knowing better than to press your luck, you rose your hands up in surrender. “Fine.”

“ I’l l r i p y e r f u c k i n’ f i n g e r s o f f i f y o u e v e n t h i n k a b o u t m e s s i n’ w i t h m e ! ”

“I’m not messing with you.”

“ Keep y e r ’ g o d d a m n p i t y t o y e r s e l f ! I d o n ’ t w a n t n o t h i n ’ f r o m y a ! ”

“Whoa, okay. You’ve established that,” you replied, leaning away. “How about you calm down for a second?”

But it only made him worse. “ F u c k i n’ l e a v e ! ”

You saw the familiar pattern of dog skulls materializing behind him, and the only action you could think of was to jerk the towel back over the cage. The room became quiet again.

Not knowing what else to do, you headed back upstairs.

“I WAS BEGINNING TO WONDER WHERE YOU WENT!” Blues commented as he smiled at you. His smile fell when he noticed the perplexed look on your face. “What’s wrong?”

You bit your lip. “Have you met any other bitties besides Charlotte in the apartment?”

“No, Charlotte is the only one I’ve seen. What makes you ask?”

“What about you, Rhythm?”

“Nope.”

“Well, I just did. He’s locked in a cage and he looks like he’s been through a wood chipper. And I pissed him off, too.”

Blues tilted his head in thought. “In the laundry room?”

“He seemed like an asshole, but it might be because I’m a human,” you admitted. “Do you think you guys could talk to him when I go down for the laundry?”

They looked at each other for a moment. Rhythm shrugged. “Yeah, Babe. We can try.”

“Thanks.” You said as you smiled, settling back onto the loveseat. Hopefully within the next hour, the cranky bitty would be calm enough to talk to someone else.

And as much as you would have liked to have heard the conversation for yourself, you didn’t get the chance.
Going back downstairs wasn’t a problem. Although the brothers were hesitant, they were more curious about what you had described to them. You were more concerned about whether tempers would fly and someone would get hurt. Either way it was agreed that you would keep out of sight until you were given the okay. It was easy enough for you given that the dryers jutted out much farther than the cage, making it a mini wall.

You pointed out the cage in the corner before setting them onto the floor and gathering your laundry. You had pulled the last bunch out into your hamper when you glanced over just in time to see Rhythm lift up the towel.

Quiet followed. Then you heard the caged bitty’s gravelly voice.

“Well well well, look what the cat dragged in .”

A split second of stony silence changed the mood from unsure to threatening. And then you heard Rhythm.

“Hey Babe, why don’t you go back upstairs?”

You never heard Rhythm’s voice so filled with vehemence before.

You hesitated. “Are you sure?”

“Trust us,” he replied.

You hoped they wouldn’t kill him. But you did trust them. And because of that, you took the laundry and left.

And that’s when the real conversation began.

“So ya survived the streets. I didn’t think ya’s would make it to adulthood either, but ya’ suprised me then too. Lil’ shits,” Edge taunted almost fondly, as he spat onto the floor in front of them. “Got caught by that purty lil’ owner of yers? Fuckin’ losers.”

Neither of them said a thing. The less he knew, the better.

“What are you doing here?” Blues hissed, curling his fingers to tight fists.

“Retirement. Got sold off and now I’m in fer the occasional fodder matches. Easy every time, heh heh.”

Rhythm shoved his hands in his pockets. “The only thing you were ever good at.”

“I can still whip yer’ asses if I wanted. Ya’s even look like a bunch of pampered lil’ prissy weaklings now. All that work he put in ya, gone.”

“We are plenty capable of holding our own, and I’d like to make sure he doesn’t know we’re still around,” Blues threatened, his sockets flickering as slivers of bone began to form around the outside of the cage.

Edge snorted. “Calm yer tits. Told ya, I’m retired . Ain’t nothin’ going fer me if I squeal. Most he’d do is feed ya to the plant, and I wouldn’t even get ta watch. ‘Sides, ya wouldn’t want ta disappoint yer owner now, do ya? Gettin’ all dusty an’ stuff. She know where ya’s came from? Buncha nasty murderers livin’ in her place?”

They told you for this very reason. Nonetheless, Blues dissolved his magic and turned around.
“Let’s go.”

“Really?” Rhythm challenged. “Not even one good hit?”

“Just look at him, Bro. He’s pitiable.”

“Yeah, guess you got a point.”

“Look at who’s the human sucker now!” Edge egged as Rhythm turned away. “Hey! get fuckin’ back here! We ain’t done!”

“We should tell Charlotte to stay clear of here. She might eat him.”

“I dunno about that. She’s a picky eater.”

“Ya’ lil’ shits! At least pull the cover back down!”

Ignoring his pleas, Rhythm and Blues made their way up the stairs and out of the basement.

Chapter End Notes

I don't have much to say other than I've been planning through some things. Thanks for keeping up, guys!

Also, shout out to Goatmom who drew fanart of one of the extra chapters! I adore it! Thanks again!
What's the Plan?

Chapter Summary

Are you willing to save this Bitty's life?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Don’t get involved with him.”

Rhythm’s firm voice caught you by surprise despite your reservations, and you put down your book to fully look at them. The severity of their conversation was as plain as day on their faces, and you got the feeling that you missed something important.

“Was it that bad?”

“Promise us,” Blues urged, “that you won’t go near him. He isn’t worth your time or your kindness.”

You looked to Rhythm, who turned his head away.

“You think so too?”

“We know the sleazeball. Trust us on this.”

Uh oh. You knew where this was going.

“From where?”

“He’s one of the bits from our circle.” Rhythm returned your gaze with an intense stare of his own. "Please stay away from him.”

You were lucky enough to find Rhythm and Blues while they still had a strong sense of, for lack of a better word, humanity. And from the examples they gave you, you could easily see other bitties casting that particular virtue aside for the sake of survival. It didn't come as a surprise that the new guy had the attitude of rusty barbed wire.

But it was freezing in the basement and he looked miserable, even if he was a raging asshole.

“Not that I have any desire to see him, but if he’s from the mill, isn’t that more of a reason to help him?”

Blues gave you a sharp look before replying.

“He is better off dead,” he hissed. Rhythm snorted.

“Doesn’t have much in him left anyway. He’ll probably bite the dust in a couple weeks.”

The callousness in their voices caught you off-guard, and it shouldn’t have. You couldn’t imagine what kind of horrific memories they had about this bitty, or what happened to cause so much
animosity.

“‘You really don’t like him,’” you said quietly.

“It’s more than that,” Rhythm said as him and his brother exchanged glances. “Somebody in the building has ties to that place. If they recognize us…”

“Then they can discover where we live, and we’d all be in danger. Especially you.” Blues finished.

“So this is a safety issue,” you said, allowing the weight of the situation to settle.

You were at a loss. On one hand, that bitty was left in the cold, surviving on the bare minimum and chained up like an animal. But if you were to confront whoever put him in there, you could be playing russian roulette with yours and the brothers’ lives.

Blues’ voice cut through your thoughts. “We can take care of him, Maiden. You don’t have to worry.”

You hesitated, regretting even thinking of the notion. “Are you going to try to kill him?”

“It is the safest way,” Blues admitted. “For all of us. This is something we are used to.”

It was the simplest solution—a cold-hearted, bitter-tasting suggestion that you couldn’t comprehend because the closest you had ever committed murder was swatting mosquitoes during summer time. You held your tongue.

“Babe, please. Don’t give us that look.” Rhythm chided as he slid closer towards you. “How else’re we gonna get rid of him?”

“Get rid of him,” you mumbled under your breath as an idea sparked to mind. If all you wanted to do was get rid of the problem, then what could you do besides kill him?

“Why don’t we take him?”

It was as if you told them that you were joining pro wrestling. Rhythm burst out laughing while Blues gave you the most deadpan expression to date.

“With US? Here ?!”

“Not here,” you clarified, “I mean we take him out of the apartment entirely. Put him in some place that doesn’t have contact with whoever goes to the mill.”

“Kickin’ him out on the streets would make us dusting him a mercy killing. Got anywhere in mind?”

You clicked your tongue. “How about the adoption center? Cry seems like she runs a thorough operation, so I doubt that she’d let him go to anyone shady. I don’t know if she’d even let him be adopted. He might live out the rest of his life there.”

“That—hmm.” Blues took a moment to contemplate. Then a mischievous grin unfurled as you caught sight of the spark in his sockets.

“It’d drive him fuckin’ crazy.” Rhythm explained, sporting a devilish smirk of his own. Nodding, Blues looked back to you.

“Let’s do it.”
And so began the rest of your afternoon, meticulously planning a breakout for a bitty who would rather spit in your face rather than accept help.

Chapter End Notes

YOU BET YOUR SWEET BOTTOM DOLLAR IT'S AN UPDATE!

It's been what, two years? Two freaking years, guys! A lot of things have happened in life (and are still happening hoo boy are they happening), but I have not once forgotten about this story. Part of it was also getting caught in writer's block, which is why this chapter is so short and a tad off-kilter. I'm not leaving you hanging though; it's a double chapter tonight!

To those of you who have waited for this chapter for two years, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for sticking with me. I have a ton of comments in my inbox that I know I'll never get to, but know that I've read all of them and I really appreciate it! Part of why I'm here is because you commented. It filled me with hope on those days, and I finally can get back to doing what I love.

For those of you who have found this story while in hiatus hell, thanks for giving Just a Little Offbeat a try! We're gonna get through this, so sit back and enjoy the ride!
"Rescue" is a Stretch.

Chapter Summary

It might be more like kidnapping.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The morning had come. Your alarm clock chimed its warning bells from hell, but instead of cursing its existence and hitting snooze, you jetted out of bed and smacked the off button within one ring. Go time.

Since the name of the game was stealth, the three you planned and prepped through the night for every detail to make his disappearance seem as inconspicuous as possible: an untimely but unassuming death. First was the alibi. Although you couldn’t be in two places at once, you sure as hell could pretend you were at work when the “death” occurred. No security cameras (thanks for once, cheap landlord) meant not having to deal with the footage. Good old eyewitness accounts were the only evidence anyone could give in your apartments. And since you’ve been doing overtime at work, who would suspect you for going out a little earlier than usual?

From there, you had worked on the “proof”. You gathered up dust from the vacuum and sifted the large debris out (and the leftover glitter from your mother’s visit, that was a pain) to have a finer, more realistic pile to stash into the cage. Blues then went over it with a fine tooth comb. Literally and figuratively.

“MAIDEN, THIS IS THE FINEST FAKE DUST I HAVE EVER SEEN,” Blues stated after an hour’s work. You had just scooped the neat pile into a small plastic bag.

“Thanks, I guess?”

Also stuffed inside your bag were a few bobby pins to pick the lock, a clean sock, and a roll of packing tape.

You weren’t the only one to stock up on items. Blues gathered a scrap of fleece no bigger than a nickel, and a strand of yarn that he had neatly coiled and placed around his shoulder. For Rhythm, a familiar rag you had seen them carry around on rare occasions, wrapped around his forearm.

You swallowed your nerves and rehearsed the plan as you showered.

Check for any potential witnesses. Pick the lock. Restrain the bitty. Get the hell out of there and onto the closest train to Mama Cry’s. Dump the payload. Go to work with the brothers. Return home and don’t open the door for a week.

Breakfast was quick and quiet as the three of you went over the details again.

“Babe, one more thing.”

You looked at Rhythm as you downed the last of your coffee.
“If he gives us any surprises, we’ll dust him for real.”

You gulped.

“THERE IS TOO MUCH AT STAKE,” Blues added. “WE REFUSE TO LET ANYTHING HAPPEN THAT COULD PUT ALL OF US AT RISK.”

When it came down to it, you understood. You didn’t like the ultimatum, but no one was asking you to like it. You just had to make this operation as smooth as possible, and no one would get hurt.

“Okay.”

That was that. You took your phone and triple-checked your bag before putting on your coat. Rhythm slipped into your hood as Blues settled on your shoulder, and off to the basement you went.

The stairwell was quiet, filled only with the noise of your boots tapping against the floor. You softened your steps as you got closer to the entrance and peered into the room. Everything lay still including the cage, just as when you had left.

All clear. You let out a sigh of relief. Now came the hard part.

Not sparing a second, the brothers landed onto the floor and stalked their way to the cage. You took a few steps closer when Rhythm motioned you to stop. Instead, he crept his way to the side of the cage while Blues took his position from the front. Everything became still. The bobby pins bit into your skin as you clenched them in your fist. You held your breath.

Rhythm ripped off the blanket.

It took a millisecond for Blues to pull out the bitty’s soul and slam him into the side of the cage.

“YOU MOTHERFU—” He didn’t get a chance to finish before Blues slammed him to the other side.

“Now!” Rhythm called for you as he wrapped his arms around the bitty’s throat, pinning him against the bars. You rushed to the cage in a few bounds, practically sliding on your knees to reach the lock. Thank goodness you had the sense to bend them beforehand, as you jammed both pins into the keyhole and started feeling the tumblers. You raked your makeshift tool against the key pins and shifted the tension on the bottom, praying that the universe would grace you with a shitty-made lock. The slight give of the plug signaled the universe’s blessing on you.

You did it again, finding the second binding pin in a series of what you hoped would only be three.

The cage rumbled and you struggled to keep your place, glancing up at the situation. Blues had managed to teleport inside and was shoving the fleece scrap into their captive’s mouth. “HURRY!”

You concentrated on the next pin, tapping your makeshift hook just enough to feel the driver slide upwards. You felt the plug slide again and jam.

“Shit,” you mumbled. “Almost got it.”

You tapped against the next pin and felt it resist. Of course the damn thing was stuck!

You heard a sharp clinking and the next thing you knew, Blues had fallen on his back. Rhythm
must have let go, because the bitty clambered on top of Blues and pulled out his Soul and oh God
open the fucking lock! Open it open it open it

“I’m a do to ya like ya did yer da—”

Click! The lock gave way at the same time that Rhythm tackled the bitty and slammed into the
cage. He rammed the fleece back into his mouth and forced his jaw shut, eye sockets blazing
orange.

“You talk too much.”

With your shaking hands, you ripped the lock off, tore a piece of tape, and handed it to Rhythm.
Once his gag was secured, the brothers flipped him over and bound his arms with the yarn. As they
went for his feet, you noticed a problem.

When you went over the plan, the brothers mentioned that they couldn’t teleport him out of the
cage because of the chain, and now you knew why. The chain wasn’t just wrapped; the link went
through the tibia and fibula. It had been there long enough that the bones had been grooved into by
the metal. You didn’t have any tools that could bend the link without taking his whole leg.

Blues met your gaze for a second, “YOU MAY WANT TO LOOK AWAY.”

“Wh-”

A second too late, as the distinct CRACK of Rhythm snapping his fibula made your stomach flip.
The muffled screams turned from barely understandable curses to true agony as Blues slid the
chain down to near the ankle bone, where the break lay.

“Hand us some tape, Babe.”

You did, making it a point to look at anywhere but them. Instead, you took out the sock and dust
out, waiting until you got the okay for the next phase.

One more thunk and the screaming stopped. You dared to peek a look and sighed in relief that he
had passed out. Almost relief. He probably didn’t faint of his own volition, seeing the bone secured
in Blues hand. They nodded to you, and you scooped the bitty up. Poor guy was roughed up twice
as much from when you met him.

As you slid him into the sock and tied off the end, it occurred to you that this was more of a
kidnapping than it was a rescue operation. You laid him onto the floor as the brothers climbed out
of the cage.

“Are you guys okay?”

Blues brushed off the dirt on his clothes and flashed you a thumbs up. His sockets still glowed a
brilliant blue.

“WE WERE SOMEWHAT RUSTY, BUT EVERYTHING IS ALL RIGHT.”

You wanted to pick them up, but the clean up came first. Besides, there would be plenty of time on
the subway for cuddles. You picked up the food pellets that fell out of the cage and put them back
into the bowl. Next, you place the chain where you wanted, then poured the dust into a pile on top
of it. You scanned for any out-of-place details, and finding none, slipped the padlock back into
place and locked the cage.
“Time to go,” you said, placing the sock-sack into your bag. This time Blues climbed into the bag with him while Rhythm took his place on your shoulder.

You snuck a few looks behind you as you left for the subway.

No one wanted to take the first train in the morning unless they had to, and boy was it freezing. A few stragglers dotted the station, but it wasn’t nearly as full during your usual ride. You grabbed a seat that had ample space and took a few minutes to unwind.

Rhythm nudged you gently, "You alright, Babe?"

"Yeah," you sighed. "This was a stupid idea. Holy shit, what was I thinking?"

He shrugged. "You're too nice. Really gotta stop picking up stragglers."

He bent over enough to wink at you.

"I have a good track record so far," you replied as you smiled.

Blues poked his head out of the bag to look up at you.

I WOULD APPRECIATE IT IF YOU WOULD STOP AT TWO. SPECIFICALLY US."

Chuckling, you brushed your fingers against his side. “I think I can manage that. How’s he doing in there?”

“ALIVE,” He snorted.

“All according to plan?” You joked.

“Hey Babe, where’d you learn to pick locks?”

“I used to get locked out of the house a lot,” you admitted. “It happened enough times that eventually my uncle—Sweet Pea’s dad—taught me. He told me my dad taught him when they were younger.”

Now that you thought of it, you did remember Grandma telling you stories of how her sons often got into things they weren’t supposed to touch. You had just successfully fulfilled a family tradition.

“I got pretty good at it until Mom remarried an upper class guy with a nice house. His security alarm called the police when I broke in.” You put your hands up, “In my defense, I waited outside until night, and nobody was home. My brother was at work, so he suggested I pick the lock. She claims that’s why she kicked me out.”

“Where’d you go?” Rhythm asked.

“My brother lived in the apartment we live in now. It was last minute, so it was all he could afford with the two of us. I was still in school, too.”

“BUT THERE’S ONLY ONE BEDROOM?”

You grinned, “Yeah. I took the living room for a while. Before he moved out and left the place to me, there was this foldout futon that had a broken support. It wasn’t a great bed.”

The two of you might have been dirt poor back then, but you had some great memories hanging out
with him on his days off, watching TV or playing old games. He’d always come back exhausted
with dirt and scrapes on his arms from landscaping, so you had to remind him to wash up or you’d
have to clean again. You had some squabbles too, but what siblings didn’t?

“I’M GLAD SHE KICKED YOU OUT.”

You blinked and then laughed quietly.

“Yeah, me too.”

The sock-sack twitched, garnering the attention of all three of you and jolting you back into the
reality of your situation. It was best you didn’t speak of too many details on the off chance that he
could hear you.

Eventually the train arrived at the closest station to Mama Cry’s, and you were off again.

The sun hadn’t broken over the horizon just yet, but the sky began to shift in hue to a dull grey.
Flurries started to fall from the sky, and your breaths puffed out in bunches of steam. You retraced
your steps to the adoption agency without much difficulty.

“What am I gonna say to her?” You muttered out loud as you turned the corner to the correct street.
You pictured an image of a furious Cry, demanding answers for the sorry state of your “rescue”.

“‘Take it’.” Rhythm scoffed.

“CAN WE SHOVE HIM IN THE MAILBOX?”

That could be an option if the store had one, although cruel. That could be the only option if the
center was closed. As you approached the storefront, you noticed that the glass lounging containers
were mostly empty, spare one or two bitties who camped out for the night. The standard
“CLOSED” sign hung from the door next to the store hours. Then you saw another laminated sheet
below:

DELIVERIES →

You followed the arrow to a handle jutting out of the ornate wooden frame. You pulled on it to
reveal a large package slot. Inside was another note taped to the metal.

“ FOR DROP OFF RESCUES-PLACE IN CLEAR BOXES”

That was convenient. She must have had her share of people dumping bitties off. A few clear
plexiglass cubes with some holes drilled on top lay in slot. You took one out and knelt down,
reaching for the bitty.

“I’m going to take him out of the sock,” you said, undoing the knot.

“CAREFUL,” Blues warned.

Thankfully he was still out cold as you slipped him out. You weren’t brave enough to untie his
limbs, but you did rip off the tape gag just before placing him in the cube.

The bitty groaned as he opened his eyes. “...What the—”

“Bye,” you squeaked, shoving him into package slot and releasing the handle. A few muffled
curses could be heard through the wall as you hightailed it out of there.
And to think, this was just the beginning of your day. You still had to take the brothers to work with you.

Chapter End Notes

I know some of you were thinking that Edge here was going to become part of the family, but unlike a lot of Edgy bitties that you can eventually warm up to, this guy is as loving as a thumbtack stabbing into your foot. That and the bros would tolerate him for a day, max.

But hey, Rhythm and Blues get to go to work with Reader! That's something!
You Swear It's a Regular Day at Work!

Chapter Summary

You all go to work.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The adrenaline wore off as you returned to the train, and you plopped down on the nearest available seat with a huge sigh of relief. You did it. Nobody died, and nobody saw you.

Now it was time for work...with your tiny, illegal accomplices in tow.

“Okay, so here’s the deal,” you said as the brothers sat in your arms, “They don’t allow bitties in the store even as customers, so you’re going to have to hide if you’re want to be inside. I think Frank and Ashley will be cool about it, but I’d stay away from my boss and everyone on the floor. I can point them out to you when we get there.”

Blues flashed a wide grin as he saluted to you, “UNDERSTOOD. IS THERE AN EASY EXIT FOR LEAVING?”

“The break room in the back. It’s an older building, so you might find a few openings.”

Rhythm yawned. “What if we just wanna chill?”

“I could make you a spot in my desk drawer.”

“Cool.”

You gently pressed your fingers against their backs. “Are you sure you guys are okay?”

“Of course,” Blues murmured as his grin softened into a sincere smile. Rhythm nodded, leaning back.

“You?” He asked in return.

“I need more coffee,” You replied. If you were lucky you could steal some from the coffee pot at work. In fact, maybe you’d keep the pot running all day. “But I’m okay.”

Satisfied with your answer, the brothers relaxed into your touch. It was finally beginning to feel like a normal day.

Once the train pulled into the right stop, Rhythm and Blues settled into your bag and you made a quick exit. The wind had picked up, tunneled by the skyscrapers and stores, and blew the cold right into your face. You hugged yourself for warmth and slipped off of the cobblestone road into the alley. Frank’s distinct mannequin frame caught your eye, and you waved.

“Morning Frank,” you greeted as he rang the doorbell.

“Morning. Morning, MORNING!” he returned.
“How was yesterday?”

As Frank went into details, your boss unlocked the door to let you in. You wasted no time opening your locker and setting the bag down inside.

“We’re lookin’ at few second fittins today,” Frank stated. The smell of coffee wafted from the kitchenette on the other side of the room, and you reached for your thermos. Blues lifted it out of the bag, and you mouthed a “thank you” in return.

“How many?” you asked. Not that you cared too much, but it served as a good distraction. You left the locker door open just enough for the brothers to peek out.

“Four, I’m thinkin’.”

You hummed in acknowledgment (and in satisfaction of the glorious elixir pouring into your cup), and turned to face the monster fully.

“Maybe it’ll be an easy day today.” You hoped. Oh, you hoped.

The bell rang, and Frank opened the door. Ashley stepped in, teeth chattering, and she greeted both of you enthusiastically.

“That wind is biting!” She exclaimed, pulling off her earmuffs. “We got a lady waiting outside already, bless her heart. I do not want to be her right now.”

The bell rang again, and this time it was Bethany. “Morning, everybody!”

A few more of your coworkers began to file in as the minutes passed by, and soon the break room held about five of you. You chatted amongst yourselves until the boss came in.

“Good morning everyone! Meeting on the sales floor!”

As everyone shifted to move out, you waited just long enough so that their backs were turned away from you. You slipped your name tag off and hid it up your sleeve.

“I’ll be there in a second,” you called to Bethany, “Dropped my name tag somewhere.”

“All right. Don’t be long!” She replied with a smile. That should buy you enough time.

You rushed to the lockers and opened the door, where the brothers waited.

“Time to go” you whispered, “Alterations is the curtain to the right, stockroom is the double doors to the left. When the meeting starts, you have about five minutes to move where you want to go. Ready?”

“READY,” Blues not-so-whispered. Rhythm gave you a thumbs up.

“Okay,” you confirmed. “Be safe.”

They jumped to the floor as you replaced your name tag, and you took a deep breath. You just kidnapped a freaking bitty; a normal work day was nothing!

You shut the locker door and marched through the hallway, praying that they stayed safe.

“Sorry,” you apologized as the whole room stared at you, “Name tag got kicked underneath the refrigerator.”
Everybody had done it at least once, and therefore no one batted an eye.

“Let’s get started,” your boss announced “We got the numbers in from our Black Friday sale, and…”

As your boss went over the highlights of the weekend and the agenda for today, you arranged your position so that you could see the hallway in your peripheral vision. For all you knew, they could have already been in the perfect hiding spot and you’d be none the wiser. It was at times like these where you wished you could sense their souls, too.

“...Remember that the dresses we’ll be presenting today are listed at the front desk!” Your boss finished. “Let’s have a great day!”

She went to unlock the main doors as the crowd dispersed to their stations. You followed Frank and Bethany back to the hallway and into your second home away from home: alterations.

At first glance, it looked perfectly normal. The ticketed orders hung from the rail in neat sections. The order you had been working on previously lay on top of the free-stand dress form by your desk. Frank laid out the freshly ordered fabric bolts onto the island in the middle of the room, and Bethany took to her scheduling book amongst the cluttered desk in the corner. The room had a sort of organized chaos to it, which made it perfect for a bitty to hide.

Back to the grinding stone. Or in your case, sewing machine.

After reviewing the ticket, you double checked the pins holding the hem and pulled the dress off of the form.

When you turned back to your desk, you jumped as you saw Rhythm leaning against your sewing machine, smirking at you. You choked down a yelp of surprise, slapping your hand across your mouth.

He made a shushing noise as he pointed back towards Frank. You shot a quick glance at your coworker, who seemed to be unaware of your predicament, then back to your mischievous friend.

“You,” you mouthed, mock glaring. He shrugged, then made a sweeping bow as he offered your machine back. You poked him lightly before sitting down.

Before you could get back to work, you rearranged the top drawer so that Rhythm had some space to work with. It wasn’t too hard considering that you mostly kept your extra machine accessories in there, as well as a few fabric scraps as test pieces.

Rhythm hopped in, and you began to push the drawer shut—smack!

“Sorry!” you squeaked, “I’m so sorry! Are you okay?”

Rhythm rubbed the back of his skull and gave you a weary thumbs up. This time you pushed the drawer carefully while he ducked his head. You left it open just enough to reach your accessories without exposing him in the back.

Finally you returned to your task, rearranging the taffeta so that you could slip the hem underneath the presser foot. The machine whirred to life as you pressed the pedal down, and soon you fell into the thrall of everyday work. When you finished hemming, you took to reinforcing the buttons on the back as per your last item on this dress’s ticket.

...Aaand finished. Satisfied with your work, you took the dress over to the completed rack.
“Sweetie, can I use your walking foot? I can’t find mine anywhere.”

“Sure,” you replied automatically as you stuffed the train back into the garment bag. And then you immediately wanted to slap yourself for it.

“Lemme get it for you— “

Bethany screamed bloody murder as she pulled out your drawer, and in the fastest you had ever seen her, hopped back and hugged Frank. You bounded over to your desk.

“Oh my god!” She pointed to Rhythm, who merely glared back. “Honey, you got something in there!”

And you, the brilliant mind you were, decided to use the first lie that came to your head. “It’s okay! It’s a doll!”

Frank gave you a pointed look. “A doll?” You sure weren’t fooling him. But you were going to double down anyway.

“A doll! I’m using it to make clothes for my bitties at home!”

“It blinked at me!”

“It’s one of those dolls that can blink when you move it, you know?”

You hoped to sweet heaven that: A, Rhythm would forgive you for the atrocity you were about to commit, and B, that he was picking up on what you were throwing down.

Bethany and Frank let you pass as you moved to the drawer and picked Rhythm up by the torso.

“See?” You pressed, gently moving Rhythm’s arm about, “It’s ball-jointed, got it off the internet for a good price.”

Rhythm lay still throughout your demonstration. You had the feeling that this was going to go on the rule list as soon as you got home.

“It gives me the willies,” Bethany shuddered.

Frank said nothing, but his felted eyebrow was raised sky high.

And then your boss poked her head through the curtain. “What’s going on in here?”

Did you have a burial plot yet? Because you could just die.

“It’s nothing,” Bethany laughed, “Hey, come here and look at this doll!”

So your boss rounded the corner of the desk and joined the party. “What is that?”

You went through your spiel again. Your boss’s reply? “It looks like a Halloween decoration!”

This was awful. You faked laughed, “Yeah, I guess so,” and that seemed to be the end of it.

“You can take it out during break, but I don’t want to see it again while you’re working,” She stated. “We have a busy day ahead!”

“Yes ma’am.”
The crowd dispersed, with your boss leaving back to her office, Bethany to the desk on the other side, and Frank cutting up tulle at the counter.

You apologized to Rhythm again, feeling like this was the millionth time today. He brushed a skeleton kiss against your finger and shook his head. And from there, he jumped off your desk and disappeared from view.

There wasn’t much time to worry, as one of the floor associates asked you to join her on the floor not two minutes later. You measured and pinned the sides for the bride-to-be’s gown, congratulating her on finding “the dress” and giving her estimates. After taking down the details, you escorted her to an empty fitting room and waited.

...Was that Blues underneath the mannequin?

You didn’t get a chance to look. The bride asked for assistance, so you went in to help.

Once you acquired the dress and sent the (now properly clothed) bride off with her information, you returned to alterations. You tagged the garment bag and placed with the other new orders, just in time for Ashley to pop in.

“Hey girl, what size are you?”

“It depends on what it is. Why do you ask?”

She hugged her clipboard to her chest as she entered, looking somewhat out of breath. “You know the fashion show we’re supposed to do today? Some of our volunteers cancelled because MTT’s Top Model auditions rolled into town.”

“Really? This last minute?”

She nodded, flipping her clipboard around to reveal a list of crossed out names and dresses.

“For real. I asked the boss and she said okay. Think you can help me out?”

You had to keep a tight schedule with your commissions, but it wasn't every day you got to wear a wedding dress. "Yeah! When do you need me?"

“We’re starting at noon so we can hit the lunch rush,” she explained. The two of you went over the details, and she wrote down your size.

“Frank!” Ashley called, “You want in on this? I know you can work that body down the catwalk!”

He snorted. “With the best of ‘em! Give me your worst!”

Knowing Ashley, she would take him up on that offer.

“We’re gonna kill ittt~!” She sang as she wrote on the clipboard. “This is going to be so much fun! Thanks guys!”

With her information in hand, Ashley darted back out to complete her mission.

In the meanwhile, you helped Bethany arrange appointments and cut new panels for Frank’s current project. Really, you reveled in anything to keep your mind off of how you were secretly excited to show off a wedding dress to the guys. Ashley wasn’t going to let you down. She was the top salesperson on the floor for a reason.
But you were also excited to see Frank, too. The monster really knew how to shake his hips.

Time marched onwards as you continued to work, and it was about 11:15 when Ashley beckoned Frank first. Once she escorted him to the fitting room, she came back for you.

“You’re gonna look gorgeous in it,” Ashley gushed. “Here, I got the underskirt and the bustier hanging up over there. I’ll be back with your headband in just a sec!”

The fitting room door clicked behind her as you finally got to see what Ashley pulled; You recognized it immediately.

The wizard dress.

Obviously that wasn’t the official title. The official title was something like “Floor length A-line Chiffon Lace Trim Dress with Pearls”, but no one wanted to say that mouthful. It came in last year’s shipment as part of the Distinct Winter Looks collection, and you remembered it for two reasons.

First, it was a bitch to alter if you were taking in or letting out the sides. While the lace overlay on the bodice wasn’t uncommon or even that hard to tackle, the designers attached the billowing chiffon cloak from the top of the straps all the way to the corset in the back. If you were taking it in, you had to remove the grommet panels, cut the chiffon, miter the inside corner of the cloak, and sew it back together. Letting it out? Make a new damn cloak. There was a reason this dress was usually made to order.

Second, you’ve wanted to try it on since it arrived at the store last year. The A-line cut made the dress full without being huge, and although chiffon could be a pain to sew, it did a fine job of giving the gown a flowing, ethereal effect. Small pearl beads adorned the lace bodice and trim, which gave the material a subtle shimmer. Lastly, and possibly the main reason, was the cloak. Dramatic, long, and equipped with an oversized hood, it acted as both the train of the dress and the blusher of a veil. You couldn’t wait to try this sucker on.

You undressed, then slipped on the petticoat and managed to clasp together the bustier. Ashley had already taken the liberty of unpackaging and steaming the dress, so all you had to do was step into it. Once you shimmied the dress up and rested the straps on your shoulders, you set to work on the hardest part.

“Ashley, are you back yet?” You called.

“Coming!” Her muffled voice returned, and she was at the door in a second. “Is it the corset?”

“You know it,” you replied.

She entered, and immediately paused. “Mm, mm, mm! Girl! You better wear this on your wedding day.”

You snorted as she handed you the crystal headband. “If they still make this dress twenty years into the future.”

“You never know! Maybe you’ll run into those 'Masked Tuxedo and Blue Knight' guys from the club? Hit it off?” She waggled her eyebrows at you in the mirror reflection.

“I think that was a mistake—” You wheezed as she pulled on the strings, “They probably meant to send those appetizers to those toga wearing girls on the floor.”
“We need to get you out more. Meet new people. Does that feel right? Can you still breathe?” she asked, fluffing out your cloak more out of habit than anything. You nodded. She stepped around and rearranged your headband before throwing the hood over your head.

“I think that does it! We’re ready to roll! I think your clothes will be okay in here— did I give you your heels?” She slapped her forehead. “I KNEW I was forgetting something! Okay, hold tight.”

Ashley darted back out, leaving you by yourself to admire the dress in full.

“Maiden, you are a queen.”

You looked up to see both Rhythm and Blues sitting on top of the divider, looking down at you.

“It’s bad luck to look at the bride beforehand,” you teased. You reached out for them out of reflex, and they teleported to your hands. “Not too bad, yeah?”

“You don’t need a dress to look stunning, Babe.” Rhythm voiced. Maybe he was trying to keep his voice low because of the thin walls, but he sounded so sincere. You could feel your cheeks heat up, and you looked away from your reflection.

“Okay, smooth operator.”

There was a moment’s pause where everything just seemed to be right, with the three of you there. Well, before he started again.

“You wanna know what the best wedding dress is?”

“BRO, I SWEAR TO THE STARS, DO NOT SAY IT—”

Ashley’s boisterous voice gave them two seconds warning before she barged through the doorway, “Put these babies on! We gotta get moving!”

She passed the box to your now-empty hands, and you almost dropped the shoes from the jarring transition.

“Whoops. Sorry,” you said, giggling nervously, “Butterfingers.”

Focusing on the task at hand, you slipped the sparkling heels on one at a time and took a deep breath. You looked at Ashley.

“Okay. I’m ready.”

Chapter End Notes

Remember when Reader said chances of wearing a wedding dress would be slim to none? Psyche! I might attempt to draw the dress for you guys later, but for now you can find a very similar dress online!

A few of you might remember Ashley and her reference to the Halloween club party from the Chapter 5 extra in Offbeat Days. If you haven't read it, the chapter gives you Blues' experience at the club and what happens afterwards.
See you next chapter!

Works inspired by this: Whispers From the Soul by Galactic_Eden

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