And Day Was Breaking
by ricekrispyjoins

Summary

Marco has been attending summer camp with his friends Armin and Bert at Post #104 of Camp Sina since he was 11, so it only makes sense that when they're looking for summer jobs to help pay for college, they become counselors at the place they spent the summers of their youth.
Naturally, Marco quickly befriends the grumpy, potty-mouthed, (and maybe a little bootylicious) Jean Kirstein. Marco and the other Survey Corps counselors must navigate friendship, feelings-- oh, and about thirty middle schoolers-- on a five week wilderness hike.

Notes

Title from "June Hymne" by the Decemberists.
And you were waking
And day was breaking
A panoply of song
And summer comes...

As always, a thousand thanks to my beta cloudmonstachopper, without whom this fic
would be a hot mess.

Rating is for future chapters (wink wonk)
You can find me on tumblr as ricekrispyjoints :3
The Summer I Was Eleven

Chapter Summary

Marco forays into the world of summer camp!

Chapter Notes

I cleaned up this chapter a little bit, just some grammar things etc. No major changes, but I hope it reads better now!

The summer I turned eleven, I finally convinced my parents that I was old enough to go to a sleep away camp. I was tired of day camp, because it was always the same thing year after year, even with different “themes” to spice things up. I was going into sixth grade: a middle schooler is grown up enough for sleep away camp.

So I did my research, I even sold some of my old video games for extra money, dumped my piggy bank, and seriously considered making a powerpoint presentation to convince my mom that I should be allowed to go to Camp Sina.


“What is it, Marco honey?” Mom said, pretending to fly an ‘airplane’ of pureed peas on a spoon to my baby sister.

“I’ve been saving up some money and I did some research and everything and I um… I really…” I trailed off, getting nervous as their kind stares bore into me.

“Go ahead, sweetie,” Mom urged. Julia spit the peas back out, letting them ooze down her chin as she giggled.

I took a huge breath, and let it out in a rush. “I wanna go to summer camp!” I blurted.

“Marco, you go to summer camp every year,” Mom said, confused. She scooped up the peas and tried again.

I was distracted momentarily by Julia’s struggle with peas, but I regained my focus. “Yeah, but, this year, I was thinking… maybe…”

“Is this about sleep away camp?” Dad asked. "We talked about this last year, son."

“Yeah,” I admitted. “But now I’m going into middle school, and I saved up extra money, and it’s not even that far!” I was already defensive, fearing my parents’ reaction would be the same as it had been every summer. I bite my lower lip.

Mom pursed her lips, but at least it wasn’t an automatic shutdown. “And which camp would this be?”
“Post #104 of Camp Sina!” I announced proudly. “It’s only three hours from Jinae, and I looked up the prices too and it’s only $300 more than the camp I always go to, and I saved up $126 and 48 cents, so you can use that to cover the difference—“

“Marco.” Dad said sternly. “Hang on.”

I stopped, but put on my best innocent puppy-dog eyes expression.

“What’s wrong with park district camp? Don’t you want to see your family? I thought you promised us you wanted to help take care of Julia?”

“Of course I do! I love you guys so much! And Julia is adorable, even when she’s spitting up who knows what or when I have to change her diaper. It’s just… Well, I really want to go to wilderness camp. We go into the forest preserve for park district camp, but it’s not really the same. And Camp Sina has horseback riding, and swimming, and I just thought… I thought it would be okay since I’m gonna be in middle school now.”

“Would you know anyone there, though? I don’t want you to be completely on your own, socially. I know you can be a little shy sometimes,” Mom said kindly. I know she didn't mean shy as a bad thing, and she wasn't not wrong. I’m not quick to make close friends. I’d always been mostly sociable, but I kept to myself a lot, too. I spent a lot of time with friends, but didn’t necessarily feel like I had friends.

“Well, Bert said his parents might let him go,” I said softly. Bert was planning on talking to his parents about it, but he was even more nervous than I was to bring it up. I doubted he had breathed a word of it to them yet.

Dad opened his mouth to say something more, but Mom cut him off with a gentle hand over his. “That could be nice. Marco, I think you’ve made a good point, and now your father and I need to discuss things together. We’ll let you know what we decide, alright? Does that sound fair?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I have a brochure for the camp, if you wanna see it. It’s in my room.”

“That would be nice; why don’t you get it for us after you clear the dishes?” Mom suggested. Julia gurgled again, and that was the end of the conversation for the time being.

I don’t think an eleven year old has ever cleared the dishes faster than I did that night. I wiped down the table, folded the cloth napkins neatly, did the dishes, dried them, and put them away with the motivation of the most dedicated Olympian.

The truth was, I really didn’t like park district camp. I was always one of the well-behaved kids, and since we weren’t getting in trouble, we were pretty much ignored. The other kids really ruined the premise of the camp. It wasn’t a bad program, despite its repetition year after year; it was just understaffed and it seemed like every horrible, menacing child in Jinae was enrolled in it. Bert was always there, and I considered him a friend more than an acquaintance; but Bert and me versus twenty other gremlin children was a tough way to spend a summer.

I heard my parents talking quietly while I brushed my teeth and got ready for bed that night.

“Well, should we call the Hoovers? I don’t want him going all by himself. I worry about him.” That was my mother.

“He’s only ten, Laura!”

“He’ll be eleven in a month. Besides, Marco is a good boy, and he really wants this. My only
concern is that he’s not alone, and that we can afford it.”

My dad yawned loudly. “I’ll look into it. You call the Hoovers, though; Jack always seems to think I’m hitting on his wife.”

“It’s a deal,” Mom laughed softly.

I smiled to myself. All I needed was for Bert to convince his parents, and I was there. *Fingers crossed.*

The biggest draw for me about Camp Sina was that it had a junior park rangers-type program that they called the “Wilderness Police.” I was aching to learn about endangered species, habitat preservation, the whole bit. I wanted to do my civic duty to preserving our world.

I was a very serious almost-eleven year old.

The next day at school, Bert rushed up to me. “Marco! Why did you tell your parents about camp? Your mom called my mom and I hadn’t mentioned it yet and I got the third degree!”

I sighed. “I tried to avoid it, but my parents wanted to know if I knew anyone else going, and you said you wanted to go, too. I didn’t think you’d get in trouble, man. I’m sorry.”

“It was horrible,” he whined, wringing his hands.

“Well, what did they say?”

“I think I’m gonna go,” he said with a bewildered expression.

My heart soared. “Wait, really?!” I yelled. “That’s great! If you get to go, I probably will too! This is fantastic, Bert!”

“Yeah, don’t get too excited. I’m afraid I’m gonna wet the bed or something awful.”

“You haven’t done that since second grade,” I said quietly. “It’ll be great! This is the best way to start my day,” I added.

* X *

A month and a half later, I was eleven years old and packing a suitcase with brand new hiking boots, sunscreen, and more socks and underwear than I thought I owned.

“Better safe than sorry,” my mom told me seriously.

“We do laundry once a week, Mom. I don’t need twenty pairs of socks!” I tried to stuff them back in my drawer, but she was having none of it.

“Better safe than sorry!” She reasserted, pressing them firmly into my duffel bag.

“Ugh,” I groaned.

Finally satisfied with the quantity of underwear I was taking with me, we loaded up into the car with my suitcase and Julia’s car seat and diaper bag.

When we arrived almost four hours later, it was exactly as I had imagined it would be. I all but jumped out of the car, ignoring the stiffness of my legs in favor of the ridiculously giddy excitement building in me.
Dad grabbed my suitcase from the trunk while Mom unloaded Julia, cooing in that embarrassing way that parents do with babies. She was almost one at that point, but Mom was just so thrilled to have another baby that she was pretty goofy with Julia.

I stared at the wooden gate over the trail that led up to the camp center. “Camp Sina Post #104,” it read.

I was stoked.

Dad handed me my suitcase and put his hand on my shoulders to guide me up to the camp. “Now remember, Son, write us letters every week, and if you can call us, do that too. We’d love to hear from you. You know how your mother gets,” he said warmly. He got that way too, but he wouldn’t admit it.

“I will, Dad. Promise,” I said with a grin.

After I was signed in, one of the camp counselors, a tall, blond teenage boy who introduced himself as Erwin, showed me which cabin was mine, where the mess hall was, and then informed my parents gently but clearly that it was time for them to go home.

“We love you, Marco!” my mom cooed. She picked up Julia’s little hand and made her wave to me, too. “Say buh-bye, Julia! Say buh-bye to your big bro!”

I smiled, embarrassed, but honestly Julia’s bewildered, wide-eyed stare was adorable. It was cute how she never seemed to understand what was going on around her. That’s how babies are, I guess.

I got settled in and went back to the check-in desk to see if Bert had arrived yet. Erwin told me which cabin he was in, and I went over to say hello.

I knocked on the door.

A chunky boy with heavy eyebrows opened the door. “You in here, too?” he asked.

“No, uh, I’m looking for my friend, Bert. Is he…?“ I asked quietly.

“Oh, yeah, Bert’s the skinny kid up there, right?” the large boy boomed.

Bert poked his head up from the bunk bed he had claimed. “Marco!” he cried out.

The eyebrows kid moved out of the way so I could come into the cabin as Bert clambered down the ladder. “This place is great, Marco. Thank you so much for helping convince my parents to let me come here.”

The other boy smirked. “First time at summer camp?” he asked.

“Well, we’ve always gone to the local park district camp. Never done a sleep away before,” Bert replied.

“Ah, you’re in for a treat, then. I’ve been coming here for three years now and it’s amazing. We do all sorts of crazy cool stuff; you’re gonna love it.”

“I’m sure we will,” Bert said. “Oh, uh, Marco, this is Reiner. Reiner, this is, well, Marco.”

“Right on, Marco. I’m sure I’ll see you around if your friends with Bertie over here.”
Bert cringed at being called "Bertie," but he didn’t say anything. “It’s just Bert,” I said for him. Only my little sister called him Bertie.

“Oh, my bad,” Reiner said. “So what grade are you guys in?”

“Gonna be in sixth this fall,” I answered. “You seem older.”

“Yeah, I’m gonna be in eighth,” Reiner said. That explains why he’s so huge, I thought. Bert and I hadn’t had much of a growth spurt just yet, and were pretty lanky and short. But Reiner was built like a tank, not really muscular yet because he was only thirteen, but a bulky kid. He was the opposite of shy, that was for sure.

“Well, I’m gonna go scope out the lake; you guys are welcome to tag along,” he offered. “I heard they got new inflatables this year.”

By the time we were back from checking out the lake (where we did indeed find several inflatable water toys, like a huge trampoline, a water slide, and something that looked incredibly dangerous and we couldn’t quite figure what it was for), there were more and more kids coming in.

Back at my cabin, I met a kid named Thomas, who looked a lot like Reiner but a little less chunky and a lot more socially awkward; a boy named Connie who appeared to cut his own hair, given the uneven tufts that stuck out from his otherwise close-as-you-get shaved head; and another boy with an unfortunate bowl-cut named Armin. Armin only hung out for a few minutes to get settled, though, saying he had other friends he was meeting up with.

X

Camp got underway, and after a couple days of orientation to the campgrounds, the camp rules, and the horrors of the camp food, we had to pick which division we wanted to be in. There was the Wilderness Police, which went on daily hikes but also did survival skills workshops at the camp center, Stohess Hall, and had the slightly academic component of learning about deforestation, invasive species, and things like that.

Next, there was the Wall Garrison, which focused on fitness and obstacle courses. They played sports, did hikes, but most importantly, did wall-climbing, giving the division its name.

Finally, there was the most intense of the three divisions, the Survey Corps, which was the only group went on overnight hikes, and focused on true survival skills. At the end of the first week, the Survey Corps would leave Sina and hike all the way out to the Maria Outpost and back for the next five weeks of the camp.

Maybe in a couple years, I thought to myself. Wilderness Police sounded like the perfect fit for me. Bert decided to do Wilderness Police with me, and basically glued himself to me the whole time. Reiner did Wall Garrison, though it seemed like most of the older kids went with Survey Corps.

One of Armin’s friends, a loud boy with intense green eyes, threw a fit in front of the whole camp when his announcement that he wanted to join the Survey Corps was met with concern from the counselors.

“Aren’t you a bit young? Survey Corps is for the older kids, the brave ones with survival
experience. Why don’t you try Wilderness Police? Or maybe Wall Garrison?”

“No!” The boy, Eren, shouted. “I’m perfectly brave enough, and I know how to survive in the wilderness! I can do it! It doesn’t say anywhere that there’s an age restriction to Survey Corps! You have to let me go there!”

The counselors exchanged worried glances, and Armin shrunk down a little bit, tugging on his friend’s arm. A stoic looking girl in a red scarf stood strong, shoulders back, on his other side, though. After a few moments of the counselors discussing Eren’s request, the girl spoke up.

“I’ll go with him. I’ve been to this camp before; I know how to do it. I’ll look after Eren.”

“Are you sure, Mikasa?” Erwin asked the girl.

“It’s fine,” she replied.

Eren fist pumped. “Armin’s coming too, right Armin?”

Armin’s eyes bulged out. “I was planning on...”

“You don’t have to, Armin,” Mikasa assured him. “Join us next year. That way, Eren will be less of a mess for both of us.”

“Hey!” Eren cried out indignantly, but Armin visibly relaxed.

“I think I’ll do Wilderness Police this year,” he said.

So Bert, Armin, and I, along with another twenty or so ten and eleven year old kids joined the Wilderness Police; a tall and somewhat frightening girl named Ymir, Eren, Mikasa and about thirty older kids went to the Survey Corps, and Reiner and everyone else went to Wall Garrison.

After we picked our divisions, we got to rearrange our cabin assignments; Bert, Armin, and I were all in the same cabin, along with the mostly bald boy, Connie. Other than Connie, we were all fairly shy and more than a little awkward. Connie broke the ice like an elephant going into a dunk tank: it was mostly hilarious, and there was nothing we could do to stop it.

The four of us became fairly close friends, especially Armin and I, within the first two weeks.

I called my parents to tell them about the division I picked, and that I had already made some friends in Armin and maybe Connie, and that Bert and I were both doing fine. After that phone call, I stuck to just writing them letters during the designated letter-writing time.

Most of my letters focused on the lastest facts or skills I had learned, something funny Connie did (like when we tried to figure out what the dangerous looking inflatable in the lake was for—that ended with Connie belly-flopping into the lake and spurting up water). I told them that I was having a great time, that I was so grateful they let me go, and asked them to say hello to Julia for me.

For the first two weeks, they responded with a long letter, telling me all the silly things Julia had tried to eat or that she almost said a word, and how quick she was getting at this whole walking thing. After that, it was a lot shorter letters, usually just thanking me for writing and that they missed me.

The camp itself was amazing, for a kid used to park district camp especially. The counselors were great, and I learned so much. Erwin left with Survey Corps, but an older man named Mr Pixis was
our head counselor in the WP.

He taught us about twenty different knots, how to tell time based on the sun, how to read a map, and we even did some archery target practice. I was pretty awful at it, but Bert was a natural.

One of the counselors, whose name was apparently Dr Hanji, was our scientist extraordinaire. They were awfully young to be a doctor, I thought, but Dr Hanji said they were “Dr. Hanji,” and we were a bunch of eleven year olds. We didn’t question it too much.

One little girl asked if Dr Hanji was a girl or boy, because she “couldn’t tell.”

Dr Hanji smiled good-naturedly, and responded that their gender was a super special science secret, and so we should just say Dr Hanji and call them “they.” Some kids snickered, but we all complied.

Dr Hanji taught me everything I ever dreamed of knowing about outdoor science. We learned about geology, meteorology, botany; we learned about medicinal plants, and what species were native to the Wall Forest, where Sina is. I spent a lot of time after the workshop during my freetime pestering them with question after question, but they never seemed to mind. I think they were honestly just happy that I was so interested in science. I adored Dr Hanji. They were honestly probably my first honest childhood crush: I was in science love.

Whenever I told my cabin-mates something Dr Hanji had told me, Connie liked to tease me. “Oooh, sounds like Marco’s in loooove.”

I blushed furiously. “Shut up, Connie. They’re just really cool and they’re so smart!”

Bert asked me once, in a hushed whisper, when Armin and Connie were both asleep, if it was okay to have a crush on Dr Hanji because they weren’t really a boy or a girl.

“What does it matter? They’re awesome,” I replied, as I drifted into sleep.

“You’re brave, Marco,” he replied.

“What? Why?” I asked. He had fall asleep, or at least pretended to, and never replied.

I didn’t bring it up again.

We continued learning all sorts of crazy things about the Wall Forest, we went on daily hikes and picked plants to help cook meals in the mess hall, and I probably got a thousand new freckles in those six weeks.

At the end of the summer, Armin and I exchanged email addresses, and we promised to keep in touch. He also lived about three hours from Camp Sina, but in the opposite direction from me.

We weren’t exactly consistent with our emails, but we sent the occasional meme that’s only funny to eleven year old boys and talked a lot about our ‘research.’ We vowed to check out at least two books per month from the library about something scientific, and that we would ‘report’ our findings to each other.

(The next summer, I printed them all out to show Dr Hanji. They were absolutely thrilled.)

X

I continued going to Camp Sina every single summer after that. I did Wilderness Police one more
time, because I wanted to hang out with Dr Hanji again, and because Bert was still terrified of leaving the safety of our cabin for the night.

The summer I turned thirteen, though, Armin and I decided we wanted to try Survey Corps, to put our scientific knowledge into practice. In the first week, we talked to Dr Hanji about what kind of experiments we could run, or what kind of samples we could collect that would help them out. They made a list of ideas, and we picked our favorites.

The first couple of nights in a tent were slightly terrifying, but after the first week, we thought we were professionals. Nothing could scare us anymore: we were teenagers now, and we were armed with scientific knowledge.

In reality, this knowledge was a lot for most thirteen year olds, but in the grand scheme of things, not nearly as impressive as we imagined it was.

X

The summer I was fourteen was one of making friends. Previous years, I had stuck pretty hard and fast to Armin and Bert. Eren and Mikasa had integrated into my friend group because of Armin, and Reiner joined us most of the time to pester Bert.

The strangest friend, however, was by far Ymir. I had talked to Christa a couple of times, but her tall and intimidating girlfriend Ymir was usually a ‘don’t-make-eye-contact’ kind of person around the camp. So I was understandably shocked when, after Christa had good-naturedly asked how my research with Dr Hanji was going, Ymir approached me.

“I know you’re not making a move on my girl,” she said by means of introduction.

“N-no!” I stammered. “I know you’re—“

“Chill, dude. I said I know. We freckled kids have to stick together,” she told me, wrapping one arm around my shoulders and the other around her girlfriend’s.

“Huh?” I asked. “I mean, I see that you also have freckles but…”

“Allow me to rephrase: we freckled queer kids should stick together.”

I blushed ten shades of red before I could splutter a response.

“Relax, Marco, my son. I just have a vibe from you. It’s a ‘I’m not straight’ vibe, and I dig your style. Let Mama Ymir know if you need any help with the ladies, dudes, and whomever may pleaseth you.”

I was fourteen. I was terrified of this girl. And she just told me to ask her for relationship advice?

“Pro-tip, though: Dr Hanji’s too old for you. I know they’re pretty hot and all, but try going after someone your own age.”

“What? They’re… they’re my mentor! We talk about science!” I defended myself.

“Yeah, science boners maybe,” Ymir laughed. “Okay seriously, you need to lighten up. That was a joke.”

Christa interrupted. “Ymir, are you overwhelming Marco?”

*Christa, my savior,* I thought.
“Nah, just lettin’ him know that I am a safe-space for all his queer and questioning needs.”

“Okay, well maybe you should let him reflect on those needs… er… alone?” Christa suggested.

*Yes, please.*

“Alright. See you around, my freckled brethren.”

I think I deflated when she left.

X

The summer I was fifteen, though, I ended up needing her advice, and approached her at closing ceremonies. “Hey, um, Ymir?”

“Ah, Marco! Come to seek the advice of Mama Ymir, have you?”

When I gaped in response, she said, “Figured. You had that look about you. Step into my office,” she said, gesturing to the lunch table in front of her.

My whole sophomore year, I was pretty embarrassingly into this guy on the volleyball team who somehow had the idea that my name was Marvin. I never corrected him, because I was too wide-eyed and awed that he had deigned to speak to me. (It was usually in history class, responding to a comment I made, but I wasn’t going to be picky.)

I shared the story with Ymir, whose response was to laugh in my face. “Oh man, Marco. That is bad. First, it sounds like you may have fallen for a hetero. Secondly, this bro does not give a shit about your beautiful freckled ass, and I would not waste anymore time or thoughts on him. If he’s hot, put him in your spank bank, but only when you’ve taken out the emotional factor. Capisce?”

It was an overload of information, but I was strangely grateful. She was honest and genuine in her response, and I didn’t doubt that she had my interests in mind, despite her callous way of speaking.

As I stood up, she chuckled to herself. “Knew you were at least a little queer, Bodt.”

I thanked her quickly and hurried away, back to my friends. When they asked why I was talking to Ymir, I just said she had asked me about our research. No one seemed to believe me, but they didn’t press, either.

X

The summer I was sixteen, Dr Hanji actually joined the Survey Corps team, because the camp was short-staffed, and they volunteered. I was over the moon excited. Dr Hanji made sure that Armin and I were in their group, and we turned our squad into the scientific experimentation squad; this called for some shuffling of the groups, as Reiner had initially been in our group, but decided he was not interested in the science side of things. We traded Bert and Reiner for Christa and another girl named Mina, who claimed they were willing to indulge our scientific inquiry.
After the first couple of weeks, it was clear that they weren’t so interested in the science side, but humored us all the same. Mina was always urging us to keep moving, saying that she wanted to get to the next outpost first, and Christa always seemed to be looking for the other groups, but didn’t say anything.

Our group was usually the last into the outpost, and as the summer wore on, Mina became more outspoken about wanting to move forward. We asked her why she joined our science group if she wasn’t interested in the science, but she just muttered to herself.

“What?” I asked for clarification.

“Never mind,” she said. “It’s not important. Just finish up your science, I wanna get to the next peak; I bet the view is great.”

We made it to the Maria Outpost, our furthest point from Sina, just in time for dinner: a surprisingly diverse meal of turkey-mac casserole, green beans, and whatever wild fruits we had found on the way.

After dinner, we made a big bonfire to celebrate the halfway point in our journey. Tomorrow, we would head back toward headquarters.

“Marco,” Armin said, “I have a theory.”

“Oh? About what?” I asked. “Does it have to do with the pH readings we took earlier, because I was thinking that’s probably--”

“No,” Armin interrupted. “Sorry to cut you off, it’s just… It’s about Mina. Why she joined our group.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” I was completely baffled.

“I think she likes you, Marco,” Armin said just loud enough for me to hear him. I locked eyes with my friend for a moment, then darted my view over to the brunette girl with pigtails giggling by the fire.

“No way, man,” I said. “She’s too cute to be into me.”

Armin rolled his eyes. “You’re missing the point.”

“What makes you think she likes me, though? I mean, we don’t even talk that much.”

“I was trying to figure out why she joined Dr Hanji’s squad if she doesn’t like science that much. She came with Christa, so at first I thought they were just good friends, and Mina followed Christa. But they don’t seem to know each other at all.

“So then I thought maybe Mina had a crush on Christa? But Christa is with Ymir, and I didn’t notice Mina ever trying to even be friendly with Christa, but she does spend a lot of time staring at you.”

“But it still doesn’t make any sense,” I admitted. “Why would she have a crush on me?”

“You’re the only one she talks to in this group, she doesn’t like science, and oh look, she’s staring at you again,” Armin said. “I’ve observed the facts, and stated my hypothesis. Now’s your chance for a little scientific method, my friend.” With a wink, Armin got up from the log we were sharing, and left me to gaze into the fire alone. I saw him join Eren and Mikasa and began talking.
animatedly with the two of them.

Not five minutes later, Mina came over to me. *Looks like Armin’s theory has some worth to it,* I admitted to myself. Mina seemed like a nice girl, and she was definitely cute. I just didn’t really know anything about her, besides she liked the views from the tops of the mountains (and who didn’t?) and didn’t have much patience for collecting samples.

“Hey Marco,” she said, tucking her bangs behind her ear. “The bonfire’s cool, isn’t it?”

*Okay, time to play it cool, Marco.* “Yeah, for sure,” I replied. *Smooth.*

“Mind if I join you?” she asked. In the firelight, it looked like she might be blushing. That made two of us.

“Oh, um, go ahead,” I said, scooting over a little to leave more space between us. She sat right next to me.

“So, uh,” I tried. How do you make small talk? “Armin and I have almost finished collecting stuff for our experiment, so the way back should be easier,” I said with a laugh.

“That’s nice,” she replied. “What’s it about? Your experiment?”

I didn’t think she was actually interested, so I decided to give her the short and sweet summary. “We’re trying to test the acidity of various water sources in the Wall Forest to determine which is the ideal for drinking water in this region.”

“Cool,” she said with a furrowed brow. She clearly didn’t think it was very cool. “So, Marco, you don’t have a girlfriend back home or anything, do you?”

I snorted in laughter. Not even close. “No.”

“So would you maybe like to um… shit,” she said.

“Mina?”

“Do you wanna maybe kiss?” It came out like one big word, no spaces in between.


“Oh my god,” she said, rolling her eyes. “It’s a simple question: yes or no? Because, like, I want to. Y’know. Kiss you.”

My eyes were the size of dinner plates, I’m sure. This was it: I was a sixteen year old boy, and a girl I only saw for six weeks in the summer wanted to kiss me. The perfect chance!

“I—Um, that is—Y-yes?” I sputtered.

Her scowl turned to a shy smile. “Really?”

“Um, sure. I mean, we can… we can try?” *The smoothest guy around: Marco Bodt.*

She settled herself on the log a little bit, and turned to face me a little more; I did the same.

Slowly, we leaned toward each other. My palms were sweaty; this was so out of nowhere that I wasn’t prepared in the slightest. I had entertained a few crushes, post-Hanji, a girl at my school freshman year, and I wasn’t exactly over the whole volleyball boy fiasco.
But this—kissing Mina on a log by a bonfire in the middle of the woods—never figured into my
daydreams of how my first kiss would go.

So I was pretty taken by surprise, but tried to make the best of it.

As we got closer, I started over-thinking. Did my breath smell okay? It probably smelled like
beans. Oh no. But her breath also probably smelled like beans. Does that mean it’s okay? My lips
felt like paper, so I tried to lick them, but my tongue was dry, too.

This was not going to be a Disney kiss by any stretch of the imagination.

Finally, we arrived at each other’s faces and our lips met, slightly askew, but more or less in proper
kissing position.

It was a brief kiss, but for some reason we didn’t really pull away. So we sat with our lips just
touching for another fifteen seconds—or maybe fifteen minutes, the way I was barely breathing
made it hard to tell—and then she pulled back, shrieked softly, and ran back to her friends on the
other side of the bonfire.

I was left alone on a log, completely and utterly confused, and overwhelmingly dissatisfied with
my first kiss.

X

The rest of the camp passed fairly uneventfully. Armin, Dr Hanji, and I put together the results of
our experiment, and Mina hung awkwardly close to me, but neither of us were about to bring up
the awkward kiss.

I for one had no desire to try it again, but the way she was clinging to me sure made it seem like
she might be interested. I tried to be amiable, but was also conscious of not wanting to lead her on.
If she tried to grab my hand, I gently pulled my hand back.

After a couple of attempts, I think she figured it out.

The last four days of hiking back, we were all exhausted, sick to death of the food we had packed,
and couldn’t wait for a real shower and something that hadn’t been heated in a can to eat.

Finally, arriving back at Sina, all three divisions came together for a farewell dinner and talent
show, though that was mostly singing and dancing acts, while Connie and his are-they-or-aren’t-
they counterpart, Sasha, went for a comedy sketch routine. Armin and I presented our research to a
thoroughly uninterested audience.

The next morning, I woke up early to go on a short hike with Armin and Bert. We had made it a
tradition on the last morning, before our parents came to get us, to go for a quick hike up to
Yarckel Point. It was west of Sina, so we didn’t have to hike into the rising sun (though most of the
tree cover blocked out the harshest rays).

I got up before Bert and Armin, so decided to walk to the lake first. When I got there, Mina was
standing with her arms crossed, one hip popped to the side, as though she were waiting for me.

“Good morning,” I said amicably. “Why are you up so early?”

“I heard you and your friends say you were going for a sunrise hike. I figured you’d have to pass
the lake to get to the Yarckel trailhead.”
“Uh, yes? Did you want to talk?” I asked, uneasily.

“Why didn’t you like kissing me?” she asked. “I know I kinda ran off, but I was a little scared. But afterwards, you would barely talk to me? And I tried to hold your hand but you shook me off. Was it that bad?”

“What? No, Mina, I—“ I stopped, trying to gather my thoughts. “You’re a great person, really. I mean, you’re really athletic and strong, you’re kind, and you’re really cute. But I just… We’re only here for summer camp, and I don’t really know you? And we won’t see each other until next summer probably so it just seemed… It seemed…”

“Oh,” she said simply. “So you don’t like me?”

My heart clenched up a little bit. “Mina, I just don’t feel like I know you that well. I’m flattered that you like me, but I just don’t know you well enough to have those kinds of feelings for you.” I hoped I was being kind.

“Oh,” her voice creaked. “Well, I’ll see you next summer, Marco.”

“I’ll be here,” I said with a soft smile.

She nodded her head, then turned on her heel and jogged back to her cabin.

Well that wasn’t… it wasn’t too awful.

I stare out at the lake for a few minutes, watching the fog slowly burn off from the weak sun’s rays that filter over the horizon.

“Hey, Marco!” I heard Bert’s voice call.

Turning around, I saw not only Bert but Armin, too. “Look who finally decided to wake up,” I teased.

Armin laughed. “You ready?”

“You bet.”

X

The summer I turned seventeen was my last at Camp Sina, at least as a camper. I knew I would miss the place, but it was already changing so much. With some of the older kids I knew already graduated and off at college or other endeavors, it felt strange.

Reiner had graduated last year, and I knew that was tough for Bert, as the big blond guy (who had really gotten quite muscular since his chubby thirteen-year-old self) had really taken my shy friend under his wing. He became a counselor for the younger kids in the Wall Garrison, so we really only saw him at opening and closing.

Ymir and Christa were only a year older than us, and had also become camp counselors, but with the Survey Corps. They were with the ten-thirteen group, so they were on a much slower pace than us, and we pretty much left them in the dirt. We left them notes at the outposts, just saying hello or if we had found anything cool. Ymir and Christa did the same, and when we hit the outposts on the
way back, we received messages like “a kid wet his pants when I put a frog down his shirt. Christa almost killed me” that made me miss Ymir, but also made me thankful that Christa was there to tame the wildness of the tall girl.

The last note we found was in Ymir’s ridiculous scrawl, and it was sealed with a band-aid, marked “4 my freckled brethren only.” Armin and Bert looked at me with laughter on their lips and curiosity in their eyes.

“Well go on, open it!” Bert urged.

I delicately pried the band-aid off enough that I could read the note inside. I held it close to me, in case it was something embarrassing from "Mama Ymir."

Boy, was I glad I did.

*My freckled baby child,*

*Come see me at the farewell dinner. I have discovered a rare specimen who is 100% your type and I wanna set u 2 up. Don’t question me, just come into my queer embrace.*

*With love,*

*Mama Ymir*

*PS I marked it ur eyes only bc I didn’t know if you were out and about on the town :)*

I folded the letter back up quickly and stuffed it into my pocket.

“What did it say?” Armin asked as the blush creeps up my neck and up to my scalp.

“Just making dirty jokes about freckles,” I lied, blushing hard. It wasn’t outside the realm of possibility; Armin knew that Ymir liked to pop in and bother me, and she addressed it to her “freckled brethren,” so it wasn’t much of a stretch. Armin and Bert let it slide.

I was glad Reiner wasn’t there, because he would have probably pressured me into reading the ‘jokes.’ I’m not exactly a mind in the gutter type, so thinking of something off the cuff would have been really awful and not convincing at all.

A few days later, we made it back to Sina. For the farewell dinner, we all crowded into Stohess Hall. I asked Armin to save me a seat, saying I had to go give Ymir what-for for the contents of her letter.

I scanned the room quickly and found Ymir and Christa at a table with Reiner and a couple other counselors.

Cautiously, as though there might be some kind of booby-trap on the path to her table, I headed towards Ymir.

“Baby Boy!” she shrieked when she saw me. Ymir stood up and threw her arms around my neck.

“How was the last hike of your childhood?” she asked.

“Well, you know I still have my sunrise hike tomorrow morning with Armin and Bert, so it’s not the last just yet.”

“Ah, yes, your romantic promenade into the sunrise with your brofriends. Cute. Anyway, I’m assuming you read my letter?” she asked excitedly.
I nodded, hoping that she really wasn’t planning on delving into its contents here in front of everyone.

“Christa, my love, I’ll be back. I have to give Marco some top secret information,” she said with a wink.

“Okay,” Christa said with such obvious love in her eyes it makes me blush a little bit.

Ymir took me by the hand and led me out of the mess hall and down toward the lake.

“Marco, do you trust me?” she started.

“Depends?” I replied. “If it’s about your ‘love advice’ then I’d have to say I’m skeptical of what’s up your sleeve this time.”

“On our way back with the little’uns, we ran into a day hike group from Wilderness Police.” A grin spread across her face, and I was becoming more and more anxious about what on earth she was getting at.

I made a gesture prompting her to continue.

“And one of the counselors with them was perfect for you.” She clapped her hands giddily. “I don’t know much about him, except his name, and that he’s probably gorgeous if you’re into dudes at all – which obviously is not me but hey, a girl can be objective – and I think you two should meet.”

“Ymir, that’s um… That’s very thoughtful of you, for wanting to set me up?” I began, “But it’s the last day of camp. He probably doesn’t live in Jinae, so I don’t know why I would even bother—”

“But he’s so right for you! Please! He’s so much like your volleyball guy, but he’s cuter than that dude was. And I’m getting a slightly queer vibe from him, which means you probably have a shot with him! Wouldn’t it be fun to at least meet him?”

“Ymir…”

“Baby Boy,” she said, returning my seriousness.

“I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“Of course it is; it was my idea. Come on, I want you to at least see him. See what you’d be missing!”

And with that, I was being dragged back to the mess hall.

“Okay, so I’ll be all discreet and stuff, don’t you worry. But he’s at my table, and he has two-toned hair and a serious scowl on his face like all the time. You’ll know him when you see him.”

“Ymir, what—“

“Just give me the look and I’ll introduce you.”

She took hold of my hand again, and almost skipped back to the table where Christa was.

“Your triumphant knight returns,” Ymir announced as she slid back onto the bench next to her girlfriend.
“Indeed you have,” Christa said with a smile. Ymir kissed her on the cheek, but then looked back to me.

“We had a nice little walk, Marco and I,” Ymir said. “Didn’t we?”

“A pleasure as always,” I managed.

Ymir wiggled her eyebrows suggestively at me, and I tried to discreetly scan the table for two-toned hair and a scowl.

Ymir was definitely right: I couldn’t miss him.

He had an angular face, thin lips set in a frown and thin eyebrows furrowed for an altogether displeased facial expression. I tried to imagine what he might look like if he were happy, or at least not angry, but it was hard when his features were so deeply set.

His hair was indeed two toned; the top a light sandy brown that was a bit of a mop, and the sides were a darker brown, cropped close. On anyone else, it would probably have looked ridiculous, but somehow, it suited him. That might have had to do with the row of ear-piercings he had. I didn’t want to stare too much, but he had at least four little silver hoops on each ear.

His shoulders were broad, but the rest of him was fairly lanky; you might have even called him scrawny if you were feeling unkind. He wore the required camp-counselor shirt, a deep forest green with gold letters spelling out “Camp Sina” with the shield-like logo. I couldn’t see what kind of pants he was wearing, but something told me it wasn’t khaki cargo shorts. He didn’t strike me as a khakis kind of guy.

He looked disappointed to be there at camp, and I had no idea why someone like him would voluntarily work with kids. He gave off a thick air of "leave me alone."

He was perfect.

I gave Ymir the look.

The summer I turned seventeen, I met Jean Kirstein.
Fond Farewells

Chapter Summary

Camp winds down at the end of another summer at Post #104: Closing ceremony shenanigans, bonfire bonding, a ship becomes canon, and a mind-boggling hike.

Chapter Notes

Don't get too excited at the pace of this update; I will probably not manage another 2 day turn-around... ever. Hoping to do a weekly update, but I'm student teaching so that might not be possible. Thanks for reading, giving kudos, etc! Cleaned up this chapter, too. gosh I have the hardest time picking a tense and sticking with it! hopefully it reads a little smoother now, though.

“Oi, Grumplestiltskin!” Ymir called.

The scowling boy looks up from his dinner and says, “Dammit, I told you not to call me that.”

“Well I couldn’t remember your name. You said it with a funny accent.”

“It’s not a funny accent, it’s my name.”

“Well what is it? I promise I’ll try really hard to remember it this time,” Ymir said, batting her eyelashes. I giggled both at her act and out of nervousness.

“It’s Jean.”

_Ooh, that is a nice accent_, I thought to myself. I felt my mouth start to twist into some sort of crazed smile, and I tried to school my features. It wasn’t working, so I faked a cough, hoping that would work.

Jean glanced to me instead.

“This your ‘freckled baby’ you mentioned?” he asked, making air-quotes with his long, spindly fingers.

I blanched.

“My one and only,” Ymir cooed. I almost feared she would pinch my cheeks, like my mom did with Julia when she was a baby. “Jean,” she said carefully mimicking his accent, “this is my friend Marco. Marco, meet Jean.” She added a flourish with her wrist.

Jean scowls at Ymir, but then turned his gaze back to me, softening a bit. “Hey, man. What’s up?”

“Uh…” I really hadn’t thought things through this far. What was I supposed to say? I didn’t know
this guy at all. I just thought he was attractive.

He waited for a response, but when one was obviously not forthcoming, he spoke up again. “You a counselor too?”

“Oh, no, um, I was still a camper this year. Well, this is my last year. Because I’ll be too old next summer.”

“Cool,” Jean said, returning to his dinner.

“A-are you in college?” I asked. Yes, plus one conversation skills to Marco.

“Hah, no. Not really my thing,” Jean replied. “I work as a research assistant in a geology lab though.”

“But you don’t have a college degree?” I asked.

He grimaced. Minus one for Marco? “I tried college, but I wasn’t suited to the academics. I did a year as a geology major, because I thought rocks were cool. I just didn’t… I didn’t get along with the administration.”

Jean returned his features to a scowl.

“Sorry, if I’m prying. I was just surprised that you could work in a research lab without… But that’s so cool that you do! Do you like it?” I asked excitedly, hoping that my genuine interest would gloss over my total lack of social skills.

“Oh, um, yeah, it’s pretty cool. Like there’s some stuff I can’t really do, because I don’t have the training, but… I get to go out and collect samples mostly. And format a lot of data sheets.”

“That’s awesome!” I gushed. Pull back, Marco.

“Is that why Ymir wanted me to meet you? You’re a science nerd, too?”

“Yeah, probably,” I agreed, taking the opportunity where I saw it. Definitely not because she thought you might be super hot and possibly like boys.

“So what kinda science do you do, Mark?”

“I-It’s Marco,” I corrected, determined to avoid another ‘Marvin’ situation. “And I’m mostly into biology stuff, but really anything is interesting to me.”

“Are you one of those people that’s into the squishy shit, Marco?” he asked, putting an emphasis on the "o".

“Squishy…?” I repeated dumbly.

“Yeah. Like you like to poke at plants and animals and things that go squish. I’m not about that life. It better be dead and it better be rock hard. Literally,” he added, smirking to himself.

“Oh, um, I guess I kinda am? I mean, rocks are really cool, too. And there used to be plants and animals in the rocks, right? I mean, fossils and things. And sedimentary rock is just like, dead plants and dissolved rocks that re-solidified, right?”

Jean almost smiled at that. It was gorgeous. “Yeah, more or less.”
“Heh,” I half laughed. Gosh, I was so nervous. This guy was hot and he liked science? I was in trouble. Good thing I wouldn’t see him again for a while. At least until next June.

Dang. I wasn’t going to see him until next June.

“Well it was nice to meet you, dude,” Jean said. Whelp, there we go. End of conversation. It’s okay. It’s probably best that I don’t make more of a fool of myself, I told myself.

“Yeah, you too, Jean.”

I shot a strangled glare at Ymir who gave me two thumbs up, before bolting back over to the table I abandoned Armin to.

“Hey, Armin. Sorry, Ymir distracted me,” I explained.

“No worries, Marco. You give her crap for the crude freckles jokes?”

“What?”

“Didn’t you say you were gonna give her crap for the jokes she left you on the note at the last checkpoint?” Armin asked.

Oh. Right. “Oh, yeah. Well that’s not what distracted me. We got to, ah, talking. About other stuff.”


“You got it.”

“Oh, and take a look what Dr Hanji is letting us borrow!” Armin said excitedly, pulling a plastic shopping bag out from under the table. He pulled out some kind of white cloth, and I realized it was a lab coat.

“Can we wear them?” He asked. “I know we’ll look super dweeby, but it’s our last summer here. I figured, may as well embrace the dorks we really are.”

Part of me was laughing hilariously and thinking “yes, let’s do it!” but the other part was suddenly terrified of looking "uncool" in front of Jean. Jean, who I spoke to for about five minutes. Jean who I would likely never see again.

“Um…” I stalled.

“Come on, Marco, you know you want to,” Reiner chimed in. “You’ll be dork-tastic science nerds. What, worried all the ladies will think it’s not hot?”

It’s not the ladies I’m worried about right now, Reiner.

“Ha ha, very funny. Yeah, let’s do it. Let’s wear them.”

Armin pumped a fist in the air. “Yes! I knew you’d agree.”

“So who’s presenting what?” I asked, and the rest of our dinner conversation was spent dividing up the information and arguing over who got to present the final results.

“We should both present it! It’s our last chance!” Armin whined.
“But you presented it last year!” I quipped. “We always take turns. Just because it’s the last time, doesn’t make it any different.”

“Aww, don’t be like that, Marco,” Bert chimed in. “It’s the last time. It’s gotta be different.”

“Listen to Bert, Marco,” Armin commanded.

“Ugh,” I folded. “Fine. But I get to start the results presentation. You can finish it.”

“Deal.”

Mr Pixis came onto the stage of the mess hall and tapped the microphone. Feedback screeched through the hall. “Hello? Oh good, it’s working.”

We covered our ears, trying to hide from the horrible reverb.

“Anyway, in a few minutes, we’re going to get started with the annual summer’s end talent show. First acts up, get your things ready and head backstage.”

“We’re sixth,” Armin provided. “So we have a few minutes to get ready. There’s only fifteen acts this year,” he added, a bit sad.

“Hopefully this is the year we see quality over quantity, then,” Reiner suggested, slapping an arm around Bert’s shoulders. He raised his water glass.

“To the talent show: may it not be as horrifying as literally every other year I have been to this camp.”

We raised our glasses, the dull plastic clicking together, and muttered a “here, here.”

The first two acts were both a girl with a poorly tuned guitar singing some pop song. The third act was basically the same, except that it was a boy singing. We headed backstage as the boy finished his song. The fourth act up was Connie and Sasha’s infamous “comedy routine.” Some years, they were hilarious; some years, Pixis had to come on stage to stop them because they were so ridiculous and frankly, inappropriate.

This year looked to be the latter type of performance.

“Sash, did you get the invitation?” Connie asked.

“Gosh, no I didn’t, Conn. What invitation?” She asked with fake confusion.

“Why, the party in my pants! Both my legs got invited,” Connie explained.

Sasha faked embarrassment, covering her mouth with one hand and making her eyes go wide.

“That sounds like it might be nuts,” she exclaimed.

“So far it’s pretty good, except there’s some asshole hanging out in the back, and one guy is a real dick.”

The older kids in the audience roared with laughter, but Pixis came in to cut them off.

“Don’t you two have any appropriate jokes?” he grumbled as he took the mic away from them.

“Come hang out with us at the bonfire to hear the rest of the skit!” Sasha yelled.
“We’ve got plenty more where that came from!” Connie added.

“Stop!” Pixis yelled.

Sasha and Connie high fived, and walked off the stage.

Pixis shook his head, and announced the fifth act. “Next up is Mina Carolina, playing an original piano song.”

My chest clenched a little when I heard her name. I still felt kinda bad about how things went last summer. I didn’t know she played the piano, though, or that she composed her own music.

Mina came out on stage carrying a hefty electronic keyboard, connecting it to the microphone’s amplifier.

“This is a song I wrote,” she announced, “so I hope you like it.”

She took a minute to settle herself on the tiny bench, and then plucked out a few chords to make sure the sound level was alright.

She began to play a slow and lyrical piece with a lot of arpeggios and obvious chord progressions, but overall it was a pleasant song. Everyone clapped enthusiastically, and she smiled and blushed profusely as she bowed.

Armin went out to help her take the piano and bench off stage, and I felt bad that I didn’t offer to do it. Pixis took the mic again to announce us.

“Next up is Armin Arlert and Marco Bodt presenting this year’s … science experiment: Thing.”

Armin took the mic from him, and I brought our tri-fold poster on stage. There were a few scattered laughs at our lab coats. I blushed, but Armin recovered for us. “Yes, I see a few of you have noticed our stylish addition to this year’s presentation. See, we now look like actual scientists, instead of seventeen year old summer campers. Oh wait.”

At least our friends laughed out from the audience, and that was enough for me. I smiled, the blush fading from my cheeks.

That is, until Ymir whooped out, “Take it off, Baby Boy!”

I’m certain that a look of unequivocal terror crossed my face. Ymir cackled even louder.

Armin scowled at her, and began presenting our experiment. “This year, we studied the effects of sunlight exposure to different types of mushrooms.”

He began to explain our process, and as he did, I searched out Jean’s face in the crowd. What did he think of our work? As Armin spoke, I started hearing all the flaws with our process. We didn’t have a way to measure the strength of the sunlight the mushrooms were receiving, so it wasn’t controlled like it should have been. All of our results were essentially useless to the scientific community. Why did we decide to do this project? Why didn’t we do that one with measuring the soil composition at various altitudes?

Jean liked rocks. Jean would have liked that.

Jean didn’t like squishy things. I bet Jean hated mushrooms.

But there he was, watching with a slightly amused, not entirely grumpy expression as I pointed like
Vanna White to the steps that Armin was explaining.

Soon enough, it was my turn to talk.

I stepped forward, wiping my sweaty palms on my ridiculous lab coat. Although we had been doing these presentations for four years now, I was still incredibly nervous on the stage. Even knowing half the audience didn’t help me. They were my friends, or they were twelve year olds. I really shouldn’t have been so scared.

But Jean was watching, too. I wanted so badly to impress him.

“So, we recognize that there were a few flaws in our method, but unfortunately, since we have essentially zero funding,” I explained with a nervous laugh, “we weren’t able to remedy these flaws, namely in the concentration and measurement of sunlight that each mushroom specimen received. That being said…”

I then showed which mushrooms grew best in the sun, which did not, and offered an explanation of the basics of how fungi work.

Armin wrapped it up with our final conclusions and I watched Jean’s reaction more closely now that I didn’t have to focus on speaking. He was shaking his head and picking at the dessert on his plate.

“Thank you for listening! Next year, you won’t have to put up with us talking about boring science stuff,” Armin said with a dry laugh.

“It’s not boring,” I interjected, surprising myself. “It’s science. It’s cool.”

“Damn right, Baby Boy!” Ymir screeched from the audience. Jean barked out a laugh at Ymir’s outburst.

Pixis emerged from the wing to take the mic from us. “Thank you, boys. Educational as always,” he said, but he didn’t mean it in the slightest.

We returned to our seats, and sat through the rest of the acts. The only really entertaining one was one of the nine year olds juggling; that kid was really good. Everything else was pretty run of the mill, though I clapped politely at the end of each one.

When the closing ceremony was finished, it was already nine thirty. Stepping into the cool night air was refreshing after nearly three hours in the crowded, poorly ventilated mess hall.

I took a deep breath, inhaling the bonfire scent and admiring the nearly full moon over the lake before heading over to the fire pit.

As I walked over, a voice stopped me. “Hey.”

I stopped, turning around to see who was calling me. It was Jean. “Oh, hey,” I replied, shoving my hands into my pockets.

“Knew you were into squishy shit,” Jean said.

“I guess mushrooms are as squishy as they get,” I smiled.

“I’m glad you mentioned your total lack of accuracy though. Why did you choose that experiment? Why not, I dunno, measure pH levels of water or something?”
This time I outright laughed. “We actually did that experiment before,” I replied. "Don’t drink from the lake.”

“Yikes,” Jean shivered theatrically. “Thanks for the heads up. Otherwise, I would’ve filled my water bottle in there.”

“Hey, don’t knock it. The Survey Corps fills water from a variety of water sources from here to Maria; it’s not all filtered goodness from Stohess Hall like you WP’s have.”

“Damn, okay, Biology Boy. I was joking.”

“But yeah, the mushrooms thing was Dr Hanji’s idea. They’re sort of our mentor, I guess? They supervise all our silly science stuff.”

“Hanji came up with it? That makes sense then. Hanji’s like, the royalty of squishy shit. If it squishes, Hanji is there, index finger at the ready: waiting to poke.”

We both laughed, though Jean’s can’t be described as much more than a light chuckle, or like he was clearing his throat.

After a beat, I decided to ask, “you headed to the bonfire?”

“Yeah, I have to help supervise the younger kids. Don’t trust those shits with fire, man. S’mores are a nightmare with the ten-thirteens.”

“I remember there being some science experiments with s’mores at that age.”

“You been to this camp a lot, then?” Jean inquired.

“Since I was eleven, yeah.”

“You must like it up here, then.”

“Well, I made a lot of good friends up here, and it’s just nice to get away from it all. I mean, I’m from a pretty small city, and we have a forest preserve, but I really like getting away from civilization entirely, you know?”

“I’m from the city; I know exactly what you mean.”

“The city? Like, Trost?”

“Born and raised,” he replied. “It’s cool because we have all these resources and museums and public transportation so I don’t need a car, but it’s also so loud and dirty all the time.”

“That why you became a camp counselor, then?”

“One reason, yeah. The money is a nice bonus.”

“Hah, I’m sure. But, if you work in a lab, then don’t you have a job normally?”

“Over the summer, they like to ‘hire’ college interns. They don’t have to pay them, so I get summers off. I was working for a pizza delivery place, but that sucked and I just ate a lot of pizza and smelled like grease all the time. So a friend of mine suggested I apply for the camp here, and they were dumb enough to hire me.”

“What do you mean, dumb enough? You seem like a good person.”
“I fucking hate kids,” he smirked.

I was slightly shocked by the frankness of his response, but I recovered. “Oh, they’re not so bad. I mean, I have a little sister, she’s only six, but she’s pretty cute.”

“They don’t know anything though. They’re so dumb. And petty. Like who gives a fuck if Timmy took the ball you were playing with? Not my problem. Use your damn words, figure it out.”

“Well, they just haven’t seen the world as much as you have. They need time to develop into cynical, snarky, young adults,” I teased.

Jean looked at me for a minute, then knocked into my shoulder with his. “You’re alright, Marco. You’re alright. C’mon, let’s go stop these little dumbasses from setting themselves on fire.”

I joined up with Armin, Eren, and Mikasa at the bonfire, and we had a good time. It was bittersweet, that this was our last time, all of us together, at Camp Sina. Most of us said it would be fun to be a counselor next year, but none of us knew whether we’d actually all follow through. Would we have summer internships? Would we find other jobs? Take the summer off?

Armin and I went off to find Bert, so we could agree on when we were going out to Yarckel Point. I wanted to get there to see the sunrise, instead of leaving at sunrise this year. I thought it would be a fun way to make it a special send off.

Bert, however, was nowhere to be found.

We asked around, but none of our friends had seen him.

They hadn’t seen Reiner, either.

Suddenly, I had a knowing feeling in my stomach. We had made our way to the outskirts of the bonfire party, so I made my way back in to the middle, where I knew a certain social busybody would be.

“Ymir,” I called out when I saw her nuzzling into Christa and laughing obnoxiously at something.

“Baby Boy!” she called happily. “How can I help you? I saw you two talking, you know. Was I right?”

“Not why I’m here, actually. Has Bert talked to you tonight?”

A mischievous grin built on Ymir’s face. “Did my Baby Boy smell the gay, too? Bertl and that big brawny blond guy left about half an hour ago. I would not go back to your cabin until after midnight. And knock loudly.”

“Oh my god,” I groaned. “Too much information, Ymir!”

“Yet the exact information you were looking for, was it not?” she smirked deviously.

“Ugh,” I groaned.

“So, since you’re here, tell me about how it’s going with Grumpy Pants McBad Haircut.”

I sighed deeply. “Be nice. I like his hair, actually. And he’s actually really interesting. You failed to mention that he’s into geology in your gushing introduction, though.”

“Oh, is he?” She asked. “I honestly didn’t know. I barely talked to him. Like I said, I just got a vibe
from him.”

“Seriously?” I asked, incredulous. “You just vaguely knew his name was something French and that he was hot and that was enough to make you think I would want to meet him?”

“Was. I. Wrong?” she replied.

I bit my lip and looked at my shoes. “… No.”

“Exactly. So you should be saying, ‘Thank you, Mama Ymir. Whatever would I do without you?’”

“Okay, okay. Thanks for the intro. Now I’m gonna go find Armin and pretend I never heard what you said about Bert and Reiner.”

“There is no escape,” Ymir chuckled darkly. “Have a good night, Baby Boy.”

“When are you going to stop calling me that?” I called over my shoulder.

“When you stop being a baby boy!”

Returning to Armin, I told him that Bert left early, and that we’d just wake him up early in the morning so he knows when we’re going.

Armin seemed confused, but he didn’t press for details, for which I was thankful.

I hung out with the trio for as long as I could, accepting that I would probably be exhausted for our pre-dawn hike in the morning, if I even managed to wake up on time.

Sasha and Connie held up their promise to finish their comedy routine, which ended up being the longest and perhaps most embarrassing string of innuendos to which I have personally borne witness.

I laughed, partly out of embarrassment, partly because they were fairly clever jokes, until Sasha started making “throbbing, pulsing music” comments. Their audience thought that was hilarious; I squirmed a little and decided it was time to visit the lake.

I wondered if eleven thirty was late enough to head back to the cabin; maybe there was a spare cabin not in use that Armin and I could crash in. If Bert and Reiner needed private time, far be it from me to interrupt that.

I heard footsteps shuffling down the dirt path toward me, so I turned around to see who it was.

“So, are we allowed to stay up until sunrise today?” Jean asked.

“I don’t know; do counselors have a curfew?”

“Hell if I know. And if we do, like I’m gonna follow that. I wanna watch the sunrise over the lake without having to get up before the ass-crack of dawn.”

“That’s an interesting way of putting it,” I decided. “Not an early riser?”

“Not if I can help it. This camp has been hell.” He ruffled a hand through his hair.

“I love getting up early,” I commented. “It’s so quiet and peaceful; it really clears my mind.”

“I love being awake early,” Jean agreed, “but I’d rather still be awake. You know what I mean?”
“Do you not like sleeping?” I asked, confused.

“Of course I love sleeping. But that’s what sleeping until three in the afternoon is for.”

I laughed. “I guess. Most of the rest of the world would disagree with you, though. They’re pretty into the whole ‘up and productive by nine am’ thing.”

“And that’s what’s wrong with our society,” Jean concluded. He wrapped his arms around himself, rubbing his upper arms like he was cold, despite the mugginess of the evening.

I wasn’t sure how to respond, so I tilted my head back to stare at the stars.

“I’m gonna miss this view, though,” Jean added after a moment. “Can’t see the stars in the city. Too much light pollution. Maybe catch a glimpse of the really bright ones, like Polaris. Might’ve seen Orion’s Belt once or twice. But in general, you’ve gotta be at least twenty miles outside the city to enjoy the view.”

“You like star gazing?”

“Stars are the original rocks, man. Shit’s cool as hell.”

I laughed at his wording.

“You laugh a lot,” he commented.


“No need to apologize. Just saying I noticed, is all.”

“Oh.”

“You seem like a cool kid, Marco.”

“Thanks!” I replied eagerly to his compliment. “You do, too.”

He snorted.

We stood quietly for a few minutes. I mulled over some new conversation topics, trying to think of how to keep making Jean think I was cool. I didn’t come up with much.

“So, you planning on coming back here next summer?”

“I dunno. Probably? I mean, I don’t see my situation changing much in the next ten months. It’s decent money, and it’s an excuse to get away from Trost for a while. It’s like paid vacation, only I have to put up with middle schoolers who think they’re hot shit.”

“Hey, some of us were really cool in middle school,” I said dryly.

“Yeah okay, Marco; I’m sure you were too cool for school when you were twelve and thirteen.”

“Absolutely.”

Another smooth silence filled the air between us.

I wondered if it would be too much to ask for his email address or phone number, just to keep in touch until next summer. We had met earlier that evening, which told me that yeah, it was a little
But he sought me out twice, and seemed to like talking to me, too… Worst case scenario, I figured, was he would think it was weird and that would be that.

Social graces I didn’t know I possessed were with me that night. “It’s getting pretty late,” I started. “I have this tradition with my friends that we take a pre-sunrise hike out to Yarckel Point, so I should get some sleep.”

“Yeah, alright.”

“But if you’d like, we could exchange contact info or something. Email, phone, whichever you prefer. If you maybe wanted to talk some more.”

“Oh,” he said, surprised.

*Did I totally miscalculate?* I worried.

“You don’t have to! I just thought—“

“No, yeah, that’d be cool. Email’s kind of for old people anymore, though. You have your phone on you?”

“Y-yeah,” I said, pulling it out of my pocket.

I pulled up the add new contacts screen, and Jean typed his number in. “Shoot me a text and I’ll add you.”

“Cool. Um, thanks.”

“Yeah, man.”

“Well, I’m gonna… head back.”

“Alright. Enjoy your early as balls hike in the morning.”

“Thanks, I will. Gnight!”

“Night.”

When I got back to the cabin, the lights were out and I didn’t hear any unusual noises, but to be sure, I knocked pretty loudly and announced that I was coming in before even peeking in.

There was no reply, so I inched the door open, slightly terrified of what might be waiting for me on the other side.

I needn’t have worried; Bert and Reiner were both sound asleep, though sleeping in the same bed. Almost comically, Bert seemed to be the big spoon around Reiner’s bulky frame, but they at least had the blankets covering them, and that was good enough for me.

I crawled into my own bed, plugged in my phone, and set an alarm for less sleep than I preferred.

Before I went to sleep, I sent Jean a quick text: *It’s Marco!*

Soon enough, my own soft snores joined Bert’s and Reiner’s.
Morning, or at least my alarm clock, came far too early to be pleasant.

My eyes were sticky and felt almost swollen from not enough sleep. I ignored it, hoping that the morning hike and seeing the sunrise would make up for my exhausted and foggy mood.

Armin had come in at some point after me last night, and I shook his shoulder gently to wake him.

“Five more minutes, Eren,” he murmured.

“Not Eren,” I replied in a soft voice, “and it’s time for our last hike. Come on.” I shook his shoulder a little more firmly, and he seemed to come into his senses with a slightly started intake of breath that turned into a kind of snort.

“’M awake.”

“Sure you are,” I smiled. “Do you think we should wake Sleeping Beauty? I mean…”

“He’d kill us if he missed the hike, don’t you think?” Armin whispered. “This started as his thing, I thought.”

"Actually, I woke him up on accident the first year; stubbed my toe on my bunk bed. He just decided to join me after that, since I already woke him up.”

“Sounds about right. Well, let’s wake him and at least tell him it’s time. He can decide for himself if he’s joining us.”

In an unspoken agreement, we did a rock-paper-scissors for who would have to wake Bert. On his best days, he was a monster to wake in the morning. Given his apparent activities from the night before, who knew what kind of reaction we’d be greeted with today.

The first try we both did paper, but the second time I stuck with paper, while Armin switched to rock. “Good luck,” I said. I sat on my bed to start lacing up my boots, while Armin reluctantly tip-toed toward Bert’s bed.

I watched Armin poke at Bert’s shoulder futilely. It wasn’t going to be enough to wake him.

“Armin,” I said in a low voice. “Come on. You know that’s not going to wake him.”

Armin poked more firmly, and hissed, “Bert! Wake up! It’s Yarckel Point time.”

No response.

“Bert!” he hissed again.

I rolled my eyes slightly, realizing that I was going to have to wake up our friend afterall.

My method was simple and effective, but posed a slight risk to the practitioner.

“Move, Armin. I’ll do it.”

Armin sighed in relief and scurried to the other side of the room, away from Bert’s reach.

I took a deep breath, and plugged his nose.
Like sodium in water, Bert burst to life, sputtering and flailing. I had learned over the years to protect my face with my other arm, so I didn’t get smacked too hard.

Unfortunately, this method also seemed to have disturbed Reiner’s sleep, too.

“Morning, Bert,” I said. “We’re getting ready for our last hike. You coming?”

“He came last night,” Reiner rumbled. “Twice.”

“Reiner!” Bert nearly shouted.

“Oh my God,” Armin whispered, backing away from the bed. It was almost too dark to see, but I knew Armin was at least as red as I was.

“Too much information,” I agreed. “Are you getting up or not?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll get up. It’s the last year, after all.”

I nodded and decided that Armin and I should maybe wait outside. “Meet you at the lake in five?”

“Sure.”

“Don’t fall back asleep,” I warned.

“I won’t.”

I exchanged a dubious glance with Armin, but we both headed out of the cabin and into the soft bluish glow of dawn.

We headed toward the lake, neither of us having much to say, still groggy from less than five hours of sleep and the physical toll of six weeks of wilderness camp catching up with us.

Armin sat on the fishing bench, and I walked a little further north around the lake. I closed my eyes a little, dragging my feet through the dirt, feeling for rocks and holes before I really put my weight down.

Thank goodness I did.

My foot bumped into something soft, and as my eyes snapped open, the something moved. “M still wake!” it shouted.

“Jean?” I asked, confused.

It was obviously Jean, who was inexplicably lying in the grass, though I couldn’t quite process why he was sleeping on the lake path.

“Fuck,” he breathed. “You gave me a damn heart attack.”

“Why are you sleeping on the ground?”

“Marco?” Armin called out. “You alright?!”

“I’m fine, Armin. It wasn’t me who yelled.”

Jean dragged a hand over his face. “Wasn’t sleeping. Resting my eyes. Told you I wanted to stay up and see the sunrise.”
“Yeah, but this isn’t exactly what I imagined you meant by it.”

“Wasn’t really the plan, but here we are.”

Armin walked over to join us. “Uh, who is this?”

“Armin, this is Jean. He’s one of the counselors. I met him last night. He said he wanted to see the sunrise…”

“And I fucking will,” Jean confirmed. He extended a hand out to Armin, who shook it warily.

“Oh look, Bert’s finally joining us,” Armin commented. “I’ll go say hi.” He walked briskly away from the prostrated Jean.

“Do you want to come with?” I asked Jean.

“Out to the point?”

“Yeah. It’s not that far, and the sunrise is going to be beautiful.”

“I… I’d rather watch it by myself.”

“Oh, okay.”

“I mean, I don’t want to ruin your little tradition.”

I looked back to Armin, who was now joined by Bert and Reiner.

“You wouldn’t ruin it. You’re welcome to come with.”

“Thanks, Marco, but I’ll… I’d rather be alone. If that’s okay.”


“Yeah, you too.”

Bert, wrapped in a sweater that must be Reiner’s given how enormous it was, allowed the brawny blond to guide him along the path. Armin led the way, and I brought up the rear, walking slowly and inhaling deeply.

I loved the way the pines smelled, and I loved the smell of just nature, but the best part about this pre-dawn hike was the smell of nighttime mixing with daybreak.

It’s a familiar scent, like the detergent your mom always uses to wash your clothes, but it’s one I can never quite summon in my imagination. The harder I try to call it to mind, the further into my memories it runs.

Night air smells clean and fresh, and morning smells thick and warm. Somehow, the combination of these two smells converges at dawn and has that special nostalgia that has always drawn me to the wee hours of the day.

The ass-crack of dawn, I remember Jean called it, and giggled to myself. But that made it sound like it smelled bad; dawn smells like fresh baked bread and a clear stream all at once.
I took another deep breath, trying to let my senses absorb as much of my surroundings as possible, one last morning.

We were close to the lookout, and our pace quickened. This journey really was about the destination, not the journey. At this point, we’d all seen the woods; there wasn’t much new to see on the paths. It was the lookout that made this particular hike worth it.

The trees thinned out as we approached the clearing at Yarckel Point, and Armin let out a breathy sigh as he took in the view.

We couldn’t have timed our hike better. As we arrived, the sun was only just rising above the treeline of the horizon; above us, the sky was still mostly the deep blue of nighttime.

The indigo faded into the lighter powdery blues of dawn, and the yellows and pinks were just starting to come out.

It was breath-taking, and we all just stood for a few minutes marveling at the wonderful phenomena of planetary rotation.

Or at least, that’s what I was thinking about.

Reiner seemed less awed than the rest of us, who were standing open-mouth gaping at the sun like fish having an existential crisis.

“Hey,” he said. “Go stand over there, the three of you. I want a picture.”

Reiner man-handled us into position, and we tried to blink the bewilderment out of our eyes and smile at least a little convincingly.

He took a few pictures, trying to get the dawn sky from the best angle, and promised he’d send them to us before returning to the blissful silence of the morning.

We spent another hour up at the lookout, occasionally murmuring softly about a thought that popped into our minds, but mostly just enjoying the silence and the company.

Finally, Reiner declared he had to head back to supervise breakfast. “You guys are welcome to stay as long as you need to contemplate existence, but I’ve gotta head back.”

I wasn’t ready to leave yet. I looked to Armin. “I was gonna stay a little longer, I think,” he nodded, and I knew he said that at least in part for my benefit.

“I’m getting hungry,” Bert said, “so I think I’ll go back with you, Reiner.”

“Alright. Enjoy your celestial murmurings,” Reiner said, teasing but gentle.

I offered a smile in response.

I let Bert and Reiner get out of earshot before speaking up. “I don’t want to leave.”

Armin looked at me, face filled with concern. “You thinking of being a counselor next year?”

“I’d really like to. I don’t know if my parents will be okay with it though; I think they were hoping I’d babysit Julia. Don’t know why she can’t go to park district camp like I did.”

“Well, maybe lay the groundwork down to prepare them when you get home, and then it won’t be so hard in March when the application comes out.”
“Yeah. You gonna be a counselor?”

“Probably. I know they’d hire me, and Eren and Mikasa are already talking about doing it.”

“You three make quite the trio,” I smirked. “From the outside, it seems like Eren just gets really excited about things, Mikasa does them better, and you analyze the best way to do it again.”

“That’s… well there’s slightly more to it than that, but I guess the gist is there.”

We laughed. “Hey, if the dynamic works, it works.”

“Marco?” Armin asked. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but do you have other friends in Jinae besides Bert?”

“What?”

“It just seems like you two aren’t… well you’re not super close, you know? Friendly, definitely. And here at camp, maybe things are different, but I mean, do you have other friends back home? That you’re close with?”

I thought for a moment. Closer than Bert? Probably not. I kept to myself, as far as the personal sharing went. I wasn’t particularly lonely, but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want a real confidant.

“I hang out with other people,” I began. “But I’m not so big on sharing my personal life? I’m a pretty private person, I guess. I’m social, though. I’m not a total hermit.” I tried to laugh it off.

“You just never talked about home much, and I don’t want to detract from how happy you’ve always been at camp. But I worry about you sometimes, that you don’t have nearly the sunny personality you’ve got here back home.”

“Maybe. I don’t know. It’s complicated.” It really isn’t. I know I’m different here at camp. I feel less shy here, more open. I tell myself it’s the fresh air and exercise, and not the fact that nature doesn’t have towering expectations of me, cloaked in the phrase “we’re just so proud of you, and we want what’s best for your future.”

I don’t know why, but somehow the pressure felt tripled because I knew they weren’t trying to pressure me. I got good grades, and I wanted to go to college. But since I started high school, my parents have been incredibly concerned with me getting into the best university, and the best program available because they’re proud of me.

I didn’t want to disappoint them, but sometimes I lost track of who I’m doing all these advanced courses for: my own education, or to make my parents happy.

“Well, not that we don’t already talk during the school year, but you can text or call me any time you want to talk; you know that, right?” Armin said, concerned.

“Thanks, Armin. I really appreciate it.” I took out my water bottle, unscrewing the top and taking a slow sip.

“I think this is going to be a great year.”
High Hopes

Chapter Summary

Marco finishes up senior year of high school, convinces his parents to let him go back to Sina as a counselor, and rolls into post #104 with one strawberry blonde darling holding his hand.

Chapter Notes

Whew, 9400 words for this chapter, and up a day earlier than I planned!
Still no beta, so the editing (or lack thereof) is my own.
Fair warning, if you hadn't already figured it out, I'm American, and because I write what I know, so are these dumb kids. Hence, American school system ridiculousness.
Enjoy!

Senior year passed in a blur. I was taking some pretty tough classes, but I’d always been a good student, and with some minor changes to my study habits and a slight sacrifice of sleep, I managed to pull off all A’s, except for one B+ in AP Physics. Physics was never my thing, anyway, so I wasn’t too worried about it.

College applications were stressful, with all the ridiculous essay writing about how great I think I am and why this school should accept me. (Okay, so it wasn’t quite like that, but you know that’s what those essays are for.)

I had taken my ACT and SAT the year before, and I was pretty pumped about my scores: a 33 composite on the ACT and a 2040 on the SAT. With all this hard work, there had to be at least one university willing to give me a full ride scholarship.

My college counselor was worried about my lack of “leadership” experience and extra-curriculars. I had been a steady member of the Academic Decathalon team all four years, but I never made it to the captain’s seat. Apparently, this could hurt my chances.

“Schools aren’t looking for followers; they want leaders! They want people who take control of a situation and set an example for others,” my counselor, Ms Taft, told me. She all but slammed her coffee cup on her desk. “Imagine, it’s you versus another applicant: you both have the same test scores, the same GPA. But the other guy, he’s the captain of the baseball team. Or he was the president of the student council. Hell, he was on the student council committee. That’s a leadership role in itself. And you participated—‘ she says it like it’s something to be ashamed of—‘in a club full of smart kids who were apparently smarter than you.”

I’ve never really seen eye to eye with Ms Taft, so usually I just smiled and nodded, waiting for her to hand me my pass back to class.

But this time, I was scared that she was right. I was scared I wouldn’t get accepted, or if I did, I’d be expected to pay full tuition. I couldn’t afford that. “The captain isn’t chosen based on who’s the
smartest,” I protested. “It’s based on who applies, and then the team votes on it.”

“So what, you lost the election?”

“Er, not exactly…”

“You didn’t even try, did you?”

I felt smaller than a flea. “No.”

“Marco, it’s chances like that that you have to take! You’re never going to get anywhere if you don’t stand up for yourself!” She took another mighty chug of her coffee.

I closed my eyes, willing the tears back into my eyes. It didn’t work.

She put her coffee down for a second to rip a tissue from the box on her desk and waved it at me. “It’s okay, Marco. You’ll find a good school. And if not, there’s always community college, where you can step into some leadership roles, get your gen-eds out of the way, that sort of thing.”

I sniffed quietly, trying to hide the obvious fact that I was having something of an emotional breakdown in my counselor’s office.

“Here’s your pass,” she said, scribbling my name and her signature on a pre-printed green paper. “I’ll put the time you leave as five minutes from now. Pull yourself together.”

I took the paper, nodding.

“And get those apps in!”

X

It turns out, that I needn’t have worried so much. Every one of the nine schools that I applied to accepted me, and three offered scholarships or work-study programs that would make it feasible for me to attend next fall. Unfortunately, my first choice school, University of Trost, wasn’t one of those three schools.

I talked to Bert at school the day after I got my last response back.

“Well, U of T is out,” I grumbled.

“Money?” he asked.

“Yeah. They gave me a five grand academic scholarship, and it’s still way too much money, because I’m not local. Why don’t we have a more European system here? I could afford two-thousand euros a year. This is ridiculous. Who has twenty grand a year for school?”

“Apparently a lot of people,” Bert replied, “or they’d be forced to lower costs. Plus, they’ll just tell you to take out loans. We’ll all be in debt until we’re retired.”

“I don’t want that burden on my family,” I said. “I’ve got to pick one of the schools that gave me more money.”
“So what are your top choices?”

“Well, the three that offered a full or nearly full ride are Trost State, Jinae College, or Shiganshina University.”

“I got into Trost State, too! Jinae wait-listed me, though.”

“Bummer. I know that was your first choice.”

“Yeah, well, there’s still time. I’m probably gonna go to Trost if Jinae doesn’t let me in, but they said they’d tell me by April, and the deadline to accept at Trost is May 1. It’ll work out.”

“Yeah.”

“So where do you think you’ll go?”

“Shiganshina’s too far. My parents would be sick with worry all the time, even if I called them every day. And they don’t think it’s a ‘safe’ city, either.”

“Pfft, what?” Bert snorted. “It’s like, a rural town. I’d barely call it a city.”

“Armin, Eren, and Mikasa are from Shiganshina,” I commented. “They’ve never mentioned any big problems with the place. But it’s too far away, regardless. My parents don’t want me to go, so I doubt I’ll go there.”

“Well, if it’s the distance that matters, doesn’t Jinae make more sense?” Bert asked after a minute. “I mean, it’s right here. You could even commute, and save dorm costs.”

“I think commuting and dorm costs would be about equal,” I said. “Besides, college is about becoming an independent adult! How am I supposed to do that living with my mom and dad? It’ll be like high school but with harder classes.”

“So what you’re getting at is you want to go to Trost State.”

“I think so. I mean, Jinae would be cheaper, and I’d have to do work-study at Trost, but I could find something science-related and make it an internship or something!”

“Dude, you know ‘work-study’ means serving cafeteria food, right? I guess that’s science,” he snorted.

I shoved him lightly with my shoulder. “Shut up.”

“Well, it wouldn’t be so bad, going to the same college as you,” Bert said. “And you know, Reiner goes to Trost... Hey, maybe we could even room together?” he asked hesitantly. “If you wanted, I mean.”

I forgot that Reiner went to TSU. He and Bert had been kinda-sorta dating since last summer, but last I heard they were "keeping it casual." I considered what rooming with Bert would be like for a second, then replied, “That could be cool. Take some of the social pressure off of us.” I smiled.

“Cool. Well, let me know when you submit your decision, yeah?” The bell rang for first period, and we gathered our books.

“See you at lunch,” I said.
After a slightly strained discussion with my parents about my academic future, I submitted my acceptance and my deposit to Trost State University about two weeks after my talk with Bert. He still hadn’t heard from Jinae, and he was starting to panic, so he accepted his place at TSU, too.

“We’re gonna be Titans!” Bert exclaimed happily, grabbing my shoulders and letting out an uncharacteristic whoop.

“Someone’s excited!” I laughed.

“We’re going to college!” He said. “Who wouldn’t be excited?”

“We’ve known we were going to college for a few months, though!”

“Yeah, but now it’s official.”

“I guess.”

“Marco?” Bert asked, turning red.

My eyes widened, concerned.

“There’s something else that’s official, too.”

My face started to do this strange cycling through expressions thing, and I tried to regain control over my muscles. “What is it?”

“I, um… Reiner, he… he asked me to be his boyfriend last night. On Skype.”

I burst into a smile. “Really? That’s great!” Finally, I thought. It only took three years.

“Yeah, well, um, I called him to tell him I made my decision, and… and he was so proud of me, and then I kinda said how much I missed him, and how in the fall we’d be pretty close, yknow? And then he…”

“And then he asked you out officially,” I giggled. “Bert, I’m so happy for you!”

“You’re not…”

“Bert, you’ve had it for him since at least the chili-mac incident, and then with last summer--”

“I thought we agreed never to mention that!” He sputtered, but relief showed in his features.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, it won’t happen again,” I promised.

The chili-mac incident happened the summer after eighth grade. Reiner had just finished sophomore year of high school, and one night, over dinner, was bragging about how great it was to be a “grown up.”

“I mean, yeah, I have homework, but I also get to use words like responsibility and syllabus. Man, high school is the best. Freshman year was a rough transition, but man am I glad I’m done with baby school.”
We had just finished middle school, and Bert, desperate to prove himself, puffed up his chest. “We’re done with baby school, too, you know. We graduated from middle school. And besides, I’m already taller than you, so doesn’t that make you the baby?”

I started laughing into my water glass, watching the two of them rally back and forth like a tennis match across the table. Reiner prided himself on being the biggest guy around; he had started lifting weights when he joined the high school football team, and had already spent most of that summer flexing in front of us showing off his “teenager muscles” and asking us, “do you even lift, bro?”

(It was kind of a douchey summer for him.)

Well, Reiner wasn’t going to take that sitting down. Literally: he stood up at the speed of light, knocking the bench of the mess hall table over as he did so.

“You wanna bet, Bertholt?” he challenged. “Prove it.”

Bert blushed profusely at being called his full name. “D-don’t call me that!” he said. “And yeah, I am taller than you. I’ll—” Bert tried to stand up as dramatically as Reiner had, but forgot one key component: Bert was alone on his side of the table, but I was also sitting on the bench on Bert’s side. The bench didn’t move under my weight, and Bert somehow managed to fall over backwards, knees hitting the underside of the table, and knocked his entire bowl of chili-mac right into his lap.

Reiner’s booming laugh was heard throughout the entire camp-ground. “Oh my god, that was priceless!” he cried.

I kind of froze, unsure what to do. It all happened so fast; did I grab napkins and try to help him up? Did I let him salvage his dignity and pull himself off the floor? I floundered.

While I hesitated, Reiner practically jumped around to our side of the table, still laughing, but concern evident in his face. “You didn’t hit your head, did you?” Reiner gathered my lanky friend up like a damsel in distress, one arm under the bend in his knees, the other under his armpits.

Bert’s face turned darker than a pomegranate. “I’m fine!” he said, struggling against Reiner’s grasp. Reiner, still trying to contain his giggles, grabbed the stack of napkins from the dispenser on our table, and began wiping off the chili-mac from Bert’s shorts. Right in a certain sensitive area.

Keep in mind, Bert and I had fairly recently entered into the world of puberty and inopportune boners. We hadn’t quite mastered the “think of giving your grandma a sponge bath” method of stopping embarrassing erections.

And so there, in the hulking blond’s arms, covered in chili-mac, my best friend Bertholt Hoover had the most embarrassing boner of his thirteen-year-old life.

As soon as Reiner realized what was happening, he stopped laughing. Instead, he started getting embarrassed, and delicately put Bert back on the bench. He walked away slowly, hands held up defensively, grabbed his own dinner and switched tables.

The cabin was tense that night, and for a few days after that. I promised Bert I would never bring it up, and I think Reiner probably did too.

After that, I had just referred to it as the chili-mac incident in my head.
I felt a little bad bringing it up now, especially right after he was so happy about Reiner finally removing this weird "casual" and "unofficial" wording from their relationship, but it was the truth. Besides, it had been long enough that I figured Bert would be over the humiliation by now. Retrospection makes it funny, right?

“That was low,” Bert said, face serious.

“I’m sorry, Bert. Really. I thought it… well I was wrong. I’m sorry.”

“Ah, it’s okay. I should probably lighten up about it,” Bert said. “Reiner always teases me for being so serious all the time. But I can’t help it! He makes me all nervous.”

I smiled shyly. Bert was blushing, and I could tell he would probably start sweating if he spent too much time reflecting on it.

“Hey. We’re gonna be college students, you have a boyfriend, and I won’t die of loan payments! It’s a good time to be us,” I told him.

He smiled back at me.

“Hells yeah it is.”

X

The week after our college decisions were made, the staff application for Camp Sina went live. Jean had linked me on our Skype call, asking if he’d see me there this summer. I bit my lip.

“I don’t know. It’s a little complicated here.”

“But you’ve gone every summer! What’s so different now?”

“Well, I’m going to college in the fall.”

“Oh, yeah, did you make your decision?”

“Jean, I texted you as soon as I did.”

“Oh. DUH. You’re coming to Trost. I’m a moron. So yeah, what’s the big difference though?”

“Well, my parents want me to stick around here and look after Julia. She hates park district camp.”

“Didn’t you hate park district camp? And yet, hey, they still made you go. Tell her to suck it up.”

“Jean, she’s barely seven.”

“So? She’s not your responsibility, she’s your parents’.”

“I know, but my parents work really hard, and—“

“And you would be making money as a camp counselor to help support your family slash pay for your college expenses. It’s totally logical. Dude, I made six grand last summer at Camp Sina. It’s the best money you’re gonna find. Hell, you could bring Julia along. Tell your parents you’ll look
after her up there.”

“There’s no way they’ll let her go to sleep away camp! I had to beg my way into it when I was four years older than she is!”

“Well, use your best grown-up, mature asshole voice and convince them. I don’t know, make a powerpoint or something.”

“Ugh.” I dropped my head to my desk.

“Seriously, Marco. It’s great pay, you’ll have a good time, and either Julia sucks it up like you did for park district camp, or she comes to sleep away camp and you look after her there. It’s sound logic, and your parents have to see that.”

I lift my head up and instantly regretted it. Jean was making the most ridiculous pouting face I’ve ever seen. “You’re pathetic.”

“No I’m not. I’m fucking adorable, and this is totally working. I see that look. That’s a look that says ‘Jean Kirstein is right and I’m going to listen to him’.”

“No it’s not!” I said indignantly.

“Yeah, okay,” he said with a smirk. “Oh shit, it’s midnight. I’ve got to get some sleep, Marco. I work at the lab tomorrow at 8.”

“Oh, yeah. You go to bed then. I’ll think about what you said.”

“You know I’m right, Freckles.”

“Freckles”? Have you been hanging out with Ymir?” I grumbled.

“No…” he said. “Okay, a little bit. But also because I know it works on you.”

I knew it did, but I didn’t want Jean to know that. I couldn’t let the both of them have that much power over me. “Go to sleep, Jean.”

“Night, Marco.”

I ended the call.

And then I did something I never thought I would do: I filled out the application to be a counselor at Camp Sina post #104.

It was no use having the discussion with my parents if I didn’t get the job first, so I figured I should apply, see if I was accepted, and then bring it up.

The application was easy: my personal info, how I knew of Camp Sina, and why I wanted the job. The app also had a section for previous work experience, of which I had none, but I decided to include my science projects at the camp in years past so that it wasn’t blank. If they decided it was irrelevant, then at least I tried.

I also included babysitting my little sister, to prove that I could handle kids. I’m not sure how much they’d value that, but again, it was better than nothing.

My stomach flipped a little as I hit the submit button, but it wasn’t like I was sneaking around. I was finding out if it was a viable option, and avoiding a difficult discussion if it turned out I wasn’t
hired after all.

X

I got hired.

Almost overnight.

It turns out, Dr Hanji had somehow been put in charge of hiring this summer, and they were over the moon that I wanted to be a counselor.

Their email read:

"Dear Marco Bodt <3!!,

Camp Sina post #104 is proud to offer you a camp counselor position this summer! We are so excited that you decided to apply and think you are a perfect fit for our organization. Your experience with us has been nothing but wonderful and we know you are going to have a great summer with us again—but this time, you’ll get paid!

Sign the attached contract with all the legal info stuff and either scan and email it or snailmail it back to me! I’m so glad you’re coming back!

SCIENCE POWER,

Dr Hanji"

Well, that settled that: time to have the conversation with my parents, fueled by the logic of Jean Kirstein.

That night at dinner, I felt like I was ten years old again. Mom wasn’t feeding Julia any more, but we might have been eating the same thing, for all I know. (My mom only has about five or six meals she knows how to make.)

“Mom? Dad? I wanted to talk to you guys about my plans for this summer.”

“I thought we already had this talk, Marco,” Dad said. “You’re going to look after Julia.”

My little sister perked up at hearing her name.

“Well, yes, I know that’s what we talked about, but some friends of mine from Camp Sina, they’re all applying to be counselors there this summer. And I think it would be a really responsible choice for me to apply, too.”

“How is it responsible to back out of a previous obligation to your family?” My mother asked carefully.

“Well, it’s good money: I’d make about six thousand dollars in six weeks of camp. It could help pay for my college expenses, and help pay for Julia’s summer camp, too.”

“But I don’t want to go back to park district camp! It’s so awful!” Julia pouted.

“Marco, this seems like it’s coming out of nowhere.”

“Well, I didn’t want to bring it up until I knew that I was a viable choice…”
“Did you already apply?” My mom asked.

“Yes. And they want me to go. But don’t worry, I’m not locked in yet: I have to sign a contract saying I accept my spot and how much pay they’re offering me. I didn’t do that yet; not until I had gotten the okay from you guys.”

“Well, I can’t say the money wouldn’t be smart,” Dad began, “but you said you’d look after Julia. You know how Jinae’s camp is, and she’s too young to sit at home all day by herself.”

“Well, I have two suggestions for Julia this summer. The first is that she should continue going to Jinae Community Camp until she’s old enough for sleep away camp, just like I had to.”

“Nooo!” Julia wailed. “Daddy, please the kids there are so mean! They pull my hair and call me orangielocks!” she put her hands defensively over her strawberry blonde curls.

My parents fixed me with a look as though this was my fault. I pressed on.

“And the second suggestion I came up with is that Julia comes to Camp Sina, and I look after her there.”

“Out of the question,” Mom said. “She’s only seven, Marco!”

“Yeah, I know. But I’ll be there, and that way I’d be taking care of Julia just like I promised, but also earning money. It seemed like a logical option.” I cleared my throat a little; my nerves were starting to choke me.

“Marco, I don’t know… this doesn’t seem like a good idea.”

“I don’t want to go to the woods! I’ll die!” Julia slouched in her chair dramatically.

I ignored her and continued addressing my parents. “Will you please take some time to consider it? I have to tell them my decision by the end of the month. That gives you two weeks to think about it. Will you at least think about it?”

“We’ll think about it, but our answer is probably going to be no,” Mom said.

I sighed. “As long as you’ll just consider it, that’s all I ask. Thank you.”

I stood up, and offered to clear the dishes. It was Julia’s turn to help, but I knew she would pitch a fit about it, and if I did it, it might work a tiny bit in my favor to show how responsible I was.

When the table was cleared and the dishes were put away, I retreated up to my room, announcing that I had some homework to finish.

I flopped on my bed and pulled out my phone.

From: Me
I talked to my parents about camp. Doesn’t look good, but they’re considering.

His response was almost immediate, like it always was this time of night.

From: Jean
Did u tell them what i said???

From: Me
Yeah, but I’m not sure if it worked. They’re worried about Julia.
From: Jean
julia sounds like a brat she deserves to be thrown in the wilderness

From: Jean
it’ll be good for her like instead of trial by fire it’s trial by bugs and bad food

From: Me
They spoil her too much. I get that it’s different the second time around, but the stuff she pulls with my parents, I’d have been grounded for a month. And she’s only *seven*

From: Jean
that’s what I’m sayin man. She needs to be put in her 7 yr old place. throw her in wp and she’ll be a changed woman

From: Jean
ok maybs not woman but u get the idea

From: Me
Yeah, I understand. And somehow I agree with you :-)

From: Jean
what did I say bout those smiley faces

From: Me
That they’re adorable and you wish I sent more. :-) :-) :-) :-) :-) :-)

From: Jean
no stop

From: Jean
marco pls

From: Me
:-) :-) :-) :-) :-) :-) :-)

From: Jean
so help me freckles I will stop texting u

From: Me
no you won’t :-)

From: Jean
go the fuck to sleep man stop assaulting me w ur dumb smiles

From: Me
it’s too early for sleep. :-)

From: Jean
GOD DAMMIT MARCO

X
A week later, my mom called me into the living room.

“Marco? Come downstairs for a minute.”

*Is this it?* I wondered. *Did they decide?*

I galloped down the stairs, trying to act casual. “What’s up?”

“Your father and I have talked about this summer,” she started.

“And?” I tried to hide the excitement and nervousness from my voice, but I didn’t succeed.

She sighed. “And we’re really nervous about it, but we’ve decided you can go--”

My face lit up and I unwittingly interrupted her. “Really? Thank you so much! I’m so glad! This is such a great idea, I won’t let you down!”

“—you can go if you can get your sister to agree.”

The smile fell from my face. “What do you mean? She’s seven; doesn’t she just have to do what her parents tell her? That’s what you would’ve told me.” *That’s what you did tell me.*

“Well, she’s not as outdoorsy as you were. So if she doesn’t want to go to Camp Sina, you need to stay here with her.”

“Mom! When I was seven, I didn’t have the choice! Why is Julia different?!”

“Because she’s your little sister, and you’re supposed to protect her, Marco!” Mom said. “You didn’t have the choice because you were our first baby, but Julia is different. She’s only seven, and we didn’t let you go to sleep away camp until you were eleven! Aren’t you worried about that double standard?”

“No, because when I was seven, I would have *loved* going to Camp Sina,” I replied. “I want Julia to have that chance, and I thought it was the perfect opportunity for her to face her ridiculous fear of *house flies* and get some great experience! The under tens group barely even leaves base camp,” I continued. “She’ll be fine.”

“Well, I’ll leave it to you to convince her. If she agrees, you can both go. If not, you stay here. You were never bullied in Community Camp, honey; we’re not making her go back to a toxic environment.”

“I appreciate that,” I said, “but just because I wasn’t bullied doesn’t mean it wasn’t awful when I was there, too. At least Julia has friends.”

“Marco...”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll talk to her.”

I went back upstairs and knocked on Julia’s door. “Julia? Can I come in?”

“Don’t make me go to the woods to *die*, Marco,” she said as she opened her door.

“Juju,” I said, calling her my special pet name, “you’re not going to die. I’ll be there. I’ll protect you.”
“No you won’t, you want me to get lost and never come back!”

“Of course not! Where did you get that idea?” I frowned.

“Because you said you’d play with me this summer and now you don’t want to. You’re trying to get rid of me. You don’t like me.”

“Juju, that’s not true. You’re my sister, and I love you. I think this will be a good thing for both of us,” I said, tucking an errant curl behind her ear. “You can learn all sorts of cool stuff about birds and animals, and they have a lake you can swim in. You’ll make so many friends there; trust me, if I made friends at this camp, then you definitely will.”

“But what about all the bugs?” she whined.

“Well, there are bugs no matter where you go. There will be bugs if you stay at home. There will be bugs if you go to community camp. And yes, there will be bugs at Sina. But you can learn about the bugs, and you’ll see that they’re not there just to bother you. They do important things!”

“Like what?” Julia asked.

I offer her a devious grin. “You’ll have to come to Sina to find out.”

“Marcooooo!” she giggled. “Just tell me!”

“Nope! I’ll leave that to Dr Hanji. They’re the coolest scientist ever.”

“Whoa. Really?”

“Yeah, really. You’re gonna love them. So what do you say? Will you come to Sina with me?”

She chewed on her lip for a minute. “Do you promise you won’t leave me there?”

“I promise,” I said seriously.

She nodded.

“Is that a yes?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said, almost inaudibly.

I scooped her up in a big hug, then spun her around and flew her through the air like an airplane. “You’re the best, Juju! You’re gonna have so much fun!”

She squealed as I dipped her near the ground, so I pulled her back up, and plopped her back on her bed.

I ruffled her hair and squirmed away from me, but I kissed her forehead and said I’d be back after I finished my homework.

I pulled her door shut and nearly walked into my mother.

“She said she’d go, didn’t she?” Mom said.

“Yup,” I said with a grin.

“You better take care of her,” Mom warned.
“Of course, Mom. Of course I will.”

X

“Marco, are there gonna be duckies?” Julia asked excitedly as I put her suitcase in the trunk.

“So many duckies,” I said earnestly.

“What other kinds of animals?”

“There’s deer, and birdies everywhere; and there are raccoons that are cute but we have to leave alone, and fishies, and sometimes there are friendly little snakes.”

“Ewww, snakes!”

“They’re the friendly kind! They’re little green guys, and they just want to slither around and do snakey things.”

“Are there puppies?”

“Some summers, Dr Hanji brings their dogs, Sawney and Bean. But not every year, so we’ll have to wait and see.”

“I hope they come!”

Julia hopped up into the old station wagon, and my mom gave me a warning look not to get her too riled up. We still had a three hour car ride to get through.

I slid into the seat behind Mom, and Dad came out of the house with a bag of snacks and not-so gracefully took his seat in the front.

“Brought some granola bars in case you get hungry! We should be there around eleven or so,” he said. “Marco, your check in is what time?”

“Any time before noon, so eleven should be great.”

“Alrighty then. Everyone buckled?” Mom asked.

I nod, and Julia giggles a “yup!”, and I double check it just in case.

“Here we go!”

The car ride was long, but I brought a book. Unfortunately, I really didn’t get much reading done, since Bert had been texting me since seven about how nervous he was to see Reiner in person again.

From: Bert
What if he changes his mind? Like he had forgotten how weird I am and decides it was a mistake?

From: Me
He knows exactly how weird you are, and that’s why he asked you out. It’s gonna be okay.
From: Bert  
Idk man, I’m really starting to wig out.

From: Bert  
Oh god he just texted me asking when I’d be there what should I say???

From: Me  
Tell him when you’ll be there!

I shook my head, marveling at how ridiculous my friend was being. My phone buzzed again.

From: Jean  
Hey man when u getting here I got a surpriiiissee

My stomach flip-flopped a little. A surprise from Jean? This was probably not going to be a good thing. I’d need to make sure he didn’t give it to me in front of my parents, at least. Definitely not in front of Julia.

Oh, crap. Julia was probably going to meet Jean.

From: Me  
What kind of surprise? The kind I’ll be embarrassed and ashamed to receive? The kind my *seven year old sister* should not see?

From: Jean  
Dude no what are u expecting porn mags its totally tasteful u'll love it

From: Me  
Fine, but if you’re lying I’ll make sure you get paired with Eren

From: Jean  
U WOULDNT DARE

From: Me  
Are you sure you want to give me this ‘surprise’?

From: Jean  
Hell yeh

I rolled my eyes. I felt pretty safe about whatever this surprise was, but I was still fairly dubious.

But man, was I excited to be seeing Jean again.

We texted all the time, and Skyped usually about once a week, if we had time. It wasn’t like I had been out of contact with him since last summer.

And it wasn’t even like I particularly knew him that well. I mean, last year, we really only spoke face to face at the closing events. I’m still not sure how that turned into daily texting, but I was grateful to have someone other than Bert to turn to.

From: Me  
Do you know about Bert’s big news?

From: Jean
u talkin bout the whole ‘reiner is super gay for him’ news?

From: Jean
bc I was on the other end of that one. All ‘dude I rlly like him but is he too young is this a bad idea blah blah blah’

From: Me
oh wow. Reiner was like that? After last summer?

From: Jean
Yeh and he decided I was the person for advice on this man I am the LAST person u should ask about tht kinda stuff

From: Jean
I don't ever want to hear about Reiner's sex life again

From: Me
Well, whatever you did, it looks like it turned out okay. Guess we’ll find out?

From: Jean
Dude we are not sharing a cabin with them

From: Me
Are you doing WP again this year? Because you wouldn’t have to share a cabin very long if you switched to Survey…

From: Jean
yeah probs gonna do Survey actually WP is cush but ugh it’s all young kids and i’m too weak for wall

From: Me
I think I have to do either WP or wall. I told my parents I’d look after Julia…

From: Jean
Noooo u gotta come with me on Survey!

From: Me
We’ll see. I’ll be there in about an hour, okay? Meet me in Stohess?

From: Jean
Yeah yeah I’ll leave soon

By the time we made it there, Julia was sound asleep, and my inbox had finally calmed down.

I stepped out of the car, smiling at the familiar site of Camp Sina. I took Julia’s bag and my own from the trunk, leaving my parents to wake up sleeping beauty.

I saw Eren, Mikasa, and Armin unloading their car a few spaces over.

“Hey!” I called out.

Armin heard me first, and rushed over to greet me. “Marco! It’s so good to see you! How’ve you
I admit, I didn’t keep in touch with Armin as well as I should have. But he was so busy, and spent a lot of time with Eren and Mikasa and I spent so much time talking with Jean that I somewhat neglected our friendship.

It looked like we were still on good terms, though.

“I’m good, Armin. It feels good to be back.”

“Definitely. Good morning, Mr and Mrs Bodt!” Armin offered.

“Good morning, Armin,” Mom replied.

“Oh, I heard Julia’s going to come to camp with you this year; is that true?” he asked, turning to my sister.

She hid behind me, suddenly shy. “Aww, Julia, this is my friend, Armin. He’s really nice. I think you’ll like him.”

He crouched a little bit to meet her at eye level, and extended his hand to her. “Hi, Julia. I’m Armin. Do you remember me from last year?”

She shook her head no. “Oh, yes you do,” I said, trying to pull her from behind me. “Come on, shake Armin’s hand. You’re a big girl now, okay?”

Slowly, she put out her hand to Armin’s, and he took it gently and shook it twice. “Very nice to meet you, Miss Julia.”

She yanked her hand back and hid behind me again.

“She’ll open up,” I said.

“I’m sure she will. I’m gonna go grab my stuff, but I’ll see you up there!”

“Alright, sounds good!”

I took Julia’s hand and led her toward the path up to Camp Sina. When we got to Stohess Hall, Hanji and Erwin were doing the check in. “Marco! I’m so pleased you were able to come! Oooh, and this must be your sister, Julia! Hi Julia! I’m Dr Hanji!”

Julia’s eyes bulged out wide, darting between me and this energetic, purple-haired, bespectacled person with the somewhat alarming grin.

“You remember I told you about what a cool scientist Dr Hanji is?” I prompted Julia. She didn’t react.

“Julia was wondering if you brought Sawney and Bean this year,” I told Hanji.

“Actually, I did! Levi took them down by the lake. You know he hates check in,” they said knowingly.

“Haha, yeah. You hear that, Julia? Hanji brought their puppies!”

Most of the fear left Julia’s eyes at that. “Puppies?” she questioned.
“Yup!” Hanji said excitedly. “Oh, you’re going to have a great time here!” Turning to my parents, Hanji added, “with the under tens, we ask the parents which group their child wants to be in. I take it Marco has explained to you Wilderness Police and Wall Garrison?”

“Well, they know about WP from when I did it, but I wasn’t sure what Wall would be like for the under tens. Not that Julia is the most, ah, athletic.”

My parents nodded in agreement.

“Well, for the little ones, Wall is basically games and sports like swimming, soccer, things like that. We also mix in arts and crafts, since they can’t be active all day long. WP is a more educational component, with very short nature hikes, arts and crafts, that sort of thing. Basically, a less strenuous version of the 10-13 range you did, Marco.”

“I think WP is best for Julia. Isn’t that what you told her about, Marco?” Mom asked.

“Yeah, because I didn’t think she’d want to do the sports and stuff.”

“Great! I’ll mark her down for WP then. She’ll be in great hands! Christa is leading the under tens WP group this year,” Hanji said, mostly to me.

“Oh that’s great! Julia, you’ll really like Christa.”

Dad cleared his throat. “I thought Marco would be Julia’s counselor?”

Hanji’s face fell for a moment. “I—I guess I assumed Marco would do Survey… But Christa is the leader, so if Marco does WP he could still be in charge of her group, just not in charge of the programming and everything.”

“Great,” my dad said.

“So, what cabin is Julia in?”

“She’ll be in… Duckling Cabin. Oh, isn’t that cute!” Hanji exclaimed.

“I didn’t know there was a Duckling Cabin,” I mentioned.

“Oh, the under tens all get cute names. They’re themed. There’s four kids in a cabin, and two counselors also bunk with them. We haven’t quite assigned all the counselors yet, because not everyone signed up for their division yet. But she can put her stuff in there, and then come back to the mess hall for getting-to-know-you time with the other campers who are already here!”

“You ready to go, Juju?” I asked.

She looked at Mom and Dad. “Come on, we’ll walk you to your cabin, love,” Mom assured her.

“I’ll be back in a few, Hanji. Just let me get Julia settled in.”

“Of course!”

We headed over to Duckling Cabin, and I saw a few of my past fellow campers on our way. Thomas was here, and so were Hannah and Franz. (Well, I only saw Hannah, but where there’s Hannah, there’s Franz.)

I waved to them, since we weren’t really friends, and soon enough we were at Duckling Cabin. Hanji was right; it was definitely themed.
There were wooden carved ducks on the little porch, and a little banner over the door that said “Duckling Cabin” with painted ducks swimming in a pond.

Inside, all the beds had duck themed blankets, and the wall space that wasn’t blocked by the bunk beds had been decorated with duck-themed artwork as well. I wondered if Hanji had decorated; it was a bit overwhelming.

“Here we are, Julia,” I said, “your home sweet home for six weeks!”

Instead of being put-off by the alarming duckling imagery, she was thrilled. “Duckies!” She shrieked, her impending separation from our parents for nearly two months all but forgotten.

“You may want to head out before the euphoria wears off,” I muttered to my mom.

“You’re probably right,” she said. “Well, Julia, it looks like you’re going to have a great time. Daddy and I are going to leave now, okay?”

Julia ran into Mom’s arms, giving her a big hug and a kiss on the cheek. She did the same to Dad. “Have fun, be good, learn lots!” He told her.

She nodded firmly, and then went back to marveling at the ducks.

“Hey, Julia, you want to head over to the mess hall? You can meet some new friends,” I told her.

“Well, Julia, you want to head over to the mess hall? You can meet some new friends,” I told her.

“Will there be duckies?”

“We might see some real ones on our way over there,” I suggested.

“Okay!”

I tucked her bag under one of the beds without anything on it, and took her hand to head toward Stohess.

Checking my phone for the time, I noticed I had a missed call from Jean. He had also texted.

From: Jean
Marcoooooo Hanji says ur here but I don’t seeeeeee youuuuu

From: Jean
Marcooooo im in stohess come to meece

I rolled my eyes and tucked my phone back into my pocket.

It was a short walk back to Stohess, and while we didn’t see any duckies, we did run across a toad that scared Julia half to death.

I asked Hanji where the under tens were, and she pointed to the West Hall. Julia was a little more sociable, and waved to Hanji this time. I promised I’d be back again to sign up for my division, and Hanji waved a hand at me.

I was glad Christa would be her counselor; Christa was amazing with the little ones. Ymir hated that she didn’t come with her to Survey, but Ymir and arts and crafts sounded awful, and Christa was too soft on the older kids. Last year, they put snakes and frogs in her bed, tried to dump spiders down her shirt, the works. I was surprised Ymir allowed them to live, but Christa decided this year she would do WP.
I aimed Julia and I at West Hall, when I saw him.

He had his back to me, and was talking animatedly to Reiner who had an arm casually slung around Bert. Julia saw Bert, and almost called out to him, but I tugged on her arm and put a finger over my mouth to indicate that we should be quiet.

I caught Reiner’s eye and made the same gesture, and he flawlessly continued listening to Jean’s animated (and likely embellished) tale. I tiptoed toward him in a cartoonish way, and Julia followed suit. When I was close, I leaned forward toward Jean’s ear and whispered, “Polo.”

Jean fell off his chair, and Reiner burst into roars of laughter.

Julia watched Jean’s ridiculous flailing to the ground, walked around him, and cried, “Bertie!”

Bert gave Julia a high five and pulled her onto his lap, while I helped Jean off the floor.

“Jesus blood shitting Christ!” Jean cursed.

Julia gasped, and I quickly covered Jean’s mouth. Bert belatedly covered Julia’s ears.

“Watch your language!” I said quickly, darting to my sister’s still stunned expression. “My sister is here,” I said, gesturing to her spot on Bert’s lap.

“What did you expect me to say, ‘cheese and crackers’?” he said grumpily.

“That would’ve been preferable,” I muttered.

When he had regained some dignity, he stood up straight and a genuine smile crossed his face. “Good to see you, man,” he said, and put an arm around me for what he called a “bro hug.” When he pulled back, he just smiled at me for a moment.

Jean looked… Jean looked good. He was tan already, and his hair was especially bleached out. I wondered if he had started dyeing it, it was so different than the darker cropped part on the sides. He looked stronger than last summer, like he had filled out some more. It was hard to tell these things on Skype, but it was glaringly obvious face-to-face.

The smile suddenly dropped from his face. “Wait what the hell—I mean, heck—Since when are you taller than me?” He asked incredulously. “Baby Marco is not allowed to be taller than me!”

“Am I?” I asked innocently. It was hard to tell; if I was taller, it can’t have been by more than a few centimeters.

“Ridiculous,” he muttered. “Oh, hey! Close your eyes. I have your surprise.”

Reiner and Bert exchanged a concerned look. Apparently, this was the first they were hearing of this surprise.

“Do I need to cover Julia’s eyes?” Bert asked.

“Dude, why does everyone assume I’m giving Marco something inappropriate?”

“Because you’re inappropriate,” Reiner said simply.

“Shut up. Marco, close your eyes. This is one hundred percent rated PG, I f—I promise.”

“Unlike your language,” I said sardonically, but I complied and closed my eyes.
I heard Reiner burst out laughing, and the urge to open my eyes was overwhelming. “No! Keep them closed!” Jean cried, slapping a hand over my eyes.

His hand smelled like coconuts. I giggled a little to myself; why did his hand smell like coconut? Did it have something to do with my surprise?

“Hold out your hands,” Jean instructed.

I did as I was told, and I felt something cloth-like placed in my hands.

“Can I open now?”

“Yeah, go ahead.”

I opened my eyes, looking curiously at the package in my hands.

It was all white, and looked suspiciously like… a lab coat?

“Jean? Is this…?”

“A personalized lab coat? Hell yes it is!”

“Oh god.”

I unfolded the coat, and sure enough, an oval shaped name tag that read Marco in gas-station style letters had been crudely sewn on.

Jean looked like he was about to burst with laughter. “Do you like it?” he asked, sputtering his giggles everywhere.

“It’s… It’s…” I was at a loss for words. “Well it’s definitely a surprise,” I managed finally.

Jean threw back his head in laughter. “I knew you’d like it!” he congratulated himself.

“You’re ridiculous,” I told him.

“Well go on, put it on!”

“Jean, no.”

“Marco, yes.”

“Go on Marco, give the man what he wants,” Reiner encouraged. Jean gestured to Reiner, nodding his head.

“What is it, Marco?” Julia asked.

“Model it for your sister!” Jean suggested with a wink.


“Yes!” Jean cheered, fist pumping in the air.

I unfolded the lab coat, and Jean helped me into it. It was a little tight in the shoulders, but it wasn’t like I was actually going to use this, so it was fine.

“Oh man, it’s amazing,” Jean said, clearly pleased with himself. “I can’t wait til Armin sees you in
“Please tell me you didn’t get him one, too.”

“I couldn’t find a name tag with ‘Armin’ on it. Seriously, what kind of name is Armin, anyway?” Jean said teasingly.

“And was this your sewing job?” I asked, gesturing to the terrible running stitch.

“Nothing but the best for you, Marco,” Jean said, flashing me a shit-eating grin.

I shrugged out of the coat, despite Jean’s whining protests.

“Okay, let me drop Julia off in the West Hall, then I’ll come back, okay?”

“Hurry up!” Jean grinned.

I took Julia’s hand, and she hopped off Bert’s lap.

“That boy is weird,” she informed me.

“Don’t I know it.”

“And his hair is ugly.”

I snorted. “Don’t let him hear you say that,” I warned. “He’s very proud of his hair.”

She looked at me, unsure if I was joking or not. “And he’s your friend?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“ Weird.”

I smiled. “Okay, here we are, West Hall. Oh, look! There’s Christa!”

I waved to Christa, and she smiled and walked over to us. “Hi, Marco! It’s good to see you!” she said honestly.

“Good to see you, too, Christa. I’d like you to meet my little sister, Julia. Julia, this is Christa. Will you say hello?”

“Hi Christa!” she said excitedly. I was shocked by her enthusiasm, but decided not to question it.

“Hello, Julia! It’s so good to meet you. Are you going to be in my group?”

Julia nodded.

“Great! We’re going to have so much fun together. Do you want to meet some of our other campers?” Christa asked.

“Okay,” Julia said, turning back to me. “I’m gonna go now, Marco.”

I laughed. “Okay, Juju. Be good!”

Christa took Julia’s hand, and smiled at me. “She’ll be in good hands,” she assured me.

“So Julia, how old are you?” Christa asked.
“I’m seven! But I’m gonna have my birthday real soon,” she said seriously.

They walked away from me, and I couldn’t hear the rest of the conversation, but that was okay. Julia was in safe hands, and I wanted to get back to my friends.

I wanted to get back to Jean.

When I got back to the group, Armin, Eren, and Mikasa were there.

Jean always got a little tense around Eren, and was quite frankly a mess around Mikasa. Last summer, he said it was something about her “beautiful black hair.” I had self-consciously run a hand through my own hair, not quite black but the last shade of brown right before it.

When Jean saw me, though, he visibly relaxed.

“So, did you show off that atrocity you gave me?” I teased.

“No, that honor is all yours. Thought it looked its best being modeled by you.”

Armin’s eyebrows shot up in confusion. “Am I missing something?”

“Prepare to be insanely jealous,” Jean informed him.

“I’m not putting it back on,” I said.

“Aww, why not? It’s a great look,” Jean pouted.

“Nope,” I replied, but I unfolded it again to hold it up for Armin to see.

“Jean made that?” Armin asked.

“Apparently.”

“Wow,” Armin said, trying to be honest.

“My thoughts exactly,” I said, trying not to laugh.

“That looks like shit, dude,” Eren said.

“Fuck off, Jaeger,” Jean spit.

“Everyone’s thinking it, I’m just saying it.”

“It’s the thought that counts?” Armin offered.

“It’s great, Jean. I wouldn’t expect anything less from you,” I assured him. He puffed up a little bit as though my praise made up for the fact that it was thoroughly embarrassing and Eren was maybe a little right.

“So, who else is missing?” I asked. “Counselor wise.”

“Connie and Sasha are around here somewhere,” Armin said. “And of course Ymir. I don’t think we know anyone else. At least, they’re not really from our group.”

“Gotcha,” I said. “So which division are you guys doing?”
Reiner spoke first. “I’m doing Wall again, because let’s face it, I’m awesome at whipping scrawny little children into shape.”

Reiner’s survival skills were alright, but he really shone with his leadership and impressive physical strength.

“I’m gonna be in WP, for the 10-13 year olds. It was my second choice, but Erwin said he wanted the older counselors with the high schoolers,” Bert explained.

“That makes sense,” I said. “What about you three?” I asked, turning toward the Shiganshina trio.

“We’re all doing Survey,” Eren answered. “They still need two more Survey counselors, you know.”

“And of course, I’m doing Survey, at your suggestion,” Jean butted in. “Which means you should be doing Survey, too.”

“I told my parents I’d look after Julia,” I said sadly.

“Dude, she’s with Christa. This is best case scenario. She’ll be fine.”

“I know, but I don’t want to lie to my parents and say I looked after her when I just pawned her off on Christa.”

Jean rolled his eyes. “Ugh, you’re too much. But it’s almost twelve, so you better go tell Hanji which division you want.”

I glanced at the clock; it was ten till. I better go find Hanji. “You’re right. Be back in a few,” I said.

I found Hanji back at the check in desk. “Ah, Marco, I was beginning to wonder where you went! Is Julia settling in well?”

“Yeah, she’s off to a good start. You have no idea how much she loves ducks.”

“Oh perfect! So, which division are you doing? We’ve got space for you in WP under tens if you want to be with your sister…” they said sadly.

“Is that it?” I asked.

Hanji’s eyes lit up. “There’s also one more space for a male Survey counselor; Mina needs a squad partner.”

I gritted my teeth. I really wanted to do Survey, but I didn’t know if Mina would be okay with being my squad partner. “Is Mina around?” I asked. Maybe I could ask her if she felt comfortable with it.

“Actually, she’s right behind you!” Hanji said.

I wheeled around, and there was Mina, directing parents to cabins with their little ones. After she said goodbye to the family she was helping, I cleared my throat. “Hey, Mina!”

“Oh! Marco! Hi!” she said. “How’s your year been?”

“It’s been good,” I said. “Yours?”
“Ah, yknow. No major complaints. College prep stuff.”

“That’s good. Hey, um, I was just talking to Hanji about placements, and it looks like the last Survey spot is to be your squad partner, and I just… I wanted to make sure you’d be okay with it, if I took the spot.”

“Oh, of course! Don’t worry, Marco. It’s fine. Thanks for asking, though. You’re always so polite,” she said with a smile.

“Great! I’ll let Hanji know, then.”

“Sounds good!”

It was only slightly awkward, and that was mostly on my side. She seemed to be comfortable with it. And it’s not like we’d be sharing a tent, so I resolved myself and headed back to Hanji.

“Sign me up for Survey, Hanji.”

“Excellent!” Hanji squealed. “Okay, so you’ll be with the 10-13 range, and you’ll be squad partners with Mina. You can pick a tent partner on your own. Boys with boys, girls with girls, that whole gender binary bit,” Hanji said, waving their hand around like there were flies.

I offered a sympathetic smile and a thank you as they handed me my counselor’s shirt: a dark green polo with the Survey Corps division logo of navy and silver wings on it. Then, they fished out the light windbreaker/rain jacket with the same logo on it, and a brown leather belt.

“The belt’s optional,” Hanji explained, “but it’s got these little loopy things so you can hang things like a flashlight or your compass on it!”

“Right,” I said. “Thanks again, Hanji!”

“Any time, Marco. Glad you’re here.”

“Me too.”

I headed back to the mess hall with my friends, and asked which cabin they had claimed. Eren, Armin, Connie, and Thomas had already set up in Counselor Cabin C. I must have made a face when they said Thomas was with them.

“He just sort of showed up,” Connie said. “We didn’t have the heart to tell him it was weird that he was there and not with Daz or somebody else. It’s only for a few days, anyway.”

“There’s a fourth bed in our cabin, anyway,” Reiner announced. “Bert and I took one side, and Jean saved you a bed on his side. Cabin G.”


I shot Jean a look. What happened to ‘let’s not share a cabin with them?’

He looked sheepishly at me, and then stood up. “I’m gonna go check with Hanji who my squad partner is, so I’ll walk that way with you.”

As soon as we were out of earshot of the others, Jean nudged me with his shoulder. “So? Which division are you?”
“I’m gonna be Mina’s squad partner. 10-13 Survey Corps.”

“YES!” Jean roared. “I knew you’d listen to me. One of these days, you’re gonna stop resisting my irrefutable logic and just start agreeing with me from the start. Save yourself some time.”

“Oh, shut up,” I teased, shoving at him playfully.

We got to Hanji’s desk, and Jean leaned on the counter like he was flirting with someone at a bar in a movie. “So, Hanji, who decided they’d put up with me?” Jean asked.

“Oh, well, no one really… Ymir offered to switch to the 10-13’s, even though she was going to be with 14-18’s, since you needed a partner.”

“Oh fuck me,” Jean sighed. “Ymir’s my squad partner?”

“Jean!” I said. “Ymir’s great, and she knows you. She can put up with your antics.”

“There were too many female counselors in the high school range anyway. So it all works out!” Hanji said, trying to smooth over the situation.

Jean’s prickly personality sure travels fast, I mused. Surely, there were some new people who didn’t know him and would agree to be his squad partner? At least Ymir would keep him in line. I hoped that the children in their squad were hearty and thick-skinned.

“Ugh, surrounded by ‘Freckled Brethren’ it is, then,” Jean conceded.

“I’m gonna head over to the cabin and put my stuff away,” I said, gesturing to the suitcase I’d been carrying around for the past ninety minutes.

“Give me that,” Jean said, taking my suitcase and the ridiculous lab coat he gave me, leaving me with just the camp shirts and windbreaker.

“Jean, it’s fine,” I said, making to take my stuff back from him.

“Nope, I’ll carry it.”

“Well, um, thanks,” I managed.

We walked back to the cabin in a tense silence.
“BABY BOY!” I heard a shriek to my left, and looked around frantically for the source. *That's one way to break the tension.*

It didn’t take long to find Ymir waving frantically at me.

She sprinted toward us, and actually picked me up, spinning me around in a vicious hug. “You have not been texting me!” she scolded as she set me down.

“I know, I know; things have been hectic lately.”

“A feeble excuse, my freckled kin.”

“Sorry, Ymir.”

“Aww, Jean, my new squad partner, do you want a hug, too?” she teased, moving toward him and threatening to hug him.

“No, please don’t,” he said seriously, backing away from her. “Why did you switch down an age group, anyway?”

“Because no one wanted to be your partner, Dingus. You’ve got quite the reputation of rubbing people the wrong way. I’m doing you a favor. Marco, what division are you in?”

“Same as you, apparently,” I said sheepishly. “But don’t yell! I just decided like ten minutes ago!”

“FRECKLE POWER! Oh my god, who’s your squad partner? We should make her be Jean’s partner so we can dominate together!”

“Oh, uh, I’m with Mina Carolina. Not sure if she’d get along with Jean.”

“What is that supposed to mean? I’m fucking charming,” Jean scoffed.
Ymir fixed him with a glare. “You are many things, Jean Kirstein, but charming does not rank high on the list.”

“Fuck off, Ymir.”

“Oh this is going to be such a pleasant six weeks,” I said sarcastically. “Will you please at least try to get along?”

“We are getting along, Marco. This is how angry people communicate.” She barred her teeth at Jean.

He sneered right back.

“Well, I’m headed to my cabin to put my stuff away, so we’ll see you in a bit, Ymir?”

“Of course, Baby Boy.”

“When are you gonna stop calling me that?” I said, reciting my lines.

“When you stop being a baby boy!” she laughed, and headed toward Stohess.

Jean and I continued toward Cabin G, but he was dragging his feet.

I opened the door for Jean, and he threw my stuff on the top bunk. (He claimed he fell off the top last summer, and refused to climb up there again.)

I was about to ask why he was being so cranky when he spoke. “Please tell me I’m not the biggest asshole on the planet.”

Taken aback, I replied, “Of course you’re not, Jean!”

“Then why the fuck does everyone treat me like I’m completely unbearable? I get it, I swear too much, but plenty of people do that and they have tons of friends.”

“I’m your friend, Jean,” I told him.

“Yeah, you’re my only friend,” he said angrily. “Like, you’re really goddamn nice! You’d think that if you could put up with me, others could do it, too.”

My chest ached. “You and Reiner are friends, too, aren’t you? And I know Ymir gives you a hard time, but—“

“They’re friendly toward me, but you’re the only one who really talks to me. It makes me feel like shit. I’m actually trying, here.”

My face contorted into a frown. It’s never fun to hear your friend say they feel like shit, but it hurt especially bad to hear it from Jean. I could relate to that feeling, at least: people being friendly, but not really feeling like they were your friend.

“Well, I can’t really do much about other people, but I’m your friend, Jean. And I’ll keep being your friend. And if the others are too mean to you, then I’ll tell them to back off. I’ll stand up for you. That’s what friends do,” I concluded.

“That’s not what I meant,” Jean said.

“What did you mean, then?” I asked, heart sinking.
“I… I don’t know. But I appreciate it, Marco. Really, I do. And I’m so fucking happy you’re coming out on Survey with me.”

“Me too, Jean. Hey, wanna be tent buddies? We can’t be on the same squad, but we can share a tent and hang out at all the base camps and stuff,” I added, trying to lighten the mood.

“Yeah, man, that sounds great.”

I debated whether I should hug him. If it were me, I would be screaming internally for some kind of physical reassurance; but Jean doesn’t seem as tactile. I felt like I knew him so well, but only in information. Most of our friendship has been conducted by text or Skype; it was hard to tell.

“Jean?” I asked quietly. “I don’t know if it would help, but… Do you want a hug? Would that help? I’m not sure if you’re a touchy kind of person or not. I mean, I am, so I thought—”

My words were cut off as Jean thumped into my chest. He wrapped his arms tightly around my torso and buried his face in my shoulder.

It was nothing like his half-second ‘bro hug’ from before; Jean was practically melting into me. Tentatively, I stroked his back, and he let out a contented sigh.

I have no idea how long we sat like that, but it was comfortable and quiet and warm.

We heard footsteps outside the cabin, and Jean flew away from me.

I was disappointed, but I understood. I didn’t think I would have been too thrilled to be discovered embracing my friend. It was a private moment; it was personal.

The door opened, and Connie, Sasha, Reiner, and Bert all came barreling through the door.

“There you are!” Sasha cried out. “We were wondering why you never came back!”

Jean didn’t say anything, pretending to be engrossed in unpacking his things and straightening the blankets on his bed.

“We ran into Ymir on our way up here; you know how she gets,” I said.

“Yeah, she said she ran into you two, but that was almost twenty minutes ago,” Reiner said. “We thought you were just dropping your stuff off and coming back.”

Crap. “Yeah, I guess time just got away from us, then. So, when are we supposed to report back to Stohess?”

“Eh, we got about half an hour. Most of the kids are here, but they’re all in the mess halls, so we’re free for a little while longer.”

“Who’s supervising them?” I asked.

“Division leaders like Christa, and the official staff like Erwin and Hanji and Levi,” Connie replied.

“I saw Pixis, too,” Sasha added.

“Ah, okay.”

Jean was still silent, and I wondered if he would be okay. Should I kick them out, give him some
time alone? Should I try to incorporate him into the group? They were sort of more my friends than his, but he knew Reiner pretty well, at least.

“Jean and I were talking about Survey squads earlier. Sasha, Connie, are you two squad partners?”

“Yes!” Sasha cried triumphantly. The two of them high-fived. “We are gonna be the best team out there!”

“You’re gonna be something,” I smirked. “Who else is in our age group?”

“Eren and Mikasa are heading a squad, and Armin got paired with Annie, I think.”

I counted in my head; including my squad and Jean’s, that was only five. “Aren’t there usually six Survey groups?”

“Yeah, but the last group is staff, remember? I heard Levi is taking the high school Survey kids this year, but I don’t know who’s coming with us.”

“Petra’s taking the under ten WP group,” Jean commented. “I heard Hanji say that earlier.”

“Um, cool; why do we care about under tens?” Connie asked.

“Because Marco’s little sister is in the under ten WP group, jackass.”

“Thanks, Jean. Julia sure lucked out: Christa and Petra!” I said, laughing nervously.

“Your sister came this year? Isn’t she like, tiny?” Connie said.

“She’s seven,” I confirmed. “Bert said he and Reiner would check in on her for me while I’m out; between them, Christa and Petra, I know I’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“So, who’s ready to head over to Stohess?” Sasha asked, diffusing the tension. “I think they have a snack table for the counselors. If we get there a little early, there’ll still be the good stuff left.”

“That sounds like a good idea; I could definitely eat,” I said. I hadn’t had anything since about ten when I ate that granola bar; it was almost one now. The opening ceremony had a late lunch/dinner, and there would be plenty of food at the bonfire when it got dark, too.

Reiner herded the group toward the door, and I looked to Jean. “You coming?” I asked, keeping my voice low.

“Gimme a minute,” he said. “I’ll meet you there.”

“Okay. I’ll save you a seat.”

When we got to Stohess, Mina handed all of us a schedule for the day’s events. There would be a half an hour meet-and-greet for the kids to get to know each other, and we would all be expected to supervise. If the kids had questions, we were supposed to answer them, or direct them to a full-time staff member who could help them out.

At two, we’d all gather in the mess hall for lunch, and then at three, the presentations would start: First Wall Garrison, then Wilderness Police, then Survey. The staff member in charge of the division would explain what each section did, and then they allowed a sort of Q and A session, where counselors added some of their personal insights, and then they let kids ask questions as they
came up.

No later than four, we took the kids on an hour-long tour of the base camp and the surrounding area, pointing out boundaries for our age groups, reviewing curfew and meal times, things like that.

Finally, we gave the kids about two hours to settle into their cabins, and explore on their own. At seven, the bonfire would be lit, and then we had to keep the kids either at the fire pit or escort them to their cabins.

It seemed pretty straightforward. The organization of the camp improved every year; it had come under new management about three years before I joined, and things were a little rocky in the early years. A lot has changed, and mostly for the better.

As promised, Jean came into the hall about ten minutes later, grabbing a schedule from Mina and scanning the room for our group. I saw him before he saw me, and I waved to him. He didn’t see me at first, and so he just sort of slinked to the back wall. I sighed.

“Be right back,” I told Bert. “Save my seat!”

I got up and headed over to Jean. “Hey, I saved you a seat next to me.”

“Oh,” he said simply.

“Come on,” I urged him. I led the way back through the sea of metal folding chairs to our spot. I took my seat next to Bert, and Jean sat next to me, on the end.

Finally, Pixis came out onto the stage.

“Good afternoon, campers!” He announced too close to the microphone. It was muffled and deafening.

He pulled back a bit before continuing. “For our returning campers, welcome back; for our new campers, welcome first!”

We all quirked an eyebrow at that; Jean snorted derisively.

Pixis continued. “In a few minutes, each of the three divisions will tell you a little bit about their section, and then you can ask any questions you have that will help you pick which group you want to be in. For our under ten campers, you’re already signed up; but you can pay attention and learn about the other sections for when you’re older!

“For our under tens, ten to thirteens, and fourteen plus group, both Wilderness Police and Wall Garrison are an option; for select ten to thirteens and the fourteen plus group who have parental consent forms, Survey Corps is also an option. This year, Petra Raal will be in charge of Wilderness Police; Keith Shadis will head up the Wall Garrison, and Erwin Smith will be our Survey Corps leader. They will each present their division’s main activities and attractions.

“Squad supervisors will then talk more about the age-group breakdown, and then you can ask questions by quietly raising your hand.”

I kind of zoned out for the presentations, only paying attention to which staff members were in which groups. I’d heard their spiels before, so it was really nothing new.

When Erwin took the stage, I sat up a little straighter. Joining him were Levi, Ilse, and Mike. Erwin announced that he and Levi would be leading the high school group, and Ilse and Mike
would accompany the ten to thirteens.

They outlined the route we would take with the younger kids: it was the most direct route, with the least hills and the safest, clearest paths. The high school group took a more scenic tour of the woods, since they could cover more ground in a day than the younger kids could.

I remembered back to my first Survey outing; I thought I would never make it all the way to Maria, much less the return trip. It’s a long way for a middle schooler to hike, even in five and a half weeks.

Finally, the Q and A wrapped up, and Pixis came back onto the stage.

“Counselors, please go to your division posts in either the East, West, or North Hall. In a moment, our campers will join you in their chosen divisions.”

East hall was Wall, and West was WP, so Jean and I headed to North Hall with Connie, Sasha, Eren, Armin, and Mikasa. We said goodbye to Reiner and Bert, promising we’d hang out at the bonfire later.

“This is gonna be painful,” Jean muttered to me. “Almost no one ever goes to Survey right away, so we’re just stand around with like six kids until Shadis scares them out of Wall and Petra babies the older ones too much.”

“Wouldn’t you rather that, than be mobbed by a bunch of little kids?” I teased with a smile.

He huffed, but I saw the corner of his mouth turn up a little bit.

It was going to be a long six weeks if Jean didn’t lighten up soon, but I could tell that I was getting through to him.

Ymir bounced up to us, squeezing herself between myself and Jean. “How are my two favorite boys?” she asked.

“We’re your favorites?” Jean scoffed.

“Of course! Baby Boy, because he is my freckled brethren, and you because you’re my new squad partner!”

I silently thanked Ymir; whether she knew he was feeling excluded or not, it was a much needed declaration.

“Yeah, okay,” he said, but it looked like he believed her, to some extent. Little victories.

“So, Mike and Ilse—do the staff members get single tents, or are they gonna share?” Ymir asked, wagging her eyebrows. “I’m not too clear on hetero mating rituals, but that seems like a recipe for some sexual tension, if you know what I’m saying.”

“How could we not know what you’re saying?” Jean asked with a sharp laugh. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Well excuse me for trying to make some conversation. Marco, tell Jean how wonderful I am at conversation.”

I turned to Jean, smiling. “Ymir is a little… exuberant, but conversations with her are always entertaining.”
“Exuberant? Yeah, that’s the nice way to put it.”

“That’s the right way to put it!” Ymir laughed. “Marco, you should also tell Jean what a great love guru I am, too.”

“Ymir, please—“

“The lesbian queen dishes relationship advice? This I’d like to see.”

“I’ll have you know, I have counseled Marco on multiple occasions about his romantic interests,” Ymir defended.

“Ymir, please,” I begged. She winked, but let it drop.

“Okay, well I’m gonna go pretend like I’m doing my job and talk to that little kid who just walked in here. Bye, favorite boys!”

Jean looked at me, biting back laughter. “You actually let Ymir give you relationship advice? How the hell did that turn out?”

“Actually, fairly well both times. The first time was when I had this stupid crush in high school—gosh, I was fifteen, maybe? She talked me out of it, and in retrospect, it really was a bad idea, and not just because I was fifteen. And the second time…” I trailed off; I was getting into dangerous territory.

Jean prompted me to continue: “The second time?”

“It was more recent. And she encouraged me to pursue it, though I’m not really sure that I’ve followed through on that one yet.”

“Uh huh,” Jean said. “You’re being awful damn cryptic, Marco.”

“You know I’m shy about this kind of thing,” I said, trying to back out of the conversation. “Look, there’s some more kids. Let’s go say hello.”

“Ugh,” Jean sighed, but followed after me.

X

When we finally made it to the bonfire, Jean looked as exhausted as I felt. The kids were mostly under control, and Levi was still lurking around, so we didn’t have much to do, other than make sure they didn’t get too close to the fire.

“Hey, Marco,” Jean said, voice low.

“Hey, Jean,” I returned. “How you holding up?”

He grunted in response. We stared into the fire for a few minutes, listening to the gleeful screams of children as they burned their marshmallows beyond recognition.

One of the campers chased after another with a burning marshmallow, and I took in a deep breath to call out to them.

“Oi, brats!” Levi’s voice rang out. “Do you have a death wish?”
I exhaled in a laugh. “That’s one way to say it,” I said to Jean.

He smiled for a second before letting it fall.

“So this is totally off topic and I hope this isn’t crossing a line or whatever, but I couldn’t help but notice you deftly avoided using any kind of genders when you talked about Ymir’s ‘love guru’ advice earlier. Are you playing the pronouns game?”

I froze. “What’s the pronouns game?”

“Trying to avoid using ‘he’ or ‘she’ so people don’t know if you’re gay or whatever.”

“Oh.”

“Marco, I want you to know that whatever you are, it’s cool, alright?” Jean looked so serious. My heart was pounding, and I thought about what to say next.

I went with “thanks.”

“So, can I ask?”

“Ask what?”

“Who Ymir helped you out with. I’m assuming it was somebody here at the camp…”

“Oh, um, well…”

“Dude, no pressure. I was just curious, is all.”

“Okay. Maybe another time? When we’re not surrounded by kids,” I laughed, trying to ease the tension.

“Sure thing, man.”

X

The next morning, I was up with the sun, despite my late bed time. Bert and Reiner were sharing the top bunk; Jean snored softly beneath me. I climbed down the ladder to grab my clothes and get dressed, but when I saw Jean, my heart stopped.

He was clutching his pillow in his arms, face scrunched up like he was about to cry. His legs curled around the bottom half of the pillow, and his legs were tangled in the blankets. He looked scared, and hurt.

He looked like a child.

I was at a loss for what to do; I hated seeing him like this, but I didn’t want to wake him up and find out he just had a sad sleeping face.

But he looked so tense, and it was chilly in the cabin, so I delicately untangled the blankets a little to pull them up around his back. He relaxed a little, shifting his grip on the pillow in his arms.
I remembered how fiercely he had hugged me the day before, and wondered if this was what Jean felt like all the time: desperate for affection but equally terrified of it.

I smoothed the blankets over him once more, letting my hand rest on his shoulder just a moment. I could have sworn he leaned into the warmth of my hand, and I watched his brow relax just a bit more.

Not wanting to risk waking him, I pulled on my jeans and a sweater and headed outside to the lake.

I’ve always been an early riser, and today was no exception. It’s rewarding in a few ways, though some are more important than others. First, it was always peaceful. Even if the rest of my life got hectic, or I was mad at my parents or frustrated with my little sister, or if school work was bogging me down, the morning, just as the day was breaking, never failed to ground me.

Another reason why I liked early mornings was the fact that I could get so much done with no one else around. I preferred to do homework in the mornings, or my chores that weren’t too noisy, because there were no distractions. My friends were never awake and texting me; my parents weren’t making small talk or asking me questions. It was just me.

The third major reason I got up early was the sense of control I felt. I wasn’t somehow immune to the comfort and warmth of my bed, and I loved to sleep. But I felt strong and determined, unwrapping myself from my cocoon of blankets to get up early every day. I decided that I was getting up: It was my choice. Even when nothing else was going right, I was in charge of how my day started. It was comforting.

I sat on the edge of the fishing pier, letting my feet dangle in the chilly water as the sun slowly burned off the fog. I had no plans for today in the first hours of light, so I just let myself relax. The mess hall would be open in another hour and a half, and I considered going to get some tea when it opened, and coming back out here for a little while longer.

There were a few birds and insects making noise, but otherwise, it was completely still. I relaxed my face and leaned back on my hands, relishing the morning.

My mind wandered back to Jean, though. I felt such closeness with him, and yet there was this uncomfortable distance there, too. I wanted to comfort him and assure him that I wouldn’t abandon him or mock him, or whatever it was he feared I would do.

But I also had to admit to myself that there was something else about Jean I wanted, too. I was fairly certain only Ymir knew about it, but that wasn’t particularly comforting. As much as I loved being Jean’s friend, I also knew that I was pretty into him. He was snarky and abrasive around others, but when we Skyped or texted, he softened.

Yesterday, when he hugged me, I could feel his loneliness radiating from him, and I wanted to be the one to replace that emptiness with the affection and care that Jean deserved.

Deep down, I thought Jean was incredibly shy and uncomfortable in his own skin. He was always on guard, constantly expecting an attack on his ability or something, but his defensiveness was usually the very thing that provoked the ‘attacks’. Jean wasn’t unsociable, he just hadn’t figured out how to navigate his insecurities yet.

He had a job he fairly liked, but he wanted to do more with it. He knew he had to go back to college, but he was terrified of failure and whatever happened last time when he ‘disagreed’ with
I felt my curiosity get the best of me: I needed to know more about what Jean had been through. I was determined to help Jean feel like he had somewhere he belonged.

X

By seven, a fair amount of the staff was up and milling about, as were a few campers. I went up to the mess hall for at least some tea, and was pleasantly surprised by the aroma of cinnamon French toast and scrambled eggs.

I got modest servings of both, and sat down at one of the tables closest to the door, so my friends would find me as they came in.

I didn’t have to wait long.

“Morning, Marco!” Sasha said, announcing not only her arrival but Connie’s as well. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yeah, ’cause you know we won’t sleep well for the next six weeks with all these preteens we have to look after!” Connie added.

“Aww, I don’t think they’ll be too bad. They’re preteens; how late can they stay up, anyway?” I asked.

“Are you kidding me? Don’t you remember being twelve?” Sasha asked, incredulous.

“Yeah, but that only lasted a couple days. After that, they’re physically exhausted from the hiking and they can’t keep it up. They’ll be sleeping like logs in no time,” I said confidently. I hoped I was right.

“Well, that’s a good point,” she conceded. “Ooh, breakfast actually looks good today. C’mon, Conn; let’s go fill up a tray or two!” she left with a giggle.

In their absence, a slightly grumpy and definitely still sleepy Jean entered the mess hall. He saw me immediately and joined me, slouching into the bench next to me.

“Good morning, Sunshine,” I said affectionately.

“Ughhh,” Jean moaned. He folded his arms on the table and buried his head.

I was tempted to reach over and rub his back, but decided against it.

Sasha and Connie were back, talking animatedly about the ideal consistency of egg yolks. They each had a tray full of various dishes from the buffet line.

“No, but if it’s too runny, then the white is too weak and it spills everywhere before you’re ready to relish the experience,” Connie was defending.

“Connie, trust me,” Sasha said patiently. “There is literally no point in delaying the satisfaction of an egg yolk drenching the rest of your breakfast. It’s not like you can eat it by itself. As long as the
white is cooked enough to avoid salmonella, it’s game time.”

Connie sighed, and it seemed their argument was settled.

Jean wearily picked his head up at their noisy arrival. “Holy Jesus, Sasha, are you seriously going to eat all that food?” he asked.

“Yes, yes I am,” she said, emphatically shoveling a huge bite of scrambled eggs into her mouth. “And you know what?” she continued through her mouthful, “Fuck you for only asking me and not Connie, who has the same amount of food on his plate. I’m a strong girl with a big appetite and I do the same amount of exercise and work as you do, pissbaby.”

Jean’s fear showed across his face. Slowly, he recovered. “I—Wow, I’m sorry. It’s early; I wasn’t thinking.”

“Damn right you weren’t. Apology accepted.” She swallowed her food noisily, and then resumed eating in a less alarming manner.

“So,” I said after a moment. “You guys ready for demo day?”

Demo Day was the day before all the sections officially started. It was a way of letting the kids test out the group they chose (especially the Survey kids) so if they had a change of heart, it was easy to switch them. After Demo Day, Wall and WP made competitive teams, and of course, Survey left Sina.

Survey’s Demo Day was essentially taking the kids in a huge loop around Sina, so if they wimped out, we were never very far from base, but they got a taste of what it was like hiking all day.

As of last night, each of our squads had six kids, except for the staff squad that had seven. After demo day, we expected at least one kid to drop, so we would likely be down to five per group. Still, this year’s camp had higher enrollment than when I was in this age bracket, and I wasn’t sure if I was glad to see more kids embracing the outdoors or worried about having more kids to lead.

“Demo Day is nothing,” Connie said. “It’s the first week after we leave base camp that’s gonna be hell. A bunch of spoiled kids whose idea of ‘camping’ is in an RV at Yellowstone are gonna be in for a ride and I for one cannot wait to see it.”

“Aww, remember when we were little twelve year olds on Survey?” Sasha mused fondly.

“Yeah, and Shadis told you that you had to jog the whole first day and you did it?”

“Ah, yeah, good times, good times. Bless that Christa for sneaking me extra food at meal time.”

I laughed, but noticed that Jean had dropped out of the conversation. He wasn’t there with us when we were younger; he only started coming to this camp last year. I searched for a topic that would include everyone.

“So, Jean, any advice for us newbie squad leaders?” I asked, nudging his shoulder to get his attention.

“Uh, I guess be a hardass from day one about the ‘no whining’ rule? You’ll be so much happier if you nip that in the bud,” he smirked.

“What’s the craziest thing that happened in your squad last year?” Sasha asked.
“Ooh, yeah I heard a girl got her first period while she was on Survey! Was she in your group?” Connie pressed, weirdly excited.

“Ugh, no she was in another squad, though we all heard all about it. Besides, that’s chick stuff. ‘S why they have one male and one female counselor for each squad,” Jean said. “Hey, I’m gonna go get some coffee and something to eat. Be right back.”

“Okay,” I smiled after him.

When I turned back to Sasha and Connie, I was met with to knowing smirks.

“Talk to us, Bodt,” Connie said.

“What’s the deal with Grumpy Cat?” Sasha gestured, jerking a thumb in Jean’s direction.

“What do you mean, what’s the deal?” I asked suspiciously.

“Like, I get that you’re friends, even though he’s a super prickly cactus-pants,” Sasha explained. “But what’s the deal?” She made some strange wave-like gestures with her hands.

“Oh my god,” I whined. “Guys, please don’t—“

“Oooooh it’s true! I got it! Ha!” Connie laughed, throwing his head back.

“No, it’s not like—“

“You wanna turn his frown upside down,” Sasha quipped.

“You wanna get two-toned boned,” Connie followed.

“Oh, nice!” Sasha congratulated him. I steadily turned more and more red.

“Oh! Got one: you want to get it on with Jean,” she said, drawing out his name so it rhymed better.

“You want to oui oui with his wee wee!” Connie cackled.

“Ew,” I groaned.

“What about you wanna put the kirsch on top?” When Connie and I gave a blank look, she added: “Get it, because his name is Kirstein, and I think in German kirsch is a cherry, and you put a cherry on top but Marco wants Jean on—“

I slapped a hand over her mouth as Jean came back to the table.

“Whoa damn, what did you say to Marco?” Jean laughed as he sat down with his tray. He had a mug of black coffee, a bowl of questionable oatmeal, and a dried out looking cherry pastry. I blushed and looked around the hall.

“Oh, we’re just teasing Ymir’s Baby Boy is all,” Sasha said. I prayed Jean wouldn’t pick up on the reference to Ymir as a nod to my not-hetero sexuality.

“I’m guessing I don’t want to know, then,” he concluded.

I tried not to make my sigh of relief too obvious.

“Well, I’m gonna go get ready,” I announced, downing the rest of my tea and getting up from the
“Bye, Baby Boy!” Sasha called after me.

“You’re not allowed to call me that!” I warned. “I’ll tell Ymir.”

As I took my tray toward the kitchen counter, none other than my “freckled kin” herself made her entrance to the mess hall. Crap.

“Ooh, messages for Mama this early in the day, Marco? What are you gonna tell Ymir?” she batted her eyelashes mischievously.

“Sasha tried to call me ‘Baby Boy’,” I pouted.

Ymir’s reaction was immediate. “Oh hell no Sasha that is not cool and beyond not okay. Hell to the mother fucking no,” she ranted.

I took my leave.

I headed back to the cabin to change into my camp issued shirt and my hiking boots. I waved to Mina, who was talking to Hannah and Franz outside Cabin F. She smiled and gestured for me to join them.

“Morning,” I said.

“Morning, Marco!” Mina said, happily. “I’m really looking forward to being a squad leader!” she chirped. “I was just talking to Hannah and Franz about it. They’re gonna be on Survey, too!”

“Oh, really?” I asked. “Are there more groups this year, then?”

“No,” Hannah replied. “Turns out Mike broke his ankle last night, and is gonna stay with WP. Ilse wanted to stay with Mike, so Erwin asked us to switch out to Survey.”

“How did he break his ankle last night?” I asked. “At the bonfire?”

“Unclear,” Franz said, “but it seems like it was a pretty embarrassing incident, since if it was cool, you know he’d be bragging about it.”

“True. Well, I’m gonna go get changed and ready, but I’ll see you guys soon!”

“Bye, Marco!” Mina called.

I shook my head; this camp was really a mess. I was glad that the changes wouldn’t affect Julia though.

My real reason for coming back to the cabin early was so that I could check in on my little sister one more time before I left. She talked a big game, but at the end of the day, she was seven, and I wanted to make sure she was really okay with me not being at camp with her, per se.

I changed quickly, lacing my boots with a practiced motion, and headed over to the Duckling Cabin. I knew my sister wouldn’t have woken up on her own, but I hoped whatever counselor was staying in their cabin would have woken her by now.

I knocked on the door, and it opened almost immediately.

“Oh!” said a young woman, a couple years older than me, with short, wavy hair. “Can I help you?”
“I’m Julia’s big brother,” I explained. “Is she here? I didn’t see her at breakfast.”

“Yeah, actually, we were all about to head over to Stohess together for breakfast.”

“Mind if I walk with you?”

“Not at all,” she said.

“Marco!” Julia squealed, running into me and wrapping her arms around me as tight as she could. I pretended it was too tight and she giggled.

“How was your first day, Juju?” I asked.

“It was so cool! That fire last night was huge and I ate so many marshmallows I got a tummy ache but it’s okay because I feel better now.”

I nodded knowingly. “I’m glad you feel better. Sometimes there is such a thing as too much sugar.”

“Nope,” she said with a grin.

“So are you still okay with me leaving tomorrow?” I asked.

The smile faded off her face. “Do you have to?”

“I’d like to go with my friends to Survey, but if you really don’t want me to leave, there’s still a chance for me to switch. But I think you’ll be okay without me for a little while.”

“Will you miss me?” she asked.

“Of course! But not too much, because I know you’ll be having so much fun.”

“Okay. You can go then. I’ll miss you too, though. So you have to have fun.”


“Love you too, Marco,” she said with one more hug.

“I’ll say goodbye for real tonight after dinner, okay? We’ll probably leave before you wake up.”

“Okay!”

I ruffled her hair and headed back to Stohess.

X

I met Mina back in the North Hall where children were beginning to file in. The Demo Day started at 9:30, after an extended breakfast hour.

“You ready?” I asked her.

“Oh, for sure!” she said, upbeat. “I’m actually really excited.”

“That’s great! Me too,” I agreed.

She handed me the clipboard in her hands. “If you’d like, you can look through our group. We’ve
I leafed through the forms. Each page had the camper’s name, home address, emergency and medical information, and a photo.

The first name up was Georgie Anders, a twelve year old girl from Trost. Her photo showed a strong, broad smile and stringy, unkempt blondish hair wrangled into a messy off-centered ponytail. She didn’t have any alarming medical issues, so I thumbed to the next page.

Next was a thirteen year old who looked like she went to the Ymir school of modeling. Teresa Azuero had the biggest shit eating grin I’ve ever seen without freckles. She had long black hair that draped over her shoulders, an angular chin and a glint in her deep eyes that said she was not to be trifled with. Again, with no medical concerns, I flipped over to the next camper.

Jai Karnik was a feisty looking boy. Our lone eleven year old, he’d have to be. His hair stood up at a ridiculous angle, and his unfortunate overbite was being tamed with braces. In a word, he looked smarmy, especially for as young as he was. I’d have to keep an eye on him. His medical form said he had ‘seasonal allergies’, but that he kept his medication on him at all times, and it shouldn’t be a problem. A few sniffles never hurt anyone.

The next boy was Trevor McHenry, a gawky looking thirteen year old who was already lurking against the far wall of the North Hall. He had a Nintendo DS in his hands and was pressing buttons furiously, oblivious to his surroundings. I seriously hoped he didn’t plan to bring that with him on the hike. His medical form threw up a lot of red flags though: asthma, seasonal allergies, dust allergies, bee sting allergy, and lactose intolerance. It said he carried an EpiPen with him in case of bee stings. I panicked a little at that, and shamefully hoped that he would switch divisions before tomorrow.

The third girl was Minh Phan, another twelve year old, who had a sweet smile and strikingly prominent cheekbones. Her medical section was blissfully short, simply stating that she had both contacts and glasses but she didn’t like either of them, so we should check in with her to make sure she had one or the other on.

As I flipped to the final page, Minh herself approached me.

“Excuse me?” she said in a shy voice. It sounded like the way you speak when you’re on the phone or ordering food; it was her ‘be polite to strangers’ voice.

“Yes?” I asked. “You must be Minh,” I said, showing her the clipboard so she wouldn’t think I was a creep or something.

“Um, Dr Hanji told me to tell you that I’m really interested in science? She said you were science-y, too.”

“Yeah! That’s really cool. What kind of science do you like?” I asked, genuinely interested.

“Um…” she paused. “I don’t really know. All kinds, I guess. But I like plants and animals the best.”

“Awesome! I love biology, too. If you have any questions on the hike, feel free to ask.”

“Okay,” she said, and retreated to her friend.

I checked out the last camper’s form, a twelve year old boy named Eli Shepherd. He was a bit
pudgy and wore thick glasses. His dark brown hair was curly and fell into his eyes a bit. His smile was forced in the photo but he didn’t look secretly menacing or awful.

I flipped the pages down and handed the clipboard back to Mina. “Looks pretty good,” I commented, “though I’m a bit worried about this Trevor kid. Should he even be at Camp Sina?”

“Yeah, I saw that, too. Thank goodness for Demo Day, right?”

“Definitely. Who knows, maybe he’ll be okay.”

“Oh maybe he’ll drop out before we even leave camp.”

“Time will tell,” I laughed.

Jean walked into the hall, and I waved at him. He offered a little wave back then walked over to his assigned squad corner on the opposite side, hands jammed into his cargo short’s pockets.

Suddenly, Ymir entered the hall with a huge box in her arms, which she threw unceremoniously to the floor. Straightening up, she took a deep breath, then climbed onto the nearest bench.

“Attention in the North Hall!” she bellowed. “We’re going to start up in TWO MINUTES so find your leaders now! If you don’t know who it is, ask anyone who’s wearing these nerdy green polos!”

After her deafening announcement, she strode over to me.

“Guess who’s in charge, Marco?” she asked, pointing to herself with both thumbs.

“Seriously?” I asked.

“Hey, I’m an experienced counselor and I know my shit. Erwin trusts me, for some reason, and I’m awesome. What more do you want?”

“I guess that’s enough,” I laughed. “Any special instructions, oh Freckled Leader?”

“Okay number one please always call me Freckled Leader from now on,” she grinned. “And number two, just wrangle up your childrens and make sure they have the basics before we leave base camp.”

“Aye, aye,” I said, standing at attention and placing one fist over my chest like a salute and the other behind my back.

I turned on my heel, relaxing, back to Mina. “I see Minh and Trevor; do you know where the rest are? Is that Georgie talking with Minh?”

“Yes, that’s Georgie, and Eli is kinda short, but he’s right next to Trevor. Teresa is---‘ she searched briefly—“oh, good, walking toward us. I haven’t seen…. Jai?” she asked, making his name rhyme with ‘eye’.

“We’ll ask how to say it when he gets here,” I agreed.

Slowly, our group trickled toward us, reluctantly leaving kids in the other groups.

I searched for Jean to see how he was handling the kids, and I was… surprised. He was smiling and laughing with a couple of the older kids, though it was unclear from here if he was really laughing with them or at them. It was a start.
For all he claimed to hate kids, I think he secretly enjoyed working at the camp. Why else come back?

Catching my glance, Jean’s smile turned devious. He bent down to speak to one of the campers with a serious face, and then the boy turned around and ran over to my group; it was Jai.

“That counselor said to tell you that you’re a big nerd,” the boy said with a mischievous grin.

“Jean!” I exclaimed, throwing my hands up in exasperation. “Really?”

Jean burst out laughing, clutching his stomach.

“You can go tell Jean that—“

“Alright! Squad leaders, go through the checklist, make sure everyone has water and their shoes are tied. We’re headed out!” Ymir cried out from her chair.

“Never mind,” I said told Jai. I’m supposed to be an adult here!

Mina stepped in. “Do you have your water, Jai?” she asked, trying out the ‘eye’ pronunciation.

“Yes,” he said, patting his backpack, “but my name is Jai, like if it were spelled with a y.”

“Oh, oops! Thanks for correcting me,” Mina said gracefully. “Marco, you ready to head out?”

“Sure am!” I replied energetically.

Our group followed Jean and Ymir’s out of the hall, and we set off for our Demo Day hike.

We didn’t make it even the first mile before the first complaint was heard.

“When do we stop for a break?” Trevor whined. “It’s too hot for this.”

“It’ll be hotter as the day goes on,” I informed him, “and we’ve really only been walking for about fifteen minutes. You’re already tired?”

“My mom signed me up for this dumb camp. I wanted to go to Park District Camp with all my friends, not walk all day,” he grumbled.

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” I told him. “But let’s try to make the most of it, since you’re already here?”

“Ugh, my feet hurt.”

Up ahead, Jean stopped on the side of the path. “Nip it in the bud, man,” he said, raising his eyebrows and jerking his head not-so-subtly toward Trevor. “You’ll regret if it you don’t.”

“I’m trying!” I said.

“Time to be a hardass, Marco!” Jean laughed.

“That’s your job,” I teased.

“And now it’s yours, too! Welcome to squad leadership!” he said, and jogged back up to his group.
By the one mile mark, Trevor was seriously lagging behind. Mina was leading our group, talking about the local wildlife, asking the kids questions about what they already knew about camping, and learning about their interests.

Meanwhile, I was stuck in the back trying to prod Trevor into walking even the tiniest bit faster.

“We’re going to lose the group,” I warned. “You need to walk faster.”

“I can’t,” he whined. “This is too much.”

“Trevor, why did you sign up for Survey? Why not do WP? They do much shorter hikes, and you get more down time. It’s only Demo Day…”

“Because if I drop out now everyone will know I’m weak!” he cried.

I pursed my lips, unsure how to respond. “Well, would you rather suffer through six weeks of this, or just tell everyone you changed your mind and think Wilderness Police sounded better?”

He didn’t respond.

“You could tell them you switched because you’re really interested in ecosystems!” I suggested. Too nerdy? I wondered.

“Augh,” he moaned, but picked up his pace.

It was a good thing I knew this circuit well, because by lunch time, Trevor and I had completely lost the rest of our squad and the four squads that followed ours.

He whined the whole way no matter what encouragements I gave him, and yet he didn’t seem to be dissuaded from continuing with Survey the whole six weeks.

Something had to give.

When we finally made it to the campsite where we planned to picnic, everyone else was finishing up their lunches.

I sat down at the staff table next to Jean. “I think it’s actually more exhausting to walk as slowly as Trevor does,” I complained.

“Dude, you’ve gotta lay down the law with him. When we leave after lunch, tell him he keeps up or he gets left, and then honestly leave him behind.”

“Jean!”

“Well I don’t mean 100% lose him, but like let yourself get far enough ahead that he can’t really see you. He’ll panic, and pick up the pace. If not, tell him he can’t do Survey, and you’re making the executive decision for him to join Wall so he can get some fucking muscles.”

“Jean, language,” I warned.

“Yeah, yeah, small ears are present. But you know what I mean. Don’t actually abandon him in the woods. Just scare him a little.”

“Ymir?” I asked.

“I’m with Jean. Slowpoke McGee is dragging you down, Marco, and if this is how far he fell
behind in two hours, imagine a whole day. What are you going to do, piggy back him to Maria?”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” I sighed.

“Of course we are,” Ymir said. “Now hurry up and eat so we can leave again.”

After lunch, it was time for some tough love. I wasn’t sure how tough I was, but I was not going to trudge out to Maria at two miles per hour with this kid. Our group was last in the procession this time, probably for my benefit.

“Trevor, you have to pick up the pace,” I said sternly. “Come on, keep up with the group.”

I resolutely stayed with the group, letting Trevor sink further and further behind. I stole some glances back at him, making sure he didn’t get too far behind.

He did better, but I wasn’t entirely convinced he would make it all six weeks.

Eventually, the gap widened enough that if we went around a curve, he would disappear. On the straight pathways, he was still in view, but over hills or through dense forest, he was hard to find.

It felt horrible to keep walking, but I did. I stayed with the group.

On the next straightaway, I realized I couldn’t see him at all.

“Mina,” I called. “I have to wait for Trevor. I can’t see him anymore, even on the straight.”

“Okay, stay safe!” she returned.

I waited a couple minutes, but he didn’t come into view. Impatient, I headed back on the path to find him. Around the bend, I found him, sitting on the ground.

“Trevor!” I called. “Trevor, get up! You need to keep moving. You have to at least make it back to base camp today.”

When I got closer, I could see that he was crying. I felt like the world’s worst camp counselor. It was only Demo Day, and I already made a kid cry. I was terrible!

“Oh, no, please don’t cry, Trevor!” I said a bit too frantically. “You were doing so much better after lunch! Why did you give up?”

“This is horrible!” he wailed. “Why would anyone want to do this?” Snot dripped out of his nose, and he swiped at it with the palm of his hand. “I want to go home.”

Guilt building in my chest, I sank to my knees and put my hand firmly on his shoulders.

“I hear you, Trevor. I do. But we’re only about forty-five minutes from camp, and that’s the only way to get back home, or at least, to base camp. So what do you say? Can we give it another shot?”

Still sobbing, his breathing hiccupping and ragged, he pulled himself to his feet.

“That’s it,” I soothed. “Great. Here, I’ll carry your backpack for you,” I said, taking the sweaty bag from the boy. “You grab some water, and let me know when you’re ready to walk.”

After draining the rest of his water bottle, Trevor finally started moving forward again. An hour and fifteen minutes later, we arrived back at Stohess Hall.
I sat Trevor down with his pack and went to talk to Ilse, who had taken over the ten-to-thirteen WP range, and switched Trevor to her group. I also added that she may want to give his mother a call.

“He was literally crying on the trail,” I said in a low voice, so the kids couldn’t overhear me. “He said his mom made him come to this camp and he didn’t want to. I think he’s homesick and scared and not mentally or physically a good match for Sina.”

“Thanks for letting me know, Marco. I’ll definitely reach out to her and make sure he feels welcome in the WP.” She scribbled a note next to his name and I returned to my group.

“Whew,” I sighed. “That was an interesting day.”

“Thanks for hanging out with him,” Mina said. “You switched him to WP?”

“Yeah, I think that was the best place for him.”

“Agreed. Well, the kids have free time at the lake, so go get your swim trunks!” Mina chirped.

“You bet.”

X

That night after dinner, I found Julia, already commanding a small circle of campers’ attention talking about the difference between a frog and a toad, and why frogs were better.

Her argument was… less than scientific.

“You don’t kiss a toad prince,” she said condescendingly, “you kiss frog princes. Duh.”

“Hey, Juju,” I interrupted.

“Oh, hi, Marco,” she said quickly, barely sparing me more than a glance. “Besides, frogs come from tadpoles like we saw today and that makes them way cooler than toads.”

That argument was better, but I was still hurt by her basically ignoring me. “I came to say goodbye, Juju. Will you give me a goodbye hug?”

“Marco,” she whined, giving me her full attention now, “I’m with my friends.”

“I see that. I’m glad you’re all getting along well. But can I please have a goodbye hug? It’s for me,” I explained to her friends. “Julia’s a big girl and doesn’t need brother hugs, but I still do.”

The campers giggled.

“Okay, okay,” she said, fighting a smile. She stood up and gave me a big hug, squeezing as tight as she could. I pretended that she was too strong and let out a big sigh when she released me.

“Be good, have fun, learn lots!” I said. “I’ll miss you, and I expect to hear all about it when I get back, okay?”

She nodded earnestly, and I let her get back to her new posse.

I had dinner with all my counselor friends, sitting across from Bert and Reiner, since we wouldn’t be seeing them for over five weeks. Jean sat to my right, always on the end of the bench.

Conversation was lively and we all compared who had the worst camper. Surprisingly, I came in
second, to a boy in Reiner’s group who talked a huge game, bragging and constantly talking over instructions, using equipment he wasn’t allowed to, the whole bit...

“And then we finally let him on the obstacle course, and he shat his pants!” Reiner boomed. “This kid—eleven years old—shat his pants running through a tire course. I’ve never laughed so hard in my life.”

“What did he do?!” Jean asked through tears of laughter.

“Oh, that’s the best part! This kid just keeps going, like it never happened! Like we don’t see the huge stain on his sweatpants! All the kids are laughing, I’m laughing, and he just keeps plowing through with this look of pure determination. I just could not.”

That certainly made Trevor seem mundane in comparison.

After dinner, I walked back to Cabin G with Jean. It was quiet except for the ever-present chorus of bugs and the frogs down in the lake.

“Hey, I have an idea,” he said suddenly. “So no way will Ymir let me lead our group because she’s like, head honcho or whatever. But what if you switched places with Mina? Because then I’ll be in the back of my group, and you’ll be in front, and we can pretty much walk together.”

I was a little speechless, and didn’t react right away.

“Forget it, don’t worry about it,” Jean said just as quickly.

“No, no! That’s a great idea. I mean, I’d really like that. Mina might want to lead some of the time, but I’m sure we could at least switch off in the front. I’d like that.”

“Cool.”

We got to the cabin and got ready for the evening in silence. We both wanted to take advantage of having plumbing one last night, so we headed to the showers.

I tried desperately not to think about Jean standing in the stall next to me, naked, but man was I glad for the flimsy shower curtain that shielded me from view. My arousal didn’t last long though, when I thought of what would happen if a kid came in and saw me like that.

When we got back to the cabin, Bert and Reiner were still out, so it was just us. I pulled out a book from my duffel bag, and was about to climb up into the top bunk when a small voice stopped me.

“Marco?” Jean almost whispered.

“Yeah?” I responded in a similar tone.

“This is gonna sound awkward as fuck,” he stared, “but could I maybe have another hug?”

My stomach leapt into my throat like I was on a roller coaster, just about to go over the edge of the first big drop. I tried to contain the stupid smile that was spreading across my face.

“No way!” I shouted, but Jean was already at me. He was in my face in the blink of an eye, and the next second, he was in my embrace. I tried to resist, but with how close he was, there was no way I could have. I gave in, and I just let his embrace take over.

“Of course, Jean, anytime.” And wow, did I mean it.

As he did before, Jean didn’t ease into the hug at all, but rather threw himself into me. I stumbled back a bit, but fortunately the ladder behind my back stabilized me.

He rubbed his face against my neck a little bit, like he had an itch on his nose or something, and his
arms wrapped tight around my waist.

I didn’t hesitate to rub his back this time, and he sighed contentedly as I did. My eyes slipped closed and we just stood there, holding each other for a long minute.

With a deep breath, Jean finally pulled away from me, and gave me a weak smile. It wasn’t a laughing smile that I’d seen him wear so often, but a much rarer, soft, peaceful one that always made my heart melt.

I nodded, and we both climbed into our bunks.

An owl hooted outside, and I smiled to myself.

“Night, Freckles.”

Chapter End Notes

It is I, your benevolent fic author, who has given you not one but TWO tender jeanmarco hugs.
Okay, I just really want them to be happy and as of right now am not planning any major angst. But that.. may.... change............ >>
As usual, my eyes sprang open at around 5 in the morning, when the sky was still a hazy grey-blue: not quite dawn, not quite night.

I sighed, feeling fairly well rested, and a dumb, uncontrollable smile spread across my face as I remembered hugging Jean last night.

I waffled between being shocked by Jean’s affectionate side and not being surprised at all: once I had gotten to know him better, it became pretty clear that his aloof attitude and the distance he kept were mostly an act he put on that he saw as self-defense.

I let myself lay in bed for the next forty-five minutes or so, not really wanting to get up. Besides, I knew my feet would be sore from my first day back hiking, and I wasn’t exactly eager to put any weight on them.

Drifting in and out of almost-sleep, my brain shifted to how I could best help Jean feel accepted. He wasn’t the type that would respond positively to a direct suggestion or comment. For as blunt as he was, he certainly didn’t handle that type of response as well when it was aimed at himself.

I was going to have to figure out how to give Jean the hint in a subtle way. That was going to take some more thought than my pre-dawn brain was ready for.

Fortunately, I had about five weeks to do it. Feeling confident and more or less awake, I finally climbed down the ladder of my bunk at ten to six. I fished around my duffel bag until I found some fresh clothes—no need to start off the hike stinky—and changed.

Feeling hungry, I decided to go wake Jean up.

Though he still clutched his pillow like his life depended on it, his face looked more relaxed this morning. I smiled, listening to his soft snores for a moment.
I sat on the edge of his bed. “Jean?” I said lightly. “It’s about six. Time to start the day.”

He woke fairly quickly, and in contrast to Bert, very gently. It was pretty cute.

“Mm?” he asked, eyes slowly coming into focus.

“It’s six,” I repeated. “Wanna go get breakfast with me?”

“When do the kids start?”

“In an hour. We’ll leave at 8.”

“Five more minutes?”

“When does that ever turn out to be just five minutes?” I asked with a quiet laugh. Bert and Reiner didn’t have to get up for an hour still, and I didn’t want to wake them.

“Fine, Freckles; you win. Let me get dressed and then we can go eat.”

I hopped off his bed to let him get up, and busied myself with tidying my bag while Jean pulled on a pair of cargo shorts.

“Ready?” he asked, smoothing down his shirt.

“Yup,” I said, zipping my bag and tossing it in the corner.

He opened the door and I followed him out, pulling it closed behind us.

Jean was in good spirits this morning, despite claiming to not be a early riser. We made small talk as we entered the mess hall, heading straight for the buffet table. Mostly, we talked about how I would miss sleeping in a real bed for a while.

I hoped Jean would sleep well on the trip. Not that the cabin beds were anything spectacular, but he already tossed and turned on those. The ground, cushioned only by the tent and a sleeping bag, wouldn’t be as forgiving.

“So that’s good at least,” Jean was saying.

I hadn’t realized I had zoned out. “Sorry, what’s good? I kinda spaced.”

“Wow, I see how it is,” he joked. “I was saying that now that Slowpoke switched out of your group, it seems like you have some good kids.”

“Oh, yeah. I feel bad for him, since I think he did want to do Survey, but he just wasn’t ready for it.”

“If he really wanted to do Survey, he wouldn’t’ve crapped out after half an hour,” Jean argued.

“Yeah, maybe. Still, though. I hope he enjoys WP.”

“That kid wanted to go back to community camp and you think he’s gonna like WP?” Jean asked, incredulous.

“Fine, fine, I said I hope,” I replied, a bit put out.

Jean smirked, and nudged my shoulder with his.
We finished up our breakfast in relative silence. I saw Hannah and Franz in the far corner, talking quietly among themselves. I offered a wave, but they were too engrossed in each other to notice me.

Jean turned around to see who I was waving at. I didn’t know if Jean knew them, but he made no comment at my wave, and I didn’t ask.

Instead, I stood up to take my now empty tray over to the kitchen window. Jean took a minute to stretch his legs under the table, then joined me.

Together, we headed over to the North Hall to start packing up the backpacks for our campers.

Ymir was already there when we walked in through the double doors.

“Good morning, favorite boys,” she called to us.

“Hey,” Jean said.

“Morning, Ymir. How’s it looking?”

“Eh, everything was actually set out for us last night; looks like Erwin actually did his job this year!”

“That looks more like Levi’s work,” Jean noted, gesturing to the tidy rows of supplies on the tables. There were the basic water bottles, a miniature first-aid kit (squad leaders carried a larger, more complete one), extra camp-issued shirts neatly rolled up, a compass, a map, and a sleeping bag. When the campers arrived to the North Hall this morning, they would bring their own socks, underwear, hats, sunscreen, bug spray, and whatever else they wanted to haul with them.

“So all we have to do is put the supplies in the bags?” I asked.

“Yup. Pretty easy. It goes in the same place it always does,” Ymir confirmed. “Just make sure you do them all the same so when we tell them where something is, it’s in the same spot for everybody.”

“Got it,” I said, and got to work on the fifth and final pack for my group. Ymir had already finished her and Jean’s group, so she sent Jean to work on Armin’s and Annie’s group’s packs, while she moved on to Hannah’s and Franz’s group.

After dropouts and rearranging groups a little, we all ended up with five campers, except for Ymir and Jean, who would have a sixth camper. With six teams of squad leaders, that meant 31 campers total. It was a pretty good turn-out, I thought.

As I was about to start on the fifth and final pack for my group, Mina walked in. “Good morning!” she chimed. Her damp hair was in her characteristic pigtails, and her eyelashes were so dark and full that I thought for a moment that she might have put makeup on, ridiculous as that seemed. Why bother with makeup to take middle schoolers out on a five-week hike in the woods?

“Oh, I can finish that last pack,” she offered. “Gosh, how early did you get up today?”

“I woke up at five,” I said honestly, “but I didn’t get out of bed until almost six.”

“Ah. I got up at about quarter after six, but then I wanted a shower and had a nice leisurely breakfast. It’ll be a while before our next big meal like that, huh?”
I smiled. I honestly didn’t mind the food we took with us out on the trails. I’d never been a picky eater, and having the same meal day in and day out didn’t bother me. Besides, about once a week, when we reached an outpost, we got to cook “real” food. (The other bonus of the outposts was getting to wash our clothes, use an outhouse with a door and everything, and sleep in a real bed.)

The only downside to the food this year was that I would be the one to carry half a week’s worth of food in my pack. Once the campers were in high school, they helped carry the food, but for the 10-13’s, it was the squad leaders who carried the food, since the packs were already heavy for such small kids.

What made them really heavy was the tent. Fortunately for them, they got to rotate who carried it, since they would be sharing. The two remaining boys would carry one tent, and the three girls would rotate carrying their own tent. Mina and I would trade off carrying a tent as well, though we wouldn’t be sharing it with each other. I was going to share with Jean, and Mina planned on sharing with Hannah.

I realized Jean and I didn’t bring our stuff to the hall, so we would need to head back to the cabin to pack our own bags. The campers had started filing into the hall, so I figured we had better go grab our things before it got too late.

“Jean!” I called.

“Yeah?”

“I’m gonna head back to the cabin to grab my stuff; wanna come with?”

“Oh, good call, man. Yeah, let me just…” he grabbed his empty backpack from the floor where it had fallen, and then planted a hand in the middle of the table, swung his legs over, and slid almost gracefully over the table, landing with a slight stumble the other side.

“You couldn’t just walk around?” I asked with a laugh.

“Nah; not cool enough.”

When we got back to Cabin G, Bert and Reiner were finally up and getting dressed.

“Morning, lovebirds,” Jean said with a slight bite to his tone.

“Morning, grumpy,” Reiner returned. “You guys heading out soon?”

“We just have to pack up our extra clothes, review the rules, and then we’ll be off,” I said.

“Well, have fun out there! We both start at 9, and man, am I glad,” Reiner said.

“Didn’t get much sleep last night?” Jean asked, arching an eyebrow.

“You could say that,” Reiner laughed. Bert blushed.

“Augh,” Jean grimaced. “You guys are nerds.”

“Don’t hate me ‘cause you ain’t me,” Reiner said with as much sass as a giant, muscular blond man can muster.

To my surprise, Bert also joined in, mumbling, “Just jealous.”

I smirked at my shy friend and he laughed nervously.
“Yeah, I’m sure that’s it, jealous of your hulking titan of a boyfriend,” Jean rebutted.

Bert blushed so hard it looked like he might start to cry.

I shot Jean a glance that said back off. He glared, but didn’t say anything else.

I packed my socks, underwear, and deodorant in to the smaller front compartment, and then rolled up my shorts in the larger compartment that would be nearest to my back. When we went back to the North Hall, I would add the food and the med pack to the same compartment, and then clip the bedroll and tent to the outside. Mina and I decided I would carry the tent in the mornings, and at lunch we would switch.

Jean and I finished packing in silence, and Bert and Reiner hung around the cabin, waiting for us to be ready.

When we had both zipped up our packs and put them on our shoulders, I nodded to Bert and Reiner. The four of us walked over to Stohess, and Bert commented pleasantly on the weather and how good it felt to be back at Sina.

“I think I’ll miss Survey, but at least I get to hang out with Reiner in the afternoons and evenings,” Bert told me.

“Yeah! That’ll be really great. And of course, you’ll be sharing the cabin, so even if you have a long day, you’ll get to see each other.”

“First thing in the morning, last thing at night,” Bert said with a love-struck expression. He blushed when he realized he had said it out loud. “Reiner said that, not me!” he said defensively.

“You guys are so cute together,” I assured him.

“Reiner said what?” Reiner asked, a mischievous grin on his face.

“Never mind!” Bert all but shrieked.

Jean made a face at me, and mouthed, what did he say?

I mouthed back, Tell you later.

When we got to Stohess, I gave Bert a quick side-hug and was drawn into a vise-like bear hug from Reiner.

“Stay safe out there, guys!” Reiner told us.

“Thanks,” I said, “we will!”

Jean had shoved his hands in his pockets, but took one out to return Reiner’s fist bump. He gave a small nod to Bert.

He didn’t know them as well as I did, I guessed, but I was glad he offered some kind of goodbye to them. In a way, I was actually pleased that he didn’t offer one of his “bro-hugs” to them, because as my brain rarely let me forget, I was kind of head-over-heels for my best friend, and I knew I would be jealous if Jean hugged them.

Pretty stupid, I knew, but all the same, the thought was there.

When we returned to the North Hall, our kids were all there, inspecting their packs and installing
the items they had brought with them in plastic grocery bags. Jean headed over to his group, across the hall from mine, and I took my pack over to the pile of prepared food I would have to haul.

It looked like Mina had already taken her share, but it was still a lot of food and it was still really heavy. I was already looking forward to lunch, so not only would we eat some of the food, but I could give Mina the tent and lighten my load a little.

Fifteen minutes later, once all packs had been secured, water bottles filled, and rules reviewed, we lined up our squads, and headed out of the hall.

The kids jostled their packs noisily, trying to situate the weight on their backs, some already complaining about the weight.

“It’s not so bad,” I assured them. “And you get to trade off on the tent.”

“Yeah, but all this stuff is heavy! Why’d we have to bring a first aid kit and this huge blanket thing?” Eli asked.

“The blanket thing is your bed roll,” I explained.

“Yeah, numb nuts!” Jai exclaimed.

“Hey! Language!” I called after him.

Jai just giggled.

“Jai, really, please don’t call others names. It’s rude.”

“Sorry,” he said, and though I doubted the sincerity, I supposed it would do for now.

“He’s a squirrely one, isn’t he?” Mina said, shifting her pack as we came to a halt in front of the wooden trailhead sign.

Ymir climbed up onto a tree stump, and held out her arms as if to show off the trail. She announced, “When we enter this trail, you are all officially members of the Survey Corps! That means you will observe all the rules and guidelines we give you; that means that you will not whine, complain, or otherwise annoy your squad leaders; and most importantly, it means you are about to have the best summer of your life!”

The kids and other squad leaders cheered and hollered.

Ymir waved her arms to cut us off, and after a moment, the noise died down.

“Are you ready?”

“Yeah!” the group responded in a chorus.

“I said, ARE YOU READY?” she shouted at terrifying volume.

“YEAH!” the group responded, matching her intensity.

“Here we goooooo!” she cried, hopping down from the tree stump, and leading her group onto the eastern path that would, eventually, take us all the way to the Maria Outpost.

Jean brought up the rear of his group, and I skirted ahead of Mina so that she would have to take the back of our own group, at least until lunch.
“I don’t think I’ve ever seen Ymir this pumped up before,” Jean whispered to me as we started walking.

“You should see her when she gets into her ‘Mama Ymir’ mode then,” I laughed, clapping my hand over my mouth to stifle the noise. “She goes off the handle!”

“Less talk, more walk!” Ymir called to us, and we flew apart. I hadn’t realized how close we had gotten, whispering to each other, but it felt like miles when we separated.

“Marco?” one of the girls, Georgie, asked me. “How far are we going until our first break? I’m just curious,” she added.

“We’ll probably walk about three and a half hours, then stop for lunch,” I told her. “So probably about…” I tried to do the math in my head. How fast would middle schoolers be able to hike with all their gear? Probably not a full 3 miles per hour…

“About three miles,” Jean said for me, doing the calculation faster. I was slightly embarrassed by how slow my math had been, but I gestured to Jean.

“There you go,” I said, “about three miles.”

“And how far is it all the way to Maria?” she asked.

“The trail we take to get there is about 75 miles, total,” Jean answered again.

“What?!” she cried.

“Well, it’s not a direct path; there’s some loop back and round-about kinda trails along the way. So in all, we’ll hike close to 150 miles there and back to camp,” Jean replied nonchalantly.

Georgie’s eyes were wide.

“It’s really gonna take us all five weeks?” Minh, the other twelve-year-old girl, interrupted. “If we’re going to do three miles just before lunch today, that’s about five or six miles for the whole day, so wouldn’t that mean to get to the 150 mile point it would only take us about four weeks, instead of five?”

“It’s not all this flat,” I explained. “We’ll get to some more hilly places, and you won’t walk as fast. Plus, it’s not all just walking. We’ll play games, hang out, and we take some extra time at the outposts, for a rest day. So it’ll take the whole five weeks, don’t worry.”

Jai bounced up to us. “What’s Georgie yelling for?” he asked.

“Did you know we’re gonna hike a hundred and fifty miles for this camp?” she said with glee.

“Whoa, seriously?” he asked. I nodded. “Talk about bragging rights! That bogus YMCA Camp I went to last year has nothing on this!”

“I’m glad you’re so excited,” I said warmly.

I glanced back at Mina, who was only a few paces behind us, talking to Eli and Teresa. The quiet girl listened intently as Mina explained something about how we would cook our meals.

One of Jean’s campers, a boy with short braids all over his head, asked Jean a question, and my attention snapped back to him.
“We’ll stop and have an official water break every hour, but if you get thirsty in between, go ahead and take a sip or two,” Jean was saying.

I smiled. Jean really was good at talking to kids. I thought back to when I was this age, and honestly, his frankness and openness would have been so refreshing. Middle school is the weird age when you start thinking of yourself as somehow more mature than your 11 or 12 years, but adults still treat you like you can barely tie your own shoes. Someone like Jean is probably exactly what some of these kids need: he doesn’t treat them like they’re babies, but he doesn’t let them get away with any crap, either.

“Sandra, don’t kick the dirt around!” he yelled. “That’s fu—that’s rude.” *Good save,* I thought to myself.

I bumped into his shoulder slightly, murmuring, “And you said you were bad with kids.”

“Shut up, Freckles.”

Ymir, not too far ahead, called back to us. “Jean, are you being nice to my Baby Boy?”

“Always, Ymir,” he said with a ridiculous grin.

“I call shenanigans,” she said, eyes locking on his.

“He’s fine, Ymir,” I interrupted her death glare.

“Haha, yeah I bet he is!” she shot back, and I turned bright red.

The boy who had asked about water looked from me to Jean, then back to me. “If you ask me, his hair is kinda ugly.”

“What the hell, David? I thought we were cool!” Jean said, outraged. He ran a hand through his hair self-consciously.

“Language, Jean!” I chided, but I had to laugh.

From behind us, Jai piped up. “I think your hair is cool, like with the two colors and all.”

“Kiss-ass,” Jean grumbled.

*Language, Jean!* I said, more sternly this time.

“Sorry,” he said, pursing his lips.

“Does it seem quiet, to you?” I asked Jean after a moment.

“Are you kidding me? With thirty kids around us?”

“No, I just meant Sasha and Connie. I haven’t seen them much this morning.”

“Oh, yeah, they’re the last group today, so they’re a little ways back,” Jean said. “Besides, when have either of those two been morning people? Just you wait till after lunch. You’ll know *exactly* where they are.”

“Hah, yeah, you’re probably right,” I said.

X
A little after noon, we made to our first stop. It was still close enough to camp that there was an actual lunch area: seven wooden lunch tables were set up in a circle around a fire pit, in the center of which was a small black charcoal grill.

We told the kids they could put their packs down on the edge of the picnic ground and sit at the tables while we prepared lunch, which they did with a huge sigh of relief. After the first few days, when they’d gotten used to the hiking, they would help us cook (or at least watch what we were doing), but for now it was the squad leaders who prepared meals.

Our first meal would be rice and beans, and they would enjoy the luxury of fresh fruit for dessert. It didn’t last very long in the heat, so there were enough apples and clementines for the first two days only. Sometimes, outposts would have fresh fruit and vegetables, but only if the staff had gotten out there with a shipment. The Maria Outpost was actually staffed part-time, usually by a guy named Oluo, and sometimes by his friend Erd. They used to work back at Sina, but Oluo and Petra had had some kind of personal squabble, and Oluo, allegedly the more junior of the two, was moved out to the Maria Outpost.

Most of the older kids were convinced Oluo and Petra had dated during the first or second year that Sina was open, and then broke up when Levi started working there in the third year. It was difficult to confirm, but I for one was pretty convinced that Levi and Petra were dating now. They were very covert about it, and Levi was so emotionless normally that even when he talked about Petra, you could never be sure if they were madly in love or if Petra was merely an acquaintance for all the boredom in Levi’s voice.

I set to opening the first can of beans, while Mina put some water on to boil the rice in.

I could never quite get the hang of the Swiss army knife can opener, so I was struggling a bit.

“Need some help, Bodt?” Jean asked.

For some reason, the tone of voice he used to ask me sounded extremely suggestive to my ears, and my hand, suddenly sweaty, slipped off the can.

“Ow!” I cried out, shaking my hand fervently. It hadn’t broken the skin, but there was a bright pink scrape on the outside of my left index finger.

Jean barked out a laugh, but asked, “Did I scare you? I’m sorry, man.”

Crouching, he took my hand to examine it for damage and my heart leapt into my throat.

Jean Kirstein was holding my hand.

It only lasted for an instant.

“Eh, you’ll be fine,” he said, dropping my hand as quickly as he had picked it up. He then grabbed my can opener and the stubborn can of beans, and opened it without the slightest difficulty.

“No fair,” I pouted.

“I know, I’m amazing,” Jean said, flashing that ridiculous jokester grin of his.

“Teach me your ways,” I mocked.

“Oh, but honestly, you’re just not holding it very well. Grab the can opener again,” Jean instructed.
I did, and I barely suppressed a gasp as Jean wrapped his hand around my own.

“See how your index finger sticks out? That gives the tool more side to side play. If you grab it more like with a fist—“he moved my index finger gently, careful of the tiny scrape—“you have a lot more control.”

With his other hand, Jean grabbed the second can of beans, and guided our hands holding the can opener toward it.

He was basically wrapped around me now, and it was the most amazing can opening experience of my life. Or something. I wasn’t really thinking too well at the moment.

I giggled a little as the can opener slid home and the beans were slowly revealed to me.

“See? You got it,” Jean congratulated me. “You’re a can opening pro.”

I was blushing, but Jean didn’t tease me about it so I figured he hadn’t noticed.

“I’m gonna go see what Ymir wants me to do, but you’re sitting next to me for lunch, got it?”

“Sure thing, Jean.”

He walked over to Ymir who put him in charge of his own group’s beans. As I watched him effortlessly open the cans, I was startled by two pairs of hands grabbing me from behind.

Before I could turn around and see who my two assailants were, they both whispered, “gay” in my ears.

It must be Sasha and Connie.

I shrugged them off and turned around. Sure enough, the duo was there, giggling as discreetly as they could.

“Shouldn’t you two be with your group?! I asked, trying to make my voice not jump up half an octave.

“Unlike you and bleach-blond babe over there, we are competent camp counselors. Our food is already cooking,” Sasha explained.

“Besides,” Connie continued for her, “we saw Jean helping you out and wow, are you even trying to be subtle?”

“More subtle than you!” I squeaked.

Sasha poked at my bright red cheek. “We are the masters of subtlety. Notice how we whispered in your ear instead of screaming from the other end of the picnic area. Besides, you two together are adorable and precious and quickly climbing to Ymir and Christa levels of homo.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I said in a low voice. “Ymir and Christa made out at the closing ceremony bonfire last year. We’re nowhere near as … obvious as that.”

“Hey, I said climbing, not that you’re there,” Sasha said casually.

“Yet!” Connie threw in.

“Augh!” I sighed. “Go stir your rice or something, it’s probably gonna burn or stick to the pot or
taste disgusting.”

“I’ll leave when you admit that when Jean held your hand, you got silly butterflies in your tummy.”

“Sasha, please!” I cried. I began to look around frantically, making sure neither kids nor other counselors were listening in.

She threw her head back and laughed. “Alright, alright, we’re going now. But just so you know, if you’re not careful, you’ll be pitching more than one tent tonight.”

Connie high-fived her, and then they went back to their group.

I was going to kill them.

X

After lunch was cooked and served out to the kids, I took my own bowl and joined Jean at one of the staff tables. There were twelve of us, so we dragged two picnic tables next to each other so we could all sit together.

Other than Hannah and Franz and Mina, the rest of us were pretty close. I sat between Ymir and Jean, across from Sasha and Connie. Mikasa and Annie were discussing something, and I realized that they were probably going to room together, or ‘tent’ together, I guessed.

The food was bland and mushy, but it had protein and it was filling, and on a hike that was what mattered.

We let the kids have a long lunch, since their feet weren’t really used to this much walking yet. After they ate and cleaned up, most of them laid down in the grass, playing some kind of game or chatting animatedly amongst themselves.

It made our jobs as squad leaders pretty easy. We took the dishes we used to cook over to the water pump and rinsed them out. We’d use them to make the same food tonight, so we weren’t really concerned with them being pristine.

After clean-up, Ymir announced that we’d give the kids twenty more minutes to relax, then we’d be on the trail again.

Mina and I switched the tent to her bag, and then I went and sat back down on the picnic table, leaning my back against the table and stretching my legs out. I closed my eyes and let the sun hit my face, knowing that the freckles that dusted my cheekbones would close to double by the end of the summer.

“Ça va?” Jean asked me. My heart stopped beating for a couple seconds, as I realized Jean was speaking to me in French: You okay? I had studied French in school, but it still caught me off guard.

“Uh, oui?” I replied shakily. “Et toi?” Yes, and you?

And that was where Jean took off at the speed of light in a language I barely understood.

I was able to catch bits and pieces, and figured out that he was surprised that I had known any French. Not that I really knew how to speak it, but I was silently proud of myself for understanding as much as I had.
“Yeah, sorry, that’s about the end of my French,” I told him sheepishly.

“Non, c’est pas possible!” He said. No, that’s not possible!

“Uh, oui, c’est possible, parce que I’m telling you I can’t remember very much.”

“Okay, it’s decided, then; I’m going to reawaken your French knowledge. It’s way too useful to know a second language. We can have secret conversations! You just gotta catch up.”

“Um, you sound like a native speaker. Even if I remember everything I’ve been taught, that still leaves me a lot of catching up to do.”

“Yeah, I was raised bilingual,” Jean explained. I wondered why he had never told me before. “Mom’s side is French. She was actually born in Dijon, but came to the States when she was pregnant with my older sister.”

I smiled; Jean had never really talked about his family before.

“Pourquoi tu souris?” he asked me. Why are you smiling?

“Je suis hereux,” I said, wincing as I heard my too-American accent clash with the smoothness of his perfect accent. I’m happy.

“Très bien! Tu vois, tu n’as pas tout oublié!” Very good! See, you haven’t forgotten everything!

“Ha, maybe, but my accent is terrible.”

“That’ll come along. Just listen to me and you’ll sound native in no time!” Jean said, laughing.

It was a beautiful day; perfect for hiking. I had the sun warming my face, and my best friend to warm my heart. Gosh, I’m corny, I thought. It was just so nice to see Jean in such a great mood that I almost forgot that I would be sharing a tent with him that night.

My stomach dropped. How was I supposed to handle that? Sure, plenty of guys had shared a tent and emerged none-the-gayer, but I was already in pretty deep. There was no way that sleeping in the same cramped tent as Jean Kirstein wasn’t going to make my crush even worse.

My thoughts were interrupted by Jean swearing. “Fucking Sandra.”

“Hmm?” I asked, but he was already striding across the picnic area, yelling at a small girl named Sandra, who was trying to play with the charcoal grill.

After Sandra was successfully reprimanded, Ymir announced that it was time to pack up and continue on the trail.

It was Mina’s turn to lead the squad, so I reluctantly took up the rear of our group, leaving Jean to walk in what would likely be uncomfortable silence between him and my squad partner.

Fortunately for me, Armin and Annie’s group was behind my own, and Armin was leading.

“How’s it going?” I asked. “You and Annie getting along?”

“Yeah, I think so. I mean, she’s a bit quiet, but that’s not really an issue,” Armin replied. He tucked a chunk of his yellow-blond hair behind his ear.

“You and Mina alright?” Armin asked. “I was surprised to see you heading a squad together,
honestly.”

“I asked her before I signed up, and she said it was fine. It hasn’t even been awkward.”

“That’s good, at least. And you and Jean…” he trailed off.

I raised my eyebrows, waiting for him to finish his sentence.

“Well, you get to spend a lot of time together, right? That’ll be… nice. I take it you two are sharing a tent?”

“Yeah. I feel a little bad for Connie, because that means he’s kinda stuck with Franz, and we don’t really know him or Hannah as well. Actually, Mina knows Hannah. But Franz is kinda…”

“On his own?” Armin finished for me.

“Right.”

“Well, he and Hannah get to be squad leaders, so he’ll have her company all day. All you do at night is sleep, anyway,” Armin stated matter-of-factly.

I almost giggled at how innocent his comment was, but I stifled it at the last second. The only reason I was thinking of doing things other than sleeping in the tent at night was because of my increasingly out of hand crush on Jean.

I definitely needed to get that under control.

X

Four hours after our lunch break, we arrived at a suitable place to make camp for the first night. Just to the south of the main trail was a nice wide clearing. A few paces away from the clearing was the eastern branch of the Karanese River.

It was a bit early in the day to stop, but we had hiked a solid seven miles for the day, and so Ymir called it.

The first night of camping was always a bit rough, anyway. The kids really struggled with their tents, and there was usually bickering about sleeping arrangements in some way or another.

“They’re pop-up tents!” Ymir was yelling at her group. “How are you sucking this much with a pop-up tent?!”

I sighed, stretching out my back as I untangled one of the longer poles where it had gotten caught up in the flap.

By far the most challenging part of the tent set up was putting the spikes in the ground. The kids were scared of using the mallet, and not strong enough to push them into the hard ground enough that they would do any good.

I helped the boys with their spikes, and Mina helped the girls. Maybe the kids would be more help at taking the tents down, I hoped.

It didn’t look like it would rain, and so we didn’t bother putting the tarp on the top. It was more work than we needed to worry about.
After getting the kids settled, it was still early for dinner. We had given the kids some trail mix about two hours after lunch, so they shouldn’t have been too hungry.

I found Jean, unpacking up our tent, and helped him out. Pop-up tents were nice, but the larger ones were somewhat unwieldy to put up by yourself, especially one as old and beat up as the ones that Camp Sina gave us.

Between the two of us, it took less than a minute to click all the poles into place. Jean tossed his backpack into the opening, and then followed it inside. I watched his slim hips shimmy a bit and then disappear inside the tent.

I took a deep breath, and crawled in.

Inside, Jean had set to unrolling his bedding, and I took the other half of the tent. Crouching so my head didn’t rub the top of the tent too much—I hated static—we worked in silence. When everything was arranged satisfactorily, Jean grinned at me.

“Thanks for being my tent buddy,” he said. “On va bien s’amuser!” he added with over-the-top enthusiasm. We’re going to have so much fun!

My mind started racing to all kinds of possibilities. What kind of fun was Jean thinking of? I wondered. Certainly not the kind that involved us making out, I reasoned. That was my own particular and increasingly ridiculous fantasy.

Maybe Jean meant that we would tell ghost stories or pull pranks on the other counselors. I’d never been good with pranks, but I was sure with Jean helping me out, I’d be able to pull something off.

Like Jean’s clothes, my brain supplied. I couldn’t believe now of all times was when my brain decided to get good at innuendos. What about all those times in high school? Where was my now apparently razor-sharp wit?

Lost in thought, I didn’t notice that Jean had left the tent. Feeling like an idiot, I scrambled out of the flap as quickly as I could.

Jean hadn’t gone far, and was talking to Ymir.

“Oh, there he is,” Ymir said.

“Right, well… Later,” Jean said.

Ymir watched Jean walk away over her shoulder, and when she was satisfied he was far enough, she grabbed my biceps with two over-eager hands.

“So I just did some research for you—you’re welcome, by the way—and I have come to the conclusion that Jean is at least 25 percent gay for you. I’m so excited for you!” she said as quietly as Ymir ever spoke.

“What do you mean, research?” I asked warily. “Ymir, I really don’t need you interfering or snooping or whatever. Jean’s my best friend; it’s probably better if he’s not gay for me, honestly.”

“What kind of talk is that? Have you not heeded my council?” she asked.

“I just don’t want to mess up our friendship,” I clarified. “Jean doesn’t have that many friends, and I don’t want to mess things up because of some dumb crush.”
“Well, you still like him, right?” Ymir asked.

“That’s not the point.”

“Sure it is! If you’re looking to show Jean how much he means to you, getting involved romantically will do that. Because you don’t just have platonic feelings for this strangely coiffed dudebro. You owe it to him to expose the full range of your feelings for him!” Ymir shook my shoulders gently.

“Let me be friends with Jean how I want to, alright? And please don’t get involved. Just be nice to Jean, and don’t do any more ‘research’ or whatever you call it.”

“Baby Boy, do you not trust me?” she pouted.

“Ymir, that’s not what I meant and you know that.”

“But you don’t trust me to be subtle. You don’t trust my research methods.”

“Er, not really, no. You’re much better as a direct and to the point kind of person…” You and Jean have that in common.

“Marco,” she said, dropping the act and the fake pouting. “I know you think that having him as a friend is better than fucking the whole thing up.”

I rolled my eyes. “Obviously, yes.”

“But I know you pretty well, wouldn’t you say?”

I nodded.

“And these feelings are going to eat you up inside like the delicate flower you are. They’re going to choke you, and you’re not going to be able to be even his friend. So just do yourself a favor, and talk to him. Soon. Probably by the end of camp, if we’re being honest.”

“Ymir, I’m sharing a tent with him!”

“So? If things go well, that’ll work to your advantage.”

“And if they don’t?”

“Then you can switch with Connie.”

I closed my eyes. Confessing my feelings to Jean was not high on the priorities list. For one, we were out here as counselors, so my first duty was to the campers. Secondly, Jean had finally started opening up to me. I couldn’t bring that crashing down before he started to let others in, too. Before he felt that he had a place to belong.

“I’ll think about it,” I told Ymir. “But I make absolutely no promises!”

“Yeah, yeah, you know I’m right and you’re gonna do it eventually.” She smiled. “Now go help that dingus Mina. She’s really not tough enough on the kids, and that scrawny little boy with the spiky hair is trouble.”

I knew immediately she was talking about Jai, and I searched the campground for his wiry frame. He was chasing some of the other campers with a huge tree branch he found, and Mina was telling
him far too gently that he need to put it down.

I approached him, and grabbed the branch firmly.

“Put the branch down, Jai. You’re going to hurt someone, maybe even yourself,” I said, staring at him sternly. Inside, I was terrified that he wouldn’t listen, but I was using my best ‘Big Brother’ voice, the one I used to scare Julia into behaving, and it seemed to work on twelve year old boys, too.

“But it’s cool,” he said, even as he began lowering his arms.

“So you look at it on the ground and you say ‘wow, that’s a cool branch.’ You don’t wave it around and chase people with it.”

He pouted a little, but nodded that he understood. He let go of the branch, and I carried it off to the side of the path, where it would resume its role in the ecosystem.

“Tear ‘em down, Marco Bodt,” Jean said not too far away.

“I wasn’t too harsh on him, was I?” I asked.

“Nah, not at all,” Jean said. “I was just surprised that that commanding voice came from you.”

“I’ve had practice,” I told him. “Babysitting my little sister and all.”

“Right. How was she doing, by the way? I mean, before you left.”

“Fine. Reiner and Bert are gonna check in on her, but she’s quite the social butterfly. She had already made a bunch of friends when I said goodbye to her last night.”

“Runs in the family, then,” Jean smirked.

“What does?”

“You’re quite the social butterfly yourself,” he explained.

“What? No way, I’m way too awkward. I’ve got nothing on Julia’s social aptitude.”

“Seriously? How do you not realize that everyone at this damn camp adores you?”

“They do not,” I said bashfully.

“Sure they do. Maybe you’re not super best-buds with them, but you’re friendly and sociable with everyone you meet.”

“There’s no point in being rude to someone I don’t know,” I said.

“And yet, here I am: huge asshole to people I barely know.”

I hated hearing him talk down about himself. “Jean, you’re not as much of a jerk as you claim to be. I think when you let people in even a little, you’re a good person. Look how well you’ve been getting along with Ymir. And Sasha and Connie like you.” I like you, I thought. I like you a lot. “You can be sociable when you want to be, I think.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, Marco. Means a lot, y’know?” He said the last part so quietly I could barely hear him above the din of children goofing around. “Not sure how full of bullshit you
are, of course,” he added self-consciously, as though he didn’t quite know how to take a compliment.

“Well, it’s true,” I said defensively. *Now if only I could help you see it, too.*

X

Dinner was uneventful, though I was able to open the beans by myself with relative ease. After the meal was cleaned up, we made a big circle to talk about how the first day had gone.

“Alright, scouts: what’d you think?” Ymir asked the group.

“It was fun!” one of the kids from Connie and Sasha’s group said. “Everything smells so nice out here.”

“Cool! Yes, nature smells great, especially for you city kids. Anyone else?”

A tall boy from Hannah and Franz’s group raised his hand next. “It was kinda boring, actually. Are we just gonna walk the whole time?”

Ymir sighed. “Walking for seven hours can be a little boring, yes. But! We will have some activities and things that’ll start soon. Right now, we wanna make sure everyone is keeping up, and that you’re adjusting to wilderness life!”

“What kind of activities?” the boy continued.

“You’ll find out tomorrow,” Ymir said. I was curious too; I had no idea what the activities would be, either.


Four campers sheepishly raised their hands.

“If they’re bad, go see your squad leaders. They’ve got special blister band-aids in the first-aid kit.

“Alright, so congrats to all, you made it through day one! Tonight, you’ll just have free time after dinner, though sometimes we’ll do a group activity. Bed time out here is *strict*: when we say zip up, it means get in your tent and go to sleep. If you’re too loud, I’ll come unsnap your tent poles.”

“When’s bedtime?” Minh asked me.

“Around nine, once the sun’s gone down,” I said.

“You need to stay in the general area of the campsite,” Ymir continued. “If you can’t see us, we can’t see you, and that means we’re leaving you to be eaten by wild animals.”

A general wave of concern rocked the campers. Murmurs of “what kind of wild animals?” and “are we gonna get eaten in our sleep?” went around the circle.

“Now, now. In this part of the woods there’s mostly deer, raccoons, and like, foxes. You’re not gonna die. Geez, it was a joke.”

Jean barked out a laugh.

“Alright, go have fun, hang out, whatever. You’ve got about two hours ‘til sundown,” Ymir said. “Squad leaders, a word please before you go about whatever.”
The eleven of us gathered in closer to Ymir.

“Okay, so activities for tomorrow and other days are gonna be pretty basic, because if they’re playing a game they’re not going to walk very fast. We’re starting it off easy tomorrow: kind of a treasure hunt for plants and animals.”

She rummaged around in her pack and drew out a stack of index card-sized paper.

“All right, so one side is plants, one side is animals. If they see it, they put a checkmark or an X or whatever. Whichever team finds the most gets a point, yada yada you know the drill. Whoever has the most points when we get back gets a special prize.”

“So are we leaving in shifts tomorrow? Otherwise, they’d see all the same animals, or they’d make too much noise for any animals to come near us,” Mikasa asked.

“Yeah, we’ll do shifts tomorrow. Jean and I will take our group first, then the rest of you, I mean, I don’t really care what order you go in. You’ll leave about ten minutes after the group before you. That way, we’ll only be about an hour apart, between the first and last groups. Shouldn’t be too wonky for dinner tonight.

“Oh, Jean, grab the golf pencils out of your bag, would you?” Ymir said, then to the full group, “I brought pencils for the kids to mark off what they found. Please impress upon them how important it is to not lose them. Tell them if they lose it, they’ll be directly responsible for the death of a bunny or something.”

“Ymir!” I cried out, shocked. “That’s a little intense, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, maybe. Whatever. Make sure they don’t lose them.”

“Anything else?” Eren asked.

“Nope, that’s it. Go watch over the dumb childrens.”

I hung back around Ymir for a moment, and Jean waited for me, while everyone else spread out to find a comfortable place to observe the campers.

“Go ahead, Jean, I’ll come find you. Just need to talk to Ymir for a minute,” I said as casually as I could.

I wasn’t sure if it was my imagination, or if he really did look a little hurt, but he nodded and headed off to the edge of the camp ground.

Ymir’s face was bright when I turned back to her. “Baby Boy, is there something you need to tell Mama Ymir?”

“Um, yeah,” I said awkwardly. “It’s just… I’m worried about tonight. Because…” I trailed off.

How could I phrase this to Ymir? I was worried because when we were alone, Jean had been rather affectionate, asking for those intimate hugs that lasted a long time. It was almost like we were cuddling. So far, though, we had always had a space to retreat to: our own beds, or even leaving the room. Tonight, the best we could do for space would be to roll over; could I handle that kind of intimacy with Jean?

Before I was able to voice my concerns, Ymir did it for me. “You’re worried about how close you’re going to be tonight, aren’t you? You don’t have a safe place to run away to, if things get too
overwhelming, right?”

“Yeah,” I admitted. I hadn’t actually told her about the hugs yet; should I? I trusted that Ymir wouldn’t tell anyone, but I feared that she would use that knowledge against me.

I decided to tell her.

“And It’s not just because we’ll be in the same tent,” I started. “It’s only been a few days, but…” I leaned closer to Ymir so I could whisper, “he’s been really affectionate, when we’re alone. Like, he’ll ask for a hug and then it turns into us just sort of holding each other for a few minutes? And —"

Ymir clutched my shoulders and looked me dead in the eye. “I want you to know how hard I am trying not to shriek with glee right now, because that is the most adorable fucking thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Um…”

“And it also makes a lot more sense why you’re so worried, because I was going to tell you to just roll over and go to sleep if it made you that nervous. But now I see the true problem. You’re worried he’s gonna ask you for a hug and then you’ll end up spooning and cuddling the whole night. Then of course, you’d wake up with a boner, and who wants that—“

“Ymir!”

She continued as though I hadn’t interrupted her. “—And so the best solution to all of this is to just tell him how you feel oh my god, Marco. This refusal to just say what you’re feeling is so junior high I’m honestly a little disappointed in you.”

“That’s easy for you to say, you’ve been dating Christa for years,” I grumbled.

“And how do you think that happened? She read my mind? No! I had to fucking tell her my feelings. And yeah, it was kinda scary and I was nervous as hell, but I did it, and she felt the same, and we’ve been together ever since!

“But you’re never going to get rid of this fear until you just tell him. If you’re really worried about how he’ll react, then tell him before you get into that tent tonight.”

“What? No! I can’t.”

“Marco, my freckled baby child,” she said plaintively, taking my hands in her own, “I have done all I can for you. The rest is in your hands.”

X

When sundown was upon us, we rounded up the campers and did our first tent check, zipping the kids in.

I heard Jean tell his campers, “If you have to pee in the middle of the night, just do it. If you come and wake me up, I’ll punch you.”

I laughed, despite the threat. It looked like the kids had figured out that Jean was mostly pretending to be a hard-ass; secretly he was a big softie. My chest tightened as I realized that maybe he really was opening up and finding a sense of belonging.
After Jai and Eli were settled in, I zipped up their tent and walked carefully over to where Jean and I had pitched our own tent.

I saw Mina walking to her own tent that she was sharing with Hannah, and called out a ‘goodnight’ to her.

Sucking in a deep breath, I crawled inside the tent.

Jean was already inside, grabbing his toothpaste. “I gotta go brush my teeth, man, I’ll be right back.”

Suddenly, I realized now was the perfect time to change out of my pants and slip inside my sleeping bag with Jean none the wiser. I scrambled to undo my belt and unzip my khakis, fingers fumbling with the worn out zipper. It always got caught about halfway down. But maybe I could shimmy out of them even without the zipper all the way down?

I lay on my back and raised my hips off the ground, trying to squirm out of my shorts before Jean came back.

Just as I worked my shorts over my hips, Jean unzipped the tent flap and crawled in, head first (naturally) into my bizarre pants dance.

He laughed. “Need some help there, bro?”

Oh my god, Jean did not just offer to help me take my pants off. My brain swirled and my face flushed a deep shade of pink.

“N-no! The zipper gets stuck sometimes,” I said shakily. Quickly, I kicked my shoes off and yanked my shorts off of my legs completely. Now clad only in a t-shirt and boxers, I threw them at my backpack and set to work wriggling into my bedroll.

“You’re a weird dude, Marco Bodt,” Jean said, still chuckling.

“Shut up,” I said, still feeling awkward and uncomfortable.

In contrast, Jean was completely at ease undressing in front of me. Not only did he take his shorts off, but he announced that it was too hot to wear a shirt, and he took that off, too.

I took my chance to stare at his bare chest while his shirt was over his head, blocking his face.

It lasted only an instant, since Jean was apparently much smoother at taking his clothes off than I was.

My thoughts started to wander to Jean doing a strip tease, and I had to pull back before I made my situation about three hundred times worse by adding an uncomfortable erection.

Jean lay down on top of his bedroll and folded his arms behind his head. He stared up at the green tent ceiling and sighed contentedly.

“I love camping,” he said, just barely above a whisper.

“Even the tent part?” I asked.

“Especially the tent part. For some reason, I sleep much better out here than I ever do in a bed back in civilization.”
“Think it’s because of all the exercise you get out here?” I asked, curious.

“Nah, I get plenty of physical activity back in Trost. I honestly don’t know what it is, but I’m gonna take advantage of it while I can.”

“Good plan,” I said. “So, you ready to turn out the light?” I asked, gesturing to the tiny battery-powered ‘lantern’ that we hung from the top pole.

“Yeah, sure,” Jean said.

I sat up and clicked the lamp off.

My eyes took a moment to adjust to the sudden darkness, and while they did, I realized that Jean was scooting closer to me.

Oh no, he’s going to ask me for a hug and –

“Marco, can I ask you something?” Jean said. He had propped himself up on one elbow now, so he was facing me. I turned to him slowly.

“Uh, sure?” I replied. Oh gosh oh no oh I’m screwed…

“Will you wake me up whenever you do tomorrow? I need to get back in the waking up early habit.”

I almost deflated with how deep my sigh of relief was. “Oh, of course!” I said, maybe a bit too enthusiastically.

“Great,” he said, smiling.

“Well, goodnight,” I told him.

“Gnight, Freckles.”

I closed my eyes and willed myself to fall asleep as quickly as I could. I could hear the murmurs of campers, chatting quietly in their tents, and Sasha and Connie were laughing stupidly about something.

“Those two need to go to their own tents,” Jean grumbled. “They have no idea what volume means.”

I shivered, remembering them whispering in my ears.

We heard them say their goodnights, and after a few minutes, the campsite was fairly quiet.

It was too quiet.

“Jean?” I asked.

“Hmm,” he grunted in response.

“I don’t know, it was just too quiet.”

“Do you want to stay up and talk a little?” He offered.

“Sure, I mean, if you don’t mind.”
“I’m not quite sleepy yet,” he confessed. “Besides, you haven’t told me much about college this fall.”

“Oh, right. Well, pretty much as soon as camp is over I have to start packing all my stuff. I’m gonna be living in a dorm, of course, and then class registration begins two weeks before classes start…”

“What are you gonna take?” Jean asked.

“Well, some kind of biology class, and then I have to take O-chem, so I figured I should get it out of the way.”

Jean hummed in agreement.

“Then I thought taking some gen-eds would be smart, so I want to take English Comp, and then probably a Calculus class, and then that leaves me with one more class to pick.”

“You should take French,” he said, after a moment.

“Hah, yeah right.”

“No, really, you should. I’ll help you! It’ll be fun.”

The thought of hearing Jean speaking more French was appealing, but I wasn’t sure if I really wanted to keep up with it in college. Maybe a new language would be easier?

“I do need a year of electives,” I reasoned.

“See? It’s perfect. Take a French class.”

“I’ll have to take the placement test.”

“So?”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. Okay, I’ll take French.”

“Yes! I win,” Jean said happily. “*Tu vas l’aimer,*” he assured me. *You’re going to love it.*

By now, my eyes had adjusted to the darkness inside the tent. I could see the faint glint of Jean’s eyes, and I could tell that he was genuinely smiling.

We just stared at each other for a few seconds, or maybe a few minutes. I wasn’t sure.

It seemed like the kids had quieted down enough that we couldn’t hear them anymore, at least. All I could hear was crickets and the thrum of blood pounding through my ears.

“Marco,” Jean said, his voice soft.

“Hmm?”

“Are you gay?”
A Hunt and a Haunt

Chapter Summary

The campers have a treasure hunt, Connie and Sasha tell scary stories, and other shenanigans ensue.

Chapter Notes

My dear, dear readers,
First, the conference I went to last weekend was amazing! Second, I know I said I'd try to do a Monday update, but that just did not happen. However, chapter 7 is already in the works, and I'm making ADWB my nanowrimo project, so hopefully much more to come very soon!

Thank you once again to my beautiful beta cloudmonstachopper, who helps not only with editing but her extensive camping knowledge, of which I have... basically none. (The camp I worked at was a city day camp, much like Jinae's community camp in this fic!)

That said, please enjoy and thank you all for the comments and kudos!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shock is a strange thing.

Your heart does that thing where it beats too fast and too slow at the same time. You get all sweaty and your eyes hold the terror of a thousand deaths in them.

It wasn’t like Jean had never tried to ask me before: his allusion to the “pronouns game” was basically phishing for my sexuality.

No, I think it was the casual, almost dreamy way he had said it that scared me so much.

A few people in my past had tried to ask about my sexuality: Bert, when he started crushing on Reiner and a couple of girls from my school who had teased me about never going to the school dances (I suspected my parents wanted to ask me, but were too awkward to ask. I was grateful for the extra time.)

But even with my childhood friend, the question was always asked with a hint of shame. Never before had someone asked me if I was gay with such... whimsy.

I was glad the light was out, because with the way I found it hard to breathe, maybe I could pretend I had fallen asleep.

Jean waited patiently in my gaping silence, and my resolve to fake sleep turned into guilt.

Why was I so afraid to tell Jean? What good would keeping it a secret do? I would’ve been lying if
I said that part of my fear didn’t stem from the fact that if Jean knew I was gay, he was also more likely to see through the thin façade that protected my ever-growing crush on him.

But still…he was my best friend. If I couldn’t trust him, what kind of person did that make me?

“I know I told you before, but it’s really okay, however you are,” Jean said, almost a whisper.

Finally, I found my voice. “So why are you asking?”

“Because you said you’d tell me later, like when I asked about you playing the pronouns game? You said later, when we’re not surrounded by kids.”

_Crap_, I swore at myself. I had completely forgotten about that.

“I mean, if you’d rather not tell me, it’s your decision and everything, but… Look this might be a shitty thing to say, but I’m really curious and I feel like it’s something I should know about my best friend.”

And there they were, those magical words that made my stomach flutter and my heart melt: _my best friend._

Those words were so precious to me, actually hearing Jean himself call me his best friend, that I decided he deserved to know, and that I _wanted_ him to know. Because we were best friends.

“Yeah,” I said after a moment, surprising myself with the surety of my voice, “I’m gay.”

“I had a feeling,” Jean said with a gentle laugh.

“Oh,” I said, my brain rapidly reviewing my behavior around Jean. Had I done something that was too gay? I didn’t want to be too obvious, not because I feared what people would think, but because I was a private person. I didn’t want to be ‘Gay Marco’; I just wanted to be Marco.

“Dude, it’s fine,” he promised me. “It was mostly the pronouns thing.”

I tried to relax myself, but my stomach was in knots. Despite Jean’s assurances, I couldn’t help but imagine worst-case scenarios. What if Jean started teasing me about it? What if he stopped wanting to talk to me?

No, he called me his best friend. We were best friends. He wouldn’t do that. I tried to crush the uneasiness I felt with a few deep breaths.

“Are you okay?” he asked. “I didn’t mean to freak you out or anything.”

“No, it’s… I’m fine. I just still have a hard time telling people sometimes.”

“Is that how you reacted when Ymir asked?”

“Oh, Ymir didn’t ask. She just knew, said she could smell it or something. I was fourteen, and she told me ‘we freckled queer kids should stick together.’ Then she started giving me relationship advice.”

“I would’ve been so traumatized. How the fuck do you smell someone’s sexuality?”

“She’s Ymir; she works in mysterious ways.”

“True story,” Jean agreed. After a moment, he added, “So are you going to tell me who it was?”
I blanched again. “Who was?”

“Whoever Ymir is trying to help you out with right now.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, a little sharper than I meant to.

“Why not? If you like him, then—“

“Can we drop it? I’m not interested in starting a relationship at summer camp.” I was getting defensive and snappy, but I didn’t want to talk about it anymore.

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” Jean said gently.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized, “I shouldn’t’ve said it like that. I guess I’m just tired.”

“Alright, well… G’night?”

“Night, Jean.”

“Night, Freckles.”

X

I woke in the morning with a stiff back and pins and needles in my right arm. Next to me, Jean was still snoozing, both hands curled under his head and a look of dopey contentment on his face.

I sighed and checked my watch: 5:40. Not too early, but I had hoped to sleep a bit longer. As quietly as I could, I dug out my shorts and slipped them on in my sleeping bag, hoping to avoid another awkward underpants moment.

Of course, burritoed in my sleeping bag, putting pants on was quite a struggle. I squirmed and wriggled in the confined space, glancing every other second to Jean, making sure he was still asleep.

Buttoned and zipped, I finally crawled out of the sleeping bag, laced my boots, and climbed out of the tent.

The morning air was already thick with humidity; it was going to be a hot one. I stretched out my muscles and took a long drink of water from my bottle. I reached both arms around to the left, pushing on my hip until my spine cracked a few times. As I was rotating to crack it the other way, I saw something move out of the corner of my eye.

Trying to focus in the pre-dawn light, I squinted and realized that the shape I was seeing, only about thirty feet from our campground, was a baby deer. This was probably its first summer, possibly its second. (I was no expert on deer life cycles.)

I gasped quietly, and cursed myself for not bringing my phone out with me to take a picture. Maybe I could sneak back into the tent without scaring it off?

As I began to edge toward my tent, eyes fixed on the deer, I heard an impressive yawn and shuffling around from within.

“Jean!” I hissed. “Be quiet, and pass me a camera of some kind.”

“What?” he asked sleepily.
“A camera! Quickly! And quietly,” I repeated.

After another rustling and a bag being unzipped, Jean’s hand popped out of the tent and handed me his cell-phone, camera app already loaded.

The deer’s head had perked up at the noises Jean made, but it was still there. I zoomed in as much as his phone let me, and snapped a few photos. As I adjusted the camera settings to get another shot, I was scared half to death by a horrific clanging: Ymir.

“Rise and shine, Survey Campers!” she screeched, ridiculously clanging a stick against her aluminum water bottle.

“Good morning, morning, morning! It is six A.M. and tiitiime to wake up!”

Then she began to sing the most obnoxious rendition of the ‘Good Morning’ song I’d ever heard.

“Good morning, good morning! Ain’t it great to stay up late? Good morning good morning to youuu!”

Jean came out of the tent the rest of the way, jabbing an elbow through his t-shirt. “Jesus, Ymir, you trying to wake the tri-county area?”

“If that’s what it takes to rouse these lazy children,” she replied cheerfully.

“You scared a baby deer away,” I pouted.

“Is that what you wanted the camera for?” Jean asked. “Did you get a good shot before Yodels over there scared it off?”

“I did, actually,” I said brightly, “but I could have gotten more if Ymir wasn’t so obnoxious.”

“Yeah, actually, why do the kids have to get up this early, anyway?” Jean asked.

“Because they take forever to get moving,” Ymir explained. “Erwin told me that to get them moving by 8, we had to wake them at 6. Don’t forget, we have to make and eat breakfast, strike the camp site, explain the activity, and do a supply check. That’s gonna take two hours with middle schoolers.”

I had to agree, but it still seemed unnecessarily early. I would have to get up a bit earlier if I wanted any quiet time in the mornings.

I ducked back into the tent to dig out our breakfast food and when I came back out, I saw Mina setting up for the meal.

“Morning!” I called, walking toward her with our rations of granola and dried meat.

“Good morning, Marco,” she returned. “How’d you sleep?”

“Eh, as well as can be expected, first night back in the tents and all. You?”

“About the same,” she said, smiling. “Have you seen the boys yet? I’m going to go try to wake the girls up again in a minute.”

“I suppose I should go try to wake the boys up,” I agreed.

I wandered to their tent, and was encouraged to hear voices from within. The boy doing most of the
talking was unmistakably Jai.

“Dude, you can’t be serious! No way, man. Nooooo way,” he said emphatically.

“But I—“ Eli tried to interject.

“Nope! I’m pretending you never said that. Don’t ever say that again, seriously.”

I had no idea what they were talking about, and part of me wanted to know while the other part screamed that I should announce my presence before I heard something that would embarrass all three of us.

“Knock, knock!” I called. “It’s Marco; are you two getting dressed and ready for breakfast?”

There was rustling inside and then the front flap unzipped and Jai’s hair, even more unruly than usual after sleeping, poked out.

“Marco, I can’t share a tent with this kid anymore,” Jai complained. “He thinks volleyball is a cooler sport than soccer. He doesn’t like soccer! How am I supposed to put up with that?”

I sighed. “Jai, you don’t have to be best friends; you just need to sleep in the same tent. I’m sure you can be a kind person and overlook your differences in favor of sleeping.”

“What if I start liking volleyball because of him?” Jai whined.

“Even if you did, that wouldn’t mean you can’t also like soccer. Now get dressed and come out for breakfast, alright?” I dragged a hand over my face, and returned to the spot Mina and I had staked out for the meal.

Ymir clanged the stick uselessly against her water bottle again. “Wakeup call number two!” She called out. “You better get up, because you don’t wanna know what happens if I have to make a wakeup call number three.”

Mina and I exchanged glances, trusting Ymir’s word that the kids didn’t want to know, but we were certainly curious what she might do.

The quiet buzz of activity that had slowly been building seemed to almost double, and more and more campers emerged sleepily from their tents.

Jean was herding his three boys towards the food, and David was chatting animatedly to him about some kind of huge bug they found in their tent last night.

“Ryan dared me to eat it, but there was no way I was gonna do that,” David said. “Besides, Tony was right: it’d be mean to kill such an awesome bug. He said if it was already dead, he would’ve eaten it. I hope he was just trying to sound tough because that’s really gross, right?”

“Yeah, little bro, that sounds kinda nasty. Good news though: it sounds like you just found a really big cricket, so I don’t think they’re poisonous.”

“I told you so!” another boy, who I guessed was Tony, taunted.

“Alright, alright, go eat your breakfast. Although, I can’t say that any food served by Ymir is going to be safe to eat!” Jean laughed like a cheesy villain, throwing his head back with a “mwahaha!” and the kids rolled their eyes at him.

“You’re weird,” probably-Tony said.
“I’m hurt,” Jean said dramatically, grabbing his chest and pouting pitifully.

I snickered louder than I meant to.

“What are you laughing at, Bodt?” Jean said, stalking over to me, swaying his shoulders in a way he clearly thought was menacing or cool. “You wanna go? Huh?”

“Calm down there, tiger,” I said with a laugh. “I’m sure you’re very emotional about what that ten-year-old said to you.”

“You makin’ fun of my manly emotions, Marco?” he asked, his serious face starting to crack. He continued swaying ridiculously, getting in my face, bumping his chest into mine now.

I shoved at him gently, but I could feel the blush rising.

He rebounded immediately and was right back in my face. “You and me, Bodt! Let’s rumble!” By now, he had given up trying to keep a grin from taking over. It was my second favorite Jean-smile: unabashed joy mixed with laughing at his own joke.

“Yeah, the only rumble that’s happening is the one in my stomach. It’s breakfast time; let’s go eat.”

“Aww, I could never stay mad at you, Marco,” Jean said, slinging an arm around my shoulders. Instead of a quick “bro hug” though, he left his arm around me and we sort of waddled to the make-shift picnic area.

When we got to Mina’s and my spot, Jean gave me a tiny squeeze and then walked over to Ymir. I watched him to make sure he wasn’t going to come back over and do something stupid. He said something I couldn’t hear to Ymir, and she looked at him briefly, before turning her gaze to me.

The expression she wore was one of pure amusement. The smirk and single raised eyebrow asked the same question I was wondering: “Is this kid for real?”

As the kids were finishing up their food (really, kids take forever to eat even the most basic meals, it’s incredible), Ymir came over to where I was packing up the rest of the granola.

“So, how was the tent?” she asked.

I stared at her pointedly, not really want to get into this discussion just now.

“Marco, come on! You’re killing me, Baby Boy.”

“Well, he asked me something, and I answered him,” I said sheepishly. I didn’t really want the campers to overhear.

Ymir seemed to sense that, though, and she leaned in closer, eyes wide and mouth slightly agape.

“He asked if I was gay,” I admitted lowly.

“Ugh, that’s it?” she said with a sigh, leaning back. “I’m disappointed in my freckled kin.”

“I’m sorry, okay? I’m really not in a rush to talk about this with him though.”

“You should be!” she scolded.

“Why, because you’re thirsty for gossip?”
“Um, duh! But also for those other reasons I already told you.”

“Well, he also told me… “I blushed a little, self-conscious—“he called me his best friend.”

“Oh m’god, that’s adorable,” she grinned. “Look at your little friendship blossom!”

Her smile disappeared in an instant: “Now tell him.”

“Ymir, no!” I said.

“Fine, fine, don’t listen to my advice. See how that goes for you.”

“I’m sure it will turn out just perfectly,” I said, even though I realized I probably sounded like a spoiled child. *Oh well.* “Now go do your job, Squad Leader.”

X

By the time we finished packing up our campsite and Ymir explained the ‘treasure hunt’ for plants and animals to the campers, it was almost nine AM. I didn’t mind much, but I think Ymir was frustrated that it didn’t move faster.

Ymir and Jean left with their group first; then every twenty minutes, another of our squads hit the trail: Hannah and Franz, Sasha and Connie, Annie and Armin, Mina and me, and finally Eren and Mikasa.

Mina said she wasn’t entirely sure about her ability to identify the plants we were supposed to find, so I went ahead and took the lead.

Minh, our scientifically inclined camper, seemed to be taking it very seriously. Every time we saw a new-ish looking plant, she hurried over to it, poking at its leaves with a pencil and scanning the small paper for something resembling the plant before her.

She also had about a million questions for every species of plant, and certainly put my botany skills on the spot.

“How can you tell the difference between a white oak and a bur oak, Marco? Given the natural variation in tree leaves, this tree looks like it could be either!”

“Well,” I said, my brain slow to recall details between the two, “I think white oaks are the ones with the spikier leaves? And I’m pretty sure bur oak trees have darker leaves.”

“But how am I supposed to tell the difference unless I have one of each to compare them?”

“Um, let’s take a look at the pictures; see how your tree has kinda blobby leaves? White oaks are a little sharper; I think you found a bur oak.”

“Awesome! Hey guys,” she said turning to the rest of the group, “I found a bur oak tree! Mark it off your lists!”

Without waiting to see if they did as she asked, she bounded forward, looking for the next plant she could check off her list.

Teresa, our quiet girl, put up with Jai’s incessant chatter quite well. She walked with her eyes trained on the canopy, either looking for birds or just admiring the view.
Mina walked in the back, nodding patiently as Eli told her some story, doubtless about his YMCA camp last summer.

Apparently, Eli and Jai knew each other from school, and had both attended YMCA camp together the previous three summers. Eli loved it; Jai hated it. The pudgy boy preferred the Y’s camp for its predictability, closeness to home, and that he reaped the benefits of being a counselor favorite.

Jai, on the other hand, expressed several times that the Y camp was “lame” and that they didn’t do any actual camping. He whined about setting up tents in a gym and eating microwaved s’mores.

I tended to agree with Jai about YMCA camp, but Eli was both a better story teller and, if I was being honest, less annoying than Jai on a regular basis.

Despite finding more flora than fauna, the kids seemed to be having a good time. As we approached a small hill, we heard voices up ahead: Armin and Annie’s group was finishing up their lunch.

It was Mina’s turn to supply the food, so while she set her pack down and rummaged for our meal, I went over to Armin.

“How’s it going?” I asked.

“Hey, Marco! It’s alright. It’s pretty humid, today; the kids are complaining about how sweaty they are.”

“Eh, they’ll get used to it. Are yours as chatty as mine are? Jai and Eli will literally not stop talking.”

“We had a couple noisy ones, but I think Annie scared them into being quieter,” Armin laughed.

“It wouldn’t take much from her,” I agreed.

We were silent for a moment, before Armin spoke up.

“So how are things with Jean?”

“Seriously? That’s all anyone ever asks me about,” I griped. “There’s gotta be better gossip or something else to talk about around here.”

“Sorry, didn’t realize it was a touchy subject,” Armin said sincerely. “Actually, I wanted to ask you something, but maybe it’d be better to wait until tonight. Remind me, if I don’t come find you?”

“Sure,” I said. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, I mean, nothing major. Nothing that can’t wait a few more hours, at least.” He smiled softly.

I saw Annie approaching from behind Armin and offered her a half-hearted wave.

“Armin, I think we should head out,” she said casually. There was something about Annie’s way of speaking that always sounded simultaneously bored out of her mind yet genuinely amused. I didn’t know her very well—I didn’t think anyone really did—but she seemed like a good enough person.

“Right,” Armin agreed. “I’ll see you in a few hours, Marco!”
“Enjoy the hike!”

I went back over to help Mina dish out the tuna and crackers out to the kids.

About fifteen minutes after we sat down to eat, we heard another ruckus coming our way.

“It was real! I saw it!”

A pause.

“No you don’t! You’re just saying that to—“ the rant was cut off.

As they came around the bend, Eren, fuming, came into view. He was leading the group, though most of the kids looked embarrassed and uncomfortable about his outburst. They fidgeted with their backpack straps or watched the path intently as they marched into the makeshift picnic area.

Mina and I exchanged a look of concern. When they were within earshot of a regular speaking voice—there was clearly enough shouting going on—Mina asked, “Everything alright?”

Mikasa opened her mouth to respond, but let it out in an exasperated sigh as Eren erupted.

“No, it’s not alright, because none of these little punks has any respect for authority! I told you all I found a horned toad! It was right there, on that rock, and none of you believed me!”

“Eren, stop yelling,” Mikasa said. “No one believes you because first of all, none of the campers know what a horned toad is. And secondly, I don’t believe you because horned toads don’t live in this region of the country, nor do they live in the woods."

“Augh!” Eren roared. “You’re so full of shit, Mikasa!”

The campers barely had a chance to gasp at his language before they were gasping at Mikasa, who practically flew across the ten foot gap that had separated the two step-siblings and effortlessly tackled Eren to the ground.

I jumped up, more of a reaction than really being able to do anything. I was not about to get in the way of Mikasa taking Eren down.

“Eren, shut up! You’re being childish and insolent and you’ve made your point! Enough.”

She held him, pinned, for a moment that stretched on and on. They made eye contact the whole time, neither one blinking. Eren seemed to be losing steam, but Mikasa still didn’t back down.

Only when Eren blinked and looked away did she let him get up.

The campers were silent.

Mikasa stood again, and adjusted the red bandana she wore around her neck. “Toby, would you like to help with lunch today?” she asked, as though she hadn’t just taken down their other squad leader.

Toby looked petrified, but Mikasa didn’t seem to notice that the young boy made no move to help her.

Mina and I tried to subtly tell our kids to finish up their food so we could get back on the trail and leave the discomfort of the siblings behind.
Eren was usually a bit hot-headed; he and Jean had had more than a couple scuffles. But something seemed off today. Even Eren wasn’t normally that over the top.

I knew that before we left, I should check in with their group to make sure everything was okay. But who should I talk to? Mikasa was generally more approachable when a conflict was involved, since she didn’t fly off the handle like Eren. But in this situation, my instinct told me to talk to Eren, so I did.

“Hey,” I said to him as casually as I could manage. “I just wanted to make sure you were gonna be okay after we leave.”

Eren waved his hand dismissively. “Yeah, we’ll be fine. It wasn’t really about the horned toad, although I totally did see one.”

“I figured as much,” I admitted. “Do you… Well, do you want to talk about it?”

“Not right now,” Eren said. “But thanks, Marco. You’re a good friend.”

I smiled warmly at Eren, wishing I could help more.

“Well, if you want to talk tonight, I’d be happy to listen.”

“I might just take you up on that,” he said glumly.

“Try to enjoy the rest of the hike, at least for the campers’ sake,” I suggested.

“Yeah. Catch you later.”

When we got back on the trail, our group was still a bit subdued from witnessing Eren and Mikasa’s throw-down.

*Maybe we’ll find some more animals, now that they’re not so loud,* I mused.

Not a minute later, Teresa pointed silently up at the trees. We stopped, and everyone squinted up in the direction she pointed.

Sure enough, she had found a brightly feathered blue jay perched high up in the branches of a silver maple.

“It’s so pretty!” Georgie murmured. “Like, what amazing plummet!”

“I think you mean ‘plumage’,?” Mina said with a smile.


“Hey, we’re all here to learn!” Mina said brightly, and Georgie laughed it off.

After the blue jay discovery, our squad seemed to be back at pre-lunch levels of spirits.

Mina joined me at the back, letting the kids lead us along the path as they scoured the brush for plants. If we hit a fork, we called out to them which way to take, but otherwise, their botanical search, such as it was, fueled us along the trail.

We chatted about college, and Mina told me about her gap-year plans.
“I didn’t get accepted to the kind of schools I wanted to go to,” she explained. “So I talked with my parents, and I decided that I’m going to go work on my aunts’ farm for a year. It’s this really cool program—have you heard of WOOFing?”

“Um, vaguely. It’s organic farming, right?”

“Yeah! They’re mostly volunteer driven farms, but my aunts are going to support me while I’m out there with them. Maybe with some work experience and a killer amount of volunteer work, I can try the whole ‘college’ thing again next year.”

“That sounds amazing,” I told her honestly.

“I think it’s gonna be great. I’m not even that mad about not getting into college anymore.”

“You didn’t get in anywhere?” I asked cautiously.

“Well, I only applied to super top schools… and they didn’t accept me. So my options were community college or WOOFing in Utah. The choice seemed pretty obvious. But now, at least, I’m getting really excited about it!”

“Coming to Camp Sina was good for you, then.”

“I think so, yeah.”

“That’s great, Mina. I’m really happy for you.”

“Thanks Marco. So you’re headed off to Trost State? Isn’t that where Jean lives?”

“He’s from Trost, yeah. Not sure how close he is to the actual university; it’s a big city.”

“Well, still. You guys can probably hang out at least once in a while,” she said.

“Yeah, I hope so!”

“You seem like really close friends; did you just meet here at camp?”

“Yeah, actually. Last day of camp last summer, in fact. Then we started texting and talking online and stuff, and here we are!”

“The way you talk, it seems like you’ve known each other for years.”

“Do we really?” I asked, a nervous laugh sneaking out.

Mina just nodded knowingly. “Don’t worry,” she said, leaning closer and dropping to a whisper, “your secret’s safe with me.”

I almost stopped walking.

“What secret are you talking about?” I asked.

“You and Jean? Please, I’m not blind.”

“Mina, it’s not like that.”

She raised an eyebrow and smirked. “Oh?”

“Honestly. We really are just friends.”
“Well, then allow me to award you the Bromance of the Year Award,” she said with a giggle.

“That’s not a real award, is it?”

“Of course it’s not, you goof,” she said, bumping into my shoulder playfully.

“Good, because knowing Jean, he’d do something ridiculous like make us matching polos with gas station nametags and permanent marker announcing the title.”

“Has he done this before?” Mina asked.

“Well, he made me a lab coat with a gas station nametag stitched into it,” I admitted.

Mina tried to hide the smile that was teasing at the corners of her mouth.

“That’s precious.”

“Oh not you, too.”

“Me ‘too’? Wait, who was the first?”

“Ymir. She’s always saying stuff like that. It’s ridiculous.”

“But true.”

I didn’t deny it.

X

By the time we rolled into the campground for the night, all the groups besides Eren and Mikasa’s were setting up their tents.

I found Ymir, who was supervising her girls as they struggled against the hulking pop-up tent.

“Ymir,” I called. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Yes of course, Baby Boy. Keep working, ladies. If you finish before the boys do, I’ll give you a prize.”

Jean shot a sour look over at Ymir, who flipped her hair over her shoulder and focused her attention on me.

“So, I just thought you should know that Eren and Mikasa seem to have had some kind of… altercation? I’m not sure exactly what happened, but Mikasa basically tackled Eren at lunch to get him to stop screaming. It seemed like it was something personal between them, but since you’re kind of in charge of our division, I thought you should know.”

“Jesus, what did that pissbaby do now?” Ymir said.

“I’m not really sure, but maybe don’t say anything to him just yet? I’m gonna talk to Armin and see if he can work through it with his friend.”

“That’s a good idea. We probably don’t need two hot heads trying to solve that problem. Let me
know if it doesn’t work, though. Maybe he needs someone besides his sister to kick his ass every now and again.”

“Heh, maybe.”

“Alright, my freckled darling, go help your children put their tent up. When the last squad gets here, we’re gonna talk about the treasure hunt and see who won.”

“You’re goin’ down, Ymir. We’ve got scientists on our side!”

“Oi!” Jean interjected. “I’m a scientist too, dammit.”

“Yeah, but not the plants and animals kind. Doesn’t count, sunshine.” Did I really just call him sunshine?

Before I could panic, though, Jean was responding as though I hadn’t said anything strange at all. “You better watch it, Bodt.”

“Oh yeah? What are you gonna do about it, Rock Boy? Cry me a river and create a new layer of sedimentary rock?”

“Dude, you’ve got to work on your comeback skills.”

“What? I thought it was pretty good.”

“Eh,” remarked Ymir. “Kinda with Sylvester Stallone over here.”

“Why am I Sylvester Stallone? I’m way better looking than that dude.”

“Helloo, Rocky? Keep up, Jean,” Ymir teased.

About half an hour later, Eren and Mikasa’s group finally made it to camp. It was about quarter to five, although my watch battery had started dying, so I wasn’t sure how reliable that was.

“Look who decided to join the party,” Ymir said. Switching to her booming ‘announcement’ voice, she yelled at the kids to form a circle where she was.

“Sit in your squads and have at least one copy of the treasure hunt out!” she shouted.

I was pretty sure Ymir just liked being loud; there were only thirty campers, and they weren’t being super noisy nor were they very far from her when she practically screamed her instructions at them.

Nevertheless, they assembled fairly quickly in a large, lopsided circle. My group was sat between Sasha and Connie’s squad on our left, and Armin and Annie’s on the right.

Our squad unanimously elected Minh as our spokesperson to announce our discoveries. We had found 19 of the 24 plants, and six of the 24 animals, for a total of 27 out of 48. That put us in second place, losing by one animal-sighting to Hannah and Franz’s group.

“We were so close!” Minh whined.

“You did a great job,” I assured her. “Besides, that puts us in good standing for the first day. On our fifth day, when we get to the first outpost, we’ll get a prize if we’re in the top two from the rest of the activities.”
“What kind of prize is it?” Minh asked, and the rest of my squad crowded in on me, honing in on the word ‘prize.’

“You’ll find out when we get there; every outpost is different, and they change from year to year. They didn’t tell us in advance, so I don’t know.”

“I hope it’s something good,” Eli said.

“I bet it’s candy!” Jai said.

“Ooh, is it candy?” Georgie asked.

“Why would it be candy?” Teresa asked, as though she genuinely wondered about the reasoning behind the suggestion.

“So I could finally get a taste of something as sweet as you,” Jai said, wiggling his eyebrows.

“Okay, that’s enough,” I said.

Teresa, unfazed, just put her hand over Jai’s face and pushed him away from her, and turned to me.

“How much free time do we have?” she asked.

“About twenty minutes, I think. Whenever Eren and Mikasa’s group get their tents set up.”

She nodded, and headed off toward her tent.

I wandered around the campground, wiping the sweat off my face periodically. I found Armin, reading a book on the south side of the clearing.

“Have you talked to Eren, yet?” I asked.

“No!” Armin said with alarm. “Why would I talk to Eren?”

“He and Mikasa had some kind of falling-out today around lunch time,” I continued, though slightly thrown off by Armin’s outburst.

“Oh,” he said, almost relieved.

“Why, is there another reason you should talk to Eren?”

Armin gritted his teeth. “Part of what I wanted to talk to you about tonight, actually.”

“Oh,” I said, nodding slowly. “I’ve got time now, if you’d like?”

He seemed to consider this for a moment, before snapping his book closed and looking at me expectantly.

I sat down in the grass next to him, and he leaned toward me so he could speak quietly; it all came out in a rush.

“So you know how a couple years ago, I was talking to you and I was like, I really think I’m asexual? Well, now I’m having some problems with that because of a certain green-eyed, short-tempered moron and I don’t know what to do about it and I’m freaking out because I think somehow I’m attracted to him and I didn’t think that was possible for me at all but here I am and it just has to happen at stupid summer camp when I have almost no time to myself and I’m sharing a
“Okay, yeah, that’s a lot to tackle at once. Let’s start with you just taking a deep breath, alright?” When he complied, I continued.

“So a couple of things stuck out to me. Maybe you’re not a hundred percent ace, you know? Maybe you’re demi or something. Things can change in two years, especially thinking you’re ace until demi feelings develop and stuff? I mean, I’m not demi or ace, but it sounds plausible.”

“You think so? But I’ve been so confident in being ace.” He seemed almost disappointed.

“The second thing that stuck out is, you guys are really close. I don’t want to get too graphic, here, but are your feelings for him maybe romantic and not sexual? You could still be ace but feel romantic attraction, right?”

“Um, yeah, but… I think they’re not-so-romantic feelings.” A deep blush spread across Armin’s already slightly sunburned cheeks.

“Well, then. Um, how long has this been going on? I mean, you’re the only one who really knows what you’re feeling, but could it just be a blip?”

“What do you mean by ‘a blip’?”

“You know, just a temporary kinda sexual phase type thing? I don’t know; I’m just making stuff up, Armin.”

“Nah, that’s alright. Sometimes it’s just helpful to talk it out. Not that I feel any better just yet… Maybe it just needs time.”

“I think time will be good. Let you get a better grip on what you’re feeling, and then you can worry about if you still feel ace or if you wanna change your mind?”

I was really getting out of my depth there, and Armin seemed to pick up on that. He put a hand on my shoulder and smiled at me.

“You’re a good friend, Marco.”

“Thanks, Armin. I’m glad I met you. Oh! I totally forgot. You said you hadn’t talked to Eren yet—not about that—but could you maybe just see how he’s doing? He and Mikasa had some kind of fight,” I said. Armin rolled his eyes, but I continued. “It wasn’t just the usual ‘Eren getting worked up’ kinda fight, either. I kind of talked to him earlier, but you guys are closer, I thought maybe he’d open up to you a little more?”

“Honestly, I have no idea what’s going on with them lately,” Armin said with a sigh. “I’ll see what I can do. For now, though, we better go check on the kids.”

“Good idea.”

X

After dinner that night, I saw Armin and Eren talking quietly on the edge of the clearing. Armin was talking rather enthusiastically to Eren, who was staring off into the distance with the kind of thousand-yard stare that could make a monster wilt.

dang tent with him and please stop me I’m rambling oh my gosh.”
Armin was unfazed.

I hoped that the two of them could resolve whatever the issue was; the kids deserved squad leaders who were focused on the campers, not some secret domestic squabble.

As I turned away to leave Armin and Eren in peace, I almost walked right into Jean.

“Whoa,” I said. “You startled me.”

“Hah, my bad. Just came over here to ask if you want to come over to the other side of the clearing. Sasha wants to build a fire and tell ghost stories to the kids. Sounds like she and Connie have a bet going on how many kids they can make wet themselves.”

“Augh, that sounds awful. I do not want to be rinsing out urine-soaked bedding in the Karanese,” I said, nodding to the river about a hundred yards from where we set up camp.

“Psh, me neither, but think how funny that would be!” He shoved at my shoulder lightly. “Come on; you can hold my hand if you get scared.”

I laughed nervously. “N-no way, I won’t. I won’t get scared, I mean.”

Jean just wiggled his eyebrows and then maneuvered me toward the spot that had been chosen for the fire.

About ten of the kids were gathered around Sasha and Connie, who had found a tree stump to sit on. Sasha was urging them to gather in closer, and they scooted forward.

Connie glanced up as we approached and grinned, waggling his eyebrows at us in that way that said “this is going to be so much fun.”

I offered a weak grin in return and was halfway to the ground before Jean caught my elbow. Awkwardly, I stood back up, and he nodded toward a small log. We dragged it closer to Sasha and Connie’s story circle, and sat down on it carefully.

If there hadn’t been kids there, it could’ve been romantic: the log was just barely wide enough for both of our hips, and our legs were touching. The heat of the summer air had nothing on the feeling of Jean’s thigh touching mine.

I was pathetic.

“Gather round, children,” Connie said. “It’s story time.”

“We’ll start with a classic,” Sasha began. “One that’s unique to this very camp: The Werewolf Beyond the Wall.”

Hushed murmurs rippled through the campers. I smiled: this was one of my favorite stories from when I was younger, mostly because of how many of us believed it.

As Sasha launched into the story, someone touched my hair from behind. I looked up and saw Ymir smiling knowingly at me. I tried to glare at her, but she wasn’t looking.

“About ten years ago by now,” Sasha began, “Camp Sina was just starting out. It’s a young camp, as far as these things go, but Erwin and the owners were determined to make it the best camp they could.

“In their second summer, Erwin interviewed a man for the job of Survey Corps co-chair. The man
was short and quiet, but he had an intense look in his eye and a knack for tidiness. That man was Captain Levi.”

Sasha paused for effect, and some of the kids who didn’t know him asked around: “Who’s Levi?” several asked.

“That super short guy who looks evil!” David, a boy I recognized from Jean’s group, supplied.

Sasha nodded slowly, then continued. “As we all know, Levi was indeed hired, and after his first summer, most of his campers said he was strict but fair, and that he knew these woods better than the animals that live out here.

“One night, a few days after the Survey Corps headed back from the Maria Outpost, one of the squads decided to get up to some midnight shenanigans. They snuck out of their tents with a flashlight and a plan: to ride the zipline one more time.”

This part of the story changed with every telling: In reality, the zipline was only a couple of years old, and until this year was reserved for the high school group. The first time I heard it, they tried to climb the weather tower about a day and a half’s walk from Maria.

The kids got excited with the mention of the zipline, though, and started chatting about how cool they thought it would be.

“Shh!” Connie said harshly. He gestured for Sasha to continue, glaring at the kids and mimed zipping his mouth closed.

They settled, but their energy was still heightened.

“So, they made it away from the campground, and they thought they had escaped. They started jogging toward the zipline, laughing and carrying on about how amazing they were for getting away from the camp. But they weren’t the only ones who had left their tents that night. You guessed it: Levi followed them.”

A gasp of silence swept through the campers. A few more had wandered over to join the circle, and they were all transfixed.

“Levi is no ordinary camp counselor, no sir. He’s a force all his own, not ever to be reckoned with. No man or beast dared defy or challenge him: he’s just that intimidating. And let me tell you, Levi was not pleased with what he saw.

“That night, Levi’s true nature was revealed to that squad of Survey kids, and if you thought he’s scary as a human…” Sasha looked around the circle, catching the eye of every camper before continuing, “…then you’d crap yourself if you ever saw him in his werewolf form.”

A couple kids gasped, but the ones who thought they were cool groaned. “Come on, you expect us to believe that?”

“I know, I know: You think werewolves aren’t real. You think you’re too cool and too tough to believe in it. But just let me finish my story, and then you can decide if you believe me or not.”

She nodded and cleared her throat. “Now, the campers had made it to the zipline, and the first kid strapped himself into the harness. Levi was still watching, waiting to make his move. He let the first kid go, and waited as they readied the second passenger.

“He let the second kid go, and waited as they readied the third passenger.
“He let the third kid go, and waited as they readied the fourth passenger.

“He made his move as the fourth camper—whose name was Griffin—was about to leave. He leapt out,” Sasha was suddenly louder, and several kids flinched, “from his hiding place and pounced on the unsuspecting camper! Griffin thrashed around in the harness, but he couldn’t escape. Levi’s jaws closed on Griffin’s neck, ripping through flesh, pulling out hair… It was a bloody, awful attack.

“When he was satisfied that he had made his mark, Levi jumped off the camper and hit the release, sending his victim flying down the line, through the trees, screaming the whole way down.”

Again, Sasha paused for effect. Jean was stifling chuckles next to me, and I smiled and stretched out my legs.

“She’s a good storyteller,” I whispered to Jean.

“Mhmm,” he responded, a low hum in his throat. I watched his Adam’s apple jump up and down as he swallowed.

Barely restraining myself from licking my lips, I turned my attention back to Sasha.

“When Griffin finally made it to the bottom of the line, his friends realized that his screams were real: this wasn’t the kind of scream you let out on a rollercoaster, but honest, raw terror.

“The gash in the boy’s neck was bleeding everywhere. His friends were screaming, trying to stop the bleeding. One ran back to camp to get their squad leader, desperate to save their friend. Of course, their squad leader was Levi: he was nowhere to be found. Fortunately, the kids found another counselor, who made it to the boy just in time: Griffin’s life was spared.

“Back at home a month later, Griffin was recuperating well. His friends and family had taken good care of him, and it seemed like all was well. As the full moon rose in the summer sky, soft beams of light filtered in through Griffin’s window. He began to feel a strange restlessness, and thinking he just had to pee, he got out of bed.”

Here, Sasha paused again, and the campers all sucked in a breath, almost in unison.

“Suddenly, his bones began cracking—” Connie did sound effects with his mouth—“and his skin rearranged itself, spouting dark black fur all over his body. Griffin let out a howl, and leapt out his window.

“His mother heard the glass shatter, and ran to his room to investigate, but her son was long gone. As she screamed for her son, Griffin’s mom saw a strange, man-shaped figure gallop into the night. Griffon was never seen again.”

“Whoa,” Eli said quietly.

After a beat of silence though, a boy with a shock of red hair and a painful looking sunburn challenged, “Prove it.”

“Well, the story of Griffin is fairly well known, and when we get back to civilization you can look it up on the internet. But for now…” She turned and gestured to Connie. That was usually where the story ended, so I was curious where Connie would take this.

“Griffin wasn’t the only camper attacked by the werewolf beyond the wall,” Connie began. “It was
five years ago now, that I first went on a Survey expedition. I was a young, naïve kid: I thought I was invincible.

“My friends and I decided to go for a midnight skinny-dip in the lake: it was a warm night, and the moon was bright. We were in the water, splashing around, when my friend, Reiner, said he saw something. We all thought he was imagining things; you know how your eyes like to play tricks on you. Shadows always look like they’re moving if you look hard enough.

“So we ignored him. But Reiner, he was more and more convinced that there was someone—no, something, watching us. Macho as I was, I went ashore, intent on making fun of Reiner’s overactive imagination.

“I waved my arms around and said, ‘Come out, come out, wherever you are!’ Of course, nothing came out. So I turned back to my friends, still out in the lake, and told them to quit worrying. As I stepped back into the water… I was attacked!

“It was definitely an animal, but it was hard to see. I was disoriented, fighting against the fanged beast as though my life depended on it. The stories of Griffin were too vivid in my mind, so I protected my neck as best I could.

“With my hands up around my neck and face,” Connie demonstrated. “The wolf-like creature pulled back, and I could really see the thing now. It was terrifying. It had golden eyes that caught the light of the moon and looked like they were glowing. Its fur was black except for grey circles under its eyes. It barred its teeth at me, and lunged.

“You see, protecting my neck, I unknowingly left my lower body exposed. And the werewolf attacked me… Right in the… in the junk.”

“What?” Several of the girls shrieked.

“No way!” Georgie cried. “That did not happen!”

“Yes it did! I’d show you the scars, but I’d be arrested!” Connie said, gesturing to the fly of his pants.

“Alright, alright, that’s enough,” I cut in. “Jeez, Connie, we’re supervising eleven year olds; did you think that through at all?”

“Yeah, that’s why I didn’t pull my shorts down,” he said with a laugh. “Sasha was gonna bring some makeup and paint a scar on my abs or something but I had an allergic reaction when we tried to test it out. So, the alternate ending was born!”

“Good show, man,” Jean said.

“Don’t encourage him,” I glared.

“What? It was funny. Age appropriate? Not so much. But definitely funny.”

“Thanks, Jean. Glad someone’s on my side,” Connie glared at me.

“Lighten up, Marco, my man,” Jean told me, clasping my shoulder with one hand and slapping my chest with his other.

I furrowed my brow in confusion. Did Jean just… boob grab me?
Ymir chose that moment to make her presence known. “Alright, campers, tent time. Don’t leave any trash or water bottles or whatever out here.”

We herded the campers toward their tents, and as we did, Eren spoke up in an obviously meant-to-be-overheard voice. “Hey, Mikasa, isn’t Levi your cousin? Are werewolf genes genetic?”

Eli shrieked and ran for his tent, and Eren laughed. In the dark, I thought I saw Mikasa smile a little.

It seemed like Armin’s talk with Eren had helped clear the air, and Eren was back to his usual self. Well, his usual self when he’s not being his usual angry self. Eren got worked up about a lot of things.

After we got all the campers zipped in and did our final tent-checks, Jean and I sleepily crawled into our own tent. It was a hot night, so climbing into my sleeping just to take my shorts off didn’t seem worth it, though I did turn my back to him while I changed.

“That was some story,” Jean commented after we turned the light off.

“Mm,” I agreed. We lay there quietly, listening to the kids whisper and giggle among the crickets and frogs.

“I’ve seen pictures of Connie on Facebook where he’s covered in body paint and makeup,” Jean commented after a minute.

*That little liar.*

“I knew he was full of it,” I said.

“Sure you did, Freckles.”

“Good night, Jean.”

“Sleep tight: don’t let the werewolves bite.”

I shoved his shoulder lightly and grumbled at him to shut up.

He rolled closer to me and grabbed my arm, pretended to bite my biceps.

“What the … What are you doing?” I shout-whispered.

“’M gonna eat’choo,” Jean threatened.

“Oh my god, get off of me,” I said, but I was laughing: any menacing tone was lost to my giggles.

“Goodnight, Jean,” I said as sternly as I could manage, yanking my arm back from him.

Even in the dark, I knew he had that mischievous grin on his face.

“Good night, Marco,” Jean said, and he ruffled my hair.

Rolling onto my side, I made a face to myself.

Jean didn’t normally touch me this much: was I imagining things? Was I blowing this out of proportion?
I was already falling asleep, though, as those thoughts went through my mind. I resolved to get up early and think about it in the morning.

For now, it could wait.

Chapter End Notes

If you’re curious about WOOFing, check it out here: http://www.wwoof.net/
Five in the morning found me awake, refreshed, and pulling on shorts. I decided to go up to the peak just south of the trail for some quiet thinking time.

From the top of the hill, the Wall Forest looked amazing. In the pale light of morning, the lush green canopy stretched as far as the eye could see, gently rolling up and down the hillside. In the fall, it would look even more beautiful, I imagined. Maybe someday I could come out here on my own in around October.

I found a soft-looking patch of grass to sit in, and made myself comfortable, pulling my legs toward my chest and draping my elbows over my knees. Taking a deep breath, I guessed that it wouldn’t be as hot today, though the humidity remained.

Slowly, my mind wandered toward the questions I had been too sleepy to answer last night. Was I imagining it, or was Jean getting more affectionate with me? Was it just because I’m his best friend?

I knew my feelings for Jean made me a little hyper-aware of his presence. I was practically cataloguing every time he initiated physical contact. We had grown close over the past year through digital means only; every smile and hug and shoulder bump from this week was logged into my brain.

I decided to consider the ideal: what would I do if Jean liked me like I liked him? My gut reaction was to say “hell yes”, but I suddenly started to doubt myself. Is that really what I wanted?

I had never had that many friends, and Jean was the first person that I really felt like I could tell anything. Armin and I were pretty close, and Bert and I went way back, but I felt the most comfortable and safe and open with Jean.

Why was that, I wondered? Armin, who I had so much in common with, was sensitive and caring and open. We had gotten along instantly, even when I had been so reserved and shy as a kid. I felt safe telling Armin everything, and I knew he would never judge me. Shouldn’t that make him my best friend, the one I could tell anything?
Bert, I supposed, was easier to understand: we had been friends since kindergarten, but as we grew older, we really didn’t have as much in common. He was still a good person, we just had less and less to talk about as our interests developed and changed. It was also hard for me to confess difficult things to Bert, because I felt like I was burdening him: even with less significant things, Bert acted like I had just passed him the hot potato and he wanted to get rid of his involvement as soon as possible.

With Jean, though… I had a lot in common with him, just like I had with Armin. For reasons still unknown to me, Jean was open and caring toward me (though he didn’t seem to extend that as openly as Armin did). Was that why I felt closer? Maybe the fact that Jean himself considered me trustworthy and such a close friend made my own feelings stronger.

I considered the second part of my friendship with Armin: that I knew Armin would never judge me. Would Jean do the same? I snorted a gentle laugh at that thought. Jean was pretty judgmental. As the smile from my laugh faded, though, I realized that maybe I needed that judgment. Jean would never hold back from telling me what he really thought and that was more raw and honest and open than Armin’s carefully crafted yet kind advice.

Would dating ruin that? I mean, I was just about to start college, so that in itself would be a big change. Besides, I might not have time for a relationship, I reasoned, what with focusing on school and all.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that I didn’t have a clue what I wanted. I had only imagined the honeymoon-euphoria of getting together with Jean, and not the long-term results of that. If it didn’t work out, I would lose Jean forever. Breaking up would mean breaking his trust, and things could never be the same.

And all of this was assuming Jean even returned my feelings in the first place. I didn’t even know if Jean was anything but heterosexual, and even if he did like boys, if he would like me that way.

There was an awful lot of speculation going on in my mind. I reminded myself that I was thinking of the ideal: Jean returning my feelings.

Given how bleak my internal discussion had turned for an “ideal” situation, I was becoming more and more convinced that I couldn’t tell him my feelings.

Ymir had been right, saying that if I didn’t tell him, that I’d turn into an emotional pile of pudding and mess everything up. But that was only if I maintained these feelings I had for Jean.

At about quarter to six in the morning, I made my decision. I wouldn’t tell Jean my feelings, and I would do my utmost to talk myself out of the feelings I already had.

Even if it didn’t completely go away, I would reduce my crush enough that I could handle it for the rest of camp, and then let the distance care of the rest when we both went home.

A voice in the back of my head sang, distance makes the heart grow fonder, but I shook my head, willing it away. Besides, I would be at college soon: we’d be in the same city.

Oh. We’d be in the same city.

One thing at a time, I told myself. Make it through camp, then you can figure out the rest.

Step one was to talk myself out of this crush that was getting out of control.

Step two… well, that’s only after I make it through step one.
The activity for the day was going to be a leadership exercise: Each member of the squad would take a turn leading the group. They had to set the pace, decide when to take the water break, and when and where we would eat lunch. As such, each group got to leave whenever they wanted, as long as we made it to the campsite together. This site was an ‘official’ campground, so it had a little signpost, a water pump (being farther from the river than our current spot), and even an outhouse. It was easy to find, but today was a long day: we had to walk nearly seven miles to get there.

Hannah and Franz were the first ones ready, so they headed out first. Mikasa dragged Eren and the rest of her group out after them, and Armin and Annie’s group left with them.

I was surprised that Ymir wasn’t jumping to be the first ones out so she could tout her captaincy, but after the third awkward glance I saw her throw from Jean to me and back to Jean, I realized she was waiting for Mina and me to be ready so we could walk together.

I couldn’t tell if the reason was because she wanted to let Jean and I talk, or if she wanted to talk to me, but Mina and our squad were ready, so it was time to find out.

“Who wants to lead first?” I asked.

I half expected Jai to insist that he was the man—okay, boy—for the job, but he instead replied with what I’m sure he thought was a smooth “ladies first.”

Georgie and Minh both rolled their eyes, but Teresa nodded curtly and stepped forward.

I shrugged off my surprise and said, “Let’s head out, scouts!”

Glancing back to see if Ymir and Jean were following, I was surprised to see that they actually weren’t. I was so certain that the look Ymir had given me was a plotting sort of ‘I’ve got my eye on you’ look, but she stayed in the camp. Strange.

I didn’t have a chance to think about it too much though, because Teresa set out at a grueling pace.

I let her go for a bit, waiting to see if she would remember she was supposed to be a leader and check on the group. She didn’t change at all. Even when I asked her to slow down, she did so only temporarily.

I was about to ask her to slow down again as Eli struggled in the back when she came to an abrupt halt.

“Next,” she said simply, and walked to the back of the squad where Mina and I were staring at her.

The plan was to have each kid lead a little over a mile each, so they got to lead about equal distances and it was defensibly “fair.” Teresa had only led us for about twenty minutes, but we had covered a mile. I wasn’t about to tell her she had some more distance to go: the squad wouldn’t have made it.

“Who wants to go next?” Mina asked.
“I will,” Eli puffed.

Eli set a much slower pace, and we more ambled than hiked the next mile and a half. We were ready to switch leaders when I heard signing coming from behind us.

“Is that… Is that the Spongebob Squarepants song?” Mina asked incredulously.

“And if you don’t think that we can sing it faster then you’re wrong…”

“Oh my god, which group is behind us?” I asked.

“I thought it was Ymir’s group, but it must be Sasha and Connie’s,” Mina said.

“C-A-M-P-F-I-R-E S-O-N-G song!”

“Who wants to lead next?” I asked, almost panicking as the shouting children grew closer.

“I’ll do it,” Georgie volunteered. She headed to the front of the line and we set off at a brisk pace, though not as ambitious as Teresa had been.

“It’s getting closer,” Jai said, eyes wide. “They’re coming for us.”

I snorted a little laugh, but I was glad that our group wasn’t interested in singing along.

I kept glancing over my shoulder to see if the group behind us was in view yet, but this part of the forest was dense, and the path was curved so there wasn’t much to see.

“But it’ll help if you just sing along: C-A-M-P-F-I-R-E S-O-N-G song!”

“Let’s move it, people,” Georgie commanded. “We’re getting the heck away from those Spongebob freaks.”

I looked back one more time, and sure enough, there was Connie and Sasha, led by the redheaded boy I remembered from story-telling last night. He was practically marching at the lead of his squad, and Sasha and Connie looked like proud parents as they sang along.

“Run!” shrieked Georgie, and our squad broke into a sprint of squeals and screams.

Mina and I exchanged a quick glance and went after our campers, arms wrapped awkwardly around the packs on our backs to keep them from bouncing and clanging around too much.

After an impressive thirty seconds, our kids got tired and slowed to a kind of power-walking speed, huffing and puffing along the trail.

The singing was still going, but it was quieter. At least they hadn’t run after us. We would have to keep up a quick pace to stay ahead of them, though, or hope that the next leader didn’t continue the song.

Georgie was able to lead us quickly enough that we stayed ahead of them, and after another quarter mile, we couldn’t hear the singing anymore. Whether they had stopped or we had simply gotten far enough ahead that we couldn’t hear them, I didn’t know. But we were safe now, more or less.

I had hoped that Jean’s group would be behind us, so I could have lunch with Jean. I loved the way he told stories about the kids, like he was hiding how much he enjoyed working with them. Jean was a terrible liar when it came to his alleged hatred of kids.
But after my morning reflections, maybe it was for the best that I didn’t have lunch with him. I could start talking myself out of this ill-advised crush on him, and some distance during the days would help with that without me having to act colder or more distant from him.

I checked my pedometer at eleven. Georgie had been leading for a little over a mile, and the kids decided they wanted an early lunch, so we stopped in the next suitable area for our lunches.

Connie’s group passed us by while we ate, but they didn’t stop. The kids wanted to ‘beat us’ to the campground tonight, and apparently thought that if they waited to have lunch, they’d magically make up more time.

Who knew what was going on in their brains.

We finished eating, and this time Minh took the lead. We still had about four miles for the day to get through. Minh’s pace was fair and steady, and she called for a water break right at one mile.

My prediction that morning had been correct: the day was hot, but not as stifling as the previous day had been. We were all sweaty and our camp shirts clung to us uncomfortably, but it was manageable. In the denser parts of the forest, the trees filtered out most of the harsh sunlight.

We let Minh lead for a little over her allotted distance, since she was doing so well, but eventually Jai started asking when it was his turn.

“She’s been leading way farther than you let Teresa lead,” he whined.

“Teresa abdicated,” I defended. “If she’d like to lead a little longer, she can. There’s enough distance left for that.”

“Nope,” Teresa said.

“Alright, then.”

“Minh, let’s let Jai have his turn,” Mina called.

Okay, Minh said amicably.

Jai took his spot at the front of the squad, and put his hands on his hips. “First things first, we need a team name. Something cool. Just ‘Marco and Mina’s squad’ isn’t good enough. As temporary squad leader, I propose—"he leaned forward and looked around at the squad dramatically—"Team Awesome.”

"Laaaaame," Georgie and Minh said in unison.

Teresa rolled her eyes, and Jai sagged in defeat.

“Okay fine,” he pouted. “Are there any other ideas?”

“Yeah, can we keep moving?” Eli suggested.

Jai started walking, but continued talking. “We need a cool name, I’m telling you. I heard there’s gonna be squad challenges and stuff and we need to have spirit!”

“A team name could be fun,” Mina agreed. “How about we all think about it, and we’ll take a vote tomorrow morning?”

Our squad mumbled their consent, and we carried on.
I was still thinking of team names when we finally made it to the campground. Hannah and Franz’s, Armin and Annie’s, and Mikasa and Eren’s groups were already there, tents set up, by the time we arrived.

“You made it!” Armin called out to us.

“Yup,” I said. “They did really well.”

“Awesome! Who’s behind you?”

“Connie and Sasha. Ymir must’ve left last today.”

“Cool. Well I’ll let you guys get settled and rested up. Hopefully the last group will be in soon; our kids are ravenous.”

“Same,” I said. I was fairly hungry myself, but mature enough to not spend every other minute whining about it.

Half an hour later, Connie and Sasha’s group rolled in, followed five minutes later by Jean and Ymir.

Jean looked exhausted.

He was surrounded by the three girls in his group: one was crying, one was trying to comfort the crying girl, and the third looked vaguely distant and utterly unamused.

“And then Olivia said that I wasn’t her friend!” shouted the crying girl as she sniffed her runny nose.

“No I didn’t,” presumably-Olivia said. The tone of voice and the look on her face reminded me strongly of Mikasa despite her curly light brown hair.

“Yes she did!” the crying girl asserted.

“I can’t handle this,” Jean said, massaging his temples. “You’re all shouting and I can barely understand what you’re saying, or quite frankly, why you’re telling me. Go put your bags down, get yourselves together, and then we’ll talk again in five minutes when you can stop fu—frigging shouting at me.”

The crying girl stormed off, followed by her consolatory friend. Olivia just dropped her bag where she was, arranging it so she could sit on it.

“God, and you three have to share a tent tonight,” Jean said.

“I didn’t say Sandra wasn’t my friend,” Olivia said.

“Sure, fine,” Jean said dismissively.

I approached Jean, deciding he could use a friendly face that wasn’t a pre-teen girl. “Hey there.”

“Man, are you a sight for sore eyes,” Jean said with a breathy laugh.

“Rough day?”

“Oh my god, you have no idea,” Jean whined. “It’s like, one second they’re best friends forever, and the next they’re yelling and crying and calling each other names. Were we this petty when we
“Were their age?”

“Probably.”

“It’s not even just the girls. The boys are just as ridiculous.”

“Oh, I know. Yesterday morning, Jai and Eli got into an argument over whether volleyball or soccer was cooler.”

“I’m so glad I’m not twelve anymore,” Jean said.

“The good news is you made it. And in two more days, we’ll be at the first outpost and we can actually relax a little bit.”

Jean nodded slowly, bobbing his head back and forth more than just up and down. “Mehhh,” he waivered.

“Outposts are more work than walks, though,” he said.

“How so? We just to sit around the cabin and there’s even the lake at this one.”

“But out on the trail, there’s a goal. It’s a structured activity. Give them free time, and they’ll walk all over you.”

“Oh?”

“You’ll see.”

“Well darn, I was excited about the outpost, but I’m not so sure now.”

“In either case, it’ll be nice to have sort of real food and to wash these nasty-ass clothes,” Jean commented.

“Oh my god I can’t wait to wash this shirt,” I practically moaned.

Jean laughed, and put his hands on my shoulders, looking me directly in the eye. “When that shit comes out of the dryer… Mmm.”

“No, shhh!” I said, blushing. “We still have to wear gross sweaty clothes for two more days. Don’t talk about clean laundry anymore!”

“Marco!”

I snapped out of our little bubble to see who had called my name. It was Mina.

“Can you make sure the boys get their tent up?” she asked patiently, hand on her hip like a disapproving mother.

“Oops,” I muttered to Jean, who actually giggled a little bit.

“See you around, Marco,” he said.

X

Normally, our squad meeting would be right when we got to the camp, but everyone was incredibly hungry after our long day, so we ate first instead.
When dinner was cleaned up, we started the meeting in our six squads instead of the whole group. We had to vote on who our best leader had been, and then the nominees would ‘compete’ in a sort of trivia game.

“So, any nominations?” Mina asked the group.

“I vote for Teresa,” Jai said.

“I vote for Minh,” Teresa replied.

“What?” Jai yelped.

“She was a good leader. I was just trying to make you suffer,” Teresa said matter-of-factly.

“I knew it!” Eli shouted.

“Alright, alright,” I said, waving my hands for the kids to settle down.

“So one vote for Teresa, and one vote for Minh. Anyone else?” Mina asked.


“I’ll vote for Minh,” Eli said.

“It sounds like Minh is our winner, then!” Mina announced.

Georgie clapped her hands excitedly and hugged her friend. “Yay!” she squealed.

“So, Minh, you’ll represent our squad in the game tonight.”

“See this is why we need team names!” Jai complained.

“Why don’t we come up with the team name now, then? Do you guys have ideas?”

“My middle school is called the Hilltoppers,” Georgie suggested. “It could work for us, too.”

“I wanna be something unique!” Jai said.

“Yeah,” Eli joined in. “Like the Wolfpack.”

“After that story last night, you wanna talk about wolves?” Minh complained. “What if we were like a play on words—Squad Trek! Like Star Trek, but we’re a squad?”

“That’s not bad,” I agreed. “I had an idea, too, if you’d like to hear it.”

“Sure,” they said, mumbling their interest. “I thought of ‘The Promenade Squad’.”

“What’s a promenade?” Georgie asked.

“There’s a mall by my house called the Promenade…” Minh said, confused.

“No, a promenade means a walk,” I explained.

Group understanding came as a chorus of “ohh”s.

“It’s too cuteesy,” Jai whined. “I don’t like that it rhymes.”
“I kinda liked it,” mumbled Eli. He was ignored.

Muttered comments faded into near silence amid the buzz of conversation in the other groups.

“The Trail Blazers,” Teresa said.

“Ooh, I like it!” Mina said happily.

“It’s perfect! I knew you’d come up with it,” Jai schmoozed.

“Trail Blazers works for me,” Georgie said, and Minh nodded enthusiastically.

“Alright: Trail Blazers it is!” I declared. “Now, Minh, the leadership challenge is two parts. One is a kind of trivia game, and the second part is a scenario-based game where you have to say what you’d do in that situation. Make sense?”

“Um, okay,” she said, sounding worried. “I don’t know how much I’ll know though.”

“Don’t worry, the questions shouldn’t be too tough. Just do your best and we’ll all cheer you on!”

“Okay,” Minh nodded shakily.

Ymir stood up to emcee the game. “Alright, squads, send forth your best leaders! It’s time to rrrrrrrumble!” She trilled the R.

A cheer went up from all the campers, and six mildly-shy middle schoolers stepped forward.

“Alright, leaders. Your first task is to introduce yourself. Tell us your name and which squad you’re on.”

A boy whose camp shirt was entirely too large for him stepped forward. “My name is Jack and I’m from the Meme Team!”

“Hang on, you’re from which team?” Ymir said.

“That’s our team name, Ymir!” Sasha called. “We’re the Meme Team!”

Jack nodded wisely. “I suggested the Dream Team, but like the good leader I am, I yielded to the … democratic majority,” he said, eyes looking up with his eyebrows scrunched together as though this was a rehearsed speech. It probably was.

“Okay, so Jack from Meme Team aka Connie and Sasha’s squad. Next?”

“I’ll go next,” Minh said. “I’m Minh, and I’m from Mina and Marco’s team Trail Blazers!”

We all cheered for Minh, whooping and clapping.

“Oh my god do you all have team names?” Ymir asked. “This is adorable. Jean, quick! Give our team a name. We have to be the coolest.”

“Ice cold?” Jean asked.

“Alright, alright, alright, alright, alright!” Connie cheered back.

“Yeah, buddy!” Jean yelled happily, offering an air-fist-bump to Connie.

When the laughing and cheering calmed down, a girl with a huge pile of braids on top of her head
stepped up next.

“My name’s Rachida, and I’m from the Booomb Squaaaaaad!” She drew out the vowels in the team name, and shot finger-guns at Eren and Mikasa’s group, who were cheering wildly for her.

The next nominee was from Hannah and Franz’s group. “I’m Jesse,” the short boy with round glasses said. “And I’m from Frannah’s Team Awesome!”

“Did he just say Frannah?” I asked Mina quietly. “Like Franz plus Hannah?”

“It would appear so,” Mina said, bemused.

The next camper up was a tomboyish—androgynous? I thought that was the term Hanji used at least—child with deep olive skin and shaggy black hair. “My name is Alex, and before you ask, yes I’m a girl, I just like to look like a boy. I’m from Armin and Annie’s A Team.”

She sounded the least excited to be up there, but maybe she just felt defensive about her appearance.

“Jean, seriously, did you guys come up with a team name yet?” Ymir asked.

Jean finished whispering something to the camper who was crouched in front of him. The kid stood up and returned to the middle with the other nominees as Jean called out.

“Yes, we’re good to go. Go get ‘em, Ryan!” Jean said.

“My name’s Ryan and I’m from team Heroes and Zeros!”

“Jean what the crap! This is what I get for letting you pick the team name.”

“The kids picked it!”

“Yeah! I came up with it myself,” Ryan announced proudly.

“Oh my god. Okay! So we have Jack, Minh, Rachida, Jesse, Alex, and Ryan.” She pointed at each kid as she said their name and they nodded as she got their name right.

“Let the game begin!” she cried. “So round one is, I ask you all a question, and you’ll ‘buzz in’ with one of these.” Ymir produced a small plastic bag and handed out the contents. I couldn’t tell what all of them were from far away, but one looked like a hand-clapper-style noise maker.

“They’re all different so I can tell who answers first better,” Ymir explained.

“What did you get, Minh?” Georgie called out.

“It’s a whistle,” she said, holding up the small yellow and pink toy.

“How do I use this, Ymir?” Ryan asked. He had what looked to be a pair of finger cymbals in his hand.

“Like…” she positioned the tiny cymbals in her hands, “this!” and clacked them furiously, dancing what amateurs like myself would call a salsa.

“Whoa,” I mused. I had no idea Ymir could dance. I mean, sure, she seemed graceful enough, but I wouldn’t have guessed she’d want to dance.
I guessed that Christa had something to do with it.

“Uh, I don’t have to dance like that, do I?” Ryan asked.

“No, just clack them together if you know the answer,” Ymir sighed. “Okay, question number one: Which direction is North?”

The kids looked up and around them, finding the setting sun, then working out which direction north would be from there.

Minh blew her little whistle as Rachida honked the bike horn, and a flurry of other noises followed.

“Oh, close but I’m gonna have to say that the whistle came first!”

“North is that way!” Minh pointed confidently.

“Correct-emundo! Minh gets the points!” Ymir made a little note in the small composition book she was holding as we cheered for Minh’s quick thinking.

“Question number two: Your friend slips and falls, cutting their hand on a stick. What’s the FIRST thing you should do?”

An obnoxious noisemaker buzzed, followed by a cacophony of other noises.

“You’re Jesse, with the noisemaker, right?”

“Yes! You should apply pressure to the wound!”

Ymir made a face. “Erp, there’s actually something to do before that!”

Rachida honked the bike horn hesitantly.

“Rachida?” Ymir prompted.

“Should you rinse it first, since they fell on a stick?”

“Ding ding ding!” Ymir sang out. “Ten points to Griffyndor! Er, I mean, to Bomb Squad.”

Eren and Mikasa’s squad cheered.

“Question number three: Which plant can help reduce the effects of poison ivy?”

Minh blew furiously on the tiny whistle. Ymir nodded to Minh to share her answer.

“Jewelweed!” she cried.

“Very good, Minh! Ten points for you. Ryan, you’re making our team look bad, you gotta guess the next one, man.”

Ryan grumbled something that I couldn’t hear but his body language made it look like he was mocking Ymir. Fortunately for him, she had already turned away, or he would’ve been staring down a Ymir-style verbal attack.

“Question four: What is one way you can be sure the water is safe to drink?”

Nearly everyone sounded their ‘instrument’ at once; it was impossible to tell who really went first.
“I think I heard that plastic handclapper first,” Ymir said.

“Finally,” Alex said. “You can boil it first.”

“Yes that is indeed one way to do it. Alright, last question: as it stands, we have Minh in the lead with 20 points, Alex just got on the board with ten, and Rachida also with ten.

“Final question of round one: What do you call a baby fox?”

Triangle, whistle, and bike horn sang out an instant tinny cymbals.

“Let’s give Jack a chance. Go ahead, Mr. Triangle,” Ymir prompted.

“A kit!”

“Wonderful! So that’s everyone on the board except our dear little Ryan,” Ymir said wistfully.

“You’re not being fair! You’re trying not to favor your own team so you’re ignoring me instead!” Ryan said indignantly.

“There’s still another round, dude. Relax, it’s gonna be okay.” Turning back to the group, Ymir announced round two.

“So now you’ll each get a turn to answer a question about a scenario we give you. Our panel of judges—that’s one squad leader per team—will score your answers from 5 to 20 points. Five points means you said something, but it was a sucky answer. Ten points is an okay answer, fifteen is good, and twenty is amazing. To keep things fair, your own squad leaders won’t vote when it’s your turn, and we won’t reveal your scores til everyone’s answered for the round. We ready?”

“Yeah,” said the six leaders.

“Oh, no,” Ymir said with a frown. “I said, are you ready?” she roared.

“Yeah!” the whole group yelled, screaming and clapping and making all sorts of unholy racket.

“Much better,” Ymir said. “Alright, we’ll start with Ryan, since he’s in last place. Ryan, the first scenario is: You’re leading your squad and after about a mile, someone says, hey, where’s Timmy? What do you do?”

“Um, I’d stop the group, and tell them to wait where we were. Then I’d take a buddy back with me to look for him. That way if he was hurt or something, one of us could stay with him while the other got help? Yeah.”

With all the other counselors, I scribbled down a quick score for Ryan’s answer. It was adequate, but I wasn’t super impressed. I gave him a ten.

“Okay, thank you, Ryan. Next: Jack, same scenario. What would you do?”

“He took my answer,” the boy said.

“Nothing to add or amend?” Ymir clarified.

“Uh… not really?” he waivered, but couldn’t come up with anything, apparently.

I briefly debated giving him a five, but then thought that wasn’t fair. It was a competition, but they were kids. Besides, if it was the same answer, then it should get the same score.
“Alright then. Next up: Jesse.”

“I would take the whole group back to look for him, because if I left with someone else, and Timmy was already missing, then there’d only be two of them by themselves. So I’d take the whole group.”

I mulled it over. His response showed a bit more thought to it, having considered the cons of leaving two campers by themselves. I gave Jesse a fifteen.

“Great. Um, Alex, what would you do?”

“I guess I’d take the whole group back, too. We’d retrace our steps to see if he had just fallen behind a little or if he got super lost or whatever.”

Alex also got a fifteen for the same reasoning I wrangled for Ryan and Jack.

Ymir nodded, then asked Rachida to share her answer.

“This is kinda bogus,” Rachida said. “I mean, they already said their answers so now anything I say is gonna look like I’m copying them.”

“Well, we’re switching the order you go in, so it’ll be different for other questions, and that’s also why we don’t give the score until you’ve all answered,” Ymir explained. “Just give what you think is the best answer and we’ll go from there.”

“Fine. I’d stop the whole group and wait up for him a little bit, maybe send someone to the last bend in the path to see if they could see him. Then we’d go back as a group to find him if he didn’t show.”

I liked Rachida’s attitude; she seemed like a good leader. But I thought her response wasn’t as good, so I waivered. On a trip like this, the biggest reason someone would be lost would be getting hurt, so waiting for them to catch up didn’t seem like a stellar plan. Usually, kids announced when they have to go to the bathroom, so it was unlikely that ‘Timmy’ was just taking a leak somewhere.

I settled on a ten, and hoped that maybe Rachida would impress me more in the next round.

“Alright, and then Minh, our current leader, your turn.”

“I would… I would send two people back and then wait with the other person wherever we stopped. I would also take note of the time that we noticed he was missing from when we last saw him, so we’d know how far back he might have gotten. If I had one, I’d take out the map and mark the route we had taken that day, so we knew what areas to look in first. I’m guessing this is all assuming there’s no squad leader with us? Like an adult? Because if there was an adult, I’d tell them right away and ask for help from them, too.”

I couldn’t vote for Minh, but she definitely had that one-up-manship that every good show-off nerd has. She had also thought of noting the time, and realized that it was a very unusual situation for a group of five middle schoolers to be without adult supervision in the woods. I liked Minh’s response a lot; but of course, I was biased. I was the reason we couldn’t vote for our own campers.

“Great responses, everyone. Alright, judges. Please share your evaluation scores.”

When the scores were shared and averaged, Minh was in first place by only five points.

After two more scenarios, Rachida had pulled ahead by five points.
Team Trail Blazers took second place again.

X

By the time the challenge was over, the kids were exhausted and they demanded to go to sleep, rather being told to. It was a refreshing change of pace.

Jean and I crawled into our tent mechanically like little wind-up toys. We were just as exhausted as the kids were, though we handled the wear on our bodies better.

I remembered being their age, though, and the way the fatigue bit into your muscles, dragging you down to the ground each night and its resistant grasp every morning when you had to get up.

I felt it even as an eighteen year old, but I could appreciate it more. I knew that at night I would sleep more soundly, and in the morning I would feel stronger.

It took some time for the whining about sore muscles to quiet down, but eventually it did. Jean and I waited in comfortable silence for the kids to drop off into sleep. When we couldn’t hear any more chatter, Jean poked his head out to make sure the lights were off and no one was up and about.

He was on all fours to look outside the tent, and having already changed into his pajamas, that left me staring at Jean Kirstein’s boxer-clad ass.

Knowing I only had about seven or eight seconds, I tried to memorize everything I could about Jean’s backside. The first word that came to my mind in that moment was “alluring.” Yes, I was inside a tent, looking at my best friend’s butt, and out of nowhere my brain came up with “alluring.”

Despite his almost ridiculously skinny hips, Jean’s ass was… well it was amazing. He was obviously fairly muscular in a lean, wiry kind of way, and I just knew that if I were ever given the chance to grab his ass, it would be firm and muscular and holy shit I needed to stop thinking about grabbing his ass if I didn’t want to explain why I was at half-mast when he turned around less than three seconds later.

Instead, I focused on the shape: the gentle curve of his toned ass as it met the small of his back, and what it might look like without the loose-fitting boxers covering him.

Damn, I swore mentally. I could just stare at his ass for days.

But honestly, I needed to get myself under control. What happened to talking yourself out of this crush, Marco?

I shook myself out of my butt-induced stupor just as Jean scooted back into the tent.

“Good enough for me,” he commented, seemingly unaware of my serious butt ogling session just seconds before.

“Great,” I said, a bit too shakily. “Then we can get some sleep, too.”

“Can I ask you something first, though?” Jean said as he turned out the light.

Don’t say anything about his butt, don’t say anything about his butt. “Ass—Ask away,” I stuttered.

Oh my god.
“Do you know what the game thing is for tomorrow? Ymir won’t tell me.”

I made a ferocious effort to disguise my sigh of relief as a yawn.

“She hasn’t told me, either,” I replied.

“Bummer. Okay, g’night, Freckles.”

Bum-mer, I giggled internally. Oh my god, Marco; get yourself together!

“Good night, Jean.”

X

The next morning, I was woken up by someone—Jean—lightly shaking my shoulder.

When I blinked my eyes enough that they would focus, I saw that Jean had a dopey smile on his face. He breathed in deeply, and then exhaled a “bonjour” to me.

“Mornin’. Whatime izzit?” I slurred.

“Cinq heures vingt,” Jean replied.

“English, please, Jean. ‘S too early for French.”

“Cinq heures vingt,” Jean repeated, slower. Five hours… twenty? My brain pieced attempted to piece it together.

He propped himself up on an elbow, one hand woven into the longer, blond part of his hair.

“T’as bien dormi?” Jean asked. Did you sleep well?

“Oui,” I said, slowly waking up. “Mais… anglais, s’il te plaît?” Yes, but… English, please?

“On parle anglais tout le temps,” Jean whined. We always speak English. “Je t’ai promis qu’on va améliorer ton français.” I promised we’d make your French better.

“Il faut que tu fasses un effort parfois,” he added with a wink. You have to make an effort sometimes.

“Are you kidding me?” I told him. I was honestly surprised that I understood him as well as I did, though I noticed that he was speaking very slowly and over articulating for me. Still: not bad for five thirty in the morning.

“Non, je plaisante pas,” he said stoically. No, I’m not joking.

He reached toward me in the half-light of dawn that peaked through our tent to muss my hair.

“It was sticking up funny,” he explained.

I half-smiled back, gulping down my surprise.

I was definitely not imagining things: Jean was getting more affectionate with me.

But that didn’t mean anything, really, I told myself. Jean was a very closed-off kind of person. Everyone needs some kind of physical contact, and Jean had simply chosen his best friend to fill that need in his life.
There was nothing else to it.

But there was a part of me that hummed with excitement, that begged him to do it again, to touch me, to hug me, to kiss me, to—no.

I had to shut this down.

Pursuing this crush would only have led to awkwardness, disaster, and poorly-thought out fantasy scenarios would crash and burn around us.

I couldn’t do that to Jean.

“Do you want to stay in bed?” Jean asked.

Did he have to phrase it like that? My heart pounded obnoxiously in my chest.

“Well, I mean, we don’t have to get up yet,” I replied.

“Bien, we’ll stay here, all comfy, in bed with my best friend,” Jean said in a sing-songy voice.

He must have been doing this on purpose. But why? I blushed absurdly, but tried to pretend like it didn’t bother me at all.

Clearly, I wasn’t convincing.

“Oh my god, Marco, relax. You look like you’re about to explode,” Jean teased.

“You’re doing that on purpose,” I accused.

“Of course I am,” Jean said. “I’m just having a nice morning, okay? Just let me enjoy the morning. I almost never like the morning.”

Was I really getting this worked up and paranoid about the way Jean was acting? Was it my fault that I was reading so much into his wording and his actions? I was far from impartial, so I concluded that I would just have to take Jean’s word for it.

“I gotta go pee,” I announced, and crawled out of the tent as quickly as I could.

No one else seemed to be up yet, and I didn’t actually need to go to the bathroom, so I just sort of wandered around the campsite for a couple minutes, trying to clear my head.

Talking myself out of this crush was decidedly not going as planned.

I needed a better plan.

I needed to talk to Ymir.

X

Unfortunately, between breakfast, striking the tents, and getting on the trail, the chance to Ymir didn’t come until lunch time.

And if I was going to talk to Ymir about Jean that meant that I would have to leave Jean to eat by himself.

I felt bad to basically ditch my friend, especially since I had acted so weird that morning, but on the
trail, I came up with a good excuse: Ymir wanted to talk to me about “special freckled business.”

It was a lie, and I felt a little queasy when I thought of actually telling Jean, but if I mentioned the “freckles bond,” he’d probably just laugh it off and say whatever.

I hoped.

As It turns out, however, I shouldn’t’ve worried: Jean was surrounded by the three girls in his group, and they insisted he sit with them for lunch.

“Do you mind?” he asked me sheepishly as they dragged him toward their chosen spot.

“Nah, you have fun,” I smiled. “I’ll sit with Ymir.”

“Ooh, Baby Boy gonna come sit with me?” Ymir squealed.

“Yeah,” I said. “Need to talk to you, actually,” I added under my breath.

“Oh, this should be good,” she said. If she hadn’t had a bowl of pork and beans in her hands, I was sure she would be rubbing them together nefariously. That’s it: Ymir was a gossip villain.

We sat off a little ways from the rest of the campers, and when a few of them came near us, Ymir snapped playfully, “Nope! Go away!” until they did as they were told.

Satisfied that we were alone, Ymir turned to me and leaned in close. “So? What developments have you deigned to share with Mama Ymir?”

“Alright, well, I did some pretty serious thinking yesterday,” I started. Ymir nodded, eyes wide, urging me to continue. “And I was thinking that maybe it would be better if I don’t act on this.”

“What?!” she shrieked. Getting herself back under control, she hissed, “why the fuck not?”

“Because I’m afraid that, first of all, he doesn’t like me that way—“

“Wrong.”

“—And if anything goes wrong it would destroy possibly the only close friendship either of us has.”

She rolled her head back and forth, then decided on “Probably wrong.”

“Oh come on; you can’t possibly know how things would turn out if … things didn’t turn out.”

“But you’re already planning for failure!” Ymir whined. “Marco, do you like this boy?”

“Well, yeah.”

“And do you want to kiss him and hold his hand and do dumb lovey-dovey stuff with him?”

“I think so…”

“Then what about this is so hard? Honestly, Marco. I’m not lying to you when I say I think he has feelings for you. That’s not just Mama Ymir prayin’ for gay, that’s me—your friend—trying to help you out. I can’t tell you for certain, but I really think he does.”

I offered her a sad, doubtful smile. “I don’t know…”
Ymir’s voice softened, a gentle tone overlaying her normal brash and husky voice. “You’re such good friends that I think even if you tell him your feelings and he can't return them the same way, you’ll be okay. He’ll understand.”

I laughed to stop a small sob from coming out. It did anyway.

“And if he doesn’t, I’ll punch him in the dick.”

That time, I really did laugh. I wiped at an errant tear that spilled down my cheek with the back of my hand. “He might need that.”

“You’re right; he needs it for dickin’ you, Baby Boy.”

“Ymir, please don’t say things like that.”

“What? Dickin’ you?”

“That’s not a verb.”

“Sure it is.”

“Really isn’t.”

“Think outside the box…er shorts,” she grinned. “It’s a verb because I said so. Now slap a smile on that beautiful freckled face of yours and finish your food. We gotta go kick some pre-teener asses up that hill.”

“Thanks,” I told her. “You always know exactly what to say to make me weirdly uncomfortable and then feel normal again.”

“That’s what we freckled-kin do.”

X

When we hit the trail again, I felt a little better, if still heavy-hearted. Today was a short walking day; we only had two miles left after lunch. The brisk breeze offered some relief from the heat, and brought the scent of rain with it.

Normally, I loved the rain. With kids at camp, though, it meant mud everywhere, a slower pace, and heaps of complaining. I hoped it would be a light shower.

The ‘activity’ for the day was to prepare some kind of group talent-show. It was supposed to promote teamwork, but I had my doubts. The project sounded like something Hanji had thought up, and though they meant well, their projects were rarely accepted by the camp community as a whole.

Armin and I had been some of the few exceptions.

Anyway, the act the kids came up with had to include three buzz-words related to camping: tent, poison ivy, and insects.

It sounded like Sasha and Connie were trying to coerce their team into doing some sort of comedy routine, while Hannah and Franz were advocating a kind of musical number.
Mina and I decided we would let the kids decide. As much as I loved Hanji, this activity did not look like it would go well.

As we trudged toward the campground, it started to drizzle. I sighed happily and tilted my head back to let the tiny raindrops hit my face.

“Augh,” Eli complained, “the rain’s gonna totally mess up my glasses!”

“I’m sure they’ll be fine. You could put your hat on,” I suggested. “That might shelter the lenses a bit.”

“Can someone help me get my hat out?” Eli asked.

Georgie, who was walking right next to him, offered a hand. “Where is it?”

“Outside pocket; should be right on top.”

She unzipped the pack carefully, since Eli had apparently just crammed everything inside haphazardly.

*It might be a good idea to re-pack that,* I considered.

Georgie yanked on the hat that had been wedged underneath a water bottle and handed it to the boy.

“Thanks,” he said, shoving the floppy denim bucket hat onto his head.

“No problem,” Georgie said.

The good news about the rain was that the kids were quiet for the last half mile of our hike, except for the soft squelching of wet boots in newly forming mud puddles.

When we got to the campground, they put up their tents with barely a word, and I helped the boys fasten the rain-tarp over the top.

“We’ll call you out for dinner in a bit. Maybe start thinking about our skit thing for tonight?” I said.

“I hope this is as bad as it gets,” Hannah commented as I headed over to help Jean with our tent.

“If it keeps up like this for more than a couple hours, it’ll be a total mud bath tomorrow, no matter how heavy the rain comes.”

“True,” Hannah agreed. “So are we gonna wait out the rain for dinner or..?”

“You’ll have to ask Ymir what she wants to do. I’d imagine we’d postpone the little ‘show’ for tomorrow night, but I’m not sure.”

“I keep forgetting that Ymir’s calling the shots,” Hannah said.

“Really? She yells at us all the time.”

“But that’s just Ymir,” Hannah replied.

It wasn’t the first time someone who doesn’t know Ymir had reduced her to a shouting, moderately abrasive person, and it certainly wouldn’t be the last. Maybe I had some kind of immunity against
her brusque attitude.

In that respect, Jean was like Ymir, though he was less socially successful than Ymir seemed to be. I tentatively attributed this to Ymir being an extrovert, and Jean being significantly more introverted.

Ymir was a lot to take in, but ultimately she wanted to be the center of attention, so she worked hard to be friendly, in her own way. Jean seemed to like the idea of attention, but either he just didn’t understand the social cues he was giving and receiving, or he wasn’t actually interested in earning people’s attention.

Well, people in general.

He seemed to be putting quite a bit of effort into getting my attention – not that I was particularly stingy with it, when it came to Jean.

At any rate, I decided to just brush off Hannah’s matter-of-fact summary of Ymir. “Oh come on, she just gets excited and has a loud voice. But anyway, check with her about dinner? I’m gonna go help Jean with the tent,” I said, excusing myself.

Hannah smiled, and I walked over to where Jean was shaking out the tent.

“Perfect timing,” he said. “Grab the other side, would you?”

I complied and started straightening the poles, pinching the spring-loaded joints into place.

I reached for the rain-tarp, draping it over the tent and clipping it into place on my side while Jean did the same.

We threw our backpacks inside and sort of stared at each other for a minute.

I broke the silence first. “We should probably ask Ymir what the plan is,” I suggested.

“Sure.”

As it turned out, Ymir didn’t have a plan.

“I don’t know what to do!” she squeaked to me. “It’s not like it matters that much,” Jean said, almost reassuringly. “Just decide if we’re eating in this misty rain shit, or if you’ll spare the little campers and let them eat in their tents.”

“Okay. Okay, um, unless it stops raining in the next, say, twenty minutes, we’re gonna eat in the tents but tell them I’ll break their pinky fingers if they spill shit inside. And then after that we’ll do the show thingy, although if we’re being honest I don’t particularly want to.”

“That was Hanji’s idea, right?” I asked.

“However could you tell,” Ymir deadpanned. “Alright, go relax for a few minutes and then we’ll worry about the rest.”

Jean and I both checked on our campers one more time, but when Jean headed toward the tent, I didn’t join him.

“You coming, Marco?” He asked.

“I’m gonna go for a little walk.”
“Really?” Jean said incredulously.

“You’re welcome to join me,” I added.

“Ah, fuck it,” he said with a small sigh.

We headed deeper into the woods, off the trail to a stand of pines that I guessed were close enough to the camp that we could still hear if someone shouted for us.

“It just had to rain right before we made it to the outpost, didn’t it,” Jean muttered as he settled his back against a sturdy evergreen.

“I really like the rain,” I said, leaning against the tree across from him so we could face each other. “Sure, it makes hiking a little tough, but it smells nice and it makes the flowers grow and everything gets so lush and green.”

“You’re such a poet,” Jean smirked.

“Hardly,” I said.

“Mind of a scientist, soul of a poet?” he tried.

“I think you’re the only person who would say I have the soul of a poet,” I laughed. “My high school English teachers certainly didn’t think so.”

“Oh come on, you can’t have been that bad.”

“If it wasn’t an acrostic poem, I was hopeless.”

“You should read some French poetry,” Jean suggested. “Apollinaire, Baudelaire… that’s some magical shit right there.”

“Maybe you’re the one with the poetic soul,” I suggested.

Jean looked at me with bemusement. “I just read it, I can’t write it. And don’t fuckin’ ask me to interpret it, because that shit makes no sense. Like, can’t you just appreciate the way the sounds all blend together, or the way they look on the page?”


“Shut up, Freckles.”

“But seriously, you’re really into poetry?”

“I mean, not super into it. My mom used to read it to me when I was little. I went to French school until I was twelve, and we always had to memorize our poésie and shit. I dunno, man; it was fun and sounded nice.”

“I didn’t know there was such a thing as French school in Trost,” I commented.

“Yeah. It’s strict as hell. But my mom’s a teacher, so we got a tuition break. I went to public junior high and high school though.”

“Why the change?”

“That shit’s expensive, and I wasn’t a particularly good student. My mom thought I might have
more success in a ‘lower-stress’ environment,” he said, making air-quotes. “Needless to say, that didn’t work out.”

“Are you the kind of person whose smarts don’t mesh with the school system?” I asked.

“I mean, I know I’m smart, but I never got the hang of school. I was kind of a problem child, getting into fights, cussing too much, you know: everything high school administrators hate. I thought that getting into college would be better, but it was the same boring shit, just cost a fuck-ton more. So I dropped out.”

“Do you regret it?”

“No,” Jean said firmly. “Maybe I’ll go back and finish a degree. But at this point in my life? It was absolutely the right choice.”

“Well, at least you feel good about your decision,” I said.

“You’re disappointed in me, aren’t you,” Jean stated.

“No!” I said quickly. “I didn’t mean to sound disappointed, really, I’m not. I’m proud of you.”

“You’re proud of me for dropping out of college?” he asked.

“I’m proud of you for making the right choice for your life,” I clarified. “That’s not always an easy thing to do.”

“Thanks,” Jean said, then added, “nerd.”

“Hey,” I said, “I’m a supportive nerd!”

“Of course you are. Let’s head back. I’m getting a little too damp for comfort and Ymir will probably try to chop my balls off if I wander off for too long.”

“Why does everyone assume Ymir is so violent?” I chuckled.

“Have you met the girl?” Jean said, a playful smile on his face.

X

The rain continued on through dinner time, so we ended up serving the food and then letting the kids eat in their tents. I didn’t threaten the breaking of fingers, but told them to be extra careful not to spill, since they’d have to sleep on it if they did.

The kids were all tired, and bored by the rain, so we decided to try to make the ‘group activity’ work just to give them something to do.

Sasha and Connie’s group gave a poorly-rehearsed comedy sketch about a hiker lost in the woods who was forced to live off of insects and accidentally used poison ivy to wipe. It was fairly typical middle-school humor.

Hannah and Franz had only succeeded in convincing two of their kids to do the song and dance they made up; the rest of the kids just stood on our makeshift stage out in the rain, arms crossed,
scowling at their squad-mates. The two who were singing did so nervously, and when they realized the other three had abandoned them, they gave up, too.

Eren and Mikasa’s group made up a short story and performed it as a kind of skit: one camper was the tent, and stood in the center with their arms clasped above their head to make a kind of triangular shape, three were various insects that tried to pry the ‘tent’ open by tugging on the campers’ arms, tickling her sides, and so on. The fifth camper was poison ivy, and everything he touched became itchy, which made the ‘insects’ scratch themselves. It was delivered without any real passion, but it was entertaining enough.

Armin and Annie’s group had a similar ‘skit’ kind of approach, though their story was more elaborate. One camper narrated the tale of a wildwoman who quite successfully lived off the land, avoided poison ivy, and in a twist only eleven year olds might conceive, somehow befriended and learned to communicate with the insects of the forest.

Jean and Ymir’s campers had put together a very bizarre, modern-art inspired presentation, in which Sandra (if I remembered her name correctly) announced each of the buzz-words in a dramatic voice, did a sort of drum roll on her legs, and then the other members of her squad did their best impressions of the keyword. For the tent, they made a cheerleader pyramid at the end. I was surprised no one fell off or got hurt.

Finally, Mina’s and my group went up. They also presented a skit, but made it sound like a fairy tale. Teresa was the heroine, and Minh narrated her trip through the forest, when she spied a handsome prince—played by Jai, naturally—who, for unknown reasons, lived in a tent. However, the brave heroine wasn’t interested in a prince and threw “poison ivy” (leaves and grass) and insects (pieces of bark) at him until he left her alone.

“And she lived happily ever after, the end!” Minh giggled.

We all clapped, though somewhat confused by the turn of events the fairy tale took. In view of the rain, we decided that the game was a tie, ignoring the failure of Hannah and Franz’s group, and said the kids could go have free time for half an hour.

The rain continued until tent-check time, so most of the kids were already zipped inside their tents anyway, laughing, playing cards, and talking about whatever middle schoolers talked about.

I took one last deep inhale of the damp, warm smell, and climbed inside the tent.

“I can’t wait to get to the outpost,” Jean commented. “My mp3 player died.”

“That’s half the point, though, isn’t it? That we unplug from technology?”

“Yeah, but consider this: washing machines,” Jean said, gesturing as though he were drawing a banner in mid-air.

“Mmm,” I almost moaned. “Clean clothes.”

“Hell yeah, clean clothes.”

“One more night,” I sighed. “Then we get clean clothes.”

“Stop talking about it; you’re making me sad,” Jean said, stretching to fold his arms behind his head. He quickly moved his arms back to fold across his chest though with a cry of “ack!”

“What’s wrong?” I asked, half giggling at his reaction.
“I smell awful,” he whined.

We did our final tent checks, brushed our teeth, and changed out of our disgustingly dirty clothes.

With a murmured goodnight, Jean clicked off the little electric lantern, and he seemed to immediately fall asleep to the soft pitter-patter of rain on the tarp above our heads.

I stayed awake a little bit longer, thinking about my talk with Ymir at lunch. I knew she was right: Jean and I were good enough friends that he could handle it. Even if he wasn’t gay or otherwise into boys, we were best friends. Things might be a little awkward at first, but they would work out: they had to.

Tomorrow, we would arrive at the first outpost.

Tomorrow, I would tell Jean.
Playing Chicken

Chapter Summary

The 10-13 Survey Corps reaches outpost #1 where they get real food, real beds, and real (chicken) fights.

Chapter Notes

Special super-duper wonderful shoutout to cloudmonstachopper who is not only in grad school, but also writing her own nano story, edited this MONSTER not once but TWICE because I was struggling so much with some sections. She's amazing I love her xoxo

Find me on tumblr as ricekrispyjoints, if you're into that kinda thing.

I woke up twice in the middle of the night, and both times I still heard the steady drops of rain falling on the tarp over our heads.

Jean slept peacefully next to me, curled up just slightly on his right side so he faced me. His usual scowl wasn’t there, though his mouth twitched the tiniest bit. I wondered if he was dreaming.

By the third time I woke up, it had stopped raining. I checked my watch. Dying battery notwithstanding, it said it was five, and I had to pee anyway, so I got up. I fished my rain jacket out of my pack as quietly as I could, which admittedly wasn’t very quietly.

Jean stirred a little, but he didn’t seem to actually wake up, so I shoved my arms through the sleeves, threw on my boots, and unzipped the tent gently.

A cool breeze greeted my face as I tried to pull myself out of the tent without crawling through mud. Despite there never really being a heavy rain, the nine hours of drizzle had certainly taken its toll on our campground.

It was a good thing we would get to the outpost that night, because we would all be in desperate need of a bath and a washing machine by the time we traipsed through the four and a half miles of muddy trails.

I wandered into the woods a little ways to do my business, and as I entered a more conscious state, I started to get a crawling, jittery feeling in my stomach: I was going to tell Jean tonight.

I had decided that it was the best thing to do, and at the outpost, we could switch ‘roommates’ more subtly: Connie with Jean, and me with Franz. At least, from the kids’ point of view it would be more subtle.

Since Connie was involved, all the counselors would know in a flash.

I bit my lip as though it might help me push the fear away.
Zipping up, I squelched my way back to our tents. I knew I wouldn’t be able to go back to sleep, but I didn’t want to sit outside, either. I carefully crawled into the tent enough that I could sit inside and take my boots off. Since it had stopped raining and I would be putting them on again within the hour anyway, and they were muddy as hell. I left them just outside the flap.

Jean seemed to wake up as I scooted back onto my sleeping bag.

“Bonjour, Taches de rousseur,” he said sleepily. Good morning, Freckles. “Bleh, that doesn’t really work in French, does it?”

“Not quite,” I agreed.

“Is it time to get up?” he asked, snuggling into his pillow.

“Nah, not yet. It’s only like five fifteen or so.”

“Mmm, good. ‘M gonna go back to sleep then.”

“Alright. I’ll wake you when it’s time.”

“Mkay,” Jean sighed. I watched his eyelashes flutter closed, and he was asleep again within seconds.

I let my mind wander to matters that didn’t concern me directly for the next half hour. I wondered how Julia was doing back at Sina. She seemed to have made a lot of friends in the first day and a half, but she was still only seven, so I worried about her.

I wished there was a way for Reiner and Bert to tell me how she was doing, but there was no chance for cell-reception until Maria, and even that was a long shot. If you were lucky, you could pick up a roaming signal. The giant tower near Maria was a radio tower, but we were only supposed to use it in cases of emergency.

I would definitely try to get a text out to them at Maria, but until then I was just going to have to trust that everything was fine.

I moved on to other thoughts, and wondered about Armin and Eren. I hoped that Armin was handling his feelings okay. I still wasn’t really sure why Eren had been so angry with his sister, but Armin was always such a calming force for him that I felt certain everything would work itself out, if it hadn’t already. I would ask Armin how things were going later, when he was awake.

Impatiently, I checked the time: it was only 5:32. Surely it had been more than fifteen minutes since Jean dozed off again? I tapped at the glass face of my watch: it still looked like it was running more or less on time.

I sighed heavily and stretched out my legs, straightening my spine first and then the rest of my body until I reached my toes, wiggling them a little before relaxing again.

Before I knew it, I had dozed off. I woke with a start, sitting up wildly, twisted in my sleeping bag, before assuring myself I had only drifted off for about ten minutes.

I heard a couple other people up and milling about the campground, so I decided to put my muddy boots back on and officially get up for the day.

Stepping outside, I stretched again, this time with my arms up above my head. Ymir, Hannah, and Franz were up, talking quietly in the stillness of the morning.
“Good morning, Baby Boy,” Ymir cooed when she saw me.

“Morning, Ymir,” I replied.

“One of these days you’re gonna start calling me by a cool nickname like I deserve,” she pouted.

“Do I get to make up the nickname?” I asked.

“Sure, but I get final say.”

“I didn’t get any say in you calling me ‘Baby Boy,’” I complained.

“But you are a baby boy. It’s perfect.”

“Whatever you say, Ymir,” I said dryly.

“Now you’re getting it,” she said, ignoring my sarcasm.

Hannah and Franz watched our exchange with bemused smiles. Suddenly embarrassed, I mumbled a good morning to them, too.

“Morning, Marco,” Hannah said.

“How’s camp going for you?” Franz asked.

“It’s fun,” I said. “No major complaints. The kids are well-behaved most of the time, and I love being out in the woods like this. How’s your group?”

“Franz has to work on not being too patronizing with the kids,” Hannah explained. “They’re always whining that he patronizes them too much.”

“I can relate,” I said. “I just always try to talk to them as though I would someone my own age, though. Sometimes they need a little less sarcasm and more direct feelings, but otherwise I don’t change my speech or mannerisms much.”

“That’s a good way to go about it,” Franz said, nodding.

Mikasa and Annie, Eren and Armin emerged from their tents one right after the other. Checking my watch, it was 6:03, and I decided I had better go wake Jean up.

“Be right back,” I said to Ymir. I waved good morning to the other counselors before I unzipped our tent.

Not wanting to actually go in with my nasty boots on, I felt around his sleeping bag for his foot. I grabbed his ankle and shook it gently, hoping to wake him up.

“Jeee-aaaan!” I sang, breaking his name into two syllables. “Time to get up!”

“Français ou casse-toi,” Jean grumbled. French or fuck off.

“Oh, that’s the kind of greeting you give your best friend who so generously wakes you up on time every morning? Fine: reveille-toi,” I commanded. Wake up.

“J’veux pas.” I don’t want to.

“Tant pis, now get up!” Too bad!
I smacked his ankle with a flick of my wrist through the sleeping bag, and Jean hauled himself up to a sitting position with a groan, tousled hair sticking up in every possible direction on top of his head.

A dopey smile crossed his face when he finally opened his eyes and saw me. “Hi.”

“Good morning, sleeping beauty,” I teased, glancing meaningfully at his hair.

He swiped a hand through it a couple times and it lay more or less like its usual, spikey self. I fought the urge to fix the few random tufts that were still misbehaving.

“You’re not gonna fall back asleep on me, are you?” I asked.

“Nah, I’m up,” he said with a sleepy sigh. He seemed to suddenly realize how dry his mouth was, and ran his tongue around the inside of it. It shouldn’t have been attractive, but I felt a blush creeping up my neck.

“I’m gonna go start waking the kids, then,” I told him, and stood up from my crouch in front of the tent.

“Mirror, mirror, on the wall: who’s the gayest of them all?” Connie whispered as I walked past him.

“Shut up, Connie,” I grumbled.

“Okay, but if he’s Sleeping Beauty, then he’s doing something wrong,” Eren commented loudly. “Because yikes.”

“Fuck off, Jaeger!” Jean called from the tent. “I can hear you, you jackass.”

“I know; that’s why I said it.”

“Boys, please. A little decorum at this delicate hour?” Ymir said.

I checked over my shoulder to see Eren’s reaction. He scowled but surprisingly didn’t say anything. When I got to Jai and Eli’s tent, there was no hint of stirring within.

“Jai? Eli?” I called. “It’s time to wake up.”

I waited about ten seconds before I slowly started to unzip the tent… and promptly burst out laughing.

Jai and Eli were asleep, facing each other, both with their fists extended toward the other and their legs curled into their stomachs in a defensive sort of position.

Did they fall asleep play-fighting? I fought to get the giggles under control.

“Jai, Eli,” I said, a smile edging my voice. “Wake up call.” I couldn’t reach their feet like I did to Jean, so I just yanked their sleeping bags toward me, hoping to jolt them awake.

Slowly, Jai and Eli both opened their eyes. Blinking a few times, Jai realized that Eli was about to sleep punch him, and he cried out with a “yah!”

Eli woke up quicker with his tent-mate’s outburst, and drew in his arms and legs tighter from where they threatened Jai.
“You awake now?” I asked.

“You trying to punch me, Eli?” Jai accused.

“You were doing the same thing, dweeb,” Eli shot back.

“Boys!” I said, raising my voice. “Get dressed and come set up for breakfast.”

“Yes sir!” Eli said sincerely.

“‘Yes sir’? Are you kidding me? You’re so lame, Eli.”

“Nuh-uh,” Eli retorted. “I’m being respectful, unlike some people.”

I shook my head and stood up, figuring they’d eventually make their way to breakfast. I couldn’t tell whether Jai and Eli were actually best friends who just liked to razz each other, or if they were more like Jean and Eren, who weren’t friends so much as mutual antagonists.

Either way, it meant a lot of bickering.

Realizing I hadn’t seen Mina yet, who was normally an early riser, I went back to the huddle of counselors in the center of the camp.

“Hannah, is Mina up yet?” I asked.

“She’s exploring where the red fern grows,” Hannah said sympathetically.

Oh. Girl problems.

“Would one of you ladies mind waking up my girl campers then? Mina said they usually take a few rousings to finally get up.”

“Sure, I got it,” Sasha said. “They won’t need more than one wake-up call after I’ve gotten to them.”

“Don’t be too rough,” I called after her. “They’re good kids.”

Sasha mumbled something as she stalked toward the unsuspecting trio of girls. I didn’t think she’d actually be awful to them, but I worried all the same.

“Yoohoo!” Sasha called. “Wakey wakey, no eggs or bakey.”

Satisfied that she wouldn’t harass my campers too much, I wandered back to my tent to get the food out of my pack. It was Mina’s turn, but I was hungry and I didn’t know how long she’d be gone.

Jean was coming out of the tent as I tried to go in, so we kind of awkwardly bumped into each other, head to head.

Jean yelped in surprise to see my face so close to his.

“Whoops,” I smiled, and stepped back to let him out.

Jean crawled out as gracefully as could be done when stepping into the squelch of soft grassy patches.
As soon as I came back out of the tent, though, Mina was there, and setting out the food for the morning meal. With a heavy sigh, I put my food back and joined Mina.

After breakfast, Ymir announced the activity for the day, which was somehow ‘Simon Says’.

“How are we going to play that while we’re walking?” Georgie asked.

“I’m sure Ymir would love to demonstrate,” Jean suggested.

“Hush you,” Ymir shot back. The campers giggled.

I looked at Armin, trying to catch his eye. I doubted there would be time to talk before we left, but I wanted him to know that I was thinking about him and hadn’t forgotten about his concerns since we last chatted.

He was chatting quietly to Annie, though, and watching his campers closely, so he barely looked up.

Ymir explained Simon Says without demonstrating, despite numerous shouted requests from Jean and Eren. Armin looked up when Eren shouted, making a fussy kind of face like a parent might when their child misbehaved.

I caught myself pulling a similar face when Jean shouted, but mine, at least, was completely indulgent. I was thrilled to see Jean interacting so casually with Ymir, and though I knew some of it was an act for the kids, it made my chest feel warm. Jean was really coming out of his shell, and he didn’t have to change his personality to get there.

I thought back to our talk back in the cabin at Sina, which felt like so long ago though really it was only five days. Jean had seemed so hurt and lost by the others’ comments about him being brusque or downright rude; he didn’t understand why I was the only one who seemed to appreciate him.

Watching him now, though, he must have understood how much other people can enjoy his presence. Be it our middle-school-aged campers or Ymir herself, Jean was really getting the hang of socializing.

Out of nowhere, a tiny pang of jealousy crept over me, cracking my smile just slightly. What if Jean decided that other people were more interesting than me? What if he decided he didn’t need me anymore? That I wasn’t his best friend because he could be best friends with anyone?

I shook my head firmly. I couldn’t let myself think like that. If I did, it meant that I saw Jean as shallow and fake, and I knew that wasn’t true. He was so honest and earnest with me that assuming he would ditch me for someone ‘cooler’ was an insult to him.

I let Ymir finish explaining the day, including protocol once we got to the first outpost, and then Mina and I rounded up our kids and did a quick equipment check before we hit the trail, right behind Ymir’s and Jean’s group.

We chatted idly about whatever came to mind: Jean talked about a concert he wanted to go see next month, having heard from a coworker how great they were live.

“Apparently they do a lot of improvised riffing and stuff,” Jean enthused.

I had never heard of the band “Colossal” before, so I just nodded patiently.
“You don’t care, do you?” he asked.

“I hope you get to see the concert,” I said earnestly.

“But you don’t care about it,” Jean confirmed.

“It’s not that I don’t care, I just don’t know what you’re talking about. They sound cool. Maybe once we get back to civilization, I’ll check them out.”

“I’ve got them on my mp3 player,” Jean pressed. “You can listen when we get to the outpost.”

“No, I’m not letting you suck me into your technology dependent lifestyle!” I teased, shoving against him lightly.

He pulled me into a side hug as we walked, grabbing my shoulders and instructing me to “embrace the technology.”

I ducked out of his arms, laughing, and poked him in the ribs. He grabbed my hand as I tried to jab again, and we play-fought until Ymir turned around and yelled at us.

“Boys!” she said. “My favorite boys. Can you just… not?”

“Sorry, Ymir,” we both in chorus, chastised like schoolboys.

We stole a glance at each other, though, and cracked up laughing again.

I might lose all of this tonight, I reminded myself. You’re still willing to tell him?

My laughter faded, and my resolve wavered. I didn’t know what I would do if Jean didn’t take my little confession well. I remembered I should talk to Connie tonight, before I tell Jean, so I don’t end up ambushing Connie with the news that hey, can you switch tents with me? I confessed my love for my best friend and he’s not taking it well.

Whoa, I stopped myself, almost literally pausing mid-stride. Confessing my love? That seemed a little dramatic, so far. I hoped I would have better verbal skills tonight, when I told him.

I had to.

We hiked another quarter mile or so until it was lunch time.

I sat with Jean for lunch, deciding that if he couldn’t handle me telling him about my big dumb crush, I may as well make the most out of our time together. That meant that I had to put off a chat with Armin, but at the outpost there would be plenty of time for me to chat with him.

We let the kids have a long lunch break, since we only had another mile to go until the outpost. They ran around between the trees, playing games that only they could understand.

“It looks like a variation on tag,” I remarked.

“Dude, everything kids play is a variation on tag,” Jean said, rolling his eyes. “They’re so unoriginal.”

“Oh come on, you were no better at their age.”

“Sure I was. I didn’t run around like a jackass, for starters.”
“What’d you play at then?” I asked.

“If we were at the park, we set up obstacle courses on the equipment, we had tree-climbing races—although the trees in Trost are pretty scrawny—and I don’t know, we did cool stuff.”

“Uh-huh,” I said skeptically. “Sounds super cool.”

“Shut up, Bodt,” Jean said, but he smiled and knocked his shoulder into mine.

“You guys are weird,” Eli informed us.

“Man, shut up,” Jean said with a tsk.

“I think you’re cool!” Jai piped up.

“You shut up, too,” Jean said. “Jesus, you’re a lèche-bottes.”

“That one I don’t know,” I admitted.

“You told me I couldn’t say kiss-ass,” Jean said quietly.

“That’s kiss-ass in French?”

“Well, boot licker if you wanna get technical,” he said. “I could have said lèche-cul. That means ass-licker.”

“Um… thanks for not?” I smiled.

“I’ve spared you… this time,” Jean said with a devilish grin.

A few minutes later, we rounded the campers up and headed back to the trail. When the outpost was in sight, the kids rushed for it in excitement. It was funny to watch them speed up to a campsite, as opposed to a heavy-footed plod towards the previous campsites ready to collapse from fatigue.

The campers all started talking excitedly about real beds and swimming in the lake.

I was fairly certain I heard Jean mumble the words “washing machine” under his breath.

Ymir called for a halt as we approached the cabin itself, and asked the campers to form a circle so they could hear her better.

“Alright, so before we settle in, let’s review the rules real quick, even though I went over the rules this morning. Where do you sleep?”

“In our assigned beds,” chorused the campers.

“When do you sleep?”

“When you tell us to.”

“When do you go in the lake?”

“When you tell us to.”

“When do you get out of the lake?”
“When you tell us to.”

“Very good,” Ymir cooed. “Now, the squads will go in one at a time so that bedding arrangements aren’t too crazy. You’ll put your stuff on your bed, change into your swimsuit, and put all of your dirty laundry in the big hampers. Make sure your name is on everything, or there’s no guarantee you’ll get it back. Your squad leaders have markers if your name wore off or you forgot to label something.

“My group will go first, then whichever group is quietest will go next, and so on. Capisce?”

The campers nodded, wanting to be the quietest already.

“Give us about five minutes, then the next group can follow?” Ymir said to us counselors.

“You got it,” Eren answered for everyone.

Ymir and Jean took their kids into the cabin, and five minutes later, Annie and Armin’s group, who had been quietest, so they went second. Eren and Mikasa’s group went third, and Hannah and Franz’s group followed after them.

Mina and I took our group fifth, because Jai wouldn’t stop talking, telling others to be quiet.

The vaguely T-shaped cabin was really more like a small dormitory. When you stepped inside, there was a long, narrow hallway with low strung halogen bulbs spaced every five or six feet. On the walls were pictures of the staff and campers from previous summers. I was in more than a few of the photos, as were most of the other counselors.

There were three main rooms: to the left was the girls’ room, to the right was the boys’ room, and in the middle was the staff room, with a laundry room branching off the back of the staff room.

Each of the campers’ rooms had a low, slanted ceiling, and was designed to look like it was a log cabin, though really that was just a façade that hid the cinder-block construction. Eight sets of old but sturdy 3-level bunk beds lined the walls, each fitted with slightly dusty, yellowed sheets.

Interspersed between the beds were old, single-pane windows that rattled in the wind and leaked when it rained.

It was good to see the old place again.

The benefit of being with the 10-13 age group was that we got to this outpost before the other groups: the older kids took a more winding path, and would get here about two days after we did. That meant the cabin was essentially as clean as it was going to get, having been recently professionally cleaned in preparation for the camp season.

Mina led our three girls to the left, and I took the two boys to the right.

We tried to keep the beds closest to the windows open, so if it rained, no one would get dripped on. I led Eli and Jai to the interior wall and told them they could pick if they wanted the bottom, middle, or top bunk of the bed.

Jai immediately scrambled to the top, and Eli grumbling about the bottom bunk not being cool, threw his bag to the middle bed.

“Get changed and put your laundry in the hamper over there,” I said, pointing to the beige-colored linen basket on wheels in the middle of the room. “I’ll meet you in the foyer when you’re ready.”
Satisfied that they would be alright, I headed for the staff room, darting through the doorway as Connie brought his campers into the dorm.

Jean was already there, throwing his stuff on a top bunk in the southwest corner of the room. “Won’t get woken up by the goddamn sun,” he explained.

“It’ll still come in through the other side,” I reminded him.

“A guy can dream.”

Franz had snagged a bottom bunk nearest the door, and Eren and Armin took over a bed across the room from him.

Mikasa took one look at her hometown friends and joined Annie at the bunk across from Jean’s chosen bed. I of course decided to take the bed underneath Jean.

Gathering my dirty clothes in my arms, I tried to breathe as shallow as possible as I carried them into the laundry room, dumping them in a blue and white striped linen hamper.

Hannah and Mina were there, too, having carried their packs into the laundry room to unload their dirty clothes that way. I saw Mina try to surreptitiously throw a bra into the hamper, so I turned away and headed back to my bunk.

After removing all my dirty clothes, my swim trunks were much easier to find inside my backpack. However, this was the part I wasn’t as sure of: where did we change? If all the counselors slept in the same room, there wasn’t much privacy for us. I couldn’t imagine that we would really just strip in front of each other, especially to go swimming, when you couldn’t even leave your underwear on.

Fortunately, Ymir arrived, shepherding Connie and Sasha to the staff quarters.

“Alright, so gents will change first using the laundry room because y’all take less time. Then you’ll meet the kids out front and go over water safety. They don’t get in the water until all of us counselors are out there, though, so make sure they wait. Hopefully, by the time you get them settled down, we’ll have changed. If not, make them sing a song or something.”

Glad that Ymir had cleared that up, I grabbed my trunks and headed back to the laundry room before I realized that I was about to strip naked in front of Jean in the light of day.

Not good.

Even worse, the laundry room really wasn’t that big, between the machines and the hampers, six guys was a pretty cramped experience.

We all kinda looked at each other awkwardly, except for Eren, who just shrugged his shoulders and yanked his shirt over his head.

Next to me, Armin stifled a gasp, and turned around quickly, before he saw more than he really wanted.

“What?” Eren said as we stared at him. He continued to undress, pulling his boxers and shorts down in one swift motion. I tried not to stare. “You’ve all seen a dick; stop gaping and change.”

There was a flurry of motion as we all shuffled around, turning our backs to each other and unzipping pants. The silence in that laundry room was suffocating.
I elected to keep my t-shirt on for the time being. I was already self-conscious enough, and it helped me shield myself as I changed my shorts at the speed of light.

Jean was slower to change next to me, but I was proud of myself for resisting even a furtive glance at his bare skin.

A sharp knock at the door made me jump.

“You ‘bout done?” Ymir demanded. “Dicks all tucked away?”

Eren being the only one of us bold enough to actually look at the others spoke up. “Yeah, yeah, we’re good. Comin’ out.”

At Eren’s all-clear, the rest of us glanced around at each other awkwardly, not wanting to make eye contact for too long.

It wasn’t that we had never changed in a room with other guys before, of course: but when we were close enough that a wobble putting a leg through your pants could mean your bare ass touching someone else’s bare ass, it was a little uncomfortable.

Normally, locker room protocol was keep your head down, change your clothes, and move on. Laundry room protocol, however, was too cramped for that.

Maybe I was just hyper-aware of the proximity, but the rest of the group seemed to feel at least some of my unease.

Armin, who had been closest to the door, turned the handle and we filed out of the laundry room.

It was then that we realized the girls had already changed.

“Well, I bet that was awkward,” Sasha cackled, clad in a red and white polka-dotted bikini.

“You little shits!” Jean cried out.

Connie burst out laughing, and Franz and I tried to laugh, too, with varying degrees of success.

Armin turned even redder, and Jean was practically fuming.

Eren simply shrugged and grabbed a towel, heading down the hall to meet the kids in the front hall.

Mina was still giggling, but made eye contact with me and gave me a head nod to say “let’s go.”

The foyer really wasn’t big enough for all the kids and adults to be standing around in at once, so we ushered the campers outside to talk about water rules.

“Rule number one,” Ymir began, pacing in front of the group like a drill sergeant, “no dunking, holding people underwater, or otherwise making it hard for people to breathe. That is seriously dangerous and if you do it, I will make you carry the next week’s food rations in your pack.

“Rule number two: do not go past the buoys. There’s a huge drop off after the buoys and I don’t care how good of a swimmer you think you are. If you go past the buoys, you’re banned from swimming activities.

“Rule number three: If for whatever reason an adult tells you to get out of the water, you do it: no questions asked. This is for your safety: I’m too young and poor to get sued.
“Rule number four: if you want to get out of the water, that’s fine, but you need to stay within sight of the adults at all times. If you need to go inside for anything, tell an adult before you do so we know where you are.

“And finally, rule number five: don’t scream if you see fish in the water. This is a lake. Fish live in lakes. Some of them might even touch your legs. Get over it.

Any questions?” Ymir concluded.

The kids shook their heads.

“Alright: once you have sunscreen on, you’ve got free time till dinner. Be free, my children!”

The kids screamed in a rush and practically sprinted to the water, shrieking about how cold it felt as they splashed into its depths. Eren dove in headlong with them, splashing water at his campers like he was a child himself.

Most of the counselors stood on the small beach, though Hannah and Mina waded in up to their ankles.

The girls from Jean’s group tried to tug him into the water, and he resisted at first, but after a chorus of pleases and some impressive puppy dog eyes, Jean conceded.

“At least let me take my shirt off, okay? I don’t want it to get all wet.”

I felt my eyes bulge out a little as I watched him grab the back of his collar with one hand, pulling it over the top of his head and down his arms in one smooth motion. His hair was ruffled, but he ran a hand through it.

And then he tossed his shirt to me with a flick of his wrist. “Hang on to this for me, would you?” he said.

“Sh-sure,” I agreed.

It was still warm, obviously, as I held the fabric in my hands. In a daze, I walked over to join Armin at one of the picnic tables that was close enough to the beach that we could still see, but there was a low risk of getting wet.

“Hey,” Armin said, looking up at me as I sat on the bench. “You alright?”

“Fine,” I said, shaking my head to snap out of it. I looked out at the kids in the lake, the girls piling on top of Jean as he splashed at them playfully. What a flirt, I thought.

“He’s really good with the kids,” Armin commented.

“Hmm?” I asked.

“Jean. He’s good with the kids.”

“Eren is too,” I commented. “And speaking of Eren… How are things?”

“Which things?” Armin said meaningfully.

“Well, the Eren and Mikasa thing as well as you,” I said in a low voice, though no one was within ear shot.
“Eren and Mikasa are fine now. Eren asked me not to talk about it yet, though, so I can’t say much more than that.”

“Okay. Well, I’m glad that they’re good again. And you?”

“I talked to Eren about maybe being demi,” Armin said. “I haven’t told him it was him that prompted the change, but I wanted to take baby steps, you know? See how he reacted, see if maybe he might… if he might feel that way, too.”

“Eren was really cool when you said you were ace, right?”

“Yeah, but it’s different now. I told him to gauge his reaction, not so much so that he knew. It felt deceptive, somehow,” Armin mused.

“Well, I’m proud of you for at least bringing it up.”

“You still haven’t done anything, have you?” Armin said, reading into response. “I mean, we’re all so close here I’m guessing I’ll know when you do.”

“I’m gonna tell him tonight,” I said. Saying it out loud to Armin made it real; it meant I couldn’t back out. (Well, I supposed I could, and Armin would think no less of me for it, but I tried to consider it a sort of promise.)

“Seriously?” Armin asked.

“If he doesn’t want to share the tent with me anymore, it’ll be easier for us to switch out without the kids noticing so much while we’re here.”

“Ah,” Armin said, raising his eyebrows. “And you think switching tents will be necessary?”

“I don’t know,” I sighed. “I hope not. Ymir thinks that Jean will take it well, but… I don’t know. It’s a lot to take in, don’t you think?”

“Well, can you do it in small doses, like I’m trying? I don’t know, don’t make it some big undying confession. That’d be a lot for anybody to handle.”

“I already told him I’m gay,” I said, barely above a whisper. “Not sure how much else I can baby-step it before it just gets painful. I think I need to take the band-aid approach. All at once.”

“You are a braver soul than I,” Armin said sagely, turning his gaze back to the campers in the lake.

“Marco!” Jean shouted from the water. “Help me! I’m being attacked!”

The girls that were ganging up on Jean squealed with laughter, and I rolled my eyes.

“You going to go save your damsel in distress?” Armin smirked.

“I really wasn’t planning on getting in the water today,” I admitted. Nevertheless, I found myself standing from the picnic table, and with a sigh, I tugged my shirt over my head. I folded my shirt next to Jean’s and left it on the table with Armin.

“Have fun!” he called after me.

I waded out into the lake, welcoming the coolness of the water that lapped at my shins. As soon as it became clear that I was in fact coming to Jean’s aid, the squealing girls started splashing me, too. I put my arms out defensively, trying to keep the muddy brown water from getting in my eyes or
mouth. It was only partially effective.

Eventually, we got tired of the girls splashing us.

“Alright, alright, that’s enough. Go entertain yourselves for a while, yeah?”

They whined a little, but soon swam off to do something else.

Thoroughly soaked, I stood next to Jean in the hip-deep water. I let my eyes rake over his bare torso just once, noting the way the water droplets shimmered on his skin.

His incredibly pale, farmer-tanned skin.

“Jean, did you put sunscreen on?” I asked. “You look like the type that burns easily.”

“Sorry we can’t all be sun gods,” he said dryly, looking me up and down.

“W-what?” I stammered.

“You’re all tan and freckled and muscle-y, and I’m over here like bedsheets on a line: white as linen and incapable of withstanding a strong wind.”

I wheezed out a laugh, but regained my composure. “You’re not _that_–” I started.

“Marco Bodt, if you’re about to say I’m not that pale or that scrawny, please just don’t. Your flattery will get you nowhere. Can’t argue the facts.” He grinned and gestured to his own chest and abs which were honestly pretty unremarkable in terms of muscle definition, and though not quite crisp linens white, he was definitely several shades paler than my olive skin.

“God, you’re gonna get like six bajillion more freckles, aren’t you,” Jean mumbled. “I’m not sure how that’s possible, considering you’re already covered in them, but you totally are.”

I looked at my skin. I had just sort of grown to accept that sunshine meant more freckles for me, but really looking at myself, I supposed I did have quite a lot. I had freckles splattered across my chest and collar bones, and even a handful that made it to my stomach around my belly button.

I was sure my back was covered, too, but didn’t twist around to see to what extent.

“I can’t help it,” I said.

“I know you can’t, Freckles. Don’t worry; they suit you.”

I blushed a little bit, and decided to focus my energy on supervising the campers.

I noticed that Hannah and Franz weren’t standing on the beach anymore.

“Where are Hannah and Franz?” I asked Jean without turning to look at him.

“Ymir probably conscripted them for laundry duty,” Jean remarked. “They’re too nice to say no.”

“Yeah, but who’s to say they’re not in the laundry room making out?” I asked, though I doubted those two would really be up to anything but laundry.

“Better in there than out here,” Jean laughed.

“Jean! Marco!” Sasha called, loud enough to draw the attention of all thirty campers. “We demand
a chicken fight!”

“Not a chance!” I shrieked.

“Hell yes!” whooped Jean. “Come on Marco, let’s kick their asses.”

“Language, Jean! And no way!”

“You’re way taller than Connie, it’ll be easy!”

I was a good six or seven inches taller than Connie, but I didn’t particularly like the idea of hoisting Jean on my shoulders so he could smack Sasha.

I looked to Ymir for help, hoping she’d say that it was too rough and dangerous, but she just threw her head back and laughed.

The campers were all clambering around us, urging us to chicken fight.

“Ymir, please!” I cried.

“Alright, all campers out of the water!” she directed.

The kids all whined, not wanting the free time to be over, but I sighed in relief. Saved.

“We don’t want anyone to fall on you, now do we?” Ymir continued.

Not saved? What the hell, Ymir? I cursed.

“Yessss!” Connie hissed. “You got this Sash.”

“Oh, I know I do. I’m gonna knock little toothpick legs here right off his pretty freckled friend.”

“Hey!” Jean and I said in unison.

“Come on, Marco, are you gonna let them talk smack about us? Let’s do this, man.”

Sasha climbed Connie like he was a tree. She situated herself on his shoulders, and checked her swimsuit top to make sure it was still securely tied and covering her.

“How do you wanna do this?” Jean asked. “I don’t think I can scramble up like she did, so how about you kneel and then stand up once I’m on?”

I buried my face in my hands for a second. Was this really happening?

Reluctantly, I sunk down to one knee on the sandy bottom of the lake, so only my head and shoulders were above the water.

Jean clambered onto me, significantly less gracefully than Sasha had.

“Ready?” I asked, as he grabbed onto my head and wrapped his knees around me for balance.

“Yeah,” he said, still wobbly.

I grabbed his ankles and slowly stood up, trying to use my abs to stabilize us.

Jean clenched his thighs around my ears and I hated how sexy that was. It shouldn’t have been sexy. We were acting like children. There were actual children watching. Now was not the time for
thinking my best friend was sexy.

Jean was only an inch or two shorter than me, so together we towered over Sasha and Connie.

Slowly, Connie and I moved toward each other, Sasha and Jean perched on our shoulders with their arms out like little crab claws or something.

The campers cheered us on from the beach, some shouting for Jean and I, others for Sasha and Connie.

Being tall wasn’t exactly an advantage here, as we soon came to discover. Jean’s added height made me unsteady and I was unable to move Jean away from Sasha’s almost vicious slaps.

Connie, on the other hand, had a lower center of gravity and Sasha could duck under Jean’s attacks with ease.

“Come on, Marco!” Jean squealed from above. “You gotta help me out, man!”

“I’m trying!” I grunted, taking a deep breath. My abs were certainly getting a workout with this balancing act, and my neck was sort of starting to hurt.

Jean and Sasha had grabbed hold of each other’s forearms, trying to twist or turn the other off their seat.

I could almost see it happening in slow motion, as though I were an onlooker on the beach: Sasha managed to dip Jean’s shoulder to our left, and the sudden force of it made him kick his right leg out for balance. I lost my grip on his ankle, and he started to fall off my shoulders. Of course, he was still holding onto me, scrambling for purchase, and so we both went down in a mighty tangle of limbs into the brownish water.

I broke the surface of the lake with a spluttering gasp, spitting the foul-tasting water out of my mouth and rubbing at my eyes.

Sasha and Connie were laughing and high-fiving each other triumphantly, and the beach cheered for the victors.

I looked around for Jean, and had a moment of panic when I couldn’t see him. But then I saw bubbles, and realized that he was swimming toward Connie and Sasha.

He erupted from the water with a war cry and launched himself at Connie and Sasha, whose laughter turned into shrills.

I sloshed over to him and pulled him off of Connie, who he had tackled into a stringy patch of weeds.

“Alright, campers, you can get back in the water,” Ymir said, wiping tears of laughter from her cheeks.

The kids rushed into the lake to congratulate Sasha while Connie chased a couple kids with the weeds that he pulled up from the sandy bottom.

I went back to the table where Armin was still sitting, now joined by Mikasa and Annie.

“That was quite a show,” Annie commented dryly.

“Thanks,” I returned. I grabbed a towel and draped it around my shoulders, fluffing out my hair
I spent the next forty minutes chatting with Mikasa, Annie, and Armin before Ymir called the kids in for dinner.

The kids were all drying off when a blood-curdling scream rang out.

“Get it off! Get it off!” Ryan, the red-headed boy from Sasha and Connie’s squad was screaming.

The kids around him apparently saw whatever he wanted to get off, and they all started screaming, too.

“Move, move,” Ymir said firmly, pulling kids aside to get to the shrieking camper.

I dashed over to Ymir in case she needed help, though Sasha and Eren were both closer than me.

“Oh, you big baby!” Ymir said, and I slowed my sprint to a jog. “It’s just a leech!”

Somehow identifying the dark-brown, slug-like creature that was firmly attached to Ryan’s big toe made it gross all over again, and the kids all whined and shrieked about how disgusting it was.

Ymir grabbed Ryan’s foot to examine how firmly attached the thing was. “Hey, someone go grab me some matches. This thing’s pretty engorged on there. Gonna have to burn this sucker off.”

“Wh-wha-at?” Ryan whimpered, trying to escape Ymir’s grab on his foot.

“Relax, we’re not gonna burn you, just the leech. Trust me; I’ve done this before.”

Eren jogged back with a box of matches, as well as a cylinder of Morton’s salt.

“Didn’t know if we’d need the salt too,” Eren said, only a little out of breath.

“Thanks. Let’s try just the matches first,” Ymir said. She pulled her long black hair over her shoulder so they wouldn’t catch in the flame.

“Now, if you hold still,” Ymir explained to Ryan, “you won’t feel a thing. If you twitch and kick, I make no promises.”

He bit his lip but nodded, just wanting to get the thing off his foot.

The circle of children was silent as Ymir struck the match and held it to Ryan’s foot. He whimpered, but held still.

“Tch.” Ymir had to drop the match as it burned down, but she quickly lit a second.

The leech started to wiggle around, trying to escape the heat… and then sort of plopped off, onto the sand.

Ryan looked so relieved he practically collapsed onto the beach.

His foot was bleeding a bit, but Armin had brought over a first aid kit, and he cleaned the tiny puncture and bandaged him up.

“You’ll be fine. Leeches don’t carry diseases or anything, but it might be a little tender for a day or two,” Armin explained.
Ryan’s lower lip quivered, and it was clear that he was trying his best not to cry.

“You did a great job,” Armin said seriously. “And now we’ve all seen how to take care of it. Everyone else, please check yourselves for leeches, especially if you spent a lot of time in the shallows or didn’t move around as much. Leeches like still water.”

The rest of the campers all began examining themselves, friends checking backs and necks in fear of the tiny little parasite.

Fortunately, no one else found a leech, and Hannah and Franz came out of the cabin to announce that the kids’ clothes were clean.

Everyone rinsed off in the outdoor showers, which were kind of like poles with spigots around them that only seemed to have two settings: gentle peeing or power-washing.

While the campers changed, we set to arranging firewood and Mikasa and Eren checked out the pantry, which was a small pantry with non-perishables and a small refrigerator.

Armin and I got the fire going, and Jean, Sasha and Connie helped with food preparations.

When everything was cooked and ready to go, Connie took a step back and admired the spread.

“Tonight, Survey Corps scouts, we feast!”

X

After a truly inspiring meal that featured fruits, vegetables, and protein that didn’t come from beans, we gathered around the campfire for some classic sing-along songs.

“Who’s new to camp?” Ymir asked.

A handful of kids raised their hand.

“Okay, so most of you should know these, then. If you don’t, just listen and you’ll pick it up. A couple are even call and response so you’ll hear your part and just repeat it, easy peasy. Who wants to start us off?”

“I always liked the Baby Shark one,” Annie offered.

“Excellent! Okay, do we know the Baby Shark song? Good. We ready?” Ymir asked, joining her hands at the base of each palm to make a little mouth. “Baaaa….byyy….shark!”

We went through every incarnation I could think of, and then a couple more that the kids added before it turned into a kind of giggled mess.

“Which one next?” a girl from Hannah and Franz’s group asked enthusiastically.

“The Cannibal King!” Annie called out.

A cheer went up, and I found myself looking for Jean’s reaction: did Jean even like camp songs?

He was cheering just as loudly as the kids for the Cannibal King.

Jean, apparently, had his own little dance that went to the Cannibal King that looked like a monkey of some kind, waddling around the campfire. As he sang the chorus, complete with squeaky kissy sounds, he was right in front of me. He leaned in close to my face, but didn’t decrease his volume.
at all, so he basically shouted at me:

*Baroomp *kiss kiss*

*Baroomp *kiss kiss*

_Honey won’t you marry me_

*Baroomp *kiss kiss*

*Baroomp *kiss kiss*

_Under the bamboo tree_


_if you’ll be M-I-N-E mine_

_I’ll be T-H-I-N-E thine_

_and I’ll L-O-V-E love you_

_all the T-I-M-E time_

_you are the B-E-S-T best_

_above the R-E-S-T rest_

_and I’ll L-O-V-E love you_

_all the T-I-M-E time!_

_whoo!_

I felt almost drunk, in a way. I was just happy that we were here together, that we could have this summer to basically hike in the forest and goof off with kids.

Maybe it was the firelight that made it feel so surreal. My smile faded slightly as I remembered my plans to talk to Jean tonight. I pushed the thought away before my brain could once again try to convince me that maybe it wasn’t worth it.

As the kids were engrossed in repeating the chorus as fast as humanly possible, I made a face at Jean, sort of glancing from him to the spot next to me with my eyebrows up and a small pout on my lips that he somehow correctly interpreted as me asking him to stay by me.

I selfishly wanted as much time with him as I could, and though I knew he was having fun with the kids, I wanted him to have fun with _me_.

The kids finished the song, and Annie was about to bust a gut laughing. “You guys are all morons!” she laughed. “Summer camp is incredible. Alright, do the Bumblebee one next!”

I scooted back from the kids a little, and Jean sat down next to me. He matched my position, legs outstretched and arms propped up behind him, but close enough that our shoulders touched and his right hand crossed over mine.
For a moment, he leaned his head against my shoulder, just touching for a moment before he picked it up again.

I was glad it was dark. Otherwise, I was certain that Sasha, Connie, Ymir, and several of the children would have drawn obnoxious amounts of attention to us.

As it was, we were tucked away in shadows.

It was my chance. *Now or never*, I told myself. There was no way I’d pluck up the courage again.

“Hey, Jean?” I whispered. When he didn’t respond, I wondered if he even heard me.

“Jean?” I tried again.

“Hmm?”

“I…” I froze. Blood rushed to my neck, cheeks, and ears and I thought I might just join the campfire and burst into flames.

While I floundered, Jean laid his head back on my shoulder.

I couldn’t do it. This was so perfect; why did my dumb feelings have to get in the way? I backed out.

“I’m really glad you’re my best friend,” I said instead.

It wasn’t any less true than what I *should* have told him, and it was exactly why I couldn’t tell him how I felt.

I trusted Jean implicitly; I just didn’t trust myself.

“Me too,” Jean said softly, above the sound of thirty kids and ten adults making barfing sounds as the Bumblebee Song approached its gritty end. “Me too.”

X

Sleeping in a real bed for the first time in almost a week was a nice change of pace. I wasn’t really tired, so I just lay there staring at the slats above my head and entertained myself with whatever came to mind.

I was wondering how my baby sister was doing back in Wilderness Police when Jean’s head poked down over the rail, making me gasp in surprise.

“Psst!” he hissed. “You still awake, Marco?”


“Let’s go for a walk.”

“What, right now? It’s like, midnight!”

“Exactly. Come on; it’ll be fun.”

I rolled my eyes but followed Jean out of the staff dorm. We picked up our shoes by the door, but didn’t really bother to lace them as we walked outside sleepily.
The moon was about three-quarters full, so it was fairly bright in the clearing by the lake. I wondered if Jean actually wanted to go for a walk, or just wander around the outpost for a bit.

He put his hands in his pockets, and looking up at the sky. “I miss the stars,” he said idly.

“Hmm?” I asked.

He sat on the top of the picnic table, still craning his neck up to the sky silently, before answering.

“I said, I miss the stars. You can’t see shit in the city. Well, a couple of the brighter ones maybe, but the light pollution ruins any view you’ve got.”

“I remember you telling me that,” I replied fondly.

“Marco? There’s something I wanted to tell you.”

“Oh?” I asked, hoping I hid the fear in my eyes well enough.

He laughed, so I guessed I didn’t. “It’s nothing bad, I swear.”

“Okay,” I said, still tense. “Go ahead.”

“I, um, I wanted to tell you that I… I feel really safe with you? I mean… Shit, this is embarrassing. That’s not what I wanted to say first. Okay.” He took a deep breath before continuing. “You make me really happy and I really like being friends with you. I’ve never really had a best friend before, but I just feel so comfortable and safe around you, like I can say anything and you’ll still be there. You’re not using me or telling me what to do. Fuck, Marco, you said you’re *proud* of me. My *parents* don’t even say that, not out loud. You’re just so raw and open and it’s kind of amazing and I really want you to know that.”

My heart soared. I breathed out a little laugh as a wonder-filled smile spread across my face.

“Jean,” I sighed. “That’s… thank you, that’s … That’s one of the nicest things anyone’s ever said to me. Possibly the nicest thing. I feel exactly the same way. I really meant it earlier, when I said I was really glad you were my best friend.”

“I know you did,” Jean said. “I feel like such a fucking sap for saying this shit. I blame you.”

“Nothing wrong with telling others how you feel!” I said. *You’re one to talk, Marco,* I chided myself. “Honestly, I’m so happy you feel that way. And I could’ve guessed that you felt those things, but it’s really great to just… hear it.” My smile faded.

*He just needs to hear it,* I thought. *I’m just guessing how he feels, and I’m making him guess how I feel. I need to tell him. You said it yourself: there’s nothing wrong with telling others how you feel.*

I took a deep breath.

“Jean, I—” *Do it, Marco. Say it!* The weight that had been in my chest all this time shifted to my stomach, and it felt like it was about to drop through my feet.

He looked at me expectantly with a faint smile, his face open.

I stared at my feet.

“I kinda think… I sort of… um… have feelings for you?” I felt like my heart had been punched.
After a couple of seconds, I remembered to breathe again.

Jean’s reaction was delayed, and I could hear him shifting his weight on the table top.

“Hah?” he wheezed.

“I like you. A lot,” I admitted quietly. I refused to look at his face.

We were both quiet for a while, neither of us sure what to do next.

I could feel Jean staring at me, but I looked anywhere but up. I couldn’t quite tell if I had done the right thing.

After another minute of silence, I risked a glance up at him.

His face was tight with concern, eyebrows knitted together and his mouth a pursed frown.

Suddenly he took in a deep breath, then let it out slowly, like he was trying to calm himself down.

“Do you want me to kiss you, Marco?”

My eyes widened and I exhaled involuntarily, the anticipatory fear shifting to a sort of is-this-really-happening terror.

Yes, yes, yes! My brain cried. For a long time, Jean.

I couldn’t get my mouth to say any of those things, though, instead I just nodded so slightly I wasn’t sure Jean had even seen it.

Hesitantly, like we might shatter if he moved too quickly, Jean leaned toward me. His eyes flicked between my own and my mouth.

My lips parted instinctively, and I tried to control my breathing.

Jean licked his lips.

His words echoed in my head: “Do you want me to kiss you?”

In the split second before our lips touched, something clicked.

“Jean, wait.” I held my hand up to stop him for a moment.

He jerked back, startled and confused. I couldn’t make eye contact, so I stared at the ground, focusing on a dandelion that had gone to seed, waiting for the wind to carry away the white tufts.

“Do you want to kiss me?” My voice cracked so that my last two words were only a whisper.

“I thought that’s what you wanted,” he mumbled, sounding defensive.

“But… Jean, I really like you. It’s just … I mean, the way you said it. It made it sound like maybe you didn’t actually want to?”

“You’re my best friend, Marco.”

“And you’re mine, Jean.”

“When you told me you were gay, I thought… I thought this was what you wanted. We’re best
friends, and you’re gay. Is that not…” He trailed off.

*Oh god.*

Jean had all the right factors, but his math was wrong: one friend plus one gay person did not equal a romantic relationship, no matter how strong the friendship was. I didn’t have feelings for him just because I was gay and we were best friends. I was gay, and I had feelings for him, and we were best friends. They were separate emotions, in a way.

“Jean,” I said gently, feeling tears brimming in my eyes. “That’s not… that’s not what I meant.”

“I don’t understand,” Jean said, sounding like a lost child.

“It’s … It doesn’t matter if I’m gay or even if I like you. You have to want it, too.” I didn’t want him to force himself into a relationship with me. He deserved better than that.

“But you want it? You want me?” he asked.

I closed my eyes and felt the tears roll down my cheeks. “Yes,” I breathed. “But I don’t think you do. Not like that, anyway.”

“I could.” He said it like a little kid: petulant, but there was fear in his voice, too.

“Jean…”

“No, I could. Let me try. I’ve never been into a guy before, but … Marco, you’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me. If you want me to kiss you, then why the hell not?”

“For exactly that reason,” I said firmly. “*You* don’t want to kiss me. That’s why the hell not.”

I wanted him to kiss me. No: I wanted him to want to kiss me. But he didn’t. And somewhere, I knew that he wouldn’t, not when he thought it was just a friendship where you kissed your best friend sometimes.

But now, at least, he knew how I felt.

We stood there silently for a long minute.

I could feel his gaze boring into me, but I was afraid to meet his gaze: what if he was upset? What if he was crying? I couldn’t bear the thought.

Carefully, I looked at Jean’s face, and I was met with a wave of emotions.

His eyebrows were furrowed in anger, but he was biting his lip anxiously. His eyes looked wet, like he might begin to cry at any moment.

He breathed heavily like he was filled with rage, but his shoulders shook like he was full of sorrow.

Instinctively, I reached a hand toward him. I wasn’t sure what my plan was: was I going for a shoulder to steady him? Was I reaching for his face to comfort him?

I hesitated, my hand pausing in empty space as I waited for Jean to pull away.

When he didn’t, I moved forward again, though I ended up laying my hand gently on the side of his neck where it met his shoulder as if it couldn’t decide which it was going for to the end.
He didn’t break eye contact, didn’t even blink.

I didn’t have the words anymore, so I hoped that this touch was enough without being too much.

He swallowed, and I felt it under my hand.

“I thought dating was just supposed to be friends that you kissed,” Jean admitted in a low voice, shaking with the effort of holding back the hot tears in his voice. “If we’re best friends, and you want me to kiss you, then why not?”

“Even if that’s what dating is, it can’t be one sided like that,” I told him sadly.

Jean pursed his lips and huffed. Some of the anger cleared out of his eyes, though he still looked upset.

“How do you know it’s one sided?”

“What?”

“How do you know I don’t want to kiss you?”

“Well, um, do you?” I blushed.

Jean finally broke eye contact, and I pulled my hand back, slipping it into my pocket.

“I don’t know!” he snapped. “I mean, how would I even know? I’ve never kissed anyone.”

“I’m no expert, and I’ve only kissed a girl, but I know what I want. I’ve thought about it, and I figured it out.”

“Well, fine then. I want to kiss you. There, I thought about it.”

It hurt, hearing how hard he was trying to convince me.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Why are you trying so hard?” I cried out. “This is exactly why I didn’t want to tell you. There are very few things more heart-breaking than falling for a straight guy, Jean, and I didn’t want to bring it up so I didn’t mess up our friendship. I was planning on telling you, because I thought you could handle it, but now I guess maybe you can’t.”

_I didn’t mean to say it like that._ I cringed.

“Wow,” Jean said. “Just… wow. I can’t handle it? Okay. Okay, Marco. Whatever you say. I was trying to be a good friend, and I offered to kiss you to make you happy, but apparently you think I can’t handle it. Okay. Cool. Great. Fine. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Jean lurched off the table and stomped back to the cabin.

I watched him leave as I sunk heavily to the bench.

Way to go, Marco. You handled that really well.

I let the tears fall now, burying my head in my forearms, sobbing at the picnic table.
My breathing was ragged and painful, but I didn’t even try to stop it: I just let it all out.

When I was all cried out, maybe half an hour later, I just felt exhausted and empty.

Somehow, I managed to drag myself back to my bunk, and crawled listlessly under the old sheet, shivering despite the muggy summer air.

Guess I’d need to ask Connie to switch tents with me, after all.
The Morning After

Chapter Summary

Marco and Jean work through the aftermath of their wonky conversation, the kids duke it out on the obstacle course, and sleeping arrangements come into question.

Chapter Notes

As always, merci to my wonderful cloudmonstachopper for beta'ing. Were it not for you, this story would be lost to the chaos of my poor punctuation. <3

Thank you all for reading, commenting, kudos'ing, whatever. It makes me so happy that I have a little following for this story!

You can find me on tumblr as ricekrispyjoints.

I hissed as I opened my eyes to the sunlight streaming through the window.

My eyelids felt scratchy and swollen, and my whole body seemed to ache. I did not want today to happen.

I listened to see if Jean was still asleep above me. I heard him snoring faintly, so I got up slowly and quietly. I grabbed some pants and dressed hastily, leaving the staff dorm as quickly as possible.

One outside, I felt like I remembered how to breathe again. I wandered toward the lake, and since I was still barefoot, I waded in to my ankles.

I watched a small school of minnows scatter in reaction to my disturbance of the water.

Last night … Last night did not go according to plan.

I wasn’t even sure there had been a plan, at least not a coherent one. The plan, such that it was, was that I would tell Jean my feelings and somehow he’d shrug and say “okay, cool” and we would continue being best friends.

I wasn’t sure in what universe I thought that plan would ever have worked out. Certainly not in this one.

I felt along the sandy bottom with my toes, searching for some skipping rocks. I found a couple that were smooth, though a little light-weight, and cocked my arm to the side to throw one.

It skittered along the surface twice, before plonking into the lake. The second one was a little better, skipping four or five times before disappearing under the gentle ripples of the current.

I felt so stupid. I blamed myself.
Had I led Jean on? Had I done something wrong?

No, I told myself. Jean’s idea of being gay wasn’t quite right, and that was what led to this whole perplexing situation.

Another voice told me that if I wasn’t gay, none of this would’ve happened.

I closed my eyes tight, scrunching up my forehead, trying to will away that voice.

“There’s nothing wrong with being gay,” I chanted. “There’s nothing wrong with being gay.”

I thought I was over this, this guilt over my sexuality.

Bert once told me that God chose only the strongest people to be gay, since they would have to go through so much other stuff.

I wasn’t sure how much I believed in God, but I definitely didn’t feel strong.

“It’s not my fault,” I whispered. “There’s nothing wrong with being gay.”

A couple of ducks landed in the lake, disturbing the morning’s relative calm and silence with a noisy flapping of wings and quacking.

I took a breath to calm myself and took a few steps into the lake, shaking my feet to kick up the sand a bit. I really didn’t want a leech on top of all the other crap I was trying to deal with.

At this point, I couldn’t change what had happened, I reasoned, so I needed to decide how I would handle it moving forward.

Do I give Jean space? Do I need to give myself space? I don’t want to lose our friendship, and I don’t think Jean did, either.

But how would he act today?

I thought about my options. First, I could give him space, switch tents with Connie, the whole bit. The benefit was that we would both have some time to regroup mentally and re-evaluate our feelings. The downside was that Jean might construe it as ignoring him, and that might damage our relationship. It might make him think that I didn’t want to be his friend anymore.

I couldn’t stand that.

Option number two was to tread cautiously, let him know that I was still around but be less personal and only talk about more surface-level stuff until we could both move forward. The benefit there was that Jean would know I was still his friend, but the downside was that it would be incredibly awkward and might seem disingenuous.

Option three, then, was to continue treating Jean the exact same way as before: same openness, same mannerisms, same closeness. I could show him that we could be friends in exactly the same way, but not have to be “gay.” The advantage of this would be that Jean would see that even though we had a rough conversation—I couldn’t bring myself to call it a fight—we were still friends. I didn’t need to blow things out of proportion. I just needed to help him understand where he had been shall we say, misinformed, and we could both move on. Especially me, since I now knew that Jean was definitely not gay.

The problem with option three was that if Jean didn’t let me back in, it turned into option two or
one and it would be beyond my control to stop it. Would Jean be able to shrug it off?

I needed to talk to him. I could at least try to gauge how he was feeling, to see if he was okay. Maybe I could ask if he still wanted to share the tent with me.

That felt like an excuse, some false pretense. I really did just want to see if he was alright. Honest, open, and to the point. Option three.

I watched the ducks dive for weeds for a few more minutes and then decided it was time to go wake Jean. It would be better if we could have this discussion quickly, quietly, and without thirty children and ten nosy counselors observing us like germs on a microscope slide.

I crept back into the staff dorm, though a few people were waking up.

I balanced on the rail of the bottom bunk and grabbed onto the rail on the top so I could see into Jean’s bed.

He looked angry in his sleep, his mouth set in a firm line and his eyebrows knitted together. His eyes looked puffy, though, and I felt a pang of guilt. *My fault*, I thought. *It’s my fault that he cried*.

Shaking myself out of it, I tapped on Jean’s shoulder.

He groaned and scrunched his face up further, but didn’t open his eyes.


I smiled, hoping that speaking French would win me a least a little bit of favor.

“Fuck off, asshole.”

Or maybe not.

“Jean, I just want to talk a little bit. Will you come outside with me?”

“No.”

“Please?”

“Why?”

“I want… I want to know how you’re doing. I know we kinda got into it, but I don’t want that to come between our friendship. Come outside with me.”

Jean made several unidentifiable groaning noises before throwing the blanket off his body.

“You’ve got to be *fucking* kidding me,” he said, only slightly more articulately.

I took that as agreement of a sort and hopped off the bed rail.

Jean followed me down the hall and outside, but we didn’t go to the picnic tables. I led him around back, so we would be behind the laundry room and relatively free from eavesdroppers, if any were awake.

“Alright, you dragged me out here. What?” he asked curtly.

“How are you feeling?” I asked honestly.
“Fan-fucking-tastic,” he replied.

“Jean, please.”

“I thought you already knew my feelings, right? Because last night you sure seemed to know what I wanted better than I did.”

I was a little confused, but tried to keep my composure. “That’s not how I meant it to come out. I’m sorry it sounded that way. Will you please tell me how you’re feeling?”

“I’m fine.”

“I’m not sure I believe that.”

“See? There you go again! Pretending you know how I’m feeling.” He folded his arms across his chest angrily.

“Okay now you know that’s not what I meant.”

“Do I? How do I know that?” Jean glared at me.

“The same way I know you’re not fine!” I said. “You’re frowning and your arms are crossed and you won’t even look at me. That doesn’t look like ‘fine’ to me. That looks angry, or maybe hurt, or maybe indifferent. I don’t know what you’re feeling besides that you aren’t ‘fine.’”

“Fuck you.”

“Jean!” I scolded. “I’m trying to make this better. I’m trying to be your friend! Would you please just meet me halfway?”

“I tried to last night!” Jean yelled. A couple of birds flew out of a nearby tree, and Jean lowered his voice. “I tried to, and you shut me down. You basically told me that I didn’t know my own feelings and that I couldn’t handle dealing with yours,” he spat. “Why are you trying to control how I feel about you? Do you not trust me to figure out my own feelings?”

I felt like I had been stabbed in the chest.

My gut reaction was defensive: I wasn’t trying to control him! Of course I trusted him! Did he think so little of me to say that?

But when his words sank in, I drew in a sharp breath and just stared.

I stared at the way his golden brown eyes pierced through my entire body, flicking back and forth angrily like he had too much emotion for his irises to stay still. I stared at the downward curve of his mouth that mirrored the steep, accusatory angle of his eyebrows. I stared at his nose, normally delicate and soft but now his nostrils flared harshly.

I stared at the way his shoulders hunched defensively, and the way his muscles seemed coiled and ready to attack at any moment. I stared at his clenched fists, grasping at the fabric of his shorts, knuckles turning white.

All this time, I had been too caught up in my own emotions. I was projecting my beliefs of Jean’s feelings on him the whole time. I had assumed I knew what he was feeling, what he was thinking.

And last night, when I told him—with my poorly chosen words—that his understanding of gay relationships was skewed… I totally shut him down.
I felt dizzy. Talking this morning was supposed to make things better, but I realized now that they were even worse than I thought.

“I… I didn’t realize it,” I said when I could finally speak. “But you’re right. I… I was trying to control your emotions even though that’s so horrible and why did I do that?”

“Good fucking question.” Jean’s face was almost blank.

“I think I was just…” I floundered for more words, hands grasping uselessly at the air like the right words might be floating by and I just needed to reach out and grab them.

“I was so convinced that you’d never feel that way about me that I didn’t consider any other possibilities. You told me your feelings, and I… I ignored them,” I finished with a low whisper.

“Damn right you did,” he cut in, though sounding less angry and more … sad.

“I was hurt, I understand that I hurt you, too, no matter how unintentional. That shouldn’t matter though, I guess, if I meant it or not? Because in the end you still got hurt. And I’m so, so sorry for that. I shouldn’t have said it the way I did, and I even realized it last night that it sounded bad… but I thought that we could just, I don’t know, clear the air this morning and be okay. I really want us to be okay.”

“Yeah, well, wishing doesn’t make it so.”

“Jean, I’m sorry.”

“You know what? It’s fine. Forget about it.” A wave of calmness settled over him.

Suddenly, I was terrified. “Jean?” I asked quietly.

“Everyone says I have anger issues. It’s fine. I’m out of line. Whatever. Forget it.”

“Jean, I think your anger is justified here.”

He raised his eyebrows in disbelief.

“I’m not blaming you for this,” I continued slowly. “I didn’t… I didn’t handle it well. I recognize that. I want to make it right.”

“You wanna make it right?” Jean asked. I nodded. “Let me kiss you.”

“Jean…”

“I’m telling you I want to kiss you. Are you listening now? Do you trust me now?”

I hesitated, still certain that this was a bad idea. Was this really what Jean needed to make things right? I wanted to show him I trusted him, and the offer was so tempting.

If a kiss was all Jean really wanted… “Okay.”

Jean’s body language shifted from that of a cornered animal to shy and almost withdrawn. But after a moment, he reaches to me, taking my shoulders in his hands.

Slowly, so slowly I wasn’t even sure we were moving, Jean guided me back a few inches to the outer wall of the laundry room, the log-style siding rough against the fabric of my t-shirt.
As he stepped closer to me, the soft morning sun caught in his golden brown eyes and I let out a tiny gasp.

God, he was beautiful.

Then again, that was never the problem.

I closed my eyes as he got closer to my face. I could feel his presence closing in on me like the anticipation before you touch something you know will give you a static shock.

His hands slid up over my shoulders to my neck.

The suspense was killing me.

*Was he actually going to kiss me?*

I opened my eyes.

Jean closed the gap.

My first kiss, the one with Mina, had been confusing. We were young, and it was mostly her idea, so I just sort of went along with it. Neither of us knew what we were doing, so we just sort of rested our lips together and then parted.

I had dreamed so many times about what it might be like to kiss Jean.

Now that I was actually kissing him, it was almost nothing like I imagined.

I closed my eyes again as soon as our lips brushed, and concentrated on the feeling of his lips against mine. They were the tiniest bit slick—he must’ve licked them right before he leaned in all the way, and I missed it—and not as pillowy soft as I had imagined.

Despite his timid approach, Jean did not kiss me shyly. He was firm, pressed up against me and though I had planned to let him lead, he certainly followed through.

I let my eyelids flutter closed again and slouched a little so I could tip my head back and give him a better angle. When I did, he began to move his lips against my own. Tiny, gentle movements at first that didn’t quite make sense, but after a moment or two we seemed to figure it out.

He sucked my lower lip into his mouth for an instant before letting it go again.

Jean’s lips brushed over mine one more time, and then he pulled away, breathing a little heavier than normal.

I was afraid of what I might see when I opened my eyes, but I couldn’t stand not knowing, either.

My eyelids fluttered open and I tried to keep my expression neutral, though I knew that my eyes were wide and my mouth was still hanging open.

Jean’s face was almost unreadable.

He looked smug but somehow upset, like he wasn’t sure if he should be proud or terrified of what had just happened.

But then Jean blinked, and the look was gone, replaced by his regular expression with a hint of a smile, even.
“There. We’re friends again. Guess we better go wake up the campers,” he said, and he turned abruptly, walking quickly but casually back to the cabin.

I stayed put, leaned against the wall, opening and closing my mouth like a fish out of water.

What the hell just happened?

I swallowed hard once and pushed off the wall behind me, leaving a hand on it for support.

My thoughts felt like they were running in twenty different directions. I tried to review what happened, but I kept getting distracted.

Jean agreed to talk to me. He was angry that I didn’t believe him, didn’t trust his feelings.

Jean kissed me.

Stop: rewind.

I apologized, and asked what I could do.

Jean kissed me. I kissed Jean.

Come on, focus!

Jean told me that I had tried to control his feelings. I realized that that was exactly what I did.

He said he had anger issues—not, that others thought he had anger issues.

We actually kissed.

“Augh!” I growled, frustrated. My brain was being utterly useless. I couldn’t stop thinking about that dumb kiss.

But then I remembered his face.

“We’re friends again,” he had said. I had to hold onto that.

Feeling more stable but reluctant to go help Mina with the campers, I walked back inside.

X

The rest of the morning was dedicated to competing in an obstacle course a couple hundred yards from the outpost.

Two teams at a time could race, though we had the problem of Jean and Ymir’s team having one kid more than the rest of us. After some debate, we decided to have each five-person team make one kid go twice. Having a counselor run the course wouldn’t be fair to the sixth kid on “Heroes and Zeros.”

The first stage of the obstacle course was monkey bars. Next, you jumped three “hurdles”—small wood piles of various sizes—and then walked across a log like a balance beam. If you fell, you had to go back to the beginning of the log. (A counselor watched to make sure you followed the rules.)

Finally, you had to slalom through a line of 5 saplings, grab one of your team’s “tokens” (a line of pinecones that had long ago been painted) and run back to your teammates so the next kid could go.
The kids were so excited that Ymir kept pausing in the middle of her instructions to tell them to shut up.

“One more of you talks over me, and I’m locking you in the washing machine!” she cried, exasperated.

The kids giggled, but settled down when they saw how serious Ymir’s face was.

“Much better. Okay, so you’ll leave when your teammate tags you, and the first team to make it back gets to go to round two. As you can see, there’s only two lanes on the course. That means we’ll have to pick which order you guys run the course. Do you wanna choose the order the fun way or the boring way?”

“What’s the fun way?” Eli asked.

“Not telling. You have to pick first. Hands up for the fun way?”

Every kid raised their hand except for Eli, who looked like he didn’t trust Ymir farther than he could throw her, and I was guessing he couldn’t throw her anywhere.

“Fun way! Hurrah. Counselors, if you would step forward please?”

Mina and I exchanged wary looks, but moved to the front of our group, as did the other nine adults.

“So: to show you how the course works and decide the order, your squad leaders are going to run the course first! The order you go in will be based on their times through the course. The fastest two will face off first, middle two, slowest two. Make sense?”

Oh no. We were going to have to run the course first? I wondered if I should really go full out speed here: this course was meant for kids, and I just knew that if I went too hard, I’d land on my butt like a moron.

But the kids were already cheering for us.

I had to at least give it a convincing try.

“Alright, Tony, you run this stopwatch, and Olivia you’ll run this one. Red watch for the red side, blue watch for the blue side. Make sense?”

The kids nodded.

“Counselors? Who wants to go first?”

Sasha and Connie leaped forward with a cry of “Meme Team!” They high fived all of their campers and then high fived each other in a complex series of hand motions that culminated in a hip bump.

Eren dragged his sister by the arm to the front. “You’re going down, you clowns!” Eren declared, his deeply seated competitive streak blazing in his bright green eyes. Mikasa, for her part, looked slightly bored, but I knew she’d give it her all when she had to.

“Perfect! Our first two teams! Alright, Tony and Olivia, you ready?”

“Yup!” they replied.

“Meme Team and Bomb Squad: Are you ready?”
“Yeah!” they cheered. Some of the other teams cheered, too, just pumped up from the competition of it all.

“Ready… set… go!” Ymir cried, and Sasha and Mikasa took off along the monkey bars.

Mikasa skipped most of the bars, swinging elegantly across three or four, and reached the end in an instant. By the time Sasha finished, Mikasa was over the last hurdle and onto the balance beam, which she basically sprinted across. She danced through the sapling slalom, snagged the pinecone, and ran back along the path adjacent to the obstacles to tag Eren’s hand.

Sasha shrieked in frustration, seeing how far behind she had fallen, but put her head down and sprinted back to Connie.

Eren had a head start and a nearly berserk desire to win, and he flew across the monkey bars as Connie got tagged. Connie went hard, but with the lead Mikasa had earned over Sasha and Eren’s intensity, it wasn’t enough to stage a comeback.

Eren and Mikasa won by six seconds.

“One minute and twelve seconds is the time to beat!” Ymir announced, looking over Olivia’s shoulder.

“Next two teams?”

“Wanna get it over with?” Mina asked, stepping forward.

“Hah, sure,” I said.

Jean tapped Ymir on the arm. “We’re going this round.”

“Oh?” Ymir asked with a quirked eyebrow, looking from Jean to me and back. “Alright, well you’re going first; I want anchor.”

“It’s not an anchor if there’s only two of us,” Jean quipped.

“Shut up, I’m running anchor. It’s my thing. Stop watches ready?”

Jean and I stepped up to the monkey bars. I snuck a glance at him, and found that he was staring at me with such a mischievous glint in his eye that I found myself looking around, like I was walking into a trap or something.

At least he was being friendly, if voraciously competitive.

“Uh, I can’t get mine to clear out,” Tony said. Olivia looked at his watch and clicked the reset button on top. “Okay, now we’re good.”

“One of you call it out,” Ymir said.

Olivia raised her hand excitedly. “I’ll do it! Okay. On your marks, get set… Go!”

Jean leaped toward the monkey bars, bending our knees so our feet didn’t drag on the ground. His intensity could have rivaled Eren’s, and I found myself trying to keep up with him. I gained some ground on the hurdles, using my long legs as best I could, but we were neck and neck as we approached the log.

We both had to slow down considerably, though the log was fairly wide and I could kind of trot through it...
along it. I knew in an all-out sprint, I could beat him, but when we reached the sapling slalom, his agility gave him a head start.

He grabbed his pinecone an instant before me, and as we raced back to slap our teammate’s hand, I just put my hand down and ran.

The cheers of the kids had faded into background noise. All I could hear was my breathing and the thud of my feet on the soft ground.

As I tagged Mina, I finally allowed myself to look to my left, to check on Jean. Ymir had a very slight head start on Mina.

Mina didn’t seem to be nearly as serious or competitive as the rest of us, and she gave up a lot of time to Ymir. Ymir wasn’t quite as fast as Mikasa, though, and when Tony announced the times, the counselors of Heroes and Zeros came in four seconds behind Bomb Squad’s leaders.

Still breathing heavily, Ymir called for the final four squad leaders to come forward.

Armin clapped a hand on my shoulder and said “good job” as he took his place by the monkey bars. Hannah went first for their squad, probably figuring that Franz was better competition for Annie.

As it turned out, Franz wasn’t even close to competition for Annie. Armin had gained a small lead over Hannah, and then Annie practically flew down the course, leaving Franz in the dirt.

Despite Annie’s incredible speed, their overall time was one minute, ten seconds: two seconds behind Eren and Mikasa.

Ymir had successfully regained her normal breathing at this point, so she announced the order based on the leaders’ times: Bomb Squad versus A Team would go first, followed by Heroes and Zeros versus the Meme Team, and finally the Trail Blazers against Team Awesome.

Each squad had a little huddle to discuss “strategy,” though there wasn’t much strategizing to do.

Our team decided that Georgie would start so she could go twice, being the most athletic of the bunch, and could hopefully make up any lost time from slower performances. Eli wanted to go second, to get it out of the way, and Minh volunteered to go next. Jai wanted to be fourth, so that he could tag Teresa. She gave him a withering glare, but accepted running fifth.

Mina suggested that stretching and a brief warm up would be a good idea, so we also lead the kids in some basic calisthenics: toe touches, quad pulls, arm stretches, and a few jumping jacks for good measure.

When the first two groups were ready, we lined up along the sides of the course to get a better view and cheer on the other kids.

Bomb Squad and A Team lined up in their decided order: it looked like Rachida, the tall girl who had been nominated as her team’s leader, would be running twice. A scrawny, dark-skinned boy whose name I didn’t know was leading off for Armin and Annie’s squad.

Eren tried to lead his team in a cheer, but they didn’t seem to know when to “explode”: on three, or after three. It was a mess, but they still sounded enthusiastic.

Armed with a stop watch each, Ymir and Sasha stood between the two lanes to announce the start of the race.
“Ready…” Ymir said.

“Set!” Sasha cried.

“Go!” The two said together.

Both teams immediately started screaming for their teammate.

“Come on, Rachida!”

“Go, Aimar! Faster!”

I found myself smiling and clapping, even though I didn’t really care who won.

Rachida tried to run too fast on the log, and ended up falling off. Aimar laughed at her, and then lost his own footing.

“That’s what you get!” Eren screamed. Man, he was heated about this competition.

When Rachida and Aimar made it to their teammates to send the next runner, the Bomb Squad was just slightly ahead.

The race continued in a rush of screaming middle-schoolers that almost certainly frightened every animal in a ten mile radius away from us.

Finally, the anchors ran a second time. The A Team had a small lead on Bomb Squad, but the fierce look of determination on Rachida’s face said it wasn’t over yet.

She leapt over the woodpiles with grace, and though she had fallen the first time on the log, she didn’t even hesitate as she hopped up and stretched her arms out to her sides for balance.

Aimar wasn’t as daring, and took the log much slower.

Rachida grabbed the pinecone and sprinted back, leaving Aimar in the dust.

Bomb Squad won with a team time of four minutes and fifty-eight seconds.

Sasha and Connie’s team was up next against Jean and Ymir’s group. Despite the strangeness of my current friendship status with Jean, I felt obligated to cheer them on. (Ymir might have throttled me if I dared to not root for my freckled kin.)

Connie looked at me with mock betrayal, but then waved me off so I would know he was just joking. Sasha just winked and flicked her tongue out suggestively, which made me blush hotly.

Jean was trying to pump up his kids, giving little shoulder rubs like a coach might right before the big game.

Meme Team put Patrick up to run twice. Jean and Ymir’s team didn’t have to worry about that, so they just lined up in their strongest order, with Ryan, the boy who tried to make someone eat bugs, running first and Sandra, the girl who I remembered as whiny and talkative, running anchor.

As it turned out, Patrick was apparently more talk than walk, and he was perhaps the slowest runner on their team. After his lackluster first round, a girl named Brittany ran second for the team, then slapped Patrick hard and declared that she’d run the sixth leg herself.

Sandra, on the other hand, was a bullet, despite all her whining. Her facial expression was pained
and if she had any breath to spare I felt certain she would use it to complain, but she actually did quite well.

Heroes and Zeros won the race easily with a time eight seconds faster than Meme Team.

I cheered happily for Jean and Ymir’s team, before I realized that nearly all the other teams had been rooting for Connie and Sasha’s group, including my own.

“That group’s weird,” Jai explained to me. “Sasha and Connie are hilarious. Jean and that scary lady are just… eh.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, puzzled. “I think Ymir and Jean are great!”

“That’s because you’re in Ymir’s cult,” Jai replied seriously.

“And you and Jean are so cuddly all the time,” remarked Eli.

My jaw dropped and the two boys burst out laughing.

“Okay, let’s get lined up!” Mina chirped, trying to lead the boys away from me.

“Mind your own business,” Jean growled, “you little---“

I slapped a hand over his mouth on instinct, fearing what expletive-laced insult he was about to hurl at a couple of eleven year olds.

He swatted me away, but let a half smile show on his lips.

I went over to my team, and gave them all a quick high five and wished them luck. “Remember to have fun but give it your best shot!” I encouraged them.

Georgie and Minh kind of giggled at my (admittedly) goofy optimism, while Teresa didn’t even seem to acknowledge me having spoken. Jai shot me finger guns in reply. Eli just smiled.

The kids lined up on the blue side next to Hannah and Franz’s group on the red side.

Ymir and Sasha took up their position as time keepers again, standing between the two teams.

“Ready?” Ymir asked.

“Steady?” Sasha asked with a huge grin on her face.

“GO!” Ymir screamed.

Georgie proved a little slow on the monkey bars, but as soon as her feet hit the ground, she was swift and graceful, like a slightly gangly version of Annie or Mikasa.

Certainly, compared to her opponent on Team Awesome, Georgie was the superior athlete. I was both surprised and not: she had talked about the various sports she plays frequently, mostly soccer in the summer, but she also played basketball and volleyball in the winter, and used to be a competitive swimmer before her parents made her drop the fourth sport in the interest of sanity (and, I guessed, financial security).

Despite knowing she was a well-rounded athlete, watching an eleven year old with that level of coordination and ability was still impressive.
Georgie sprinted back to Eli, slapping his hand and he started off strong on the monkey bars. He did alright through the hurdles, but definitely slowed down on the balance log. His agility was sorely lacking, too. By the time he made it to the pinecone, he was running out of steam.

Eli’s sprint back to Minh was more of a wheezing jog, and we lost the lead that Georgie had so easily won for us.

Minh proved to be competent and steady on the course: not overwhelming like Georgie, but more like you would expect a reasonably fit twelve year old girl to run the course. I cheered especially loud for Minh, since she was kind of my unofficial scientific protégé.

Minh closed the gap as she tagged Jai at nearly the same time as the fourth member of Team Awesome was tagged.

If Jai and Teresa could hang on, I was sure Georgie would be able to win the last leg.

Jai’s speed was similar to Minh’s, though his style was different: where Minh had run the course with a loose fluidity, Jai was like a tightly wound coil: his movements were jerky and tense. Still, he ran quickly and despite a serious wobble on the log didn’t fall off.

He ran toward Teresa with decent speed. She didn’t even glance at him as he approached and tagged her hand, just flung herself at the monkey bars.

There were about ten rungs, but Teresa only swung twice, much like we counselors had done. She barely broke stride to jump over the small piles, and though she very nearly fell off the log twice, she maintained nearly perfect composure the whole time.

The spindly-legged boy on Hannah and Franz’s team decided did not maintain composure as he fell spectacularly off the log: arms windmilling, leg uselessly kicking out to save his balance. He went down like a ton of bricks, as my mother would say.

It happened so fast, I couldn’t be sure from the thirty or so feet away, but I thought I saw Teresa smirk as the boy fell on his bottom.

She yanked the pinecone off the plank and dashed back to tag Georgie.

After Samuel’s fall, Georgie didn’t really need to hurry to beat them, but she did anyway. If anything, she went through the course faster the second time, fatigue be damned.

The Trail Blazers finished with a time of five minutes and two seconds, just one second ahead of Heroes and Zeroes, but four seconds behind Bomb Squad.

Round two was a time trial: one team at a time would run the course and try to get the fastest time: the top two times would then face off for the “championship round.” The other three teams would earn points for the squad competition based on their times from the first round.

Since Bomb Squad went first the first round, they went first again since they had had the longest rest period.

Eren drew his team into a circle, which Mikasa rolled her eyes at, until her brother yanked her down to join the huddle.

They decided to keep the same order as the first time, and their time was nearly the same: four minutes and fifty-nine seconds.
Heroes and Zeros ran their time trial next, though they switched up the order. Sandra ran first and sixth again, but they shuffled the middle of the order a bit. The change seemed to help: they trimmed their time down to five minutes and one second, but they were still behind Bomb Squad.

Finally, our team got to have one more go. We also switched our order, mostly to give Eli a slightly longer breather. Georgie would still run twice, but Teresa would go second, then Minh, then Jai, Eli, and Georgie once more.

The kids ran well, but Eli just didn’t have it in him for a second go. Our time was worse than our first round, at five minute and eleven seconds.

When Eren realized that his team would face off against Jean’s, he let out an over-the-top roar that could only be described as a battle cry. “You and me, Kirstein! You’re goin’ down!”

“Wow, asshole, the kids are racing, not us.”

“Language!” Ymir and I snapped in unison.

“Doesn’t matter. Our rivalry is their rivalry,” Eren smirked.

“Dude, what?” Jean laughed. “The kids don’t give a—” he glanced at me—“sliced banana pepper about your dumb rivalry with me. I don’t even care about your dumb rivalry.”

I giggled at the improvised swear and Jean’s assertion that he didn’t care about the competition between him and Eren.

Jean absolutely cared. He cared wildly.

He just wanted to seem cool and aloof, so he put up a flimsy front about not caring.

“Sliced banana pepper? What is that supposed to mean?” Eren quipped.

“It means your team’s gonna lose.”

“Do you hear that, kids?” Eren asked his squad. “That is the sound that expired cabbage makes: because it stinks!”


“Ooh, call him a wet bandaid next!” Sasha called out.

“Say he’s a sweaty bus seat!” Connie suggested.

“What the soggy lampshade does that mean?” Sasha asked.

At this point, the whole camp was in stitches of laughter: Ymir was wheezing something about “French-fried pickle dust,” and Franz even jumped on the bandwagon with a cry of “boxed gravy flakes.”

The rest of us were laughing so hard that tears were welling up in our eyes and we couldn’t breathe enough to make suggestions.

I bit my lip to calm my breathing a little, just enough to giggle “moldy pudding cup” and dissolve once again into peals of laughter.
When we finally settled down a bit, Ymir tried to get the kids to line up for the “championship” round of the obstacle course relay.

That was when Eren took it one step too far: “Bring it on, Horseface.”

I braced for the impact of Jean’s anger at being called Horseface.

“Horseface” was what Eren called Jean the very first time they fought. It was the name he constantly threw out in fights: real, hurtful fights, when Jean and Eren had still gotten into fistfights. It had nothing to do with Jean’s crabby personality, insults upon which he bore relatively well, at least externally.

But insult him for his appearance? That was the straw that broke the camel’s back.

It wasn’t that Jean was just so vain that such insults were hurtful to him. He explained it to me once, that to insult your basic physical composition like your facial features was the lowest, scummiest insult there was. You don’t like his hairstyle? Fine. Think his clothes are ugly? Whatever. But insult his very genetics? Jean took that very personally.

Instead of a flurry of punches, cusses, or yelling, though, Jean just froze. His eyes were dead, and his mouth showed no emotion.

Slowly, he reached out to Connie, standing a step or two in front of him, and he wiped his hand down Connie’s back.

Connie shivered away from Jean, and twisted around trying to see what was on his t-shirt. “What did you just wipe on me?” he cried out.

“My faith in humanity,” Jean said seriously. And that was it.

You could have heard a pin drop in the forest after that. Jean broke his own silence as he clapped his hands, and called his team to huddle up.

And so for the second time that day, I watched Jean pretend like nothing had even happened.

The two teams lined up, and Connie took over Ymir’s stop-watch duty. The easy going, fun competitive atmosphere had almost completely deflated, but Mina, Hannah, Franz, and I did our best to cheer everyone on in a positive manner.

We decided the best way to do this was with clapping and “whoop”-ing. Words were too slippery.

As I watched the race take off, I reflected on the whole exchange.

We shouldn’t have fed the insults-battle, funny as everything seemed. Despite the lack of swearing, they were still insults. It wasn’t showing us counselors as positive role models, and it was encouraging negativity. We should probably all apologize to the campers tonight, for letting it get out of control and for letting it happen at all.

By the time I worked through my guilt about the whole thing, the race was over: Bomb Squad won.

X

After the obstacle course race, it was time to wash hands for lunch, so we walked the kids back to the cabin and set to preparing the meal.
Armin and took Eren to go get food from the pantry out back.

They were gone a lot longer than it should have taken to get the food, but I figured that Armin had talked to Eren about his part in the whole debacle.

When they returned, Eren’s body language had completely changed. His shoulders were slumped, and his head was lowered submissively.

He approached Jean slowly and with a low voice, I heard him apologize. “I went too far, man. Sorry. I’ll keep it in check better next time.”

“Whatever,” Jean said.

“I’m apologizing,” Eren said a little louder.

“Yeah, but only because Armin told you to.”

“Okay, yeah, he told me to, but I really am sorry. I ruined the whole mood because I couldn’t pull back. You handled it way better than I would’ve. I’m sorry.”

“Okay,” Jean said. It looked like that was as accepted as Eren’s apology was going to get.

We prepared a nice spread of PB and J sandwiches, potato chips, and cucumber slices for lunch, with raspberries for dessert.

Armin continued to play mother duck to Eren the rest of the afternoon: Eren followed him around obediently, and only talked to the campers, his sister, or Armin.

I hung out with Mina and our campers for a little while: they wanted to play a game called “Ninja,” where you took turns moving and tried to tag other members of the circle. The last one standing won.

When we got tired of the game, I wandered back over to where Ymir and Jean were talking casually about the plan for the next day, when we would leave the outpost.

I sat down next to Ymir, but angled so that I was mostly facing Jean. I didn’t talk much, just listened to Ymir’s explanations, Jean’s clarification questions, and comments about how slowly this summer seemed to be going.

Maybe it would pick up now that we were in the second week.

I wanted to talk to Armin about what had happened with Jean, but I figured he had his hands full with Eren.

Mikasa approached our little gathering about twenty minutes later and point blank asked me if I wanted to talk to Armin.

“How did you know?” I asked, bewildered.

“Easy. You keep staring at him and then when you see Eren is still there, you return to the conversation in front of you. I’ll go steal Eren for a few minutes.”

“Thanks, Mikasa!” I said honestly.

“What do you want to talk to Armin about?” Ymir asked curiously.
“It’s personal,” I said evasively.

“Your personal or his personal?” she pressed.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Sure it does. If it’s you personal I get to bother you until you tell me about it too.”

“It’s both, okay?”

“Fine, fine. You’ll tell me eventually,” she said dismissively.

“Be back in a bit,” I said to her and Jean. Jean just sort of gave me a nod, and continued staring out to survey the kids splashing in the shallow edges of the lake.

Armin and Eren were sitting close, heads bowed, though I couldn’t actually tell if they were talking or just sitting there.

When Mikasa called out to her brother, Eren’s head popped up, but he didn’t get up.

“Get up, I need to talk to you,” Mikasa demanded.

“Can’t it wait?” Eren asked.

“No. It’ll take five minutes, just come here.”

Eren looked at Armin with puppy dog eyes, but grudgingly stood.

As he did, I saw that he and Armin had been holding hands. They held onto each other’s hand as long as they could, before Eren let Mikasa put a hand on his shoulder and steer him away.

Well now I feel like a jerk, I thought.

“Hey,” I said to Armin.

He smiled warmly. “Hi, Marco. What’s up?”

“I just wanted to see how you were doing,” I said. “And… if you don’t mind, could I um, could I talk to you about Jean?”

“Well I’m doing a lot better, actually,” Armin replied. “I had a nice long chat with Eren, first about the whole fight with Jean, then it just sort of turned into a heart-to-heart, and we talked about a lot of stuff. He told me that he’s really trying to be more thoughtful about what he says. He gets frustrated with himself for saying things he doesn’t really mean, and then he takes that frustration out on others.”

“He’s lucky to have you, Armin,” I said. “You’re a really great friend. I think you and Eren kind of balance each other out, sometimes.”

“Yeah,” Armin said with a blush.

I didn’t ask about the hand-holding, though I was bursting with curiosity. Armin would tell me when he was ready to.

“So,” Armin said after a moment. “You wanted to talk about Jean?”
“If that’s okay,” I said. “I don’t want to burden you with more than your fair share of drama or whatever.”

“Marco, you’re not a burden to me.”

“Still, I can try to talk to Ymir, I guess, if you’d rather…”

“Marco. What is it?” Armin said shaking his head gently.

I took in a deep breath and told him everything.

“So I was going to tell him that I have feelings for him, right? But then I kinda chickened out, and ended up just saying what a great friend he is. Then that night, he woke me up at midnight and we went for a walk outside and he … he wanted to kiss me.”

“I’m guessing by your tone that that wasn’t a good thing?”

“No, I—I mean, obviously my first reaction was ‘yes!’, but it was the way he phrased it. He asked if I wanted him to kiss me. And it made me stop him. I didn’t have the best wording, so what he ended up taking away from our conversation was that I thought he didn’t know his own feelings, and that he couldn’t handle mine.”

“Ouch. What was your intention?”

“My understanding was that he had equated being best friends with a gay person as by-default romantic! I didn’t want it to be like that. If he wants to kiss me, it needs to be because he feels that way, not because he thought it was the expectation.”

“On the plus side, he’s kind of the opposite of no-homo.”

“Yeah, but on the negative side, he got really angry with me. So this morning, I asked to talk to him again to clear the air, and…” I felt the heat creeping up my neck.

Armin waited while I gathered my thoughts: I didn’t want to tell him that Jean had been right, that I had been a terrible friend. I didn’t want Armin to think less of me.

“And basically he said that if I let him kiss me, we’d be okay.”

“Marco, please say you didn’t.”

I bit my lip and looked at my shoes.

“Marco!” Armin sighed. “You do realize that sounds super emotionally manipulative to an outsider, right?”

“No, it wasn’t like that,” I said quickly, hands out in a placating manner. “I guess saying it out loud now, it does a bit, but honestly. I told him last night that I wanted to, but I didn’t think he wanted it. He asked me to trust him, to trust that he wanted to kiss me. So… I did.”

“You did. And now you’re freaking out about it? Have things been awkward?”

“That’s the thing!” I said, “he like, flipped a switch or something and he’s acting like nothing happened! Everything is completely normal.”

Armin scrunched his face. “Isn’t that kind of what you wanted, though? Now he knows how you feel, but he’s not treating you any differently because of it. You’re best friends still.”
Armin was right: this was practically my ideal. So why was it such a problem?

I knew exactly why it was such a problem. It was because that kiss was absolutely amazing. It was tender, it was sexy, and damn did he smell great. I wanted more. I wanted him more than ever.

“I guess the problem is that he’s acting like it never happened, but I… I can’t. I don’t want to. I want him to want me like that. And it sucks because I don’t think he ever will.”

Or maybe he did. I didn’t think either of us really knew.

“Then why did he kiss you?” Armin asked.

“Because he asked me to trust him. Last night, I… I didn’t trust him. I put words in his mouth and it was bad for both of us. I just… ughh,” I moaned, and buried my face in my hands.

“It’s gonna work itself out, Marco,” Armin assured me, clapping a hand on my shoulder. “It really will. Just keep talking it out in little chunks, and it’ll work itself out.”

“I hope so,” I said. “Another month of this is going to kill me.”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Armin laughed.

I stood up and offered Armin a hand, but he shook me off.

“Nah, I’m gonna stay here. Send Eren back over, would you? I’m sure Mikasa’s running out of things to stall him.”

“You knew?”

“Please, Marco. The timing was incredibly obvious. Next time you can just ask to talk to me though. Eren would understand; you don’t have to go through Mikasa.”

“Well, it was her idea anyway. I figured I should trust her judgment of her own brother.”

Armin shrugged. “I’m just saying.”

“Okay, Armin. Thanks for listening. Really, I don’t tell you enough what a great friend you are.”

“I’m happy to help,” he smiled.

I found where Mikasa had dragged Eren, and interrupted quietly. “Thanks, Mikasa.”

She nodded. “Everything alright?”

“Yeah, or it will be soon. Sorry to kinda have you dragged away, Eren.”

“I knew this whole conversation was bogus,” he complained, gesturing to his sister. “Just ask next time. Jesus.”

“Sorry, sorry. I know, Armin already told me.”

Eren’s cheeks turned just the slightest bit pink, before he turned and jogged back over to Armin.

“They’re both idiots,” Mikasa said vaguely.

“Mhmm. They’re idiots.”

“Uh…”

“I’ve always been so protective of Eren, but maybe he doesn’t need me so much anymore. Look at them,” she added softly. “It’s actually so cute, now that they’re figuring things out.”

“They’re good for each other, in whatever capacity they decide on.”

“If this camp ends in anything less than them declaring their love for each other, I will be truly shocked indeed.”

And with that, Mikasa strolled off toward the lake, ruffling one of her campers’ hair on her way past.

I smiled.

At least something was working out.

X

That evening, when we had the bonfire lit, I told Ymir that I wanted to offer an apology to the campers. She agreed that it would be a good idea, and called a brief staff meeting to discuss who would talk and what we would say.

“So I think I’ll let Marco and Mina kinda be the spokespeople, since this was their idea,” Ymir said. “And Eren, I think you should say something. Jean, I think you should too. We have to pretend to be adults, remember?” Sasha giggled a little, but didn’t say anything.

“Okay campers, gather ‘round!” Ymir called out. “We have a little announcement before we get back to the fun and shenanigans of summer camp. Marco and Mina?” she prompted.

“So, in light of this morning’s little ‘insult battle’,” Mina began with emphatic air quotes, “we thought we owed you all an apology. We were laughing and having fun, but no matter how silly the words, insults are not a positive way to interact. Insults aren’t how we build friendships, and they aren’t how we resolve problems.”

She nodded for me to continue.

“And even though we were all having fun, you saw how just one little step too far can turn things sour in the blink of an eye,” I said. “Our words have consequences, and even if we mean well or think it’s silly, others won’t always see it that way. We all have to choose our words carefully so we can get along.”

“So we want to apologize to you all,” Mina said, “and promise that we’ll try our best to be better examples for you.”

Mikasa and Armin both shoved Eren forward.

“I uh, I wanted to apologize to you guys, too. I’m working really hard on thinking before speaking, and I know firsthand that it’s hard. It’s hard to not just blurt out whatever you’re thinking, especially if you think it’s gonna be funny. But… I’m gonna do better. So to Jean, I’m sorry for calling you that. And everyone else, I’m sorry that you had to see that. It was really uncool.”

“Jean, did you want to add anything?” Ymir asked softly.
“Just that… Eren’s…right. It was uncool. Sorry.”

That was probably all we were going to get from him, but I thought he did well.

“Alright, so let’s get back to the fun and games, shall we?” Ymir suggested.

Once the kids were singing “The Cannibal King” again, I decided to take up Armin’s advice: talk it out in little chunks.

And at this point, I figured the sooner I dealt with it, the better. We would be back to the tents soon, and that was going to make things a lot tenser on my end, if not his as well.

I tapped him on the shoulder as I walked past him, and nodded for him to follow me.

He made a small discontented sound, but stood, pushing on his knees like it was a great effort to get up.

I thought about going to the back of the outpost to the laundry room where we had our chat this morning, but I decided I’d rather go somewhere different, for a fresh start.

Instead, I wandered closer to the woods, just off the path.

When I was satisfied with our spot, I climbed up a tree with a low branch, and patted the space next to me for Jean to join.

I scooted over so he wouldn’t have to climb over me for space, and he jumped onto the branch nimbly.

“It’s almost cool tonight,” Jean commented casually.

“Mm,” I agreed.

“Is this about Jaeger?” he asked gently.

“No,” I said. “Actually, I was really impressed with how you handled that. I was a little nervous that you’d rise to the bait, but you actually pulled off a joke, sort of. I was proud of you.”

“He fucking knows. He fucking knows not to say that to me and he had to go there.”

“I know. But you were strong and you didn’t let it rile you up. You set a good example for the kids,” I added.

“Unlike fucking Jaeger,” he grumbled.

“Yeah. But he’s working on it.”

“Sure he is. So if this isn’t about Jaeger, I’m guessing it’s about this morning,” Jean stated.

“Yeah.”

“What is it now?” he asked. The words were harsh but he spoke softly, looking up at the crescent moon through the leaves.

“I’m feeling really confused,” I confessed. “You’ve been so… casual and normal about it, but I’m not quite there yet.”
“That’s what you wanted, right?” Jean snapped without hesitation. “For me to pretend it didn’t happen? So that’s what I’m doing. I’m being a good friend, dammit. Just fucking let me be a good friend. You won’t let me do anything else.”

I heard somewhere that anger is a secondary emotion: anger is how people stop themselves from hurting.

Jean’s reputation as an “angry” person, or uncaring or rude or any of those things, wasn’t right.

Jean was none of those things: in fact, I would say that Jean was one of the most caring people I’d ever met.

He just didn’t know how to show that he cared, or when he did, he felt exposed or weak. So he lashed out to cover it up, trying to protect himself.

That’s how he was when Eren got on his nerves, at least. I was quickly realizing that I didn’t have much experience with most of Jean’s deeper emotions. I knew about his interests, his sense of humor, his opinions about cats versus dogs, his vague political views, and that he broke his collarbone in a fistfight when he was fifteen.

I knew that he wouldn’t ever ask for a hug but he would crush you if you hugged him first, and that he would eat barbecue sauce on almost anything.

I knew he was my best friend.

But I had spent so much of our friendship harboring this crush that I was starting to question everything I had felt, now that those feelings were in the open.

“I just don’t know how to act around you,” I said after a while.

“Just be Marco,” Jean said, impatience coming through in his voice. “Don’t overthink it.”

“But part of me has to hold back,” I reasoned. “I can’t just be myself. Because…”

“Because you’d try to jump my bones? Marco, please. We both know you wouldn’t be like that.”

I was silent, picking at the tree bark next to my leg.

“Look, I appreciate that you’re trying to work through all your feelings or whatever but can we maybe give it more than twelve fucking hours?”

He jumped down from the branch then held out his hand to help me down. It made it a bit more awkward, honestly, holding his hand like that, but I didn’t want to turn down the gesture.

“Just be my friend for a while, okay? If you have something new to tell me, fine. But for now can we please stop rehashing this conversation?”

He seemed to be aiming for joking and playful, but the emotion in his voice betrayed him.

“Okay, Jean.”

We started to walk back to the outpost, when I remembered I had one more thing to ask. “Jean? Do you want me to switch with Connie? When we go back to the tents tomorrow night, I mean. I’d understand if… I mean, I can share with Franz.”

My chest was tight. Part of me hoped that he would say no, I didn’t have to switch, but the other
part prayed that he would ask me to.

“I think that might be a good idea,” he said after a moment.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll let Connie know.”

We walked a few feet in silence before Jean laughed lightly.

“So what are you gonna tell him?”

“I could always blame it on your snoring,” I mused.

Jean shoved my shoulder so I stumbled off the path a bit. “I don’t snore!” he cried.

“Um, yeah you do. It’s soft, but it’s there. Every single night.”

“Marco Bodt you’re a liar.”

“Am not!” I poked him behind his ear, where I knew he was ticklish and sprinted away from him.

He gave chase immediately. “You little ..! Get back here, Bodt! This isn’t over!” he yelled.

I laughed, as I ran toward the cabin, always just out of his reach. Winded, we leaned against the cabin, laughing and trying to catch our breath at the same time.

“You’re a,” Jean puffed, “huge loser. And don’t tell Connie I snore or I’ll tell him that you... wear women’s underwear.”

“What’s wrong with that?” I grinned.


I just smiled.

We were friends again. If there was one thing that made me happy, it was being friends with Jean Kirstein.

Right now, it seems like that’s just enough.

Chapter End Notes

~sings stupidly~ it started out as a kiss, how did it end up like this?

*edit* Forgot to mention that I totally stole that quote that Marco "heard somewhere" about anger! it's from tumblr: “Here is a fact: anger is a secondary emotion. Anger is how people stop themselves from hurting. Anger is how people stop themselves by empathizing.” r.i.d (via inkskinned)

Chapter 10 is already written, so fingers crossed that it might go up this weekend!
(Must be respectful of my hard-working beta, though. She is a busy lady sometimes.)
New tent mates, new nick names, and a new outpost await the campers and counselors of the Survey Corps.

This chapter was so fun to write and my lovely beta, cloudmonstachopper, seemed to think so too since about half her notes were variations of excited squealing.

Special shout-out to Siseja for coming up with all these absurd names for Ymir. Your brain is a nickname factory of evil genius.

When I had the chance that night, I found Connie to ask him to switch with me.

“Could you maybe do me a favor?” I asked him.

“For a price,” he said mysteriously. Then he cracked a smile. “Nah, I’m just playin, what’s up?”

“Would you mind switching tents with me?”

“Is yours busted or something? Why would I want your jacked-up tent?” he asked, one eyebrow raised.

“No, I mean like, trading places. You share with Jean, I share with Franz,” I clarified.

He wiggled his eyebrows. “Saving yourselves for marriage?” he giggled.

“Not exactly,” I laughed uneasily. “Will you switch?”

“I guess. All joking aside though, everything okay?”

“Yeah. We’re just… getting on each other’s nerves,” I said. “Need some space.”

“Okay. But if he farts in his sleep, I’m out.”

“Seriously Connie?”

“Yeah, that was weak. Alright, I’ll tell Franz. I’m sure he’ll be fine with it. Dude would let a wolf rip his throat out if it asked politely enough.”

I grimaced. Poor Franz. Hannah at least was friendly with Mina, and Mikasa and Annie seemed to tolerate her, more or less. The male counselors had been a little harsher on Franz, and even I found myself unknowingly leaving him out. He wasn’t really in the ‘circle,’ and we hadn’t done a great job of letting him join.
Maybe I would get to know him a bit, sharing a tent. All I really knew was that he and Hannah were together and he was almost too nice: there had to be more to him than that.

After the kids were all in bed with the lights out, I wandered to the staff dorm to get ready for bed myself. I ran into Jean in the laundry room, where he was brushing his teeth over the stained plastic sink basin. He scooted over to give me space to join him.

“Talked to Connie,” I commented as I squeezed out some toothpaste.

Jean spat out the toothpaste in his mouth. “Did you tell him I snored?”

“No, I just said we needed a break from each other.”

“Guess that works. Thanks for, uh, talking to him.” Jean turned on the water, and cupped his hands to rinse his mouth.

“No problem.”

He moved to scoot past me, but I noticed he had toothpaste on his mouth still.

“You got a little…” I gestured to the spot on his face.

“Thanks,” he said, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth. He didn’t get it.

“Er, not quite.”

He pawed at it again, and thankfully, it came off this time. I didn’t want to push things by offering to wipe it off myself or something.

He shuffled back to the dorms to check on the kids. After two days of rest, the kids were less exhausted at the end of the day, so we had to gently remind them to be quiet and go to sleep.

“You think we don’t hear you talking? You have a very poor concept of whispering, there, kid. Shut up and go to sleep,” I heard Jean telling the boys.

Gentle didn’t work well with eleven year old boys, anyway.

In the morning, we would hit the trail once again toward the Maria Outpost. If all went according to plan, we would get to the second outpost up in the not quite mountainous hills in five days, and Maria about a week after that.

Then it was a straight shot back from Maria to Sina, with only the Rose Outpost in between.

I was excited to stretch my legs again, and to give myself something to focus on other than my poorly managed emotions around Jean.

The kids finally quieted down around ten thirty, and I drifted off shortly after that.

X

At breakfast, Ymir sidled up to me as I stirred the pot of oatmeal for my group.

“Baby Boy,” she said. “A bald and slightly ugly birdie tells me there’s mischief afoot.”

I rolled my eyes. “Ymir, can you please just speak normally? You make it sound so … dramatic that way.”
“Fine. What’s up with you and Snarkbutt?”

“We talked,” I said curtly.


“I know you are, Ymir. But for once, I’m gonna take Jean’s advice, and stop rehashing the same conversation over and over. I need some time to think things over myself,” I said, nodding my head to convince myself.

Ymir took a dramatic sniff of the breakfast I was preparing.

“Mmm, what’s that?” she asked with false enthusiasm. “Smells like bullshit.”

“I’ll tell you when I’ve sorted my own thoughts out a little more, okay?” I promised.

She pouted. “I’m really not just prying because I’m nosy.”

“I know.” I paused a moment, then added, “Hey, I thought of a nickname for you.”

She brightened instantly. “What’d you come up with?”

“Captain Freckles.”

“Hmm. Needs work. Keep thinking on it!” She advised.

As I had hoped, the nickname was enough to distract her, and she left me to finish making breakfast.

X

Before we left, we had to gather everyone for a picture. Ymir found a tripod in the laundry room, and she had the “official” Camp Sina camera that Erwin gave her to chronicle our journey. We lined all the kids up in three rows: the tallest kids standing on logs behind a row of standing campers, and then the shortest kids in the front, kneeling.

Ymir set the camera up so that we could get the cabin and the lake in the background, to match the photos from previous years.

“Squeeze in closer!” Ymir commanded. “Connie and Sasha, move your group to the right a little bit, and everybody else scoot over to fill in.”

“Our right, or your right?” Sasha asked.

“Uh, that way!” Ymir gestured.

The group shuffled as instructed.

“Okay scouts, we’re gonna take three pictures. Let’s make the first one nice, smiles from everybody. Second one can be goofy, then the third one will be a nice smiley one again. Got it? So first, regular smiles!”

Ymir fumbled with the controls on the camera for a minute, then sprinted around the tripod to join her squad.

We all waited for some kind of indication that the picture had taken. When none came, we started
giggling a bit.

“Did it go?” Mina asked.

“No idea,” I said through gritted teeth, still trying to maintain a smile.

“Ymir!” Eren called. “How long a delay did you set?”

“I thought it was ten seconds!”

“Go check it!”

“Fine!” As soon as she moved to check the camera, though, there was a flash.

We burst out laughing.

“All of you shut up!” Ymir ordered. “Okay, it’s reset. Try again, still regular smiles please!”

Ymir took her position again and we all waited extra long for the flash.

“Hold it,” Ymir growled as the kids started getting antsy.

Finally, the flash went off, and we all sighed in relief.

“Alright, that’s one!” Ymir said as she jogged over to the tripod. “Let’s see how it turned out.”

She pulled up the review, and nodded. “It’s pretty good. Okay, goofy time! No obscene gestures, please, or you’re carrying rations!”

She reset the timer, and hurried back to her spot.

Mina put up a peace sign and an extra cheesy smile, her mouth open wide like she was laughing.

I went for a wink with finger guns toward the camera, though I regretted the winking part when my face started to cramp up on one side waiting for the picture to take.

I could only imagine what the other counselors were doing.

Most of the kids seemed to be going for some variation of sticking their tongues out, or pulling on their faces in a way that may possibly be rude. One of the girls from Annie and Armin’s group did the splits, and a boy from Hannah and Franz’s squad tried to imitate her, though he looked like he was about to pull a groin muscle.

The flash went off, and everyone relaxed.

Then the kids all wanted to see the picture.

“Back up, back up!” Ymir directed. “You’ll see it later. Alright for the last one, I changed my mind. We’re gonna do one more, but I want everyone to do the same pose: we’re gonna be the coolest survey group yet. Eyes up here, I’ll show you how it’s done.”

She stood between the tripod and the campers and explained.

“So, arms crossed, pop a hip like you ain’t got time for any crap, and I want a real serious face. If you can raise one eyebrow, do it.”

She stopped talking for a moment to demonstrate the full effect.
A lot of the kids giggled, but as she held the pose, they got quieter.

I thought I heard Jai whisper a “whoa.”

Then she broke out of the pose, shattering the illusion of bad-assery.

“Everyone got it? Show me your best cool-camper poses!”

The kids immediately complied, all anxious to impress Ymir.

She fixed a couple kids’ poses, and had to teach Patrick, the red-head on Connie and Sasha’s team, how to pop his hip, but after a couple minutes she was satisfied.

“Okay, back to formation, scouts!” The kids all scurried to form the squeezed-together group by the logs.

“If we’re kneeling, how do we pop a hip out?” Minh asked.

“Uh, try spacing your legs a bit more, that should help. Yes perfect!” Ymir cried as Minh tried it. “Front row do it just like Minh! Alright, straight faces, everyone. This is gonna look so cool, just trust me. Ready?”

When she was satisfied with our expressions, she pushed the button and dashed around the back to take up her spot once more, striking the pose herself.

When the camera flashed, there was once again a commotion to see how the picture had turned out.

“This is incredible,” Ymir said as she reviewed it. “I don’t even want to send them the smiling one. I want this one framed for eternity. I want this screen-printed on tee shirts. I want to name my kids after this photograph.”

The counselors crowded in to see, and she passed the camera around to us. Jean and I were next to each other, so we held the camera and marveled at it together.

The kids did indeed look fierce, like they were not to be trifled with. Even the whiniest kids looked impressive.

Jean quickly scrolled over to the goofy picture before it, to see what poses everyone had chosen.

The boy pulling the splits in the front did indeed look pained. A couple of kids had tried to jump, but it had been nearly impossible to time so they looked a bit like those inflatable noodle dancers that car dealerships put out front to attract customers.

The most hilarious aspect of the picture, in my opinion, was the counselors.

Eren had picked Armin up and was holding him bridal style with a fierce look in his eyes. Armin, for his part, was clinging to Eren’s neck like he didn’t quite believe his friend wouldn’t drop him.

Mikasa and Annie were pretending to run away from the rest of us, looks of embarrassment on both their faces.

Ymir, Connie, and Sasha had apparently gone the Charlie’s Angels route, with Ymir in the middle and Connie and Sasha on either side.

Then there was me, with my cramped-face winking, and Jean, next to me, posed with a smirk on his face, head tilted slightly back, and brushing off his shoulder.
I laughed.

“Nice pose, Jay-Z.” I teased him.

“Shut up, I look fly as hell.”

I gave him a doubtful look, and smacked him lightly. “Language, and of course you do.”

“Alright, Mister Fingerguns, sorry I wasn’t as cool as you.”

“I know, I set the standard high.” I couldn’t finish the sentence with a straight face like I wanted to. Jean just shook his head at me.

“Nerd.”

“You like it.”

“Never said I didn’t,” he confirmed.

We passed the camera along to Connie and Sasha, and returned to our groups to get ready to hit the trail.

X

Between the first and second outpost were an annoying amount of large hills. That meant we covered less distance each day, but it was a tougher hike for the kids.

On the positive side, though, the view was incredible. The trees were a bit more dispersed, so you could see further out. At the top of every hill, usually when we stopped for a quick water break, I just stood and marveled.

It reminded me that I really wanted to come back here in the autumn, because while the lush green canopy was beautiful, I was certain that the foliage would be absolutely breathtaking once it turned to vivid golds, burnt oranges, and rusty reds.

The wind through the hills ahead of us made the Wall Forest look kind of like water. The leaves shook in the breeze, making them appear to move in waves over the rolling pitch of the landscape. If I stared at it too long my eyes lost focus, the movement of the treetops blurring my view.

We had different games to play on the trail every day, serving the dual purpose of distracting the kids from whining so much (though it certainly didn’t stop them) as well as providing some amusement for the counselors.

The first evening back out on the trail, the kids complained heavily about the tents.

“There should be more outposts,” Jai complained.

“That defeats the point of camping,” Teresa stated bluntly.

“Exactly!” I agreed. “The outposts are a nice change of pace, but the tents are fun, too! Go help Eli set up, please. I’ll be there in a minute to check on you.”

I had to go set up my own tent with my new partner, Franz. I walked past Jean and Connie, and offered them a weak smile on my way to Franz’s tent.

“Hey,” I said, announcing my presence.
“Hey, Marco!” Franz replied. “We’re all set up, so you can go ahead and put your stuff inside.”

“Thanks,” I said. “And thanks again for letting us switch.”

“No problem! Though, can I ask why? I mean, I don’t want to pry, but Connie just said he was gonna go with Jean now, and I didn’t want to take offense, but he was a little… rude about it.”

“Ugh, Connie,” I muttered to myself. “No, this has nothing to do with you or really even Connie. I needed to switch, and Connie is really the only one who can put up with Jean.”

“Ooh,” Franz nodded. “What, um, prompted the change?”

“It’s a little complicated,” I said. “Maybe another time.”

“Okay, if you want to. You really don’t have to tell me if you don’t feel comfortable.”

“Thanks, Franz.”

X

When it was time for bed that night, I felt incredibly lonely.

Franz was chatting away about the activity from the hike which had been a sort of Q and A session about insects. Mina and I were able to find most of the species we had to talk about, and we talked about the bugs and their importance to the ecosystem and all that.

I made for a pretty poor conversation partner, but I did my best.

“And then Cassie asked if earwigs got their name because of old men with hairy ears,” Franz was saying. “It was hilarious!”

I wasn’t convinced it was actually hilarious, and not just a curious seventh grader.

I knew he meant well, and seemed like a good guy, but being in that tent with him just reminded me of all the stupid crap I had put Jean through in the past couple of days.

But that was partially why we needed some time away from each other. I needed to come to grips with everything just as much as he did.

During the day, with other people around, we hung out and joked around, spending time together like the friends that we were. But at night, I was on my own to work through my emotions and how poorly I had handled Jean’s feelings.

It was going to be a long few weeks.

X

Week two was the sophomore slump: the novelty and excitement was wearing down, and it was a tough part of the trail. Morale was low, and even the counselors were cranky.

My new tent partner, Franz, remained his usual chipper self though, which I actually found slightly irritating after the first few nights.

He always had some hilarious tale from the day to share with me, but frankly he was a terrible story teller and I had a hard time not letting my disinterest show on my face.
Even after lights out and the tent checks were complete, he couldn’t let the silence stand for more than a minute, so he’d interrupt it with a “hey, Marco!”

I tried to be polite about it, and answered his questions as succinctly as possible, always followed up with a “good night, Franz.” But he still didn’t seem to get the hint.

The third night, I snapped.

“Franz, I’m sure whatever question or anecdote you have is important or entertaining, but please. I’m exhausted. Can we just sleep?”

“Oh. I—yeah. Sorry, Marco.”

“It’s okay. Just… g’night.”

“Good night,” he said, not hiding the hurt in his voice well. 

Great, I thought. Now I’m being a jerk to Franz, too.

I lay awake with my thoughts for a while. I tried to focus on something besides Jean, but it just wasn’t happening.

I wondered if he was spending any time thinking about me, or if he was just goofing off with Connie. I wondered if he would let me hug him again.

I really needed a hug.

In the meantime, I wrapped my arms around myself and tried to get some sleep, willing myself to think about literally anything but Jean.

It didn’t work, but I finally fell asleep.

X

On the fourth morning, Ymir announced that today was “Free Team” day: kids and counselors alike could pick who they wanted to walk with. We would all go as a big group, instead of by squads. Ymir told us counselors it was an attempt at a morale booster. Even if the kids didn’t really switch up too much, they had the illusion that they could, and that would supposedly make them happier to trek up and down hills for four miles today.

Tomorrow in the late morning, we would get to the next outpost, though it wasn’t quite as glamorous as the first one had been: there was no lake, for starters, and no washing machines.

There were beds, though, and I for one was looking forward to being free of my zipped-up nylon prison with Franz.

When Ymir told the kids they could walk with whoever they wanted, they interpreted this as making their own teams and set to organizing themselves.

Sasha and Connie’s kids refused to leave them, so Meme Team was still intact, though most of the other squads had dispersed significantly.

Eren and Armin walked together, and Mikasa joined Ymir up at the front.

Jean grabbed my arm and asked me with one inquiring eyebrow if I’d walk with him.

Minh hung back with me so Georgie did, too, but the rest of my squad seemed to have merged with Eren and Armin’s or Hannah and Franz’s new groups.

The girls from Jean’s group joined us, too. It must have been quite a sight, Jean and I surrounded by eleven and twelve year old girls. Ymir certainly seemed to think so, since she snapped a few pictures of us with the official camera.

“You neglect that dumb thing the whole first week and now is when you take it out?” Jean squawked indignantly, wiping sweat from his brow.

“You’re welcome!” Ymir trilled, taking one more picture of Jean’s sour face before turning around again.

It was a hot day, probably in the low eighties, but not hot enough that the kids were totally lethargic and wilting. In fact, the persistent conversation from the girls didn’t leave Jean and I much time to talk to each other about even the most banal of topics, but I still enjoyed his company along the way.

When we stopped for lunch, Jean asked the girls to give us some quiet time, banishing them to the other side of our chosen picnic ground.

“Those girls sure can talk,” I commented when they were finally gone.

“My ears haven’t stopped ringing since we left Sina,” Jean complained.

“Don’t pretend you don’t like the attention,” I joked, waggling my eyebrows at him.

“From middle schoolers? Yeah, it’s a real power trip,” he said dryly.

“How’s rooming with Connie going?”

“Okay, you know what, you’re not allowed to say that I snore ever again because that kid sounds like a damn tractor.”

I burst out laughing. “I assume you’ve made fun of him for it?”

“Repeatedly,” Jean sighed.

“Well, there’s not much more you can do,” I said. Other than let me come back. I clamped my jaw shut.

“How are things with Franz?” Jean asked after a moment.

“He’s chattier than I expected.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” I said, and then leaning closer and lowering my voice, “and he’s one of the worst storytellers I’ve ever heard.”

“Oh no,” Jean laughed. “What does he do?”

“He’s constantly getting events mixed up, and when he gets really excited about something he only uses two adjectives: hilarious or horrendous. It takes him ten minutes to tell me something that
should take ten seconds.” “Damn, I do not envy that. I’ll take snoring any day,” Jean said grimly before bursting into laughter again.

“Shh,” I chided him.

“He talkin’ smack ‘bout me?” Connie menaced from the other end of the picnic area.

“Conn, please. What would you even do about it?” Sasha giggled.

“No one’s talking about you, Baldie,” Jean said.

“Oi!” Connie protested. “I’m not bald, my head is just shaved.”

“Okay, Baldie Locks,” Jean smirked.

“Jean, come on,” I said through a poorly suppressed laugh. “No insult battles, remember?”

“Fine, fine,” he agreed.

We cleaned up lunch and headed back out. We had one more big hill to climb for the day, then we’d make camp in the valley, where it would hopefully be cooler.

“So what’s the activity at the next outpost?” Chloe asked us, playing with the end of her braid. I wanted to ask if Chloe had ever had a haircut, since her braid went to her knees, but I didn’t want to be rude, and couldn’t think of a curious-not-judgmental way to ask.

“The second outpost is a little less fancy than the first one,” I said, choosing my words carefully.

“It’s boring, is what he means,” Jean clarified with a roll of his eyes. The girls giggled. “Just wait till we get to Maria, though. That’s the best part of this whole trip.”

“Ooh, what’s at Maria?” Chloe asked, and the rest of the girls clambered around us even closer, making it difficult to keep walking without tripping on someone’s feet.

I stepped on the backs of at least two girls’ shoes, mumbling a “sorry” each time. They didn’t seem to notice though; they were too caught up in Jean’s explanation of Maria.

I agreed, it was the best outpost, but I didn’t want him to talk it up too much, or they’d get whiny and antsy before we got there.

“So the day before we go into Maria, we’ll camp just south of the zipline,” Jean said.

“Like in that dumb story Sasha told?”

“Hey, that’s a true story,” Jean said with a barely serious look. The girls made faces back at him.

“So the next morning, you zipline into Maria, basically, and it’s so cool. The view is amazing, and you go so fast and it’s literally the best. It’s new, like from last year, so it’s not rickety and scary like half the rest of this camp.”

“My older brother went on it last year,” Sandra said. “He said a bunch of kids were afraid of it.”

“But not you girls, right? You’re braver and stronger than those kids were.”

They shook their heads enthusiastically.
“So what do we do at Maria?” Chloe pressed.

“I’m not sure which order we’ll do them in, but there’s archery, and there’s horseback riding, and the river is super wide and slow there, so we get to swim in it and it’s cleaner than the lake.”

“Plus, no leeches!” I interjected. “The current’s too much for those little pests.”

“Ooh!” the girls all exclaimed.

“Don’t forget the rope swing!” Hannah called back to us.

“Oh, right! The rope swing,” Jean said. “It’s on a tree on the riverbank, so you can swing on it and jump into the river. So cool.”

“Thanks for the reminder, Hannah!” I called. She waved over her shoulder.

“Plus, the beds are nicer, and the food is better… Maria’s the best!” Hannah enthused.

“But we’re not there quite yet,” I said. “Don’t be too disappointed with the second outpost.”

“How far is Maria from this outpost?” Sandra asked.

“Another six days walking,” Jean said.

“Aww,” Sandra whined, “that’s so far!”

“Where’d you think we were going? The Seven Eleven down the street? Buck up, Sandra. This isn’t the YMCA.”

“Jean doesn’t like whiners,” Chloe said, puffing up her chest. “He’ll make you walk with Ymir if you don’t watch it.”

“I also don’t like snobs, Chloe,” Jean said, the parental sternness strong in his voice.

“Sorry, Jean.”

I had to smile at how great Jean was with these girls. Was he a bit of a flirt? Absolutely. Ridiculously so. But the girls loved it, and he could command their undivided attention and I was pretty sure he had their undying loyalty, too.

Jean was so good at this job, and I could tell that he was enjoying himself. I wondered if he knew how good he was at it. I bet he has no idea, I thought, but then I caught myself.

I had promised myself that I couldn’t just make assumptions about Jean anymore. I knew him fairly well, but that didn’t mean that I could just guess things about him like a character from my favorite book. My thoughts and assumptions had consequences: Jean was a real person, not some work of fiction that I could make-believe things about.

I would talk to him. Like a grown up. Yeah.

When the girls were distracted, talking about archery and horses, I moved just a bit closer to Jean as we walked. My legs were burning, and my lungs were getting tired; this hill was taking too long.

“You know you’re really good at this job, right?” I asked, shifting my pack on my shoulders.

“You think?” he asked with an honest smile. I wasn’t sure if he was just being modest, or if he
wasn’t sure. I decided it didn’t matter.

“Absolutely,” I confirmed. “Once you got the hang of filtering your language, you’ve been really great with them. Playful and funny without losing your authority. It’s really obvious the kids like you, too.”

“Especially this little gaggle,” he said quietly, making a small circular motion with his index finger to indicate the group of girls around us.

“Yeah, especially them. But the boys seem to think you’re pretty cool, too.”

“That’s because I am cool, Marco. Gosh,” he said with fake pretentiousness, tossing his head back like he was getting hair off his face.

I laughed. “Nerd.”

“You like it,” Jean accused.

“You know I do,” I said, a little more tenderly than I meant to.

We fell silent again, until Chloe asked another question about the next outpost. Georgie and Minh had been fairly quiet. Minh occasionally asked me about a plant we saw, or asked about the experiments I had run when I was a camper here.

I told her a little about them, but promised that we could talk to Armin later, when we weren’t trekking up a hill.

Finally, we reached the crest of the hill, and Ymir declared a water break for everyone. I couldn’t have agreed more. We sat along the path, some kids finding tree stumps or stones to sit on.

I just sagged against a tree, dropping my pack to the ground and rubbing my shoulders.

Jean stretched his neck and cracked his back next to me, bending forward to touch his toes, arching just slightly to tease out the pop pop pop of his spine.

I tried not to think about how flexible he looked, or how nice that skinny butt was.

I decided to crack my own back to distract myself, and put both hands on the tree trunk I was leaning on, twisting my hips to the left first, then the right.

“Nice one,” Jean commented, and then copied my motions.

He moaned as his spine cracked again, and I drew in a long, steadying breath.

“I think I just saw Jesus,” he deadpanned.

Me too, Jean. Me too.

After about a ten minute break, Ymir rallied the kids together for our final descent.

“You see those crummy lookin’ shack things down there?” she asked.

The kids looked around for the cabins, some on their tiptoes.

“Well, even if you can’t see it, it’s there. It’s just down this big hill. So watch your footing, and we
should be there really soon.”

I spent the twenty minute walk downhill trying to pick Jean’s brain for a good nickname for Ymir.

“She calls you Baby Boy, so why don’t you just call her Baby Girl back?” he asked.

“Because that’s what she calls Christa,” I explained like it was completely obvious. “Besides, the connotations of that are... odd.”

Jean shook his head side to side and shrugged. “Yeah, okay I can see that. Hmm… what about…” he thought. “Shit, I don’t know. Didn’t you call her a gossip villain once?”

I laughed. “Yeah, I did.”

“You could call her GV for short,” he suggested.

“Nah, that’s not who Ymir is to me, though.”

“Well, tell me what she is to you, then. Maybe that’ll spark some ideas,” Jean offered.

“Okay, um… she’s a friend, of course, and she was one of the first people that I, uh, came out to. She’s always been kind of my go-to for personal advice? She’s a little older, so she’s got more experience, I guess.”

“Keep talkin’,” Jean instructed. “I’m not getting any good ideas yet.”

I laughed, but continued. “She’s warm and honest and bright, but she won’t take any crap from anybody. I like that about her,” I admitted. “I like that she can see through me and that she’s not afraid to call me on it.”

Jean smirked. “That sounds like me.”

“You two are pretty similar in that respect, yeah.”

We exchanged a brief glance before Jean broke the silence. “But I don’t go around calling myself your mom.”

“True. And thanks for that, by the way. That might be a little weird.”

We laughed, and the girls asked what was so funny.

“Don’t worry about it,” Jean said through a chuckle.

“No, come on! Tell us!” Sandra begged.

“We were thinking about how silly it would be if Jean pretended to be my mom,” I said matter-of-factly before bursting into laughter again.

“What?” Georgie said, tuning into our conversation.

“Yeah, that makes no sense. You guys are weird,” Chloe said.

By now, we had arrived at the crummy little cabins that would be our lodging for the night.

This outpost had seven separate cabins with eight beds per cabin, and a suspicious looking front porch on only five of them.
The two porchless cabins were newer, and the camp had apparently decided eliminating the porch was more cost effective.

They each had mismatched curtains in the windows and moss growing on the shingles.

“Alright, listen up. Each cabin is named after a tree. There’s a sign over the door that tells you which cabin it is. Each cabin has space for up to eight campers. And yes, boys with boys, girls with girls, you know the drill. You can pick your groups, but we reserve the right to move you around. You cannot have less than six people in a group, or we’ll have to break you up and reorganize.

“The Silver Birch and Catalpa Cabins are reserved for the counselors. They’re the ones without porches. Get your group together and pick a cabin, but don’t settle in yet. We’ll be around to approve your groups,” Ymir finished.

The kids bustled around, trios and pairs of kids trying to find other trios or pairs to join up with.

Jean just watched with an amused smile on his face as several girls fought over the more popular kids. After a minute though, when it looked like no agreement would be reached, he called out to them.

“You better figure out who you’re rooming with or I’ll come decide for you,” he menaced half-heartedly.

“Hey! What did I say about not going inside yet!” Ymir threatened.

“You could always call her Shouty McFreckles,” Jean murmured to me.

I sputtered out a laugh. “That can be your nickname for her,” I suggested.

“The Ymirinator,” Jean giggled.

I clapped a hand over my mouth to prevent an incredibly unattractive guffaw from erupting too loudly.

“Ymiry Poppins?” he suggested, his voice almost hoarse with laughter.

“What about Ymirmaid?” I wheezed. “She’d love the idea of luring men to their deaths.”

“Hey! Frick and Frack! Do your jobs, would you?” Ymir snapped at us.

We looked at each other in sync, breathless from laughter.

“If I’m Frick and you’re Frack, then she’s…” Jean started.

“Freck!” we chorused, and then dissolved back into our laughter fit.

Wiping a tear from his eye, Jean grabbed my shoulder. “That’s it,” he told me. “Your new nickname for Ymir is Freckle-Frackle.”

X

Once we managed to stop laughing our asses off at the horrible puns and plays on Ymir’s name, we did in fact, do our jobs.

When the kids were taken care of, we settled into bunks of our own. This outpost (as well as the Maria and Rose outposts) had separate lodging for male and female counselors.
The ladies picked Silver Birch, so the boys took Catalpa.

“I don’t understand why they don’t make the first outpost single-sex for the counselors, too,” Annie commented. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, the laundry room prank was funny, but it seems kinda sleazy.”

Ymir pulled me aside and whispered, “The stunning dearth of heteros on this staff makes the single-sex housing pretty sleazy, too.”

I froze in embarrassment, blushing profusely, but she punched my arm lightly and I snapped out of it enough to go put my belongings by the bunk underneath Jean’s.

“Did you tell Ymir about her new nickname yet?” Jean asked as he unrolled his sleeping bag on the mattress.

These cabins were less attended to than the first outpost, so the mattresses just had a simple fitted sheet covered with plastic and no other blankets to be eaten at by moths.

“No, not yet. I figured I might tease her with some of the bad ones first though,” I said.

“Why, Marco Bodt, that’s almost mischievous of you!”

I smiled.

It seemed silly, but just having our nights apart made our days so much more comfortable with each other. I was lonely, yeah, but I was working through it. I knew that I couldn’t spend every possible moment with him, even if we were dating. That just wasn’t practical.

This was good for me.

Although, the loneliness was tinged with regret that this particular separation was my own fault. If I had just been more careful about the way I phrased things—no, if I had been a better friend from the start—then maybe this wouldn’t have been necessary.

I could have spent six weeks sleeping next to my best friend (who I also happened to have a gigantic crush on).

Well, that ship has sailed.

I did still get to spend six weeks hanging out with my best friend, cracking jokes and sharing stories and goofing off with the kids. I tried to convince myself that it was just as good.

Armin and Eren burst into the cabin in a fit of laughter. I turned around to ask what was so funny, and I saw that they were holding hands again.

Armin looked so happy with Eren, happier than I’d ever seen him. His cheeks were flushed pink from laughing heartily, and even when he caught his breath his smile didn’t fade in the slightest.

Eren seemed to realize that they had made a slight ruckus, and were now the center of attention of not only me, but Jean, Connie, and Franz, too.

“What are you all looking at? Make your beds,” Eren snapped.

To my surprise, Armin brushed Eren’s hair to the side with a gentle hand when he chastised him. “Eren, be nice.”
Eren grumbled something unintelligible.

“Much better,” Armin told him with a smirk, and he kissed Eren’s cheek lightly.

Eren turned eight shades of red, and Armin looked pretty pleased with himself.

“Marco!” he called to me. “Looks like you’re done with your bed. Let’s go get the games out for the kids.”

“Um, alright,” I said.

Armin threw his pack on the bed next to mine and headed back out of the cabin. I followed him out, giving Jean a wave goodbye.

As soon as I stepped outside, Armin set off for the storage chest behind the Silver Birch cabin, trusting that I would follow.

As we got close, I saw that there was a padlock on the box. “Do you have the key, Armin?” I asked.

He ignored my question and sat on the box with a plop. He kicked his feet and squealed.

I laughed gently, amused by his little display.

“Marco, I’m so happy.”

“I can tell,” I told him. “Did something happen?”

“I … I told Eren, I told him that I had feelings for him, and he asked if I meant romantic feelings, because I told him I was ace, right? Like, he remembered. He told me he had done some reading, because he had feelings for me, but he wanted to make sure he understood the difference between sexual and romantic feelings and--- oh, Marco, I’m just so fucking happy!”

My eyebrows flew into my hairline, hearing Armin swear so strongly. He swore even less than I did, normally. In middle school, he could barely say the word “heck” without turning red and giving a rambling apology for his “foul language.”

“That’s wonderful, Armin!” I told him. “So you guys… together?”

“Yeah,” Armin said dreamily, lying back on the box. It didn’t look comfortable, but he didn’t seem to mind. “I think those weird sexual-ish feelings were just a blip, though. But Eren said that as long as he could kiss me sometimes and hold my hand, he was happy, too.”

“That’s great,” I said honestly. “I’m really happy for you.”

I just sort of stared at him, smiling and wondering if I was supposed to do or say something else to him. It was then that Ymir walked around the corner of the cabin.

“Hey, Baby Boy,” she greeted me, then glanced at Armin. “Is he okay?”

“Just very happy,” I confirmed.

“I see. Well, Armin, I hate to interrupt, but can you move your blissed-out starfish pose somewhere else? I’m gonna open up the box you’re on top of.”

“Hmm? Oh, of course,” he said dazedly, and rolled awkwardly off the box.
Ymir produced a small key from her pocket, and jimmed it into the lock. “Alright, let’s see what we’ve got.”

Inside were two slightly flat soccer balls, a handful of jump ropes, a selection of brightly colored Frisbees, and a rusty air pump.

“Wow, knock yourselves out, kids,” Ymir said sarcastically. “Didn’t there used to be more stuff in here?”

“I thought there was a basketball, but I don’t see the hoop up anymore, so maybe they got rid of it,” I commented.

“There were hula hoops, too, but I think Eren broke them,” Armin added with a giggle.

“How the hell do you break a hula hoop?” Ymir said incredulously.

“Step one: be Eren Jaeger,” Armin said with a nod. “Step two: there is no step two.”

“Sounds about right,” I said.

“Alright, well, there’s nothing we can do about it now,” Ymir said. “We’ll just break up their free time so they don’t get bored with this stuff. Help me bring it over, would you?”

Armin took the knot of jump ropes and I collected the Frisbees. Ymir tested out the air pump, but it didn’t budge.

“So much for that,” she said, tossing it back in the box. “Mushy soccer balls it is. She tucked one under her arm and let the other drop to the ground with a plop so she could close the chest.

We took the equipment over to the clearing behind the collection of cabins, where the rest of the counselors were waiting with the kids.

“Sadly, this is all we found, but here you go kids,” Ymir said, dropping the soccer ball from under her arm.

I dropped the Frisbees to help Armin try to untangle some of the jump ropes that had knotted together impossibly.

“We should wrap these up nicer when it’s time to put them away,” I commented.

“Definitely,” Armin agreed. “These are more tangled than earbud cords in a pocket.”

Georgie charged forward to take one of the soccer balls.

“What, you play soccer?” one of the boys from Eren and Mikasa’s team asked.

“Um, duh,” she said. “Bet I can beat you.”

“Oh yeah? We’ll see,” the boy retorted. “I call captain.”

“If you’re playing soccer come over here so we can divide teams,” Georgie instructed.

A handful of boys took her up on her offer, as did Minh, Sandra, Rachida, and a girl from Hannah and Franz’s group whose name I didn’t know.
“Alright, the scrimmage was my idea so I get first pick. I want Rachida.”

The girls high fived as Rachida took her place behind her new captain.

The boy ground his jaw a bit. “I pick… Daniil.”

A boy from Armin’s team with incredibly thin light brown hair jogged over to stand opposite Georgie’s team.

Rachida whispered in Georgie’s ear. The tall blonde girl announced her next pick: “I’ll take Jack.”

“I thought we were doing boys versus girls?” the other captain asked.

“Nope, just pickin’ the best players first is all,” Georgie said smugly.

“Fine. I want Patrick.”

“Aww, come on Andrew,” Patrick whined. “I don’t wanna be on your team.”

“Too bad,” Georgie said, “you got picked. Minh, you can be on my team.”

“Sandra,” Andrew announced.

“Next… uh, what’s your name?” Georgie asked a boy from Jean’s team with frizzy dark hair and wide brown eyes.

“David,” he replied.

“Cool, David, you’re on my team.”

“Tony with me.”

“And that means Marisa’s on my team. Sweet. Alright, someone get a few sweatshirts or water bottles we can set up for goals. Who wants to be goalie?”

I watched as Georgie directed the other campers to set up the boundaries, the goals, and take their starting positions.

I hoped the others were skilled enough to challenge her; she seemed incredibly competitive.

Mina tapped me on the shoulder. “Hey, would you mind taking care of dinner?” she asked with an extra polite smile. “Because I would love to get in on that soccer game.”

“Yeah, I’ll make dinner,” I said lightly.

“Yes!” she squealed, pumping her fist. “I mean, thanks, Marco!”

I turned toward the non-soccer side of things to find a squabble over the Frisbees.

“Come on, why’d you take the best color?” Henry, the boy who fell on the obstacle course, whined.

“Because it’s my favorite color,” the girl said, deftly flipping the electric blue Frisbee in her hands.

“No fair, Brittany!” he complained. “It’s my favorite color, too. Why do you get it?”

“Because I grabbed it first. Don’t be a baby, just take a different color,” Brittany told him.
He grumbled but grabbed a highlighter-yellow Frisbee instead.

I shook my head lightly, somehow still surprised by such childish behavior. *They’re only eleven,* I reminded myself.

I watched one of the girls throw a wobbly, arching pass to Jean, who made a big show of doing a super delayed dive roll for it, even though it had already landed.

I snorted as he flopped dramatically on the grass, and rolled over to pick up the disc.

“Jean!” Ymir called across the clearing.

“What,” he responded as he brushed the grass off himself and floated a pass to Brittany.

“Your turn for dinner. Go,” she said with a wave of her hand.

“Oh, come on,” he whined. “You’re not doing anything, can’t we trade?”

“Nope. Boys cook tonight!” Ymir declared.

Sasha whined. “But Connie’s terrible!”

“Jean will help him,” Ymir offered, walking toward Jean to put her arm around his shoulders.

“Jean will *not,*” Jean quipped, shrugging her off.

“Hush you and go cook for the kiddies.”

“Okay, *mom,*” he said grudgingly.

“See, Marco?” Ymir called to me. “Jean calls me mom. Why can’t you call me Mama Ymir?”

“I think I should call you the Ymirinator,” I said matter-of-factly walking over to join them. Jean stifled a laugh so hard I thought he choked.

Ymir gasped out a laugh. “Clever, but please no.”

“Ymiracle?” I tried, battling against the smile that threatened to break my straight-face.

“Closer, but still no.”

“Ymirmaid?” I was starting to crack, but I fought to regain composure.

“Do I look like I wear seashell bras?” she said, arching an eyebrow.

“I was going for you might appreciate luring men to their deaths,” I said innocently.

“Knew I liked you,” Ymir said, ruffling my hair affectionately. “But keep working on that nickname.”

“Oh come on, Ymirmageddon, that was a good one,” Jean snerked.

“Ymirmageddon?” I giggled. “You didn’t tell me that one before!”

“It just came to me,” Jean said smugly.

“Both of you go cook dinner!” Ymir said with a growl that turned into a laugh pretty fast as she put
a hand in the middle of each of our backs and pushed.

Armin and Eren were already arranging firewood when Jean and I got to the fire pit.

“Hey guys,” Armin said.

“What kind of delicious edibles do we have today?” Jean asked, rubbing his hands together.

“Nothing, if we let Connie near anything,” Eren grumbled.

“Maybe Connie can boil the water?” I suggested. Surely he can’t mess that up.

“Connie can do what now?” Connie asked, heading over with Franz.

“You’re going to boil the water for the potatoes,” Jean instructed. “So all you need to do is fill this pot with water from the pump over there, hang it on the hook here, and tell someone when you see bubbles.”

“Bro, I’ve seen enough Food Network with Sasha to know that much, at least,” Connie said with a glare.

“I’ll help you carry it,” Franz offered. “It’ll get heavy with all that water.”

While they got the water set up, the rest of us headed over to the edible garden. That was one of the best parts of the second outpost: there were fresh vegetables and herbs. Though they were rarely tended to, since it was pretty squarely in no-man’s-land in the Wall forest, there were plenty of fresh vegetables for everyone.

Eren and Armin tossed a salad together, and I picked some parsley and chives to go with the potatoes.

Jean messed around with the other herbs in the garden, trying to make himself useful.

“What’s this one?” he asked, grabbing at a plant with bright green leaves.

“That’s mint,” I told him. “You can tell by the square stem. Anything with a square stem is in the mint family.”

“Why the hell are they growing mint here?”

“Well, it’s a native plant, and it has medicinal qualities,” I replied. “It’s not just for bad breath, but can also help with stomach aches, headaches, and even to soothe bug bites.”

I decided to leave out the fact that it can also treat diarrhea and gas. Some things are better left unsaid.

“Gee thanks, Ranger Rick,” Jean said with false sincerity, then letting his sarcasm show on his face.

I pulled up a small Queen Anne’s lace where it had intruded on the garden and tossed it at him.

“You asked,” I said.

I put the parsley and chives in the plastic bowl with me and tiptoed out of the garden, careful not to squash any of the plants there.
Jean followed me over to the bag of potatoes, which I picked up and carried to the water pump. The two of us scrubbed at the potatoes as best we could with bare hands, working silently but comfortably.

Dinner was just about ready half an hour later, and we sent Connie to round up the campers. About five minutes and thirty-one giggly and exhausted middle schoolers later, our quiet was completely broken, but I didn’t mind too much.

After dinner we had a campfire, featuring awful singing and exuberant but largely awful dancing from campers and counselors alike.

By nine the kids were exhausted, so we sent them off to bed.

The lady counselors headed over to the Silver Birch cabin, and we headed to Catalpa.

Connie tried to talk us all into a game of poker, but neither Armin nor I knew how to play. Franz, Jean and Eren agreed, though, so Armin and I ended up watching a very spirited and not very rule-abiding game of poker.

“That hand does not beat mine! That’s not even a thing,” Connie practically shrieked at Jean. “I have a full house, and you’re sitting over here with two sevens and a jack and telling me that trumps? Get out.”

“Nah, come on, bro, it’s a totally valid hand!” Jean defended. At first I thought he was serious, but at this point I was certain he was just trying to pull one over on Connie.

“You’re a fucking moron,” Connie said, shaking his head.

“Connie, I’m just messing with you,” Jean said, flashing Connie his famous shit-eating grin. Eren was almost doubled over in laughter.

“You son of a—” Connie swore, and stood from their makeshift card table to smack Jean in the arm.

When they settled down again, Armin got up and went to get his book from his pack.

“Did you hear that?” I asked. I could have sworn I heard someone knock at the door.

“Hear what?” Franz asked.

“Hear me handing Jean his ass again,” Connie said proudly, laying down his hand. Jean sighed heavily, apparently having lost again.

“No, I think someone’s at the door,” I said, moving to stand up.

Armin was already on his feet so he said he’d get it, and opened the door.

“Hi,” he said. “Were we being too loud?”

“No,” Teresa said. “I—Can I talk to Marco?”

I stood, concern knotting itself in my stomach. “Everything okay, Teresa?”
She gave me a sour face as I walked toward her. The grimace was enough that I knew something was wrong, but no one was in any mortal danger, either.

I gave Armin a meaningful glance to keep an eye on the card players before I went outside, closing the screen door behind me.

“What’s goin’ on?” I asked, trying to stay casual.

She shuffled her feet before settling on pointing her toes in while picked at her nails. I was starting to get nervous again, seeing the normally stoic and poised girl so upset.

“I miss my family,” she said quietly. “I want to go home.”

“Aww,” I said sympathetically. “I know it’s a long time to be away from home. What can I do to help?”

I wasn’t really sure how to help her. We were only about two weeks into camp, and there wasn’t a lot we could do about getting anyone back early until we got to Maria.

“I dunno,” she said.

“I have an idea,” I said. “Tell me if you think it might help. What if you told me about your family, and then we could think of something cool to make for them? Do you think that would help?”

Her lip quivered.

Oh no, I told myself. That idea was the opposite of helpful. Pull back, Marco!


“Do you want to come play cards with us?” I asked.

The waterworks turned on.

However strong Teresa was, her sobs were stronger. I didn’t know if it would be okay for me to hug her, so I just opened up my arm in invitation and let her decide.

She threw herself into me, and I lost my balance momentarily.

She seemed to be talking, but between her face buried in my chest and her hair covering her mouth, I had no idea what it was.

“It’s gonna be okay, Teresa,” I said in my most soothing big brother voice. “It’s perfectly normal to feel this way. But you’re a really strong and amazing person, and you’re gonna make it. And you’re going to love Maria,” I added after a moment.

She said something in reply, but again, I couldn’t understand her.

“What was that?” I asked gently.

“Mis hermanos… están solos porque… ¡están en la guardería porque no quería quedarse con ellos! ¿Cómo puedo divertirme cuando sé que están tristes? ¡Estoy una hermana terrible!”

My high school French was decidedly not helpful with a native Spanish speaker.
I craned my neck around to look through the screen door in a silent plea for help.

Franz, apparently having overheard us through the flimsy screen, was almost to the door.

“She feels like a bad sister for leaving her little brothers in daycare while she’s here at camp,” he said, explaining.

I turned around, surprised, and Teresa stared at him like he had just told her there was free ice cream.

Franz stepped outside, “¿Que hay, cariño?” I interpreted this to mean “what’s wrong” and stepped back a bit to give them some space.

Teresa started speaking to him in full speed Spanish. It looked like Franz was keeping up, though, and it looked like just being able to speak Spanish with someone was helping her recover.

I caught a few stray words here and there, and after a minute or two, Teresa was laughing again.

They chatted another minute, and then I heard Teresa whisper “gracias” to Franz, before she turned to me.

“Thanks, Marco,” she said.

“Anytime, Teresa. We’re always happy to help,” I said honestly.

“Don’t tell Jai I was crying,” she said, wiping at her tear-streaked cheeks one more time.

“Of course,” I said. “Sleep well, Teresa.”

“G’night,” she said, and turned back to her cabin.

Franz and I went back inside, and Eren and Connie’s jaws were wide open.

“Franz, you speak Spanish?” Eren asked incredulously.

“Yeah,” he said easily. “I grew up in a really Hispanic neighborhood. It was learn Spanish or have no friends. I learned Spanish.”

“Damn. I’m impressed,” Connie said. “Didn’t they have to speak English, too, though?”

“English was our school language. Spanish was what we got to speak when we were at recess or just hanging out as us kids. Besides, I went to this daycare run by a Puerto Rican lady from about age three, so it was real easy to pick up.”

“I’m kinda jealous,” Armin said. “I took Latin in high school. Thought it would be helpful for biology, but I basically just spent two years translating old poems and stuff.”

“That sounds awful, Armin,” Eren teased. “My parents made me take German to ‘uphold my heritage’ or some shit. I sucked at it, though. As soon as they started talking about *akkusativ* and all that I was zoned out.”

To my surprise, Jean offered Eren a fist bump. “Heritage speakers where ya at,” he said.

“Kirstein? You speak German too?” Eren asked.

“Nope, French. My dad lost the language battle because mom doesn’t speak any German, but dad
speaks French.”

“Oh, parlez-vous français?” Connie asked in an exaggerated American accent.

“Fuck off, Connie,” Jean said.

“What, you’re not gonna offer to give me lessons like you did for Marco?” he asked.

I sucked in a breath and glared at Connie with murder in my eyes.

“Marco just needs some help with his fluency, not an entire linguistic intervention.”


“Fuck you too, Jaeger,” Connie snapped.

“Alright, alright, everybody calm down,” I said, and looked at my watch. It still said 9:20, even though I knew it had to be at least quarter to ten. “We should get to bed soon, yeah?”

“Sorry, mom,” Eren said, “didn’t realize we were twelve still.”

“I just meant that we have to get up early in the morning, so we should start winding down,” I explained.

“He knew what the fuck you meant,” Jean said, but there wasn’t much aggression behind the words.

“Yeah, we should probably put the cards away at least. It’s not as fun when Jean just loses so badly all the time,” Connie said meaningfully.

“Oi, watch it, jackass.”

“Or what, cheri?”

“Don’t you fucking call me pet names, Conrad Springer.”

“That’s not even my real name,” Connie said with a laugh.

“Both of you shut up,” Eren said.

I was surprised that Armin hadn’t stepped in, but when I saw him sitting on his bunk across the room, his face was covered by his book. The parts of his forehead and chin that weren’t covered by the paperback were bright red, and he was shaking with silent laughter.

I shook my head and took my cargo shorts off so I was in my ‘pajamas,’ which was really just boxers and a t-shirt.

Eren waited by the light switch while the rest of us climbed into our bunks: Armin, Franz and I on the bottom bunks, and Jean and Connie on the top.

When the lights went out, no one mentioned the fact that Eren slid into the bunk with Armin.

I smiled and rolled over.

“Good night,” I said quietly.

“G’night, Freckles.”
Waking up was significantly easier than it had been since the first outpost.

Rather than relying on my steadily dying watch, I just looked outside to gauge the time. I didn’t actually want to get out of bed yet, so I just sort of hung my head over the edge of the bed until I could see through the window on the opposite wall.

The sun was just starting to rise, so sky was still predominantly the navy of nighttime, but a washed out gradient of lighter blues trailed toward the horizon.

Guessing it was about five, I rolled over onto my back and tilted my head to each side to stretch out my neck. Satisfied, I pushed my hips up off the bed, and brought my hands down to prop them up as I stretched my lower back. Finally, I threw one leg over the other and pushed on my hip to crack my back: first left, then right.

Feeling sufficiently awake, I decided to get up, even though it was still so early. I didn’t have any particular aims, I just didn’t want to lay in bed any longer.

I rolled out of bed and found my shorts over the foot rail of my bunk, where I had discarded them the night before.

I zipped and buttoned, smoothing my sleep-rumpled shirt down.

Armin and Eren were wrapped up in each other, mouths slightly agape and blanket twisted around Eren’s ankles. If it weren’t for his sock tan, it would be hard to tell who was who.

Jean snored lightly, one arm carelessly flung over the side of the bed. He would probably be numb from the elbow down when he woke up.

Jean had said that Connie was a loud snorer, but the buzz-cut boy was sleeping face down into his pillow, so the noise was pretty stifled. I could barely hear it at all.
I smiled gently and left the cabin, taking a deep breath as I stepped into the slightly hazy air of morning.

“You’re up early,” a voice said behind me.

I think I jumped three feet straight in the air, making a strangled gasping sound.

“Good morning to you, too,” Sasha laughed.

“Jeez, Sasha, you scared me!” I panted, still recovering my breath.

“Apparently. What are you doing up?” she asked.

“Could ask you the same thing,” I muttered. “I just woke up and didn’t feel like laying in bed.”

She nodded her approval. “Pretty much same here. Though I could’ve used a few more minutes in bed.”

“So why get up? It’s still early,” I commented, moving toward the fire pit to sit on one of the low stone benches there. Sasha followed.

“Eh, me and the whole ‘five more minutes’ shtick don’t really get along. Five more minutes kind of turns into five more years,” she laughed.

“Ah,” I said in understanding.

“So…” Sasha said idly.

“So,” I agreed.

“How are things?” Sasha asked eventually.

“Great!” I said. “You?”

“Good, good.”

We sat in silence for a few more minutes. I liked Sasha, but I didn’t exactly know what to talk about with her. Time passed slowly as my brain tried to churn up conversation topics. We spent all our time with each other, so there were very few stories worth sharing that the other hadn’t heard. I certainly couldn’t think of any.

Sasha, fortunately, came up with a comment. “Don’t you think it’s funny how everyone at this camp is, like, dating each other? I mean, Ymir and Christa, Reiner and Bert, Eren and Armin are up to something and even you and Jean have some kind of complicated couple thing going on. Plus, Hannah and Franz have been a matched set since they were probably seven. Am I missing anyone?”

“Jean and I aren’t a couple,” I protested.

“Whatever,” she dismissed. “Doesn’t it just seem awfully neat to you?”

It seemed like a genuine question, but it struck me as odd, like the tone of her voice was hinting at some further reason for bringing it up.

“I mean, not really?” I said hesitantly. “I guess we all just spend so much time together that we were bound to develop close relationships. Whether that’s friendship or something else just kinda
depends on the people, doesn’t it?”

“That’s the thing though! Everyone just assumes that close means a couple, don’t they? I mean, why can’t we just be really close friends with people? Why does it always have to be about romance?”

Her voice was smaller than I’d ever heard it, and her normally bright and open face was replaced by a fierce look of concentration.

“Sasha,” I said carefully, “is this about—“

“Of course it’s about me and Connie!” she cried out, kicking her legs out in exasperation. She took a big breath and let it out quickly, her lips buzzing as the air rushed out. “Marco, I’m so sorry for teasing you all the time about Jean, because Ymir was been harassing me all last night about whether or not we’re dating and it’s … it’s just so unfair!”

“Did you tell Ymir that you don’t like it? She’s usually pretty good about backing off if you tell her she’s gone too far,” I said, though I was worried. Ymir often thought that her ideas were somehow more correct than others’, especially when it came to dating and relationships.

“No, I mean, not in so many words. Connie always just plays along like it’s a huge joke,” she pouted. “But honestly, we’re just friends. Connie’s like my brother. We actually talked about it last summer… Like, I asked if he was into me like that because I was worried that we couldn’t be friends if one of us had a crush on the other.”

She trailed off, so I waited for her to keep talking. When it seemed like she had gotten lost in her thoughts, I nudged her back to the conversation.

“And what happened?” I prompted.

“We kissed once just to try it, and it was weird, and we both agreed that we were more like siblings and that we shouldn’t ever do that again,” she laughed, though it lacked her usual exuberance.

“Then there you go,” I said. “If you two talked about it and you’re on the same page, then that’s what you are. If you want me to tell Ymir to back off, I will; I really don’t mind.”

“No, it’s fine, I can—actually, yeah. Would you? Because I don’t really want to bring it up with her again. I just get so defensive. Why does everyone think Conn and me are dating?” I could tell how hard she was trying to cover up how much this was upsetting her.

“I think people are just conditioned to think that close friendship, especially between a guy and a girl, has to mean dating,” I said carefully. “We don’t see enough examples of opposite sex friendships out there. How many chick flicks have you seen where the girl eventually falls for her best friend who’s been ‘right here all along?’ It’s a Hollywood staple.”

Sasha groaned.

“But it doesn’t have to be you,” I concluded.

She slumped over onto my shoulder.

“Marco, you’re amazing, and don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.” I could hear the smile back in her voice.

“I won’t,” I promised.
I wrapped my arm around her shoulder so she didn’t put it to sleep, and we sat like that until Sasha complained that her neck was hurting and she sat up.

She rolled her head to the side, a pleasant and slightly sleepy smile on her round face. Suddenly, she gasped.

“Ooh, look!” Sasha whispered, pointing up into the trees. “A blue jay!”

I craned to catch a glimpse of the bird, even though I had seen hundreds of blue jays in my life. “Where?” I asked.

“Aww, it just flew away again.”

I sighed in disappointment.

“Bummer,” she said. “It was a pretty one.”

“I’m sure it was,” I agreed.

“Marco,” Sasha hummed. “Tell me something: how does someone as nice and easy-going and so great end up friends with a shit-stain like Jean? Or even Ymir, I mean… she’s pretty rough and let’s be honest, kind of aggressive. Seems like you would’ve steered clear of her, is all.”

“Heh, well, I’ve been friends with Ymir for a long time now,” I explained. “At first, I was pretty overwhelmed by her, but she really does mean well. She’s… a lot to take in, but you get used to it, I guess. Not in a ‘I can ignore the rough parts’ way, but like, in a ‘I appreciate those parts’ way.”

“Really?” Sasha asked.

“I guess I do have a kind of reputation as the sheltered, super-nice type person,” I shrugged. I thought of myself as a nice person, and I did my best to be kind to everyone. But I never thought of myself as the ‘super-nice guy’; I thought that was just being a decent human being.

I guess somewhere along the line—maybe in middle school—I started to buy into it too. Maybe it was when Julia came along and I became a big brother that I decided to go along with it. I was already kind of shy and bookish, and I wanted to make my parents happy. Having a baby sister around was a lot of work for them, so I just wanted to do my duty as older brother.

I did chores, I did my homework without being asked, and I did my part to raise Julia, too. I remember changing her diapers when I was twelve because my mom just looked so tired and I thought it would help.

“You’re such a good boy, Marco,” she would tell me. “Your father and I are so proud of you.”

So I did it whenever I could. I offered to cook dinner, do laundry, anything I could. I didn’t really have friends other than Bert, at least none that I spent time outside of school with, so it was easy. I was a good student, so my grades never suffered, and I became the super-nice person that I thought I had to be.

I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with that, but I knew that I was actively tamping down other impulses—like going out to the movies, staying up late, making other friends, even—because I didn’t think my parents would want that.

It’s why I still haven’t come out to them.
“Anyway,” I said, snapping out of my reverie, “I really like that side to Ymir. She’s brutally honest but I really appreciate her openness and that she won’t put up with any crap. Like, if I’m trying to downplay something that’s upset me, she’s like ‘no! Let it out! Tell the world you’re pissed!’ and sometimes, I really need that.”

Sensing that I was getting a little more personal than I intended, I added, “Plus, she’s pretty hilarious.”

“Yes, I can see that,” Sasha said with a gentle laugh. “You know who else is funny?”

“Hmm?” I asked, shifting my position on the hard bench.

“All right,” Sasha said wistfully.

“Actually yeah, that makes sense. She has a great laugh, too. At the campfire when we were all signing, she was a riot,” I nodded, remembering Annie’s whole-hearted chuckle.

“She’s a good kisser, too,” Sasha said so quietly I wasn’t sure I heard correctly.

“What?” I asked. “I mean… I just…”

“No, no, it’s fine. It was kinda unexpected?” she said, voice going up to a near squeak at the end.

“How did this um… transpire?” I asked after a moment.

“Last night, we were all talking about random shit in the cabin, and Ymir was… kinda bullying me about Connie. I was trying to get her off my back. So I said, ‘Conn and I kissed once, decided it wasn’t us.’ And Ymir’s like, ‘that doesn’t mean anything, boys are naturally bad kissers.’ So I asked if that was how she figured she was a lesbian, and she said kind of.

“So Annie pipes up and says, ‘Sasha, are you sure you’re straight?’ And like, fuck, I don’t know. I know girls are pretty, but boys are too, and I just don’t fucking know. So I said ‘I guess I’m not sure.’ And then Annie gave me this totally wicked and carnivorous smile, licks her lips and gives me the eyebrow waggle and goes, ‘wanna find out?’”

My jaw dropped and I laughed awkwardly, for lack of a better reaction.

“So yeah, I made out with Annie last night. Ymir might be on to something about boys being bad kissers,” She added absently.

“So, um… are you… I mean, how do you feel about it, I guess is what I’m trying to ask?” My cheeks were hot, but I was strangely curious.

“It was fun, but I don’t think I’m a lesbian. Or bi, which is what Annie said she is. But I figure, it was a good experience, and she was damn skilled with her tongue. So really, it all worked out.” Sasha sounded surprisingly cavalier about the whole thing. I was impressed: I spent months wondering what my own sexuality was, and here she was deciding it all on a make-out session.

I slumped a bit on the bench, my eyes half focused on a mushroom that was growing about a foot from the bench in front of me as my thoughts wandered off.

I wondered how that kiss with Jean had impacted him. Was that him experimenting? He told me that he wanted to kiss me… was it because he was trying to explore his sexuality? I didn’t really want to be an experiment, but maybe Jean needed that.
If he just wanted to kiss me to prove a point, I didn’t think it would have been so… passionate. That wasn’t a peck on the lips we shared behind the laundry room, it was soft and intimate and…

“Fuck,” I whispered.

“Marco?” Sasha said, concerned.

“I—sorry, I didn’t mean to swear. It’s nothing,” I said quickly.

“You just dropped an f-bomb so don’t give me that ‘nothing’s wrong’ crap.” She moved closer to me, ducking her head down to try to catch my gaze.

“Um… do you ever realize like, all at once, a bunch of things that you missed before?” I asked.

“Sure. What you thinkin’ bout?” she asked knowingly. She was trying to make me say it.

I looked at her guiltily. “How much do you know?” I asked instead.

“Actual facts? Maybe not many. Rumors I’ve heard and observations I’ve made? A lot. I don’t want to pry but if you’re looking for someone to talk to…”

“No, that’s alright. I just need to think about some stuff, I guess. I’m gonna go for a walk,” I announced in a hurry.

My knees cracked as I stood and set off toward the path. I didn’t go far, but I knew that Sasha wasn’t the person I wanted to have this conversation with.

When I had been gone about ten minutes, I decided it was long enough. I checked my watch before heading back to wake Jean up and get the day started.

If I had learned anything from this whole shitstorm, it was that I shouldn’t be left alone with my thoughts too long. I mean, sure, I needed to be a little more self-aware and critical of my own thoughts.

But more important than that, I needed to listen to Jean, and maybe not just his words: I needed to listen to his body language.

I needed to listen to that kiss.

X

After breakfast, we organized ourselves back into our original teams. Today’s activity was building a human knot.

It was simple: First team to untangle themselves got first place points; the second team finished got second place points, and so on.

To demonstrate the proper way to arrange and untangle the knot, though, Ymir asked a few of us counselors to demonstrate.

“Basically, you hold hands with two other people in the circle. It can be anyone except the person right next to you. So,” she said, moving me from her right side to across our little circle, “if I really want to hold hands with Marco, he can’t be standing next to me.”

Ymir stuck out her hand and I held it.
“And I’ll also take Connie’s hand. Great, so I have two partners, and now Marco and Connie have to hold hands with someone else in the circle. But Marco can’t hold Annie’s hand, because she’s right next to him. Make sense? Marco, take Jean’s hand, please.”

I blushed and hesitated a second, but Jean held out his hand immediately. *It’s just a demonstration for a game, you idiot,* I reprimanded myself.

“Jean can hold Annie’s hand, though—“ she gestured with her head for Jean and Annie to clasp hands—“since they’re not next to each other.”

Annie grabbed Sasha’s hand with a wink, and Sasha took Connie’s other hand.

“Perfect!” Ymir chirped. “So we’re all holding hands with two different people and not with someone directly next to us. Now, we have to untangle ourselves. This is the tough part!”

The six of us ran our eyes over the lattice-work of hands, and we started shifting around to try to open up the circle.

Sasha ducked under Ymir’s and my hands, and I moved to my left. Jean had to step over Connie’s and Ymir’s arms, since he was too tall for Connie to reach over his head with his other hand linked to Sasha.

This move didn’t seem to really solve anything, so Jean moved back, and Connie went under Jean’s and my hands.

We still seemed pretty twisted up, until Annie sighed.

The rest of us turned to Annie.

“Let me come under you two,” Annie said to Ymir and Connie, “and then Marco you come around behind me to my right. Sasha, step closer and go under Marco and Ymir…”

We shifted to follow Annie’s directions, and she continued to direct us until we were, surprisingly, standing in a circle with not a single crossed arm.

“And there you have it!” Ymir said, preening as though it was thanks to her that we were now successfully untangled. “Now, in just a second you’ll form your own knots, but do not start untangling until we tell you to go. If you move before we tell you to start, your whole team will be disqualified!” she menaced.

“The first team to untangle gets 10 points, second team gets 8, third gets 6, and so on. Got it?”

The kids chorused a resounding “yeah” and moved into their groups to link hands and make their knots.

When we had inspect our group and made sure that no one was holding hands with the person next to them, Mina and I held out a thumbs up. When all six teams’ leaders had their thumbs up, Ymir shouted a countdown.

“Three! Two! One! GO!” she said.

A few kids shrieked, but moved around. I watched with amusement as our group twisted and shifted. They seemed to be trying the “novice Rubik’s cube solver” method: if you just move the parts around fast enough, it has to work out!
Instead, it seemed like they just got more and more tangled. Eli tried to take charge as Annie had, but he wasn’t as successful as she had been, and though it seemed like he managed to get the group to undo all the movements they had made from the start, they were no closer to untangling.

I heard a barking, delighted laugh and whipped my head over to see Jean in peals of laughter as he watched his group scramble to untwist their arms. He was honest to god holding his stomach, head thrown back, eyes crinkled shut with the size of the smile on his face as he practically guffawed.

It was one of the most beautiful sights I had ever seen.

The cause for his outburst seemed to the utter mess of his squad. One of the kids had fallen down, and of course their linked hands had brought half the rest of the group tumbling to the ground.

Watching Jean enjoy himself so thoroughly brought a smile to my face.

*I want to be the one to make him laugh like that.* The thought came unbidden, and I shook my head to watch my group, which had started to make progress since following Eli’s advice.

Hannah and Franz’s team seemed to be doing the best; they were moving quietly and calmly, and only two kids had their hands still twisted around, but they would likely figure it out in a moment.

Eli had noticed their progress, though, and started to urge the Trail Blazers a little stronger.

His rush to beat them distracted him, though, and he twisted Minh and Georgie up again just as Team Awesome held up their linked hands in celebration.

“First place is Team Awesome!” Ymir shouted. “Who’s gonna be second?”

“Come on, guys!” Eli whined. “Jai, move under Minh and Georgie—there, and then Teresa come in front of me and step over – yes!”

They untangled themselves at last.

“Second place right here!” I called to Ymir. My group held up their untangled arms as proof.

A groan came from Connie and Sasha’s group as they untangled seconds after our squad did.

Next came Jean and Ymir’s kids, Armin and Annie’s, and finally Eren and Mikasa’s.

“Third place isn’t bad, considering half your team fell down and could barely stand up in the middle,” I teased Jean.

“Dude, that was the funniest shit I’ve seen in months,” he said, a small chuckle escaping as he remembered the scene.

“Language,” I said absently.

“Whoops. Eh, they weren’t listening. It’s fine.”

“Don’t you know rule one about child care, Jean? They’re *always* listening,” I deadpanned.

“Fine, that was the funniest excrement I’ve seen in months.”

“When you say it like that, it just sounds gross,” I said with a grimace.

“See? The first way was better,” he grinned.
I loved that grin. It was the one he made when he knew he was being a smart-ass and he wanted
you to call him out on it. It was a wide, toothy grin, and both sides of his mouth rose evenly, unlike
his “I told you so” smirk, where only the right side went up and he kind of puckered his lips.

The smirk was cute, but the grin was dazzling.

Ymir was talking again, but I was barely paying attention.

Jean elbowed me gently, his grin fading slowly, to bring my attention back.

Ymir wanted to see how big of a human knot we could untangle.

“So let’s do like, two huge knots, yeah?” she said enthusiastically.

A few kids groaned, but a decent enough amount clapped and sounded excited, so it looked like we
were going to try it.

The Bomb Squad, A Team, and the Meme Team formed one group, so the Trail Blazers, Heroes
and Zeros, and Team Awesome made the other.

We squad leaders stood back and let the more enthusiastic kids direct the group of sixteen to join
hands and begin twisting, reaching, and stretching to find the elusive path to a perfect circle.

Both groups were making good progress, and Jean shouted little cheers of encouragement on
occasion to my left while Ymir clapped and laughed on my right.

I knew I was looking at him with googly, love-sick eyes, but I couldn’t bring myself to stop. I
threw out my own cheers, or joined in with Jean’s, congratulating them when they made a good
move.

“Baby Boy,” Ymir whispered in my ear. “Your gay is showing awfully strong right now.”

“Huh?” I asked, dazed.

“Tone down the heart eyes, you’re making me nauseous,” she teased.

I closed my eyes for a second and sighed. I still hadn’t told Ymir about our talk, and definitely not
about our kiss. I wasn’t entirely convinced that I should, but the urge to spill my secret to her was
rising at an alarming rate.

“Unless you have something to tell me,” Ymir suggested again.

“Later,” I told her.

“Oh, shit! Really?” she said in an excited whisper.

I rolled my eyes. “Not like you’re thinking.”

“Damn. But hey, progress is progress, Baby Boy.”

“If you can call it that. Just… lunch?”

“Of course,” she grinned.

Ymir’s grin, though more wolfish and slightly villainous, reminded me of Jean’s, and I smiled
fondly.
“No, no, no! Go back!” Jean shouted.

I focused back on the quickly unraveling human knot of campers.

The other group was nearly done, probably because Annie had taken charge and untangled them with her concise instructions. I got the impression that Annie would be good at chess, too, given how well she could envision and plan out all these moves.

A cheer went up as they finished, and then they circled around to watch our group.

Eli was trying to untangle two girls from Hannah and Franz’s team. When he saw Annie approaching, his voice wavered a bit on his instructions.

Annie made a slight movement with her chin, indicating her approval of his directions, and he smiled and blushed a light pink.

Kids are so funny. They’re terrible liars and worse whisperers, and they wear their emotions on their sleeves. It’s easy to tell what they’re thinking a lot of the time, though it’s also easy to hurt their feelings.

One of the funniest phenomena I’ve noticed with kids, though, is their propensity to develop crushes on teachers, their friends’ older siblings, or in this case, camp counselors. Most kids, and it seemed like middle schoolers especially, were constantly fighting between being a kid and wanting to be a grown up.

I certainly understood the desire to grow up, thanks to my becoming a big brother. I can’t say I remember having a crush on any teachers or anything, but I understood when Bert told me in seventh grade that he thought our math teacher was beautiful and he wanted to marry her.

The girls in Jean’s group certainly had a crush on him, and now it looked like Eli had some sort of crush on Annie. Maybe it was her sharp intellect, because it was probably not her friendly demeanor that interested him.

I shook my head, trying not to giggle too much as Eli continued to seek Annie’s approval of his detangling methods.

Her nods were subtle, and when she didn’t agree with a move she just narrowed her eyes and titled her head slightly, as though she simply wanted him to reconsider instead of saying he was outright wrong.

A few minutes later, and he had successfully untangled everyone to the point that they could figure out the rest themselves, and moved faster than his instructions.

The kids who had enjoyed it clapped and cheered, while the less enthusiastic ones simply looked relieved that it was over.

Ymir told the kids to circle up for a quick pep talk before they had free time.

“So, what did we learn from our human knot adventures?” she asked.

Alex raised her hand. “That Andrew has really sweaty hands.”

“Hey!” a boy who must have been Andrew exclaimed. “That was your sweaty hand.”

“Was not,” she shot back.
“Stop,” Ymir said sternly, holding up her hand. “It’s hot out, you all have sweaty hands. Does someone have an actual thing they learned?”

Jai raised his hand this time. “We learned about problem solving and teamwork,” he said in a way that suggested he thought his was the best answer in the world.

“Yes, good,” Ymir said, and Jai preened. “And how did you solve the problem? What strategies did you use?”

“We just did what Annie told us to do,” Jack, a boy from Sasha and Connie’s team, said in a bored tone.

“Don’t be a fart,” Ymir said impatiently. “What about before Annie was helping? What did you do as a group?”

“We tried a bunch of stuff to see if it would work,” Rachida said. “Trial and error.”

“Thank you, Rachida,” Ymir said, glaring meaningfully at Jack. “That’s a great problem-solving strategy. Anyone else?”

“Well, I tried to kinda plan it out?” Eli said. “Sort of like what Rachida said, but it wasn’t just random movements. I tried to think about where people would go if they made the move, and if it would be helpful or not.”

“Great! Planning ahead, another good strategy,” Ymir praised.

“We didn’t try to solve the whole thing at once,” Minh said. “We focused on one section at a time.”

“Yes!” Ymir enthused. “Especially in the bigger group, you couldn’t just immediately untangle everyone, you had to pick somewhere to start, untangle that section, and go from there. Baby steps: awesome. Anything else?”

“I just wanted to make a quick comment,” Annie said. “I know I kinda took over the second group there, but really any of you could have done what I did. You have to take it in little steps, that’s true, but you also have to look at the big picture. Any of you play chess?” she asked.

I knew it! I mentally congratulated myself.

A couple kids nodded.

“In chess, it’s tempting to just take out the pieces that are right in front of you. But what’s more important is to remember the end goal: look at the whole picture, and plan ahead. Some of the moves I had you guys do seemed like we were making it more tangled, but in the end, it worked out, right?”

The kids nodded again and mumbled agreement.


Ymir nodded her approval at Annie’s little speech, though, and she clapped her hands together firmly. “Alright, thank you for your participation and awesomeness. It’s about quarter after eleven,” she said, looking at her watch, “so you guys have forty five minutes of free time till lunch. Please stay within sight of the cabins.”
The kids dispersed and the squad leaders either sat on the stone benches by the fire pit or stood around the edges of the campground.

Jean got dragged into playing some game with the three girls from his group, and Ymir was tending to a gnarly splinter on one of her campers, so I sat and talked to Mina a bit.

“There’s just one thing I don’t like about this camp,” Mina commented idly.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“No Mexican food. No spicy food of any kind. It’s all so bland and flavorless.”

“The beef jerky isn’t cuttin’ it for you?” I joked.

“Not even remotely,” she groaned. “I know the kids hate it too, but they’ve been pretty decent about not whining too much.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. But we have to carry all the food with us in this heat, so we’re kinda limited on options, yknow?”

“They should install a pneumatic tunnel to deliver food out to us,” Mina said matter-of-factly.

“A what?”

“There’s this tunnel that connects San Francisco to New York City,” she explained. “It works using only air pressure and gravity. They use it to deliver burritos.”

“That sounds like something The Onion made up.”

“It’s legit!” she said emphatically. “It was designed to deliver mail across the country, but it took so long to put together that airplanes were better. Plus it superheated the mail and burned it. But with burritos, it’s perfect!”

“What a time to be alive,” I laughed. “Man, now I want burritos. Thanks a lot, Mina.”

“You’re welcome,” she said with a wink. “So what about you, what’s the worst thing about this camp for you?”

*Messing up my relationship with Jean,* I thought bitterly. *Getting too caught up in my daydreams to be a good friend.*

“Oh, probably the heat,” I said instead. “I hate that we get so sweaty, I feel like I smell awful literally all the time and we don’t get nearly enough chances to bathe.”

“Too true,” she agreed. “After a while, though, you get desensitized to the smell I think. I mean, now that you mention it, yeah, I probably reek. But it’s not like, constantly on my mind like it was the first couple days.”

“Heh, nice pun,” I said.

“What pun?”

“You said de-scent-sitizied,” I giggled.

“Oh my gosh, Marco. That was bad,” she groaned, laughing despite herself.
“But you still laughed.”

“Against my better judgment.”

“Looks like you need better judgment then,” I returned.

“You’re too much,” Mina teased. Her smile was big and genuine, and the freckles on her cheekbones reminded me of my sister.

My face softened a bit when I thought about Julia. I sighed.

“What’cha thinking about?” Mina asked. “You look really serious all of a sudden.”

“You just reminded me of my sister, is all. I hope she’s doing alright back at Sina.”

“I’m sure she’ll be fine,” Mina assured me. “She’s at a great camp with great people looking after her. Didn’t you say she had already made friends when we left?”

“Yeah, but…” I trailed off, not sure what the ‘but’ was.

“Marco, if she’s anywhere near as amazing as you, she’s gonna be just fine. It’s natural to worry about her, and I can tell you’re an amazing older brother. But I’m sure she’s having a great time.” Her voice was calm and warm, and I was really grateful that Mina was my friend.

We weren’t close, maybe, but she was fun to talk to, and a genuinely good person from what I could tell.

Not a bad person to have shared my first kiss with, but she paled in comparison to my second.

That kiss.

I absently licked my lips at the memory: his firm, smooth lips against my own, the soft noises he had made… did he use tongue? What had he smelled like? The memory was getting blurred between fantasy and reality.

Probably all for the best, since I really just needed to stop thinking about it. At least now it was more like a dull ache in my chest now, instead of the sharp, stabbing, “I-can’t-handle-it-because-it-won’t-lead-to-anything” pain from the first couple days afterwards.

“Marco?” Mina asked. “You’re getting serious again.”

“Shoot, sorry,” I said quickly.

“Something else on your mind?” she asked. I couldn’t tell if Mina actually wanted to hear about my problems or was just trying to be compassionate. Either way, she wasn’t the person to talk to. I didn’t want to make her uncomfortable talking about my love life (or lack thereof).

“Yeah,” I told her finally. “But it’s…”

“I understand,” she said. “You should talk to someone, though: You look like you’re going to explode.”

“Nah,” I said. “I’ll be alright. I’m just… gonna ask Ymir when lunch is.”

“Okay, see you,” Mina said.
I wasn’t fooling her one bit.

X

By the time the kids were finishing up lunch—an odd sort of eggy casserole that Ymir swore she followed the recipe for—I thought I really might explode. I kept stealing furtive glances at my freckled friend, trying to gauge the right moment to approach her.

I waited for the kids to clean up their dishes and to be dismissed to free time, and then I made my move.

I sidled up to her as she supervised the kids climbing some of the smaller trees near the edge of the path.

“Hey, Freckle-Frackle.” I tried to say it casually, but my nerves betrayed me and it was more of an uneven squeak.

“Really?” Ymir said, rolling her eyes. “Okay, fine. What’s up, Baby Boy?”

“Can we talk?” I asked. I wasn’t sure why I felt so nervous. Maybe it was because I knew Ymir would see right through me and she would call me out in every way she knew how when I told her what a jackass I had been to Jean.

“Of course!” she said, then turned to the clearing near the cabins. “Hey, Sash! Watch the kids in the trees for me, would you? Don’t let them break their necks.”

Sasha jogged over to where Ymir and I were. “Why can’t you watch them?” she asked skeptically.

“Marco-baby and I are going on a short character-developing fieldtrip,” she explained.

“Yeah, okay Zuko,” Sasha smirked, but she turned to watch the kids in the trees. “It’s just these five kids, right?” Sasha asked.

“Yup,” Ymir confirmed. “Back in a bit.”

She looped her arm through mine and led me up the trail a ways until we found a decent place to sit. We were only about five minutes from the outpost, but it was nice to not hear the chatter and shrieking of children.

“So, do you finally have your thoughts in order enough to seek advice from Mama Ymir?” she asked.

“Well, it’s less advice and more just that I need to talk it through with someone else because it’s kind of killing me? Well, maybe killing me is a bit strong, but—“

“What happened?” Ymir asked seriously. “You haven’t told me anything since you switched tents. That’s not like you.”

“Okay, so the short version is that Jean and I talked and he sort of asked—no, he actually asked if I wanted him to kiss me, and the way he said it sounded odd to me. Like, it sounded like he didn’t really want to kiss me? Maybe he was just trying to figure out my feelings.

“Anyway, he told me that he knew I was gay, and thought that because we were friends and I was gay, that meant that we should kiss. And I… kind of completely shut him down.”

“Damn. That’s kind of like anti no-homo though,” she added.
“Ugh, that’s exactly what Armin said!” I moaned.

“You told Armin before you told me?” Ymir asked, slightly offended.

“I needed a more sympathetic ear first, I think,” I explained. “You always hit me straight on with the truth, and I like that, but I was kind of overwhelmed. I needed a softer sounding board the first time.”

“Fine. Okay, what happened next? Because you two have seemed pretty buddy-buddy other than not tenting together,” she said, pouting a little.

“Well, we talked the next morning, and he called me out for being a bad listener and a bad friend. I had gotten so caught up in my imagination, how I thought things would play out, that I didn’t really listen when he tried to tell me what he was feeling.”

“Good for Jean,” Ymir said. “You are a wonderful human being, Baby Boy, but sometimes you need a good calling out. You were pretty caught up in your own little world, weren’t you?”

I blushed a little. “Yeah. And um… after he told me that, he said that I needed to trust him. And then he—” I gathered my courage “—he kissed me.”

Ymir sucked in a breath and let out a high-pitched keening noise. “You did the two-mouth tango?”

I groaned and buried my face in my hands, curling over.

“Can I start calling him Jean Kiss-stein?”

“Absolutely not,” I mumbled into my lap.

“Was it good?” she asked mischievously.

I chanced a glance up at her and she flicked her tongue at me suggestively.

I sighed and sat up straight again. “It was amazing.”

“Ahhh!” she said excitedly, slapping my arm playfully. “Give me the details!”

“Ymir…” I warned.

She was practically vibrating with energy. “Why didn’t you tell me this before? This is incredibly important information, Baby Boy!”

“Because it didn’t… it didn’t end there.”

Ymir’s face went dead serious. “Oh my god, did my Baby Boy become a Baby Man?”

“No! Not like that!” I said quickly, blushing profusely. “I mean… when he pulled away from the kiss, he went back to normal. He was like, ‘okay, we’re friends again. Time to make breakfast.’ And he’s been acting like it didn’t happen ever since.”

“Ahh, I see,” she nodded slowly. “That is quite the pickle.”

“Yeah. And when I tried to bring it up again, he told me that I just needed to let it simmer for a while. To stop bringing it up.”

“Yeah, you mentioned not wanting to rehash the same conversation,” she said thoughtfully. “So
what’s changed?”

“I’m not sure,” I admitted. “I mean, I feel better about it. Clearer, I mean. And we’ve still been talking and being friends, and I’ve been working on being a better listener to him. Letting him tell me what he thinks and feels instead of just guessing or assuming.”

“Jean actually tells you his feelings?” Ymir asked, incredulous. “I mean, I know you guys are friends, but he seems to keep that shit locked down pretty tight.”

“He does sometimes, but when I ask, he always tells me. Sometimes even when I don’t. He trusts me, I think. He knows that I won’t make fun of him or belittle his feelings.” I could hear the pride in my voice, but I didn’t care. I was proud that Jean trusted me. I was proud that he told me things he didn’t tell anyone else.

“And you’re sure he’s not actually into you? I mean, the kid’s been repressing feelings for who knows how long. Who’s to say that he didn’t just royally fuck up articulating his feelings for you?”

“I don’t even know,” I said in a tiny voice.

“Well, then it sounds like you need to do some more listening,” Ymir suggested. “He clearly cares about you. Like, crazy cares about you. And damn if he isn’t one of the strongest people I’ve ever met, because if I kissed someone that I care about that much, I wouldn’t be able to pretend it didn’t happen just to maintain a friendship or whatever. I would’ve totally self-destructed.”

“You think so?” I asked.

“Damn straight. Most people would be at least a little awkward, don’t you think? If he pushed all that out of the way just to stay friends, he’s in deep.”

Jean’s words echoed in my head: *That’s what you wanted, right? For me to pretend it didn’t happen? So that’s what I’m doing.*

Would he be angry at me for bringing it up again?

*Just fucking let me be a good friend. You won’t let me do anything else.*

Did that mean he wanted to do something else, but he thought I didn’t want that?

What the hell had that kiss done to me?

What had it done to Jean?

X

Armin and I decided that evening back in the Catalpa cabin that poker was not allowed anymore, especially since Connie kept pushing for the strip version.

“Out of the question!” Armin had yelped. “Give me the cards.”

“Aww, but mom!” Connie whined.

“No. Give me the cards, you dirty bird.” Armin demanded, flushing.

Jean just chuckled, and flopped onto my bunk.

“Get your grody boots off my blanket,” I tsked, swatting at his feet.
He rotated so he was lying perpendicularly and his hips hung over the edge of the bed and he lifted his head sleepily to smile at me. “Better?”

“Yes, thank you,” I replied.

“Have you been sleeping alright?” I asked after a moment, smoothing down my blanket where Jean had rumpled it. “Your eyes are all red and you’ve been yawning a lot.”

“Eh, last night was better,” he said, sitting up and folding his left knee, careful to keep his boot off my sleeping bag. “I didn’t enjoy sleeping in the tent as much after you left.”

“Why not?” I asked. Did he miss me? Did my presence soothe him to sleep? I frowned a little at the desperateness of my own thoughts.

“Marco, I’ve come to a realization during our time in the bunks here at the murder cabins.”

"Murder cabins?” I asked in confusion.

“Shh, Marco,” he scolded jokingly, “I’m trying to share my deep inner thoughts here.”

“My apologies,” I said lightly. “Please tell me about your deep murder cabin thoughts.”

“You’ve gotta switch back with me, Marco.” Jean said desperately, grabbing fistfuls of my shirt and shaking me lightly.

“Hah?” I stuttered.

“Connie snores like a damn jackhammer, I’m gonna lose it!” he moaned, exasperated. “Save me, Marco-wan Kenobi. You’re my only hope!”

I started giggling uncontrollably. “Does that make you Princess Leia then?”

“Shut up and switch back with Connie tomorrow,” he whined.

“Okay,” I said, humming happily I would get to sleep next to Jean again. I would watch his face soften and his hands curl under his cheek while he slept. I would wake him with a gentle touch again and watch his eyes flutter open, knowing I was the first thing he saw every day.

My mind flashed back to what Bert had told me back at Sina: First thing in the morning, last thing at night.

I smiled.

“Really?” he asked in a quieter voice. “You’re not pissed at me for kicking you out?”

“Of course not, Jean,” I assured him. “I mean, I kinda deserved it, and you were well within your right to do it. But that doesn’t mean I’m not happy to switch back.”

“Good,” Jean said a bit awkwardly. “I mean, thanks.”

I smiled warmly and wished I could hug him. But with the other counselors in the cabin, chatting amiably as they were, I didn’t think Jean would want to.

So I held back.

“Well, I’m gonna do final rounds,” I announced, “then we should all probably get some sleep.”
“Good plan,” Franz said. “Do you want me to come with?”

“I’ll go,” Jean offered immediately.

“Have fun with the mosquitoes, then,” Franz chuckled. “Better you than me.”

Jean slid off my bunk and followed me out the door. We forgot to hold the door as it closed, and the screen slammed with a clatter.


Jean and I split up to check on the boys’ cabins. Jean went to Burr Oak cabin, and I took Elm cabin next door.

I opened the door as quietly as I could, and was happy to see that the lights were off. After a quick headcount, I found all eight boys safe and sound, asleep, or at least pretending pretty convincingly, in their bunks.

I smiled and walked back out the door.

I waited for Jean to finish his inspection of Burr Oak, and he closed the door as quietly as I did.

“All good?” I asked.

“Sleeping like a bunch of babies,” he smirked.

“Babies don’t really sleep that well,” I commented.

“You know what I meant,” he said, nudging me with an elbow.

“Still fun to tease you, though,” I said with a grin.

“You have the others all fooled, but not me,” Jean said seriously. “You’re secretly a devious little jackass.”

“What?” I said with mock innocence. “I am offended, Jean Kirstein.” I clutched at my heart dramatically.

“No you’re not.”

“Nah, I’m really not,” I laughed.

Jean slung an arm around my shoulders. “You’re a nerd.”

“So are you,” I reminded him, and tentatively put my arm around his waist in a side hug.

“But I’m a cool nerd, you’re just a straight up nerd.” To my surprise, he leaned into my touch.

“Sure, Jean. Whatever you say,” I said in a sing-songy voice.

We walked back to our cabin like that, wrapped up in each other like a real couple.

He pulled away to hold the door open as we entered the cabin, but I could still feel his warmth from where he had pressed against me.

I had it so bad for Jean.
In the morning, we packed up the campers early, and after a quick breakfast we hit the trail. Ymir said she smelled rain in the air again, so she wanted us to make as much progress as we could before a storm rolled in.

There were more hills between the second outpost and Maria, but only for the first couple of days. We got some reprieve until a half-day before we got to Maria, when we would climb to the zipline post and arrive at our halfway point.

First, though, we had to make it through the hilly part of the route, and in the humidity and gusting winds caused by the approaching storm, the kids were making even slower progress than expected.

It still hadn’t started raining when Ymir decided to break for lunch, though heavy clouds were gathering overhead. I estimated we had less than an hour till the rain started.

“Are we going to keep walking through the rain?” I asked Ymir as I dished up the rice and bean casserole to my campers.

“It looks like a fast storm, given how quickly those clouds came through,” she commented, looking at the sky once more. “I was thinking we could set up a quick campsite to wait it out and then get another mile or so in, depending on how long it lasts.”

“Works for me,” I said. “I’ll let Mina know. Er, are we going to do it right after lunch?”

“Yeah,” Ymir confirmed. “When they’re done eating and cleaned up, they can set up their tents.”

“Got it.”

I took my bowl to the picnic table where Jean was waiting for me and sat down. We chatted with Sasha and Connie about Marvel movies versus comics, but I backed out when Jean and Sasha got too heated about it.

“Cinematic verse has nothing on the comics!” Sasha asserted.

“That’s such a joke! Comics are limited by two dimensions, and an incredibly short format,” Jean asserted in response.

“But movies take too many liberties, diverging from canon and stuff,” Sasha sighed. “Plus they take forever to get released. I wait a month for my Ms Marvel updates. You have fun waiting two years for your next Captain America movie. Oh! And that’s another thing. Can we talk about the quite frankly disgusting lack of variety in the movies Marvel chooses to make?”

Jean clenched his fists and was about to launch into a no-doubt stunning rebuttal when the first raindrops fell.

A couple girls shrieked at the cold water splattering on their arms and in their food.

“Oh, relax! It’s rain, it’s not going to kill you,” Ymir chided.

It actually felt wonderful on my too-warm skin, and I tipped my head back to let it fall on more of my skin.

A drop splashed on my throat and I practically moaned.

“Whoa there, Tiger,” Jean said to me with a soft chuckle.
My head snapped up and my eyes sprang open. He was smirking at me.

“Don’t get too excited, there’s kids around,” he teased in a gruff whisper that was almost a growl.

I made a small choking sound. “Hghwat? I’m not--”

“Relax, Marco,” Jean said firmly. “It was a joke.”

“I know that,” I snapped.

Jean muttered something under his breath that I couldn’t hear.

“What?” I asked, a bit indignantly.

“Nothing,” he said, but a faint blush spread across his cheeks.

“That’s not nothing, you’re blushing!” I gasped in surprise.

“Don’t worry about it, Bodt,” he said, regaining his composure.

A raindrop landed in my eye with a wet splat and I flinched. I felt my face do something weird, like it did right before a sneeze.

“What was that face?” Jean laughed as the rain picked up even more.

“Raindrop in my eye,” I said, rubbing at my face.

“Nerd,” Jean said affectionately. He finished the last bite of his meal, and stood up. “I’m gonna go help the kids get their tents set up. Meet me at the tent?”

“Sure,” I said, standing as well.

Eli and Jai were already setting up their tent in the downpour when I got there, so I just helped them attach the rain tarp and then met Jean at his campers’ tent.

“Hey, wanna start setting up our tent?” he called over the hiss and patter of the rain, nodding at the still-packed tent next to him. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

I nodded as thunder rolled overhead, grabbing the tent and finding a clear enough place to put it up.

I was mostly finished by the time Jean came over to help, but I didn’t mind. Before, he had usually set up the tent himself, so it was the least I could do.

The rain was really coming down by the time we got the tarp on the tent, so we dove inside quickly, giggling the whole time.

“Phew!” Jean said as we settled into the tent. He shook his head like a puppy, sending water flying in every direction.

“Hey!” I complained, putting my hands in front of my face to protect myself.

“What’s the matter, Freckles?” he teased. “You made of sugar? You gonna melt if you get wet?” he rose up on his knees and scooted toward me, grabbing my shoulders for balance.

Then he started rubbing his wet hair all over my face.

“Gah!” I yelped, and we both burst into laughter.
He kept rubbing his hair on my face and neck, laughing so hard that I couldn’t understand whatever taunts he was throwing at me.

I could barely keep myself sitting up anymore, and we toppled over in a pile of laughter.

“Am I interrupting?” Connie said.

Wait. Connie? Where did he come from?!

I sat up quickly and blushed furiously, but Jean seemed to think Connie’s appearance was extra hilarious, as he doubled over in laughter again.

“What the hell is going on?” Connie asked.

“N-nothing!” I stammered. “Jean was trying to rub his hair on my face and—you know what, never mind,” I finished as Connie started laughing, too.

“Hey, whatever y’all do behind closed tents is your business,” Connie said, putting his hands up in defeat. “Is this my eviction notice, then?” he asked, look at Jean.

“Huh?” Jean asked, sitting up again. It seemed he had recovered enough from his giggle fit that he could process what Connie was saying again.

“You didn’t tell him?” I asked Jean.

“A little notice would’ve been nice, is all I’m saying,” Connie said. “I don’t even know which tent Franz is in.”

“Sorry, Connie,” Jean said. “You snore like a damn lawnmower and I couldn’t handle it, so I asked Marco to switch back.”

“And neglected to tell me. No it’s fine, I see where your priorities are,” he said meaningfully.

I leaned away from Jean just slightly, but Jean tossed an arm around my neck and gave me a noogie.

“What can I say? He’s a distraction,” Jean said innocently.

I wrestled my head out of his grip, and sat up, trying to finger-comb my hair back into place. My fingers scrabbled for my center part, but Jean smacked my hand out of the way.

“No, let me do it, it’ll look better to the side,” he said, clucking his tongue.

“Right, well I’m out. Thanks for nothing, you sack of shit tent-mate,” Connie said sarcastically.

“Sorry again, Connie,” I offered as Jean messed with my hair.

“Bah, your haircut is too strict, I can’t make it side part,” Jean pouted.

“You’re ridiculous,” I said affectionately after a minute.

“Yeah, I know,” he said.

We spent the next half hour or so playing twenty questions and then Jean showed me a ridiculous slapping game he called “Quick Hands” that I was much better at than he was, much to his chagrin. The rules were simple: slap the other person’s hands before they could pull them back.
Apparently, Jean’s reflexes were less than stellar, because I slapped his hands a good ten times in a row before he insisted that my turn was up and it was his chance to slap at my hands.

He only grazed my knuckles once.

“This is bullshit, let’s do something else,” he suggested.

“Okay, like what?” I asked. Like making out, my brain supplied. I blinked hard, dismissing the thought.

“I don’t know. What about Never Have I Ever?”

“With two people?” I said, making a face. “I’d rather not.”

“Why not? ‘Fraid you’re gonna lose? Does perfect, angelic Marco have a dirty, dirty past?” he teased.

“Not even a little,” I said with a breathy laugh.

“Oh come on. Tell me the dirtiest thing you’ve ever done,” Jean encouraged.

“Uh…” I thought for a moment. The dirtiest thing I had ever done was probably getting off to my fantasy of Jean confessing his feelings for me and then fucking me hard against the wall of the Maria outpost dorms, the rough timber paneling against my bare skin, his hot mouth all over my chest…I blushed profusely at the memory.

I was not about to tell him that. Not when we were doing so well.

I could always say it was someone else I had fantasized about? No, it was too close to the truth and I wasn’t a good liar.

Should I make a joke of it, and say that the Mudder I ran my junior year of high school was the dirtiest thing I’d done? No, Jean would just press for more sexual information.

I hadn’t really done anything sexual, though. I didn’t even look at porn. (Too dangerous when I shared a computer with a seven year old.)

“Well?” he pressed.

“I really haven’t done anything that dirty,” I responded. “I mean, I’ve barely even kissed anyone. Even that was… I mean it was barely even a kiss. We were fifteen. And who are you to be pressuring me about dirty stuff? You said you’ve never kissed anyone.”

“Well, now I have…” he said quietly, tucking his chin to his chest to hide the bright red flush there.

The air was heavy between us suddenly. I could still hear the rain dripping on the tent, though it had lightened up significantly.

How did I diffuse the tension? I couldn’t make a joke about it; we were both too fragile for that still. I needed a subject change, and fast.

“One time I stole a bottle of my dad’s brandy,” I said suddenly. “It was awful. That’s not something dirty, really, but it’s technically illegal, so…”

“You picked brandy?” Jean said incredulously. “That’s probably the worst thing you could’ve
stolen from the liquor cabinet. Should’ve gone for the Bacardi.”

“I don’t think there was any,” I said. “Anyway, I felt so bad afterwards that I promised myself I’d never do it again.”

“Oh my god, you’re too pure, Marco Bodt,” Jean said with a laugh. “I’m over here like a damned delinquent, drinking and smoking whatever I can get my hands on and you’re like, oh, one time I had a sip of daddy’s brandy but it was icky and I felt like a bad son!”

“Hey, be nice,” I said, smacking his shoulder lightly. “I have a little sister at home. I have to set a good example!”

“Ah, the perks of being an only child,” Jean said, leaning back against his pack and crossing one leg over the other.

“I was an only child for a long time,” I commented.

“Yeah, but not for the fun years,” Jean replied.

“Well, I’ll be off at college soon enough,” I reminded him.

“Dude, yes! I’m actually fairly close to campus, so we’re gonna hang out a bunch. I hear you get guest passes to the dining halls as part of your meal plan, too, so you should definitely let me use those.”

I rolled my eyes. “I see how it is, using me for my meal plan.”

“You caught me. This whole friendship has been an elaborate hoax to get at your three guest passes per semester,” he deadpanned.

“You’re such a loser,” I said.

“Yeah, well you’re friends with this loser, so what does that make you?” he quipped.

Someone unzipped the tent flap with a hiss. “Incredibly charitable,” Ymir said, sticking her head in with a vicious grin. “Get up, Favorite Boys. The rain stopped and I want to get a little more distance in today.”

We groaned but set to taking down our tent, then moving on to help get our campers ready to hit the trail again.

It was at least five degrees cooler now that the humidity had cleared, and the skies were bright and clear, as we trudged down the muddy and mossy path towards Maria.

X

We only made it about another mile between the hills and the mud just as Ymir had predicted, but she seemed pleased with our progress.

After dinner, the kids were pretty wiped out, but we had made camp close enough to the Karanese River that the kids were able to rinse some of the mud off of their ankles and their boots.

When the kids were all zipped up, Connie gave Jean and me a knowing look as we headed for our tent.

Ymir made a special point of hollering out a “goodnight, Baby Boy,” to indicate that she saw we
were sharing a tent again. I was grateful she didn’t do anything more obnoxious than that.

Once inside, we quietly set to rolling out our sleeping bags and arranging our packs. I shoved tomorrow’s t-shirt into the bottom of my sleeping bag so it wouldn’t be too chilly in the morning. This afternoon’s rain would make the morning brisker than usual.

Jean reached up to turn out the light once we were both comfortably situated, and I hummed a little as my body relaxed.

“I’m glad you’re back,” Jean said quietly as our eyes adjusted to the darkness.

I bit my lip to stop myself from saying something stupid like “It’s your fault I left.” It was at least half my fault.

“Me too,” I said after a moment.

“Marco?” Jean asked.

I hummed to acknowledge that I had heard.


“Are you sure?” I asked gently. I could tell it was something he wanted to ask, but he was afraid to. Was it about that kiss?

“I just… How do you keep friendship and… more than friendship… separate?” he asked finally. “I mean, you don’t really have a lot of chick friends, so there’s got to be something to it. Something that tells you one guy is just a friend, and the other is something else.”

“Well yeah,” I said, a bit off-guard. “I mean, Armin and Bert are my friends: I like talking to them and hearing their ideas and stories, but I’m not attracted to them.”

“But how do you know that?” Jean pressed in a small voice.

“Jean, are you attracted to everyone you meet?” I asked with a kind smile.

“Of course not,” he huffed.

“Neither am I. I keep them separate because I’m simply not attracted to everyone I meet. Sometimes I might be attracted to someone I also consider a friend, but they’re separate. Does that make sense?”

“I—Yeah, I guess,” he muttered.

“Let me give you an example that you can personally relate to. Would you say that you’re attracted to girls?”

“Yes,” he said without hesitation.

“Alright, so let’s pick a female friend you have. How about Sasha? Would you agree that you’re friends with her?”

“Sure,” Jean said.

“Now, are you attracted to Sasha?” I asked, doing my best to keep my voice even. Part of me panicked that Jean might actually secretly be attracted to Sasha, and he’d ruin my whole example.
Or worse, that I would sound like a jealous ex, when I didn’t have the right to be like that at all.

“No.”

“But you’re friends with her.”

“Yes.”

“And she’s a girl.”

“Obviously.”

“And you’re attracted to girls,” I continued.

“Yes.”

“But not Sasha.”

“Right.”

“See?” I said. “Just being attracted to a gender doesn’t mean you’re attracted to a person. Sure, I happen to have mostly guy friends, but it doesn’t mean I’m magically attracted to all of them just because I’m gay.”

“You make it sound so simple,” Jean said, letting out a deep sigh.

“Well, it kind of is,” I said shyly.

“Thanks, Marco. I didn’t… I didn’t mean to sound condescending or whatever. It was just—I was just hung up on it, I guess.”

“No problem,” I told Jean. “Just keep an open mind, and you’ll be just fine.”

We’ll be just fine, I thought.

I was happy that Jean had been thinking about his misunderstanding of being gay. I tried to remind myself that it wasn’t solely due to that fact that we had disagreed – I still couldn’t bring myself to say that we fought—but it was reassuring that I wasn’t the only one doing some soul searching.

I tried not to get my hopes up too much; he was probably just trying to reassure himself that he wasn’t gay, and that it was okay to be friends with me and not have to date.

But the stupid, giddy thought of what if wouldn’t leave me alone until I fell asleep.

What if he had really examined his feelings and decided that he really did want to kiss me?

What if my words had just assured him that it was perfectly okay to feel attracted to me and not other guys?

What if?

I squeezed my eyes shut, grinning to myself as I rolled over with my back to Jean.

I was still smiling when I woke up at dawn.
Chapter End Notes

If you're interested in a (slightly lengthy but) very entertaining read, this is the burrito tunnel Mina was talking about: http://idlewords.com/2007/04/the_alameda-weehawken_burrito_tunnel.htm#

also join me in my weeby trashness on tumblr: ricekrispyjoints.tumblr.com
Apotheosis

Chapter Summary

Apotheosis (n): 1. the highest point in the development of something; culmination or climax. 2. The elevation of someone to divine status; deification.

In which there is much teasing, zip-lining, and a discussion that's all Greek to me.

Chapter Notes

Hello my dear readers. A few announcements:
1. I completely did NOT plan on making you wait this long. I only have a partial valid excuse. See, my lovely beta, cloudmonstachopper, edited it and got it to me on like... 12 or 13 December? But it was a hot mess, and I was leaving the country on the 15th, so I was like "how about I edit it... later..." And then of course I was traveling around Europe, and let's just say this fic got some serious back-burner treatment. My only valid excuse for not editing and uploading it RIGHT after I got home is that I gave myself a concussion on Monday, so looking at screens and reading are KIND OF AWFUL I'm so sorry. But here it is now, I hope you can forgive me.
2. I've started writing chapter 13, but it's probably going to be another long-ish wait (though hopefully not as long as this one was) because not only do I have residual concussion problems but I'm having knee surgery next week (eep!). I'm hoping to get some writing done while I'm basically stuck sitting on my butt all day, but we'll see how I'm feeling.
3. THANK YOU for your support thus far and for sticking it out with me. This project was initially going to be like 30k, one chapter a week kinda thing and thanks to copious plot bunnies and way more backstory than I predicted, it's... well it's gigantic. That said, there will be THREE more chapters before this draws to an end.
4. HOWEVER, I am planning to come back to this verse and probably write a college AU as a sequel after I get some other (deeply important) fanfiction written for the Haikyuu!! fandom (oops?).

You're all wonderful, I'm so pleased you're reading and commenting and kudosing and all that good stuff. Come say hello or bug me on tumblr: ricekrispyjoints.tumblr.com

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The pace of the camp certainly seemed to pick up as we neared Maria, though I'm not entirely convinced that the kids were walking any faster. Maybe it was just the anticipation that made it feel quicker. We only had about three and a half days of hiking left before the halfway marker.

As for Jean and I, we were doing really great. Our familiar intimacy was back, and I felt comfortable and relaxed around him instead of on edge about hiding my feelings. We fell into an easy rhythm on and off the trail.
That night, in the relative comfort of our tent, Jean told me about his apartment back in Trost.

“It’s a shitty little studio with a kitchen so small you can hardly make a damn bowl of cereal in it, much less actually cook anything real. The radiators leak and the walls are fucking paper thin.”

“Jean, that sounds pretty awful,” I said truthfully.

“I fucking love it,” he gushed, and I could hear the grin in his voice.

I made an incredulous little huff as he propped himself up on one elbow to look at me through the darkness. “You’ll come visit me in the fall, right?”

“Sure,” I agreed.

“We’ll order pizza and watch Netflix on my bed,” he said easily before realizing what it sounded like. “Oh, uh, on my bed because I don’t have a couch or whatever. No room.”

I hummed in agreement and understanding. My mind drifted to pleasant scenes of us cuddling in Jean’s blankets, clutching at each other when the movie got too scary, throwing popcorn into each other’s mouths and kissing the buttery residue off of Jean’s firm lips.

I sighed quietly at the fantasy.

“Did you fall asleep on me, Marco?” Jean asked after a moment.

“No, I’m still awake,” I replied, a thrill running through me as though Jean could have somehow read my thoughts.

We lay in silence another couple of minutes before Jean yawned mightily.

“I’d be happy to show you around campus, too. I only went there a year, but that was enough that I can find my way. And of course I know the city really well from growing up in it.” I could tell Jean was getting sleepy by the dreamy way he was talking.

“I could use a tour guide,” I agreed gently, not wanting to break the quiet tenderness of his voice.

“Just you and me, Marco Bodt,” he said, his voice getting more and more mumbled. “’M gonna show you the whole damn world.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, thankful for the cover of darkness that hid my broad smile. “I can’t wait.”

X

The next day was a welcome reprieve from the heat: it was only in the mid seventies, and a near constant but gentle wind from the west kept the sweat on our skin cooler still.

Ymir took the lead as usual, so Jean brought up the rear, and I led my group so we were walking together.

Now, call me a biased party, but Jean always looked good. He’s got that sharp jaw, gorgeous golden-brown eyes shaped like almonds or something, broad shoulders but a slim physique, and those tiny little hips and muscular ass that drove me crazy.

On that morning, though? He was absolutely gorgeous. Better than an Abercrombie model. The wind seemed to know that I was hopelessly attracted to him, because it sure did its part to ruffle his dark blond hair (despite his distracted efforts to maintain his oh-so-carefully-constructed bed-head)
like he was a dang movie star on a photo shoot.

When the breeze got strong enough, the slight bit of looseness in his polo shirt rippled across his chest and waist. I wanted to chase the ripples across his torso, smoothing them over with my hands all over his body. I wondered what it would be like to drag my fingers across his shoulder blades, nuzzling into and kissing the smooth skin in crook of his neck.

Speaking of his neck, that was a whole other work of art. It was tall and proud, and I loved how pronounced his suprasternal notch was. When he turned his head to face me, the definition was incredible. I had to resist biting my lip more than once, reminding myself that we were at summer camp with middle schoolers talking about the time Jean tricked his cousin into springing a mousetrap on his own hand.

To maintain his cool and casual image, Jean of course never buttoned his polo shirt all the way, so I got a great view of his collarbones and a peek at the tan line his t-shirt had given him. It was almost laughable to call Jean’s skin “tan,” but his face and forearms were slightly darker than the rest of him, so I secretly granted him the title of “less pale than you could have been.” Really, though, I didn’t mind that he was so pale. It worked for him. It made his light eyes pop more, I thought.

On the really hot days, he looked flushed and like he was about to melt into a puddle at any moment. It was hard to say if he was sunburned or just bright red from exerting himself in eighty percent humidity, but he was just this side of feverish.

With the cooler air, though, he looked strong and vibrant. His cheeks and the nape of his neck were rosy pink (okay that part might have been sunburn), and the sweaty sheen that built up on his face, neck, and forearms was gone.

His laugh was brighter, his smile was bigger, and the glint in his eyes was sharper.

I knew Jean would probably not appreciate being called beautiful, but “handsome” seemed insufficient: it reminded me of my grandmother at my Aunt Zelda’s wedding. I was nine, and the ring-bearer. My mom got me a little tux from JC Penney’s and parted my hair so severely I wouldn’t be surprised if that was why I still parted my hair down the middle. My grandma had pinched my cheeks and said, “Well aren’t you just so handsome!”

Jean wasn’t handsome.

Jean was the most beautiful person I had ever seen.

Someone tapped my shoulder, and I turned to my right to see Georgie stifling laughter.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

She giggled. “You’re staring an awful lot there, Patroclus.”

I blushed hot. Was I that obvious? Jean must have noticed too. But he seemed so happy… Surely he would have teased me if I was being too obnoxious!

“If he’s Patroclus, does that make me Achilles? Because I am totally down with being a Greek war hero of supernatural origins,” Jean grinned. Shit. He noticed.

“Achilles gets shot in the ankle and dies,” Georgie interjected dramatically. “Why would you want to be that guy?”
“Um, because he and his best bro—" Jean elbowed me and raised his eyebrows suggestively —"were the heroes the Trojan war? And he was widely acknowledged as handsome, strong, and generally amazing?”

“Why don’t you tell us about that other thing Achilles and Patroclus are known for, Jean?” Ymir called back from the front of the group, voice dripping with false innocence.

“Why don’t you shut your freckled mouth, Ymir,” he snapped.

“What’s that word I’m looking for,” she said, tapping a long finger against her chin. “Sash, help me out. That ancient Greek word for bromance.”

“Paiderasteia?” Sasha supplied.

“Okay that’s enough!” I shrieked. Thankfully, the kids were not likely to remember the word “pederasty” and look it up, but I worried that “Greek bromance” might yield similar enough results. I did not need angry parents telling me that I was corrupting their eleven, twelve and thirteen year old children with ancient Greek men’s traditions of having gay sex with their friends. “Ymir, why don’t you lead us instead of being rude to your favorite boys?” I intoned.

Jean wasn’t nearly as concerned about this as I was. In fact, he was laughing his ass off.

“No wait, this is fun. Who would Ymir be in Greek mythology?” he asked.

“Medusa?” I suggested bitterly.

“Baby Boy, I’m hurt! My hair is much prettier than snakes,” she quipped.

“To keep with the Trojan War theme, shouldn’t she be Helen?” Georgie asked.

“Ooh, the greatest beauty in the land? I like this one,” Ymir smiled, shooting Georgie a thumbs-up.

“But also known for her harem of male lovers,” I reminded her gently.

She stuck her tongue out. “I’ll be the modern, lesbian adaptation,” she said smugly.

“You’re incorrigible,” I complained.

“It’s pronounced a-ma-zing,” she corrected me.

“Ymir, please,” Jean countered. “Since when would you be content just being some pretty lady? We all know you’re Dionysus. Parties, recklessness, and having a good time are your life force.”

“Yes!” She agreed. “Wow, I forgot about Dionysus. Good call, Favorite Boy.”

“Aww, come on, I wanted to be Dionysus,” Connie whined.

“Ooh, you and Sasha could be Apollo and Artemis!” Georgie said excitedly. “They were twins. Um, Artemis is the goddess of the hunt, and Apollo is the god of truth. And music, I think. Are you a musician, Connie?” she asked.

“Hah, not really, but that would be so ironic if I were the god of truth,” he laughed. “I think I’m more of a Zeus.”

“Which one’s the jokester god?” I asked. “That’s Connie. Twins fits them, but Connie is not the god of truth or thunder,” I added emphatically.
“Unless the thunder is his snores,” Jean offered. Connie glared, but didn’t rise to the bait.

“Maybe Hermes, then?” Georgie offered.

“Ooh, I like that,” Jean agreed. “It kind of implies that he’s a thieving gossip. Good call, Georgie.”

“Alright, so is Sasha still Artemis? Because I think she’d make a good muse,” I suggested.

“Sasha, you should be Thalia,” Georgie said. “She’s the muse of comedy.”

“Yes, perfect! Oh my gosh, this is so much fun,” Sasha gushed.

The rest of the day’s hike was spent determining which characters all the other counselors would be. Georgie seemed to be the most knowledgeable about which god or goddess was which, but once she offered explanations of who each one was, the other campers got fairly involved, too.

“How do you know all this mythology?” I asked her.

“I’m in this gifted program at my school, and in fourth grade we did this huge Greek unit,” she explained. “I really liked it, so I kept reading about it and studying stuff.”

“That’s awesome,” I said honestly.

By the time we set up camp, an impressively lengthy discussion led to the following new titles for counselors: Jean and I were Achilles and Patroclus; Ymir was Dionysus; Connie was Hermes; Sasha was the muse of comedy, Thalia; Armin was the Oracle of Delphi; Mikasa was Athena, the fierce and wise warrior; Mina was Persephone, the seemingly docile wife of Hades; Annie claimed her Norse roots and dubbed herself Brynhild, a fearsome Valkyrie; Hannah was the faithful Penelope; and Franz was the steady (yet usually forgotten I determinedly did not say) Hephaestus.

Eren ended up being Prometheus, despite whining that he wanted to be Hercules.


“But Prometheus was a Titan! They were the bad guys!” Eren complained.

“Not necessarily,” Armin soothed. “Prometheus was an independent thinker, who was the only Titan to side with the humans against the other Titans. He chose to fight for what he thought was right, not just what he was expected to do. But at the same time, he was a Titan, so he was an awesome fighter.”

“Oh,” Eren said, relaxing as he accepted his new title.

“Can we call you by your new Greek names?” Georgie asked, excited.

“If you can remember them all!” I laughed. “I doubt I will.”

“I’ll help you remember, Patroclus,” she said with a smile.

X

Jean certainly took to the Greek names fondly. He didn’t seem to know the story of the Iliad very well, but he would rattle off proudly to anyone who would listen the parts that made it to (or were corrupted by) pop culture.

That night in the tent, Jean was still a little amped from his new “identity.”
“You know, I sprained my ankle once playing hockey,” Jean commented. “It’s like I was meant to be Achilles.”

“Okay, Jean,” I sighed, resigned to humor ing him. I wasn’t sure if it was really the Greek mythology or something else that was riling him up, so until he decided to spit it out, I decided to just let it go.

We did one last tent check, and then crawled back into our own tent. It was definitely the coolest night we’d spent outside thus far, so I caved and unpacked my flannel blanket from the bottom of my pack.

“Hey Marco, how big is that blanket?” Jean asked me casually, eyeing the plaid fabric I was arranging over my legs.

“Not big enough to share,” I said apologetically, holding it out to show him. It was probably about four feet by six feet. I brought it with mostly because my mother had insisted the very first year, and now I just kind of packed it by habit. (Plus, I was a cuddler by nature, and burrowing in my blankets was no exception.)

“Ah, come on, if you flip it long-ways we can both put it over our shoulders,” Jean reasoned. “I’m skin and bones, man. Help me out?” He flashed a winning smile.

I rolled my eyes. “Fine,” I conceded, and flipped the blanket so it could cover Jean, too. Our sleeping bags still separated us a bit, so we decided to unzip them both, using mine as a blanket and Jean’s as the bottom. After a lot of shuffling, we were settled in once more.

He scooted closer to me as I draped it over him so he could wrap up in it a little more. He nuzzled into it gratefully, not so subtly nuzzling into me, too.

“Mmm,” he hummed pleasantly. “Your blanket smells great, dude.”

I eyed him skeptically. “It smells like my pack.”

“Nah, it smells like you,” Jean replied, closing his eyes as he inhaled the scent once more.

“Um, thanks?” I said. I felt a blush crawling over my whole upper body. “Ready for lights out?” I asked, reaching for the switch on the lantern at our feet.

“Yup.”

With a twist and a click, we were surrounded by darkness.

I slid down into my sleeping bag, and tried to get comfortable with the blanket over my shoulders, though it didn’t wrap around me like I wanted it to. I waited for my eyes to adjust to the darkness so I could see how much Jean had on his side; if it looked like he had more, I was going to tug more blanket to my side: it was my blanket, I should get to snuggle in it!

I lifted my head to check how far over Jean the blanket reached. Not much.

“If we both sleep on our sides, we might get better blanket coverage,” Jean suggested, seeing me appraising the distribution of the cottony warmth.

That made sense: we could get a bit closer, and also not need to reach the blanket so far across.

But it also posed a huge problem: which direction should I lay in?
If we faced each other, we would be incredibly close, and I would feel every one of his snores on my skin.

If I faced him and he didn’t face me, we would be in serious danger of spooning. (Same if he faced me and I didn’t face him.)

So that meant to be in the safest, least romantic position, we should both sleep back to back. Right?

I rolled to my right, away from Jean, scooting my hips side to side to dig out a comfortable position for myself.

I felt Jean roll, too, but instead of the blanket pulling tight, it got slacker.

He had shimmied closer to me, so close that I could feel the heat coming off his body, warming my back.

I let out a slow, controlled breath as I tried to ignore it.

He didn’t do it on purpose, Marco, I told myself, willing my muscles to relax. Maybe he just likes to sleep on his right side, too.

I heard Jean suck in a quick breath, and I panicked. I turned my head slowly, trying to keep my shoulders more or less squared away from him.

Jean, propped on an elbow, was reaching his arm toward my waist. Very. Slowly.

My eyes met his in the dark, feeling more than really seeing his gaze.

“Marco,” Jean breathed. He closed the distance between his arm and my hip, and I swear I melted into his touch. My neck had been straining to turn around and see what he was doing, but when he touched me I let it drop back to the pillow.

“Is this okay?” He whispered.

I could hardly breathe. Fuck. Was this okay

“Depends?” I said, my throat so tight I could barely get the sounds out. “Is this… platonic?”

The silence between us was deafening.

“If you need it to be,” Jean finally croaked.

One of us was going to have to use our words a little better, because this was entirely too cryptic and I had already completely misread Jean’s intentions once.

I couldn’t do it again.

“I need you to be a little clearer for me,” I managed. “Does that mean that… you don’t want it to be platonic?”

He took in a slow, deep breath. “If that’s okay with you.”

My heart started racing, and my thoughts were right behind it. I couldn’t have articulated a single thing I was feeling in that moment if I tried. My whole body felt just absolutely flooded: with the physical heat of Jean’s arm draped over my side, and the emotional heat provided by adrenaline and who knows what other hormones rocketing through my veins. I felt giddy and nervous and
light-headed. I knew my hands were clammy and sweaty, and I was fairly certain my feet were
doing that awful cold-sweating thing, too.

Not being able to actually focus on anything in the darkness made my eyes flit all over. I closed
them, but I could still feel them vibrating behind my eyelids. I opened my eyes again.

“Marco, I don’t want you to think this is, like, some crazy impulse or whatever. I really… Okay, I
seriously think I like you… like that. I—I’m—Shit, why is this so hard,” he swore. “Help me out
here, Marco. Are you… do you still want this?”

As I rolled flat onto my back to get a better view of him, and his arm slid with my movements from
my left hip to drape across my stomach and rest gently on my right.

I contemplated turning the light on, but decided that the sudden brightness would interrupt the
moment more than it would help clear up the confusion.

Hesitantly, like touching him might burn me, I reached toward his shoulder. When my fingertips
brushed his t-shirt, I trailed my hand down his shoulder until I felt the cool softness of his skin.

As I let my palm rest on his forearm, I remembered that I should be breathing. And that I owed
Jean some kind of verbal response.

I swallowed audibly, trying to get some of the moisture back into my mouth.

“Oui, s’il vous plaît,” I whispered. Yes please.

I could practically hear his smile. “S’il te plaît,” he corrected. “No need to be so formal.”

“You know what I meant,” I said, finding my voice.

“Yeah,” Jean sighed, but he bit his lip like he was unsure how to proceed.

I wanted nothing more than to climb on top of him, straddle those skinny hips, and kiss the doubt
away, but I didn’t also want to overwhelm him. I tried to relax and make my expression seem as
warm and open as possible.

It wasn’t hard.

He scooted closer to me somewhat awkwardly, still a bit hesitant. I wriggled closer to him, too,
helping to close the distance.

Gingerly, he cupped his hand to my face. It had been under the blankets, and it felt warm to the
slight chill on my cheek. I turned into the touch, letting my eyes flutter closed.

Jean leaned forward, and moved the hand on my hip to the small of my back, drawing me toward
him.

I worried that if I took the lead, I might go from zero to sixty too quickly, so I just gave him a nod,
to urge him forward at his own pace.

I wanted Jean to choose this for himself.

And after a split second of hesitation, that’s exactly what he did.

When he finally closed the distance between us, I inhaled deeply and closed my eyes, taking in the
texture of his lips. I couldn’t get enough of him.
I opened my mouth, giving him the opportunity to use his tongue. He didn’t try it right away, but when he did, the sweet taste and bizarre sensation of his tongue against my own filled my consciousness. He was faintly minty from brushing his teeth before bed, and also had a kind of sweet taste that I couldn’t quite place.

I didn’t spend much time trying to decipher the taste though, because Jean’s kisses were getting deeper, licking into my mouth a bit clumsily but with enough enthusiasm that I was clutching at his arms, trying to drag him closer still.

We broke apart briefly, and Jean’s breathing was so ragged I wondered if he had been holding his breath while we kissed. He kicked the sleeping bag-blanket off his legs, and then after a couple of heavy exhales, he dove back in, bumping our noses together a bit.

I brought my hands up into his hair as we kissed sloppily, carding my fingers through the shorter hairs on the back of his neck and scratching lightly at his scalp. Next, I explored the longer, blonder hair on top, and was pleasantly surprised to find that it was downy soft. I sighed into the kiss once more, and sucked at his bottom lip.

Jean wove one of his legs in between mine, and continued to barrage me with wet kisses. He was a little exuberant with his tongue, so I tried to slow and guide his motion with my own. I wasn’t sure I really knew what to do any better than he did, but he seemed to follow my suggestions.

As I inhaled once more, Jean pulled back just a bit, breaking the seal our mouths had made with a sort of raspberry sound.

My eyes shot open and I was suddenly flooded with embarrassment. *That was so hot and then we had to go and make a mouth fart!* I cursed.

Jean noticed my awkwardness, but instead of trying to smooth it over, he just laughed.

“Wh-what?” I stammered.

“I’m sorry but that was hilarious,” he said through his chuckles. “I made that noise and then you went stiff as a board.”

“I’m so embarrassed,” I said, flustered.

“Did you really think this was gonna be like Hollywood?” he asked gently, though he was still laughing quietly.

“No, but—“

“Alright, come on. Take two?” he grinned.

I huffed out a little nervous laugh.

“Back to business, Bodt,” he deadpanned, and he flung the blanket off dramatically, and I shivered partly out of suddenly being exposed to the cool air, partly out of anticipation. He pulled the blanket up around his shoulders and resituated himself next to me. “Ready? And… action!” he said with glee, and practically tackled me back to the ground.

I giggled at his bravado, though I worried that he was putting up a front. Was Jean really this confident? I felt like the answer might have been no, but I didn’t want to spoil the mood.

We stared at each other for a moment before he swooped back down to kiss me sloppily. I mean, it
wasn’t like I knew what I was doing much better than he did. I was just so thrilled that we were kissing at all that I figured we could refine our techniques later.

He cupped my face, then flitted his hands down my neck, to my shoulders, and finally trailed his nails softly up and down my sides. It should have been ticklish, but instead I was shivering at how much I liked it. It was like his hands were searching for something to do, but he wasn’t quite sure where he wanted to touch.

I hummed in appreciation as he bit lightly at my lower lip, pulling it just a little. When he let go, he looked at me for a moment with a nervous, lopsided grin before shifting his hips and slinking further down my torso to kiss at my collarbones.

I was a little dazed, but I didn’t want him to think I wasn’t into what he was doing, so I put my hands in motion and reached up to grip his shoulders, running my hands along his shoulder blades.

In response, his fingers scrambled at the fabric of my t-shirt, like he was asking if he could take it off.

“This okay?” he asked through the kiss.

“Mmm,” I hummed.

“Arms up,” he directed, though his voice shook a bit. I did a sort of half sit up while Jean pulled my shirt over my head. He kissed me as soon as my face was clear of the collar, and I wrestled the shirt off my arms while he moved to my open mouth, dipping his tongue in and sliding it over mine.

It felt rushed, frantic. It felt scared. I laid back down to give us space.

Jean stayed upright for a moment, and I watched him, concerned that he was uncomfortable or second-guessing this decision. Licking his lips, he put his palms flat on my shoulders, and then slowly ran them down my chest.

“Jean?” I whispered, my muscles tensing as his hands ran across my abs. “Are you..?”

“Damn, Marco,” he teased.

I blushed, and tried to cover my stomach, but he swatted my hands away. He looked calmer now, some of the worry lines smoothing out along his forehead.

“Th-that was a good ‘damn,’ I promise,” he said with a shy smile, his eyes taking in my bare torso.

“Then you have to take your shirt off, too,” I pouted.

“Prepare to be blinded,” Jean laughed.

“What?” I asked.

“Because I’m pale as hell,” he said with a smirk. That was the Jean I knew, and I relaxed a tiny bit from seeing that impish half grin.

I started to lift his shirt up slowly, but he grabbed the back of his collar and practically ripped it off over his head, mussing his already disheveled hair. Now it was my turn to trail hands over his exposed skin. I decided Jean got low marks for strip-teasing, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t appreciate the view I had now that he was shirtless.
He wasn’t very muscular, but damn, his skin was unbelievably smooth. I let my hands wander just a bit, testing which part of his skin was the softest. He let me explore his torso for a moment, and I found myself strangely fascinated by the thin trail of hair from his navel down into his waistband.

After I had run fingers through his happy-trail at least twice, he took my hands gently in his and guided them up around his neck, and he lay back down on top of me. Both of us now bare-chested, I actually let out a sound close to a whimper as we both got situated.

Jean kissed my lips once before nuzzling into my neck and kissing along the tendon there. He started to suck on the thin skin where my jaw met my neck and I gasped.

“Jesus, and you’ve never done this before?” I asked breathlessly.

He nipped at my ear before responding. “Active imagination, I guess,” he suggested.

As much as I loved the way his lips felt along my neck, I wanted to be the one kissing him, with my lips trailing along his smooth skin. My fingers traced along his ear, touching each of the silver loops along the shell of his ear, and then I hooked a finger under his chin to pull him back to my face.

“Jean,” I whispered.

“Marco,” he replied affectionately.

“I don’t want to sound like I wouldn’t have been your friend if you… didn’t like me like that, but I’m really glad that you do.”

“Good,” he said happily. “Because after all the shit we’ve put each other through, this damn well better have a happy ending.”

“Does this happy ending mean we can make out some more?” I asked sheepishly, ducking my head to look up at Jean through my eyelashes.

“Fuck yes,” Jean said enthusiastically, and brought his mouth to mine once more.

X

I woke up in the morning with a heavy weight on my chest.

Jean was snoring softly, head resting on my still bare chest, and his arms wrapped around me, with one leg between mine.

The only thing covering us was my little flannel blanket, which probably explained why I was so damn cold (that and we were still shirtless), but I wasn’t particularly concerned with that.

I ran my hands lazily over Jean’s back, giving his shoulders a quick squeeze.

“Jean,” I said quietly.

He made a muffled little humming noise as he slowly awoke.

His eyes were hazy and unfocused, and he had the dopiest grin I’ve ever seen, all the more adorable for it being on his perpetually scowling face.

“Bonjour,” he mumbled, smiling.
“Bonjour,” I replied. I couldn’t stop smiling myself. I could hardly believe this had happened. I woke up shirtless with an adorable Jean Kirstein (also shirtless) lounging on top of me like I was the perfect bed.

I wanted to make sure it was real. So I decided to ask for a kiss.

“Baise-moi,” I said.

Jean’s eyes bulged out and he laughed so hard he was wheezing. “Whoa there, Freckles, let’s pull back,” he replied.

“What?” I said, horrified. Oh no oh no oh no—

“I’m hoping the verb you were looking for was embrasser-moi?” he asked, reining in his laughter. “Because I will gladly kiss you, but it’s a bit early in this endeavor to be fucking just yet.”

**OH MY GOD.**

I just asked Jean to fuck me.

“That’s not what I meant!” I yelped.

“You’re cute when you’re flustered,” Jean informed me, and stretched up to kiss the look of shame and terror off my face. It was still there when he pulled back, though, and he looked puzzled.

“I thought *embrasser* was to hug!”

“False cognate, man,” Jean said apologetically. “That was fuckin’ hilarious though.”

“Ugh,” I groaned.

He kissed me again, but this time when he pulled back he chuckled to himself, “baise-moi.”

“Stop laughing!” I said, shoving him gently.

“But it was funny! You gotta admit it was funny,” he insisted.

“Nope. I’m getting up,” I said, pushing myself up onto my elbows.

“Nooo,” Jean whined. “I’ll be nice! I’ll stop laughing!” he promised, squeezing his arms around me to protest me getting up.

I flopped back down to my back, and Jean landed with an “oof” on my chest, then nuzzled into me.

“Much better,” he said smugly.

“You better watch it,” I said. “I could dump you outside in the muck.”

“But if you did that,” Jean started, licking his lips, “I couldn’t do this.” He looked up at me with raised his eyebrows to gauge my reaction, but I had no idea what he was about to do.

Until he lowered his head and licked a broad stripe across my chest from one nipple to the other.

“Huuuh!” I gasped shakily.

“Was that a good noise?”
Instead of responding, I just dragged him up to kiss him senseless.

The moan he made as I dipped my tongue into his mouth?

Definitely a good noise.

X

We did eventually get up, though Jean whined about how warm I was and how he didn’t care if everyone made fun of us, he was comfy and that was that.

I managed to roll him over though, so that I was on top, and kissed him deep and wet, before rolling my hips once…. And getting up.

I found Jean’s shirt first, so I tossed it to him, where it landed on his face. “Marco,” he whined, drawing out my name. “It’s cold!”

“Put your hoodie on then,” I said. “Come on, the kids are starting to wake up; I can hear them outside. We gotta go make breakfast.”

“But baby, it’s cold outside,” he said.

“If you’re quoting that awful Christmas song—First, it’s June. And second, it’s kind of a weird song. So nope. Get dressed, let’s go,” I said, feeling more like his mom than his friend. (Who he made out with last night. And this morning.) I bit back a smile and put my own shirt on, laced up my boots, and unzipped the tent.

It looked like most of the counselors and the kids were up I noted, as Mina and Ymir were walking toward me.

“There you are,” Mina said. “I was just coming to wake you up.”

“Good morning, Baby Boy,” Ymir greeted me. “I was just telling Mina that you’re normally the first one up in the mornings.” She quirked an eyebrow. “It’s already quarter after seven.”

I blushed guiltily. “Guess it was the cool air that kept me wrapped up this morning.”

“Mhmm,” Ymir nodded.

Thankfully, Mina broke the tension. “So, ready to make breakfast?” she asked. “I’m thinking oatmeal.”

Jean finally crawled out of the tent as I headed off with Mina, and Ymir greeted him with a “Good morning, Favorite Boy.”

I glanced over my shoulder and laughed softly, seeing Jean twisting his t-shirt around after apparently putting it on backwards.

If Ymir noticed something had happened between the two of us, she didn’t say anything.

Were we keeping this secret, though? Obviously we wouldn’t be shouting it from the rooftops (tent tops?), but was it something I needed to actively hide?

X

Out on the trail, the kids were still pretty groggy, though we were making decent enough time. It
was still cool for summer, but rapidly warming up as we walked.

I walked with Jean, though with the kids so out of it, it seemed weird to talk too loudly. And I was afraid of giving it away if Jean didn’t intend for others to know about us, so I kept our chatter firmly on boring topics like the weather, saggy socks, and what we might make for lunch.

After an hour or so, Connie jogged up to talk to me while Jean was listening to one of Chloe’s elaborate stories with convincing interest.

“Hey, Marco,” Connie said with a slightly devious grin on his face.

I didn’t like that look.

“Hey, Connie,” I said, guardedly.

“So, I was just wondering,” he started innocently, “is that a hickey on your neck?”

My hand flew up to cover my neck and I felt my entire body flush with embarrassment and terror. Did Jean give me a hickey last night?

“Oh, ho, ho, I so called it!” He announced loudly, drawing Jean’s attention. “I knew something happened last night!” he added in an excited whisper. At least he was being slightly discreet.

“What are you blabbing about, Conrad?” Jean asked curiously.

“I’ve told you before, my name isn’t Conrad,” Connie said, rolling his eyes. “And there’s nothing there, Marco. You can take your hand off.”

Relieved, I dropped my hand and slouched a bit.

Connie put an arm around my shoulders and whispered into my ear, “It’s on the other side.”

I gasped—or maybe hiccupped—and blushed even hotter.

Connie just cackled and turned around to go join his group again.

“Let me see,” Jean said quietly, brushing my hand out of the way. “Marco, there’s nothing there. It’s fine.”

“You’re sure?” I asked meekly.

“Yes, I’m sure. He just did it to get a rise out of you. Gonna start calling him Connard if he doesn’t stop,” Jean threatened.

“What’s a connard?” I asked.

Jean opened his mouth to reply, but seemed to think better of it, closing it. He tried again. “You’ll yell at me if I say it in front of the kids,” he explained.

“Ah. Gotcha,” I nodded.

“Speaking of in front of the kids,” Jean said, his voice tight despite his casual segue, “we’re not gonna… be like… in front of the kids, right?”

“No,” I agreed, understanding perfectly. “That would be unprofessional.”
“Right, but like… Eren and Armin have been, yknow,” he lowered his voice to a whisper, “holding hands.”

“Well, that’s them. We don’t have to,” I said easily.

“Okay. And then… like, Connie’s such a gossip, plus you’re probably gonna tell Ymir, I’m guessing, or she’ll just friggin’ smell it or something, but can we…” he sounded nervous, not quite embarrassed but definitely working up to it.

“There’s a difference between ‘secretive’ and ‘private,’” I told him. “Not a fan of secretive, but private I can do.”

“Okay. Good. Yeah, just—Yeah.”

“We’ll talk more later, though, okay?” I said gently.

We needed to iron out exactly what there was going to be that was ‘private’—was our makeout session a one off? Did this make us some kind of friends with benefits? Did he want to pursue a romantic relationship? I needed to know before I got too carried away, like I always did.

Like we already had, to be honest.

In the moment, we seemed to both be pretty firmly on board, but I worried that Jean was regretting it, at least some part of him.

I took a deep breath and reminded myself not to jump to conclusions.

X

I did my best to avoid Ymir the rest of the day, knowing that I wouldn’t be able to stop myself from spilling the beans about the late night make-out session.

Given the knowing looks and arched brows, she seemed to have realized what I was doing, but let me get away with it. I knew the grace period would be short.

When we had finished our final tent checks, Jean said he was tired and was going to head to bed.

“Aww, but we were gonna hang out a little bit,” Sasha complained.

“Who’s ‘we’?” Annie asked.

“All the counselors!” Sasha replied, as though it were obvious.

“Sorry, Sash, but I’m gonna rain-check this one,” Jean laughed lightly. His eyes darted to me, and there was a look there that I couldn’t quite figure out. Was it an invitation to join him, or the opposite?

“He’s a party pooper any way,” Eren said matter-of-factly. “Goodnight, Denim!”

“Ha ha, because I’ve never heard that one before,” Jean said dryly and flipped Eren the bird. “That’s not even how you say my name, you damp sock.”

“I’m loving the creativity, Jean,” Ymir commented.

“Hey, we’re not allowed to have insult battles anymore! Don’t compliment him, yell at him!” Eren protested.
“Well, you started it, but fine. Stop it. There, I did my job. Now let my Favorite Boy go to sleep if he wants to. Baby Boy, you joining us?” Ymir asked smoothly.

My eyes darted between Jean’s honestly tired face and Connie’s quirked eyebrows. Maybe Jean was really just tired, and didn’t care if I stayed up a bit? But if we were going to talk, I should head back sooner rather than later, especially if he was sleepy already.

But Connie would probably run his mouth off if one of us wasn’t there to defend ourselves.

I hedged. “I guess for a little while.”

I could have sworn Jean’s face scrunched the tiniest bit. “Gnight,” he said around a yawn.

“See you in a bit,” I said, hoping that my slightly cryptic response would indicate that I did still want to talk to him tonight.

Jean shrugged and turned toward our tent, and I followed Sasha and the others over to the small fire pit we had made for dinner.

We sat down in a close circle. Franz and Hannah sat together, with Mina right next to them. Connie and Sasha were sitting similarly, though less intimately, and Annie took the space right next to Sasha, followed by Mikasa. Eren managed to drag Armin into his lap, and I stationed myself between Armin and Ymir to complete the circle.

“So who’s got the blunt?” Connie joked.

“Shut up, the kids might hear you!” Sasha chided.

“It’s not like they know what that is.”

“You knew what it was when you were thirteen,” Sasha accused.

“Okay, so what are we doing out here, besides being eaten alive by mosquitoes?” Mikasa asked with a sigh.

“I dunno,” Sasha admitted, “I just wanted to do something a little different tonight.”

“We could play a game,” Armin suggested half-heartedly.


Eren laughed. “I dunno, we could play Would You Rather? That’s usually fun sober.”

“Yeah, I think I’m gonna head off to bed if you guys don’t actually have a plan,” I said.

“Aww, come on, Marco,” Sasha whined.

“I’m not really one for those kinds of games,” I said. “Besides, you can’t get too loud or you’ll wake the kids.”

“I think Marco’s right,” Hannah admitted. “We’re gonna head off to sleep too.” She, Franz, and Mina all stood up.

“No, come on guys! I want to do something fun!” Sasha whined.

“We’ll do something fun at Maria,” Mina promised.
I said goodnight to the seven counselors still sitting around the fire pit and headed toward my tent.

I unzipped the tent gently and slid in as gracefully as I could.

“That was fast,” Jean said in the darkness. He was sitting on my side of the tent with his arms hugging his knees.

“Mind if I turn the light on real quick?” I asked.

“Why?”

“So I can find my pajamas.”

“Don’t need ‘em,” Jean said. “Just wear your boxers.”

I was about to protest, but I decided that digging out my designated “pajama shirt” wasn’t worth it.

I sighed, and reached down to untie my shoe in the darkness. Jean grabbed the other one, and as soon as both boots had been pulled off my feet, Jean’s mouth was on mine for a quick peck.

I hummed a little in surprise, and wary of letting it get too intense, I pulled away from his lips to drop two quick kisses on his collarbones, and he buried his face in my neck.

“Why are you still wearing this?” he smirked, picking at my camp shirt.

I didn’t have a chance to respond, because Jean just pulled it up over my head.

He leaned forward again to catch my lips in an assertive kiss.

Breathing deeply, he pulled away to lie down comfortably on my sleeping bag. He held out his arms, inviting me to lie down next to him.

I obliged, scooting my hips down and lying back. Once I got situated, Jean wrapped his arms around me, one around my chest and the other around my waist, kissing my hair.

I couldn’t believe this was only the second time we had slept this close; it just felt overwhelming natural.

“Jean?” I asked in the stillness, my voice just above a whisper.

“Hmm?”

“This is gonna sound stupid,” I said. Jean’s mouth frowned against my scalp. “But, um… Okay, see I like kissing you a lot, and cuddling like this is fantastic.” His arms squeezed around me. “But… I just want to know, that is… are we, like, together? As a couple?”

I was glad it was dark and that Jean couldn’t see my face, because I was embarrassed and also kind of afraid of what his response might be.

He had gone completely still behind me, and I closed my eyes, terrified of what that might mean. Don’t jump to conclusions, Marco, I reminded myself again.

“Jean?” I prompted when he showed no sign of answering me. “If you’re not sure, that’s okay, too. I just need you to tell me, so that I know how to act around you. Okay?”

He was silent a moment longer before he replied. “Can we still sleep like this if I don’t know?” he
asked, his voice small and uncertain like a child’s.

“Yeah, I think so. If you want to.”

“Okay.” He nuzzled into me, hooking a leg over my knees. “Then I don’t know.”

It hurt a little bit, to hear him say that, but what could I really have expected? A week ago I had to explain to him that being gay didn’t mean falling for every guy I knew.

I think somewhere, logically, he knew that. But he was still coming to grips with that, and whatever his own feelings meant for him.

It was perfectly understandable that he wasn’t sure what dating would be like. What it would mean.

That didn’t make it hurt any less, though.

X

The next morning we were less affectionate than the previous day, though Jean did accept a chaste kiss before we left the tent.

The kids were squirrelly the entire mile up to the zip line point, but that was pretty expected. It wasn’t like we normally made them walk silently in straight lines or anything, but I could have done without all the pushing and shrieking.

When we got there, a few started looking pretty nervous, but others seemed to be practically vibrating with excitement.

The zip line point looked kind of like a tree house: it was a large, wooden platform that circled around the large oak tree it was perched in. It was equipped with two single-cable lines descending along the canopy of the Wall Forest.

At the base of the tree was a long, rectangular cabin that housed the harnesses, helmets, and other supplies for the zip line.

Hannes came outside to greet us as we arrived in a flurry of noisy middle schoolers.

“Hannes!” Eren waved. Hannes was a family friend of the Jaegers, and Eren always seemed somewhat irritated yet pleased to see the man.

“Eren! Good to see you back this year,” Hannes replied. He then addressed the whole group with a cheerful “good morning!”

The kids replied in unison.

“Survey Corps ten to thirteens reporting for pants-wetting fun!” Ymir announced.

“Well hopefully there’s no pants-wetting,” Hannes chuckled, “but glad to meet all of you! My name is Hannes, and welcome to Dauper Point! From here, you’ll be zip lining down to the Maria outpost on Camp Sina’s 3-line Dauper to Maria Glider System. I like to call it the 3DMG for short,” he smiled. “Are you ready?”

“Yeah!” the kids yelled.

“Alright, I know you guys are a little amped today,” Hannes continued, “but I need your absolute,
undivided attention while I explain safety. Understood?”

“Yeah,” the kids chorused.

“Good. So, there are three lines: the south, central, and the north. Who can tell me which is which?”

Hands shot up in the air, and Hannes called on Aimar, who I recognized from the obstacle course. “That one is north, and that one is south, and the middle one is central!” he announced proudly, pointing at each.

“Right! Okay, so either I or your squad leader will help you into the harness, and yes you have to wear the dorky helmet. No helmet, no zip line.”

Hannes continued to rattle off directions and general safety information, words he had once used a little card for but now he just had memorized. When he finished, he fixed the campers with a questioning look.

“Any questions?”

The kids shook their heads.

“Great, so quiz time! Where’s a good place to hold onto?” Hannes asked.

“The safety belt!” several kids called out.

“Very good. Should you ever touch the cable?”

“No!” the campers chorused.

“Excellent. If you have long hair, what should you do?”

“Tuck it under your helmet!” Georgie answered.

“What about my hair?” Chloe asked, holding up her long braid.

“Oh my, that is a lot of hair,” Hannes said. “We might have you tuck your braid down the back of your shirt, just to be sure it doesn’t get caught in anything. Next question: Can you flip around and try to do acrobatics?”

“No!” the kids chanted.

“Right! You have to sit up the whole time, because we don’t want you to get hurt or tangled or something like that.

“Now, the line is about a half mile long, but it’s a gentle slope so you won’t go too fast.” Hannes turned to the counselors. “I’ll have you guys dismiss them to start getting harnesses, helmets, and gloves. Just have them grab one of everything and then I’ll demonstrate how to put them on.”

Ymir dismissed us by squad to go into the cabin to grab our supplies, and then Hannes showed where each strap went and how to tighten or loosen each belt.

When the kids thought they were ready, they went to Hannes for inspection, and he would tighten or adjust where he saw fit.

Helena, and Eli and Patrick all looked exceptionally nervous. Others looked slightly apprehensive,
but those three looked honestly a bit scared. I shot Mikasa a look as I approached Eli, and she nodded, heading over to Helena.

“How’s the harness coming along?” I asked.

“I-I think it’s good,” he said, shoving his glasses up his nose.

I knew Eli well enough to know that he would get flustered if I tried to ask him directly if he was freaked out by the zip line, so I tried to side-step into it.

“I rode the zip line last year,” I commented, fussing with the leg straps on Eli’s harness. “I was a little scared at first, but once I saw a few people go, and saw how much fun they were having, I relaxed a bit. And once I was up there, the view was great!”

“How long is the line?” Eli asked, a little shaky. “Like, how much time does it take to get down there?”

“Well it’s a half-mile long, and I don’t remember the exact duration, but it’s kinda short. Less than five minutes, for sure.” I told him. “I wanna say like three minutes?”

“That’s it?”

“Yup.”

“Oh. Well… that’s… that’s not too bad,” he admitted after a minute.

“Exactly. Okay, your harness looks good to me. Why don’t you have Hannes give you the final check?”

He nodded and headed toward the man in charge.

It took every bit of half an hour to get all thirty one kids and twelve counselors into their harnesses, find gloves for everyone, and adjust the helmets to Hannes’ liking.

Finally, we climbed up the ladder to the platform.

“Now, form three lines, please,” Hannes directed. “There should be about ten in each line. And then counselors, I’ll need three of you to go first to help kids with the dismount.”

Ymir raised her hand. “I’m lead counselor, so I’ll go. Favorite boys, care to join me?” she asked me and Jean.

“Sure,” I said.

“Yeah, alright,” Jean replied.

“Great. Watch carefully.” He gestured for Jean to come forward to the north cable. “What’s your name? I remember you from last year…”

“It’s Jean,” Jean replied.

“Right. Okay, so when it’s Jean’s turn, he’ll come forward, and I will attach him to the line.” He snapped Jean’s harness into the pulley.

“Next, he’s gonna sit on the ledge here, and if he wants, he can hold onto the handles, or on his harness, whichever is more comfortable. Once you’re launched, you don’t have to hold on, but
before you’re launched, it’s best to hang on,” Hannes explained, nodding to Jean to sit down.

“Finally, we’ll do a final safety check, to make sure nothing’s changed since I okay’d him the first time, and then I’ll clear him to go. You ready, Jean?”

“Yup.”

“Alright: Helmet clipped?”

Jean tipped his chin up to show that it was. “Check.”

“Gloves?”

“Check,” he said, holding up his hands.

“Any loose articles like necklaces, long hair, things like that all tucked away?”

“Check,” Jean said, pretending to flip non-existent long hair over a shoulder.

“Harness tight?” Hannes tugged on Jean’s straps, nodding at the tightness.

“And I will check the pulley connection,” Hannes rattled the pulley to test it. “Excellent! Can Jean leave now?”

Some kids said yes, others no.

“No, he can’t! Because I did not tell him to launch! In fact, let’s get Ymir ready to go before we launch Jean. Ymir?”

She approached the central cable, and Hannes did the same safety check on Ymir, but this time a little faster.

Finally, Hannes called me to the south cable. “And now let’s get Marco ready to glide. Who can tell me step one of the safety check?”

“Helmet!” Several kids yelled.

“Now the gloves!”

“Marco doesn’t have any long hair,” Alex said.

“No, but he might have a jacket hood or something. Always good to check,” Hannes reminded. “Next step?”

“Harness!”

“And then you gotta check the pulley!” Helena said. She looked significantly less green than before, though still pretty scared.

“Alright! I have my first three ready to make the Dauper-Maria Glide! Jean, Ymir, Marco: You are clear to launch!”

The three of us exchanged glances, and pushed off the platform, and the campers collectively gasped and started cheering.

As I told Eli, it really was a pretty gentle slope, so it wasn’t like we whooshed down the tree-line
like a roller-coaster. Rather, we started fairly slowly, and then we gradually gained speed. I glanced behind us, waving to the campers, and then I looked out in front of and around me.

The rush of seeing my feet dangling close to a hundred and fifty feet in the air, the beauty of being able to see the Wall Forest stretched for miles in every direction: sure, Maria was great, but it was the arrival that was the highlight of this stretch of the trip for me now that I was a counselor.

Ymir was whooping, pumping her fist and leaning as far forward as she could.

Past her, I saw Jean leaning back in his harness, his arms outstretched and face up toward the warmth of the sun like he was just soaking it up.

We slid down the zip line at a good speed, and while I wasn’t really the daredevil type, the ride was exhilarating. There was just something about the smooth, amazing feeling of flying (or as close to flying as humans could get) that sent a rush through my whole body.

It felt incredible.

After another moment, the Maria outpost came into view. The trees thinned out near the outpost—really more of a lodge—which allowed for the three zip lines to arrive safely in the clearing.

When we were only about twenty feet off the ground, I felt the pulley system gradually slow me down so that by the time my shoes could skim the grass, I was going a manageable speed.

I stumbled a bit as I touched down all the way and took a moment to reacquaint myself with the ground. The harness was tight, like it was supposed to be, but that meant my feet felt a little tingly afterwards.

I struggled a little with unclipping my harness from the line, but eventually got the pulley to click open and release my safety belt. Jean was still attached to the line, and he was letting out increasingly creative swears while the thing refused to unhitch.

Ymir laughed. “Oh my god, all you have to do is twist the safety open and--”

“I know how to do it!” Jean shot back, frustrated.

I jogged over. “Here, let me,” I offered, taking his hands gently in my own to move them out of the way.

Jean blushed and crossed his arms sulkily. I twisted the safety and pinched the clasp open, and Jean’s belt was released.

“Fuckin’ finally,” he grumbled.

I really wanted to kiss him, but I could feel Ymir’s gaze boring into me and I knew I shouldn’t. I stepped back.

“Perfect,” Ymir said, pulling out the walkie-talkie Hannes had given her.

“Dauper Command, this is Unit Leader 10-13 reporting in—all three gliders have successfully disengaged, over,” she said with a smirk. Releasing the button, she added, “I love walkie-talkie speech. I feel so badass.”

A crackle came through on the walkie-talkie. “Roger that, first batch is about to be cleared for launch, over,” Hannes said.
“Ten-four, over,” Ymir replied. “Well, now we’ve got a couple minutes till the munchkins arrive. Any bets on tears or pants-wetting?”

“I’m a little worried about Eli,” I said, “but I think he’ll be alright. I’ve never heard of any of the kids opting out and walking with Hannes.”

“Patrick looked like he already shat himself,” Jean smirked.

“That kid cannot walk the talk,” Ymir said, shaking her head.

“I’m betting at least one kid cries,” Jean said after a moment. “Not sure who, but there’s gonna be tears. There always are.”

“Jean, didn’t you cry the first time you did this?” Ymir teased.

“The wind bothered my contacts!” Jean said defensively. “I closed my eyes this time and it was fine!”


“Fuck off, Ymir.”

“Love you too, Favorite Boy,” she sang.

“Here they come!” I said.

We waved to the first three kids who were whooping and screaming as they slowed down and approached the landing. When they got close enough, I recognized Ryan from Jean’s team, Patrick from Connie and Sasha’s team, and Andrew from Armin and Annie’s team.

Ryan was on Jean’s line, and they high-fived as the boy came to a stop. Patrick, on Ymir’s line, looked pretty queasy and incredibly relieved to be on solid ground, whining the whole time.

Andrew was completely relaxed and serene as he coasted in on my line. I unhooked his harness, and asked if he liked the ride.

“It was pretty cool,” he said casually.

“That’s it?” I said, a little sad by his lack of amazement. The first time I had ridden the 3DMG, I felt like my brain had exploded.

“The one in Costa Rica was cooler, though,” he added as explanation.

“Sorry the Wall Forest can’t quite compete with the rainforest,” I said a little sarcastically.

Ymir radioed that we were good to go, and Hannes sent the second round of campers.

“Tiens, Marco,” Jean called to me. Hey, Marco!

“Qu’est-ce qu’il y a?” I asked. What’s up?

“Change de place avec Ymir,” he requested. Switch with Ymir.

“I heard my name,” Ymir said.

“Yeah, switch with Marco,” Jean said gruffly.
“Wow, rude,” Ymir said, but she walked toward my post. “Well go on, see what Prince Charming wants.”

“Sorry, Ymir,” I said bashfully as I hurried over to the center line. “Sois sympa,” I told Jean. Be nice.

“It’s fine, she knows I didn’t really mean it,” Jean said, continuing on in French. “I wanted to tell you that I, uh, I thought about your question from last night.”

“Oh?” I asked.

“Yeah, and I just want… I guess I want to make sure what you want. With me.” His French was faster than normal when he spoke to me, probably because he was embarrassed. I took a minute to parse his verb tenses while he walked closer to me.

“Oh,” I asked slowly. “Can we have this conversation in English? Later, that is? I do not know how to say what I want to in French.”

“We’re not in the tents for two days. When are we going to have this conversation in English?”

“In the middle of the night seems to work,” I said, quieter.

“Round two incoming!” Ymir announced. The English was a welcome relief to my ears, but after we got Georgie, Minh, and Rashida unhooked, Jean joined me again and went straight back to French.

“What if I tell you the French? I’ll use Franglais if that helps,” Jean continued.

“Jean…” I warned.

“Please, Marco. If we have a chance to be alone at this outpost, I don’t want to spend it talking about this. This part sucks. I want to get back to the kissing and touching you part,” he added wickedly.

I flushed bright pink. “Jean!” I scolded.

“What? They can’t understand what we’re saying,” he said, glancing at the six campers who were excitedly talking about the zip line ride.

“Fine, but do not use too many cognates, or they’ll catch on. You know she is listening,” I said, avoiding Ymir’s name. Jean knew exactly who I meant.

“Relax, Marco. Okay, so… Do you want to be together? Like boyfriend and… boyfriend?” Jean asked.

In the back of my mind, I marveled at my ability to recognize words that I thought I had never even learned. The front of my mind was concerned with how to reply. Do I need the subjunctive here? I wondered briefly before deciding it didn’t really matter.

“Yes, that is what I would like,” I said after a moment.

“Okay. And what exactly would that look like for you? What would we do?” he asked cautiously.

“Honestly? Basically what we already do,” I began. This was where vocabulary got tricky for me, so I wasn’t sure how to continue. “We talk about important things, and we also do the physical things that are nice.” I blushed.
“That’s it?” Jean clarified.

“I am a little limited in my vocabulary, you know,” I defended my meager answer.

“What about—“

“Next group!” Ymir called. “And Hannes says central line is a counselor, just heads up.”

“Thanks, Ymir,” I said. Jean returned to his line.

The counselor on my line ended up being Mina, accompanied by Eli and Helena, the other two nervous fliers.

“How’d they do?” I asked, helping Mina unhook her belt.

“Eli spent the whole time saying ‘oh my god’ over and over, so I think he did pretty well,” Mina said, shaking out the pins and needles from her legs. “Helena was silent, but she looked like she had a death grip on the safety belt.”

“Well, no tears, and no pants-wetting; I’ll count that as a win,” I said with a laugh.

“You doing alright here? I’m happy to take over if you like,” Mina offered.

“Nah, that’s okay,” I said.

“He means yes, thanks Mina!” Jean called, looking at me meaningfully.

“Oh, uh… in that case I guess, sure. Thanks?” I laughed nervously.

Mina quirked an eyebrow, but didn’t say anything else.

I went over to Jean, shaking my head the whole time.

“Dude, take the opportunity when it comes up,” he said as though it were obvious. “Now, I think I was about to ask about things like going on dates,” he resumed in French.

“If you want to,” I said.

“Marco, I’m asking what you want. You can’t just turn it back on me.”

“But I do not want it if you do not want it,” I said, frustrated.

“Fine, fine. I wouldn’t… I wouldn’t mind,” Jean said after a moment.

“Going on dates?” I clarified.

“Yeah,” he said.

“I would like that,” I said bashfully. I hated that I sounded like a little kid when I spoke French, but I did understand Jean’s desire to get this conversation out of the way. He was uncomfortable talking about his feelings, and I was uncomfortable speaking French: it kind of put us on level ground.

“So if we both want that,” I continued awkwardly, “does that mean we are boyfriends?”

Ymir called out the next group’s arrival, and Jean watched Chloe glide in and helped her off the line before he answered my question.
“I know what I’m telling you probably sounds conflicting, because I like kissing you and sleeping with you. But I’ve never had a relationship, and I know I’ll mess up. Probably a lot. So putting that label on it scares me,” he said. His voice was soft and a little scared.

“Hey,” I said as affectionately as I dared with the kids around: they may not speak French, but they pick up on more than you’d ever imagine. “I am proud of you for being able to say that to me.”

“Thanks, but that’s not what I was looking for.”

“Then what do you want from it?” I asked, unsure how to phrase it.

“Look, why are you so eager to put a label on this?” Jean said, getting frustrated. “What we’ve been doing was working. Why are you trying so hard to categorize it?”

“Because I need to know … to what depth this goes,” I said, struggling through the French. “I cannot continue to kiss you and holding you like this if you do not have the same feelings that I do. It will break me, and then we will have nothing.” I could feel the tears building in my eyes, so I took a deep breath and looked up to the clouds, hoping the tears wouldn’t fall. “So please, tell me how you want me?”

“Marco…” Jean murmured, eyebrows knitted together in concern. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I know, Jean. I know,” I said, struggling to keep my breathing from hitching like I was about to start sobbing.

“This is all so new to me and I’m so bad with talking about my emotions, you have to know that by now,” he said with a laugh. I nodded, but didn’t trust myself to speak just yet.

“You know what?” he continued, squaring his shoulders to me and holding my gaze. His voice was resolute, stronger than before. He put his hands on my shoulders firmly. “Fuck it. Let’s do it. It’s just a label. It’s just a word for our feelings. And I suck at those. I’ll leave it to you. Let’s do it: be my boyfriend.”

I gasped. I replayed what he said over and over, making sure I had understood him correctly. Jean took his hands off my shoulders, and I’m pretty sure that another round of campers came through while I was processing, but I couldn’t tell you who came through.

“Can I take you staring at me like a fish as a yes?” he asked in English, his golden-brown eyes twinkling.

“Yes!” I exclaimed. “I mean, yes, you can,” I said again less exuberantly, grateful to return to my native language.

“Good. So tonight, when I ask you to come take a walk with me…” Jean suggested, winking on the word “walk.”

“I’ll be there,” I grinned.

Jean returned my smile.

“Jesus, how many kids are there in this camp anyway?” Jean teased. “They just keep coming.”

I took over Jean’s post of unhooking the kids, because he said I was better at it. I certainly was, but I think it was also because Jean liked to watch me do it.
I might have made an extra show of flexing as I released the safeties.

Once all forty three of the 10-13 Survey Corps team had arrived safely on the landing, it was definitely lunch time.

We rounded up the kids and headed to the famous Maria Outpost.

Our journey was only halfway done, but I already felt like I was at home.

Chapter End Notes

Quick PSA While I am definitely *not* a scholar of antiquity, the definition of paiderasteia here is like, the super simplified version. In reality it was pretty misogynistic, because ancient Greek dudes were like "we don't want to have sex with women SO BADLY that we're gonna do it with our bro friends". So don't get too excited about gay Greek men. Because they were also kind of assholes.
A Fine Line

Chapter Summary

The Survey Corps kids finally made it to the Maria Outpost! What kind of delicious shenanigans will ensue? So many.

Chapter Notes

Okay, so y'all already know my beta cloudmonstachopper is amazing, but did you also know that siseja is incredible?

siseja is the master of all things horse related, and she literally talked to me for HOURS about horses and trails and read the horse-riding section like three times for me. I literally owe her a bajillion thanks for making the horse-riding section accurate and actually readable. Bless u, siseja. bless u

you two: you two are my favorites.

Gentle reminder that there are only two chapters left! I am kinda running out of gas on this fic, but don't worry! Though it may take another month (yeep, sorry), the end *is* going to be written.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

We had the hardest time getting the kids settled into Maria.

When you walked in, there was a long hallway with six doors, three on the left, three on the right, and the hall ended with a staircase to the second floor. The first room on the left was the “rec room,” for games when it rained. There was a pool table, ping pong, darts, and more board games than you could shake a stick at. Obviously, the kids ran straight for that as soon as it was in sight, tossing their packs on the floor all over before Ymir took charge.

“What are you doing?” she roared. “Did we say you could play like a bunch of hooligans in the rec room?”

Her demand was met with silence.

“Did an adult tell you that you could go play in the rec room?”

“No,” they said quietly.

“So, again I ask, what are you doing?”

They slowly found their packs again, leaving the games where they had found them, more or less.

“Much better. Now, down the hall and up the stairs you go,” Ymir said firmly, crossing her arms and tilting her chin just slightly to enforce her authority.
The kids filed out of the rec and followed Ymir’s instructions, though they did peek at the other rooms along the hallway.

Across from the rec room was the dining room, which consisted of six large, rectangular folding tables, where we would eat our meals, if we wanted to eat indoors. It was also useful for having a “meeting room” with all the kids, without the distraction of the rec room.

The second room on the right was the kitchen, which was off-limits for the kids. It was fully stocked with both food and utensils, and also had a decent stove and a microwave.

On the left was the entry to the staff dorms, also off limits to the kids. It had a little hallway which led to the men’s, women’s, and laundry rooms.

Finally, there was the downstairs bathroom right next to the staircase. On the second floor, there were a “boys” and a “girls” bathroom, but this one on the first floor was unisex, used for anyone not comfortable in either of those rooms. You had to wait one at a time to shower there, but it was nice that non-binary or other kids could have the choice.

(There was a boy when I was thirteen who used the “other” bathroom because he had a skin condition that he was really embarrassed about. Hanji also used the “other” bathroom.)

Anyway, we got the kids up the stairs, and that was when all hell broke loose.

Someone, somewhere, decided that creating “themed” rooms at the Maria outpost was a great idea.

In my experience, all it achieved was creating rifts in friendships and encouraging tears, yelling, and name calling.

I never even thought the themes were that cool, but it was a battle for the kids to not get stuck in the “lame” rooms.

There were eight camper rooms for the kids, and each had its own, wildly different theme: plaid, oceans, dinosaurs, castles, ribbons, “traditional country” (which I liked to call the grandma room, as it featured paisley, lace, and pastel colors that reminded me of my Nona’s pajamas), music, and inexplicably, snowmen.

Just as the second outpost was, there were six beds in each room, and the kids were free to create their own groups, regardless of their squads.

But now that there were poorly painted animals and patterns on the walls and the blankets were colorful, it was a gruesome battle for the dinosaur, music, and ocean rooms.

The thing that made me laugh was that if they just shuffled groups a bit, no one would have to be in the “traditional country” room, because there were 48 beds but only 31 of them. Naturally, though, no one wanted to switch their groups, so they all threw a fit over who would get which one.

After fifteen minutes of a stalemate in the dinosaur room, Ymir rummaged in her pack for something. With an “a-ha!” she stood and raised the small silver whistle to her lips and blew.

Everything stopped.

“You have thirty seconds to pick a room! If you don’t pick one, one will be assigned to you. If you complain about your new assignment, you will sleep outside. Without your sleeping bag. Your time begins… now!”
Suddenly, the cacophony intensified threefold, as kids shoved and yelled and tried to claim beds in their preferred room.

After thirty seconds, most of the squabblers had intelligently decided to give up and pick anything that wasn’t the grandma room.

Three boys and two girls continued to duke it out, though: Jai, Patrick, and Ryan were fighting over the last bed in the ocean room, while Sandra and Marissa were both sitting on a bed in the music room.

I looked to Ymir. “Grandma Room for the boys?” I asked.

She nodded solemnly.

“Tough break, gentlemen,” I told the bickering pre-teens. “Please take your packs and head to the first room on the right, next to the stairs.”

“But that room is hideous!” Patrick cried.

“We’re only here for four nights,” I reminded him. “Or, of course, you can sleep outside.”

“Ugh,” he groaned, but he went to the grandma room without further complaint.

Mikasa directed the girls to the other vacant room, the plaid themed one, which I always thought looked kind of moldy. The plaid was all of the same color: mustard yellow and what I’ve been told is colonial blue, though honestly it just looked like faded out, regular old blue.

After the kids were all placed in their rooms, some happier than others, we gave them half an hour to settle in while the counselors created an impressive sandwich assembly line.

Fifty sandwiches later, we called the kids down to eat. They picked a plate from the dining room table, grabbed a drink from the cooler, and went outside to the picnic tables.

After lunch, they could swim in the river, play on the rope swing, or do whatever. The next day would be split between horseback-riding in the morning and archery in the afternoon. I hoped the kids wouldn’t get too worn out; Maria had so many things to offer, but the kids still needed to make it back to Sina after all.

We had a s'mores-centric bonfire that evening, and Ymir said that we’d try to do the night-hike tomorrow, since it was overcast that night.

With the kids ushered off to bed, the counselors kept the fire going. Sasha was determined to have her “counselor bonding time” that we had promised her upon our arrival to the outpost. Since we were outside and the kids were in the building, we organized a half-hour rotation by each squad’s leaders to check on them.

“Oh kay,” Sasha said, clapping her hands, “can we please play a game now? I’ve got some great ‘would you rather’ questions.” She grinned mischievously.

I plastered a smile on my face despite the internal groan I felt. “Okay, Sasha. We can play your game.”

“Don’t encourage her, Marco!” Jean whined.

“Come on, it’ll be fun!”
“Nope. Count me out,” Jean pouted.

“Oh, no you don’t,” I said, pursing my lips. “You are playing this game with us, Jean Kirstein.” I fixed him with my best authoritative glare.

He tried to stare at me defiantly, but when I stuck my lower lip out like a little kid, his smile broke through. “Fine, fine. You win, Freckles.”

I puffed up my chest proudly, square shoulders and smug grin on my face, and only just stopped myself from leading Jean over by the hand. We resituated ourselves into a tighter circle, moving the benches and folding chairs closer, both for warmth and for ease of conversation. Armin plopped down in Eren’s lap like it was the most natural thing in the world. I sighed contentedly, happy that my friend seemed to be comfortable with his new relationship with Eren.

Hopefully, the group wouldn’t be too loud…

Jean sat next to me, and I tried to keep my glances at him subtle, but I’m not certain how successful I was. I pointedly ignored Ymir’s stares in my direction, listening intently to Sasha’s explanation of a game I’d played every summer since junior high.

“So, you can ask anyone you want,” she explained as she put her hair into a messy bun. “However, you can’t ask someone who’s already answered one. Eventually it’ll come back to the person who started, and then we can start a new round if we want.”

Connie raised his hand. “Are we playing the points one?”

“What the hell is the points version?” Ymir asked.

“The group votes if they’d do the same thing, you get a point if the group agrees with you,” he said, as though it were perfectly obvious.

“Ugh, no,” Eren sighed. “That is the stupidest way to play this game. Who’s got a good one? Let’s get this shit started.”

“I’ve got one,” Hannah offered.

“Nice! Who you gonna ask?” Eren prompted.

“Um… well Sasha wanted to play so bad, so I’ll ask her.” Hannah turned to Sasha and we all waited with bated breath. “Sasha, would you rather travel to outer-space or the bottom of the ocean?”

I thought it was a cool question, but Sasha seemed a little caught off-guard. Whatever she had been expecting, it wasn’t that.

“Bruh, that is a hard question,” she said, stroking her chin theatrically. “Gonna have to go with space. No, wait: ocean! Because there’s some crazy shit living on the bottom of the ocean. Space would be soooo tight though.”

“But Sash, it’s space!” Connie exclaimed. “How could you turn down space?”

“When it’s for the bottom of the fucking ocean, dumbass!”

“Alright, alright,” Ymir said, holding out her arms in a calming manner. “Let’s pipe down, it’s only round one. Sasha, you get to ask next.”
“Yes. Okay. Um… Oh! You should all be thinking about questions to ask too, so when it’s your turn you’re not stuck thinking for five minutes like a moron like I’m doing right now,” Sasha advised.

I had no idea what kind of question to ask, or even who to ask—should I pick someone I didn’t know well to learn more about them, or should I pick someone I know pretty well and ask them something outrageous?

“Oh, I got it!” Sasha cried out happily. “This one’s for Armin. Would you rather work at McDonald’s for five years—she paused dramatically while Armin stuck out his tongue in disgust—or repeat all of high school?”

The look of utter terror on Armin’s face was absolutely priceless. I wished I had a camera. Sasha was brutal.

“When you said the McDonald’s one, my first thought was ‘I’ll pick the other one, no matter what,’ but now that I’ve heard the second choice… I feel like I have to pick McDonald’s? At least I’d be making money. I might be able to pay for a tiny bit of college. And I could always study and learn things in my free time,” Armin said sadly.

“But high school would be so easy the second time around!” Eren argued.

“High school was so easy the first time around,” Armin said. “Besides, if I was repeating, I’d be older than everyone … Just no. Never going back to high school. Hit me with Mickey D’s.”

“That was a good question, Sasha,” Hannah commented. “Sorry mine was boring.”

“No, no! It was a perfectly good question,” Sasha said smoothly. “Armin, who’re you going to ask?”

“Um… how about Mina? Would you rather… Oh, I just had it a minute ago… Greasy hamburger thoughts ruined my good ide—no wait I remember. Would you rather marry the last person you kissed, or kiss the last person you’d ever marry?”

“Oh, Armin’s goin’ for the love connection,” Connie teased.

Armin sunk down into Eren’s lap a bit further, and Mina blushed hard.

Her gaze caught mine for a second before flitting back to the fire. “Well, the last person I kissed was Marco,” she began, and a chorus of “ooh”s rang out among the counselors.

Some of them knew already—Hannah and Franz seemed to be in the know, and Ymir had heard from me—but others, namely Jean, were honestly surprised.

“When did this happen?” Jean asked, trying to stay casual but his posture was so stiff that he wasn’t fooling anyone.

“Gosh, it was a while ago,” Mina replied easily. “We were what, fifteen?” she asked me.

“Sounds about right,” I said with a shrug, my embarrassment growing with each passing second.

Jean was pointedly not looking at me. I wondered how much the counselors knew about us. Had Connie blabbed? If so, what had he blabbed? I hoped Jean wasn’t going to sulk over this. I knew how petulant he could be.
A sharp giggle brought me back to the conversation. “Aww, you haven’t been kissed since you were fifteen?” Annie said with a hint of pity.

“It’s not a big deal,” Mina said unabashedly.

“So would you marry Marco or kiss some awful person?” Eren asked, bringing us back to the question.

“Honestly, one little kiss with someone I don’t like versus forcing Marco into marrying me? I guess I’d have to go for the kiss. I don’t want to be a home-wrecker.” She flashed a cheesy grin at me.

“Thanks,” I said grimly, the flush on my neck creeping up to my cheeks. My face was on fire.

“Okay, now it’s my turn to ask someone, right?” Mina asked, and we nodded in reply. “Okay, my question is for Franz: would you rather shave off your eyebrows or donate ten bucks to PETA?”

Franz let out a booming laugh. “Eyebrows, Jesus. That shit’ll grow back; the damage PETA does won’t.”


“Honestly, have you seen the bullshit PETA pulls? And don’t even get me started on Greenpeace. Those fuckers need to stop hustling me for money on the street I swear I will end the next one who gets in my face about it.”

“I love this new side of Franz,” Annie said, laughing. “Before you said that, if someone asked me to describe you I’m not sure what I would’ve said, but now I’ve got a really good idea.”

“Okay, but putting aside Franz’s PETA-slash-Greenpeace hatred, let’s all take a minute to imagine him without eyebrows,” Connie said.

“He’d look like a potato,” Jean whispered to me, sending us both into a ridiculous bout of laughter.

“What’s so funny, you two?” Ymir demanded, a knowing smirk on her face.

“Nothing!” we chimed through our giggles.

“Mhmm,” she said. “Real convincing. Alright, Franz, who are you asking?”

“This one’s for Connie,” he said, sitting up tall like he knew this one would be good, “would you rather grow out your hair—like Armin’s length kinda grow it out—or manscape?”

“Who says I don’t already manscape?” Connie deadpanned without missing a beat.

Sasha wheezed with laughter and my eyes bulged out of my head so far I probably looked like a chameleon.

“What’s manscape?” Hannah asked, an embarrassed squeak to her voice.

“Oh my god,” Annie deadpanned.

“It’s when guys uh… shave. Down there,” Franz explained in a low voice.

Hannah made a sour face. “Unfortunate.”
“For the record, I’m totally joking. Who wants razor burn on their junk?” Connie said matter-of-factly. “I’d grow out my hair. But y’all know that it would not look anything like Armin’s, right? Like, I’m part black. That shit’s not gonna look like goldilocks over here.”

“Bullshit you’re black,” Annie scoffed.

“Just ‘cause I’m white-passing doesn’t mean I’m not black!” Connie shot back.

“He really is part black,” Sasha said, putting a hand on Connie’s shoulder to hold him back. “Besides, if I told you I was part Irish you wouldn’t be like ‘bullshit!’, you’d say ‘oh really?’”

“Fine, I’ll call bullshit on you being Irish, too,” Annie said defensively, though her face softened and it seemed she was realizing she was in the wrong.

“Just fucking apologize, Annie,” Sasha demanded.

“Fine. I apologize, Connie.” Annie said with a sigh.

“Apology accepted. Now, it’s my turn,” Connie grinned, eager to move on. “Marco! You sir are the target of my query.”

“Oh no,” I groaned.

“Would you rather… wear ladies’ lingerie or lose all of your freckles forever?” he asked.

“You better say that lingerie, Baby Boy!” Ymir shrieked as soon as the words left Connie’s mouth.

Connie was rubbing his hands together like a cartoon villain watching Jean and me blush profusely while Ymir was in a mini-panic and trying to protect my freckles.

“I mean, I love my freckles, but… lingerie? Would I have to wear it in public?” I asked.

“You’d wear it like ladies wear it. So under clothes or in the bedroom,” he replied, waggling his eyebrows, eyes darting between Jean and me.

“What do you think, Jean?” Sasha teased. “Wanna see Marco in lace panties and thigh-high garters?”

Somehow, Jean managed to blush even deeper. I was shocked that he didn’t have some sort of witty quip in store; he just crossed his arms and hunched over like he was trying to disappear. Maybe he was worried he’d say something hurtful to me if he spoke? What if he said yes?

“I don’t wanna lose my freckles,” I said, trying to draw the attention away from Jean, “and since you said I could wear clothes over them in public I’ll go for the lingerie. Whatever.”

“Ow-oww!” Sasha hooted.

Mikasa was watching the whole ordeal unfold as quietly as though she were watching a chess match, though the amused smile on her face was growing larger by the second.

“Okay, my question is for the Freckled Fiend—I mean Friend,” I teased. “Ymir, would you rather legally change your name to Frecklenator or have to salsa dance on national television in a fringe dress?”

“Ooh, Frecklenator is very tempting, actually. But hell yeah I’d dance on TV. My legs would look great in a fringe dress,” Ymir said with a smug grin.
“Plus, fringe might hide the fact that you have no tits,” Sasha joked.

“Oi! My lady loves me just the way I am, thank you very much,” Ymir said crisply.

“Wait, you would salsa dance on TV?” Mina asked.

“I’ve done it before,” Ymir said casually.

“The local PBS station doesn’t count as national, Ymir,” I reminded.

“No, but I’ve danced on TV before! Won a competition once, too. My partner was really short though. Ah, Kenny. You had the rhythm of a pineapple.”

“Why a pineapple?” Hannah asked.

“Because he was sweet, but couldn’t dance for shit. Also he was shaped kinda like a pineapple. His hair stuck up like the leaves and everything.”

“Oh my gosh,” Mina giggled.

“Yeah, I may have small tits but these hips don’t lie,” Ymir smirked, wagging her eyebrows.

“Do we get a demonstration?” Mikasa asked.

“I only dance with Christa.”

“I’m gonna hold you to that when we have the final bonfire,” Mikasa said.

“Whatever. My question is for…” she looked around the circle. Those of who had already been tortured—er, asked a question, kind of leaned back. Ymir’s gaze lingered on Jean for a moment, but then a slightly diabolical glint shone in her eye and she whipped her head to Eren.

“Shrimpsticks, my question is for you,” Ymir grinned wolfishly.

“Hey, don’t call me Shrimpsticks!” he objected, but Ymir carried on.

“Would you rather grow six inches taller”—Eren’s eyes lit up momentarily, but then waited for the catch—“or have a one inch longer dick?”

“Pahaha!” he burst out laughing. “I mean, Armin’s not really into dick, so I’d go for being taller. Damn, I was expecting something horrible for the second choice since the first one was so good.”

Armin groaned, covering his face with his hands.

“What, you don’t want a bigger dick?” Ymir asked. “I thought all dudes wanted bigger ones.”

“I am perfectly confident in the size of my wang,” Eren deadpanned.

Armin looked about ready to crawl under a rock. “Can we stop talking about my boyfriend’s penis now?” he whimpered.

“Sorry, Armin,” Ymir said. “I thought he’d get more worked up about it and I could tease him. He didn’t rise to the bait though.”

“Boo, terrible boner joke,” Jean complained, showing a thumbs-down.

“That’s it, Jean; you’re next,” Eren declared. I tensed: hopefully Eren wouldn’t ask him anything
“Bring it on, Jaeger.”

“Alright, would you rather wear nothing but a Speedo for the rest of summer camp or take a naked lap around the camp fire right now?”

I let out an involuntary gasp, and most of the other counselors seemed at least slightly shocked. Mikasa simply rolled her eyes.


“Well?”

“I’d rather the bonfire because at least the kids wouldn’t see me and parents wouldn’t fucking sue me for sexually harassing their middle schoolers.”

“Alright then. Let’s see it.”

“Fuck off, this is would you rather, not truth or dare.”

“Then I dare you to take a naked lap around the camp fire.”

“Eren,” Armin warned.

“Eat shit, Jaeger,” Jean spat back, ignoring Armin.

“Fucking make me, Kirschstein.”

“Stop!” I cried. “Enough, both of you!”

Everyone went silent.

“No one’s getting naked, and no one is eating shit,” I continued.

“Did Marco just say shit?” Connie whispered.

“Either we play the game the right way or I send both of you to bed like the kids.”

I was trying really hard to sound authoritative, but my big brother voice felt less effective with people my own age. Armin pursed his lips and crossed his arms, trying to help me. He was clearly still rattled from the discussion, but he managed a glare to get Eren to relax.

I put my hand on Jean’s leg firmly to bring him back to reality a little, and he jolted at my touch.

“We’ll go check on the kids,” Hannah and Franz offered, standing up.

“Good idea,” Ymir said.

After Hannah and Franz left, Sasha took a deep breath. “So,” she began, “Jean, who would you like to ask?”

“Here’s one for Mikasa,” he said with an edge to his voice. “Would you rather your brother be less of an asshole or step on a mountain of Legos?”

I tried to muffle my laughter; I really did.
Jean’s question earned snickers from the other counselors, and even a smirk from Mikasa.

“I know which answer you’re going for, but I’m gonna have to go for Legos. Eren’s assholery makes me laugh,” she explained.

“An entire mountain of Legos!” Jean whined.

“You never said I couldn’t wear shoes.”

“Aw, come on, that’s cheating! You know what I meant!”

Mikasa shrugged. “Even if it was barefoot, I’d still go for Legos. Eren being an asshole is what makes him Eren.”

“… Thanks, sis,” Eren said dryly.

“Anytime, baby bro,” Mikasa said. It wasn’t entirely clear if she had missed his sarcasm or if she was simply choosing to ignore it. “Now then, for my question I’d like to ask Annie. Would you rather eat pussy or suck dick?”

“Damn, Mikasa!” Connie nearly shrieked. “Isn’t that kinda personal?”

“Nah, I don’t mind answering. You boys weren’t there at the last outpost; we had a serious sexuality jam, just us ladies. It was pretty eye opening, if you know what I mean.” She winked at me and I actually gulped. She was so carnivorous sometimes.

“So, Mikasa,” she continued, “to answer your question honestly, it really depends on the person’s hygiene, y’know? I guess in general ladies tend to be a little better maintained, and also it’s not just a one and done like with guys. If you know what you’re doing, you can get a good five or six rounds in one night.”

“Holy shit,” Jean muttered almost in a daze. “Six orgasms. Women are amazing.”

I would’ve made some kind of retort like “hey I’m your boyfriend you’re not supposed to be thinking about that!” but I was honestly impressed, so I didn’t say anything at all. Plus, I was trying to figure out how long it would take a guy to come six times, and decided there was absolutely no way we could compete with Annie’s statistic.

Then I started thinking about making Jean have an orgasm, and I felt like I might explode. They can’t read your mind, Marco. Just stop thinking about it! I took a deep breath, willing myself to pull my thoughts out of the gutter.

Hannah and Franz returned in that silence, with the guys in various states of awed silence, and the girls all either stifling laughter or blushing. (Some were doing both.)

“Oh, perfect timing, you two,” Annie said after a moment. “I think Hannah’s the last one to get asked, right? So here’s your question: would you rather only be able to eat one flavor of ice cream for the rest of your life, or never receive oral sex again?”

Armin let out a yelp, burying his face into Eren’s shoulder. Eren wrapped his arms around Armin, rubbing soothing circles into his back.

Franz sputtered. “Again? What did she mean again?”

Hannah looked ready to die from embarrassment: red cheeks, eyes bugging out, mouth a nervous
frown. She resolutely stayed silent.

“Shit, Franz, you’ve never given her oral?” Annie laughed. “You must be damn good with your hands then.”

“Annie!” Sasha hissed, smacking her thigh roughly.


“It was before we met!” Hannah squeaked.

“You were fifteen when we met!” he yowled.

“I was almost sixteen!” she defended.

“Who gave you oral when you were fifteen years old?!”

“Gah!” Armin wailed. “Guys, please! Can we please talk about something else?”

“Don’t worry about it! We weren’t even dating, okay?” Hannah continued.

“Oh my god, was it some random guy?”

“Franz, please, let’s talk about this in private.”

He pouted like a five year old and stood up.

“Franz,” Hannah said, her voice stern.

He pouted more. “Please? Can we talk about it?”

She rolled her eyes before standing up. “Ugh, fine. Sorry, guys. Have fun.”

“It’s okay. Go nurse your man’s fragile ego,” Sasha said gently.

“Have a good night, everyone!” Hannah said as she walked to catch up with Franz.

“Well, that took an interesting turn,” Jean commented, breaking the silence with a sharp laugh.

“I’m gonna go refill my water; you want anything, Marco?”

“Hmm? Oh, uh, just some water? Thanks,” I said, snapping out of my daze to smile warmly at him.

“I’ll take a soda, Jean!” Ymir teased.

“Get your own, Captain Freckles.”

“Favorite Boy, is that anyway to talk to your squad partner?” she asked with mock-offense.

“I’m not getting you soda!” Jean called over his shoulder.

“So who’s in for round two?” Sasha asked.

“I think I’ll just watch this round,” Armin said quietly. “You kids got a little too sexual for my comfort, and I’d rather that wasn’t directed at me.”

“Aww, we can ask you non-sexual stuff! Whoever asks Armin has to ask not-sexual questions only, deal?” Mina suggested.
“No, that’s okay. I’d rather sit out,” Armin pressed.

“Boo. Well, if you change your mind, you let us know. We’ll think of a good one just for you,” Sasha affirmed.

“I’ll let you know,” Armin said, and settled in closer to Eren. After a moment of re-situating, Armin was sitting between Eren’s outstretched legs, wrapped in a gentle hug from his boyfriend. They were so affectionate with each other before they started dating, that they really did seem natural even after such a short time.

I had to admit, I was a bit jealous. I wanted Jean and I to be that casual.

But Armin had always been more open with his affections, even with friends: he was a hugger, even right after you met him sometimes. Jean and I, were more of the ‘behind closed doors’ type, even pre-friendship. For once, though, I felt a quiet ache that I didn’t want it to stay like that forever.

It was going to take some time, I guess.

“Alright, I’ve got a good one!” Mina chirped up. “I think I’ll ask… Mikasa.”

“Are we gonna wait for Jean to come back?” I asked.

“He’s fine; he’ll be back in a minute,” Ymir said dismissively. I tried not to look too much like a kicked puppy, but that’s kind of how I felt.

Jean was doing better with the other counselors, though obviously his spats with Eren were still alive and kicking. Yet he still wasn’t seen as an integral part of the group. If Sasha had been missing, we would’ve waited. I liked to think that if I were missing, they’d wait for me, though I was less certain of that one. Jean was still on the fringe, though, and that definitely soured my mood a little.

“So, would you rather go to prison for six months or participate in a reality TV show?” Mina asked.

Armin breathed out a loud sigh when the question was decidedly not of a sexual nature.

“What exactly am I going to prison for?” Mikasa asked, arching an eyebrow. “I mean, that implies that I committed a sloppy enough crime to get caught. That’s not really my style.”

“Well, just pretend you somehow got caught. A genius detective pinned you to your crime. So which would you choose?”

“A genius detective was assigned to a case where the culprit was only sentenced to six months in prison? People on possession charges have gone to jail for longer than that.”

“Will you stop arguing and answer the question?” Mina sighed.

“Fine. I’d do the TV show because at least if it sucked, I could quit. Or like, get myself voted off or whatever. You can’t just ditch prison.”

“Fair enough,” Mina agreed.

“Alright, I’m asking Annie again,” Mikasa announced.

“Oh come on, mix it up!” Eren complained.
“Here you go,” Jean said suddenly from behind me, holding out my water bottle, and I gasped.

“Whoa, didn’t mean to scare you,” he said with a light laugh.

“Just startled me is all,” I assured him, taking the water bottle.

He sat next to me, close enough that our legs were touching. That was enough, for now. We were still getting used to each other, and I knew Jean didn’t want to be super obvious about it.

Still, I tried not to look at Eren and Armin, perfectly nestled into each other.

Jean noticed. I could feel his muscles stiffen, but he shifted closer to me so that our shoulders were touching, too. I leaned my head on his shoulder just briefly before sitting back up, a silent thank you and a promise that the next time we were alone, I was going to cuddle the crap out of him.

I wasn’t sure how much of that message was actually received, though.

“So would you rather pole-dance or lap-dance?” Mikasa asked plainly.

“Jeez, Mikasa!” Connie exclaimed. “You’re really trying to get the sexual 411 on Leonhart, aren’t you?”

“She’s made it clear that she’s open to questions of a sexual nature. I find her candor interesting and the rest of you guys’ reactions amusing,” Mikasa explained.

Armin groaned again. Poor guy, I thought. Not that I was faring a lot better on the embarrassment scale, but it looked like Armin’s discomfort went beyond that.

“That’s an easy question, Ackerman,” Annie answered, leaning back in her folding chair, placing her hands behind her head. “Lap-dance earns the better results, and frankly is less exhausting than pole-dancing.”

“You saying you’re too weak to pole dance?” Connie challenged.

“Not in the slightest,” Annie said, lifting her camp shirt up and displaying four-pack abs by the firelight. “Whoa,” seemed to be the collective response.

“That’s what I thought,” she said, letting her shirt fall over her stomach again. “Now, let’s see… who should I ask next? I know. Marco.”

I shrank away from the fire light as though I could somehow hide from Annie’s question that way. I understood exactly why Armin decided to sit this round out. Annie could be about to ask me the most innocent question in the world but she’d still make it feel dirty. I braced myself.

“Would you rather smoke pot…” she started, and I started to relax just a tiny bit: I can handle a question about marijuana. That’s not too b—

“Or admit that you and Jean are fucking?”

I felt like a cat that had been thrown into a bathtub: every hair on my body stood on end, and my whole body jumped seemingly from my muscles tensing alone.

“We are not!” I yelled, before I clamped a hand over my mouth for the volume. “We are not fucking,” I hissed.

I wasn’t sure why exactly I had reacted so strongly: did I want to get down and dirty with Jean?
Definitely, though I think we both needed a bit more time to work up to it. Had we had a few steamy make-out sessions? You bet your ass we did.

Maybe it was just the sheer lewdness of the remark, or the way she had said it, but I was on the defensive like I had never experienced.

Suddenly, I worried that Jean might interpret my outburst as a denial of our entire relationship. My blood ran cold. That wasn’t my intention; but I didn’t know how to fix the damage without crossing a line with Jean that we hadn’t really talked about.

Jean took a deep breath next to me, and we locked eyes for a second. I don’t think my head actually moved, but I willed Jean to understand that I was nodding.

“We are dating, though,” he said, just loud enough for the others to hear.

A small “yeep!” came from Armin, a broad smile filling his face.

I smiled too, albeit sheepishly, and reached for Jean’s hand, lacing our fingers together loosely. For once, Jean was the one with words.

“Oh, thank fuck, does this mean we can stop pretending we don’t know?” Ymir asked dramatically.

“You all knew?” I asked with a squeak. I mean, I knew Ymir was aware, and Connie had teased us pretty bad… but everyone?

“Yeah, honestly, you guys are the worst at keeping things on the DL. I thought after Connie’s joke on the trail earlier that the cat was pretty much out of the bag, but nope, you kept on pretending,” Eren said, shaking his head.

“Oh, I’m so happy for you two, finally figuring things out,” Armin said happily.

“You all suck,” Jean said sourly.

“No, I think it’s you who’s doing the sucking,” Sasha laughed.

“Sasha!” I exclaimed in embarrassment.

“Oh, I’m sorry, is that your job, Marco?”

“We are not having this conversation,” I warned.

“Come on, Sasha, back off,” Mina said. Finally, someone on our side! “They need time to explore each other’s bodies and figure out what they like and don’t like. Those things take time. You can get back to us about the sucking,” she said with a wink.

Or not.

“Mina, not you too!” I groaned.

“Whelp, I think I’m calling it a night,” Jean said, standing up.

“Me too,” I agreed.

Jean and I exchanged a quick glance made to bolt, but Ymir grabbed my arm.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said with a smirk. She let go, and I practically dragged Jean by the hand toward Maria as briskly as possible.

Halfway there, Jean stopped.

“Forget something?” I asked.

“No, just… What did Ymir mean by ‘rare specimen’?” he asked shyly.

“Oh, uh… it was just something she said once to me. A-about you.”

“Huh?”

I sighed and pursed my lips before continuing. “She met you and then… she thought I would want to meet you. She called you a ‘rare specimen,’ and said silly stuff like ‘he’s 100% your type, you have to meet him,’ blah blah blah.”

“Was that why… was that why you wanted to meet me?” Jean asked with a nervous giggle.

I blanched. “Uh…”

“You… you liked me this whole time, didn’t you,” he said softly.

“Yeah,” I mumbled, turning away from him.

“Hey,” he said, tucking a finger under my chin and drawing my face back to him. “That’s fucking adorable.”

And he pulled me in for a light kiss.

“I’m glad you don’t think it’s creepy,” I told him.

“Marco, you are the least creepy person I ever met, and I am pinning any creepiness I may feel on Ymir.”

“Deal,” I said with a fluttery laugh.

We walked the rest of the way to Maria, linked hands swinging gently between us.

When we got inside, though, Jean immediately let go of my hand. I was a little hurt, until I saw the shadowy outline of a kid walking down the hall towards us.

Squinting through the darkness, I made out spiky hair. “Jai? Is that you?” I called out.

“Marco?” he asked. “I, uh, I was just getting some water. I’m really thirsty.”

“What’s wrong with the upstairs bathroom faucet?” Jean asked. “It’s all the same water.”

“Oh hey, Jean,” Jai replied. “And uh, someone’s using it. Taking a huuuuge dump.”

“Gross,” Jean said, and I made a face.

“Right, well, hurry up,” I said, and Jai went into the downstairs bathroom.
I flicked on the light to the rec room, just to be sure everything was in order. I wanted to make sure that Jai really was just getting a drink, so I was mostly just trying to buy time before he went back upstairs.

Jean seemed to catch on, and he pretended to tidy the board games while I straightened the ping pong paddles.

Soon enough, we heard the pitter-patter of bare feet climbing the stairs, so we gave up the ghost and headed down the hall to the staff dorms.

We had put our stuff on separate beds, and I had assumed that we would be sleeping separately, given Jean’s apparent desire to keep things quiet. However, I hadn’t anticipated him admitting to the entire counseling staff that we were dating—well, not the entire counseling staff.

Hannah and Franz had left early, and were probably around the dorms somewhere. I put an arm in front of Jean before he could push open the door to the men’s dorm.

“Shh,” I whispered. “Hear anything?”

I pressed my ear against the door, afraid for what I might hear.

The voices I heard were thankfully not coming from the men’s dorm, but it wasn’t really the kind of conversation that I wanted to listen to.

“Franz, baby, I love you but you are not good at this,” Hannah said.

“Come on, I’ve never done this, just give me a minute.”

A pause. Jean and I looked at each other, torn between laughter and wanting to run screaming from the situation entirely.

“You need to—” Hannah’s instructions were cut off with a quiet, breathy moan.

Jean wasted no time in pushing through the men’s dorm room door and dragging me in behind him.

Luckily, we had chosen beds against the outside wall, and not the one next to the women’s dorm. I hoped Hannah would be quiet enough that we couldn’t hear it. And more importantly, that the kids wouldn’t hear it.

At the very least, Jai was still awake. I cringed: he was the kind of kid who would ask questions if he heard anything.

I set to making my bed, which really just meant rolling my sleeping bag out on the mattress. As I smoothed it down, I felt Jean’s hands at my hips.

“Hmm?” I asked, standing up, careful not to bonk my head on the bunk above me.

“We’re not gonna sleep together for two nights,” Jean said with a pout.

“I know,” I consoled, and pulled him into a hug. He tucked his face into the space where my neck meets shoulders, and wrapped his arms tightly around my waist.

I dropped a couple of light kisses in his hair, and we stood there for a few minutes, my back against the bedpost and arms full of Jean.
Jean, my boyfriend.

I kissed his hair once more, and he pulled back to look at me. I smiled warmly, bringing a hand up to smooth his hair a little.

“It’s supposed to be like that,” he said sleepily, mussing his hand through the unruly tufts.

“Ah yes, the carefully coiffed bed-head look,” I smirked.

“You told me you like my hair,” Jean pouted.

“I do.”

I ruffled his hair again, and he kissed me, light and sweet on the lips.

“You’re really great,” I told him, and he squeezed me a little tighter in response.

My back was starting to hurt from leaning against the wooden post, so I shifted my posture.

“Let’s get some rest,” I suggested. “Because if we keep hugging I’m gonna want to cuddle you all night and this dorm isn’t exactly private.”

“But you’re so comfy,” Jean mumbled into my shoulder. I rolled my eyes with a grin.

“I promise that we can cuddle all you want when we’re back in the tent, okay?”

“Hrnnn,” Jean whined.

I kissed his forehead.

“Hrnn?” he whined again.

With a sigh, I kissed him again, intending it to be a final goodnight kiss. Jean, it seemed, had a different idea, as he cupped my face in his hands and deepened the kiss.

Before he could get too into it, though, I pulled back. “Goodnight, Jean.”

“Next time,” Jean said.

“Next time for what?”

“Next time I’m gonna cuddle you so hard.”

X

The goal of the next morning’s activities was simple: keep Eren and Jean away from each other.

Eren wasn’t great around horses anyway, since he was usually so fired up (he made the more skittish horses nervous) so he was on “alternate activity” duty. Armin swore he didn’t mind missing horseback riding, but it wasn’t clear to me how much of that was him just wanting to spend time with Eren.

However, when it was time to head over to the stables, none of the kids wanted to opt out.

“We made it down that death-trap Hannes calls a zip-line,” Rachida smirked. “I think we can all handle a pony ride.”
That was great for the kids, but it made holding Eren back more challenging.

“Just stay up front, Jean,” Ymir instructed. “Eren stays at the rear so he doesn’t rile up the whole line, and you stay up front with me.”

By ten in the morning, we had all thirty one campers and twelve counselors crowded into the Maria outpost stables. I was half expecting to see Ilse or Mike out here, before I remembered that they stayed back at Sina after Mike’s ankle mishap.

Instead, we were greeted by Moblit, who looked more relaxed than I had ever seen him.

“Sup, Mo?” Ymir called to the sandy-haired man.

“Criminy, they put you in charge this year?” Mo laughed.

“Hey, they let you take the stables,” Ymir teased in response.

“I deserve a break away from Hanji,” he said almost miserably. “That person is a health hazard.”

“So instead of hanging with your boss-friend you’re teaching middle schoolers how to ride ponies. Amazing,” Ymir drawled.

“Is this your whole group?” Mo asked, changing the subject.

“Yup! Not a single one wanted to miss out on the magic of horses. Or something,” Ymir concluded, shaking her head.

“Great! Well, I’ve got most of the horses tacked and ready to go, but you’ll need to break into two groups. I don’t have forty horses,” Mo explained.

“Well that actually works out,” Ymir told Mo. “Mikasa! Take your squad, Annie and Armin’s squad, and… Mina and Marco’s group down to the archery range. When we’re done here, we’ll come switch with you.”

“Sounds good,” Mikasa said. “Alright, my team, A team, and Trailblazers, follow me please.”

“Aww, but I wanted to ride the horses too!” Jai complained.

“We’re still gonna ride the horses,” Teresa told him with an almost patient sigh. “We just get to shoot arrows first.”

“That’s the spirit,” I confirmed, waving a goodbye to the other groups—okay, waving goodbye to Jean.

The archery range wasn’t set up yet, so Mikasa took the lead and instructed Eren and I to set up while she sat the campers down to go over the safety rules and a brief demonstration of proper archery techniques.

“Rule number one is no one enters the archery range unless told to do so. Rule number two is never point any arrows at another person. I don’t care how dull you think the tip is. Rule number three, listen to and obey all instructions from the range-master: I’m the range-master,” she clarified.

“If you cannot handle yourself, you will be kicked out of the archery range and you will also be forbidden from riding horses when we switch. Understood?”
The kids nodded furiously.

“Good. Now I’m going to show you the correct way to grip the bow so watch closely.”

Mikasa continued her demonstration, explaining how to nock an arrow, finding your dominant eye, and how to pull the string back correctly.

“If the string starts bothering your arm, you can use a guard, but I’m not sure if there’s enough for everyone; we may be a few short,” she said, rummaging through the box.

“Anyway, so there’s five targets. Please split yourselves up into groups of three, but do not cross the yellow line until I tell you that you may.”

The kids scrambled to pick which target they wanted, which seemed to consist largely of what color the arrows’ fletching was.

All we had to do was keep the kids behind the yellow line; Mikasa took care of the rest.

Teresa was the first of our squad to shoot, and was shockingly good at it. She got all three of her arrows on the target, two of which were in the red circle just beyond the bull’s-eye.

“That wasn’t very good,” she commented.

“Are you kidding?” Jai enthused. “That was amazing! You’re really good at this!”

It happened quickly, so it was hard to tell, but I was pretty sure Teresa smiled at the compliment. Jai must have seen it too, for the flicker of pride and delight that shone in his dark brown eyes.

After a few rounds through for each of the kids, everyone had hit the target at least once (though Andrew’s arrow didn’t actually stick in the target).

“Alright, I say it’s the counselors’ turn,” Eren announced.

“Something about Eren with a bow and arrow feels dangerous,” Mina whispered to me. I tried to stifle my laughter by turning it into a cough. Armin didn’t look impressed.

“Are we just messing around or competing?” Annie asked. “Because I will school all of you.”

“I don’t know about that, Annie,” Armin told her. “Mikasa’s a fantastic shot.”

“Yeah, let’s compete, then!” Eren said, getting fired up already.

The kids got excited too, gathering around the counselors, either booing us or cheering us on, depending on their allegiances.

It hurt a little to see my own squad members flocking to Annie and Mikasa instead of me, but I couldn’t blame them. I wasn’t really that good at archery.

We split up into two rounds of three counselors each: Armin, Mina, and I would go first, followed by Mikasa, Eren, and Annie.

Armin’s first arrow skittered across the top of the target, but his next two hit the black. Mina put all three of hers in the red, and I managed two blues and somehow my final arrow hit the yellow center.

When Annie, Eren, and Mikasa stepped up though, I felt like any pride I had in my one measly
bull’s-eye had drained out of me.

All three of them hit the yellow center with all three arrows, so they went in closer to see which ring of the yellow circle they had landed an arrow in.

Eren’s were farther out than Annie and Mikasa’s; and in the end, the girls decided to call it a draw, despite the chants from the campers demanding a tie-breaker.

“Not everything is a competition,” Mikasa said. “We just wanted to shoot some arrows and have fun. It was a tie. We’re done. Now who wants to shoot a few more rounds?”

The kids cheered, and they lined up in front of the targets once more.

“Ymir’s coming over,” Armin pointed out as the kids went to pick up their arrows.

“Ah, see? No time left anyway,” Mikasa said.

“You all did a very nice job of listening and following safety rules,” I told the group.

“Can we do this again?” Christopher, a short blond boy from Mikasa’s team, asked.

“If you come back to the camp next year,” Annie teased.

Ymir waved as her group got closer. “How was it?” she called to us.

We waited for them to get a little closer before responding. “It was fine,” Mikasa said. “They did a great job. How about you guys?”

“Eh, bout what you’d expect. We had a few nervous nellies but they all made it, right?” Ymir elbowed a boy from Hannah’s team. “Anyway, Mo said the horses could use a break, so instead of switching right away, we’ll go do lunch and start the second activity after that.”

As we headed to the outpost to get lunch started, Jean tugged on my sleeve to hold me back a second.

“Ymir gave me the talk,” he whispered.

“The talk like… the birds and the bees?” I whispered with a giggle.

“No!” Jean hissed, “the ‘break his heart and I’ll break your spine’ talk.”

“Oh,” I said, still smiling broadly, “well I guess someone had to.”

“Someone had to threaten me with bodily harm?” Jean clarified.

“It’s tradition!” I said. I realized it was a weak justification, but I was touched that Ymir was being so protective of me, and tickled that Jean was so scared of her.

“Isn’t usually like, a sibling or something?” Jean whined. “Ymir’s fucking scary. If Julia threatened me I’d feel a lot safer.”

“You’re not supposed to feel safe when you’re being threatened,” I reasoned.

“You know what I mean!” he cried, exasperated.

“I know, I just think it’s funny how flustered you’re getting over this. Ymir calls herself my
‘Mama;’ you can’t say this surprised you.”

“Yeah, but now I have to find someone to give you the talk, someone who’s on par with Ymir. And in case you’ve forgotten, I don’t really have friends.” He said this last part with a forced laugh. I frowned at his self-deprecation.

“Jean, you have friends. And I’m sure Ymir wouldn’t mind giving me the talk, too. Why don’t you ask her?”

“This is ridiculous.”

“You’re the one who wants someone to threaten your boyfriend,” I replied.

“UGH.”

X

After lunch, Mina and I gathered our squad up to go horseback riding. Moblit was getting the last couple of horses ready still, so Mikasa distracted the kids.

“Raise your hand if you’ve ever ridden a horse.”

About half the kids raised their hand, some more enthusiastically than others.

“Okay, that’s not bad. Again, if you decide you don’t want to do this after all, there’s no shame. You can either stay and watch, or one of us will walk you down to the archery range, though you probably won’t get to shoot. Everyone still on board?”

The kids nodded again, with various levels of vigor, and then Moblit exited the stable, wiping his hands on his pants.

“Hello again,” he said with a nod. “Now, just like the morning group, we’ll be going out on a loop trail. It’ll take about forty five minutes, give or take, along the trail. While we’re on the trail, I will be setting the pace. We’ll start it off nice and slow, and work our way up as you get more comfortable. Those of you who are brave or have ridden horses before will get a chance to try a trot or a short gallop toward the end, so just be patient out on the trail until I say you can speed up.

“Okay, so a couple of important rules around horses. The overall way to act around horses is to be calm and avoid sudden movements towards their head, speak calmly and don't run around. Now, these horses are very kid-friendly, but you should still stay calm and respect them.”

The kids were actually paying very close attention, though I had to glare at Jai every time he kept whispering to Teresa. It seemed like Teresa had decided that Jai wasn’t so bad, and there were glimpses of friendly banter between them. Now, of course, was not the time.

“Now, the horses know the trail, but it’s important for you to be in control: you are the boss, not the horse,” Moblit continued. “I’ll be right there with you if anything happens, but if your horse gets a little cheeky, remind it who’s in charge. Counselors, I’ll be counting on your help if anyone gets into trouble, because you may be closer than I am.

“Alright, now for the fun part! How to ride a horse,” he announced, and as if on cue, one of the stable-hands appeared with a horse. “This is Betsey. She’s one of our steady ladies, as I like to describe them. Obviously, we will help you onto the horses using a ladder, since I’d bet none of you can mount on your own.” In a practiced movement, Moblit pulled himself onto Betsey, and situated himself on her broad back before continuing.
“Anyway, let’s talk about the reins, first: everybody make a telephone with your hands,” he said, holding up both hands with his thumbs and pinkies extended. “Good. Now, the reins will go between those three fingers in the middle and your palm, like so. Obviously, your legs are going to be against the horse’s sides at all times. To give the signal to move forward or speed up, you can click your tongue like this,” he said, demonstrating. “Everyone give that a try.”

The kids eagerly started making all sorts of cacophonous clicking and kissing sounds. Betsey perked up attentively and made to take a few steps, but Mobilt’s firm arms on the reins kept her still.

“Good, good, alright that’s enough,” Moblit laughed, putting his hands up. When the chatter quieted, he continued. “Okay, so steering is just pulling lightly to one side, and to stop, lean back, clench the muscles in your butt, take a firm grip of the reins, and move your hands slowly, but firmly, towards your hips,” he explained, going through the motions as he did so. Betsey obediently took a few steps backwards as he did.

“When you feel the resistance, hold for a couple seconds, then ease up. We’ll practice before we hit the trail, so don’t worry.”

The kids were starting to get chatty, though from experience, I knew Moblit still had his horse personalities speech left. “Come on, now, I just need your attention a couple more minutes before we start putting you on horses, okay? If you don’t learn the safety rules, I can’t let you ride.”

They settled down again.

“Thank you. A couple quick trail rules: we’ll be riding in a line. You can talk, but no yelling unless you have any trouble, in which case you should yell ‘stop!’ If you hear someone yell ‘stop’, you yell it too, to make sure I hear it. Also yell ‘stop’ if you get too far behind. We’ll pass messages up or down the line, so you should not pass anyone. We’ll practice that too, before we head out. Don’t let your horse try to eat any tall grasses or leafy branches, because it could be poisonous. Horses aren’t always the most attentive about what they’re eating.

Now, every horse is different: they’re not a bicycle, they’re a living animal. Horses have personalities. Some are better than others, though as I said, these horses are used to having summer campers ride them. Your horse might be eager to go; it might be on the lazier end. Your horse might ignore everything you do, or it might react to every movement you make. Some horses will try to test you to see what they can get away with: don’t let them get away with anything. So pay attention to your horse, and remember who the boss is.”

Moblit slid off his horse, and the stable-hand took Betsey’s reins from him. “Alright, let’s have the shorter ones up in front here, so I can put you on the smaller horses first,” he instructed. Mina and I exchanged glances before we ushered Eli and Jai forward, Minh toward the middle, and Georgie and Teresa toward the back with the tallest campers.

We decided that a tiny blonde girl from Armin’s team whose name I swore was Tabby was the shortest of the group. A second stable-hand with hair like a waterfall of long braids helped Tabby to the ladder while Moblit led a dappled grey horse out of the barn.

“This fine young lady is Hitch,” Moblit said as an introduction. “Actually, you look familiar… were you here last year?”

“Yeah, and I rode Hitch then, too,” Tabby said proudly. “We’re both always the littlest.”

“Well, then even better, you already know a bit about her,” Moblit said. The stable-hand gave
Tabby the reins and led her toward the field that led to the path.

“Next!” Moblit called, leading another small horse, this time a tan one, toward the campers. He made his introductions between the horse and its new rider, adjusting the stirrups and checking the handhold on the reins.

After a few kids were ready, Annie and Armin saddled up as well, not only to have adults on horses with them, but also because they were the shortest counselors.

Finally, the last of our squad was mounted up, though Eli’s face was constantly scrunched up like he was about to sneeze. My observation was shortly proven accurate, as a monstrous sneeze wracked the small boy’s body atop his horse, Coyote.

Fortunately, Coyote seemed to be the kind of horse who couldn’t be bothered to react to the boy’s uproarious expulsions. The dark bay just stood calmly, curling his lips in that way that horses do, while Eli sniffled miserably.

“You gonna make it?’ I asked with a sympathetic smile. My own horse, a cream colored giant named Ferdinand, was higher strung than Eli’s. I had to put my limited horse experience to work to get him to stay still.

“Yeah, just allergies,” Eli explained.

“It might settle down once we get moving, with the wind and fresh. But if it gets to be too much, you let one of us know, alright?”

“I will,” he promised.

After what felt like another half an hour of keeping Ferdinand still and murmurs of “really will you please just relax” on repeat under my breath, Moblit announced that we were ready to hit the trail.

He arranged us in an order of sorts, according to general horse temperament. “The more enthusiastic horses will stick to the front, and the lazier, slower horses will go to the back. They’re herd animals, after all, and their flock tendencies will make sure they keep moving. Those of you in the back, though, remember to yell ‘stop’ if you drop too far back!”

The horses seemed to have picked up on the fact that we were going to move now (Ferdinand in particular), and some of the kids shrieked a little.

“Remember who’s the boss!” Mo called over his shoulder as he clicked his horse forward.

The first five or six minutes were pretty uneventful although a few kids struggled to keep their cool as they felt the muscles of the horse move underneath them. One of Mikasa and Eren’s kids, Eva, rode in front me on a chestnut mare named Honeypie. Honeypie was even less thrilled by our snail’s pace walk than Ferdinand, and she kept trying to nudge her way forward.

“Marco, she won’t stop,” Eva said, in a slight panic.

“Remember how Moblit explained to lean back? Try that,” I suggested. “You’re doing a great job; just remind her that you’re the one who sets the pace.”

Eva leaned back and pulled her hands in, and Honeypie slowed down a bit.

“There you go!” I said. “Nice job, Eva.”
But as soon as I congratulated the camper for handling her horse so well, Honeypie sped up again, trying to overtake Aimar in front of her.

“Marco…” Eva said cautiously.

“Do it again, Eva. Keep reminding her,” I urged.

Again, Eva leaned back, drawing the reins back to try to slow the eager horse.

Moblit, just ahead of Aimar, appeared to have overheard Eva’s struggle. He turned back a bit in his saddle to offer encouragement. “Honeypie is younger, and she’s just got that temperament. I warned you she’s a bit much to handle. But you’re doing a great job with her. In a few minutes we’re going to try a trot. She’ll like that, but remember not to let her take over.”

Eva nodded firmly.

“Have you ridden horses before?” I asked.

“A couple times,” Eva said. “At summer camp. I really like them, though.”

Ferdinand was getting caught up in Honeypie’s energy a little, and I had to pull him back a little, too.

Moblit called a halt to our almost painfully slow pace. We passed the message down the line as we had practiced, and the procession came to a stop.

“Alright, how are we all feeling?” he asked when everyone had successfully stopped.

“Good!” the kids cheered in unison.

“Great, I’m glad to hear it! Now, who wants to try going faster?” Moblit asked.

Some kids started to shuffle a little nervously atop their horses, but Mo was quick to reassure them. “If you’d rather keep walking, that is absolutely fine. If you want to go back to the stables and dismount, that’s also fine. However, those who want to try a trot or possibly a short gallop will have the chance here.

“Raise your hand if you do not want to go faster,” Mo requested. “No shame, just need to know who’s going where.”

Eli raised his hand as another sneeze racked him. Alex, the tomboyish girl from Armin’s team, also raised her hand with a slightly horrified expression. Four other timid hands joined the first two.

“Okay, you guys will head back with two counselors to the barn. There’s a nice little trail around the barn that you can walk around. Counselors, who’s going back with this group?”

Eren raised his hand and shot a look at Armin. “We’ll take them, Mo.”

I raised an eyebrow at the two of them, but Moblit just smiled.

“Great, thank you,” he said. “You can take the right-hand branch here,” he said, indicating the split in the trail, and let Eren and Armin lead the group of six campers back to the barn.

“So,” Moblit continued after they were safely on their way, “I take it the rest of you want to try to go a little faster?”
“Yeah!” they replied in unison.

After a quick headcount to see how many were left, Mo talked briefly about how to get your horse to speed up into a trot, or even a gallop, and more importantly, reviewed how to get the horse to slow down again. Since Mo would be leading the line, the horses would probably just follow in step behind him, but it was a good review anyway.

“Any questions?” he asked.

When the kids shook their heads, he grinned.

“Alright, here we go!” Moblit exclaimed, and led us deeper into the woods along the path.

I kept an eye on Eva and Honeypie, but it looked like she had it under control. Our walk was a little faster than the crawl we started out with, and with a bit more speed, the horse actually seemed to become more responsive instead of continuing to try to run out from under her.

After a few minutes, we came to a long stretch of straight, flat dirt, and Moblit announced that we would do a short trot.

At Moblit’s command, I urged Ferdinand into a gentle trot as the line moved forward, sucking in a quick gasp as the extra speed and movement caught me a bit off guard. It had been a year since I rode a horse last, and I thought I remembered the sensation well enough, but Ferdinand was proving me wrong.

Lips pursed in concentration, I sighed in relief when Mo called out to decrease back down to a walk.

After a few rounds of trot-walk-trot-walk, Mo deemed the group sufficiently comfortable with the trot.

“Alright, who wants to gallop?” Mo asked.

Most of the group responded with an excited “yeah!”, while a couple declined.

“Okay; let’s have those who do not want to gallop go to the back of the line, where the pace will be slower. We’re going to walk the horses over to the hill over there” – he gestured vaguely—“and I’ll explain how it’ll go when we get there.”

Basically, we would start at a trot, gallop up the hill a bit, and eventually slow to a walk by the top. I grimaced a bit at the pain in my thighs from the saddle, but hoped that Mo’s reminder that there was actually less movement in a gallop would be true, despite how counter-intuitive it sounded.

We went up a small hill first, then a slightly larger one. It actually was a bit less bumpy now that we were galloping, and I was grateful for the reprieve. After the gallop, we walked the horses around a few more minutes, and some kids began asking if we could gallop again.

“How was the gallop?” Mo asked the kids.

“Good!” they chimed.

The two who didn’t want to gallop before passed the message up that they wanted to try it, after all.

“Have them come back to their original spot in the line, then, and they can gallop on the next hill,”
Mo directed.

When the kids were all ready again, we set off at a nice walk until we got closer to the hill, where we increased to a trot and then a gallop once more.

A few kids decided that three hills was enough, but Moblit said we had time to do one last hill. After the line was rearranged – gallopers in the front, slower horses in the back—we ascended a final hill.

A few kids begged to gallop more, but Mo could only offer a gentle laugh.

“Unfortunately, it’s about the end of our time,” he said. The kids whined and aww-ed appropriately.

“We’ll walk back to the barn now, and I’ll show you how to dismount, so I’ll need you to listen carefully when we get back.”

We rode back toward the stables, and Moblit brought Betsey to the front of the group where everyone could see him.

“All right, now the absolute first thing you should do when dismounting is to take both feet out of the stirrups. That is very important. Then you’ll put your hands on your horse’s shoulders, swing one leg over the back, and slide down. I’ll show you, then I’ll ask counselors to dismount, then you’ll dismount.”

Mo went through the steps, exaggeratedly taking his feet out of the stirrups, then leaned forward so he was almost lying flat over Betsy’s shoulders. Finally, he swung his leg over the back and dropped down.

Next, he instructed the counselors to dismount, announcing the steps as we complied. Finally, the kids came down.

Eren and Armin’s kids were gathered along the fence, watching us all dismount, waving to their friends or laughing when someone dismounted ungracefully.

Finally, with all kids successfully dismounted from horses, we walked them to the stables, where Mo and the stable hands showed the kids how to unsaddle the horses and groom them after their workout.

When Mo was satisfied with the kids’ job of grooming, we waved goodbye to our equine friends and headed back to Maria.

We rejoined the other three squads outside the outpost, and I couldn’t help but shoot Jean a fluttery smile. We saw each other at lunch, and I didn’t find myself particularly distracted by thinking of him while we were riding, but now that I saw him again, my mind was swamped with the giddy reminder that he was my boyfriend now.

“Alright, friends,” Ymir began her address, “before we give you free time till dinner, I have remembered a crucially important detail. Laundry. We need to wash it. Gather all your nasty, dirty clothes in the hamper in your room, and bring it downstairs to the laundry room. Once your room has turned in your dirty clothes, you are free for about two hours. Dismissed!”

Maybe we could volunteer for laundry duty, I thought, as the kids rushed up the stairs to their rooms.
“Counselors, we need 3 teams,” Ymir continued. “Swimming supervision, non-swimming supervision, and laundry. Volunteers?”

“I’ll do laundry!” I said quickly. Too quickly. Armin snorted at my enthusiasm.

Ymir quirked an eyebrow at me and I flushed crimson. “That’s an awful lot to do all by yourself,” she said innocently. “Maybe Jean can help you out.”

“Oh… sure,” Jean said, not catching onto my transparent plans and Ymir’s tacit support.

“Sasha and I got swimming covered,” Connie said.

“Depending on how many kids go in the water, we may want a couple more,” Ymir said. “Maybe Hannah or Mina?”

“Sure,” the girls agreed.

“Cool. So the rest of us are on non-swimming supervision duty to start with, at least. Let’s get to it!”

X

If someone asked me what the best part of the Maria Outpost was for me this year, I would have answered ‘laundry duty’ in a heartbeat.

Not, of course, because I had developed a Levi-level interest in cleanliness, but because amidst baskets of sweaty, muddy clothes and an over-stuffed Maytag from circa 1997, I enjoyed the best make-out of my life.

Admittedly, there was not a whole lot of competition for this title, but I think it’s safe to say that Jean and I gained quite a bit of experience in those two hours.

For example, we navigated how much tongue was fun and felt good versus how much was suffocating and too… wet.

We had just started the second load of laundry, and Jean’s hands reached out to cup my face. I hummed pleasantly, licking with just the tip of my tongue, thinking that we would ease into where we were before the sharp end-of-cycle buzzer had jolted us apart.

To my surprise, though, Jean had sucked my tongue into his mouth, lips open and sliding sloppy and wide over my own.

“Mmm!” I exclaimed, pulling back. “Jean. Too much.”

He pulled away from me with a slurp. “Hah?”

“That was too hard,” I said gently, moving back to meet his lips.

“Sorry,” he said sheepishly, pouting.

I kissed him quickly. “Hey, we’re learning,” I smirked. “Just less tongue this time, okay?”

He nodded, determined to make this attempt even better.

He slowed his movements, and instead of a tongue bath, we had blissfully shifted to a soft, sensual kiss. As we let it grow deeper, Jean shyly grabbed my ass, pulling me closer to him.
incredible, and suddenly I got the idea to lift him up on top of the washer.

He wrapped his legs around my hips, and then I was the one reaching up just a bit to reach his face, and he let his tongue gently slide into my mouth, taking advantage of his new angle.

I hummed happily, trying to let him know that I so approved of this level of tongue, and we let our hands roam over backs and up chests and across ticklish stomachs.

After the second load, though, my jaw was getting tired, and I didn’t want to emerge from the laundry room looking like we had sucked face the whole time (despite the fact that that’s exactly what we were doing).

Instead, we just let ourselves bask in the relative privacy and intimacy of being able to hold each other. We chatted about how horses and archery had gone, pausing in stories every now and then to press a chaste kiss or three to cheeks and noses.

I highly recommend laundry duty at Maria outpost.

X

That night, once the kids were asleep, or at least faking it well enough, we counselors went outside to the fire pit to hang out again. It was decided that games were not a good choice for this crowd, given the tensions they had created last night, so we decided to try telling ghost stories.

It was Eren’s idea, so he started it off. But when he told some story about giants with no genitals eating people and destroying humanity, it was more ridiculous than scary.

“You realize the point of ghost stories is to make us believe them, right?” Ymir laughed.

“Shut up,” Eren sulked.

Armin, seated in his lap, smiled sweetly and patted Eren’s cheek. “It was a very well-developed story, just not the height of the realism,” he soothed.

“Whatever.”

“Anyone else have an actual ghost story?” Sasha asked.

Hannah cleared her throat. “I’ve got one.”

Hannah’s story was at least about ghosts, but it wasn’t particularly scary either. A few other half-hearted attempts were made, but somehow the conversation derailed and we ended up talking about genetically modified foods.

I was getting sleepy anyway, so when Franz started yelling about the downsides of Monsanto, I decided to call it a night.

“Hey, what time is it?” Jean asked as I used his shoulder to stand up.

I angled my watch toward the light of the fire, tilting it back and forth to read it through the glare. “It’s… wait a second,” I said, holding my wrist to my ear. My face fell.

“What is that pout for?” Armin asked with a laugh.

“My watch died.”
“Aww,” Armin said sympathetically.

“Sorry for your loss,” Jean said with a sleepy grin. “Eh, I’d rather go inside than get eaten by mosquitoes again. I’m gonna have welts for weeks,” he complained.

“Yeah, alright. Let’s call it a night,” Ymir announced. “Tomorrow is free time in the morning and woodcarving in the afternoon, so we’ll do a slightly later breakfast? There’s no reason to drag them out of bed, I mean.”

“Finally,” Annie sighed. “The girls in our group are not early risers.”

“Same,” Hannah smiled.

Franz and Connie put out the fire, and we gathered our belongings and shuffled back into the lodge. Jean grabbed my hand lightly in the darkness, though he let go with a squeeze when we got inside.

“Goodnight, Freckles,” he said fondly.

“Goodnight, Jean.”

X

The next morning it was drizzling, so “free time” ended up being “rec room” time. The advantage of this was that we really didn’t need twelve adults to supervise thirty kids playing board games and air hockey, so we organized a rotation to give everyone an hour-long break.

The kids ended up creating an elaborate gaming tournament to become the “ultimate games champion”, which they insisted should be counted in the team competitions.

“Oh shit,” Ymir whispered to me. “I completely forgot about the team competitions. Did one of us write the scores down somewhere?”

“I thought you were doing that, Leader;” I teased.

“Are you sassing me, Baby Boy?”

“I might be.”

“I’m so proud.”

“You could ask Mikasa or Hannah,” I suggested. “Hannah might have a copy of it, and Mikasa might just remember off-hand where the points stand.”

“I’m a terrible lead counselor,” she whined.

“No you’re not,” I soothed. “No one’s been lost to the wild, everyone is eating and drinking well, and the kids respect you. You’re doing a great job, Ymir.”

“Thanks, Marco,” she said with a smile. “You’re a good guy.”

“I try,” I said, returning her smile.

She leaned her head on my shoulder as we watched Ryan and Rachida bicker over whether or not Rachida had violated the “no intentional flipping” rule of the air hockey tournament, and if so, if this meant the point was re-played or if she was disqualified from the entire tournament.
Two and half hours later, when lunch was called, Teresa was in first place, Rachida in second, and Alex in third.

“You’re gonna add our scores to the running totals, right?” Jai asked. “Because Teresa’s really representing the Trailblazers out there.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” I assured him.

The rain let up after lunch, so we took the kids outside for the woodcarving activity. The afternoon was therefore spent nervously watching middle schoolers handle knives to try to carve out various animals, letters of the alphabet, and horribly misshapen people while sitting on damp benches.

“That one looks like one of Eren’s monsters from last night,” Annie giggled quietly, and I struggled to hold in an ugly snort of laughter.

Jesse, the wide-eyed boy from Hannah and Franz’s team, made a small bird that, well, actually looked like a bird. I was quite impressed.

“Mine is way better than yours,” he said to Teresa, holding up his carving.

“Whatever,” she said, continuing to peel wood, smoothing the little flute she was working on.

“I mean, making a flute is the easiest thing,” he said. “You’re not actually sculpting anything, you’re just carving little holes in—OW!” he yelled as Teresa poked him in the thigh with a spare piece of wood.

“Don’t be a braggart. No one likes a braggart,” she said simply, shrugging as she continued to smooth the finger holes.

“Franz! Franz!” Jesse cried out. “She stabbed me!”

“Teresa!” I nearly shrieked. “You—you can’t do that! Apologize!”

“Sorry for stabbing you,” she said with minimal sincerity.

“Separate, you two,” Franz said. “It happens again and you’re done with the project, got it?” Franz said sternly.

They both nodded, and Teresa stood up and moved to where Jai was sitting, as though nothing had happened.

Jai was thrilled that she had sought out his company, and eagerly complimented her flute. “Wow, does it really work?” he asked.

“It should,” she said with a shrug.

I looked at the sad lump of wood in my hands, turning it over and over as though that might make it look more like the sailboat I had envisioned.

With a sigh, I glanced over to Jean, who had sat himself in a corner of the room, completely ignoring the kids he was meant to be supervising. Occasionally, one of the girls from his group would come over to show him their progress, and he would ooh and ahh appropriately, but otherwise, he kept his carving project a secret.

Any time someone tried to sneak a look at it, he blushed and stashed it under the table until they stopped looking at him.
“He better not be carving a penis,” Connie stage-whispered to Sasha as I walked by.

As the kids finished up, they had free time again (though not in the river) until dinner, but Jean kept working.

I gave up on my pathetic sailboat. It was basically a rectangle with a lumpy triangle on top, and I supposed if you knew what it was meant to be, you could kind of see it.

Teresa’s flute did in fact play, though she complained that it was out of tune. It was a little sharp here and there, but overall I was very impressed.

“Have you done this before?” I asked.

“No, but my abuelo does it all the time. I just did what I saw him doing. His never turn out this off-key though.”

“I’m sure he’s had a lot of practice,” I assured her, “and I think he’ll be pretty impressed with your first attempt here.”

She offered a small smile at that. “I hope so,” she said, and then wandered off to join in a tree-climbing expedition with Jai.

I took a seat on the damp bench again, resigned to my ass being wet.

“Hey, Marco,” Jean called as he walked over, holding something behind his back.

I hoped it was whatever he had been carving; curiosity was definitely getting to me.

He gave me a warm smile and a gentle shoulder nudge as he joined me on the bench.

“So do I get to see what you were carving?” I asked as casually as I could.

“It’s uh… it’s for you,” he said, blushing. “It’s really dumb, but I couldn’t think of anything better to make that would actually work, so uh… yeah.”

Slowly, he brought his arm from behind his back and uncurled his fingers.

On his palm was a small vaguely-heart-shaped medallion with the letters JK + MB in the middle. It had a small hole in the top.

I was honestly surprised by what I was seeing; who knew Jean was such a sap? I covered my mouth with a hand, hoping that Jean wouldn’t think I was making fun of his gift.

“You could like… put it on a chain or something, if you wanted,” he said, clearly embarrassed.

“This is so sweet, Jean,” I told him earnestly. “Thank you.”

“I wanted it to be nicer, but…”

“No, no. It’s perfect, I love it. I’ll put it on my keychain or something,” I promised.

“Dork.”

“You like it,” I teased.

“Heh, you caught me,” he said with a broad smile. He leaned toward me as though he might kiss
me, so I pulled back, watching the kids run around us earnestly.

“One more night,” I reminded him.

“Yeah. One more night,” he echoed quietly.

One more night until we were back in the tents, back on the trail, and headed back toward civilization.

Chapter End Notes

I mean, you could look up a picture of an archery target, but here’re the colors from outside to inside: white, black, blue, red, yellow. :D

Also: holy shit this chapter was 13.7k????

Next time: ¯\_(ツ)_/¯

(I literally have no idea what to do for the last two chapters but please rest assured that they are coming. Just... very. very. slowly.)
Reunited (and it feels so good)

Chapter Summary

Camp Sina is coming to an end-- the final days of the hike, the infamous bonfire, and one last sunrise hike.

Chapter Notes

Holy goshwow working full time takes it out of you. Plus I keep doing silly things like getting distracted by iwaoi headcanons. Oops. But here it is-- chapter 14!
Many thanks as always to my wonderful beta-babe cloudmonstachopper without whom there would be significantly more confusion, errors, and shitty writing. You're a gift <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Our final day at the Maria Outpost had only one real planned activity to give the kids time to “relax.” Yeah right— whenever we weren’t walking all day, these kids had more energy than that battery-powered rabbit.

Anyway, pottery was our scheduled morning activity, and the kids were acceptably calm as we sat them down at the table.

Ymir brought out the butcher paper and rolled it down the table to protect the wood from the red stain from the clay.

In previous years, Hannes was the pottery guy in addition to his gig at the zipline. He taught the kids about the best way to mold and work the clay, gave them some history on pottery and how it evolved over the years, and encouraged creative projects like spoon-rests or something.

With Hannes covering extra odd-jobs this year in light of Mike’s excellent ankle adventure, we had to improvise a little bit.

There was a kiln that Hannes would use to fire the kids’ projects when they were done, and despite his absence, he would still come by to fire our group’s creations.

Of course, without Hannes to help us figure out what would actually survive in the kiln and what would just explode into smithereens, we tried to steer the kids toward the one thing we counselors all knew how to make: bowls made from “worms.”

“Alright, we’re going to make some small bowls today,” Ymir announced, though she sounded a little unsure about the word “bowls.” When it came to arts and crafts, Ymir was a little out of her element, but she was trying not to let her bias show.

“Like real ones?” Jai asked.
“Yes real ones. With…” Ymir paused to heave one of the huge bags of clay onto the table. “This!”

“That is a lot of clay,” Georgie giggled.

“So, we’ll give you each a chunk of clay and you’ll start off by making a pancake. That’s the base of the bowl. Next you’ll make a bunch of little clay worms,” Ymir continued, rubbing her palms together to demonstrate the motion.

“When the worms are ready, you’ll lay them around the edges of your pancake, and smooth them together with your fingers,” Ymir said. “Cool?”

We passed out the small bricks of terracotta clay covered in clear cellophane to each kid.

Ymir gave the most disimpassioned demonstration, her dislike of arts and crafts evident. I chipped in where I could, hoping to brighten up the activity a bit.

I helped a few kids smooth the first worm onto the base, but after the first couple, most of them seemed to have figured it out.

As I observed the kids and made comments here and there, I picked the clay from under my fingernails, grimacing as I found all kinds of dirt and grime under there, too.

“Gross,” Jean teased. He hip-bumped me gently and flashed his joker grin at me as he made his way around the table to help Sandra with a too-large worm.

I tried to suppress the grin that bloomed across my face, but it was still super obvious. Jean chuckled a little at me, a twinkle in his eye.

_“I’m in love with a huge nerd,”_ I thought to myself.

What?!

The word “love” certainly snuck up on me. I assured myself I hadn’t said it out loud as my heart restarted itself. But you know what? Maybe I did love him.

But I’d keep it to myself for a while longer.

X

The afternoon was lazy and hot.

It was a nearly unanimous decision to hang out in the river, so after lunch and a generous amount of sunscreen, we all donned our swimming gear and plunged into the cool water of the Karanese River.

Jean had a steady line of kids asking to be thrown into the deeper water. He scooped them up, did a pump fake or two, and then sent them crashing into the water. They shrieked and giggled, and I couldn’t help but laugh, too.

“Need any help?” I asked when the line got longer and longer.

“Yes, oh my gosh, I’m so weak,” Jean complained. “You kids are too big for this!” he teased, and they giggled.

“Here, give Jean a break, you guys,” I offered, holding my arms out.
“Yeah, Marco’s taller and stronger than me. I bet you’ll go flying,” Jean chimed in.

Chloe was the first to slosh over to me, and I scooped her up.

“You wanna go really far, or just get dumped like Jean was doing?” I asked.

“Far!” she squealed.

“Alright, you asked for it!” I said, bending my knees a little. “Ready?”

“Just do it!”

“Huahhh!” I grunted, and tossed her into the air. She screamed the whole way into the water, and the handful of girls watching all clambered on me even before Chloe managed to surface, begging to go next.

I didn’t actually throw them at my full strength, because first, I would get tired way too fast, and I wanted to be able to throw them approximately the same, no matter their height or weight.

They didn’t seem to notice, though, and the way Jean laughed at their cries of delight was worth the burn in my muscles.

X

We sent the kids off to bed early, in preparation for leaving in the morning.

I was fairly exhausted myself, not only from throwing the kids around but also from all the sun exposure.

Jean was rosy all over from sunburn, but he wasn’t as crispy as Annie looked.

“There’s aloe vera in the med bags,” I offered. “It’ll help.”

“Yeah, I know. I used SPF 100, though,” she whined.

“Sorry.”

“Yeah, you and your perfect dark skin. You and Ymir can both eat it.”

“I didn’t burn,” Connie piped up.

“Well then you can eat it too,” Annie said with a small smile.

The counselors went to bed fairly early too, though I managed to steal a quick kiss from Jean after we finished brushing our teeth in the bathroom.

“I can’t wait to get back to the tents,” Jean said, putting his hands on his lower back and stretching. “These shitty beds are killing me.”

“Is that the only reason you want to get back to the tent?” I whispered, giving his shoulders a quick squeeze.

I watched the blush spread across Jean’s cheeks and ears before I walked out of the bathroom and back into the dorm room.

Everyone else was already ready for bed, so Jean and I changed quickly and climbed into our
bunks.

“Goodnight, Jean,” I said quietly.

“Gnight,” he mumbled back.

“Get a room,” Connie teased.

I was waiting for Jean’s retort, but it seemed he was already asleep.

“Goodnight to you too, Connie,” I giggled.

“Aww, thanks Marco,” he said happily.

I fell asleep not five minutes later.

X

It felt good to get back out on the trail again, and when we stopped for the night and set up camp, it struck me that we only had a little over a week left.

Usually, we thought of Maria as the halfway point, but in terms of time, distance, and the pace of the trip, it really wasn’t. We spent almost four weeks getting there, building it up to the kids, that it was more like the really cool roller-coaster at the amusement park that’s all the way in the back, and you have to wait forever to get there, but once you’ve ridden it, your parents say it’s time to go home, and you have to walk back through the park, not really doing anything except trying to get to the exit. You don’t take detours or goof around; you’re tired and you take the most direct path.

The kids were tired and in good spirits, though I knew that soon fatigue would combine with impatience and homesickness and it would get tougher for the kids.

Luckily, we had built up a good rapport with them, so we could distract them well enough with goofy stories and easy conversation.

As we crawled into our tent that night, Jean and I were still laughing about the latest giggle fest of the day.

“I feel like a jerk for laughing,” I said, wiping a tear from my eye and taking my hiking boots off. “But—“ I burst into another round of quiet giggles.

“Poor Sasha,” Jean agreed, doing a much better job of suppressing his laughter than I was. “Like… we were outdoors. You’d think a fart would dissipate. But that… that shit stuck around,” he said, shoulders shaking as he zipped the tent up behind us.

“And Connie’s shriek,” I whispered, “‘Girls aren’t supposed to fart, Sasha!’”

“Forget ‘girls,’” Jean snorted, “humans aren’t supposed to fart like that. That fart could’ve been weaponized.”

We let the giggles fade out as we set up our sleeping bags, unzipping them both so that mine was underneath and Jean’s was on top of us acting as our blanket.

As I reached for the light, Jean stopped me with a gentle touch to my wrist.

I cocked my head, meeting the suddenly serious look in his eyes.
“I’m gonna miss this,” he whispered after a moment.

I couldn’t help the sad smile that pulled at my lips. “Well, we still have like a week left out here. And then it’ll only be about a month before I’ll be in Trost at the end of August.”

“Yeah, but you’re not exactly going to be sharing a tent with me in Trost,” he smirked.

“I will bring a tent to your apartment,” I deadpanned.

“You nerd,” he said with a playful shove to my shoulder.

“Can I turn the light out now?” I asked.

“Only if you admit to being a nerd,” Jean teased.

“Well that’s not hard. I’m definitely a nerd.” I turned the light out and settled in next to Jean, fitting my face into the crook of his neck and flinging an arm over his waist. He nuzzled into my hair a little, and I gave him quick kisses along his collarbones.

“So this… us… we’re gonna do this after camp is over?” he asked tentatively.

“Of course,” I said. The thought had never occurred to me that we might just have some summer camp fling. “Why wouldn’t we?”

“Well, how do you want to handle parents?” he asked.

“Oh.”

“I mean, I’m financially independent, so I’m not worried about my parents, but you… you said you weren’t even out to them. Like, I don’t want to pressure you, but—“

“No, no,” I assured him, “it’s a totally valid question. I guess I hadn’t really thought about it. I got so caught up in us that I sort of forgot about the rest.”

“It’s because I’m just so distracting,” Jean teased with a breathy laugh.

“You really are, though,” I told him, tapping his nose lightly.

“How about this,” he said after a moment. “You think about how you want to handle your parents, and in the meantime we’ll make out a little bit before we go to sleep.”

“You drive a hard bargain, Kirstein,” I smirked, propping myself up on an elbow to get a better look at him.

Jean rose up to meet me in a gentle kiss, and I could feel his smile against my lips.

I tried to deepen the kiss, but Jean’s smile only got bigger, so much that I pulled back.

“What?” I asked, only mildly annoyed to see that the smile had turned into silent, shoulder-shaking giggles.

“I drive a hard bargain,” he whispered through his laughter.

“What?” I asked, this time confused.

“Hard bargain,” he repeated, this time thrusting his hips in the air at each word.
“Oh my god,” I groaned, rolling away from him.

“Aww, come back!” he complained.

“Nope. Go to sleep. Your dumb pun ruined it.”

“Don’t be like that, Marco,” he said, though the fact that he was still laughing ruined any sincerity. He wrapped his arms around me, latching onto me like an octopus.

“Marco,” he said, kissing the back of my neck gently, “Baby, can we please makeout?”

I snorted out a laugh. “I might have said yes until you called me ‘Baby.’”

“No calling you Baby. Got it.”

“Go to sleep, Jean. We’ll make out tomorrow.”

“I’ll hold you to it,” he whispered.

I decided to make my own pun this time, pulling one of his arms closer to me. “Yeah, I think you will hold me to it.”

“Seriously?”

**Six Days to Sina**

There is only one thing more socially contagious than yawning, and that one thing is kids playing tag.

Someone (whom I strongly suspect was Connie) started a subtle game of tag toward the end of our caravan.

It started as a sort of poking battle, one kid poked the other, the second kid poked back, but the first one tried to sneak away and avoid it. You know how it goes.

Eventually, the poke-duel expanded into a regional poke-war, and the next thing we knew, almost the whole gaggle of campers was running, shuffling, and shrieking in an all out free-for-all game of tag.

They couldn’t really run very well, with the weight of their packs bouncing against their backs as they scrambled away from whoever was ‘It,’ so it was actually kind of hilarious to watch.

Well, hilarious until Sandra chased Olivia off the trail, and they jumped off a mossy rock.

Olivia jumped back to the trail just fine.

Sandra lost her footing, and crashed to the forest floor, scraping her knees on small rocks and underbrush.

Jean got the med bag out in record time, hoping to quiet the girl’s wails as quickly as possible.

The kids didn’t play tag after that.
I get that I’m in the minority when I say mornings are a great time. I like the smell, the way the sky looks, the slow fade from nighttime quietness to the hustle and bustle of the day.

Patrick Wojciechowski was not a morning person.

He was almost always the last camper to emerge from his tent in the morning, red hair flat against his head on one side and wild bed-head on the other. His eyes were bleary and his entire body exuded exhaustion.

He wandered past me that day, barely even registering when I said good morning to him.

I smiled sympathetically after him, exchanging a look with Mina. “Poor kid,” I said.

“I thought he’d adjust to the conditions out here by now,” Mina replied. “Guess not. Rough way to spend your summer.”

Patrick waddled up to Sasha for a bowl of oatmeal, and then he plopped down in the grass next to Ryan and Jack.

When it was time to clean up breakfast, the campground was flooded with raucous, teasing laughter.

Patrick was twisted around, face as red as his hair, and pulling at the fabric of his shorts and staring in abject horror at the seat of his pants, which were smeared with a dark brown … piece of shit.

In his bleary state, Patrick had managed to sit in a huge pile of what we decided was probably deer droppings.

I don’t think Ryan or Jack stopped laughing the rest of the day.

We really did our best to keep their spirits up, although Mina pointed out that telling the kids geeky science facts was only motivational to a very select audience.

I kept trying anyway, since I did have a small but loyal group of nerdy kids.

“It’s totally true,” I enthused, “Plants can communicate with each other!”

“But they don’t have mouths, Marco,” Eli complained.

“Not all communication is done by flapping your gums,” Mina smiled. “Like… clapping your hands, frowning, or hugging. Maybe the person didn’t say anything, but you can still gain information about their mood by their body language. It’s like that.”

“So plants have body language?” the boy asked, shifting his backpack a bit.

“More or less,” I said.

“Tell us another fun fact, Marco!” Minh requested.

“Okay, um… a group of owls is called a parliament,” I offered.
“Oh, like how crows are called a murder,” Minh replied.

“Yes, exactly. There’s a bunch of animals with weird group names, actually,” I said, trying to remember as many as I could. “Like a bunch of cats is called a clowder, or a group of elk is called a gang.”

“Pffhaha,” Minh giggled. “A gang of elk? That’s so goofy. I’m imagining a bunch of elk like… I don’t know, dealing drugs and graffiti-ing their territory. Gang stuff, I guess.”

“I think ferrets have a funny one, too,” Mina said.

“Oh, I’ve heard the ferrets one,” Georgie interjected. “It’s a business. I remember it because I saw a picture of ferrets wearing little tiny collars and ties on the internet.”

I laughed. “Perfect. Oh, how about a romp of otters?”

We enlisted the help of the other squads, and by the end of it we had added a bloat of hippos, a shrewdness of apes, an ostentation of peacocks, and an army of frogs or caterpillars.

It wasn’t until I was lying in the tent that night, Jean nuzzling into my stomach, that I remembered a tower of giraffes.

I didn’t stop laughing until Jean smacked me lightly and told me that it was hard to sleep when your pillow was shaking.

I kissed his head lightly, and settled into sleep with a smile on my face.

**Three days to Sina**

“You know what I just remembered?” Annie said, picking her teeth as we sat around the camp fire that night, with the kids sent off to bed about twenty minutes ago. “School starts up in like… a month.”

We all groaned.

“Do not mention the forbidden s-word here,” Connie hissed. “I’m trying not to think about it.”

“Wait, so who all is fresh meat here?” Ymir asked. “I know Baby Boy is.”

Eren, Armin, Connie, and I all raised our hands.

“No shit,” Annie said. “This is adorable. Where are y’all headed?”

We exchanged glances, trying to gauge who was going to talk first.

“I’m going to University of Trost,” Armin said quietly.

Sasha stood up to high five Armin. “Hell yeah you are! U of T! U of T!” she chanted in a stage-whisper.

Eren beamed. “Not only is he going to U of T, but he’s going on a full ride. Because that’s how amazing Armin is.”

“Come on, I just wrote a couple essays,” Armin blushed, though there was a hint of pride in his
voice.

“I’m incredibly proud of you, so I get to brag,” Eren defended. “I know you’re too modest, but I’ll gladly do it for you.”

“That’s fantastic,” I agreed. “Congrats, Armin.”

“Thanks, Marco,” he said, tucking his hair behind his ear.

“So Eren, you going to U of T, too?” Annie asked.

“Alas, no. I… Well I didn’t exactly know if I was going to go to college this year, so I didn’t apply in enough time for scholarships. I’m going to Trost State, because the deadline was the latest.”

“I’ll be there, too,” I said. “And Bert.”

“Ooh, isn’t Reiner at TSU?” Sasha said.

“Yeah, he’s a psych major,” I smiled. “It’s gonna be like a mini-reunion.”

“And a marathon of gay sex,” Annie teased quietly, mindful of the campers, who had only recently been sent to bed. “Hope you make friends with someone with a nice couch, because if you and Bert room together you’re gonna need an escape.”

I exchanged a knowing look with Jean. He might not have a couch, but he does have a bed we can share only fifteen minutes from campus.

“Alright, so Connie, what’s your game plan?” Ymir asked. “You’re in the same year, right?”

“Well, I have no fucking clue what I want to do with my life, so I’m going the illustrious community college route until I ‘get some direction,’ as my parents say,” he said, rolling his eyes as he made air quotes.

“The true story is, Connie is looking for his future missus so he can mooch off her job and benefits,” Sasha said dryly.

“It’s not mooching, it’s called being a stay-at-home dad! Like, raising kids and cleaning and stuff!”

“Aren’t house-husbands supposed to be good at cooking?” Sasha ribbed.

“Oooh, she told you,” Ymir laughed.

Connie crossed his arms across his chest. “I’ll have you all know I’m gonna take a culinary class in the fall.”

“Hey, more power to you,” Hannah smiled.

“What about you, Mina?” Mikasa asked. “You going the college route?”

“Not just yet,” Mina said. “I’m actually taking a gap year. Gonna work on my aunts’ farm in Utah.”

“Well that was unexpected,” Ymir laughed. “Work it, girl.”

“So wait, the rest of us are already in college?” Mikasa asked.
“Speak for yourself,” Jean grumbled.

“I’m a junior at U of T. Linguistics major, dance minor,” Ymir said. “Christa’s over at Trost State. History major.”

“And I’m a sophomore, health science major at U of T,” Mikasa added in.

“Enviro-sci at Mitras College,” Franz said.

“Suddenly the Greenpeace rant makes sense,” Annie mused.

“And I’m a math major at Mitras,” Hannah said.

“Ugh, why?” Ymir groaned.

“Hey, math is cool!” Armin pouted.

“Thank you,” Hannah nodded, crossing her arms defiantly.

“You two are literally the only ones who think that,” Eren said affectionately.

“Eren, you remember that I’m a double major in physics and astronomy, right?” Annie smirked. “Math is friggin’ choice.”

“As long as it’s you guys doing the math and not me, I’m happy,” Eren said.

“Hear, hear,” Connie smirked.

“You guys are all so old,” Alex said, rolling her eyes.

“Whoa, where’d you come from?” Jean said, flinching at the camper’s sudden appearance.

“From my tent. Where’d you think?” Alex said, rolling her eyes again. Seriously, she was going to pull an ocular muscle or something. “Anyway, can you keep it down? You sent us off to bed and then you’re out here blabbing about your old people school.”

“Sorry,” Ymir said. “We should get going to bed, too.”

Annie directed Alex back to her tent, and the rest of us gathered ourselves and made as little noise as possible as we crawled into our tents.

**Two days to Sina**

The next day on the trail was anything but quiet. Annie tried to get them to sing the “Green Grass Grew All Around” song, since it takes forever and the kids were getting cranky. When it was finally over, they tried to think of another long song to sing.

And that is how we were completely surrounded by middle schoolers chanting “99 bottles of beer on the wall” as loudly and as off-key as possible.

“You can’t say ‘beer!’” Mina scolded. “At least change it to soda!”

Only some kids actually heard Mina’s cry, though, so about a third of them switched to soda, while the rest continued with beer.
I hoped they would just get tired of it and stop, like I always did when I was younger, but the kids were still going strong when they were down to fifty-six bottles.

“Ugh, just make it stop,” Jean whined. “This song is worse than that one that never ends. You know the one that ‘gets on everybody’s--’”

“No!” I said in a panic, slapping a hand over Jean’s mouth. “You’ll give them ideas!”

**One day to Sina**

“It’s gonna be such a pain scanning all these pictures onto my computer when I get home,” Marisa complained to Jesse, gesturing to her disposable camera.

“Why didn’t you just bring a digital camera?” he asked.

“Because the battery would die in like one day,” she said, with a serious air of *duh*.

“So bring backup batteries?”

“Yeah, because I own six weeks’ worth of back up batteries,” Marisa said acidly.

“You don’t have to scan all of them,” Hannah suggested. “You could just pick your favorites, and keep the rest in a scrapbook or something.”

“But I have to show my Instagram followers my camp experience!” she complained. “I’ll have been gone for six weeks; I’ll owe them six weeks of pictures.”

“Lord save us from Instagram,” Annie whined from the group behind them.

Her comment stirred up a flurry of statements from the campers that were essentially some form of ‘I miss social media.’

I get it; I’m a pretty frequent user of Facebook and I have an embarrassing number of tweets. But it does make you feel pretty old to be around middle schoolers with smart phones when you remember a time that texting didn’t exist.

“You’ll be back soon enough,” I assured when Jai complained about his “blog readers missing him.”

“You wouldn’t understand,” he sighed dramatically.

I snorted. “What?”

“You’re old, you don’t get it. My blog is my life.”

“Well, I’m sure it’s very important, but you’ve lived for these past five weeks without it and you’ll make it a few more days away from it, too.”

“When I was your age,” Jean said in his ‘old man’ voice, “the World Wide Web was brand new!”

“Jean, you’re not that old,” I laughed.

“No, but we had dial up until sixth grade.”
“That’s rough, buddy,” I offered.

“What’s dial up?” Georgie asked.

“Long ago, the internet used the phone lines to connect,” Jean began. “And to let you know that it was connecting, it screeched out a terrifying battle cry that sounded something like this.”

Jean started hissing, buzzing, beeping, and screeching in an attempt to sound like the song of nineties internet.

Soon, all the counselors were joining in, offering their own versions – “no, it was more of a hissing sound! Like this!”—and the kids were all groaning, covering their ears, and acting like drama queens about how old we all were.

It was a great way to end our trek back to camp.

X

Our arrival back to camp Sina was made loud and clear to everyone within a five mile radius by Ymir’s uncharacteristically high pitched shrieking of “BABY GIRL!”

Christ had about six seconds from Ymir’s screech to brace for impact as her gangly girlfriend launched into Christa’s arms.

Christa—tiny, sweet, Christa —caught Ymir with apparent ease and a beaming smile. Ymir wrapped her legs around Christa’s waist, arms around her shoulders, and buried her face in the crook of her girlfriend’s neck.

“I missed you so much, Baby Girl,” Ymir repeated over and over.

“I missed you too, Miri,” Christa cooed, and we herded the kids toward Stohess, leaving our freckled leader to have a moment (or six) with her girlfriend.

We dropped off our stuff in the East Hall, and headed to the dining hall. It was a little early for lunch, but we were exhausted and hungry, so I figured we could convince the kitchen staff to feed us a little before the regular time.

With Ymir absent, Mikasa took over as our leader and we settled the kids into the tables. A few minutes later, one of the kitchen workers followed Mikasa out of the galley doors with a cart full of hot food. Real, honest-to-goodness, fresh, cooked, food.

My mouth watered almost instantly.

Grilled barbeque chicken, half an ear of corn, fresh salad with ranch dressing, and a brownie.

We ate in near silence, except for the quiet murmurs of how good the food tasted. I had to elbow Jean a couple times to quiet his almost lewd moans as he chewed his food or took a gulp of soda.

“I feel so alive,” he said solemnly.

I just sighed in response.

Ymir snuck into the cafeteria about halfway through our meal, grabbing a plate and silently sliding onto the bench next to Armin.

After our meal, Erwin found us and said that the cabins were ready, so we picked up our gear from
the East Hall and headed over to the cabins.

“You have free time until six,” I told the boys. “You can shower, nap, hang out, whatever you’d like. There should be a life-guard by the lake, so you can go swimming if you want. Just make sure you put sunscreen on, okay?”

They nodded wearily, and trudged into the cabin.

My shoulders slumped. It was like all the exhaustion I should probably have been feeling the whole five week hike hit me at once. I felt like I was melting.

I met up with Jean back at Cabin G and we dumped our stuff on the empty bunks there.

“So here’s my idea,” Jean said to me with a sleepy smile. “We should go take a shower and get this disgusting sweat and dirt off of us… and then take a nap in this tiny-ass bunk.”

“That sounds like a fantastic plan,” I agreed. “I have to add just one tiny step after the showers. I need to find Julia and let her know I’m back.”

“You’re such a cute big brother,” Jean said. “Alright, shower, say hi to Julia, then nap. Got it. Let’s do this.”

We grabbed a change of clothes—the cleanest ones we could find—and headed to the bathroom.

There are very few pleasures in life greater than a post-Survey Corps shower.

The water was literally brown as it went down the drain, taking sweat and grime and old sunscreen and who knows what else with it. I scrubbed at my skin under the hot water, lathering soap wherever I could reach.

When I finished washing the grit out of my hair, I shut the water off and wrapped a towel around my hips as I headed over to where I left my clothes.

Jean was still in the shower when I was dressed, so I called out to him. “Hey Jean? I’m gonna go find Julia. I’ll meet you at the cabin?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Sounds good. I just need some more time in the shower. Feels so fucking nice.”

“I hear you,” I said. “Just remember that the hot water runs out after thirteen minutes.”

“Thirteen minutes?” he asked skeptically.

“Thirteen, on the dot. You’ll know,” I smirked, and headed out.

I went back over to Stohess to check the posted schedule to see where Julia’s group was, and found that her group was scheduled for lunch in four minutes. I meandered toward the mess hall and sure enough, there was Petra, leading the under tens toward their tables.

Julia didn’t see me at first, so I just watched her. Her red-blonde hair was frizzy and wild, escaping from what looked to be the same French braids our Dad had put her in when she left almost six weeks ago—and her cheeks and shoulders were dotted with almost as many freckles as I had. Her eyes were bright, and when she wasn’t talking, she was grinning.

She had always been a social butterfly, and it looked like she was quite popular. Actually, it looked like she was commanding the attention of her entire group, regaling them with some epic tale or other.
I caught Petra’s eye, though Julia hadn’t seen me yet and she smiled at me.

Slipping quietly in line behind the group, a few kids turned around to look at me, but Julia continued to regale her friends with the story she was so energetically recounting.

It wasn’t until really stopped to listen that I realized she was telling stories about me.

“—And then he actually did it! We got shovels from the shed and dug this huge hole and filled it with garbage bags like a little swimming pool and filled it with water and Marco even built a little island in the middle. Mom and Dad got so angry because we played in the mud and got it all over the house on accident but he made sure I didn’t get grounded for it ever.”

“He sounds like a great big brother,” Petra said with a smirk, glancing at me.

“He’s the best,” Julia said, and I puffed up a little with pride. “But he can never know or he’ll tease me about it forever!”

I decided to jump in. “But the best big brother would never tease his little sister!”

Julia spun around so fast that a small burst of wind fluttered against her companions.

“Marco!” she shrieked, launching herself at me. I bent down so she could give me a hug, and I scooped her up while she giggled delightedly.

I had so many other things on my mind while I was out on Survey, but I really did miss her. She’s my baby sister: how could I not?

“I missed you so much, Juju,” I told her, giving her a playful squeeze. “Did you have a good time?”

“I missed you too, Marco,” she whispered in my ear. Of course, she was seven, so it was a really loud whisper, but she clearly didn’t want to broadcast it to her new friends. I didn’t want to embarrass her too much, so I put her down.

“I had so much fun,” she said, returning to her normal voice and tugging her t-shirt down where it had rucked up a bit. “We made these really cool bird feeders and I get to take it home and we can put it in the back yard to feed the sparrows and chickadees and cardinals if there are any. But we have to put it somewhere where the squirrels won’t get it, okay? I want the birds to eat it, not squirrels.”

“Okay, we’ll find a good spot for it,” I said with a smile. My heart was flooded with relief that she had enjoyed herself and had such a positive experience. She was already rambling about the next thing they did, but I didn’t worry too much about not hearing the beginning: I would likely hear this story at least three more times in the next week.

“Guess how many I caught, Marco! Guess!” she was demanding.

Was she talking about fish?

“Um… six?” I guessed, thinking that six would be a pretty impressive number of fish for a seven year old to catch.

“No! Way more! I caught twenty three! Twenty three lightning bugs! And they crawled around in the little jar we had and glowed and they were so cute and not scary at all! I caught the most of everyone because when I put a new one in I didn’t let the old ones out like Margot and Louis did.”
“Wow, Juju, that’s amazing!” I said enthusiastically. I wasn’t even faking it: I was truly impressed that she had voluntarily chased after bugs. That was huge. I couldn’t wait to see the look on my parents’ faces when they heard this story.

Oh gosh.

My parents didn’t know I went out on Survey.

*That sounds like a problem for Future Marco,* I told myself, and let her continue regaling me with stories even as they settled down to lunch and ate.

While Julia chewed, her friends told me stories of their own, usually centered around my sister anyway, and with each tale, despite the probable embellishments, I felt more and more at peace with having left her at Sina for Survey. She was with Petra and Christa, and Bert was there, too.

Somehow, she had been convinced to not mind bugs too much and she was willingly eating vegetables before my very eyes.

No matter how upset my parents might get, they would *have* to acknowledge that she had a good time.

And that was enough for me.

X

After a very much needed nap in a bed not meant for two grown boys, I convinced Jean to come find Bert and Reiner with me.

While we wandered, I told Jean about seeing Julia, and how happy I was that she had enjoyed herself.

“I think I managed to play it pretty cool, but I really was worried about her,” I told him.

“Yeah, I know you were. But hey, I think you made the right choice. She was in safe hands, she had a great time, and *you* got to have a great time, too.”

“Modest, Jean,” I teased.

He rolled his eyes. “That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

I bumped shoulders with him. “I know what you meant, you goof.”

“If either of us is a goof, it’s you,” he shot back playfully.

“Um, no, I’m pretty sure that *you* are the goof here. I’m not the one who let himself be swarmed by middle school girls for five weeks.”

“They meant nothing to me, Baby, I swear!” he said melodramatically, clutching my hand to his chest.

“That’s what they always say!” I tried to deadpan, but my giggles at the word “baby” didn’t let me stay in character.

“Hah! I win,” Jean smirked, and with a quick glance around us, he pecked me on the cheek.

“This round,” I menaced, though the affection in my voice betrayed any real threat.
“Oh hey, that looks like Reiner,” Jean said as we approached one of the fields behind Stohess Hall. As if to confirm that the still-distant bulky blond figure was indeed Reiner, a booming laugh rang out.

The kids were playing soccer, and it looked like Reiner was the ref, though he was laughing at a kid who had just tripped over thin air.

When we got closer, Reiner waved, and pulled first Jean (slightly against his will) then me in for a spine-crushing hug.

“How the hell are ya?” he asked, clapping a hand on each of our shoulders.

“We’re good,” I said. “Really good. You look so tan!”

“It happens to the best of us,” Reiner said with a wink. “Sorry, Jean.”

“Yeah yeah, make fun of the pasty kid,” Jean grumbled.

“I can’t wait to hear all the stories from Survey Corps,” Reiner said. “Find us at the bonfire tonight and we’ll swap stories. Bert’s got some great ones.”

“Where is Bert?” I asked. “Do you know?”

“Eh, he’s probably down at the lake? Hanji’s been doing some sort of science experiment with a couple young’uns, and Bert got roped into helping out. It’s kinda complicated, so I’ll let him tell you himself.”


I laughed. “One day I’m gonna put like… moss and lichens in your bed.”

“Why would that make me like it more? Besides, joke’s on you because mon lit est ton lit, mon cœur,” he teased, though a blush crept across his cheeks.

I blushed, too.

“Oh, what’s this?” Reiner asked, raising his eyebrows and waggling an accusatory finger at our faces. Jean frowned at the offending digit. “What are these pink cheeks for?”

“It’s like two thousand degrees outside,” Jean snapped. “Can’t a couple of dudes be overheated without it being some capital issue?”

“Oh, we’re playing this game?” Reiner laughed heartily. “Alright, Jean, I’ll play your game. Tell me all about how hot Marco is.”

I sucked in a nervous breath, unsure of the direction this conversation was going.

“You think my boyfriend’s hot?” Jean asked, arching one long, thin eyebrow.

Reiner did a double-take so hard I could feel the whiplash. “Well I’ll be damned,” he said when he had recovered. “You two finally did it.”

Jean’s composure cracked. “D-did what?” he managed, jamming his hands in his pockets.

“He means we got together,” I said, shooting a meaningful glance at Reiner not to push it.
“Good for you,” he said. “Plus, now Bert owes me a –“

“I’m sure it’s a lovely prize,” I said quickly.

“Dude, I was gonna say pancake breakfast. Geez. Mind out of the gutter, Bodt,” he grinned. “Anyway, I’m super stoked for you both. We’ll talk at the bonfire, yeah?”

“Of course,” I said, nudging Jean to head back with me.

“Oh, hey one more thing,” Reiner called. “Can I tell Bert or do you wanna do that?”

“I’ll tell him,” I said. Bert and I had been friends since kindergarten; I’d feel like a jerk if he found out about my first ever relationship from anyone but me.

Jean and I headed back toward the lake. Sure enough, Bert was there, holding jars of suspicious looking water while Hanji scribbled something on a clipboard.

Jean bristled a little at seeing Hanji there. Their exuberance always put Jean on guard: he admired their work, but personally found them to be exhaustingly over the top excited.

“Are you gonna tell Hanji, too?” he whispered to me.

“That wasn’t exactly the plan,” I admitted. “Let’s see if we can just… borrow Bert for a couple minutes.”

When we were close enough to not need to yell, I announced our presence with a simple “hey.”

Hanji was mumbling to themselves about algae levels or something, and Bert looked so relieved to see someone other than the exuberant scientist in hip-waders that I thought he might cry.

“Marco!” Bert said with a smile. “And Jean. Glad you made it back.”

“Good to see you too,” I said, giving him a brief side-hug. “What’s, uh, what’s in the jars?”

“Lake water samples. Hanji won’t say much else that’s comprehensible to the outsider,” Bert lamented. “I’ve been holding these jars for twenty minutes, and they’re just babbling about bacteria.”

“Not bacteria, Bert!” Hanji exclaimed. “Micro-organisms!”

“Hanji, why don’t you ever do research on rocks? I bet there’s some kick-ass sediment in this lake,” Jean offered.

“I actually—oh, Jean, this is fantastic—thank you for reminding me! We found some fossils a couple weeks ago! Some of the WP kids were helping me dig for bugs—don’t make that face—and I found something that looked a bit like shale, and it was a fish fossil! Would you like to take a look?” they asked, finally pausing for breath.

Jean exchanged a quick glance with me. I smiled to encourage him to accept the invitation, as I genuinely thought he’d think it was at least vaguely interesting, and I could get Bert alone for a few minutes.

“Yeah, sure,” he said. “Did you already identify it?”

“Not yet!” Hanji declared. “I’m no expert, so I thought I’d hang onto it until I found someone more knowledgeable in the ways of fish skeletons…”
They walked toward Hanji’s office, which was sort of like a small greenhouse with a little room attached on the side stuffed to the brim with books and articles.

“What about these jars?” Bert called after them, but Hanji was already immersed in their fish-fossil world, and Bert just looked at the jars dejectedly before sighing and sitting in the tall grass.

I sat next to him and peered at the jars curiously as I gave Bert a few minutes of silence after who-knows-how-long he had listened to Hanji’s rambling.

He spoke quietly when he was ready. “So how was Survey?”

“It was fantastic,” I told him, returning his gentle tone. “I missed the woods. It’s a different world out there.”

“Yeah, I remember. Well, I missed you here. Isabel was my group partner, which was fun, but we didn’t really talk? I did spend almost all of my free time with Reiner, though, which was nice.”

“That’s good,” I said. “I don’t really know Isabel, but she seems nice.”

“Yes, she was,” Bert confirmed. “Have you seen Julia already?”

I nodded.

“She did really well. Every time I stopped by to check in with her she practically shoved me out, all ‘Bertie, you’re so embarrassing!’ and stuff. It was kinda cute.”

“Thanks again, really, for keeping an eye on her,” I said honestly. “It really … it made it easier for me to be away for so long, knowing you were right there if she had any problems.”

“No problem, Marco,” he said with a gentle smile, wiping sweat from his brow. “Let’s move into the shade, though, yeah?”

We resituated ourselves away from the lake a ways, where we could sit under the somewhat sparse coverage of the edge of the Wall Forest.

“So,” I began when we were comfortable. “I uh… Jean and I are dating now.”

A slow, warm smile spread across my friend’s face. “I thought you might be. Guess I’m cooking a pancake breakfast for Reiner, then,” he said with a light laugh.

“I thought Reiner made that up!”

“Nope. If you came back and you weren’t together, Reiner would’ve had to make me that special caramel pie he makes so well. Oh well. Maybe he’ll still do it,” Bert smirked.

“I bet he would,” I said with a smile. “So you bet against us?” I asked after a minute.

“I didn’t think you’d want to upset the status quo!”

“A likely story,” I joked.

“Well, I don’t mind cooking pancakes, and I’m happy that things worked out for you guys.”

“Thanks, Bert. Things going well with you and Reiner?”

“Yeah, things are great,” he confirmed. “But is it just me, or is this camp a lot gayer than I
After rescuing Jean from the loquacious clutches of one Dr. Hanji, it was almost time to set up for
the bonfire, so we headed up to the big hill to join Erwin, Mike (with his ankle wrapped with at
least two Ace bandages—he must’ve done it himself), and Ilse, who were already making
preparations.

“Mike, honestly. Just sit. You’re going to hurt yourself,” Ilse tutted, grabbing the bundle of
kindling from his arms.

“It’s been almost six weeks!” Mike complained. “I’m fine.”

Ilse scowled in a very motherly way. “No, you’re not fine. You broke your ankle because you
thought reliving your youth and having a swing jumping contest the day before summer camp
started. Forgive me if I don’t trust your judgment here: Now sit down.”

Mike plopped himself in the nearest chair with a harrumph, crossing his arms petulantly. “At least I
won the contest,” he grumbled.

Ilse shot a withering glare at him, and he pursed his lips shut.

Jean and I exchanged a quick glance that communicated exactly one word: whipped.

We looked around at the small gathering of counselors who were already helping with setting the
tables move up with games and food.

Eren and Armin were setting up the s’mores station, though by the looks of it Armin was having a
hard time keeping Eren from trying to eat all the marshmallows, given the number of times we
heard a faint slap as Armin smacked a marshmallow out of his boyfriend’s hands.

Mike busied himself with the to-do list on a clipboard, assigning tasks to newcomers and calling
out weak encouragements.

“Hey, you two, do you have something to do?” he called, pointing at us with a pencil.

“Not yet,” I said, heading towards him.

“Not yet,” I said, heading towards him.

“Great. Think you two can help Gunther and Erd there setting up the stage?” Mike asked. “They
could use some extra hands. That stuff’s kinda heavy and hard to maneuver with just two people.”

“I’m not sure if I’m the best person for this job,” Jean laughed awkwardly. “Where’s Reiner when
you need him?”

“Eh, you’ll be fine. Petra set it up last year,” Mike said, clearly meaning it as a taunt.

“Yeah, but Petra could kick my ass,” Jean grumbled.

“Just go, get to it!” Mike rolled his eyes, and waved us off with an impatient gesture.

“If I like, rupture something, will you visit me in the hospital?” Jean said.

“Oh don’t be such a drama queen,” I teased. “Come on, let’s see what we need to do.”

The stage was pretty heavy, but Jean’s also stronger than he gave himself credit for. Between the
four of us, we had most of it set up in about twenty minutes.

When Ymir showed up, Christa on her arm, she laughed as she saw Jean laboring to hold his corner of one of the platforms.

“Need some help, Favorite Boy?” she called.

“Dès que je peux laisser tomber cette putain de truc j’vais te casser la gueule!” Jean swore at her. *As soon as I can drop this fucking thing I’m gonna kick your teeth in!*

“What’d he say to me, Baby Boy?” Ymir demanded. “Do I need to kick his ass?”

Jean turned to me with a pleading look. “Don’t you dare translate that, Marco Bodt.”

“Uh…” I wavered.

“Baby Boy, is he impugning my honor?” Ymir menaced.

“He uh… he wants to know if you’d like to help him!” I lied. Very poorly.

“A likely story,” Ymir said, but she rolled up her t-shirt sleeves and hip-bumped Jean out of the way, taking the weight of his end of the flooring piece from him.

Her biceps flexed impressively, and she grinned mockingly at Jean.

“I was doing fine,” Jean pouted.

“Sure you were, Chicken Arms,” Ymir cackled, and then waggled her eyebrows at Christa.

“Yes, you’re very strong, babe,” Christa assured her with a small smile.

“You see that, Marco? Christa gets to use pet names,” Jean groused.

“She was being so patronizing though! I can’t take it seriously!”

“Oh my gosh, what did he call you?” Ymir squealed as we set the platform into position with a final heave.

“He called me Baby,” I said with a blush, wiping the sweat from my brow.

“But I call you Baby Boy all the time!” Ymir cried. “What’s so different?”

“Exactly! *Thank* you, Ymir,” Jean said, crossing his arms.

“But you’ve called me that for years!” I protested. “And we have never and will never date. It’s different.”

“Hmm, true that it’s different, but I still think it’s fun,” Ymir said. “Isn’t that right, Baby Girl?”

“Of course, Sweetie,” Christa replied.

“Quit slacking off!” Mike called out, and we hustled back to work.

Half an hour later, the kitchen staff showed up with the cooking supplies to prepare for the barbeque.

The infamous night of the bonfire was about to begin.
It was kind of bittersweet to not be performing in the talent show with Armin.

On the one hand, I didn’t have to stand in front of a bunch of people who didn’t really give a crap about scientific inquiry and tell them about some half-assed experiment we had run. But it was something Armin and I had done together for seven summers; I kind of missed it.

I was pleasantly surprised by the talent displays though, especially from the 10-13 Survey Corps kids.

Annie and Armin’s group untangled their human knot at an impressive speed (hey, that totally counts as a talent!); Olivia, Chloe, and Sandra did some intense gymnastics routine that had me wincing and holding my breath, terrified despite their expert flips and landings.

When they finished, a huge cheer arose, for both their athleticism and (at least from me) the fact that no one crash-landed or hurt themselves.

When Pixis came back out, the girls took the tumbling mats off the stage and Hannes (acting as a stage hand of sorts) brought out a mic stand.

“So we’ve got three more acts tonight,” Pixis announced. “Next up is Jai Karnik who will be, er, rapping for us.”

I couldn’t help the gasp of laughter that burst out of me, but I figured if any of the kids from our group were going to rap, Jai was a likely candidate.

He stepped out onto the stage, hair spiked into a fauxhawk with so much gel that it glistened in the fading early evening light.

“So uh, this is a rap by my idol, George Watsky,” Jai began. “I didn’t have time to write an original piece, so uh, yeah. Music please.”

Hannes flipped a switch on the soundboard, and a beat started up. Jai shifted his weight a little bit during the intro, and then he took a deep breath, and the words practically flew out of his mouth.

“Gotta be the one to bite the bullet i'm sinner but I bet I coulda been a better man
I wanna be zen. but I go sipping on some medicine instead of meditating but I get when I can
I don't wanna wind up in the gutter with a bottle of malt-liquor, bitter cause i never got a call
telling me
that it's all
figured out”

Sure, he shouldn’t have been rapping about liquor, and I’m pretty sure I heard the word “ass” in there somewhere, but I was so floored by the fact that Jai’s articulation was spot on that I sort of ignored the counselor/big brother instinct in me that should’ve cried out about foul language.

It looked like Pixis felt more or less the same way.

The beat kept going on the tinny amplifier that was connected to the soundboard, and Jai kept up with better rhythm and diction than I had heard from some professional artists, until—

but if my baby's gay I'll say you go gay baby, work that crib!
work that bib—

And then a horrible, awkward silence. Jai was making a weird face, like he was about to throw up or something.

I put a hand over my mouth, trying to mask my horror. He was doing so well! Did he suddenly get stage-fright?

The beat kept going, and I saw Hannes crane his neck around to see if he should stop the music.

But then a horrible, watery burp floated out of Jai’s mouth and into the microphone, and he continued with a blush as he miraculously got back on the beat:

burp that kid
screw po-lice
flip that car
i don't want a Jesus piece
but i want a Reese's Piece and a Kit Kat Bar

He finished out the rest of the rap as the music faded and the kids cheered over the staticky feedback of the amplifier.

Jai bobbed his head, appreciating the applause. He popped the microphone back into the stand, hopped off the front of the stage, and headed for Teresa, who actually seemed impressed.

Pixis was back out on stage announcing the next act as the kids settled down. I was standing fairly close to my squad—they all sat together, probably out of habit but I liked to think also because they were all friends now—and I heard Jai ask Teresa what she thought.

“It was pretty good,” she said mildly, “but I would’ve been more impressed if it was your own writing.”

“Ah, well my original stuff isn’t quite ready for the masses. It’s still in the, um, private viewings only stage. You interested?”

Teresa barked out a laugh loud enough to earn a glare from Pixis who was announcing one of the high school kids who would be “jump-roping with his own leg.”

Man, this kid was eleven years old and he already had better game than me.

“I’m flattered by the offer, but I’m not interested in dating yet. Ask me again next year,” Teresa said nonchalantly.

*How were these kids so laid back?* When I had confessed my feelings to Jean, I was a mess. I had just been out-done by sixth graders.

“I knew you liked me,” Jai said, sidling closer to her. He was met with Teresa’s palm to the face.

“I said I might like you next year, dingus,” she said, ruffling his hair like you might with a sibling. Apparently she forgot about the gel, because then she was grimacing and wiping her hand on his shirt.

“Pendejo,” she said affectionately.

“Gracias?” Jai replied sheepishly.
“I just called you stupid.”

“I’m wounded, Teresa,” he said with a hushed giggle, and then they focused on this kid who was, in fact, holding one of his ankles and jumping the other leg through it.

I shook my head.

\textit{Ah, youth.}

X

After the talent show ended, closing statements were made, team winners were announced (Mikasa had tracked points after all, and Trailblazers actually won by a single point over Jean and Ymir’s team), and then it was time to eat.

The sun was low on the horizon as the kids queued up for their heaping serving of barbecued chicken and/or pork, corn on the cob, homemade potato chips, and fresh fruit salad. After regular dinner, there were also cookies and brownies, and of course, s’mores.

Now, I had some experience with this bonfire, and I could do the math: Kids plus skewers plus fire equals a huge mess.

It was only a matter of seconds once the bonfire was roaring and Levi and Erwin announced that the kids could start roasting marshmallows on it that someone had set their entire s’more on fire. Because the kids were so untrustworthy with fire, we had a constant and vigilant rotation of counselors keeping an eye on them.

There was also Levi.

It seems to be some sort of universal constant that kids always look around for the nearest adult before they do something stupid. When the first adult they see is Levi, arms crossed and a glare that practically screams ‘I fucking \textit{dare} you,’ this is a pretty good deterrent for would-be pyrotechnic daredevils.

Due to the sheer number of kids present, though, it was impossible for Levi to death-stare \textit{all} of them, so the rest of us had to help fill in the gaps.

Hannes put some music on—what sounded like a 2003 top 40 mix, to be honest—and soon enough the kids were roaming around the fire, the games, and with the arrival of Moblit and Hanji, we had more than enough counselors to look after the campers.

Jean and I took \textit{slight} advantage of this, and snuck off to the woods for little five to ten minute breaks, to get away from the noise of shrieking children and the scent of burning wood that filled our sinuses and made our eyes water.

I am proud to admit that we exhibited enough self control that we did \textit{not} make out or grope each other in any way.

This was definitely not because Jean was freaked out about “raccoons or something could be watching us, man.”

We agreed that it was because we would lose track of time, and we needed to keep our breaks short so that we didn’t get yelled at.

After our second break, Jean and I wandered near the dunk tank where Connie, clad in a black and
white striped vintage-style one-piece swimsuit and matching swim bonnet (seriously where did he get these from?), whooped and hollered, taunting kids to hit the target. Sasha was equipping an all-too-eager Rachida with a ball.

“Hey, Marco,” a voice called as I grinned in anticipation. Rachida looked like she had a good arm on her; I wanted to see Connie get dunked.

I swiveled my head toward the voice, and saw Mikasa walking toward me. Jean nudged me sharply, though, and I whirled back to watch Rachida let loose on the dunk-tank target.

A buzzer went off and Connie splashed into the water with a spluttered war-cry. Her friends congratulated her, high-fiving and fist-bumping while they grappled for a turn.

Sasha was clutching her abs and laughing as Connie struggled to climb back onto his seat. His swim bonnet had flopped down over his eyes, and he spat water at Sasha as she laughed even harder.

Satisfied, I turned my attention back to Mikasa, who was smirking pretty hard.

“Ymir was looking for you,” she said.

“Oh?” I asked.

“I convinced her to do it. Well, I convinced Christa. So they’re getting ready now. Didn’t want you to miss it,” she grinned.

Mikasa was one of the smartest people I knew: of course she went to Christa first. That was the best way to get Ymir to do something: make Christa want Ymir to do it. Ymir would do anything if Christa just asked her to.

I wasn’t about to complain.

“Oh man, I haven’t seen this in years,” I said with a wicked grin. “Not since…”

“Pineapple Kenny,” Mikasa finished, and we both laughed.

“Whoa whoa, hold up. What am I missing? What are they doing?” Jean asked, confused.

“Oh no, don’t tell him,” Mikasa told me. “It’ll be way better this way.”

I took Jean by the hand and dragged him after me as I weaved through the crowd of children to get to the stage again.

As we walked up, elbowing through the small crowd of high schoolers who apparently thought they were too cool for the games and s’mores, Pixis came out with a microphone.

Flipping the switch on, there was some screeching feedback, and we all groaned and covered our ears.

“Ah, sorry,” Pixis said, leaping a bit as the feedback flared again as he spoke. Hannes fumbled with some levers and then nodded at Pixis, who tried again. “Better? Ah, yes, much. Okay, so if you’d like to come back to the stage, we apparently have a special performance tonight. Christa Lenz and Ymir—“he covered the mic, though we could still hear him talking—“what’s your last name?”

A pause.
“It’s what?” he said, confused.

“Never mind!” Ymir shouted, “You’d never say it right anyway!”

“Fine, fine,” he continued. “Christa and Ymir have a special performance for you.”

Repurposed floodlights suddenly splashed a spotlight on Ymir and Christa, intimately posed on the stage.

Their heads were bowed, and Ymir faced the audience with her legs spread while Christa’s back was to us. Christa’s left leg was centered to Ymir, with her other leg wrapped around Ymir’s at the knee. One of Ymir’s hands rested lightly at the small of her girlfriend’s back, with the other hanging loosely at her side. Christa’s hands gripped Ymir’s shoulder and hip.

Ymir was clad in all black, and she had done her hair up in a tight braid that was piled on her head and tucked under a black newsboy hat. Christa was wearing a peach-colored sundress and strappy red sandals that had an small heel on them. Even in the heels, though, Ymir towered over her tiny partner.

As the music started, Christa’s hand slid down Ymir’s arm until it found her hand, and the shorter woman swayed her hips in such a sexual way that it was hard to believe this was still Christa.

The music sounded like pretty standard Latin music to me, but Ymir and Christa connected to it in such a way that I wondered if it was a special song or something.

Their dance was pretty… well, it was fairly raunchy. It was salsa, after all: there was going to be some provocative hip movements. The way they moved around each other was amazing though, and even knowing nothing about dancing, I could tell that they were really good.

The eye contact they held with each other could have burned a building down. Ymir twirled Christa in crisp turns, hands and feet and hips and eyes always exactly where they needed to be, always exactly in sync with the other.

We all watched the two of them, mesmerized.

I had seen the grainy VHS recording of Ymir’s first (and only) televised competition, when she made it to the championship round of some local ballroom dancing organization’s event. The days of Pineapple Kenny and stiff, scowling movements from Ymir were long behind her: this was on a whole different level.

There was no fringe skirt, but it didn’t matter.

This was the best part of the bonfire, hands down.

When the song finished, Ymir and Christa struck a dramatic pose that closely resembled the one they had started the dance in, though Ymir’s hand was between Christa’s shoulder blades now, and the smaller woman was draped back away from Ymir instead of pressed close, chest to chest. Their shoulders were heaving with the exertion, but their smiles were radiant.

Post #104 of Camp Sina erupted in applause.

X

After the dance, Jean and I chatted a bit with Ymir and Christa, complimenting them and Jean all but bombarded them with questions.
“Why the hell do you have those shoes with you here at camp?” he pressed.

“I um… I was kind of planning on getting Ymir to dance with me anyway?” Christa said, blushing. “It’s been such a long time since we’ve competed or anything, but Ymir mentioned in passing that she’d do it with me at camp in the talent show or something, so…”

“I said that in January, Baby Girl,” Ymir said, squeezing Christa into her side.

“Yes, and I remembered,” Christa said matter-of-factly. “Most would consider that a positive quality.”

“Everything about you is a positive quality,” Ymir said, offering a big cheesy smile before smacking a wet kiss to Christa’s cheek.

“Eww,” Jean teased.

“More where that came from, pretty boy!” Ymir laughed, and licked Christa’s face.

“Ugh, Miri,” Christa said, wiping at her face.

Ymir nuzzled into her hair, rubbing her nose back and forth, and Christa drew Ymir’s arms around her.

I shuffled my feet a little bit, a little embarrassed by the intimacy of their embrace.

“I think there’s a certain dumbass in need of dunking,” Jean offered awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Sorry, is our schmoopy love making you uncomfortable, Jean Boy?” Ymir leered.

“Ugh, don’t call me that. My mom calls me that,” he groused.

“Oooh, you shouldn’t’ve told me that,” Ymir cackled.

“Alright, let’s go dunk Connie,” I suggested.

“Have fun, Jean Boy!” Ymir laughed.

“Nice job, you two. Really, it was amazing,” I told them.

“Thanks, Marco,” Christa said graciously. “You’re a sweetheart.”

“Wait, she gets to call you sweetheart? What is that about?” Jean whined. “I’m your boyfriend, I’m supposed to have license to call you sweetheart!”

“Jean,” I warned, though my giggles probably spoiled the effect. “Why do you want to call me by a pet name so badly?”

“Huh?”

“Like at first, I thought you were just sort of pushing it because I got sort of embarrassed by it, but now it seems like there’s more to it?” I finished sheepishly.

“I, um, I thought…” Jean blushed. “I thought it would be like, a couple-y thing to do,” he said in a rush.
I bit my lips, trying not to laugh at how cute he was. It didn’t work. “That’s adorable,” I giggled. “You’re adorable.”

“I’m manly as hell,” Jean defended, crossing his arms.

I wiggled my hand around one of his arms. “Yes you are,” I said, pecking him on the cheek, “and you’re also adorable.”

“If you insist, darling,” Jean drawled.

“Come on, schnookums,” I said with a teasing smile. “Let’s go burn some marshmallows.”

When I woke up the next morning, Jean was draped over me like a blanket, a little bit of drool sticking to my bare chest where he lay on me, dead to the world.

I groaned a bit at how early it was; it can’t have been later than five. Considering we went to sleep at almost two in the morning, that wasn’t a lot of sleep.

It took my eyes a minute to adjust in the dark, but my brain finally made sense of the dark blob of Armin Arlert hovering over my bed.

“Marco?” he said. “It’s time.”

Oh. Yarckel Point. Yeah, I guess it is.

Well at least Armin woke up on time. Heavens knows Bert would never be up this early on his own. Normally I was a little more reliable than this in the mornings, but only three hours of sleep will do that to you.

I rubbed Jean’s shoulders, lightly at first and then with more pressure, hoping to wake him in the least obtrusive way possible.

“Jean,” I whispered. “Jean, I’m gonna go out to Yarckel Point with Armin and Bert now. You have to at least let me up, but… do you want to maybe come with?”

I heard Eren stirring across the room, and he called out Armin’s name in a slurred, happy mumble.

Jean scrunched his face up, running his tongue around the inside of his mouth and then letting out a monstrous yawn.

“Jean?” I asked again.

“I um… I haven’t woken Bert yet,” Armin whispered sheepishly.

I sighed. “I’ll wake him in a minute,” only just resisting adding the “like always” to the end. I think Armin kind of knew he had skipped out on sharing the burden of waking our friend, and there was no point in rubbing it in his face.

It was too early for that.

Jean was mumbling something though, and I couldn’t quite make out where one word ended and the next began.

“Hmm?” I asked.

“Wanna stay with you,” Jean repeated a little more clearly.
“Well, I’m going out to Yarckel Point. Does that mean you’re coming with me?”

He groaned. “Come back to bed.”

“Jean, I always go to the Point,” I said, brushing his hair off his forehead a bit. He scrabbled for my hand, pulling it down from his forehead to his mouth, kissing it dryly.

“It’s the last day of camp,” Jean said, pouting, though his eyes were still resolutely closed.

“… Yeah,” I said after a moment.

“Wanna stay with you,” Jean said again.

“I know, Baby, but I’m leaving. So are you coming with or staying in bed?” I said as gently as I could.

Jean’s eyes opened slowly, and a smirk spread across his face. “You called me ‘Baby.’”

I… I actually did.

Why did I do that?

“It’s because you’re being a baby,” I said weakly. “Now are you coming with me or not?”

“Oh I’m definitely coming with you, Baby,” he said, sounding more and more awake as he teased me.

“I’m not to be held accountable for my words when I’ve only had three hours of sleep,” I complained.

Jean finally rolled off the bed, taking care not to hit his head on the bunk above as he stood up.

“No, no, I like it,” Jean said, sleepily kissing me on the lips. “You can call me Baby whenever you want.”

“Gross,” Eren groaned from his bed.

“Fuck off Jaeger, it’s too early for your shit,” Jean said, and making an honest effort to not get flustered and shy about PDA, kissed me again.

“Alright, let me just… wake Bert up here,” I said grudgingly.

“Why don’t you just wake Reiner first?” Jean asked, wrapping his arms around me from behind me. He was still warm from bed, though the hoodie he had slipped on was a little chilly. “Make him wake up his monster boyfriend instead of risking life and limb to do it yourself.”

That… is a fantastic idea.

I was actually surprised Reiner hadn’t woken up yet; he was the complete opposite of Bert in many respects, and his feather-light sleep was definitely one of those ways.

All it took was a gentle brush of his shoulder and Reiner’s eyes flew open.

“Guh?” he asked drowsily.

“Morning,” I offered with a smile. “We’re headed out to the point. Not sure if you’re coming with,
but can you wake Bert at least?”

“Mmm,” he agreed, and then he… bit Bert’s ear?!

Bert squirmed against Reiner’s nibbles, and finally his eyes opened up.

“Whazza?” he asked, a bit startled but all things considered, pretty gently.

“It’s time for the sunrise hike,” I told him as Reiner vigorously rubbed his arms in an apparent attempt to wake Bert up some more.

“Oh,” Bert said simply. “Wow. Last day already.”

“Don’t fucking remind me and just get out of bed already,” Jean complained.

About five minutes later, the six of us had rolled out of our three respective beds and headed to the point that had somehow become a symbol of both endings and beginnings: the ending of camp and the beginning of a tradition; the ending of summer and the beginning of life outside the Wall Forest.

By the time we got up there, we had missed the very beginning of the sunrise, but that was okay.

Jean was warm and soft next to me, humming quietly as I tried to keep my eyes open to actually watch the sunrise, finding it too easy to sink into his warmth and drift towards sleep.

I had to marvel at Bert’s and my little world had really grown. The first time we came up here, we barely knew Armin, we were friends more out of convenience than anything and, to be fair, we were eleven years old. Everyone’s friends when they’re in grade school.

Now, surrounded by people I would honestly call friends, breathing in that luscious mix of nighttime with the heavy warmth of the sun, I felt clean.

And day was breaking, and I was ready for whatever came next.

Chapter End Notes

So if this chapter seems like it ends on a kind of final note, that’s because chapter 15 is going to be kind of like... an epilogue with some flashbacky stuff. Next one is the last, so you only have one more stupidly long wait between updates before the whole thing is there and waiting for you! Thanks to all who have stuck with me, left comments, kudos, etc. You’re amazing!
Chapter Summary

Marco moves into his college dorm, reminisces over his final weeks of summer, and has no idea who his roommate is.

Chapter Notes

Oh my gosh, y'all. This is it. This is the end of this MONSTER of a fic.

Special thanks to cloudy for beta-ing with not only constructive criticism and keeping my comma obsession in check, but also for providing ridiculous commentary, moral support, giggles, encouraging bokutos, and your wonderful face. You're amazing and this fic would have probably fizzled and died without you.

Shoutout to siseja for liveblogging every chapter as she read it, basically dramaturgy-ing the horse chapter, and being a steady source of inspiration and happiness.

And of course, thank you to everyone who read this, kudos'd, commented, subscribed, whatever. Your hits and words brought smiles to my face and I'm so happy to have brought something to this fandom.

I'll have a few more notes at the end, but for now, enjoy the final chapter. You deserve it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“This is it! Room 104,” I said, letting the over-packed duffle bag on my shoulder slide to the floor so I can wiggle my new dorm room key into the lock. The Goodhue dormitory where I’d been assigned is a musty brick monstrosity, one of the furthest from the main academic buildings. It was a freshman dorm, except for a few unlucky sophomores and the RAs who drew the short straw.

My dad was carrying a box of my desk supplies, and Julia insisted on wheeling the slightly wobbly suitcase.

When I managed to wiggle the key into the lock, the door lurched open to reveal two simple-framed twin sized beds, two matching desks, and a window so caked in dryer lint that it let in only a weak stream of sunlight.

“What’s on the window screen?” Mom asked as soon as she was inside. “There must be an output vent from the laundry room outside your window.”

“Oh, fun,” I said dryly.

I looked from the left side to the right side, unsure which side of the room to take. Who was my roommate? Would they be picky about which side I took?
I sighed and figured they were so identical, it really didn’t matter. I stepped into the room with my duffle bag and threw it onto the left-side bed. My dad followed suit, putting his box on the left desk, and Julia parked the suitcase by the left closet.

“Julia, you wanna stay here and help Marco unpack, or carry in the next load from the car?” Mom asked.

“I’ll help Marco!” she chirped happily.

“Alright, then Dad and I will go get another load of stuff. Put him to work, Jules,” Mom. Seeing a small brick behind the door, she used it to prop open the door. “Need to get some air flowing through here, get that lint smell out a little,” she said. “Okay, back in a few!”

Julia saluted our parents as they left the room and then surveyed my belongings.

“You start with the clothes, and I’ll do your desk,” she instructed seriously.

“Aye, aye,” I said and picked up the suitcase to flop it onto the navy blue, hard-as-a-brick mattress.

Unzipping the suitcase, it suddenly hit me full force: I was moving in to college.

I was really doing it: I was going to study biology or pre-med or something “squishy,” as Jean would say, and I—

Just thinking about him put a smile on my face.

“Marco,” Julia whined, snapping me out of my reverie. “You’re not doing anything.”

“Yeah, sorry, just excited I guess,” I said. “Make sure it’s organized, Juju, don’t just throw stuff in the drawers.”

“I know,” she said, running her hands over my pens and pencils.

By the time I returned to folding my shirts and moving them from suitcase to closet, my parents were back with another load of my stuff.

“There’s just a few things left in the car,” Dad said. “Your XBox, and a box just labeled ‘squishy’?” He makes a confused face.

I laughed. That was my box of science materials I had already acquired in high school: goggles, gloves, previously completed science labs in neatly-labeled composition notebooks, and a white lab coat with a poorly sewn name badge on it.

“It’s school stuff,” I explained, though remembering the lab coat brought a faint blush to my cheeks. I focused intently on folding the shirt in my hands.

“Alright, I’m gonna head out to the car one more time,” Mom said, turning to leave. “Oh, hello,” she said suddenly.

“H-hello, Mrs Bodt.”

A huge smile broke across my face. “Jean!”

I whipped around to see Jean, my lanky and handsome boyfriend, leaning sheepishly against the doorframe.
“I’m so glad that—I mean, you’re—it’s so good to see you,” Jean finally managed.

I took him by the wrist, leading him into my room and then closer to my chest for a hug. He tensed when I first grabbed him, but he relaxed into me when I squeezed him tighter.

It had taken a lot of convincing to get Jean to come over before my parents left. His first meeting with them was, admittedly, not the most positive way to meet your new boyfriend’s parents. I didn’t think he’d ever live it down…

Julia was holding Dad’s hand in her left, Mom’s in her right, swinging their linked hands back and forth obnoxiously. When there was a bump or something, my parents lifted her over it like she was still 4.

And she was babbling.

“And then Petra showed us how to skip rocks! It was so cool she’s really good at it like every single time she got like at least four skips every time it was so cool,” she gushed, pausing to take a really big breath. “And she said I was a natural too because on only like my second try I got three skips and one time I even got five!”

“That’s very impressive, Jules,” Mom said with that earnest enthusiasm that only truly loving parents can make sound convincing.

“And when Marco got back I showed him my awesome skills and Jean was all, ‘I bet I can do that!’ and he picked up a rock but it just went thunk straight in the water and we both laughed at him a lot.”

“Who’s John?” Dad asked.

I opened my mouth to speak, but Julia jumped in on it first. “No, not John, Daddy; his name is Jean, it’s French, just like he is. And he’s Marco’s friend who says funny things like ‘Jesus blood-shitting Christ!'”

My parents stopped walking.

And slowly, in that ‘you’re-about-to-die-Marco-Bodt’ way, they turned to me in unison.

“A ‘friend’ of yours?” My mother asked quietly, arching an eyebrow so sternly and with such control that I think I actually gulped.

I floundered for a second, unsure how to tackle this conversation in a way that wouldn’t make me look like the worst sibling in the world.

“He didn’t know Julia was there,” I stumbled, “and I scared him, so it was a bad reflex and he’s normally really good about censoring his speech especially around the kids I swear—“

“Julia, do you know that what you just said is a very rude thing to say?” My mother asked, turning away from me to let me wallow in the red-faced horror of this conversation.

“It is?” she asked innocently.

I didn’t entirely buy it.

“Yes,” Mom confirmed, “so you should really not repeat it, because it’s not a nice thing at all to say. A lot of people would be very offended to hear it.”
“Then why did Jean say it?”

“Probably because he is a very rude boy,” my mother said sternly, glaring back at me.

“Mom, he’s—“

“Jean’s not rude, he’s funny! And he’s really nice to me. And he’s really nice to Marco, too. Maybe he just doesn’t know what it means,” she reasoned.

“Hm, I think he probably does,” Mom said evenly.

“That’s the only bad word he’s said in front of her, I promise,” I said, desperately trying to protect my boyfriend’s honor.

And that’s when said boyfriend came jogging over to me and my family.

“Hey, I’ve been looking for you,” Jean said, only a little out of breath. His eyes darted from my face to my parents, and I could tell he was connecting the dots. He spoke quickly. “I found your toothpaste cap, after all. It rolled under the bunk.”

He held it out to me, and I took it awkwardly.

“Thanks,” I said stiffly.

Jean’s smile faded momentarily, before he plastered it on as best he could. “You guys must be Marco’s parents,” he said airily. “I’m Jean.” He was convincingly not too awkward as he held out a hand to shake.

Little did he know, it was already too late.

My mom extended her hand to shake his, but she captured it in a death grip and stared at him with an icy glare. “So nice to meet you, Jean. Julia was just telling us about your colorful vocabulary.”

Jean froze.

When he was able to move again a couple of seconds later, he turned to me, eyes begging for help. I mouthed the words ‘blood-shitting’ to him, and his face drained of color.

“I… I am so sorry. I was caught off guard and I didn’t know there were any children around. I apologize for my poor language choice,” he said, true remorse knitting his eyebrows together.

Dad stepped in to break the tension, extending his hand to Jean. “I’m sure it won’t happen again,” he said sternly.

“No sir!” Jean agreed hastily, shaking my dad’s hand as he continued to blush furiously.

“Actually, Marco helped me come up with some, uh, appropriate ways to express myself. Mostly by putting the word ‘soggy’ before any common noun,” he mumbled.

“I’m glad he’s had a good influence on you,” Dad commented.

Jean blushed. “Yes, sir.”

“Well, we’re going to get Jules’ things packed up. Marco, are you ready to go?” Mom asked.

“I uh, just gotta round up a couple last minute things, check out with Hanji, stuff like that.”
I glanced at Jean, trying to gauge his reaction. I knew how efficient my parents were. If Mom had her way, we’d be out of here in thirty minutes.

“Alright, well don’t take too long. We’ll meet you at the gate in half an hour?” Mom said. “I wanna try to beat the traffic back to Jinae.”

“Sure thing,” I said with a nod.

Mom and Dad scooted Julia away, who threw a goodbye to Jean over her shoulder.

We stared at each other for a moment before we both erupted in nervous, giddy laughter.

“Nous sommes foutus,” Jean giggled. *We’re screwed.*

“Pretty sure my mom hates you,” I snickered.

“It was *one time*!” Jean whined.

I threw an arm around his shoulders, and nudged him in the direction of Cabin G. “Come on, I gotta go pack. Come with me?”

“Of course,” he said.

We sobered up on our walk over, quickly realizing that we’d soon be saying goodbye for a little over a month until I got to campus.

As I did a quick sweep of the cabin, including grabbing my toothpaste that was just sitting on my bed, Jean asked what day I’d be moving in.

“I don’t remember the exact day,” I said. “I’ll text you or whatever when I get home. My mom wrote it on the calendar or something.”

“Oh,” he said, quiet.

“You okay?” I asked, jostling my pack to make my belongings settle deeper into the pouch so I could close it properly.

“Yeah,” he said, scuffing his foot on the floor like a little kid. “Just… gonna miss you, is all.”

I couldn’t help the dumb smile that broke across my face.

I wrapped him in a tight hug, and he nuzzled into the crook of my neck. “You can come help me unpack,” I offered. “I’ll text you the second I’m on campus, and you can come over and help me move in and we can spend all day with each other.”

“Mmpf,” he grunted into my chest. “That sounds nice.”

“Yeah, it does,” I said, pulling back a little to get a better look at his face. I raised a hand to cup his jaw, guiding his face up from where he was sulking so I could look at him properly. “And we’ll talk on Skype, like, every day. And we’ll text all the time like losers. And I’ll snap chat you every dumb thing I can think of,” I promised.

Jean’s face was turning a deep, rosy pink. “Wanna kiss you,” he mumbled so quietly I almost didn’t hear it.

“Please do,” I said gently.
He kissed me sweetly and chastely, and I moved my lips against his, breathing him in and trying not to think about the next few weeks.

My phone vibrated in my back pocket, and I knew it was Mom asking where I was.

With a sigh, I let one hand drop from Jean’s hip to check the message.

**ETA?** It asked.

*Leaving the cabin now, just have to stop by Stohess to check out with Hanji and say goodbye to some friends. 20 mins?*

I tried to buy as much time as I could, and she said half an hour. Mom’s reply came quickly and confirmed my suspicions.

**Let’s aim for 15.**

I sighed. “Jean? I gotta go check out and say goodbye to everyone else,” I said as gently as I could. “Can we head over to Stohess?”

He kissed me again, slow and sweet. “Now we can,” he said.

I kissed him quickly on the forehead and heaved my pack onto my shoulders, glancing at my bunk one last time for any forgotten possessions.

“It’s only a month. We’re gonna be fine,” I assured, though whether it was for his benefit or my own, I’m not sure.

Back in my dorm room, Jean shifted awkwardly, unsure how to behave around my parents. I came out to them in the month after camp and before school, and told them he was my boyfriend.

Honestly, coming out to my parents had been weird but went about as well as it could go. I had heard some pretty messed up stories of parents disowning their kids, doing horrible things to them, and while I was confident that my parents weren’t huge assholes, I wasn’t quite sure how it would go over. Mom seemed to be trying a little too hard to make sure I knew she was cool with it, but she got better when I pointed out to her that she didn’t need to treat me any differently, I just wanted them to know. Dad was sort of awkward about it, in his own way, lots of “I love you son, you know that, right son? I love you. I love you and your sister. Especially you.” Overall, I considered that part a roaring success.

The part that was not quite as well received was the fact that I was, in fact, dating Jean. Jean, who had made such a delightful first impression on them. (Jean, whom they blamed for luring me away from my promise to look after Julia. I was still technically grounded for that, by the way.)

Gay? Sure, honey, we’ll always love you. With Jean? I’m not so sure that’s a good idea, sweetheart.

I tried to keep their disapproval hidden from Jean as much as possible, because honestly, I didn’t think he needed to know, at least not yet. It would only stress him out about my parents even further, so I didn’t lie, but I pretty much avoided talking about their opinions of him. They just needed to get to know him a little better to see that he wasn’t the huge jerk they imagined him to be.
I did my best to tell the funniest, most family-friendly stories about him from camp—like how well Jean did with the kids, playing in the lake (not the chicken fight part), the Greek personas conversation, and how he belted out every camp song in the book, loud and proud—but ultimately, they just needed to spend more than two minutes with him to see how wonderful he was.

Standing there in my dorm room with my parents, kid sister, and very awkward boyfriend, I realized it was going to be up to me to diffuse the tension.

Oh boy.

“Ah, I um, haven’t properly introduced you all, I suppose. Mom, Dad, you remember Jean from Camp Sina?” I asked, squeezing his hand to gain at least some strength from him.

My dad was side-eyeing Jean pretty hard. Work with me, I willed.

“Jean, these are my parents, Maxime and Susan Bodt.”

“Pleasure to meet you, er, again,” Jean said. I could tell he was nervous, as his hand fidgeted constantly in mine.

“We’ve heard a lot about you,” my dad offered.

“I’m sorry!” Jean blurted.

“No need, son. You already apologized. And it seems Marco is, uh, quite fond of you. So long as you watch that mouth of yours,” Dad said, raising his eyebrows meaningfully.

“Yes, sir,” Jean said.

We spent the next hour or so unpacking my things, my mother fussing over whether I had brought enough pairs of socks, if my backpack was big enough for all my ‘big college textbooks’… worried parent things, I guess.

Jean was pretty reserved, just asking quietly where I wanted something to go or entertaining Julia with silly stories or guessing games.

They were on their fourth round of “I Spy” when Mom put her hands on her hips and sighed.

“Well, kiddo, I think that’s everything.”

“Yeah, I think it is,” I agreed, untangling the cord to my Xbox to plug it into the wall.

“Call us if you think of something you forgot or if you need anything; I can probably come down next weekend if it’s important.”

“Nah, I’m sure it’s fine, Mom. Thanks,” I said with a warm smile. The nervous bundle in my stomach was building with the thought of my parents leaving. I’d be alone, on my own (kind of) for the first time in my life.

Well, not entirely alone.

Jean was there.

Honestly, one of my biggest fears about college had always been homesickness. I’m a serious homebody, and while I managed six weeks at Sina every summer, it was a very different experience.
I was mostly confident in my ability to make friends, and Jean would be nearby… maybe things would work out after all.

“Tell us about your mysterious roommate, whenever he shows up, yeah?” Dad asked, though he was making a weird face. I nodded, sensing he wasn’t quite done yet.

“Gosh, I’m so proud of you, son. It feels like just yesterday you were no bigger than Julia, and now you’re … you’re leaving home,” he continued, lip quivering.

Oh no. My father was about to cry.

“Dad, it’s gonna be fine. I’ll tell you all about my first week, and my classes, and my roommate, okay. We can Skype, and call and text. It’ll be good.”

Julia quirked an eyebrow, watching as our father’s chin wobbled and – yup, that was a tear falling out of his eye.

“Julia needs to have the single-child experience for a little while,” I tried, reminding him that he wasn’t an empty nester; he still had a second grader to dote on.

“It’s just gonna be so different around the house without you there!” he cried, and Mom stepped over my backpack on the floor to comfort her husband.

“Different is okay, dear. He’ll keep in touch, and we’ll see him for October break, too,” Mom assured him.

He pushed his shoulders back, trying to retain some dignity.

“We’re gonna hit the road, okay sweetheart? Want to beat the traffic. I’ll text you when we’re home safe,” Mom said with a warm smile. She looked a little sad, but nowhere near Dad’s level of emotional outburst.

Julia was torn down the middle, it seemed: she was pretending to be like Mom, but I could see the tears filling her eyes.

I scooped her up one last time, blowing a raspberry on her cheek to get a giggle out of her. “You take care of Mom and Dad now, okay?” I said. “Learn lots in school, and tell me all the cool stuff that happens, too.”

“I’m gonna miss you, Marco,” she sniffled, trying not to hiccup.

“Aww, I’ll miss you too, Juju,” I said, squeezing her tight before I put her down again.

I gave my parents a quick hug each, though Dad was reluctant to let go.

“Don’t distract him too much, now,” Mom said with a not-so-teasing glare at Jean.

“No ma’am!” he said, turning beet-red at the sudden attention. He already looked a little uncomfortable at my dad’s emotional display, so my mother’s watchful eye suddenly focused on him made him try to melt into the dingy, off-white painted walls.

“Bye, Jean!” Julia said, and gave him a quick hug around the waist. He froze in shock, but recovered enough to give her a quick pat on the shoulder.

Dad offered Jean a handshake on the way out, muttering about “you be good to my son,” and Mom gave him a stiff attempt at a hug, before ushering my father toward the door.
“Sorry you had to see that, Jean,” she offered. “Come on Jules, time to hit the road.”

“But Mom, hitting the road hurts your hands!” she grinned.

Making bad puns already: I was a pretty good big brother after all, I guessed.

As soon as my family was down the hall, Jean closed the door behind them with a gentle click, and we both breathed out a deep sigh of relief.

I moved to my bed, sitting limply on the edge of it, grimacing slightly at how hard and springy it was. That would take some getting used-to.

“Can put a mattress pad under the sheets,” Jean suggested. “Give you a little more cushion.”

“Mmm,” I agreed, giving him a fond but tired smile.

He met my gaze with his own, and we just grinned at each other stupidly for a moment.

“So…” Jean said, eyes darting from the floor to his hands to the shelves over my desk. “Makeout time?”

My grin grew even wider, somehow. “Makeout time,” I confirmed, and we lunged at each other like idiots.

We were just starting to get into a good rhythm when the door burst open.

“Forgot my sunglasses!” My mom called out, followed immediately by, “really boys? It’s been like three minutes!”

“The door was closed, Mom!” I shrieked as she grabbed her forgotten frames from my desk.

“Yikes, I’m leaving for real now, bye!” she laughed, waving over her shoulder.

This time when Mom left, I not only closed but locked the door, and then returned to the bed.

Jean looked at me sheepishly through his long blond eyelashes. Maybe it was because they were so straight, but his lashes were unreal. They were gorgeous.

“I like your eyelashes,” I told him, leaning forward to kiss his forehead gently.

“You like my eyelashes?” he confirmed with a gentle, breathy laugh. “That’s … that’s so specific.”

“They’re pretty. You’re pretty,” I told him, ducking in for another kiss.

“Excuse you, I’m rugged and manly as hell,” he said sardonically. “The term you’re looking for is handsome.”

“Of course, my apologies,” I giggled.

“I’m gonna kiss that dopey grin right off your face, Bodt,” he threatened.

“Do it,” I dared him.

Half an hour later, he was still trying to kiss the grin off my face. Problem was, the more I thought about it—that I was at college, that I had a gorgeous boyfriend, that I was making out with said
gorgeous boyfriend—I couldn’t stop smiling.

Jean made an Olympic effort, though, varying between peppering little kisses all over my face, my shoulders, my hands and deep, wet, sigh-inducing kisses. (He was getting pretty good at that kind of kiss, I might add.)

It was getting dark outside, nearly eight PM, when a thumping sound came at the door, and a key slid into the lock.

“That must be the roommate,” I said, pulling back from Jean with a hasty pop, and we situate ourselves on the bed at a respectable distance.

The door swung open, and my jaw dropped.

“No fucking way,” Jean muttered before flopping face first into my pillow.

“Oh hell yes,” Eren Jaeger hollered as he schlepped his belongings through the door.

“Wait, did you know before you got here?” I asked, confused. “They told me that my roommate was still unassigned when I got here this morning!”

“Nah, dude, I had no clue. You know how I sort of applied late? Well they forgot to matriculate me into the roommate pool or some shit so I just spent two hours in the Office of Campus Housing. This is where they told me to go, so here I fuckin’ am.”

“Well, at least you know he’s not a homophobe,” Jean said, muffled through my pillow.

“Oh man, Marco, this is gonna be so hella,” he grinned, reaching out for a fist bump. He sort of tried to swagger over, but he tripped over his own suitcase.

Jean laughed like a maniac.

“Just to be clear, though, I mean, I love you guys, but if you guys are gonna have sex can you do it at Jean’s place because I so do not need to see or hear that,” Eren said casually.

My cheeks flushed dark red, but I tried to keep my composure. “Sure thing, Eren.”

Jean sat up at that. “Wait, wait. We’re gonna have sex?”

“No in here!” Eren cried out.

Jean didn’t even flinch at Eren’s outburst. “Marco, you’re unpacked, right? I wanna show you my apartment, now.”

“Thirsty much?” Eren smirked.

“Maybe Eren needs some help unpacking,” I said.

“He’s a big kid, he can take care of himself.”

“Jesus, keep it in your pants, Kirschstein,” Eren complained, rolling his eyes. “And that’s nice of you to offer, Marco, but it might actually be more helpful if you take Boner Appetit over there out so I can organize in peace.”

Jean glared at Eren’s nickname, but didn’t say anything.
“Alright. Well, I’ve got a couple things to put up, then I’ll get him out of your way.”

“Whatcha gonna hang up?” Jean asked, rolling onto his stomach.

“Just a couple of pictures,” I said, ripping off a piece of sticky-tack from the fresh pack my mom bought me. I warmed it up in my hands, and pressed it carefully to the back of the three photos I had printed on glossy paper.

The first was a picture of my family. We were on a “staycation,” as my mom called it (which basically amounted to camping in the backyard), but we had set up the slip-n-slide for Julia, and of course, Bert and I had made fools of ourselves on it, too.

My mom and dad are posed like you’d expect, shoulders pressed up next to each other in a parental display of affection for each other that wasn’t too gross to bring to college with me. I’m in the foreground with Julia, and our pose is a little… less orthodox. I’m lying on my back, legs up in the air, with Julia on her stomach, balanced on my feet. I have a hold on one of her hands for better balance, but she’s got her head thrown back, her damp curls everywhere, and a big, gap-toothed grin on her face. The sun caught her freckles just right, so she looks like she’s practically glowing. I’m laughing so hard at her that my face is all scrunched up and ridiculous.

The next picture is of Bert, Armin, Reiner, and me at Yarckel Point last year. Reiner insisted that we take a picture and of course he had to be in the shot too. Bert is holding the camera, since we decided he had the longest arms, and it’s a little blurry because it took so many attempts to not crop out anyone’s face, and we were fidgety. We all look bone-tired and sleep deprived (we were) but it was a nice picture of the four of us, and it held so many positive memories that I didn’t mind that we kind of looked like zombies.

The final picture I brought with me is a candid shot of Jean that Ymir snapped with the camp camera, and it was just too gorgeous to not bring with me. He could deal with it. He’s sitting on the river bank at Maria, elbows propped on his knees. He’s wearing a striped tank, his khaki cargo shorts, a backwards baseball cap that doesn’t quite tame the spikier parts of his blond hair, and the most beautiful smile I’ve ever seen. Ymir claimed that he was watching me, hence the broad smile that crinkles up into his eyes. Whatever it was, he was gorgeous, and the photo itself is almost professional looking.

I pressed all three pictures up to the wall next to my bed, so that I could look at them when I’m falling asleep or when I wake up or when I’m watching movies on my bed, or just whenever I want to.

I scooted back, inspecting how straight and even they were. Satisfied, I let Jean sneak a peek at them, too.

He smiled sweetly at my family, nodded at the Yarckel Point photo, and froze when he saw himself.

“What… where is this from?” he asked quietly.

“Maria,” I said, slipping an arm around his shoulders. “Ymir caught you with the camp camera.”

“Wh-why’d you hang it up here? That’s so embarrassing!” he said blushing furiously.

“Because you’re gorgeous—sorry, handsome—and I want to see your face all the time, even when you’re not here.”

I leaned my head onto his shoulder, and silently thanked Eren for not adding any unnecessary
commentary.

Picking my head up, I turned to Jean with a mischievous smile. “Hey Jean, will you go out with me?”

“I’m already your boyfriend, dude.”

“No, I mean—I’m asking you on a date. Will you go out with me?” I clarified.

“Well isn’t that just fuckin’ adorable,” Eren crooned from across the room where he was hanging up posters.

“Shut up Jaeger!” Jean spat, but then his tone went soft and gentle as he turned back to me. “Marco, I would very much like to go on a date with you.”

I kissed him chastely on the cheek. “Good.”

“Side note, does this date end in makeouts at my place, or…”

“Keepin’ it classy, mon coeur,” I teased.

“It’s why you love m—” Jean said, freezing mid-word. He gaped at me for a moment.

“Did you, um…” I stammered, desperate to break the silence.

“Yup,” he said, making a loud pop on the ‘p’.

Eren doesn’t say a word.

“I love you, too,” I grinned.

I grabbed my wallet, room key, and Jean’s hand, and practically ran out of that room.

X

I had been to Trost a few times in my life: on a couple of day trips with my family and to visit the campus last year before applying here.

Which meant that my grand plan of sweeping Jean off to dinner at a nice restaurant was kind of difficult, since I had almost no clue where to go.

I summoned whatever urban instincts I had and decided that heading toward the area with the most light was a decent idea. I tried to make it seem like I knew what I was doing, but Jean just started snickering at me.

“What?” I sighed.

“It’s just… there’s not really any restaurants in this district. You sure you know where you’re going?”

“For the record, I’d like to state that I never knew where I was going,” I admitted.

“Alright, much as I love this in-charge Marco, I’ll find us a good restaurant. What you in the mood for?”

“I’m not picky,” I shrugged. “Could go for mozzarella sticks, though.”
“I know just the place,” Jean grinned.

He led us a few streets over, and after waiting forever at a six-way intersection for the walk signal, we arrived... at TGI Friday's.

"The mozzarella sticks are literally endless," Jean enthused.

I was sort of hoping for some cute, locally owned place laced with nostalgia-inducing décor, but I supposed eternal deep-fried cheese was enough to make a memory for our first date.

“But it’s only Thursday,” I teased, grunting when Jean elbowed me in the ribs.

“Shut up and take me on a date, nerd,” Jean grinned.

It was the tail end of the dinner rush so it wasn’t too crowded, though there was a dull roar of conversation humming through the restaurant. The hostess seated us in a large booth with a framed photo of Elvis Presley in a white sequined jumpsuit that made me question if it was actually Elvis, or a Vegas-style impersonator.

Our waitress, a perky young woman whose nametag was so covered in stickers you could barely tell that it said ‘Monica,’ came over right away. “Hello and welcome to TGI Friday’s, my name is Monica and I’ll be your server. Can I get you started with something to drink?”

“I can’t decide between mango or peach iced tea. Which do you recommend?” I asked Monica.

“Well why not get both? We have our Signature Slush of Mango Peach lemonade,” she replied with a glimmer in her eye.

“That sounds amazing; I’ll have one of those,” I smiled.

“Ginger ale for me, please. And we’d like to get those endless mozzarella sticks, too.”

“I’ll be right back with those drinks, and I’ll put the mozzarella sticks order in,” Monica said with a knowing nod.

We looked over the menu quietly, half listening to the garbled Bon Jovi playing from the overhead speakers.

Monica returned a few moments later with our drinks. Jean’s eyes bulged a little at the monstrosity that was placed in front of me.

It looked amazing.

“What kind of incestuous slurry is that,” Jean grimaced.

“Want a sip?” I offered, holding the glass out to him.

“Hell yeah I want a sip,” he grinned.

Monica arrived at the table with a plate of mozzarella sticks just as Jean put the glass down.

“Damn that’s sweet,” he said, lips puckered as he grabbed for his ginger ale to neutralize the sugariness.

“We ready to order, or do you still need a couple minutes?” she asked.
“I think we’re ready,” I said as Jean nodded through his soda.

I ordered a Jack Daniels burger, and Jean got what he affectionately called a ‘heart attack burger’—a bacon cheeseburger with deep-fried onions on top. Monica approved of our choices, took our menus, and left us to put our order in.

Normally, I was content to sit in silence, but Jean seemed to fidget when we went for more than about thirty seconds without saying anything. When he shoved a mozzarella stick in his mouth and commented on how good it was despite his eyes watering at the heat radiating off the golden-fried food, I knew I needed to break out some small talk. We talked about what we had done over the past month, though there wasn’t much news to add since we had been in contact literally every day.

We were on our second plate of mozzarella sticks when the burgers arrived, and our conversation had gotten more natural. I told Jean about which classes I wanted to take, voiced my concerns and worries about college, mused what my professors might be like, all the while Jean adding little bits of commentary about things he had experienced in his time as a student.

When he wasn’t giving his two cents, though, Jean was staring at me with a sort of dopey expression, even as he chewed his burger.

I broke off mid-ramble. “Sorry, I’ll shut up. I’m sure you’re tired of listening to me babble.”

“No, no! It’s fine. You’re just… you’re so cute when you’re all excited and honestly I’ve got no clue what you’re talking about for some parts of this but… yeah. You’re fine, don’t worry.” He took a hasty sip of ginger ale, like his throat had suddenly gone dry.

I grinned. “You’re right; I’m adorable.”

“Hey now, let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” he teased. “I said ‘cute,’ not ‘adorable.’”

“Oh, my mistake. Because those are totally not synonyms. How clumsy of me,” I deadpanned.

“Gosh I’ve missed you,” Jean sighed suddenly.

My attempt at a straight face melted immediately into a gooey, blushing grin. “I’ve missed you too.”

“Back at camp, six weeks felt like forever, but now I’m just… six weeks is like…nothing. I’m so glad we get more time together.” Jean spoke quietly, and I could tell he was embarrassed.

“He’s such a nerd,” I thought.

“I’m just, like, so happy that we’re gonna be able to see each other a lot. Like, as much as we want, other than like, school and work stuff. And y’know, makeout a lot and stuff,” he added in a rush. I swallowed hard and reached my hand across the table. Jean took it with only a brief glance around us.

“You’re a big sap, you know that?” I said finally.

“Wow, way to ruin the moment, Marco,” Jean barked with laughter.

“Sorry, sorry,” I said, though I wasn’t really sorry. I was actually really happy that Jean had shared his feelings so openly. He was good at catching me off-guard like that, sometimes, but it was still such a welcome feeling. “So, should we get the check and go makeout?”
Jean’s hand that held mine squeezed hard, and his other hand flew into the air. “Monica!”

I laughed all the way out the door.

X

At camp, Jean had described his apartment as a “shitty little studio,” and now that I was seeing it for the first time, I was pretty sold on the “little studio” part, but it was actually pretty nice. His building was one of those big ones with thirty-some units, and he led me down the fluorescent-lit hallway until we got to his.

Jean unlocked his front door, flashing me a shy grin as he turned the knob and let us in.

“Bienvenue chez moi, I guess,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. Welcome to my place.

He flipped on the light switch, and added, “I’ll give you the grand tour.”

I smiled, toeing off my shoes.

“So this is my living room, bedroom, and office space,” he explained, pointing in turn at the beanbag chairs next to a small TV, his bed, and a simple desk.

“Over to your right is the bathroom and my closet, and uh, over here on the left is my kitchen.”

“It’s cozy,” I said sincerely. “And the kitchen is bigger than you led me to believe.”

It was a sort of galley-style kitchen, long and narrow, but it looked functional.

“Yeah, well, can’t beat the rent, so…” he trailed off, turning his back to me and tidying the boxes of cereal on his shelf.

“I really like it, Jean. It feels like home, yknow? Like you’ve really made it your own space.” I kissed his cheek lightly, and he relaxed a little.

“Anyway, you should take a look at my posters, too, because you need some posters in your dorm. And I don’t trust whatever shit Jaeger’s got,” he scoffed, but his voice went soft again as he turned to me. “Your dorm has to be cool, okay? Will you promise to make your dorm cool?”

“Yes, I promise,” I said seriously.

Tentatively, like he couldn’t quite believe it was allowed, Jean leaned forward to kiss me gently on the lips. I moved deliberately into him, guiding his hands to my hips and threading my own into his hair.

I deepened the kiss, keeping it slow and trying to pour my emotions into it as best I could.

Sure, we had talked every single day, but now we were there, together, in person, and I wanted nothing more than to touch and hold every inch of him.

I wanted him to physically feel how much I had missed him, how much I liked kissing him… and yeah, how much I also wanted to totally feel him up.

But one thing at a time.

I pulled back gently as we came to a natural break in the kiss. Jean was slower to open his eyes than I was, so I watched his lashes flutter and his pupils refocus. Gosh, but he was gorgeous.
Can I—“Jean’s voice cracked, and he cleared his throat to start again. “Can I get you something to drink? I have uh… water, probably some milk if it didn’t go bad yet, and Canada Dry.”

“More ginger ale?” I teased.

“What’s wrong with liking ginger ale?”

“Nothing, it just kinda reminds me of the stomach flu.”

“It’s delicious and helps nausea; what’s not to love?”

“Are you nauseous?” I smirked.

“No, but don’t forget the other crucial factor: delicious.”

“Tempting though that sounds, maybe later,” I laughed.

“Um, do you wanna listen to music?” Jean asked, his nerves showing again. “Or I could pull up Netflix and we could find something to watch there? What you in the mood for, Bodt?”

I bit back the cheesy “I’m in the mood for you” that threatened to burst out of my mouth. “Music sounds nice,” I said instead.

I mostly wanted to make out with him.

“Cool. How about, uh… Oh! Dude, I gotta play you some Colossal,” he enthused. The band sounded vaguely familiar, and I squinted at him, waiting for the context to come back to me.

“They’re the band I’m gonna see in concert,” he supplied at seeing my confusion.

“Oh! I knew the name sounded familiar. Yeah, that sounds good,” I agreed.

Now it was my turn to be awkward. Would it be too forward to sit on his bed? He did say he used it as a couch of sorts, but I was wavering between beanbag chairs and the edge of the bed for a moment when Jean saw me.

“Beanbag chairs are for Mario Kart only,” Jean said with mock-seriousness, turning back to his laptop to queue up a Colossal album. “Park your fine ass on the bed.”

With a barely suppressed giggle, I did as instructed, though I admit I sat quite gingerly.

Jean finished fussing with his computer and flopped on his bed as music started to hum from his speakers.

From the first minute or so of this song, I decided Colossal sounded lot like what Radiohead might be if they ever did ska.

It was pretty cool.

Jean was clearly waiting for me to start gushing about them, or at the very least react, so I smiled, nodding my head to the beat. “I have to say, it’s nothing like what I was expecting, but I do kinda like it.”

“Just you wait; you’re gonna be obsessed with them in like three days, promise,” he said, grinning widely at me. “Wait, what were you expecting?”
“I dunno, you have such eclectic tastes; it could’ve been anything. I guess the name made me think more like… metal or hard rock?”

“Yeah, I could see that,” he agreed, propping himself up on one elbow to get a better look at me.

“Plus, the last time we discussed music, you said you were really into AC/DC and Taylor Swift.”

“Her new stuff is amazing don’t you dare judge me for that.”

“Not judging, just pointing out the breadth of your musical taste. I bet you listen to, like, K-pop too.”

Jean gaped. “Excuse yourself immediately,” He objected. I opened my mouth to defend myself, but he held up a hand to stop me. “K-pop? Please. I listen to j-rock, thank you very much.”

I burst out laughing. “Shut up and kiss me, Kirstein.”

Jean hooked one arm around my neck and one at my hip to move me like a marionette to a more comfortable make-out position.

I had no objections.

Any shyness Jean had exhibited earlier seemed to fly out the window. Maybe it was the banter, or the courage of good music that gave him the extra push, but his lips were anything but hesitant as they moved against mine.

I breathed in deeply through my nose, letting it out again in a sigh as we kissed. Jean smelled like coconut again – it must be his body wash or shampoo or something, I made a mental note to ask him some time-- and that intoxicating scent of boy.

The sheets smelled like fresh-laundered cotton, and I found myself smiling into Jean’s lips thinking that he must have changed the sheets on his bed pretty recently. Did he do it anticipating me coming over, or was he just being responsible and it had simply been time to freshen up the linens?

When Jean nuzzled my jaw to the side to drop little wet kisses down my neck, I carded my fingers through his hair. The first song faded straight into the next, this one a bit more electronic than the first, but still nice. It had a nice rhythm, and I found myself kissing Jean in time to the beat.

“Marco,” Jean murmured.

“Hmm,” I hummed in response.

“Don’t kiss me like a metronome, you dork,” he said, grinning. “Or at least do it less… obviously.”

I poked his nose. “I’m adorable and you like it.”

“Yeah, but right now I’m more interested in hot-makeouts-Marco, not so much adorable-Marco.”

“You know, the two aren’t mutually exclusive. I can be both at the same time.”

“Is it really at the same time though? Or is it more quick transitions from one to the other?”

“You wanna find out?” I teased, though I wasn’t really sure what that meant. I wasn’t particularly trying to be hot-makeouts- or adorable- Marco; they both just sort of happened.

“You’re a huge loser,” Jean said affectionately.
“And I’m your huge loser,” I replied, wiggling my hips like a nerd.

“Damn straight,” Jean said in a serious tone, cupping my jaw to kiss me hard and deep.

But I couldn’t resist. “Actually, this is pretty gay,” I giggled, pulling back just enough to speak.

Jean groaned and shoved my face away from his, and I rolled off of him, laughing like an idiot. He threw an arm over his eyes in embarrassment.

“Damn it, Marco, this is why we can’t have nice things.”

All his comment did was make me laugh harder, though, and soon we were a ridiculous, giggling mess.

I wriggled around until we were both lying on our sides facing each other, and pried his arm off his face, placing his palm against my hip.

My laughter subsided, and I felt my face settle into a gentle smile instead of the face-splitting grin from my giggle fit. Jean licked his lips absent-mindedly.

We looked at each other for a moment, blinking to focus at the other from so close, and then the distance was gone as I pressed forward to kiss Jean once more.

He pressed back against me with firm lips, gripping my hip and wriggling closer to my body. He wrapped his other arm around my neck, pulling at me and pressing into me so we were flush against each other.

I groaned a little at the contact: Jean was radiating heat, and damn if this wasn’t the hottest makeout session we’d ever had.

With a strength I forgot Jean possessed, he actually rolled me on top of him. I felt my body flush hotter, if that was possible, and tried to shift my hips away from Jean’s body just a little so I didn’t end up getting, uh, too excited.

He wasn’t having it.

Jean slipped his hands down my back and grabbed my ass through my jeans.

I gasped in surprise and also because the extra pressure of him grinding my hips into his felt pretty good.

I tried once again to shift my hips away from his though, because the last thing I wanted was him to get overwhelmed or feel like I was going too fast.

He growled when I tried to pull back, biting at my lower lip and then sucking it into his mouth, running his tongue along the inside.

Jean’s learning curve was pretty amazing.

“Jean,” I whispered heavily, “I uh, I’m kinda… I have—“

Why was the word “boner” or “erection” so embarrassing to say?

Jean moved his kisses to my jaw to let me talk, and he started sucking and nipping at the thin skin just under my ear.
“I’m hard,” I finally managed.

“I know,” he said with a quiet laugh. “Me too, actually.”

“Oh,” I said dumbly.

“Do you maybe wanna… try something?” Jean asked, his aggressive kissing slowing and the shyness taking over from what he’s asking for.

What was he asking for?

“What kind of something?” I asked. My body was screaming “sex! Have sex with him right now!” but I knew neither of us was quite ready for that.

“I… I don’t know. But I just… don’t want to stop,” he whispered, quiet but fierce.

“Me neither,” I said, swallowing hard. “How about we um… we keep kissing and see where it goes?”

“Take your shirt off,” Jean said suddenly.

I nodded dumbly, sitting up but still straddling Jean’s hips. I grabbed the back of my collar and yanked my t-shirt over my head.

Jean gaped up at me, still lying on his back, raking his eyes over my bare torso.

“You’ve seen me shirtless before, nerd,” I said, though I couldn’t keep the nervousness out of my voice.

“I know, but it’s never been… like this.”

I was a little pleased that he sounded just as flustered as I felt.

I let out a breathy laugh, and leaned back over to kiss that wide-eyed stare off his face. I kissed him my favorite way: open mouthed, deep and wet, but only a little bit of tongue.

Gently, I fussed with the hem of his shirt, riding it up slowly to drag my fingers across his skin.

“Can I take this off?” I asked between kisses.

In response, Jean sat up under me, guiding my hands to slide his shirt up over his head, though he only broke away from my lips when the fabric passed his face.

As soon as it was over his head, Jean was crashing back against my lips, throwing his shirt who-knows-where, and he dragged me back on top of him with arms wrapped around the back of my neck.

“You’re incredible,” I whispered into his mouth.

“Touch me, Marco,” he replied, voice strained and desperate and rolling his hips into me and damn if that wasn’t the hottest thing.

I raked my fingertips along his sides, scratching just a little, and he arched up into my touch, and I could definitely feel his erection against my hips.

“Fuck, Marco, come on,” he complained, rolling his hips up again.
I shoved a hand between us to fumble with his jeans, and his fingers scrabbled at my fly.

And here I had been worried about moving too fast.

Despite the clumsiness I felt in my fingers, I managed to get Jean’s pants open, and he tried to wriggle out of them further.

After a bit of awkward shuffling, he got his jeans down past his hips, and I admit I probably stared a little more than was polite at the tent in his pants.

“Marco,” he whined, shoving his hands down my pants to palm my ass.

“Yeah,” I said, trying to assure him that I heard him.

Taking a deep breath, I traced my fingers down his abs until they brushed along the soft cotton of his boxers, and then I was touching his dick.

He hissed at the contact, even with the thin layer of fabric between our skin, rolling his hips up harder, trying to press into my hand as much as he could.

Driven by instinct or maybe just a desire to keep that pressure up as long as possible, I rolled my hips right back into his.

“Shit, do that again,” Jean said.

I did, grinding down into him hard, and he made the prettiest sound so I did it again.

We started to get into a rhythm, a push and pull that subconsciously followed the beat of the music that was still playing, though it felt distant now.

Every now and then Jean would mutter something—my name, most frequently, but also variations of “yes” and “please”—but otherwise we kissed and grinded our bodies together, the music now almost distant and only a low hum in the back of my mind.

I felt amazingly focused, somehow, intent on feeling every inch of Jean moving beneath me, remembering and memorizing every noise and shiver Jean let out.

As we moved, I felt Jean’s hands travel across my pecs and my shoulder blades, and then they slipped back down into my waistband. He shoved at my pants, and made a surprisingly coordinated attempt to divest me of them without interrupting our rhythm too much.

He ran his foot along my calf, pressing up into me just as hard and hot as before, but now his hips were getting more erratic. We weren’t following the music anymore, but I didn’t really care. This felt amazing, and if we kept it up, I was probably going to—

“Marco!” Jean cried, and I realized he was coming.

I kissed him deep, panting into his mouth a little bit, rubbing against him just a little more, a little harder… then I was falling over the edge, too.

“Jean,” I moaned, and I couldn’t find it in me to be embarrassed.

I collapsed on top of him, letting us sort out our breathing for a long minute, before I thought about the stickiness in my boxers and found the energy to roll off him.
“Fuck,” he said with a dry laugh. “We just came in our pants like teenagers, didn’t we?”

“Well, technically, I am still a teenager,” I giggled.

“Oh my god, Marco.”

“So, uh… can I borrow a clean pair of boxers to sleep in?” I asked.

“That’s gonna cost you,” Jean smirked, a mischievous glimmer in his eye.

“Name your price, chéri.”

“Hmm,” he thought. “Three kisses, and you’re not allowed to wear a shirt in this bed.”

“Deal.”

X

Waking up in Jean’s arms was definitely something I could get used to.

I mean, it would have been nicer if I was waking up in the morning after a full-night’s sleep instead of 2am, but I guess sometimes we can’t have it all.

“Jean?” I whispered, kissing his collarbones gently. “Jean, wake up.”

“Mmm noo,” he mumbled.

“I have to go back to my dorm,” I said.

“No you don’t,” he argued sleepily.

“Orientation starts at 8am on campus; I really should go back.”

“I’ll drive you in the morning so you’re not late.”

“That’s tempting, but you’re not a morning person, babe. I’ll text you in the morning, okay?”

Jean whined pitifully.

I kissed him softly on the lips, and his whine turned into a muffled sigh.

“Love you,” I told him when I pulled back.

“Don’t go,” he asked one more time.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

I gathered up my clothes from the floor, sliding my shorts on and hoping I was putting my shirt on front-ways and right-side out. I only found one sock, but I wasn’t about to turn on the light to look for the other one.

When I was decent enough to go, I bent over Jean one more time to kiss him (though he was almost asleep again), and then I left, pulling the door shut after me.

I pulled my phone out and entered my school’s address into my phone’s GPS—I wasn’t about to get lost in the city at 2am. I knew I wasn’t far from the bus stop, and Jean had assured me that it ran 24 hours a day.
When the little map loaded, I followed it carefully, and found the bus stop about four minutes later. With another ten minutes waiting for the bus, and a twenty minute ride actually on the bus, I got into my dorm room at nearly three in the morning.

Waking up in four hours was going to be rough.

It looked like Eren was asleep, though the pile of blankets on his bed was so huge that I honestly wasn’t sure that he was under there.

I sent a quick text to Jean that I made it back safely as I slipped under my own blankets, and was about to fall asleep when I heard a faint “night, Marco” from Eren’s bed.

“Night, Eren.”

X

I was right: waking up was awful. I was always a morning person, but the stress of moving in, and my middle of the night transit really threw off my sleep schedule.

“Marco. Dude, it’s seven twenty,” Eren called to me, and I felt something land on my butt. “You put your phone on my desk last night, by the way.”

Assuming it was my phone, I mumbled something about how I was awake, obviously, and grabbed at it.

I had twelve texts: one from my mom (that I had ignored in favor of my date with Jean) and eleven from Jean.

The one from Mom was just saying that they made it back to Jinae, and hoped I was settling in well.

I scrolled through Jean’s messages a bit more carefully as I woke up more fully.

From: Jean
Glad you made it home safe
miss u already
This is dumb
You left like half an hour ago
Why couldn’t you just stay the whole night?
I’m never gonna get back to sleep now because my bed feels cold
Ugh I’m getting all sappy. u did this to me
fuck I can’t sleep
THIS IS SO DUMB
u better stay the whole night next time
love u
I bit my lower lip as I read through the texts, smiling as I scrolled.

“Those texts must be from Kirstein,” Eren said. “You’ve got that dumb love-struck face thing going on.”

“Yeah,” I blushed. “He uh… sometimes he gets really sappy and it’s cute.”

“I was surprised you came back last night,” Eren added after a minute.

“Yeah, well I didn’t want to be late to Orientation, and as you can see, I’m having a hard time waking up as it is. Jean is not a morning person.”

“But you were always the first one up at camp,” Eren said.

“I was pretty tired after moving in, and then Jean and I were up pretty late listening to music and just hanging out…” I defended weakly.

“Is that what the kids are calling it these days?” Eren smirked.

“I—“

“Hey, congrats, all that. But remember: I don’t want to think of Kirstein having sex.”

I flushed bright red. “It wasn’t—“

“I’m gonna go to the dining hall for breakfast, and you look like you could use a shower,” he said. “See you there?”

“Uh, yeah,” I agreed. “See you there.”

I typed out a quick response to Jean, “Love you too, hope you got some sleep after all”, and then I hauled myself out of my bed, found some clothes and a towel, and wandered down to the hall bathrooms.

When I was clean and dressed, I grabbed a small notebook and a couple of pens, my wallet, checked that I still had my room key, and headed to the dining hall.

It was fairly deserted, because only freshman and Orientation leaders were on campus yet, so finding Eren was pretty easy. He was sat at a table with Bert, who looked more exhausted than Marco felt.

“Morning,” I called to them, putting on my most alert, pleasant expression.

“Ugh,” Bert moaned, and Eren just laughed.

“Rough start today?” I asked sympathetically.

“My roommate was up until three talking to his parents on the phone. He’s international, so they were extra worried about him and stuff.”

“That’s pretty cool, though; where’s he from?” I asked.

“Brazil.”
“Ooh, make him teach you Portuguese,” Eren suggested.

“Did you get a chance to get to know him at all?” I wondered.

“Eh, not really,” Bert said, stirring his fork through scrambled eggs. “He was pretty focused on calming his parents down, and I was pretty shy about the whole thing.”

Bert and I had tried to request rooming together, but the university said they want to mix up freshman as much as possible to “broaden our horizons” or something. I wasn’t sure how sticking Eren in my room was “broadening my horizons,” but I supposed the university hadn’t considered the fact that we might know each other despite being from very different hometowns.

“Well, it’s only the first day. I’m sure you’ll get to know him at least a little, and you don’t have to be friends,” I reasoned. “Living with someone doesn’t mean you have to be like, best buddies.”

“I know, but I’m… I worried about when Reiner gets here, I guess. What if he’s like… super against us dating?”

“If he gives you shit, you report him and request a roommate change,” Eren said firmly. “It’s none of his business who you’re with, and if you’re too shy to do it, I’ll report him myself.”

“Let’s just try to stay positive,” I offered. “Maybe he’ll be a cool guy. What’s his name?”

“Rafael.”

“Alright, let’s all just give Rafael the benefit of the doubt, and go from there, okay? Good. Now, which group are you guys in for Orientation?”

We spent the rest of breakfast wondering what Orientation would be like. Groups were organized by last name, so Bert and Eren were actually in the same group, but I was in a different one. That was alright; I’d be okay on my own, and Bert knowing someone else would likely help his nerves.

We turned our trays into the conveyor belt, and wandered toward the quad, where we were supposed to find our groups.

I said goodbye to Eren and Bert, giving Eren a look that I hoped conveyed “look out for him,” and wandered to the table with a sign that said A-C on it.

“Good morning!” the woman behind the table chirped. “What’s your name?”

“Marco Bodt,” I told her, and she looked over the list in her hands until she found my name, highlighting me in blue.

“Your leaders are Sulli and Louis, so you’ll check in with them right over… there!” she said as she found the two leaders in question.

“Here’s your welcome packet: there’s a campus map, the schedule for orientation week, and some other helpful stuff, like the student handbook. There’s even a free sticker!”

“Thanks,” I said as kindly as I could. She seemed to be really jazzed about that sticker, but it was only 7:50 in the morning, so I hoped she could forgive me for not sharing her enthusiasm.

I texted Jean my schedule for the day at his request and then checked in with Sulli and Louis. I met a couple of other freshmen who had already signed in and would be in my group with me for Orientation week.
We made idle small talk, asking where everyone was from, their intended major, and things like what sports or clubs we had done.

I was sociable despite my exhaustion, and when the tour started, our group had fifteen students in it. Most students were local—from Trost or the surrounding suburbs—but there were four of us from further away.

In addition to me, there was a guy named Kevin from a small town about halfway between Jinae and Shiganshina that I had never even heard of, and two girls from Mitras, Valerie and Luz, though they seemed to have a pretty intense rivalry going on, and I tried to steer clear of them.

We finished up our tour of campus just before lunch. The university had organized a buffet-style lunch on the quad for us, since it was such a nice day. It was mostly barbecue food: burgers, hot dogs, cole slaw, and the like, and they all looked, well… bland. If this lunch was anything to go by, the school’s catering company wasn’t very creative. I hoped it was just an orientation week thing.

“So, Marco,” Valerie started as we sat down with our plates on the lawn, “you’re from Jinae? Why’d you come here and not go to school there?”

“Was the pull of the city just too good?” Kevin asked, joining us.

“Uh, I guess Trost State was just more appealing to me because it wasn’t local,” I started, taking a sip of soda to put off eating my food. “I wanted a chance to get out of the house, get a taste for being on my own a bit.”

“Oh, so you’re the rebel type?” she asked.

I laughed. “Not really. More like, I have very caring parents who like to baby me. I’d rather let them baby my eight year old sister instead of me.”

“Aww, you have a kid sister? That’s so cute!”

“Oh, yeah. Her name’s Julia, and she is, hm… Precocious is a great adjective for her. And stubborn, but she comes by that honestly.”

“You sound like a good brother,” Kevin said earnestly.

“Please tell my parents that, because they’re still mad about me leaving her at summer camp,” I said half jokingly.

I explained how exactly I “left her” (though she was fine and it wasn’t like I abandoned her there), and we got to talking about why they chose Trost State, too.

“Mitras is a great school for some subjects, but other majors it’s like… why are you there?” Valerie explained. “What I want to major in is one of those subjects. So I found a school with a better program.”

“And what program is that?” I asked.

“Theatre and Dance,” she said.

“Oh, I have a friend who’s a dance major! Though, she’s at U of T. Her girlfriend is here, though, as a history major, I think.”
“That’s nice that they’re still close,” Valerie offered, and I finally decided to bite into my burger. It was pretty awful, but I didn’t feel like going back up to look for something else to eat.

“Yeah, Ymir is pretty thrilled about it,” I said.

“My girlfriend broke up with me when I told her I wasn’t going to Shiganshina with her,” Kevin said plainly.

“That’s rough,” I offered.

“Nah. I mean, I wasn’t super keen on long-distance anyway, but she was actually angry with me for not basing my college choice on her. All for the best that we ended it, honestly.”

My phone vibrated softly in my pocket—once, twice, four times (how many texts was Jean sending me?!)—but I tried to ignore it in favor of being social.

It started buzzing again, and I realized it was a phone call.

I rolled my eyes, but the smile on my lips betrayed me. I answered the call.

“Hello?”

“Finally, jeez, I called you three times. You said you were free right now.”

“I am. We’re eating lunch on the quad.”

“Such Freshmen,” Jean teased.

“Well, yeah,” I said. “Are you on break?”

“Yes,” he said. “Do you have to get back to your cool new friends or can you talk to me for a little bit?”

“I can take a break here,” I said, smiling stupidly.

“Ooh, is that your girl from back home?” Kevin asked, raising his eyebrows in curiosity.

“Neither girl nor from back home,” a low voice said from behind me.

“Jean!” I cried, hanging up the phone, now useless in my hand. “What are you doing here?” I asked, suddenly incredibly aware that I was about to come out to a bunch of people I had just met. I could do this, I was—“Wait, is that pizza?”

“I’m crashing freshman-O, clearly,” Jean stated. “And yes, it’s pizza; because I remembered this so-called picnic and knew that it was horrible. Fear not, the cafeteria food is actually amazing, I have no fucking clue why they serve this shit the first week.”

He grinned, and I threw aside my worries about outing myself and kissed him briefly on the mouth. “My hero,” I said sappily, prying the pizza from his hands.

“Oi, we’re sharing that, you know. It’s not all for you,” Jean complained.

I sat again, scooting over for Jean to join our little circle. “Guys, this is my boyfriend, Jean,” I said, proud of how little my voice shook. “Jean, this is Valerie, Kevin, and Luz,” I said, nodding at each of them.
“Sup,” Jean offered, before opening up the box.

I saw the pizza and grinned. “You remembered!”

“Yeah, I got that gross shit you like on one half,” he grumbled.

“Olives and pineapples are not ‘gross shit,’” I protested.

“Fruit does not belong on a pizza.”

“Tomatoes are a fruit,” I countered.

“Yeah, well, wisdom is not putting tomatoes in a fruit salad, so check mate, Bodt.”

“You two are adorable,” Luz said suddenly.

We froze.

“Uh, thanks?” Jean said, and then turned back to me. “Peut-être il serait mieux de continuer en français?” Maybe it would be better to continue in French?

“Comme tu as fait hier?” I asked. Like you did last night?

“Hé, t’as pas eu un problème au moment ; qu’est-ce tu veux dire?” Hey, you didn’t have a problem in the moment; what are you trying to say?

“Rien! Y a pas de problèmes ici!” I laughed. Nothing! No problems here!

“Holy shit! You guys speak French?” Valerie cried, an excited smile across her face.

We looked at each other briefly, then turned back to our little audience. “Nope,” we said in unison.

X

Lying in bed that night, Eren and I chatted idly about how day one had gone. He assured me that Bert was adequately relaxed, and that he had made a couple of prospective friends, just like I did.

“So when do you pick classes?” he asked.

“My group goes tomorrow,” I said. “First thing in the morning, after breakfast and a short group meeting of some kind, I guess.”

“Cool. Our group goes at like, 3:30 or something. So we’ll have our schedules soon. That’ll be cool.”

“Yeah, for sure,” I said. “Hey, speaking of schedules, I don’t really know what you’re like outside of camp. Do you stay up late?”

“Yeah, I mean, not too late. Like midnight, one AM usually. Are you saying you’re actually a disgustingly early riser and not just for Sina?” he teased.

“Yeah, I like to go to bed around ten thirty-ish?” I said.
“That’s fine. If you want, I can go out to the lounge or whatever if I’m gonna be up past eleven.”

“That’d be great,” I said.

“What about music?” Eren asked after a pause. “I kinda like to blast my music.”

“Depends on what kind of music, I guess.”

“Mostly like, experimental and techno?”

“Ah, um. Do you mind using headphones? Like, rock music, pop, whatever, that’s probably okay, but the edgier stuff might be a little… difficult.”

“Headphones upon request then. Got it,” he agreed.

“And same for me; if I’m ever playing music you don’t like, just let me know and I’ll put headphones in.”

“Cool. So uh, I see you’ve got an Xbox,” he said casually.

“You can play it whenever I’m not, basically,” I said. “Or we can play together, if you want.”

“For sure, bro. What kind of games do you have?”

I listed off the few games I had brought with me, and Eren hummed at each title. “Good, good. We gotta get you into some old-school stuff, though. You know, like Bioshock.”

“Since when is Bioshock old-school?” I scoffed. “And I’m not really a huge fan of first-person shooters?”

“Yeah, but Bioshock has a good backstory!”

“I’ll think about it,” I conceded.

“Hey, if you wanna use the mini fridge too, you can,” Eren said. “Like, don’t use up all the space, but if you wanna store some small stuff in there, go for it. Just, probably label it so I don’t accidentally eat all your food.”

“Cool, thanks,” I said, and stretched out, yawning widely.

“And, uh, Marco?”

“Yeah?”

“If you and Jean ever… want the room, like. That’s okay? But you gotta give me like a day’s heads-up so I can crash at Armin’s or something.”

“Of course,” I said. “Though we really will try to keep that kind of thing at his apartment. He doesn’t have a roommate to worry about; it’s no problem.”

“Well, regardless. I appreciate it.”

“And if ever you and Armin want the room for some quiet alone time, let me know. I’m sure Jean wouldn’t object to me coming over to his.”

“Thanks. Well… I think that’s about it? As for like. Dorm room rules. Oh, like don’t throw parties
“Pfft, who do you think you’re talking to, Eren?” I laughed. “Me, throwing parties in here. No worries on that front.”

“Cool. Well, I got up at balls o’clock, and I know you’re tired too. So… goodnight, Marco.”

“Gnight, Eren,” I said.

I pulled out my phone to send Jean a text goodnight only to find that Jean had already sent me a Snap.

I opened it, and he’s making an obnoxious kissy face; the caption said, “goodnight je t’aime.” I love you.

I responded with a goofy face of my own, and then put my phone on the charger next to my desk.

I flipped off the lights, and crawled into bed with a content sigh.

It was stuffy in the room since clearly our building was not equipped with air conditioning, and the dryer lint plastered on the window screen really overpowered the usual crispness of the night air. The city smelled different than the fresh scent of the woods, anyway. Maybe dryer lint was better.

I’d never lived in a real city before; Jinae’s more of a large town, and I preferred the woods of Sina to any other place I’ve lived. The faint sounds of traffic seeped through our open window, and I wondered how long it would take for me to get used to these new night noises.

But I figured that if I could lead thirty middle schoolers through the woods, get myself an amazing boyfriend, and come out to my parents in a little over seven weeks… I could handle whatever Trost could throw at me.

Chapter End Notes

First, please love yourselves and try pineapple and olive pizza. You won’t regret it.

The TGI Friday’s experience, including Monica the waitress, was ripped off from my beta cloudy’s hilarious and fantastic asanoya fic with permission. I’m sorry, Monica the Fictional Waitress. Stay strong; we’re not done with you yet.

The title for this chapter is… well it’s ridiculous. I was going to make a little anecdote, like how it was an inside joke from camp or something, but the reality is that when I was writing the chapter where Connie and Sasha tell dumb ghost stories, I started thinking about wolverines. And when I got frustrated in my writing, I would complain in our group chat that I no longer cared, and that wolverines could eat my ass. And well… It stuck. I promised cloudy and siseja that I’d name this chapter after it, so here we are.

Finally, yes: I am planning a sequel. It won’t be written for a while, because I have so many haikyuu!! plot bunnies right now that it was truly a struggle to stay focused on jeanmarco enough to finish this. But when I’ve got enough of a plot going, I’ll start posting, so I guess keep an eye out for that if you’re interested.
Merci à tous, and as always, you can find me on tumblr as ricekrispyjoints.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!