Road Trip

by thedeadflag

Summary

A week after being outed, Santana’s having difficulty handling the new-found attention and aggression from her fellow students. When she makes a plan to fight back, Rachel steps in and gives Santana an offer she can’t refuse.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Santana Lopez entered school that Friday morning on a mission of sorts, forcing her chin up in defiance as she moved through the halls to her locker. Ever since word got out that she was a lesbian, she’d lost about a third of her bravado and confidence, which happened to be a hell of a lot, all things considered. She knew it shouldn't have been a surprise after watching Kurt endure it, but she couldn’t help but feel it was worse for her, more humiliating. Not that she wanted to play the oppression Olympics or any crap like that, but Kurt didn't have half a dozen jocks trying a few times a day to pin her up against lockers, threatening to drag her into janitor's closets, washrooms or locker rooms to show her what a 'real man' was like, or to 'fix' her. She wasn't sure if they were joking some of those times, either. That the school seemed unwilling to take her harassment seriously was infuriating and only fueled her paranoia. On top of the lumbering oafs constantly trying to seriously mess with her, there were the taunts, jeers, leering, ogling, and all that sort of thing that made her feel like packaged meat at a grocery store.

It didn't help that Glee in general inexplicably seemed to take Finn's side in the debacle, and Britt did her usual silent act. Santana loved Brittany, she did, but she wished the girl would stand up for her in front of the others for once, to tell them how much they sucked, even if confrontation really upset the blonde. That she was dating Artie only made it worse. And Quinn, well, she was almost always off in her own world these days, and when she wasn't, Q was usually tactical and subtle instead of overt;
aside from the single gleek-led intervention with Josh Whitshisname on Monday between second and third period, she hadn't seen any progress or protection from her, so Santana was pretty sure she wasn't on Fabray's mind. It had been just under seven days in this special hell of hers, and Santana felt as if she was increasingly alone in school, for at least the rest of the semester most likely; no power, no minions, no leverage, and a pair of friends who didn't seem to be around nearly as often as she'd like.

Despite Sue's sympathy over the ad, Santana had been kicked from the team Thursday afternoon when a few major Christian donors called in with concerns about the squad's leadership. She hadn't even made it ten steps out of the locker room in her street clothes before she'd gotten slushied. So she was kind of nervous, but kind of excited that it was the end of the week. She needed people to get over her being outed, and she needed it to happen fast. Santana really didn't plan on carrying brass knuckles or wearing steel toe boots indefinitely, especially with how the school apparently had a zero tolerance violence and weapons policy, except for when slushies as well as sexual harassment and assault came into play. Then it was somehow impossible to get administrative justice done. Just boys being boys.

Santana quickly swapped out her books for her next two periods, AP Calculus and Spanish, and shut her locker, only to find a small brunette girl standing right behind where the door had been blocking her view. She couldn't hide the small anxious jolt that ran through her over someone sneaking up on her; Santana did have what seemed to be a whole school out to get her, so she figured it was legit enough in any case.

"What the shit, dwarf! Next time a little warning, or I might just step on you." Santana growled, charging past the diva, who gamely kept up with her as they moved quickly down the halls. Santana was a fair bit early; it had never been too difficult to notice most of the hormonal guys seemed to have troubles dealing with their morning wood, which meant pre-homeroom time in the halls was usually the worst. It made for a bad start to the day, and she'd shown up early to avoid that.

"After seeing how you've been treated, I can assure you that I completely understand why you reacted in such a hostile way. After yesterday, I had my fathers reach out to Ohio's branch of the ACLU, in hopes that they could pressure the school board to take action." Berry rambled, and Santana couldn't suppress the weak laugh that escaped her throat. Yeah, it was nice knowing someone took action, even if it was surprisingly Berry, but it was impersonal. The diva had contacted someone to contact someone in hopes that some other people would contact McKinley and tell them to fix their shit. Santana could handle the assholes at school, she just didn't want to have to be a one woman army all the damn time. "I hope I didn't overstep any boundaries, Santana."

Santana just made her way to her usual seat in the back and dropped her books onto her desk as she sat down. Rachel, determined as ever, sat down beside her with an annoyingly cheerful smile on her face. "Whatever, it won't change anything. Either way, today's going to decide how this goes. Either I get expelled for knocking around some horny oafs, or I don't and they probably back off a little." She noted with a shrug. Sure, she was nervous about her next confrontation, but she wasn't about to let Rachel Berry know that.

"Santana, you…I apologize, but with your stature, I can hardly imagine you knocking out anyone such as Karofsky or Azimio without gaining some sort of tactical advantage." Rachel retorted with a concerned look on her face, obviously not pleased with the fact that Santana was sure that violence was necessary. The diva had always been something of a pacifist when it came to people physically hurting other people. Emotional and mental warfare was an entirely different thing, though, apparently.
Santana pulled her brass knuckles out of her pocket and showed them to Berry for a moment, placing them back before the diva could have an aneurysm. "You carry a rape whistle and pepper spray, tiny. You'd at least have SOME people coming to help you if you got in trouble these days. There'd probably be a crowd cheering on anyone attacking me after...well."

That seemed to give Rachel pause, which was good, because Santana wanted to enjoy the next fifteen minutes of relative silence before homeroom began. Unfortunately, the silence was broken six or so minutes later as Berry shifted around in her seat to face her.

"Santana, let me help you." The diva stated with a strange and disarming amount of confidence. Of course, the entire idea of Rachel being able to help her was implausible, so of course she couldn't help but roar with laughter. This didn't amuse Rachel one bit from the look of her petulantly pouting lips. "I'm incredibly serious, Santana! You can't do this alone, and I won't have you ruining your high school career over this when there are other options!"

Santana just shook her head, trying to come down from her laughing fit; she couldn't help but imagine Berry in a Xena costume, yipping and yelling through the halls, tossing a gold chakram at other students. It was possibly the only scenario where Berry would be able to help, instead of putting her unarmed diva self in harm's way. She didn't hate the tiny girl, and she'd kind of come to be okay enough with her in the past months, so she wasn't about to let the hobbit take a hit for her. Santana knew Rachel had enough on her own plate without having to deal with an ex-cheerleader's hostile coming out extravaganza. "You can't help me, Berry, so just lay off. Unless you've got super-powers or whatever, it's useless and you'll just get hurt."

"But Santana, I know I..." Rachel started, but the ex-cheerleader raised a hand to halt her speech, and surprisingly she complied.

"Don't. Like I said, it'll be over today. This week's just been karma anyway." Santana spoke calmly, leaning back in her chair as she let out a deep breath.

"What's that clothing store that you like? Eden?" Rachel asked out of the blue, doing a comically stereotypical 'deep-in-thought' expression.

Santana really wanted to laugh at how absurd Rachel looked at times, as if she'd sat at home and studied what she needed to do exactly when she visibly expressed certain things, or felt certain things, to make them as dramatic as possible. But she really couldn't, because for some reason, Berry knew Santana frequented a shop in Columbus. It would have been a lot less creepy if it had been a store in Lima, but Columbus? That was sketchy. "What are you, like, stalking me?" Santana asked hesitantly, not liking that Berry knew one of her usual haunts when she got the urge to shop.

That seemed to break Rachel out of her daze, and the girl looked wide-eyed at her in response. "Oh, no! No. I just saw you there a few times, and I was told you shop there often." Rachel noted dismissively, as if it made it any better. Rachel Berry shopped at one of her favourite stores, even though they didn't sell animal sweaters or argyle, and Berry had asked about her to the staff there. Super sketchy.

"And why the fuck would you ask about me?" Santana asked, feeling defensive, like perhaps Berry had a glitter-coated shank on her or something, and was trying to plot something weird that included her.

"My uncle owns and manages it... I visit him sometimes on the weekend and we usually have lunch together. It was just odd to see someone else from Lima in there." Berry stated with a smile and a shrug, which kind of made sense, and kind of didn't. On one hand, Berry had a relative who was involved in fashion, one who apparently let Berry continue her atrocities against good taste
The concept was kind of mind-boggling. Rachel Berry wanted to pay her so that she'd accept her help. Honestly, it was so absurd yet, after a second of thinking, something she could only imagine Rachel doing. And while it was frustrating that the diva was still trying to talk to her, she figured they had a few minutes until other kids started showing up. She'd listen. "Go on."

"My uncle has long offered me the option of buying up to three items at his store per month, at cost. At times, he has pleaded with me to invest in a wardrobe more to his liking. I enjoy my current style, so I...rarely feel the need to purchase from his selections, as my wardrobe is already fairly extensive, so I was considering offering you the next three months of my discount. Of course, you'd have to let me tag along so that I could apply it, but since you tend to appreciate his wares more than I do, I thought that it could be a solid incentive." Rachel rambled, though Santana was paying full attention. Clothes at cost, high fashion clothes at cost, was an alluring offer. And Berry just wanted to help, whatever that meant. Santana wasn't sure things could get much worse, so she cocked her head to show the diva she was thinking about it.

After a few moments, she looked back to the brunette. "Tell me the plan first, then I'll let you know."

Rachel's brows furrowed, apparently expecting a quick acceptance. "I...well, you'd need to skip school for the day. And...well, um...I can't exactly reveal my plans directly, but I can assure you that you can trust me. And worst comes to worst, I'll abandon my plan if you find yourself opposed to it, but only once you've given me until noon on Saturday."

Santana couldn't help but be shocked at the girl requesting her to skip; Berry had always been a proponent of high attendance, and on more than one occasion she'd complained about how Santana missed the odd class here or there. She still held a 3.93 GPA, it was just that the teachers were so inept that Santana often studied at home and taught herself the material. She'd always been a quick learner.

"I'd consider leaving now if I knew by Monday that this shit would be better, but I'm not gonna let you run rampant through the halls here and get yourself hurt or in trouble or whatever. You've got your perfect attendance to worry about, after all." Santana explained warily, even more suspicious when Rachel laughed out loud.

"While I appreciate your surprising concern, Santana, you needn't worry. My dad works at the hospital with your dad, he writes me letters to excuse my absence whenever I deem it necessary. A few minor legal threats related to the violence I suffer at school are made to Figgins, ensuring that my attendance record remains pristine so long as the notes are legitimate. And while I sadly cannot procure such a letter for your attendance, I can state that your situation should improve drastically by the time your week begins anew on Monday. And..." Rachel started rambling, but Santana had heard all she needed to. In truth, she really didn't want to punch anyone's face in; sure, she loved a good scrap, but she didn't like the prospect of a few of the linebackers cornering her like they did on Thursday. Why not give her a chance?

"Whatever. I'll skip and watch Law and Order or whatever while you sort whatever it is out." She noted calmly, picking up her books. Rachel, though, seemed to be confused, grabbing her wrist with a befuddled expression on her face.

The diva slowly got up from her seat once she saw Santana was impatiently waiting for her to speak, rolling her eyes at the silence. "You're not going to stay at home this weekend. I'm taking you to a place I go when I have difficulties coping with certain situations in my life."
Once again, Santana's eyebrows skyrocketed, and her mouth hung open momentarily in shock before she managed to regain composure. "Berry, if you're abducting me for a weekend, then I'm gonna need more than a few months of clothes at cost. I love that place, but I'm starting to feel like you're gonna try to leave me out in a field in Kentucky to die or something."

Rachel just rolled her eyes and grabbed Santana's wrist, dragging her out of homeroom and down the busier halls toward the exit. Berry seemed to pick up on Santana's anxiety and moved quickly, which was appreciated, and soon they were in the diva's Prius, driving through Lima. "I'll wager you my last month's eBay profits. If you don't have fun, and can last to the end of the weekend, you can have it as well as the discount." The diva stated abruptly as they were on the way to Santana's house, which was surprising since she'd never invited the pint-sized brunette over once.

"If you think twenty bucks is going to make me spend a weekend with you, then you're dreaming, Berry." Santana laughed, looking out the window at the early morning sky.

Rachel turned onto Santana's street and soon pulled into the driveway. "I made three hundred and eighty two dollars profit last month." Rachel spoke as she opened her door, Santana gaping at her. "What? I've taken the only useful vocal and dance classes within range of Lima, and achieved as much as I feasibly could given the talent levels of the instructors…I have a lot of spare time this year, so I buy and re-sell Broadway-related items in order to pad my bank account in case I struggle when starting off my career. And sometimes I keep certain memorabilia to help accessorize my living area for when I eventually move to New York."

Santana narrowed her eyes at the nervous looking diva. "So you're one of those last second bidders that always piss me off. Fuck eBay." Santana grit out, not entirely joking; she'd had some less than positive experiences of people always outbidding her by large margins at the last second to ensure any follow-up bid wasn't better than the one laid down. She'd missed out on some sexy buys because of that bullshit, so she was strictly a 'Buy It Now' girl these days. "That said, respect for being a total ruthless bitch out there. You must be if you pull in that kind of coin."

Rachel just blushed and followed Santana to the door. "Anyway, we're here to pack. We'll get there this evening, and we'll leave Monday morning given it's a PA day…oh, and bring a swimsuit." Rachel stated as they entered, and Santana froze at the last word, offering Berry a look of pure disbelief. Rachel noticed eventually, and looked back at her. "Just in case. You won't have to swim with me, though, Santana. I doubt I'll hit the water…I've been told I'm a terrible swimmer anyway."

Santana shook her head, but led the girl to her room, more curious than anything at that point. Ohio was going through a cold spell, and with it being mid-October, that meant temperatures were pretty damn low. Still, she packed some pretty casual warm weather clothes as Rachel had suggested, along with one of her bikini sets, a jacket, and the odd accessory. She wasn't sure where exactly they were going, and Berry was being secretive about it, so she just hoped she wouldn't regret her decision too much. She knew she'd likely hold the diva to her offer the next day at noon, but by how nervous the Rachel was, she couldn't help but be intrigued.

The two of them stopped off at Rachel's so the diva could pack and leave a note as to their whereabouts, with Berry's contact information of course, and by 8:05 they were off heading southbound. Santana was determined not to say a heck of a lot en route, and while Berry was playing some surprisingly decent music in her car and humming along, she too was mostly wordless and relatively carefree until they hit the first turnoff for Columbus.

And proceeded to drive right past it.

Now, Santana had, up to that point, thought Berry probably wanted to spend a weekend in the city, where being a lesbian or a star-struck diva was more accepted than in Lima, and do some weird
It was only when they passed the final exit to Columbus that Santana finally broke her vow of silence. "Berry, what the fuck. There's nothing down south but Cincinnati." she whispered harshly, drawing an amused smirk on the diva's face that she really wanted to wipe off. "If you're planning on attempting to murder me in Kentucky, short-stack, I swear to god you won't live to regret it, because you'll be dead. So dead."

"And here I thought you'd appreciate getting away from Lima. I suppose I do enjoy the dramatics of keeping our destination a secret until the last moment, but if I may be honest, we're not staying in Ohio, Santana. Nor will we be traveling into Kentucky." Rachel explained patiently, a hint of a smile on her face. Now, Santana really wanted to figure out why the girl was going through all sorts of trouble for her, but thus far she was baffled. None of it made sense, but she knew her life mostly hadn't made any sense over the past week since she was outed, so she supposed that it wasn't such a huge thing to just go with the flow for a bit. A little road trip never hurt anyone. Except teenagers in B-rated horror movies.

"Whatever, I'm probably gonna nap for a bit, I didn't sleep last night...so listen to your show tunes or whatever you normally do, hobbit, just not too loud." Santana stated, still trying to wrap her head around the whole situation. "And if I wake up in Kentucky, I have no qualms in taking a preemptive strike against a Berry bloody murder." She added, just in case it wasn't clear that she wanted no part in anything to do with Kentucky. Not even as a joke of sorts, as she really wasn't in the mood; truly, she was only in the mood to catch some extra Zs. It didn't take long for her to drift off, especially after having had such a restless sleep the previous night.

Santana had never been much of a morning person, but that really could be chalked up to her love of sleep. Sleep was fantastic, and while cozy beds were pretty much the best place to sleep, cars weren't horrendous options, all things considered. Being woken from sleep to a reality where there were early morning cheer practices, stupid idiots at McKinley, or glee club drama tended to get her in a bad mood, because sleep was so much better than dealing with all that shit. So when the faint, muffled sounds of Berry's stereo cut off, Santana floated back into consciousness, feeling pretty grumpy that her nap was disrupted.

"Whuh's goin on?" she mumbled out with a frown, eyes still closed shut; she knew the car was stopped, but she didn't know why, and why it had to have happened so soon. Berry's not so contained giggle only made her scowl deeper, because sleep was serious business. Even naps were, like, not to be trifled with. "Berry…"

Her growling apparently was enough to spur the diva into explaining their current situation, thankfully. "We've stopped for lunch, Santana. We're in the parking lot of a Wendy's, and while I have packed enough food to cobble myself together a nice, healthy, vegan lunch, you're certainly free to purchase some food of your own for the trip if you feel so inclined." Rachel explained, and maybe if Santana wasn't still in a sleepy haze, she would have been happier, because her stomach WAS rumbling a bit, but there was still a lot to be grumpy about.

However, a baconator could maybe cut her losses and help her endure the crazy mystery road trip with Rachel Barbra Berry.

So, with great herculean effort, she opened her eyes, let out an annoyed grunt, and left the vehicle, tromping her way over to the ragged looking fast food establishment. If the outside had seen better days, the inside was only marginally better; still, food was food and Santana Lopez needed to get her eats on.
Thankfully, it wasn't a popular lunch destination, at least it didn't seem like it. She wasn't sure exactly what time it was, but it couldn't have been too late; judging by the sun she'd briefly noticed outside, it was probably still morning, if at the tail end of it. Either way, her food was quickly served, and she left the restaurant with a greasy bag of tastiness in hand, making her way over to the Prius which had its back hatch open, Berry sitting there with her legs dangling out like she was a kid or something.

As Santana got closer to the vehicle, though, she looked around and couldn't help but feel some sort of familiarity with the area. There was just something that gave her chills and had her on edge. There weren't any cars close enough to tell what license plates were on them, or at least what state, but it didn't look like they were from Kentucky. That was a good thing. They also didn't look like Ohio's which was sort of neutral, given they WERE on a road trip. But the chills still had her suspicious; her psychic Mexican third eye was tingling up a storm.

When she got around to the back of the Prius, it was clear that Berry was having some crazy ass vegan picnic in the trunk of the car. Seriously, there was a freaking red and white checkered blanket, an open cooler full of food, a thermos with something warm in it to kill the slight chill in the air, two small sandwiches, a container of green grapes and cut up apples, and a few weird looking chocolatey treats that were probably from some vegan no-bake recipe. She respected the preparation, because that sort of meal was about ten times more appetizing than a greasy burger and fries, but she kind of did love her meat, and Berry probably wouldn't share.

"So, Santana, how are you enjoying life outside of Ohio?" The diva asked cheekily, probably thinking she was being so clever and amusing. Not so. Wherever they were, she was getting bad vibes, and they needed to leave soon.

"Well, I take it we're not in Kentucky…" She started, earning a nod and roll of the eyes from Berry. Which was a good start; always nice to get that sort of confirmation, even if there was a sneaking suspicion that Rachel was mocking her with that gesture. Santana really didn't want to put in the sort of work murdering required. It always looked so messy on TV. Scowling and teasing was more in her comfort zone. "But if we're not in Ohio, then…Pennsylvania?"

Rachel's smile blossomed into this weirdly smug grin that had her thinking that Berry had a future in potentially being one of those weird characters in horror movies, usually at some abandoned gas station or whatever, that gives the main characters advice with a creepy smile and sends them into oblivion. "We're in West Virginia…Point Pleasant, to be exact."

Those few words made Santana's blood run ice cold, and it was only with Snixx's inner reserves of hatred and anger that she was able to push back her absolutely legitimate fear, put her burger down, and force a furious glare at Berry for bringing her THERE of all places.

"What the FUCK are we doing in Point Pleasant, short stack?!!" She grit out, trying to look and act intimidating even if her mind was freaking the fuck out and on red alert. The name brought back memories of a certain thing she'd like to forget.

"Well, I felt it would be an appropriate time to stop for lunch, as we likely ate breakfast a little before seven in the morning, and given it's eleven thirty now, a break seemed reasonable. Road trips can feel taxing on the body, especially of the driver, so it's important to get the energy needed to last the drive, at least until we need to stop for dinner." Rachel rambled on, blabbering endlessly when she could have just said she was hungry. Seriously. The girl turned a short sentence into a three paragraph short essay. Santana wondered if Rachel could ever have the ability to do a thirty second elevator pitch. It seemed unlikely.

"Why here in this shithole, though?" Santana growled, because she understood hunger, she had a burger on her lap ready to be devoured, but she didn't get why they had to stop there.
Rachel gave an infuriating shrug, as if she had zero clue why their current location was an issue. "It's a cute, sleepy little town just past the border in the Appalachians, and..." Berry started, before a hesitant smirk overtook her lips, and her eyes took on a deviously amused glimmer. "Santana Lopez, are you freaking out right now?"

Bullshit. It was all so much fucking bullshit. All week she'd put up with the shittiest shit and then Berry promises her some escape from it all, only to turn things around and proceed to just drive them into a mountain of shit. Fuck. That smug smirk needed to be wiped off, but if she murdered Berry in Point Pleasant, Santana was pretty sure karma would bite her in her sweet, perfectly toned ass given their current locale. "Okay, first off? Fuck you for even thinking that. I'm not freaking out, it's just that this town is a piece of shit and we're in West fucking Virginia. Do you expect me to be excited we're in the state best known for moonshine, chewing tobacco and sadist hillbillies?"

"Santana! They're people too, be nice." Rachel said chidingly, and yeah, they were people, but Santana held a notorious loathing for most people, so she wasn't really sure what Berry was trying to accomplish. "And if you're referencing 'Deliverance', that took place in Georgia, not West Virginia. You're never sloppy with your pop culture references, so I'm not convinced you're not freaking out. Also, you wring your hands when you're nervous. I've only ever seen you do that a very, very small handful of times since we first had classes together in grade four, and with that all said, I've come to the conclusion that you hold beliefs in old folk tales, which is unusually superst..." Rachel rambled once again, smiling all the fucking while, and it was aggravating as hell, because Rachel was CLEARLY teasing her, and that wasn't cool at all.

"Fuck you, hobbit, I'm not freaked out, so let's just eat our lunch and get the hell out of dodge!" Santana growled, turning away from Rachel and quickly devouring her burger, probably in record-time. Not that it made her some absolute common slob, or that it was evidence that she was scared or anything. Santana was hungry, was all, and the sooner they were gone from that hellhole, the better.

However, Rachel didn't seem to think so, and seemed to welcome adding to the town's annual murder count, because Berry fucking laughed. It was a bright, melodious laugh, but a laugh AT her nonetheless. Not that it made her some absolute common slob, or that it was evidence that she was scared or anything. Santana was hungry, was all, and the sooner they were gone from that hellhole, the better.

Until Rachel spoke again.

"Aw, who would have thought big badass Santana Lopez would be freaked out by local mythology?" The diva noted with far too much amusement, and it was all she could do to not smack the bejeezus out of her. But Snixx did make an appearance.

"God fucking dammit, Berry, I'm not freaked out! But if I was it'd be totes legit because psychological horror mindfuckery is freaky as hell to lots of people, and a hell of a lot scarier than some fucking murderous clown or some lame masked dude with a knife! So shut the fuck up!" She ranted, not rambled, at the diva, drawing upon the past year's memory of Rachel huddled under a blanket at a glee get-together, too terrified to watch 'Halloween' of all the stupid slasher films.

Berry thankfully had the good sense to blush, at least. A silent admission of hypocrisy was better than nothing, and cooled Santana's anger down enough to finally finish her meal. "Horror movies ARE rather terrifying, psychological or not, and I'm not meaning to tease, I was just surprised that while you most certainly aren't scared of psychological horror films, that you would understand if others were. Of course. It's very good of you to be mindful of that."

Now, Santana could definitely see Rachel was brown nosing the hell out of her by saying what she
did, but she didn't mind. It meant the topic was pretty much put to rest, thankfully, which meant no more teasing. She was already grumpy from having her nap interrupted; there was only so much frustration and annoyance she could handle. That Rachel was trying to mend fences or whatever was cool enough in her books, and she always respected the fact that Berry stood up to her most of the time, or at least got her licks in. This brief stop was no exception, even if Berry landing them in Point Pleasant was a major piss-off.

"Yeah, well, I'm open-minded and everything. People get scared over a lot of things. It's whatever. Now…can we get out of here?" She asked, noticing Rachel only had the container of grapes and apples left. Rachel scanned her surroundings and nodded, starting to pack things away.

"I believe we can."

And like that, the first potential catastrophe of the road trip was avoided. But with her destination still unknown, even leaving Point Pleasant wasn't putting her mind at ease.

It took about an hour after leaving the hellhole-that-shall-not-be-named before Santana felt the energy her meal provided her, leaving her fully awake in her early afternoon adventure. Which wouldn't have been a remotely bad thing at all, except she was in the passenger seat of Rachel's Prius, with a Barbra Streisand-themed playlist coming out of the car's sound system; Berry singing along, of course.

Now, Santana secretly enjoyed a bit of Broadway stuff, she did, but there was really only so much Streisand a sane person could take. And really, Barbra wasn't on that scene for all that long anyway, so whatever. She was thankful when Barbra shifted out to something drastically different, but remained unimpressed at the sudden foray into banjo-music.

Eventually, the forgotten container of grapes and apples from lunch got placed between them, but it was only so helpful in distracting Santana from the truth; she was stuck in a car in the middle of West Virginia, just entering the Appalachian Mountains, with the biggest diva she'd ever known, probably far from any sort of civilization. It was looking like a bad horror movie already. All that would need to happen was a blown tire, or something happening with their axle or whatever. And Rachel would try to befriend the local serial killer, and swiftly get killed, leaving her to traverse the wild in search of a weapon to defend herself with, because she knew very well that sexually experienced female characters in horror movies don't tend to live. It was bullshit, but it was a trope that endured.

She did her best to ignore that and just focus on the enjoyably tangy grapes and apple slices, having more or less commandeered the container since Berry was adamant that keeping her hands at ten-and-two was of utmost importance. It was kind of funny, really, and it did feel kind of good to know Berry was taking safety seriously. If there was anyone she trusted to have a well maintained vehicle and a series of ten step plans of action if anything went wrong, it was Rachel.

The sound of Led Zeppelin filling the car cabin brought her out of her scattered thoughts, her gaze shifting intensely to the iPod hooked up to the car's stereo. Sure, it was one of the band's more upbeat, sillier songs, but she totally hadn't pegged Berry for a classic rock enthusiast. Yet, there the diva was, singing along happily to 'Misty Mountain Hop', her head swaying from side to side childishly. It was a nice shift from a bunch of the weird old-timey bluegrass recordings that had been playing over the past few minutes. Which, despite being an egregiously inappropriate style of music for a road trip, had at least been a something of a welcome change from Barbra. That said, Santana's ears weren't meant to listen to twenty minutes of banjo, so the thirty had been overkill. So, really, it was fair to say that Led Zeppelin had rescued her previously plummeting mood.

Santana just sat back, closed her eyes, and listened to the music, letting a nice sort of calmness flow
through her. Music was kind of a personal drug of hers, and while Led Zeppelin didn't break her top hundred list of favourite musicians, she did enjoy their music well enough, and she did like Berry's voice. So it was nice, relaxing, and for the first time since her nap, she was feeling pretty good. They were breezing down a pretty quiet highway, it was sunny out, and the scenery was a rather pretty hilly area. Nothing crazy huge, but definitely a change from flat north-western Ohio. Things were pretty nice, right then.

It was when 'Misty Mountain Hop' faded out into a song from her somewhat bohemian cousin's favourite band that she caught onto Berry's sneaky new playlist.

"Berry?" She asked, unable to keep her own amused grin off her face as Rachel's eyes shifted so the diva could side-eye her and keep her face directed toward the road.

"Yes, Santana?" The girl asked cheerfully as the harmonized vocal intro started in. It was a little odd that Rachel always said her full first name, even in situations when it was just the two of them and there was no need to specify. It was weird.

"Is this a playlist full of songs about mountains?" The immediate telltale blush on Rachel's cheeks was answer enough, and she couldn't help but laugh. Of course, Rachel would have a playlist for driving through a modestly mountainous area. Of course. "Oh my god, Berry, you're ridiculous."

"I assure you, taking time to appreciate songs crafted through the influence of mountainous regions and the stories from those communities is hardly ridiculous. Appalachia has a long, storied history with music, after all, and their place in the annals of America's music history should be respected, so I'm doing my part. I find it relaxing and freeing to express myself through song when driving through this area, leading through Virginia, because it makes me feel more connected, and..." Rachel was rambling at an even faster pace than normal, her blush only intensifying as she felt, and Santana felt like she had to stop the girl before she went full tomato.

"Berry, easy. Just teasing you. No need to recite some pre-written speech on the merits of your playlisting." Really, it was entirely a Rachel Berry thing to do, so it wasn't even a big deal or a surprise, but Rachel's little huff was enough proof to know that the diva was either frustrated or annoyed with her. Which, oh well. Whatever.

"It's just you were acting as if I should be embarrassed for my musical interests and my methods of expression. I usually take these road trips alone, and don't have to put up with heckling." Rachel grumbled, her teeth lightly biting her lower lip as she stared straight ahead at the highway.

Santana waited for Rachel to return to singing, but after about half the song was over, Berry hadn't sung a single note, and the girl's bitten lip looked like it was probably hurting. So Santana restarted 'Blue Ridge Mountains' on the iPod, quickly drawing the diva's attention.

"The show must go on, right? Come on, I actually like this song. I'll even sing harmony with you." Her offer was quickly met with wide brown eyes and a hastily growing smile. And then a squeak. A goddamn, excited-as-hell squeak. She'd previously only had that effect on people through sex, so she was gonna take that as a big plus from Berry. The girl probably had a massive bucket list and was thrilled to check off 'Have a road trip sing-a-long' or something.

And as they both opened the song with the harmonized intro, Santana thought that maybe this trip wouldn't be so bad after all.

The afternoon passed at an oddly swift pace, Berry's mountain-themed playlist providing them with plenty of music-related fun throughout, even if Santana didn't know a decent minority of the songs. It
was just nice to be carefree again, and to enjoy her favourite hobby with someone who had similar enthusiasm as her. Sure, Berry was positively insane, but that wasn't a shocker; what was a shock was that they rolled into Waynesboro, Virginia at a little past quarter after four, and Santana could have sworn it had only been, like, an hour. Barely four and a half since they left Point Pleasant, and three since they started that crazy mountain song stuff.

Berry was right, though; going on a road trip did weird things to the body, and she was oddly hungry once they finished filling up on gas, even though it hadn't even been a full five hours since she had her baconator. So really, she was pretty thrilled when Rachel pulled up to some Green Leaf Grill place, because 'grill' usually meant there was tasty food at hand.

It was a Friday, so it took a few minutes to get a table, as early as they were; Santana thought people-watching made the wait a little more interesting, even if Rachel kept telling her to stop being mean. Berry was giggling the whole time like some gossipy teenager, so what was she supposed to do, stop? Psh. It was funny. Making up fake, hilarious backstories for random people was a hobby of hers, and like hell if she was gonna stop out of politeness. Though, she DID lower her voice, at Berry's request. Whatever.

The first thing Santana noticed when she and Rachel were handed menus was that it was full of, like, a whole bunch of stuff she'd never heard of. It wasn't like she traveled a lot, so regional cuisine just hadn't really been anything she'd considered before, but it was all kind of exciting. In another life, she would totally be a chef, but music was just too important in the one she was in, so she'd settle for eating at sweet as hell restaurants like that one and cooking up her own similar concoctions later on.

It wasn't long until their orders were sent off, Santana selecting the herb-grilled mahi-mahi and Greek salad with a 'chipotle raspberry baked brie' to start with, whatever the hell that was; the trouble was that it'd take a while for the food to arrive, and she was stuck at a table with Rachel Berry, without any music as a social lubricant. It was a dicey situation.

Santana wasn't sure how long they sat there, across from each other at the small two person table, when Rachel spoke up. It almost felt like relief when the girl's voice reached her ears, but the content of her words was another story. "So… how are Brittany and Quinn?"

Leave it to Berry to jump right into the difficult shit. Seriously, the girl was so bad at handling small talk that she rammed an unlubricated conversational dildo into their little pre-dinner discussion. Santana took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, trying to figure out how to say what needed to be said so that the topic would shift. "Britt's Britt. She's still obsessed with her fat cat, still dating Wheels, and is sad over the ducks that will be migrating away for the winter. Quinn…I'm not sure, she's still a little insane last I checked. I've tried to help her out, but she doesn't really seem to want it, so…she's Quinn. Unstable as always. Nothing new."

And it was mostly true. Britt loved ducks, Lord Tubbington and Artie. None of that had changed. And Quinn loved Beth and thought the baby was the only sort of perfection she could ever get close to, which was bullshit, but Quinn always was a stubborn ass like that.

"Oh. Well, I'm sure Brittany will be fine this winter without her ducks. It does happen every year. And maybe Quinn's mental health will improve soon. I worry about her…I think she needs a friend right now." Berry noted quietly, and Santana couldn't contain the scoff at the last assertion.

"Try convincing Quinn of that. She's got tunnel-vision right now, I'm pretty sure she doesn't notice anything that's not Beth, Puck or Shelby." Santana stated confidently, Rachel's unimpressed glare not backing her down from her stance because she knew she was right. Even if she knew it probably sucked for Rachel to hear that woman's name, which she understood. Shelby was a bitch to Rachel.
Anyway, Q used to be her best friend. Maybe not the same type of best friend Brittany was, but a different type; they looked out for each other, they teased each other, they supported each other. They were adversarial at times, but that was only after Q held a massive goddamn secret from her and broke her trust, and made her think she'd failed the blonde by not noticing. And that started a chain of events leading through mid-junior year until they finally patched things up at nationals. But this year had been different, Q disappeared partway through the summer break, and barely ever noticed her since school started up again. Even when she was getting harassed and shit a few feet away. So yeah, Q wasn't all there anymore. The girl didn't want a friend, even if she really needed one.

"Look, I'm still her friend even if she seems to have forgotten that. At least I tried to help her out with her recent episodes of craziness." Santana added, before Berry could say anything that probably wasn't accurate or relevant. "Anyway, outside of taking a weird interest in me, what have you been up to lately?"

It wasn't like Santana didn't know her way around casual conversation; she may not engage in it often, but she knew it was only polite to ask about Rachel at that point in their talk. It'd help pass time, maybe clear some awkwardness or tension, whatever. It'd at least take the focus off of herself.

"My life has been mostly uneventful recently. My focus has been primarily on glee, my upcoming NYADA audition this spring, and working on my extra-curriculars, though my focus would be more fine-tuned if the Neanderthals at school weren't forcing me to carry around multiple changes of clothing." Berry rambled, and Santana couldn't help but frown at the revival of slushie use. She, Brittany and Quinn had stopped that for the most part the previous year, and as former head Cheerio, that policy toward the gleeks had held steady as far as she knew.

"Wait, you've been getting slushied again? What about the others?" She asked, though admittedly in a more interrogative fashion. Santana couldn't help it; even though she wasn't a Cheerio anymore, it seemed like an affront to her law of the land, and that pissed her off, even if it was sort of predictable.

"I haven't noticed any others aside from myself receiving such treatment, but I suppose breaking up with Finn, alongside the instability of the New Directions, may have antagonized certain jocks to lash out for old time's sake." Berry's voice was just so odd. Usually, when the girl was victimized by slushies, she'd have her head held high and it was as if nothing could touch her. There had been times in the past, such as the egging, where cracks formed in her armor, but that made sense. But now, the girl was trying to put on a brave face, but sounded defeated, and that wasn't cool. At all.

"Maybe I should have stayed back today and knocked some freaking sense into those assholes." She grumbled, clenching her hands into fists and taking deep, calming breaths. No need for Snixx in a fairly fancy restaurant. Hunger won over her rage, but just barely, and not without considerable effort. "I swear, I'll…wait, you dumped Finn?"

It had taken a few seconds for it to click, but when it had, she couldn't help but be baffled. It wasn't as if it was unheard of, but generally the oaf did the dumping between the two of them. And Rachel always went back to him. Sure, Santana was pretty confident the duo would get back together eventually, but this was an interesting change of pace.

"If it makes any difference, I'd rather not talk about Finn past the fact that I broke up with him. I had my luggage partially packed earlier today for a reason…I needed this weekend as much as I felt you did." Rachel explained, and Santana could only nod at the honesty coming from the diva. They'd apparently both had weeks from hell and needed a break from it all, and Santana could respect that. She may not be the best of friends with Berry by any stretch of the imagination, but she figured that she'd do her best to make their getaway enjoyable for the both of them. And hopefully, that wouldn't
backfire on her.

Santana nodded in understanding, knowing conversation wasn't going to happily head in that direction; she'd been pretty broken up back when Britt chose Artie over her, and comedy had always worked well to cheer her up. So in line with that, she gestured to a couple off to their right.

"So, let's play a game. Pick a person at a table, and tell me their guilty pleasure song and how the others at the table feel about it. Go." Santana urged with a playful grin, Berry following her line of sight to a table with a man who looked like a slightly too old 'bro', with the jersey-shore style spiked hair and ridiculous tan.

Rachel giggled immediately, even if she tried to suppress it, her eyes shooting back to Santana thoughtfully, before returning to the disaster of a man sitting across from a fairly attractive date. At least, Santana assumed it was, whether they were officially together or not.

"The rather frighteningly orange man. Heart's 'These Dreams'. She found it sort of funny the first time, but he thinks no one can hear him singing it off key in the shower, and she's forced to wear earplugs to drown out the sound." Rachel answered in a hasty whisper; a guilty, if devious, smile tugging at her lips.

As Santana laughed at the creative response, she knew that the wait for their food would breeze by quickly now that they were getting to more playful discussion. It wasn't often she'd seen that side of Berry, but it looked good on her. And it was nice to get her laughing. Hell, after her week, it was just nice to laugh and have someone else to share that with.

Dinner had been really freaking awesome. While she didn't think she'd ever be back in that neighbourhood again, she made a point to save the address of the restaurant in her phone just in case, because that chipotle raspberry starter was phenomenally tasty, and the fish was pretty great too. Seriously. While she still loved her breadsticks from Breadstix, she had to admit the actual meals at the grill were of much better quality than what Lima could offer.

Once they'd paid for their food, they were quickly back on the road again, and Santana had watched the sun set as they ventured eastward across Virginia. When they'd got to Norfolk, she'd raised questions to Rachel about where in the bloody hell they were going, but the diva had told her to be patient, and she'd tried. She really had.

But as the Prius traveled down a narrow, sandy strip of land on an empty highway near the northern tip of North Carolina, dunes at each side of them, she had to ask again. There was only so much patience she could reasonably possess, and Santana had felt she'd already put in a legendary show of it already.

"Berry, what is this place?" Santana asked as she peered out the window of the car Rachel had rented at the tall, stilted houses lining the coastline. They were by the ocean. They were by the ocean, and there were tall as fuck houses on fucking stilts, and Santana could only look on as they passed what seemed to be a continuous beach that spread for miles upon miles. Even in the dim moonlight, it was kind of spectacular. She'd seen movies and stuff, but she didn't really know places like this existed, at least, not stretched out for so damn long. It had been miles so far and there wasn't much of an end outside of some areas where there were just sand dunes.

She'd only been to the ocean a few times when she was younger, and while she'd wanted to splurge and go on vacations and everything each summer, she'd generally work instead. Santana wasn't like Berry; she wanted to do music, but she hadn't been trained in it nearly as long. She'd need money in her savings to fall back on, and while her parents were usually pretty damn supportive of her, the
week's revelation had made her question whether they'd fully support her after graduation. It made her happy to know that the thousands she'd saved up were there as a cushion, even if it had meant that she hadn't been able to visit any awesome places like Hawaii, Spain or Italy or whatever.

So to have been brought to the ocean for the first time in years, for free, potentially getting paid with a discount at one of her favourite fashion stores, she couldn't help but be baffled. There was no way she'd get those eBay profits, not with the ocean literally right there and a pleasantly mild night wind blowing in her face. In truth, Santana couldn't help but wonder what she could do to make it up to Berry, as she couldn't imagine why the girl was being so generous to her.

"Cape Hatteras. It's the off-season right now, so there's barely anyone here, but it's been unseasonably warm here all through autumn so far, so I'm sure the ocean won't be too frigid if you feel like swimming." Rachel explained as she drove through the winding road carved between sand dunes. "After one of the big hurricanes ran through here a few years ago, my dad bought one of the houses. He rents it out during the summer to pay the mortgage and make a small profit, and in the off-months, it's mine whenever I want it. Which is lucky, because it's always so tranquil, and it's during the school year, so if I've had a bad week, I just come down here to recuperate. Normally I'd fly, but I wanted to take the scenic route this time around, since we have a little more time on our hands with the PA day on Monday."

Santana just looked at the girl in the driver's seat and nodded, imagining that any of the places she was looking at along the coastline would be pretty peaceful to be in. The sound of the ocean, along with the sound of rain, had always been something of a sleep-agent for Santana, or it would at least relax her. She understood why Rachel brought her there, she just didn't know why she felt the need to bribe her. If the girl had told her she wanted to take her to the ocean down south for the weekend, she would have hopped on that chance and paid airfare on her own. Well, probably. At least now she knew she'd fork over the gas money for the return trip.

Rachel turned her head slightly, and Santana could see the diva's eyes side-eyeing her carefully. "I just thought you'd had a bad week and could find some peace here while my parents pull strings to get the bullying and harassment enforced at school."

Santana wasn't sure she had it in her yet to thank the girl for bringing her there, so she just decided to key in on the second half of the girl's statement.

"I don't see what they could do to make the school board listen." Santana noted with annoyance, not at Berry, but at the school's indifference to her plight. She saw the diva's expression, and knew the girl understood, so she continued. "They've let it go on since Monday."

"And I've had Jacob Ben Israel videotape the assaults and harassment you've faced. Video which I obtained written permission to create from McKinley's administration might I add, thus making it legal and admissible in court if need be. My daddy's friend Andre says it should be ironed out by the time school starts on Monday." Rachel stated with a bit of a bite to her tone, and Santana could only imagine she had to bribe the creeper. It made her feel a little warm inside, knowing that someone had been trying to help her all week, and helping her both in a legal way and by giving her some time away from it all. Weeks ago, anyone could have asked Santana if Rachel would have helped her up if she'd been pushed down twelve flights of stairs, and she would have said no. Yet, the brunette had once again put herself on the line for a glee member. It didn't make much sense.

"You didn't have to do that for me. Jewfro's a creep, so you can tell me what he needed from you to do this, and I'll get it back, or make sure he never gets it and leaves you alone." Santana said firmly; she never enjoyed the feeling of owing anyone anything, and Berry was oddly enough quickly becoming someone she owed a hell of a lot. It was starting to get uncomfortable, even if it was nice.
Rachel let out a short, weary sigh. "I…told him that I'd give him pictures. He knew I'd be heading here this weekend, and that was his demand. Just don't hassle him...he doesn't need much to be appeased, and as disgusting as he is, I'd rather he not spill any secrets of mine that I'm not ready to let out into the open."

Santana could understand that. Even though she and Britt had never exactly been stealthy, she knew most guys thought their intimacy was an act to lure guys in. The students there were idiots, but they were also cruel, and she knew Berry was behind the eight ball anyway already. Still, she silently decided to figure out what she could do to permanently dissuade Jewfro from blackmailing Rachel. It just wasn't cool, and Rachel was too sweet of a person to have to deal with that. She could admit that, at least.

Soon, they pulled into a small avenue, Rachel parking in the driveway of one of the last houses on the street. It was tall, and a strange lemon yellow colour, but she figured the inside and view would be worth it, considering there were balconies on the second and third floors. The in-ground pool out back didn't hurt, as she imagined it was warmer than the ocean, but Santana had never been scared away by cold water. She couldn't wait for Saturday morning to come, so she could spend all the daylight hours on the beach. The sun had long set already, and her body was cramped a bit from the traveling. Plus, she was tired as hell, so she figured they'd just unpack, rest up a bit, get a feel for the place, and have a nice quiet sleep. Berry had been uncharacteristically quiet during the last part of the trip, and it was refreshing to know the girl had an off-switch, and that their silence wasn't uncomfortable or whatever. Though admittedly, the diva looked really wiped from driving all day, so maybe that was partially to blame.

Santana quickly got out and grabbed both sets of luggage, letting Rachel lead her inside and up to the main, or second, floor. It was more or less what she'd expected for such a locale; the interior was light and breezy feeling, with lots of windows, and a really refreshing open concept kitchen, dining room and living area. Everything looked enormously cozy and somewhat flowery, but not TOO cutesy. Just the right amount, if that was possible. The balcony right off the kitchen looked to lead out to a charcoal barbecue and a covered seating area, and there was a bedroom and bathroom nestled in by the stairwell. Rachel unpacked some things into the kitchen before leading her upstairs to one of the stupidly large bedrooms. The wall facing the ocean was almost all glass, with windows that almost ran from the floor to the ceiling, as well as a joined balcony with the other room that Rachel would no doubt be taking for herself. Santana allowed the tired diva a thankful smile before she unpacked, the brunette quickly going about her business. After a few minutes, she heard the girl start her eventful nightly routine, but Santana was too busy out on the balcony to care too much about how Rachel would run scales while doing her skincare.

There was just something sort of magical about the sight and smell of the ocean in the quiet, starlit night. It was ludicrous, maybe a hundred and fifty meters at most separating their house from the waves lapping against the beach below her. And the stars above were clearer than she'd ever seen them. All in all, there was a beauty to this place that had her thinking Berry was goddamn lucky to have somewhere that she could go and see parts of the world like they were meant to be seen and heard and felt and smelled, all in peaceful solitude. Or, usually.

It was only then that she realized that Rachel had mentioned JBI knowing the diva would be at her oceanfront sanctuary. The thought perplexed her and, try as she might, she had difficulty understanding why he would know the diva would be there. Sure, she'd stopped paying attention to the school gossip, simply because ninety percent of it had become about her in some form, but she'd also stopped going to glee all week because Finnept was always there. Maybe something happened in glee that made her upset and she leaked she'd be here? I mean, I hadn't heard of this place from her before, and I'm kind of nosy as hell. Did they press her hard for details after the breakup? Beh, fucking pricks. No one...not even me...really appreciated her as a person the whole time. She was
always just a voice to most of them, but I would have thought more would have been cooler to her over the years. I haven't changed much, I've just been honest. And maybe a little nicer to everyone, but still honest. What's Tina or Artie got to lose by being nice to Berry, anyway? They never slushied her, and Berry never stole their solos, and rep wasn't on the line...makes no sense. At least I had legit reasons...well, kind of...and at least I stopped slushying her a long time ago...

Santana lounged around on her spot on the balcony for about an hour, long enough for Berry to finish her routine. It was nearing forty-five minutes after midnight, after all. Way past the diva's bedtime. And after checking to see that Berry had indeed collapsed face-down on the bed and was quietly snoring while snoozing, she decided to pack it in and get some decent shuteye before the next day's beachfront extravaganza. And maybe she made time to cover Berry with a blanket or something, because beaches were supposed to be colder at night or something. It was, like, common courtesy or whatever.

Santana woke with a start, a muted scream rushing through her as the last moments of her dream lingered in her post-sleep haze. She took the following few minutes to gather her wits, assuring herself that she was in bed, by the ocean, and not in the boy's locker room naked and cornered by the football team. It had been much too vivid a dream to just instantly shake off like most of the nightmares she'd had in her life, so she sat up, wiping the sweat from her forehead, and took a look outside at the North Carolina coastline. The sky was turning the slightest hint of purple, letting her know it was a new day, in a new place. It was ten to six in the morning, meaning the sun likely wouldn't rise for about an hour and a half, giving her plenty of time to clear her head and do something productive.

She hopped into the bathroom, had a nice refreshing shower, and changed into a simple fitted tee and shorts before she ventured downstairs to get breakfast going. Rumour had it that Rachel woke at 6AM and worked out for a half hour right afterward to wake herself up fully, giving the ex-cheerleader a few minutes to get started. Santana quickly opened the cabinets so she could see the ingredients, and with the help of her phone, decided that she could make vegan waffles for the both of them. Which, honestly, was so much better than no waffles at all.

As she started readying the mix, she spotted the other girl's iPod and dock scattered on the coffee table in the living room, and she really felt like some music therapy to fully exorcise the ghost of her dream. Santana brought it to the kitchen and scrolled through the artists until she found something of a surprise; sure, she knew Berry listened to music other than show tunes and big-voiced divas after the previous day's road trip music selections, but she hadn't expected the wide variety of music found on the device. Just as she heard the other girl coming down the stairs, she found a pretty fitting song and pressed play, Okkervil River's "Calling and Not Calling My Ex" emanating out of the speakers, because of course Berry had the band's entire discography. They were certainly wordy and dramatic and theatrical enough.

Rachel descended the final steps, shooting Santana a curious gaze as she moved toward the kitchen, the taller girl promptly back to making breakfast, singing along, complete with the odd overdramatic gestures fitting to the lyrics. Performing was kind of one of her real joys, it wasn't like Berry had a monopoly on that. Besides, Santana knew Rachel broke up with Finn, but the girl was still probably having a hard time with it all, so she decided to try and cheer the diva up a little; show her that she made the right call, and that she was better off without the ogre.

And sure, Santana was pretending she was a somehow more intelligent and verbose Finn Hudson for the purposes of the song, but Rachel seemed amused enough by the playful act for it to be worth it. And it was the truth; Finn would be begrudgingly proud of Rachel, and entirely regretful that he let Berry slip through his monstrously large fingers. And Rachel would find someone new, she'd break
hearts, and she'd live her little diva life to the fullest. Even if Rachel wasn't, like, her favourite person in the whole wide world, Santana knew that much. Anyone with eyes and ears knew it.

Santana dished out the first plate of waffles to Rachel as the song finished, enjoying the bright smile the diva was flashing her. "And just like I'm sure you'll break some hearts, short stack, I'm sure you'll like these entirely vegan waffles. Thank god for google."

"I know, right?!" Rachel exclaimed as she stuck her fork into the center of one of the waffles and lifted it off the plate, entirely dripping with maple syrup. "You can learn anything you could ever want to, you just...need to know what you want to know, I suppose. And...thank you for the meal. I honestly hadn't expected you to cook me anything."

Santana watched with amusement as Rachel took an enormous bite from the waffle; it was possibly the strangest way she'd ever seen anyone eat a waffle, the diva slowly rotating her fork so she could take another large bite from another fuller corner. She just shook her head and returned to prepping more breakfast.

"So, you're up early. I didn't peg you for a morning person, Santana." Rachel curiously noted between bites.

Santana shrugged; she felt pretty comfortable where she was, both physically and mentally, but she didn't feel like reliving any of what had upset her earlier. And despite not really being super friends with Rachel or anything, the girl clearly knew she'd had a rough week, to put it lightly. Going on the road trip was admission enough, so it wouldn't hurt her any to say something about it if it also settled the topic of discussion. "I had a bit of a nightmare, and woke up a few minutes before you. Feeling better now, though." She felt a little weird, allowing herself to be honest like that, but the world didn't explode, and it wasn't really that difficult or painful to admit.

Rachel smiled and returned to whittling away her waffle, and she couldn't appreciate the girl's tact more. Santana knew that Berry wasn't exactly the best person when it came to secrets, at least from her history with them in regards to Quinn and Finn, and the girl usually seemed to be like a mini Sherlock at times. That she understood that Santana needed her to let the issue go meant a hell of a lot to the taller girl.

They both leisurely ate their meal and then sat around the living room, listening to and talking about music, Santana excited to share some similar tastes with the smaller girl. Britt and Quinn had never taken to her love of concept albums; Britt tended to find them confusing, and Quinn often insisted that if she wanted to learn about a story, she'd read one, in a book, and that grand concepts were wasted in music. Rachel, of course, loved the dramatics of it all, as well as the theatricality of having a narrative and progression from track to track. She'd also learned that the diva liked diversifying her musical tastes, that it helped with expanding her musical horizons and gave her an easier way to tap into specific emotions. To Santana, that just meant that Rachel liked a lot of different music, which was cool, but the diva was always keen on explaining.

"For instance, if I were to play some jaded, weary thirty-something on a Broadway show, or in a movie, I'd probably listen to The National's 'Boxer' album on repeat as much as possible, or perhaps something by Tom Waits or Joni Mitchell. Or if I had to play the role of a quirky upstart dancer, I'd probably listen to some Lykke Li and Chairlift, or maybe some Scissor Sisters here and there. If I were to perform a role of a singer in a historical film based on the forties or fifties, I'd look up Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan for historical context as well as Cassandra Wilson and Madeleine Peyroux for insight on how to apply stylistic shifts to keep viewers from feeling my delivery is too dated despite the theme. Music's not just good to listen to, it's a way to focus emotion, to feel and express yourself in a way that you might otherwise be unable to." Rachel explained, and Santana
found herself, just as she had for the past forty minutes or so, strangely hanging off every word.

The girl was smart, and clearly passionate about music and acting. Sure, Berry rambled, but her ramblings were surprisingly interesting if it wasn't entirely focused on Broadway stuff and Barbra Streisand. It was kind of relieving to know that she'd be able to have normal conversations easily during their short vacation without food to fill the gaps, and that Berry away from McKinley seemed a lot more chill than the one she was used to. It was kind of relieving and intriguing, honestly.

"Sun's gonna rise soon enough. Wanna go up to the balcony and watch it?" Santana asked eagerly, slightly put off when Rachel shook her head.

"I have a better idea." The diva noted with a sly smirk. "Slip on your sandals."

Within a minute or two, the both of them were side by side on a large beach towel, sitting on the sandy beach, watching the top of the red sun peaking up over the horizon. The breeze was cool and damp, and the water splashed at them from a foot or two away, salty surf spattering against their legs. It was about as perfect as she could have hoped for; she'd never seen the sun rise over the ocean, she'd never seen such a clear sunrise before, and it was breathtaking.

"It's going to storm tomorrow. Apparently some tropical storm is rolling in, according to the weather reports…it's weak, but it'll be rainy and windy, so we should make the most of the beach today." Rachel noted, smiling out at the ocean before her, her eyes following the back and forth nature of the waves.

The prospect of a storm didn't bother her tremendously, though she'd never been anywhere near the path of any sort of big storm before, aside from blizzards. Ohio always just took remnants of hurricanes, smallish tornados, that sort of thing. It was kind of exciting, in a strange sort of way. Rachel wasn't worried, so she knew it couldn't be that bad, right? Besides, they had the whole day to relax on the beach.

"Well, I guess that means I should go get changed, and get some chairs and an umbrella." Santana stated as she nodded, her eyes still fixated on the sunrise ahead of them. "At least, after this. This is just too…amazing. I want to live by the ocean when I'm older." The mere reality of waking up once to a view like the one she was witnessing was enough to bring a smile to her face, so she couldn't imagine what it would be like to have that each morning. Santana was pretty sure it would never get old.

"There are lots of nice places on the coastline, Santana. I prefer the east coast…New York's my destined stomping grounds in the future, obviously. That said, you could go anywhere…Miami, Boston, New Haven, Jacksonville, New Orleans, San Diego, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle…lots of big cities by the ocean, Santana, and that's just in this country! I could definitely see you enjoying Marseilles, Athens or Barcelona, or somewhere exotic like Gibraltar, or…" Rachel rambled on, and Santana had to cut her off, because she couldn't imagine going outside of the country. It was like, a pipe dream or something, and it was kind of baffling to hear Berry speak so casually, as if she'd been so all sorts of countries.

"You sound like you've been to all those places." She noted, earning a small shrug and a slight, shy smile. It kind of blew her away, really. "Like…seriously?" Santana asked, leaning toward the diva a bit, to gauge her reaction. It was hard enough to believe Rachel had a private getaway below the Mason-Dixon.

Rachel blushed and bit her lip, and that kind of sealed it. Blushing, nervous Rachel Berry was sort of cute. Still worthy of 'short stack' and 'hobbit', but the diva had her moments where Santana just felt a little fluttering in her stomach. She herself had sexy locked down, but cute things had always been
"I don't have many active friends in my life, and there aren't any good music theatre camps around that I haven't already eclipsed, so...my fathers take me on their trips. They don't travel often, but once or twice a year, in the summer, they take some weeks off, and we go wherever. We spent this past summer in Gibraltar, Portugal and Spain, mostly, with a short visit to southern France." Rachel stated softly, and Santana couldn't help but gape at her. She'd always wanted to see Europe, and Berry had already seen it. All because no one ever wanted to hang out with her. It was depressingly karmic in that Berry got to experience some amazing shit because people treated her like shit. Entirely fitting.

"Well, fuck. Remind me to bring you with me if ever I make the jump overseas, Berry." Santana remarked with a smile, hoping to see how red Rachel Berry could get. Which, apparently, was quite red, by how her blushing intensified.

"I...fear I may not be such an optimal travel guide, Santana. My fathers tended to organize the trips. It's admittedly one of the few times a year I let go of my organizing and planning and just relax." Rachel clarified, and though Santana knew she hadn't really insinuated that she'd only take Rachel along for guidance, she wanted to snuff that out, because Berry was kind of alright when she wanted to be. And Santana didn't want the diva feeling shitty about herself. The back of her mind kept telling her she owed the girl for all this, but something else was knocking at the edges of her mind, too.

She gently shoulder-nudged the girl beside her playfully, unable to keep the smirk from her lips. "I wouldn't mind having a travel buddy, is all. I'd probably be too enthralled by the architecture and the weather to know what the hell was going on, and you'd probably at least have the wide-eyed wonder to drag me around looking for something interesting. And if we ended up just spending all our time relaxing on a beach, or wandering around aimlessly, that'd be damn cool, too. Because if today and most of yesterday are any indication, you're pretty alright, Berry. Give yourself some credit."

The shyness of Rachel's absolutely beaming smile stunned her momentarily, wondering why Rachel was reacting like that, but she brushed those thoughts aside quickly in favour of cataloguing their little weekend adventure. Jewfro wouldn't be the only one getting pictures of that weekend.

Santana fished around in her purse for her camera and slid over beside a befuddled Rachel, leaning up beside her with a smile, angling them so that the gorgeous sunset was right behind them. "Say cheese, tiny."

She took a few snaps of them smiling together, eventually working through Berry's nervousness and surprise until they were both relaxed and happy, the rising sun just peeking over their shoulders in the shots.

At that, they both just sat back and relaxed, watching the sun until it was fully up and into the sky. Santana had a feeling that it would be a good day.
It was only when she got downstairs to meet that diva that she immediately knew she was in trouble. Santana had expected some standard bikini, or some obnoxiously brightly patterned full torso one-piece monstrosity, but damn. From behind, she just assumed Rachel was wearing some normal white halter set or something, but the only thing more distracting than the diva's smile when Berry turned to look at her, honestly, every collective square inch of her deliciously sexy torso. It was the most glorious monokini Santana had probably ever witnessed, like the slingshot swimsuit's more sneakily sexy and more elegant Greek goddess cousin. It was drapey and sheer to a degree where it could probably almost be considered lingerie, but knowing Berry, it probably had something underneath to cover up the goods if the diva got wet. Still, there was a surprising accumulation of saliva in her mouth, which totally wasn't drool because it hadn't quite spilled past her lips or whatever. Santana did her best to ignore thoughts of her hands grazing over the material and the sun-kissed skin beneath and around it, but there were just a lot of distractions. Like the small mole or freckle just above the left side of Berry's hipbone. Or that tantalizing hint of sideboob.

Santana wasn't sure how long she was staring, but eventually, she noticed Rachel walking up the stairs, passing her. Confused, she looked over her shoulder at the diva. "Hey, wait, what's up?"

Rachel froze on the landing, fiddling with the two straps of fabric running mostly vertically over her upper body. "You don't need to say anything, Santana. I…I knew it was a mistake. I can't pull this off at all…" Rachel started, clearly incredibly nervous, and Santana felt like a total bitch. She'd made Rachel think the wrong thing, and if she'd paid more attention, she probably would have noticed that the girl really needed a compliment. A well deserved one. And really, Berry was often vocal about her need for applause, so Santana knew she should have expected that sort of reaction.

"Berry, go right back down to the kitchen and sit on a stool, okay?" Santana asked, gesturing firmly when the diva hesitated. Rachel eventually conceded, and sulked her way back down the stairs and over to sit on a stool, her arms covering her body as best as she could. Santana followed her and gently tugged at the girl's arms, forcing her to expose her body.

"My first thought when you turned around was honestly 'Holy fuck, Berry's absolutely killing that'. Okay? And then my mind went to a happy place because I came down here expecting you'd be wearing an argyle one-piece…and you were wearing THAT instead." Santana spoke fairly honestly, leaving out the lewd thoughts that had filled her head; it earned a befuddled look from the diva, who clearly didn't understand her, which was probably an effort in willpower from Berry herself.

"Seriously, do I really have to say it? You look…don't repeat this ever, but fuck…amazing. Hot. Scorching. Me gusta mas, Berry, te ves bien. And if it wasn't getting closer to winter than summer, I'd warn you about your tan lines, but seriously…no need to hide this. It would be criminal."

Rachel blushed, but she clearly wasn't convinced, her eyes boring into Santana's as if there were some hidden secret to find in her irises. "Santana, you don't have to coddle me just because I brought you here. You don't have to pretend to be nice to me." Rachel stated with a huff, and Santana instinctively took a step back, kind of hurt by the accusation, because fuck if she wasn't actually trying to be a cool houseguest, teammate, and sort-of-friend. She steeled her expression, pushing down her fiery temper so that she didn't go all Lima Heights on the deluded diva.

"Berry, listen closely, because I'm only going to say this once, and I hate repeating myself. Okay?" Santana said slowly, earning a nod from the diva, who was entirely focused on her. "Good. Berry, you've been surprisingly cool and fun, and really…nice…to be around. I've had a great time this weekend with you so far, and a big part of that is because you're not only easy to talk to, you're weirdly fun to talk to. But while that was a surprise and all, and it made me wonder if I needed to stop off at a mental hospital on the way back, nothing…NOTHING was as surprising as you
basically going from animal sweaters and argyle to…to THAT. Fuck. I mean…who are you?"

That final question was an honest one, if rhetorical, as Santana was feeling kind of blitzed by all these new details of a girl she thought she’d known well. Apparently not. Rachel was quiet for a moment as she seemed to process Santana's words, her smile inching bigger with every second. "I'm Rachel Barbra Berry." The diva spoke with audible pride, and Santana couldn't help but smile reflexively, even though Rachel was literally extending her hand for a handshake. It was absurd. Patently ridiculous.

She gamely took Berry's hand and gently shook it, rolling her eyes. "Santana Maria Lopez." She added, grabbing her phone from the counter. "Wanna take a picture of this momentous occasion?"

Rachel blushed, but sidled up against her as Santana went to take another selfie of them. She noticed Berry's blush deepened a little when she slung her arm across the shorter girl's shoulder, squeezing her closer. If JBI was going to get pictures of Rachel, they'd have her in every one, basically claiming her; not that she was, but she figured it'd keep him from doing anything stupid with them, given her somewhat fiery, violent rep at school.

Rachel's arm wrapped around her waist after the first picture was taken, and Santana figured another one or two wouldn't hurt, anyway. Besides, Rachel WAS looking damn fine, so it wasn't like she was at all embarrassed or whatever. After, she gestured to the door. "Sweet! Now, let's go and enjoy the sun, and thank god or whatever for the fact that there aren't any boys around to get their nosebleed on us."

"Santana!" Rachel yelled out, playfully slapping her arm, before freezing in place, her body akin to a statue.

"What? We're hot shit! Puck would have fainted by now, and Finn would be literally yelling 'MAILMAN! MAILMAN!'" Santana laughed, before realizing Rachel wasn't laughing either, or changing her expression, or even fucking moving. It was freaky. "Berry, you alright?"

She watched the diva closely, the smaller girl's eyes narrowing as they slowly scanned her body. Santana stood and modeled cheekily, not sure why Berry insisted on intensely ogling her at that precise moment, but if she needed to get it over with so they could get out to the beach, she'd do it. She was proud of her body now, and if a friend of hers appreciated it, she was cool with showing it off. No biggie. Posing was fun.

"They touched you." Rachel's tone was dark with a cold fury she'd pretty much only ever heard from Quinn before, forcing Santana to turn back around from her modeling pivots to face Rachel, who appeared to be vibrating, her lower lip quivering as the girl reached out as touched one of the hand-shaped bruises on her waist. And just like that, Santana realized Rachel hadn't been ogling her, she'd been appraising the accrued damage from the past week.

"I'm okay, they…they didn't get far. Reminded them where I come from." Santana noted as confidently as she could manage, really not wanting to talk about her string of incidents from the past week. However, Rachel didn't seem to be comforted by the fact that she was still alive and healthy; standing in front of her, the diva was still staring in rage at the dark marks on her body. She sighed internally, knowing she'd have to improvise a plan B to assuage the tiny ball of fury in front of her.

"Rachel…look at me, okay? Look me in the eyes, alright? Please?" She asked, feeling kind of embarrassed that she was practically begging to get the girl's attention. Rachel reluctantly turned her gaze to Santana's face, her eyes wide and angry spilling with thin trails of tears. She'd honestly never seen the smaller girl so upset over something distinctly not Berry-related, so it was a little confusing. Santana could only hope that her improvised plan would work out. "I'm safe here with you. I'm safe.
They can't touch me anymore. You've already helped me so much, and I believe you, okay? That your lawyer friends will sort this all out and you'll have made me safe at school, too, okay? Just as safe as I am here with you."

Rachel just stood there as she had for the past few minutes, though her gaze softened and her jaw was trembling so much Santana was afraid it'd fall off. Deciding to get it over with, Santana opened her arms and gestured the girl in with her hands. She sort of expected the girl to tackle her into a hug, but Rachel slowly stepped into her personal space, placing both hands on her shoulders tenderly and laid her head against Santana's collarbone. It was different than what she expected, but it was a nice feeling, calming the diva down like that.

She enveloped the smaller girl and held her as Berry cried and sniffled, finding it odd that she was the one comforting Rachel, considering the tiny singer hadn't been the one who'd been constantly attacked and harassed all week long, at least not like how she had been. It was sort of nice to know someone cared that much, but she didn't want Rachel worrying about her. She really did want to trust that the ACLU would get the school to act. And honestly, she just didn't want Berry to cry, so she let herself rub Rachel's back, whispering hopefully soothing words in the girl's ears, telling her she was alright and all. Santana wasn't sure what else she could do at that point but hold Berry close and wait it out.

After a few minutes of sobbing, Berry managed to calm herself down to the point where she was just leaning onto the taller girl, rubbing Santana's shoulders tenderly as she remained in her grasp.

"San?" She heard Rachel speak, for the first time in a long stretch. She gave a wordless hum of acknowledgement, sort of showing her approval for the shortening of her name, thankful that the girl could use words. Thankful enough to plant a brief kiss to the top of the diva's head in encouragement after a long silence. Nothing wrong with continuing an intimate moment or whatever; it honestly hadn't been super awkward or weird or anything. "I need to see the ocean rinse you clean."

Santana quirked her mouth; it was an odd choice of words, but she sort of understood. The ocean was Rachel's place to let her troubles wash away into the ocean. It made a twisted sort of sense that she might need to see her in the water. However, her flirty side was on red alert, especially after having held Berry's scorching body for a good ten minutes. "You just wanna get me wet, Berry." She teased, pulling away to see that Rachel was still kind of catatonic and dazed, albeit a little redder in her cheeks. "Come on, I thought you'd never ask."

Rachel was kicking and screaming. Or shrieking, perhaps. Santana wasn't entirely sure, but she'd spent about two hours alone among the waves while the diva tanned on the beach. Which, she totally understood, because tanning was awesome, especially when tanning beds weren't necessary, but they were vacationing along the Atlantic coastline. And Rachel hadn't swum yet.

So that's how she found herself rushing toward the waves, hauling Berry in a fireman carry toward the water, laughing maniacally as the smaller girl wriggled and wailed in her grasp. When the water got knee deep, she dove forward, letting the diva go as they both tumbled into the salty waves.

Rachel came up sputtering, an absolutely non-threatening scowl on her face as Santana tried not to laugh too hard. Of course, she failed, and wasn't sure she'd ever laughed so hard, but hey, whatever. It was hilarious.

"Santana! You…I was perfectly fine on the beach!" the girl yelled angrily, already storming her tiny diva legs toward the sand again, but Santana wasn't about to let that happen quite yet.

She grabbed the diva by the waist and wrestled her further into the water, giggling all the while as
Rachel renewed her kicking and screaming. Eventually, they got to a reasonable depth, and Santana let go, giving the smaller girl a pleading look, ignoring her shouts of protest.

"Swim with me? Please?" she asked, jutting out her lower lip in an attempt to sucker the girl into agreeing. Rachel's face briefly flashed in amusement before schooling back into her previous annoyed expression.

"No! I prefer tanning, and had no plans on swimming today. The water…the water's cold." Rachel stated firmly, though stumbling over her words a bit when it came to her excuse. Which Santana clearly saw through. Rachel had never been a good liar.

"The water's fine, you're not shaking, are you? No. So just…give me a few minutes. I don't want to swim alone." She added, playing the guilt card, which she wasn't so surprised worked quite effectively. It made Santana feel a little bad, but it wasn't like swimming was such a terrible thing.

Rachel averted her gaze out toward the ocean, a worried look taking over her face. "I…I'm not a good swimmer." Rachel stated quietly, and Santana could believe it. There weren't many lakes near Lima, and not a heck of a lot of places to swim that weren't painfully public, so it made sense for Berry to be sub-par. "I tried lessons when I was young and almost drowned, and I…I'm just not a fan of swimming." The girl finished, shooting her a sad smile.

Santana nodded and waded closer to Rachel, a plan forming immediately. "I'll take you in, it'll be fine." she said softly, giving Rachel a smile she hoped was encouraging. "In the summer, Sue signs the whole squad up for a pool membership at that club over on the west side. One of her friends runs the place and makes sure we go in and do a bunch of sprints and endurance trials at least two or three times a week. I worked as a lifeguard there this past summer, too… I won't let anything happen to you. You're safe with me."

Rachel looked at her hesitantly, glanced back at her vacant chair on the beach, and then back at Santana before nodding. Feeling a little proud of the diva, Santana swam a short distance from Rachel, where the shore underneath them dropped off fairly steeply, hoping to show the girl how to tread, at the very least.

"Now, there's one thing you need to know about swimming. Honestly, it's like dancing, you just need to know how to position your body and do basic motions. You'll be great at it, I promise, it's no trickier than a plié. And salt water helps you float better, so you're totes gonna rock this." Santana said encouragingly as Rachel moved closer, clearly on her tiptoes so that her head and neck would stay comfortably above the water. The diva looked understandably hesitant, but was watching closely, which Santana was happy about. "Now, I'm going to cover what to do with your arms first, then your legs, okay? To start off, make sure you're good and vertical, and that your body's relaxed. From there, all you need to do is close your hands like flippers, palms facing the way you want to push the water, so backward in my case…and with your wrists stiff and your arms close to the surface of the water, you slowly push the water back like this." She added, performing the slow breaststroke like action, Berry still watching intently.

"And then, you just turn your hands and push the water back the way you came. Still slow, you don't want to waste energy. From where you are, can you just give a few practice runs for me, Rach?"

Santana asked, hoping Rachel would have the guts to go through with it all. Already, she was having more fun than she had for the hour she was alone in the water. Having company made things better, even if she was shifting into lifeguard mode.

Rachel bit that lower lip of hers yet again, but the girl started moving her arms slowly, watching Santana and falling into rhythm with her. She smiled at the diva and nodded, and could tell Berry was gaining a little confidence. "Great, just like that. Now, I'm gonna come over there and get you,
and we'll work on your legs, okay? It'd be easier to see what's going on in a pool, but we can do this out here, and you're not about to drown on my watch. Not even close, I'm actually gonna lift you just enough to get your feet off the ground so you can practice, okay?"

At that Rachel nodded in relief, likely having thought she'd be taken into the deep waters. Which, really, would be just as safe, but Santana knew the girl needed all the confidence she could get. She made her way up beside Berry and wrapped her arms snugly around the girl's waist, only briefly wondering what it'd feel like if she was holding her from the front or the back instead. Still, Rachel looked determined as their eyes met.

"Okay, so I know you've got stamina taken care of with those crazy morning workouts of yours, so I'm not worried about you getting tired. Still, when we get out there, you tell me if you're feeling a little winded, okay?" She asked, wanting to add a little assumption that they would get out there, hopefully to help Rachel believe that'd be the end result. She wasn't expecting the girl to be an amazing swimmer by any stretch, she just hoped they could float out there for a bit.

When Rachel nodded, she continued. "Okay, so leg movements are really simple. It's just like doing smallish scissor kicks, with your feet pointing down. You go slowly, just like with your arms, and just keep repeating the motions. Okay?" Santana asked, earning a quick nod from Berry, who was looking a little determined, which was cool, because she wasn't sure how long she could hold a wet Rachel Berry up. It'd have to be long enough. "Good, so I'm going to lift you a little, and I just want you to do a few repetitions for me. I'll point something out if I see anything, like, wrong, but I think you've got this."

Lifting Rachel wasn't actually too bad, and as soon as she got the girl off the sand, Rachel was slowly moving her legs back and forth like she asked. Really, treading wasn't a difficult thing to do, and she was pretty hopeful that when she got Berry at that edge where the shore dropped off, that Berry would be fine.

After a half minute or so of that, she let Rachel down, gave her an approving smile, and started leading her into deeper waters. "Okay, and if you get tired, again, tell me. Or fill your lungs with air, lean yourself backward, and relax your body…you'll float, and I'll be right there with you. Or, just grab onto me and force me to be right there with you, your call." She finished with a laugh, hoping to dissipate some of the newfound nervousness she was seeing across Rachel's face. "We're just going to the edge…two quick strokes backward and you'll have your feet on the ground, so there's nothing to fear."

At that, she gently pulled Rachel from where it fell off, taking hold of Berry's hands and keeping them a small distance apart. "Okay, I can tell your legs are moving, slow them down for me just a little, chiclet. I need you to be calm and to trust me. Can you trust me?" Santana asked, earning a slow nod from the diva; it was about as good as she was gonna get from the girl, so she gave Rachel's hands a light squeeze and let them go.

Rachel immediately began moving her hands like Santana had taught her, and while she was happy that Rachel wasn't letting herself sink like a rock, and was instead treading pretty well, the girl was still moving too fast. "Easy, slow your arms down a little, but you're doing great. See? You're treading water. Now just stay vertical, breathe calmly, keep your movements at that speed and you're perfect."

Offering the diva a smile, she did a brief lap around Rachel, checking her form, before deciding it was pretty good. "Nice work, tiny. See? Now you can't say you're bad at swimming."

"You…you know, I had plans for today. Books to read, music to listen to, things to think about and plan…" Rachel murmured, and even though she couldn't see her face at that moment, Santana could
"Only you would have a plan on how to make plans, Berry." Santana laughed, shaking her head at the girl's ridiculousness. It was kind of endearing. "And it's nice to give into impulse sometimes, do something new and fresh, get out of your comfort zone…"

"Is that why you're doing this?" Rachel asked, her hesitance gone, replaced with a healthy dose of curiosity. Berry, more and more, was reminding her of Tinkerbell; tiny, cute, and unable to feel more than one emotion at once, or for a lengthy amount of time. It was funny how the girl switched gears so quickly.

Santana took a moment to let the question sink in, deciding honesty would be the best policy. "I just wanted to swim with you. But I also kinda didn't want to leave you alone to your thoughts for too long. And when you told me you couldn't swim, I just wanted you to."

"I can swim, I just…I'm not good at it." Rachel argued weakly, the pout in her voice having returned in full force.

"Well, if it makes any difference, you're a quick learner, and I'm happy you gave it a shot today. I'm taking you to the club sometime, and I'm teaching you to swim before you go on your next vacation." Santana stated confidently, and Rachel shifted slightly to face her, the diva's dark, wet hair just freaking sparkling in the sun, framing her face in a way that she couldn't help but think was really pretty. Like, steal the air from your lungs pretty. It was kind of absurd, so she decided to keep talking to hopefully get past it. "I want you to be able to enjoy any of the crazy beaches you and your fathers visit, I want you to be able to feel confident swimming out here. And, as you might be aware, it's a practical skill to have in case of emergency."

"Oh…okay. I…suppose that would be helpful. Only if you're certain, though." Rachel mumbled, not sounding entirely against the idea, just a fair bit nervous.

Santana shifted in the water to face the beach at that point, thinking that maybe they could just tan for the rest of the morning after this. She knew she could go deeper, but she didn't want to push Rachel too much in one day, and she'd seemed to get the message across to the girl anyway. "I'd really like to. Like I said, it's like dancing, and you're good at dancing. You'll be great at it, I promise. And then we can both re-enact the scene from Dr. No at some beach this summer and make everyone jealous."

"Th…this summer?" Rachel stammered out, two words that Santana didn't quite understand until a previous conversation flickered through her mind.

"Well, I know I just met you this morning, but we're friends, right?" Santana asked cheekily, earning an amused huff. "Seriously, I told you you're alright, Berry. That means I'm totes entitled to at least one beach day hangout this coming summer. Even if it's at the freaking reservoir, though I'd prefer a real beach. With jealous bystanders."

Rachel didn't say anything, she just grinned and rolled her eyes as Santana gestured for them to head back to the shore and shallower waters. She honestly couldn't complain, not with how big of a smile that was gracing both of their faces.

As expected, they spent the rest of the morning, and much of the afternoon, sunbathing. The breeze was delightfully warm, the sun was glorious, and the smell of the ocean was soothing as hell. In short, it was fantastically relaxing, and while Santana hadn't really talked much with Berry for the rest of their time by the water, they still interacted. Both needed help with their sunscreen occasionally, they routinely swapped positions from relaxing under the shade of the umbrella and
being stretched out under the sun, Santana handed out their lunches, and Rachel made sure both were properly hydrated. She was sure they did some other stuff, too, like burying Berry in sand for a bit to cool her off, but it wasn't all that important to remember, anyway. They'd been quiet, but it wasn't like they were ignoring each other at all. Santana was sure Berry would have called it coexisting peacefully, but she just called it hanging out.

They hauled their equipment in around five to wash up and prep for dinner after a nice long day by the water. Santana spent the first half hour back from the beach calling her parents to let them know she was doing okay; she'd left them a message after packing, but figured her parents would feel better having a more recent update. That discussion went back and forth for a bit before she finished up and headed in for a nice, long, lukewarm shower. A bath sounded a bit more compelling, but the sand stuck to her body had her thinking otherwise, and Rachel had been busy with the outdoor shower.

It took a while to wash and condition her hair, dry it, and then straighten it, and by the time she left the confines of the washroom, it was getting on in hours, and the scent of dinner was wafting upstairs into her room. Knowing her bed was the greatest seductress in the land, she opted for a seat in a comfy, cushioned wicker chair in the corner of her room, just relaxing and enjoying the peace and calm.

It was only when music drifted from the main floor and into her ears that she found herself curious enough to leave the room she'd grown fond of.

Santana descended the stairs and she had to do her best to suppress her laughter at the sight of Rachel doing the robot in the kitchen, while apparently cooking. 'Robot Rock' was blaring from the sound system in the living room, and Berry seemed to be in her own little bubble as she got food ready. Santana didn't often see Rachel dance anything but Schuester's lame choreography, but she knew the girl had skills. Berry was no Brittany, but she knew the girl did damn well in her dance classes; it was just interesting to see Rachel let loose a little and have fun with what she's worked hard for. However, the scent of burning food forced her legs into the kitchen, because if Rachel was sacrificing a meal just to keep in time with her dance, then that just wouldn't do. Santana was hungry, after all.

She slipped quietly around Rachel and eyed up what the diva was making; it looked vegan, and it was salvageable. Only a few crispy, burnt veggies. Just as she went to stir them in the pan, a limb robotically came into contact with her, followed by a loud shriek. Santana allowed herself a laugh at the shocked diva's expense, continuing to look over the meal that was being prepped. "I didn't think robots could make such convincing analog sounds." Santana noted with amusement, occasionally glancing over at the smaller girl who was still breathing heavy and clutching her chest. "I admire your commitment to dance but I wasn't going to let you ruin the food."

"I wasn't going to ruin it." Rachel mumbled petulantly, leaning up against the island behind Santana, pouting fiercely. "I just...burn things sometimes."

Santana rolled her eyes. As if burning food to a crisp wasn't ruining it, like, ninety five percent of the time. "Do you cook often?" she asked, lifting an eyebrow that was more instinctive than anything; she was pretty sure with Rachel behind her that the diva couldn't see it.

"Not often, no. My family tends to order in most nights, because of our schedules and...well, other reasons." Rachel answered hesitantly, and Santana couldn't help but feel a little relieved at the answer, even if she wondered what other reasons there could be.

"Good, then I'll handle the cooking while we're here. You've done enough already." Santana stated firmly, but not unkindly, as she took the veggies off the heat and readied another batch, quickly
moving over to check the sauce before tossing the pasta in the pot of boiling water.

"Santana…" Rachel started, but Santana tossed up a hand, much like she'd done earlier in the day, halting the other girl's statement.

She took a moment to add salt to the water first, before spinning around to face the diva. "I almost never feel guilty for having an awesome time and having someone cater to me, alright? I feel like I've been taking advantage of you already, and that's kind of shitty, so just let me have this, and never speak of it again." She spoke quickly, turning back to the food as 'Robot Rock' faded into a song she'd never heard before, but was clearly once again the furthest thing from a show tune. The fuzzy synths and dark dance beat were intriguing, and when she looked back to Rachel and saw her looking incredibly nervous, she figured that she'd done something wrong. "You dance when you cook, and that's why it always burns." Santana guessed, smirking when the diva pouted at her.

"It…doesn't ALWAYS burn…" Rachel mumbled again, and Santana could barely keep from rolling her eyes yet again. Not that it was out of frustration or annoyance, she just figured it was a pretty obvious conclusion, no matter that it was somewhat cute that Berry danced while cooking.

"But you always dance. Well, I'm sorry for interrupting your fun, but you can still dance." Santana said, hoping to see more of the girl's dance moves, though the diva looked entirely noncommittal. She really didn't want Rachel feeling uncomfortable in her own sanctuary, so she decided to take some initiative. "Hey, why don't you come back over here and take the reins again, and I'll just make sure nothing burns. But…only if you dance."

Rachel looked back up to her and frowned in confusion, though the girl's expression quickly shifted into anxiety and her gaze averted. "You'll laugh, I'm not very good outside of ballet and jazz."

Santana knew that was a bald-faced lie. On countless occasions, Britt came back from dance classes rambling about how good Rachel was. Well, she used the word 'hot' or 'sexy' more than 'good', and I'd usually have to…relieve her tension...so Berry can't be that bad, and she isn't cosplaying as a female Benjamin Button, either...she's still the same girl I kinda drooled over this morning… Santana mused, thinking that the simple black tank top and yoga pants looked pretty great on her. "Britt always went on about how good of a dancer you are, so don't give me that crap. Just start this song over, because it's fucking awesome, and come back here and dance with me." It was true, the song was sexy as hell, and Santana had a lot of nervous energy built up over the week that she wanted to dance off.

Rachel's eyes were still averted, but they widened at her words, the girl visibly gulping before slowly moving over to her iPod dock to start the song again. Santana smiled and began moving to the slow intro; dancing had always been her favourite outlet for stress relief, a fact that most students at McKinley probably would have been surprised about given her rep. She just liked how freeing it was, and even though she didn't take many classes, it didn't mean that she didn't take the initiative and teach herself what she wanted to know. It'd always been personal, intimate, and Santana didn't enjoy the idea of dancing around in a class of thirty other people. So if Berry knew what was good for her, she'd appreciate this.

When she looked over her shoulders once the main melody hit, she saw Rachel fidgeting nervously, so she sashayed over to the diva and decided to force the issue. Santana slipped a hand to the small of Rachel's back and used her other to grasp the girl's right hand. Brittany had always been an absolute genius dancer and choreographer, and in sophomore year, the blonde had come up with this crazy tango hybrid mash-up that incorporated more modern dance elements; traditionalists would label it a desecration, but it made for a lot of fun nights brainstorming and working out the kinks. While her memories of it with B were filled with sexual tension, she just wanted to get Berry more
comfortable, and figured getting her dancing would help. But hey, she knew what the diva was probably capable of and didn't want to just give her a free pass, either.

She took the lead, slowly working them backward, knowing the veggies wouldn't be ruined by the time they got back so long as she was successful. Rachel followed nervously, her eyes everywhere but on Santana's own, but she was happy the diva was starting to feel the music a little. Santana spun Rachel out, their hands still linked, and for a moment, Rachel's curious gaze fell upon her own, and Santana couldn't help but grin. She spun her back in, Rachel squeaking out in surprise when Santana stepped into her movement, cut off the spin, and brought their hands down to Rachel's waist, the diva's back held against Santana's front as she moved their hips together. Surprisingly, Rachel adapted quickly, her free hand shooting up and holding the back of Santana's neck as they moved together.

From there, Santana worked through the motions, pleased to take the lead and show off the choreography both her and Britt worked so hard on, one of their free hands occasionally leaving the other's body to stir the food or remove it from heat. Both of their bodies moved seamlessly in time with each other, each instigating the odd sensual gesture or pose that would be followed up by their partner soon after; Santana couldn't help but notice, though, that Berry got a bit more aggressive as the music went on and the diva started improvising. She'd led them both at the start, and that eventually changed to something of a tidal system, each rolling into and receding from each other equally. However, Rachel was touching her more, pressing deeper into her already minimal personal space, the diva's body molding against her a lot more often than she'd expected.

With each new song came a new style, and by the end of the fourth song, Rachel was seriously into her groove, and it was kind of jaw-dropping that Britt had been right. Her eyes traced the other girl's movements as Berry moved her body fluidly to some other unknown dance track; the brunette was absolutely on fire, and Santana wasn't even ashamed to admit it. Sure, the diva didn't instantly make her wet like Britt's dancing used to, but there were very familiar reactions through their dancing, especially when Berry's fingers would graze her skin adventurously, sometimes with a hint of desperation. Soft, gentle, feminine fingers, by the way.

It took her a moment to gather her thoughts after a particularly risqué and nearly lewd touch from Rachel, which she thankfully used to finish up the prep for dinner and get the food onto plates and over to the island. Santana knew she was a lady-lover of the first degree; it was just how she was, and since beingouted, she refused to be apologetic about it. Women were fucking hot, it was a fact of life. Sure, she'd teased Berry over her fashion sense and height, and made the occasional insult about her nose or her heritage, and once or twice called her a troll, but most of that was smoke and mirrors. It wasn't like she wanted all up on Berry's berries before, but she'd been caught staring a few times, because damn that girl's skirts were short; so she'd played it off by scowling and insulting her, so as to not give her the wrong idea.

But hundreds of miles from Lima, with Berry in a kitchen, dancing with her like a freaking succubus, she was pretty okay with admitting her attraction. Not like she'd do anything about it, as those were desires she was less willing to admit to even mentally. Also, seeing as Rachel was entirely straight as far as she knew, it would be fruitless, but she felt surprisingly comfortable with the fact that Berry had it going on. And she was sweet as a fucking sugar cookie, too. Wait, she bakes sugar cookies too, right? Lord, help me...

When Rachel saw the plates set out on the table, she quickly rushed over to the iPod dock and lowered the volume, before grabbing a bottle of wine and returning to the table. Santana raised a questioning eyebrow, but went and gathered two wine glasses anyway, not having expected Berry to be into underage drinking after the whole Ke$ha vomit party incident.
"Thank you for your help, Santana, I fear I would have forgotten about the food like usual and burned it, and then we would have ordered in, or taken time to make even more food and…" Rachel started, her rambling quick and nervous, and Santana wondered how someone could flip the switch from sensual and seductive to endearingly cute in a heartbeat.

"No worries, tiny. I like my food edible, and it was fun dancing with you. You're just like Britt said you'd be." Santana said as she coiled some noodles around her fork's spokes, her voice a little husky still from the lingering arousal their dancing had inspired. It was unintentional, but the pink blush on Rachel's face made up for it.

"Um…well, I suppose she always did smile at me and hug me after dance classes, but she never said anything to inform me of any sort of reputation, and…" Rachel prattled on, her voice fading off for a moment as she met Santana's amused eyes. "What is it? I'm annoying you aren't I? I'm sorry, I'm not used to having company here, and I'm certainly not used to talking with you in anything resembling a polite conversation, and while we did have our moments in the car, at the restaurant, this morning in the kitchen, and in the water today, I fear I've overstepped and made…"

Santana laughed and placed a hand over one of the ones that had been tapping away nervously on the countertop. "Easy. I can handle a little rambling, you don't need to freak out. You…" Santana was quiet for a moment as she thought of how to thank the girl across the island from her. It wasn't often she had to thank anyone for anything; normally what she wanted, she accomplished from hard work or from fear, not someone giving it to her selflessly.

It was weird, and she wasn't sure how to go about it, but she needed to in order to dissipate the remaining sexual tension in the room. So it was a necessity, but confusing as hell. Santana was pretty sure the last time she said 'Thank you' sincerely was back in sixth grade when a teacher gave her a lollipop after she fell and scraped her knee during recess. "You've been the only one really trying hard to help me, and I don't understand why you would, but I'm happy you did. Thanks, Rachel."

Rachel blushed hard and unleashed her radiant megawatt smile. "You're very welcome, Santana. I'm happy to help however I can." The girl stated cheerfully as she took a sip of her white wine. Santana wasn't sure why Berry would be happy to help her, because she just figured her situation was probably karma for being such a raging bitch all the time. Sure, she liked using her wit, and insults were always a fun outlet for it and her creativity, but she didn't really want to keep hiding herself away if it meant everyone hated her. Ever since her fall from grace, she realized she hadn't had any real friends at all. Well, except apparently Rachel Berry…and Quinn and Britt when it's convenient now. Or when they have time for me.

After dinner was done and Santana finished the clean up, something Rachel protested loudly about from the living room couch where she'd been banished to, Santana mentally went over her options of what she could do. She looked over to the living area and saw Rachel curled up on the couch, humming along to a soft jazz number, and figured she could just relax there if she wanted to. Her eyes then went toward the stairwell, and the image of the ocean and beach filled her mind. The balcony had been relaxing and really peaceful as well.

"Come upstairs with me?" she asked, the words out of her mouth before really giving them any thought. She watched Rachel lift a questioning gaze to her, the diva's head cocked slightly to the side in curiosity, clearly waiting for an explanation. Santana wasn't sure what else to say, she hadn't really meant to ask the girl for company, even if she did want it a little bit. "I just need to…it's nice up there on the balcony."

Not waiting for a reply, because who the hell wanted to get rejected, Santana opened the nearby linen closet and grabbed two blankets just in case before almost dashing upstairs and out to her
balcony, taking a seat on the comfy chair she'd previously ignored the last time.

For a long ten or twenty minutes, Santana sat there alone, just taking in the sight, sound and smell of the ocean, trying to forget what just happened downstairs and why. As with anything involving her Snixx-like willpower, it worked; she'd never seen the beach at night before, at least in person. Looking at the crescent moon hanging over the horizon made everything so gloriously calming that she wasn't sure she'd be able to leave the chair until the morning. She needed to see another sunrise.

The sliding of a door broke her from her reverie; she didn't need to look to know Rachel had come out to the balcony from her own room, and was sitting down on the lawn chair a foot or two away. It was nice to know the girl was there, even if they were both quiet. Which they were, for at least an hour; it was serene to just relax in each other's presence, by the Atlantic shoreline. Much like they did that afternoon, but there was a different energy to it. Santana wasn't surprised when Rachel eventually spoke; she certainly didn't know what to say, so she figured if the girl wanted to talk, the diva could take the initiative.

"How do you feel?" the girl asked quietly, her words barely audible over the crashing waves beneath them.

Santana thought about the question, but not for long. It was one that had been on her mind ever since she'd been outed, and it had evolved over time. "Relieved. Relaxed…water's always calmed me. It's beautiful here." She answered, wrapping the blanket a little tighter around her legs; it wasn't getting all that chilly outside, but it was chilly enough, and it was always cooler around water, especially with the sun down.

"You're not still upset about…about last Friday?" Berry asked hesitantly, drawing a sigh from Santana's lips. It was complicated, for certain. Santana had never had a yes or no answer about her being outed. It was a mess.

"I'm pissed that Finn did that, seeing as his brother's gay and his ex-girlfriend had two gay dads. I'm pissed that I lost control over something personal like that. I'm pissed that almost all my friends took Finn's side, or just refused to help me or show even a damn bit of support." Santana stated wearily, allowing herself to vent to Berry. She didn't really have anyone else at the moment, and she wasn't about to get picky after having been practically ignored by her two closest friends that she'd been BFFs with for close to a decade. "I'm pissed that even though I've been cooler to everyone in glee except Finn, who knowingly called on my wrath for hurting Britt and outing me, for some reason I'm still the villain. I'm pissed that some people see me as a challenge to be conquered over everything else. I'm pissed that even though I was consistently groped and harassed in school this week, with teachers and students nearby and watching, I wasn't given help. I'm pissed at all that, and that's not changing."

Rachel took a deep breath, and she expected the diva to lay out a long rant, but surprisingly she was succinct. "It's okay to be angry, Santana."

"I'd fucking hope so!" Santana growled out, though not toward Berry, just toward the water and the waves. "I'm a bitch, I've been a bad person sometimes, but I'm still human. I'm still a person."

"Which is why it's okay to feel other things aside from anger, Santana." Rachel added quietly, and while it was accurate, Santana didn't want to admit that quite yet. It wasn't anything she was comfortable speaking about, so she desperately changed gears.

"Whatever. Just…I'm free of that here. At least, I feel free of it, which is good enough for me. I just want a break from that right now, it's been a long week." She stated, earning an understanding nod from the smaller girl beside her. She waited a few moments to figure out whether she had the right to
ask Rachel about what question had been filling her mind for a while, until she realized Berry had asked her about being outed. Fair was fair.

"What's rattling away in that mind of yours, Berry?" Santana asked, putting on her best soft voice; it was one she usually reserved for Britt, but she figured that Berry deserved some tact and support from her in turn.

Rachel quietly fiddled with her fingers and the hem of her sweater for a long time, and eventually Santana turned her gaze from the smaller girl back to the ocean. She could be patient when she wanted to be, Britt had taught her that. It was all about wanting to be patient for someone, and she wanted to be a better person. That started with helping Berry out, if she needed an ear or a shoulder or whatever.

"Finn outed you." Rachel stated sadly, her head bowed so that her hair curtained her face from Santana's view. She didn't turn to the girl yet, she knew Berry was probably formulating a rant in her head, and needed the time and space to find the perfect way to explain her thoughts. "He did it without thinking. And he wasn't even remorseful afterward when he'd HAD time to think. When… when I told him to apologize…he…he came back to me later saying he'd tried to convince you and the Troubletones to come back to glee. He said he did it for the team."

Santana nodded; it sounded like Finn. He was a big stupid oaf, but he had a manipulative streak and was as self-centred as some of the worst as school. That he turned a promised apology into the eventual attempt at blackmail was a shock, even if it shouldn't have been. It made Santana wish she'd followed through with her desire to slap the idiot again after the mash-off performance.

"He was supposed to be the man I'd grow alongside, the man I'd marry. The one who I was supposed to look for in the audience while accepting my Tony award. I saw him in my future since sophomore year and then suddenly…I didn't anymore. I didn't know who he was anymore, and all week in my dreams…I couldn't see him there anymore." Rachel noted quietly, wringing her hands in the blanket covering her lap. "And on Monday when I saw him joking around with one of the boys I'd seen attack you earlier that day…I broke up with him. And I can't be with him again."

Santana's eyes widened at that confession; she'd always loathed Finn, always thought he was terrible for Berry, but she'd resigned herself to the reality that the diva would be dragged down and broken by Finn eventually. Stuck in Lima, doomed to teach music, her eyes and smile a little less bright with each passing year until the diva's passion eventually fizzled out forever. It wasn't something she thought about a lot, but she had thought about it a few times. The diva had dreams, and it always sucked seeing those extinguished, especially when someone had worked so hard to make them come true.

"So that's why I'm here. Just…trying to get over the idea of him, or who I thought he could be I guess, and figure out how to cope with knowing there's no one to fill the vacancy Finn left in my future plans."

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"So that's why I'm here. Just…trying to get over the idea of him, or who I thought he could be I guess, and figure out how to cope with knowing there's no one to fill the vacancy Finn left in my future plans." Rachel finished with a watery sigh, a sigh that Santana had heard before. She'd heard it a few times before; whenever anyone hit the girl when she was down, whenever someone's words or actions made their way past Berry's near impenetrable emotional defenses, Rachel would sigh like that. Santana knew, because she'd caused it a few times herself.

She stood up from her chair, her legs a little stiff as she walked the three steps over to Berry's chair and gestured for the diva to get to her feet. Rachel, her face streaked with tears, just looked away in embarrassment. "Berry, I know you just want a hug, so come up and get one before the offer expires." Santana noted softly with a little playfulness, hoping to ease the mood and reassure the girl she meant no harm in the gesture.

Almost immediately, Rachel was pressed up against her, her tiny diva arms wrapped tightly around
Santana, with her kinda pretty diva face in the former cheerleader's neck. Santana returned the hug and turned them around before slowly easing her way down onto Rachel's comfy lawn chair, stretching it out so that they could both comfortably just rest there. Rachel didn't seem to mind, adjusting her grip as Santana leaned back in the chair, Berry's face still crushed in her neck as the smaller girl occasionally sobbed and hiccupped. And here I thought I was the crier out of us two...

She just held the other girl tight with one arm, the other freed up to give the smaller girl a scalp massage. It was something Santana always liked when she was upset, and back in the day, Quinn gave the best ones. Britt was good too, but she wasn't Quinn. Either way, she hoped Berry would like hers, and that it'd help her relax, as crying girls tended to soften her up a bit more than she was comfortable with. Santana kind of didn't want to end up feeling like a human Squishable physically and emotionally any time soon.

"You'll find someone, okay, Berry? They'll totes get you and make you better because you'll want to be that for them, not because they'll demand it. They won't ask you to change who you are for them, and they'll support you in public like you deserve to be, okay? They'll be your biggest goddamn cheerleader when you hit Broadway for your first show, and they'll be your biggest cheerleader for your five-hundredth show." Santana whispered to the crying girl, gently continuing her ministrations on the diva's scalp, pleased to hear the odd hum of comfort from Rachel. "You don't settle when it comes to Broadway, so don't settle when it comes to the people you want in your life. I'm a perfect example of how alone you can end up when you settle for minions, acquaintances, symbols, and part-time friends instead of real friends that are worth being around."

Rachel shifted on top of her, the diva's messy hair obscuring part of her face as she looked up at Santana. "You're not alone." The girl spoke, her voice sincere and clear, her mocha brown eyes boring into Santana's own dark orbs.

"I know that now. Once upon a time, knowing one of my only friends was Rachel Berry would have made me question my sanity, but I think for the first time in a while, I'm thinking clearly. And I'm pretty happy." Santana stated softly, mussing up Berry's hair further, earning a surprisingly cute pout of annoyance. "I'd say I needed more people like you in my life if I didn't already know you're one of a kind anyway. I doubt anyone else in the world would be as forgiving, have as traumatizing of a fashion sense, and as awesome of a voice as you."

Rachel smiled shyly before again burying her head against Santana's shoulder, letting out what sounded to be a happy sigh. Which, in Santana's mind, was a pretty damn good thing. Hey, she just sort of complimented the fuck out of Rachel, so it made sense. Didn't hurt that it was all the truth, either. She didn't feel guilty anymore about the trip; instead, she felt it was exactly what the both of them needed to get through their recent crap luck.

Santana laid there with the smaller girl in her arms for an unknown amount of time, at least until a soft snore woke her from her daze. It was just relaxing to have the girl's warmth, to have comforted someone that wasn't Britt for the first time in a while, and to know Rachel would do the same for her if she ever needed it. Which would be a cold day in hell, but hey, she could admit that that part of her was a weakness. It was better to let herself feel sometimes, even if it was dangerous.

Gently and with as much grace as she could muster, Santana carried Rachel into the diva's room and deposited her on the bed. The girl's arms quickly went from around Santana's neck to around one of her pillows, clutching it tightly as her body curled into it. Santana silently thanked Sue Sylvester for all the strength training they'd been forced into doing that allowed her to carry the girl without dropping her or straining all that much. She carefully covered the Berry with the sheets, tucking her in, before shutting off the lights and returning to her own room to catch some sleep before dawn hit them both upside the head.
Sunday morning arrived with the same clear sky and brilliant sunrise as before, and both Santana and Rachel were there to meet it again on their beach towel by the water. This time, Santana had woke early enough to prepare a bigger breakfast with raspberry-cinnamon quinoa, blueberry scones, and strawberry jam oat bars for an extra snack. One might say she was 'berry' motivated to get some vegan cooking and baking under her belt, and Santana considered herself lucky that Rachel had the place stocked fairly well with food, as apparently her parents had been there the previous weekend doing minor repairs and decorating.

The morning passed much like the previous one, with plenty of tanning, though Rachel had heeded Santana's siren song and actually swam with her for a good half hour. It was a pleasant surprise, and Santana was just happy to hang out and have more pictures of the both of them having fun out there. Berry walking around in that heavenly swimsuit didn't hurt either.

Eventually, despite kind of loving their little bubble of reality, Santana had made the executive decision for Rachel to take her on a tour of the area. Berry happily obliged her, and they soon were packed up, changed and strolling down the coastline of Avon, North Carolina. The winds were getting a little stronger as the day went on, and there were clouds on the horizon, but it was still pretty damn clear and warm as hell, so Santana wasn't about to complain.

It was when they were crossing from the ocean-side shore to the side facing Pamlico Sound that Rachel broke their comfortable silence. "So, if I may ask, how are you enjoying the island, Santana?"

It was an odd question, given that she was pretty sure she'd answered that question at least twice already. "Warm weather, awesome beaches, houses on freaking stilts…definitely up my alley as far as vacation spots go." Santana answered, looking over to Berry curiously. "How'd the others like it?"

Rachel's confused expression was unexpected, the diva leaning up against the weathered wooden fence bordering the pathway. "What others?"

"I mean, you dated Finn for a while, and Jesse too…" Santana started, Rachel's mouth quirking to the side as the diva gazed at her, seemingly unimpressed. "Okay, maybe not. So sue me, I just figured you'd maybe brought Kurt up here, or at least one of them given how…you know…kinda romantic this place is."

Rachel sighed and gestured for them to continue toward the opposite coast on their thin strip of an island. "You're the first guest I've had here. Like I said before, this is my private sanctuary in the off season." Rachel explained, though the dramatic swoon shortly after caught Santana off guard and had her stepping behind Berry in case the girl fell backward. "It IS romantic though. Did you know 'Nights in Rodanthe' was filmed here? Rodanthe is just a few minutes north of here! Sometimes I go up there and just walk around and imagine that tale unraveling in front of me, with Richard Gere and Diane Lane falling in love as the sunset's glow basks us in that ever so romantic orangey magenta tint, and sometimes the homeowners there aren't even around to yell at me and tell me to get off their property, but I don't really understand the legality of having a private beach given that water and sand shift around so frequently, and…"

Santana shook her head and just grinned, halfway in disbelief that Berry was going on about the finer nuances of land ownership and how it conflicted with the theatricality and drama of life by the ocean and the freedom it supposedly stood for. One thing was for sure; Rachel was an absolute maniac. Still, that maniac had the weirdest ways of putting a smile on Santana's face, and she kind of didn't care all that much anymore that those ways were logically annoying as hell, because subjectively, they were endearing.
Rachel was winning her over. In less than a full weekend, she was finding herself enjoying the girl's company, and if that wasn't a sign of the apocalypse, she didn't know what was. Though, she knew that if the apocalypse did come, she'd take Berry along with her. They were pretty much friends, now, anyway.

So they walked, until they hit the beach at least; Rachel was still going on about the ethics of the landowners kicking her off the beach in Rodanthe, but Santana was all too happy to split her attention between that and the deliciously warmer waters. It wouldn't be too long before the storm hit, so there really wasn't any time for a lot of swimming, but maybe if she ended up there again in the coming years, she'd give it a shot.

Rachel was talking with her hands, dramatically narrating some incident that happened last year during a 'casual' stroll on the beaches up there, and she couldn't help it. She took a few incognito photos of the animated girl, then, feeling a need for a change of topic, sidled up to Berry and tickled her armpit.

Immediately, Rachel was lashing out and shrieking, Santana ducking away from the flurry of limbs Rachel was throwing around to protect herself. She couldn't help but laugh at how red-faced and wide-eyed Berry was, taking this ridiculous defensive stance as if the five or so feet between them would disappear in an instant and Santana would be in tickling range again.

"Well, at least I know you're ticklish now." Santana added between laughs, Rachel huffing and crossing her arms cautiously, still glaring at her, though the petulant pout let her know Berry wasn't THAT upset.

"You could have learned that fact if you asked nicely, Santana. There was no need to test your hypothesis on me. Participant consent and experimental ethics are of utmost importance, I'll have you know." Rachel's words were a little stilted, and certainly flowing at a quicker pace than usual, but Berry just seemed on edge for being caught off guard. Not angry or hurt or anything, which was good. Santana liked to know how far she could push her friends. It was useful, and fun, and she was never malicious about it.

"Well, last I recall, experimenters of a lot of studies don't tell their participants about the nature of their study, but instead misdirect them a little." Santana retorted with a raised eyebrow, knowing they'd both taken their fair share of AP courses and knew enough about basic experimental methods to keep going for a while on that, which she really wasn't in the mood to do. Putting on her best 'apologetic-puppy-dog' face she could muster, Santana took a hesitant step forward. "Didn't mean to get you mad, tiny."

Rachel's expression shifted almost comically from an upset diva a few moments from a storm-out (on principle, of course) to this soft, doe-eyed one as Berry closed the distance between them and placed her hands on Santana's shoulders.

"It's okay, Santana. I was…merely caught off guard, not upset, and as someone who is incredibly ticklish, I tend to get defensive in those situations." Berry said with a reassuring smile, letting Santana feel a little more comfortable lightly resting her hands on Rachel's hips. The diva surprisingly just took a half step closer, her smile growing, but a questioning glint in her eyes remained.

"I get it. I mean, I know I'd probably get a little defensive if you did that…" Santana noted, resting her forehead against Berry's, a slow grin almost giving Rachel enough time to realize she was in dangerous territory. "Or this!" She yelled out, sweeping her hands up to tickle Rachel's ribs and armpits once more, sending the diva into a shrieking, flailing wreck, both of them tripping and tumbling into the sandy coastline beneath them. Santana couldn't help but laugh as she mercilessly tickled the hell out of the diva, but it surprisingly didn't last long, because she really hadn't expected
Rachel to get out from under her in one swift motion and flip her onto her back. Fucking ninja diva.

Now, Santana was a LITTLE ticklish. Not too much, but it was almost like Berry knew exactly where her worst spots were on instinct, mainly her legs and her sides. And if Rachel was anything, she was determined to be the best, and Berry was damn good at keeping her locked down in the sand, nullified with the diva sitting on her.

Eventually, through her tears and forced laughter, she realized Rachel was straddling her. Like, seriously, they were on the beach in the shortest of denim shorts, and Rachel's tank top had ridden up to expose her abs, and it was pretty much all she could do to distract herself. Being tickled helped, until Rachel hit her sweet spot, one of the diva's hands working her stomach now.

"NO! Fuck n…no! Not there…fuck…anywhere e…else!" She wheezed out between laughs, heat building up in her core at both the situation she was in and the fact that Berry had inadvertently discovered one of her more potent erogenous zones.

"See how YOU like being tickled, Santana! It's not so funny now, is it!?" Rachel yelled out with an intensity she was probably a little turned on by, but it was kind of hard to distinguish between all of it, given Rachel was touching her in a very nice if currently inappropriate way, was straddling her, and looked like a sun-kissed girl from a really hot, kickass music video or something. It was hard to focus her energy on escaping with all of that going on, even with her hatred of being vulnerable at play, counteracted by Rachel's toned, compact frame and steely determination.

Rachel, waist-deep in her little post-tickle-victim power trip, didn't seem to notice Santana's laughter was falling off in favour of mostly stifled moans and whimpers, and that her body wasn't wriggling away from Berry but writhing toward her. And yeah, she had two free hands, but one was busy trying to push Rachel off her to save face with the increasingly risky situation, and the other was trying to fend off the tickling to no success.

So when it started to get a LITTLE too hot and heavy for her comfort, she abandoned trying to get the diva off her and instead decided to focus on covering her most important areas first and foremost, swatting Berry's hands away from her midsection and covering it. Of course, Rachel tried to pry her hands away, but it gave her enough of a breather to catch her breath, calm a bit, and form some well-needed words.

"Berry unless…unless you're DTF here in public right now and up to finish the job, you're not gonna touch me there again. O…okay?" Santana practically breathed out, just trying to get some strength behind her words with her body feeling like jelly from arousal and exertion.

Rachel stilled her movements momentarily, her hands gripped around Santana's, and just looked down at her with a puzzled twist of her mouth. "DTF? I'm…not familiar with that acronym, nor do I believe tickling is a profession."

Santana let out a frustrated sigh, because of course, virgin extraordinaire Rachel Berry would be one of the few who don't know what she's talking about. "Rach…you're a smart girl…but next time you've got another girl under you…maybe pay a little more attention…to what she's doing." She stated between breaths, feeling thankful that Berry hadn't resumed her assault. "For future reference, my stomach…is not real ticklish."

"Santana, you can't lie to me. You were reacting rather strongly to my focusing on that area, and you won't convince me otherwise. It's okay to admit you're ticklish." Rachel stated with a pointed look, as if to warn her from telling another lie or something. Seriously.

"I'm not ticklish there, but…" Santana started, really not wanting to admit anything honest, because it
could really make things awkward between them. However, Rachel's immediate prying of Santana's hands quickly had words spilling out of her mouth in frustration. "For fuck's sake, it's an erogenous zone, okay? A really strong one. It's weird. Whatever, get off me."

Rachel was still as the diva continued straddling her, the girl's hands slowly moving away from Santana's stomach. "An...erogenous...you mean to tell me that...I got you...oh fiddlesticks...oh dear..."

Santana let out a weak laugh at how red Rachel was getting, the girl's brown eyes darting between Santana's own and the stomach Berry had been ravishing. There HAD been an instinct to throw the diva off her violently, but that kind of dissipated given the girl's absolutely stupid handle on the English language. "Yeah, fiddlesticks... wow. Okay, anyway, I tried to warn you, but...well..."

Rachel nodded at that and clambered off a fairly embarrassed Santana, letting the ex-cheerleader shakily get to her feet. Thankfully, Rachel's arm around her waist helped, and soon she felt good enough to walk down the sandy shore again. "I apologize for the results of my ministrations, Santana, though I do feel this was educational for the both of us. You learned the consequences of tickling me, and that I can indeed wrestle you to the ground in self defense, while I learned a surprising intimate detail of yours by accident and will carry the embarrassment of my lack of awareness for quite some time."

"Yeah, real educational. Though if your hands ever stray there again, best believe I'll expect you'll know what you're doing, Rach." Santana noted, hoping to shake the focus away from her and get Berry to change the topic through added awkwardness. She really didn't care to talk about things that would have her thinking of Berry topping her or whatever. It was bad enough that she had gotten worked up inadvertently.

However, her plan didn't exactly work. "I suppose that's fair, although I must say it's rather odd to find that tummy rubs have such an effect on you. I may find myself too curious to refrain one day." Berry noted with a sly bit of amusement, side-eyeing her pretty hard as they made their way onto a wooden walkway back inland.

"Tummy? Really? Only you, Berry." Santana scoffed, not understanding how Rachel could be clinical with her vocabulary in so many ways, yet default to freaking 'tummy' instead of stomach or abdomen. Seriously. "And whatever. Kitty has claws, tiny, so you'd be looking at two possible reactions you want no part of, comprende?"

"Please, Santana. If you were an animal, you'd be a dog instead of a cat...possibly a Rottweiler...you're too loyal, as is perfectly clear, since you didn't annihilate me for putting you in a vulnerable situation back there. You wouldn't hurt your friends, at least not for tickling you or...well...you know. But you can indeed be vicious when you feel the need to be, and I will respect that when considering sating my curiosities." Rachel rambled thoughtfully, and Santana guessed the diva made a little bit of sense; Rottweilers WERE pretty badass. She supposed she could accept that.

"Whatever, so long as you get that Snixx barks AND bites, Rach. Anyway, where are we going now?" She asked, happy to have diverted the discussion in another direction, and happy to have her feet on solid, unshifting ground for a while.

Rachel's arm looping around hers wasn't any sort of answer, but thankfully Berry gave one, even if it took a little nudging. "Alright, alright, stop being so impatient, Santana. You said you wanted a tour, and we have been out here walking around for a few hours, but the storm's approaching and I wanted to stop by my favourite pizza place while we're here."

Santana smiled at the thought of pizza before her HBIC instincts kicked in, clarifying the situation.
"Berry, I told you I'd cook the meals, we don't need to eat out. There's still a bunch of fresh stuff that you brought up and the stuff that's leftover from last weekend. Let me cook something up for you. Besides, pizza? Since when is that vegan?"

"I can have a favourite pizza place and not order pizza, Santana. They have a wonderful vegan selection of sandwiches and wraps." Rachel stated cheerfully, though it made no sense. That was like saying someone's favourite Quaker Oats food was Gatorade. Technically legit, but misleading as hell seeing as Gatorade had zero oats in it, and the Quaker logo wasn't even on it or whatever, from what she remembered.

Santana looked around, noticing the sky was getting a little darker to the south. They were running out of time, and some quick food at Berry's favourite place seemed like a decent idea. It wouldn't have her risking the power potentially going out at the house, which would turn an awesome food situation into a mediocre one. So she shrugged and they trekked onward into the late afternoon, Rachel leading her through Avon to the restaurant.

Santana was in a good mood. Scratch that; she was in a great mood. The sun was setting outside, she was back at the house's outdoor dining area with Rachel and their respective dinners, dancing and singing to cheesy sixties music. Rachel had been hard at work, trying to guess Quinn's favourite songs and artists, and with every failed guess, Santana would perform a song that Quinn's public image from most of their high school lives would perform, like 'Come See About Me', 'You Keep Me Hangin' On' and 'Heart of Glass'. All in all, she was having a blast, and Rachel was fun, taking up the backing vocals gamely, doing half-hearted one-armed choreography as she ate her weird vegan sandwich across from her on the couch.

"Honestly, Santana. Your hints are not helpful at all! You probably just want me to guess that one of her favourite artists is something like Mastodon or some crazy death metal band, which would make no sense as you've already told me that Quinn prefers her narratives in books, not in musical form, and while she is an intense individual, I do not foresee such anger in her favourite musical numbers!" Rachel protested, her frustration absolutely delicious to Santana. Sadly, though, Rachel's pout came out and she cracked a little. She had to admit, the diva had a good pout going on. It was like a half-power Brittany pout, but Rachel was sly enough to use it twice as often.

"Okay, okay…but you'd better get this or I swear I'll be really disappointed." Santana spoke as she picked up another slice of pepperoni-hot pepper-pineapple pizza, making sure to scoop any fallen toppings onto her slice. "The artist or band's name involves two words, one being a measure of distance, and one of their albums describes how Quinn was after her pregnancy."

Rachel sat there with her brow furrowed for a moment before raising her head and shooting Santana a questioning look. "Miles Davis?" the girl asked timidly, clearly not up for yet another Motown or sappy Christian number. Santana nodded, because it was painfully obvious. "Santana, just because she was upset and kicked you to the bottom of the cheerleading pyramid, doesn't mean you can infer that she's a bitch."

Santana nearly doubled over in laughter at the remark, stumbling off toward the couch in order to save herself from a face-full of greasy pizza. "Berry, I meant 'Kind of Blue', not 'Bitches Brew', but respect for calling it like you see it. She was a bitch, but she was my friend, and her being sad and whatever meant a lot more than her being conniving and manipulative. She's had a hard time." Santana finished, willing herself to calm down so she could finish her slice and pack up leftovers for the next day's lunch. The storm was visible off in the horizon, and they both wanted to enjoy the outdoor eating area while they could, even taking to bringing the Tupperware out beforehand so they wouldn't have to go in to pack.
"I've always admired Quinn. I suppose she started off rather cruel to me, but she struggled through more than any teenager should have had to." Rachel stated as she made room for Santana to sit down beside her, moving the throw pillows around.

"She's pretty amazing. Even when she's crazy, and believe me...right now, she's absolutely bat-shit devil-spawn crazy about getting to see Beth more...she's still kind of amazing. I just..." Santana didn't know how to express the thoughts billowing in her mind about Quinn. Truly, she still didn't know how to feel about the girl outside of feeling a little betrayed. "She knew about me and B since sophomore year. She was my best friend, I couldn't not tell her, you know?"

Rachel nodded, laying an open hand across Santana's lap, which Santana took without much hesitation. It was nice to have someone there for her, someone who might keep their promise. "Quinn told me she was okay with it. That if anyone ever gave us hell for it, that she'd be right there with me, with Britt. We were the Unholy Trinity...we swore that even if we bickered and fought and were slightly incestuous, we'd always have each other's backs." Santana explained, feeling a dull ache in the pit of her stomach. "You think Quinn got through her pregnancy with the help of Puck and Finn's useless asses paying the doctor's bills? You think she magically got slushied only once every few weeks for no reason? I put the fear of god into the jocks, and every time they stepped out of line, I made sure they were paid in kind. You think people don't talk down to Britt, don't call her stupid, just because she's an absolute sweetheart? Fuck no. I bugged Britt's locker and the locker on the other side of the school that she occasionally mistakes as her own, and I tear apart anyone who tries to hurt her."

Rachel just squeezed her hand, letting Santana vent, because FUCK, she really, really needed to. She hadn't talked about any of that shit to anyone, bottling it up as usual with all the rest of her crap; it was just nice to have someone who wouldn't judge her, who was willing to listen. It had been so long since she'd been allowed to really vent, and it had been far longer since she'd vented in the company of another person. It meant a lot.

"I needed them. For the first time in a really long time, I needed them...and they weren't there."

Santana sighed and continued, squeezing Berry's hand a little harder. "That little gleek intervention on Monday was cool, but it was all of what, a minute long before everyone walked away? It kept happening, and it got worse. Thursday...when Varone, Azimio, Clarke and Jorgensen surrounded me in the Cheerios locker room...I just kept thinking Q and B would be there, they'd stop them. Or they were getting help. That maybe Q was dragging Figgins himself over there while B videotaped the whole thing so that I could finally be safe. I wanted to believe...and when Coach Sue came in and interrupted them because she'd decided to personally light my uniforms on fire due to me being such a disgrace to the sponsors, I thought it was them. But I asked Sue, and she was oblivious, and just handed me the brass knuckles for safety. When I got out to the hall, the two of them were talking and laughing with Mercedes. They didn't even notice me. They wouldn't have known. They didn't look like they cared."

"Santana, sometimes people don't see what's happening, even when it's under their noses, and..." Rachel started, but Santana was too upset to let her continue. She knew that Quinn had every reason to know.

"Quinn's still friends with Mercedes, and that crazy diva's dating Sam again. Sam's on the football
team and I know for a fact that his locker is right beside Azimio's." Santana stated flatly, ignoring Rachel's confused expression. "The football and hockey teams have a bet going on about who's going to crack me open first. Losing team pays for a keg. Winning member gets the first keg stand, and Vereen said he'd buy whoever won it a private lap dance at the Sugarbush. The betting list is up in Azimio's locker. It's common knowledge, I heard only a few are like, taking part or whatever, but everyone on the football team knows, which means that people in glee know. So unless Quinn and B have taken to ignoring absolutely everything about me lately, which is probably impossible after the drama Finn caused, and the mash-off between both glee clubs...they knew. Mercedes IS the biggest gossip in the school.Britt was probably just confused or something. I don't get why, but..."

"Santana..." Rachel interrupted, halting the former cheerleader's stream of consciousness rambling momentarily. "There...has been some talk. Artie said you'd be fine. And Brittany doesn't think anyone or anything could hurt you...she's not worried at all, or she didn't seem to be. Quinn's been so busy with the whole Beth thing that she looked like she was taking Brittany's lead when it came to you. I know she's asked Mercedes about you, and she asked me once...and I should have done something. I should have said something, I'm sorry. I'm..."

Santana, finishing up her third slice, stood up; her body was rigid, feeling as if the anger vibrating through her would shatter her at any moment. "Don't apologize, but don't lie to me. Britt always cares about me. She worries about me. She loved me once, okay? She wouldn't just...she wouldn't assume that." Santana choked out, unable to accept Berry's opinion that sweet Brittany wasn't worried. She knew that theoretically, it was possible, as B was always confident in her, but the dancer had never thought her to be indestructible or invulnerable. Britt had seen her break down from stress alone in the past, and had been there through many worse instances. The blonde had seen her at her worst, she knew just how weak Santana could be about some things.

Brittany, she decided, would never, ever abandon her if she was aware of everything. Someone had to be manipulating poor Britt. Probably just Artie, from what Rachel said. It was the only logical explanation, as B did tend to take as gospel the words of those she loved. And Santana knew she wasn't all that close with Q anymore since the girl's rebellion and subsequent freak-out over Beth, but the girl had always been there for her when it mattered. Someone must have lied to her, maybe Mercedes. Her blondes wouldn't desert her, they were just confused. Because even if it wasn't her and Britt in trouble, and instead just her, they would have cared. They always told her it'd get better, didn't they? "I'm not hungry anymore. 'Night."

Santana rushed off into the house and up the stairs to her room, closing the door behind her before burying herself in the bed, her tears spilling out of her like all the dreams she'd once imagined for the three of them. The Unholy Trinity. She knew logically that she'd both defended and condemned them to Rachel, but the hypocrisy wasn't the issue. She'd been a fool, she knew, but everyone had to believe in something. She had been too stubborn to stop altogether what she'd been committed to for so long and not go down with the ship.

The storm was more brutal than Santana had expected, winds shaking her window's panes of glass, rain pounding relentlessly against the home. It made for a fitting partner for how Santana felt inside. Her thoughts had been storming for the past few hours, not at all sure what to think or feel.

Okay, that was a lie. She knew she kind of hated Artie in a few important ways. That was clear cut; it was everyone else that was all too confusing. Santana couldn't be angry at Brittany, not really, but she was hurt that the girl didn't stand up for her, that she didn't do something in glee to show support. It hurt, because the tall blonde was her BFF and Santana felt let down, given B hadn't really noticed her all last week.
She wanted to be angry at Quinn, as the girl had seemingly abandoned her in her hour of need, but Santana couldn't help but acknowledge that blondie had a lot of her own shit going on. That Quinn had been working through a rage-fueled tunnel vision for months. Her friend had been having a tremendously difficult year, and Santana couldn't help but be worried for the girl, despite everything, so she cut her some slack. But she was still angry, too, because it was alright to have expected and wanted their help when she needed it.

And then there was Berry. Sweet, kind, generous Rachel Berry, who Santana was pretty sure would go through hell and high water for her. Which was quickly becoming less of a surprise as hours passed; the diva had been slipping little notes under the door with remarks and questions. Like how Rachel had stored the leftovers from dinner for her in the fridge if she got hungry, or how she was doing their laundry downstairs, in case Santana wanted to find her, or that she was hoping Santana was keeping warm due to the drafts the storm was causing, and that there were spare blankets left outside the door if she wanted them. It was nice to know Berry was giving her space, and making any interaction with her entirely optional, while telling Santana that she was there for her if that's what she needed or wanted.

That was mostly why she was still in her room. She knew that she'd need more time to process Britt and Quinn's behavior, but she'd come to something of a loose conclusion about how to wrap her mind around them. It was Rachel that entirely baffled her. In less than three days, Santana had grown to like Rachel, as in she seriously liked her. The same girl that was a maniac in glee, who had a manipulative streak, and who was addicted to Barbra Streisand and Broadway musicals. The same girl who stood up for her, brought her to her personal sanctuary, and was working to keep her safe. It was mind-blowing and confusing to think that the tiny diva could keep her safe, but she was starting to believe it, and that was kind of scary.

As she stretched out under the covers of her bed, she heard yet another note be slipped under her door. Her eyes peered over at it, wondering what exactly the tiny diva was doing or thinking. It was still a bit too early for her to go to bed, but she was nice and cozy under the covers, and honestly didn't feel like moving until about ten minutes later, when she heard the downstairs back door open and slam shut.

Immediately, Santana was on her feet, at her door, picking up the note.

'Santana, do you hear that? The storm outside's amazing!'

She looked at the note first with confusion, and then with concern as a particularly strong torrent of rain impacted against her sliding glass door. "What the fuck is she doing?" Santana wondered openly as she rushed to her closet to grab her sandals, slipping them on before running down the stairs to the back door. Rachel's sandals were gone.

With an exasperated sigh, Santana swung open the door enough to slip out before slamming it shut, rain already drenching her. She raced off through the backyard and hopped the fence, her legs carrying her down the sandy path toward the beach. It was hard enough to see with the rain beating down so hard on her face and the wind blowing her hair around; the poor lighting conditions and Berry's short stature didn't help at all. The thin, crescent moon did little to help her see what was going on as well, not with the sky so overcast and dark.

It got worse as she reached the beach, the wind propelling the sand at her so harshly that it felt like she was in some wind tunnel filled with dull shrapnel. It wasn't pleasant in the least, and the rain was only making it more annoying as a serious chill crept into her, and the roar of the waves drowned out pretty much any other sound but the storm and the slight chattering of her teeth. Sure, they were down south, but it was October, and it still got cool at night; the wind-chill and rain didn't do her any
favours.

Eventually, she spotted someone, likely Rachel, a far ways down the beach, seemingly dancing and spinning around. Santana would have expected such behavior from Brittany, not Rachel, and while it was kind of amusing, her worry overtook that. Santana knew that if she was freezing and sore, then Berry must be too. She darted across the beach toward the smaller girl; the sound of some melody, interspersed with giggles, became audible over the sound of the storm as she got closer.

"Rachel! What the shit are you doing?!" she yelled out as she neared the diva, who was spinning around joously, a huge smile on her face. Okay, it was a little infectious, but Santana fought it, needing to be a little serious for a moment. "It's, like, fucking ten o'clock or whatever, and it's really, really stupid out here!"

The diva stopped her spinning, nearly losing her balance, as she locked her gaze on Santana. "I've decided to ditch my nightly routine for the moment!" Rachel yelled back, with a huge smile on her face, the girl's dark brown hair whipping around in the air, stray wet strands molding across the girl's cheeks. \textit{God, she's so breathtakingly beautiful right now.} "Order and structure is lovely, but sometimes it's nice to give in to impulse, Santana!"

Santana couldn't help the laugh that escaped her, not with Berry miming her own words at her. It was ridiculous, but seeing Berry out of her comfort zone, just embracing everything around her on a whim, she couldn't help herself. Her feet carried her across the short distance to the diva, who was wide-eyed and so happy that Santana couldn't help but wonder how she'd never even considered it before.

"Who are you?" she asked for the second time that weekend as she stood in awe of the tiny girl, looking the diva over as if she'd been reborn in front of her. In a way, she had, Santana figured; nearly all her opinions and thoughts of the girl from her time back in Lima were scattered to the stormy winds, leaving her with only recent memories, only the ones she could trust were real reflections of Rachel.

Rachel bit her lip as she grinned widely, stretching out her hand much like she'd done the other morning. "I'm Rachel Barbra Berry."

Santana grasped the girl's hand and pulled the diva closer, her lips seeking out Rachel's in a soft, explorative kiss. Santana had always loved kissing girls, it was often the highlight of her day whenever it happened, but the jolt of energy rushing through her as their lips collided couldn't be chalked up to the storm alone; when she pulled away briefly just to plant another fleeting kiss against the diva's lips, Santana felt a hand clutch the back of her neck, pulling her in closer, deeper as the winds buffeted them in a tempest of wind and sand. Santana melted into the kiss, Rachel's lips meshing perfectly against her own as the diva's tongue agilely worked witchcraft on her. It was utter madness, and only when she felt entirely short of breath did she pull away gasping for air, and gasping that she felt so much.

Rachel's smile was back with a vengeance, but she was clearly confused, her eyes giving off a questioning glimmer. "I may have just met you again, but I knew I had to kiss you." Santana explained playfully, doing a poor job to suppress her own smile. It had been a risk, doing what she'd done, and Santana more or less had given into her urges, but it seemed to have worked out alright. Even if she was being the least smooth individual in the world at the moment.

She couldn't see the girl's blush due to the poor lighting, only compounded by Rachel's face being matted with wet hair, but she saw the same nervous tug against the bottom of her t-shirt, and the same shy smile. It was a fantastic feeling. "You might not like the other side of me...most don't." The diva stated hesitantly, her eyes searching Santana's for some sign of acceptance. Acceptance that
Berry should have known was already given the previous night.

Santana shrugged playfully as she tried to get all the hair out of Rachel's face, her lips briefly pecking the girl's left cheek once it was clear. "I'll take my chances." She noted slyly, running a hand down Rachel's arm, keeping her hand open and ready for the diva to take, if she wanted it.

Rachel took the hint, gently taking her hand, leading Santana slowly back toward the house. Wind and rain whipped against their bodies, but Santana walked backward against the torrents, shielding the smaller girl as best she could from the storm; Rachel seemed to appreciate it, if the smile on her face was any indication. That said, Rachel seemed happy about a lot of things a lot of the time, so she was just happy that status quo hadn't changed. "I'm an only child to two gay fathers in Lima, Ohio." The diva stated, as if Santana hadn't already known that fact.

She quirked her lips in amusement at the idea of having a fresh start, doing the whole 'getting to know you' bit all over again, the right way for once. "What a coincidence! I live in Lima too…with my mom, my dad, and my younger sister Olivia. She's nine, and she's my little princess."

Rachel's expression turned soft, taking Santana's free hand so that the diva held both. "Awww. Tell me, is she as pretty as her sister?" Berry asked with a bit of a playful glint in her eye. Santana hadn't really been sure prior to the kiss about whether the diva would be open to it, but she was thrilled that Rachel apparently was. And she was SO giddy over the fact that Berry was flirting with her. It was a nice feeling, and even the knowledge that Q and the school would give her hell over it couldn't kill her good mood.

"Smooth…is this how you charm all your lady friends, Miss Berry? Invite them on an exotic getaway, singing, dancing, dining and lettering your way into their hearts?" Santana laughed, and Rachel was immediately back to the blushing, shy girl from before. "What do you like doing? What are your hobbies?"

"Well…singing and dancing are my favourite things…I hope to be a lead in a Broadway musical somewhere in the future." Rachel stated shyly, fiddling with the hem of her absolutely soaked shirt again, her eyes averted away from Santana. It was only then that Santana realized she was wearing a light t-shirt, and Berry could easily see through it, to her bra. She smirked at the girl's shyness and reminded herself to wear something low-cut the next day.

"I'm sure you sound like an angel." Santana stated softly, dipping her head close enough to see the red tinting the girl's cheeks. She gently wrested one of her hands free and lifted Rachel's chin up so that their gazes would meet. "I'm serious. See, I have this feeling that you're so good that you could make an audience smile, laugh, cry…you could make them nostalgic, wistful, have them longing for more. We both seem like we have two modes…awesome or not at all. Am I wrong?"

Rachel gave a light, playful shove as they turned onto the path back to the house, Santana angling herself again to keep the worst of the storm from the smaller girl. "What do you like to do?" Rachel asked curiously; it wasn't a question many had asked her before, really. Pretty much anyone who mattered tended to already know.

"I like dancing, but not so much in front of others…unless, of course, there's a cute girl nearby." Santana noted playfully as Rachel ducked her head to hide her smile. "And I like singing too, fancy that! Swimming's fun, and I'm a horror movie nut, too. But my biggest hobby…well, I kind of like sound design, music production and composition, that sort of thing."

Rachel's head popped up at that admission, her eyes wide with interest. "Is that what you want to do when you're older?" Berry asked, though the glimmer of mischievousness let her know the diva had made a mental note of the horror movie admission, especially with what happened on the drive up
fresh in their minds.

Santana shrugged and gave a noncommittal hum. "It's a lot of fun. I'll try, sure. With luck, it'll work out…but I won't be heartbroken if I have to do something else. Cooking's always been fun, so being a chef or whatever wouldn't be so bad either. Music's just in my blood, I think." She added, enjoying how Berry literally looked like there were cogs spinning in her head. The girl's comical expressions had really started to grow on her.

"You do make tasty food, I'll admit, from the little I've had of yours. But have you written any music before?" Rachel asked, Santana happy that she was both complimented on her food-preparing abilities and that Berry showed such interest.

"Well, I wrote a song about a boy's lips once. But yeah…I've written a few, I guess. I've had a pretty rough week, and that kind of helped me push a new one out the other day." She stated offhandedly; secretly, she was proud of her work, but she didn't want to show that confidence, only to get torn down by the diva. Santana knew that the girl had high standards for everything involving music.

Rachel swung open the gate to the back yard and led the both of them in. "I'd like to hear it one day, if you'll let me."

Santana didn't know how she could say no to that request, honestly. Especially given that their little vacation escape was meant to exorcise their Lima-based demons. She wasn't sure it'd hurt any more to show off the fruit of her labour from Thursday night.

"I'm not sure, it's rough, and it'd probably only be appreciated by someone with a serious flair for the dramatic…" Santana noted cheekily as they neared the door. Rachel just looked up at her, silently asking if Santana knew who she was talking to. "But you seem like you could be the right kind of person for the job."

And really, while Rachel looked at her with a dubious, albeit amused, expression, she honestly wasn't sure there would be anyone better to critique it than Rachel Barbra Berry.

Santana could only smile as they both slipped off their sandals, safe and sound in the comfort of the ocean-side home. She was pretty sure her skin was raw by how her body was aching, and she knew Rachel was feeling it too. After a quick photo due to Rachel's prompting, her brain got to working at what was next. Deciding that her top was entirely unnecessary, she pulled the transparent tee off and led Rachel upstairs by the hand, the girl following her silently. Santana strolled into the diva's room, and then into the ensuite bathroom, gesturing for Rachel to take a seat on the toilet.

She wasn't sure where the items were that she was looking for, but she knew they were in the room somewhere. All through West Side Story, Santana had heard the diva cheerfully proclaim that she would have a nice relaxing bubble bath after 'practicing such strenuous choreography'. Eventually, after the fourth cabinet search attempt, she found a proverbial goldmine, pulling out a small solid object from a pile, all glittering gold. Santana held one up for Berry to see, cocking her eyebrow questioningly. "Soap or bubble bath?"

Rachel cocked her head to the side subtly and looked down at the gold item. "That's for a bubble bath, but…"

"Thanks." Santana interrupted with a smile, placing the object on the edge of the tub, before taking a folded towel and placing it at the end ledge, where she imagined Rachel would rest her head. Santana figured the girl was as sore as she was, so a bath would do her well. She turned on the water, filling it with a pleasantly hot temperature, and dried her hair off with another towel as she
waited, adding the bubble bath when it was necessary. She could feel Rachel's eyes on her the whole time, and Santana hoped she wasn't overstepping any boundaries. She just wanted to do something nice while her good mood lasted.

Once the tub was full and bubbly, the water and bubbles glittering gold, she got up and moved to the door, the diva looking at her questioningly. "I'll be right back. Get yourself settled in, Rach." Santana noted with a smile, moving out of the warm bathroom and back out into the slightly chilly rest of the house. It didn't take too long to get to her room, but it did take a minute or two to track down her purple iPod that she'd stowed away in her luggage. After a short trip downstairs to grab the dock, she was back in Rachel's bathroom, wordlessly setting up the iPod dock, scrolling through her catalogue until she found the track she was looking for.

Her gaze quickly found Rachel's, the diva owning a warm smile and even warmer cocoa-brown eyes, looking entirely relaxed in the bathtub. "You can totally skip it if you don't like it…it's just a demo I threw together Thursday night with my guitar, midi drum kit, and a bit of post production cleanup. It could really use the jazz band's help in filling it out, but for now it's just a raw demo. Again, if you don't like it, just toss on my night time playlist…it's more relaxing or whatever." She stammered out nervously, a bit anxious that she was letting Rachel hear her music so soon, and kind of embarrassed that she was blushing. Hell, she liked the song well enough, it was honest, but it wasn't her best stuff. She wasn't sure she was comfortable handing that music over yet, though, so a rough demo of hers would test the waters well enough.

"Thank you for trusting me with hearing it, Santana." Rachel noted shyly, and while Santana kind of just wanted to stay in there and relax with her, she knew that she needed a shower too, or whatever. Sure, baths were awesome and all, but her bed was calling to her, and that was about as much seduction as she was likely to get for the rest of the night. "Now go warm up, you're shivering."

She was, honestly. Her body was vibrating from the chill running through her. Still, she mustered up the energy to mosey on over to the bathtub, planting a chaste kiss on the diva's forehead before pressing play on "Be Here Now" and leaving the room. Because at that point, her actions spoke louder than whatever words she could use right then and there, and she wasn't sure she'd be able to say anything without stumbling over each syllable, and not just because she was freezing.

Santana's shower was brief, but satisfying. Sadly, though, she was nearly done her bottle of body wash; she'd bought it strictly because it was purple, on sale at some liquidation store, and because its name was 'Black Amethyst', which was kind of super tacky and amusing at the same time. It turned out to be pretty amazing and made her smell awesome, but she hadn't been able to find it ever since. Still, it was nice knowing that she'd smell good for at least a few more days.

She slipped onto her bed and stretched out, feeling entirely content about how relaxed her body felt as soon as it hit the mattress. Santana decided she'd ask Rachel to find out what mattress that was, because whenever she left home for college in the coming year, she'd need one. It was pivotal to her success as a human being going forward in life. She propped herself up on her elbows and dragged over a pillow to rest her head on so that she could look out at the storm. Now that she'd experienced it and returned, it seemed oddly placid, being somewhere still while the world raged around her. It was comforting.

Eventually, the creak of the door behind her stirred Santana from her wandering thoughts; she turned her head to look over her shoulder, finding a terribly worried looking Rachel Berry peeking out from behind the door. Santana rolled over onto her back and took in the sight of the girl, finding it odd that she appeared to be clutching the doorknob in a death-grip. "Come here, Rach." She called out quietly, wanting to know what had the girl so shaken up.
The diva complied, softly padding across the floor in her utterly ridiculous pink footie pajamas with gold stars, her eyes not once leaving Santana's. Rachel crawled onto the bed, sitting cross-legged at the foot of it, looking yearningly at Santana, which only made the taller girl more anxious. "Are you okay, Santana?" the girl squeaked out, her voice as tiny as she'd heard it. It was unsettling.

"I'm awesome, actually." Santana said, an easy smile spreading across her face, which seemed to put the other girl a little at ease, though certainly not entirely.

Rachel reached out and lightly grasped one of Santana's feet, her eyes reflecting both worry and hope simultaneously as her fingers played with exposed toes. "So...you're not suicidal?"

The question was out of left field, and Santana found herself sputtering for a few moments before realizing that Rachel was desperate for an answer, the girl's eyes quickly filling with unshed tears. "No, no... of course not. Come here, tiny."

She held open an arm and Rachel crawled into it, snuggling against her side as Santana hugged her close. "Hey, look, I know it could be taken that way, I guess...apparently...but I'm okay." she whispered resolutely, tenderly wiping the tears from the diva's big doe eyes, willing her into a small relieved smile. "I'm just ready to let go of my old life, hiding behind all those masks and my reputation and everything. I don't want that to control me anymore...it was just as painful living like that as it has been living out, just... in different ways. I wasn't happy...but I want to be. I just need to find out how to do that, you know?"

"But...but there are people in your old life that...that would really miss you, Santana." Rachel retorted worriedly, which only led further into her reasoning, she supposed.

"There were some good people and nice times in the past, yeah, and I won't forget that...I just won't latch onto them by being what I had to be back then. If those people want in my life, it needs to be on my terms in some ways, you know? I need to be me, because I can't take that stress and pressure anymore. I need to find my own way. And I'll fuck up sometimes, because it's kind of new territory I guess, but that's life, right?" Santana asked hesitantly, drawing a firm nod from the girl in her arms.

Rachel wriggled around, getting comfortable as she practically used Santana as a pillow. "What did you mean when you sang that you're a threat when you're left alone? I don't want you to feel like that." The diva noted sadly, clutching her tighter. Like...god, what is she doing, TRYING to actually MELT my heart? Jeez... Santana thought, readying her mind and heart for the sort of honest answer that Rachel probably deserved. Being open hadn't hurt her yet, so she decided to keep pressing.

"I'm not that strong sometimes. Or, I am, I guess, but I'm not good at being vulnerable, and I need people either in my corner or out of reach when that happens, because I fuck up anyone who gets caught in the middle, every time. And when I'm alone, I tend to think...and when I'm vulnerable when I think, it's usually not all that good. I'm always looking for the easiest way out, even if it's more than a little self-destructive, repressive, or makes me think I'm, like... damaged or not worth it or...whatever. It's why I've started making music, so I don't think so much, and so I can put all my shit on paper and get it out of my system and everything. I don't think those things when I'm working on my music. I don't feel alone with music." Santana explained calmly, hoping Berry would understand.

Most people thought she was untouchable, invulnerable to any insults or attacks. She just let herself feel everything when she got home, or sometimes when she'd go to Quinn's or Britt's. Those were places where she'd let herself be hurt, it was where she let herself be scared or worried or angry or feeling worthless. Because sometimes she needed her friends to help convince herself she could keep her image up, that she could keep going and that things would get better, and sometimes she needed to be alone and let it out so that she could be strong for her friends the next day when they needed
her. So rarely was she just allowed to heal, though. And that damage just built and built, and when she'd been outed, Santana cracked.

"You won't be alone anymore, I promise." The diva remarked resolutely, lifting herself from Santana, holding herself up by her palms as she stared into the taller girl's eyes. "Nothing's gonna harm you, not while I'm around…"

The shift into song was absurd. Ridiculous, even; especially given the chosen song and how new their friendship was. Yet, the sincerity in Rachel's eyes and the conviction in her expression removed her instinct to laugh outside of an instinctual giggle, and mostly had Santana in awe as Rachel peered up at her, quietly continuing. "Nothing's gonna harm you, no ma'am, not while I'm around." Berry added, snuggling a little further into her shoulder. "Demons are prowling everywhere nowadays…"

Rachel's sudden breakout into choreography, her arm lashing out into the air around them comically, earned a laugh or two from her; Santana was more than amused and touched, but didn't want to laugh through a performance that she knew Rachel was sincere, if dramatic, about. "I'll send them howling, I don't care, I've got ways…" Berry's little nonthreatening fist shake at the end was almost too cute to handle, and it just reminded her of Friday morning, thinking about Rachel dressed like Xena and tossing a chakram around.

"No one's gonna hurt you, no one's gonna dare. Others can desert you, not to worry, whistle, I'll be there!" Rachel sang sweetly, punctuating it with a quick peck to her chin that had her blushing deeper just as quickly. Thankfully, Rachel didn't seem to notice, what with the lights dim and everything; however, the girl was pretty much dead on facing her as she finished the song, those big brown eyes so tender and full of passion. "Demons will charm you with a smile, for a while…but in time, nothing can harm you…not while I'm around."

Santana immediately tugged the girl back down into a crushing hug, burying her face in the smaller girl's hair as she tried to compose herself. She'd never had anyone, non-jokingly at least, pledge to protect her and defend her. All her life, she'd been the big sister keeping her little sister safe from bullies. She was the one making sure kids didn't throw Quinn's beloved books in puddles or mud in elementary, and she was the one keeping the wolves at the door when Q led the Cheerios. She was the one who made Brittany immune at school and kept it that way. She was the one standing up for Kurt and Warbler against the self-destructive, flaming Karofsky. No one had been there for her so passionately; Rachel had once believed her back in sophomore year in front of everyone, but no one else but a generally silent Britt had, and that had been the extent of it. Quinn and B would help her in less public places, but it was always limited to that.

So Rachel offering that sort of aid to her was mind-blowing and surreal, and even though it was a promise done through song, she was unbelievably awestruck and thankful that Rachel cared enough to not only listen to her and understand her, but to just promise to be there for her. "Thank you." She choked out, squeezing the diva harder. "That…this weekend…has been the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me."

"Thank YOU, Santana… for letting me know you. I must say, I'm rather fond of you, Santana Maria Lopez." Rachel noted airily as she wrapped her arms around Santana in return.

Santana willed herself to lean back a bit, just enough to look into Berry's playful, glimmering eyes. "Is that so, tiny?" she asked, unable to keep the positively ecstatic, goofy grin from spreading across her face, even as happy tears ran down her cheeks.

"It is." Rachel said simply, donning a smirk that Santana of old would be proud of, entirely charming and smug. She found the more that she learned about Rachel, she more she found her to be entirely endearing.
"Well I'm...I'm fond of you too, Rachel Barbra Berry." Santana stated, trying her best to mimic Rachel's overly formal tone that she often used in glee, hoping it would mask how nervous she was at saying those sorts of things. The last time she told a girl she liked them, she got shot down, and as nice as the past hour or so had been with Rachel, she wasn't about to forget that heartache. It wasn't something her heart allowed her. Even with Rachel making that same declaration first.

The diva blushed wonderfully at her words, her face a delightful shade of red. "Is that so?"

Santana cocked her head to the side, enjoying drawing out the moment, watching Rachel squirm in her arms, clearly impatient for an answer. "If you must know, I'm feeling a peculiar need to ensure that I remain one step ahead of the suitors who will undoubtedly attempt to woo you."

That sent Rachel into a fit of giggles, the tiny diva rolling slightly in her arms as she pushed herself out of Santana's grasp. "Santana, I don't exactly have a horde of people knocking down my door or anything."

"Wow, I'd hope not. That'd get expensive and weird really fast. Most people knock politely or ring the doorbell. Then again, we do live in Lima." Santana joked, drawing an amused grin from the diva, who didn't seem to be aware that she was practically straddling Santana given how much Berry had shifted around against her. Not that the taller girl minded one bit. "But once you get out to civilization, where people have enough brainpower to use their eyes and ears at the same time...well, they'll want to know the lady with the golden voice from little ol' Lima, Ohio."

Santana watched as Rachel rolled her eyes, blushing and laughing, but she could see that the diva was letting herself believe a little of the flattery, and that's all that she really hoped to succeed in doing with that subject. "Well, I'll have you know that I will be on the lookout, and will live up to my starlet reputation by providing opportunities for wooing eventually, but that I'd very much prefer to get some quality sleep tonight so that I can wake up at a decent hour tomorrow." Rachel noted with an adorable smirk, clearly enjoying herself.

"If you require an escort to your room, I could provide one." Santana noted, cocking her eyebrow questioningly, not really feeling quite ready for the night to end, even if it would assuredly end on a high note either way. She just liked seeing that subtly goofy side of Rachel, who apparently had the ability to make fun of herself and go along with Santana's sense of humour. Which, even though she was keeping it very tame and teasing, was promising.

Rachel shook her head and crawled up the bed, pulling back the sheets. "I'd rather begin a basic compatibility test. Besides, this bed is remarkably comfy." The diva spoke, a hint of her tiredness slipping into her speech. Santana wasn't surprised; she knew it was only a matter of time before her bed seduced Rachel too. They were basically resting on the bed equivalent of Helen of Troy, except she was totally willing to share.

She just followed Berry up the bed to the other side and slipped under the covers. "I aced the SAT on bedside manners years ago, I think you'll be satisfied." Santana said playfully, turning off the bedside light, casting the room in darkness. She heard Rachel slip in as well, and they both closed the distance with a bit of shuffling. Santana's hands eventually found Rachel's shoulders, and then quickly dipped to her waist, pulling the smaller girl against her; Rachel, in turn, immediately snuggled into her and prodded her onto her back so the diva could use her as a pillow. Santana didn't mind one bit, and just held the girl, her fingers tenderly exploring the smooth skin of Rachel's lower back, feeling pretty damn happy with how her Sunday turned out.

The next morning found Rachel spread horizontally across her stomach, the diva having dragged a pillow over for her own use. It turned out that Berry rolled around in her sleep, which was kind of
hilarious. Still, she'd repositioned the diva back onto her chest and rested there for a quarter of an hour before Berry had woken up. Santana just wanted to start the morning off right, after all. No harm in that.

The storm hadn't let up even a little bit, so they were looking at a potentially longer drive back home. It hadn't taken them long to pack, or doze any food that needed to be trashed, and soon they were off on their way to Lima at nine in the morning. Rachel was, frustratingly enough, back behind the steering wheel after a brief argument about the fairness of it. Santana didn't get why the diva had to make that ridiculous drive twice in a weekend's time. It wasn't fair, and she was a little worried.

Still, Rachel's determination won out, and the diva took the wheel. At least, she took it for a while. It was clear that by the time they reached Kitty Hawk, Rachel's nerves were fried, and the diva was a few minutes from going into red alert panic mode. Santana could understand, as it was raining harder than she'd ever experienced, and the wind was blowing the car all over the road, and some areas of the island were partially flooded, forcing them to drive through large, deep puddles.

"Rach…" She started, wanting to get the girl's attention while they sat at a stoplight. Berry didn't turn her head toward her, but Santana could see some eye movement, so she continued. "Pull over, please. Let me drive."

"Santana, I told you…" Rachel started, but Santana knew the red light would only last so long, and if Rachel got on the highway, she'd keep going for hours. Her window of opportunity was brief.

"I'll keep your baby safe, I promise. Sue made us take all these stupid tests and stuff…had us drive through a blizzard, and drive monster trucks over buses with the decals of our rival schools before nationals in sophomore year." She stated, recalling the insanity of not even having a license and needing to learn how to control a vehicle on black ice, in snow, to avoid collisions, and more. By the time she actually took the test, she was good enough to get through it error-free. "Let me help you, Rach."

Rachel bit that pouty lip of hers for a moment, before being distracted by the light turning green. Santana waited, feeling tense about what decision Berry would make, but thankfully the diva pulled into a nearby parking lot and parked the car.

"Thank you." She said sincerely, giving Rachel a quick hug. "Okay, slip on over to the passenger seat…I'll brave the rain and run around to the driver side."

And like that, her seat belt was off and she was out of the car, darting around it. Fortunately, Rachel was halfway over the console by the time she opened the door and got back in; she wasn't completely soaked, but she WAS definitely much wetter than she had been. Not so wanky.

As she adjusted her chair, Rachel quietly pulled a towel from the backseat and began patting her dry, which was kind of a fruitless endeavour, but it was a nice gesture nonetheless. It at least earned Berry a smile. And maybe something else. "Hey, why don't you put on some Barbra and get some more rest? It's a long drive, and you were up late last night, so why not catch some Zs?"

Rachel's mouth gaped open as the diva quickly grasped her iPod tightly, her stupidly pretty brown eyes sparkling; probably at the thought of another Barbra marathon, but Santana liked to think it was because she was being pretty awesome and nice and stuff.

"You want to listen to Barbra?" Rachel asked, her voice low and kind of taking on a sexy husky quality that she really didn't want to mentally link to Barbra Streisand, but whatever. Rachel WAS a little crazy, after all.
"I want you to be able to relax, and I noticed on the drive up that the Barbra solo album stuff you played calmed you a bunch, so...I mean, I figured why not? Not like I HATED it." And it was true; Santana didn't hate Streisand, she just hated long marathons of Barbra, and she was pretty sure Berry would zonk out soon, so she'd be saved from that.

Rachel offered a confused, if happy smirk, before putting on the previously referenced playlist. Santana smiled as Berry got comfy in her seat, though she liked to think she earned some points in pulling Rachel's fuzzy blanket from the backseat and draping it over the diva.

From there, the drive was slow and arduous; the weather didn't ease up until they passed Charlottesville, Virginia around two in the afternoon. Rachel had mumble-sung in her sleep all morning to the various songs Santana queued up, which was kind of adorable. Of course Berry would be clued into music even in her sleep. And around noon, Rachel had brought out their packed lunches, Santana snacking on hers occasionally as she drove down the highway at a faster speed than Rachel appreciated. It was just about the limit, but the weather WAS poor. Though when it cleared, or at least stopped pouring, she sped up, wanting to get home quickly. She admittedly blazed through the Appalachians, but the police weren't out in force on a Monday, and the weather was pretty great in those mountains.

Eventually, they made it to Charleston in West Virginia just in time for the dinner hours; Santana filled up on gas and then drove the short distance to the weird looking vegan restaurant she'd google searched that morning on her phone, 'Mission Savvy'.

It wasn't like she was totally trying to win Rachel over, or anything, because some of the food on the menu puzzled her and piqued her curiosity, and that was a good enough reason to check it out. Still, Berry had brought her to a few places that served mostly non-vegan stuff with a bit of rabbit food on the side, so Santana figured it'd only be fair to treat the diva to a vegan specialty shop.

Rachel, refreshed from her nap and cheerful over the sky having mostly cleared up, hopped out of the Prius and got to stretching her stiff body. Santana did the same, though less enthusiastically, and certainly not while humming the 'Reading Rainbow' theme song. Seriously, that girl. Because yeah, the whole town smelled like fresh rain, the sun was warm on their faces, and there was a rainbow in the distance, but was it really enough of a reason for that? Santana wasn't sure.

"So...what is this place?" Rachel asked as they made their way toward the little café, eyes darting curiously over the building's features and sign.

Santana shrugged, deciding to play it cool a little bit in case Berry didn't like it or whatever. "Just a place I thought we could grab some dinner at."

"I take it that another trip to Point Pleasant wasn't up your alley, miss horror movie connoisseur?" Rachel asked teasingly, lightly nudging her in the ribs with an elbow. She gave the diva an unimpressed glare, just wanting to forget that they'd ever stopped in that forsaken town. Still, she was pretty sure Berry would make her watch 'The Mothman Prophecies' or something at a later date. Or maybe not, seeing as Rachel was pretty cool. It was a toss-up.

When they entered the place, Rachel's eyes lit up; seriously, it was like watching the fourth of July reflected in the damn girl's eyeballs. "Santana this place is vegan!" Berry squealed, literally squealed, with joy and started hopping in place with a big smile on her face. And maybe it was a little infectious, so Santana smiled too. Besides, getting that reaction from a girl she was really into? That was an awesome feeling.

"I've got my order written on my phone, so why don't you figure out what you want and we'll order together, okay?" she asked, only to be swarmed in a hug by the diva briefly before Rachel practically
ran up to the counter and started bombarding the girl behind it with seemingly endless questions. Thankfully, or perhaps frighteningly, they both seemed to build off of Rachel's enthusiasm, and before she knew it, the diva was swaying back and forward with her arms slightly shaking back and forth with excitement as if she were holding maracas or something.

Santana took a moment to take a washroom break, and to avoid a cuteness overload; by the time she returned, Berry was ready to order, and they were soon seated and waiting for their food.

The initial conversation about glee regionals lasted for a few minutes, but the whole time Santana knew something else was bouncing around in Rachel's head. After discussing a possible thematic link for the Troubletones group number and the New Directions songs, Berry's arm slowly crept out across the table, palm up.

"Santana?" Rachel's voice was oddly cautious, as if she were concerned about something. And honestly, Santana racked her brain to figure out what it could be and came up with nothing, so she just took the diva's hand and cocked her head questioningly. "I don't mean to interrogate you on your choice of restaurant, but…well…why here? I know you enjoy meat, and there's none for sale here."

It was an odd concern, and she couldn't help but cock her eyebrow as if to ask whether Rachel really was asking that question. Yet, Rachel's gaze remained firm, so she let out a sigh, not knowing why it even needed answering because it was so obvious. "It's vegan. You're vegan. The recipes sounded crazy. So…it made sense. Besides, you've brought me to places that have decidedly non-vegetarian main menus, so I thought it'd be cool to flip that around. No biggie."

"It IS a biggie…or…well…a big deal. To me. It's a big deal to me." Rachel stammered out clumsily, Santana's smirk growing with amusement as the girl across from her grew redder and redder. Letting out a long, exasperated sigh, Rachel gave Santana's hand a squeeze and collected her thoughts before focusing her with a possibly adoring expression. "It means a lot to me."

Deciding to up her game a little, feeling a little affection-hungry since the previous night's events, Santana leaned forward in her seat and met Rachel's gaze, finding every shred of courage in herself as the words formed in her throat. They felt like shrapnel, and the sheer effort nearly had her eyes brimming with tears, but she demanded more of herself, because the girl across from her seemed to think she was capable of it. And Santana desperately wanted to be.

"You mean a lot to me." She noted softly, her words quiet if sincere, unwilling to project any louder from the amount of will it took to keep her hand, her voice, her entire body from shaking like crazy. It'd been a while since she'd been in love with Brittany, but that rejection at Britt's locker still hung in her mind every time she considered putting herself out there.

Santana was scared. She really was, but Rachel smiled at her like she did in the wind and rain last night, so bright and ecstatic and free, and that fear just blew away. Even still, it caught her off guard, because Britt's smile never did that; the blonde's would make her feel better, yeah, but there would always be some nagging fear that what they had would fall apart or that something would go wrong. Rachel's just made her feel reassured that Berry cared about her, and more than that, it made her feel free. It wasn't exactly a familiar feeling, but it was pretty great once she got used to it, Rachel lightly squeezing her hand only hastening that process.

Enough to have the next thought flitting through her mind escape her lips. "I just figured these people would totes outclass me with vegan cooking today, but maybe later this week I could try my hand at whipping up something for dinner at casa Lopez?" Santana asked, her eyes widening a little in shock that she fucking propositioned Rachel for a dinner date without even thinking about it.

Again, though, Rachel's shy smile had her nerves settling quickly. "That sounds lovely, Santana. I'd
love to have dinner with you later this week.

Santana wanted to ask if it was really going to be that easy, but it seemed that Berry was actually keeping in line with how she'd been the previous night; Santana thought that maybe with a night to clarify things, that Rachel would rethink any sort of relationship with her past friendship, but it seemed that she was being given an opportunity. And Santana, could indeed, cook up a vegan masterpiece so awesome that Portland would be jealous.

The sun was out, the rain was over, and Rachel agreed to a dinner with her, so things were officially looking up.

It was cold and dark when she pulled into Rachel's driveway at half past nine, the diva's parents almost instantaneously out the door to help with their daughter and her luggage. Rachel had sent a text off to them when they were passing Columbus, and Santana couldn't be happier to see the smaller girl ushered away and into the house. Not that she wanted to be away from Berry, or anything, but she knew how close-knit the girl was with her fathers.

While the two men helped a sleepy Rachel head into the house with the cooler of food in tow, Santana grabbed the girl's luggage and followed them in, not too sure if she had free reign to bring it up to Berry's room or not. By the time she got inside, she could hear three voices in the kitchen, so she placed the luggage down in the foyer and wheeled it toward the Berry family, feeling newly nervous about meeting the parents.

She wasn't sure if they knew about her, if they hated her already, if they would fake being nice for Rachel's sake, or whatever. But when she peeked into the kitchen area, and caught one of the dads' eyes, she was happily waved in by him while the other had a hushed conversation with the diva.

"Santana, come in! Feel free to have a snack, I'm sure all the driving made you hungry." The man noted with a seemingly sincere amount of cheer.

Feeling justifiably cautious and anxious, she stepped further into the kitchen and took a seat at the table, the man sliding over a container of relatively fresh oatmeal chocolate chip cookies. And yeah, she was a cheerleader, but Santana would happily work off those calories in practice. Still, she wasn't about to raid the container, so she smiled and took two cookies, putting them on her place mat as Rachel separated from the other father and started toward the stairwell.

"Santana, can you come up and say goodnight after you're done with my dads?" Berry asked sleepily, rubbing her eyes and yawning as if she were some living cliché or whatever. It was cute.

But it didn't take long before the second half of the sentence sunk in, and by then, Rachel was upstairs and both men were sitting down to her left and right at the square table. She fought to stay calm and collected, but this seemed like it was probably going to be some harsh interrogation given the serious expressions on both mens' faces. Snixx wanted to bubble up, but Santana knew that's just be a really bad time. So instead, she bit into a cookie.

"So, Santana..." The slightly taller, bespectacled father started, his brows furrowing as he focused intently on her. "How are you feeling?"

The question admittedly caught her off guard, and she had to reel in her surprise a fair bit to cover the dread she'd felt leading up to it. "I'm doing alright. Definitely feeling better than I was Friday morning."

"Good, good. And how was the trip? I trust you had to live through the Barbra Streisand Magical
Musical Experience with her driving." The other father, the one who had offered her cookies, remarked with a knowing grin; it helped ease her nerves a bit to know at least one of them clearly was okay with poking fun at Rachel.

"It was…long. The drive down was a bit frustrating with all the Barbra and her not telling me where we were going, but it worked out. And I drove back when I realized she was having a hard time with the rain." Santana said as clearly and politely as she could manage, because it wasn't like she didn't know how to talk to adults decently or whatever. She was a master of image; maybe not at Quinn's level of pushing a single perfect Christian girl-next-door image, but she could pull off pretty much anything if she wanted to. Hell, on the Cheerios, she was both the most feared and the first one many would go to for a shoulder to cry on when Sue was going ballistic.

"And you liked the vacation home? I love the place, but when you're down there and a storm's running through, it can get drafty and cold." The glasses-wearing Berry added, cocking his head curiously at her, even if his question was pretty much the easiest to answer.

"Honestly, your place is gorgeous. Not too drafty, especially with all the warm blankets. Also, that mattress in the second floor bedroom on the right hand side…you need to tell me what that is, because it's pretty much the bed of the gods." Santana noted, smiling at the memory of how ridiculously comfy that bed was. It was obscene, really. Almost dangerously comfortable.

The non-glasses-wearing Berry man laughed at that, shaking his head as he looked toward his husband. "Hiram went on a day-long adventure last summer when he was in New York City, and scoured it for the best mattress. And that's what he found." The man, LeRoy if her memory held, said between laughs as Hiram looked on unimpressed.

"At least Santana can appreciate my struggle and the marvelous mattress I paid for at the end. It was well worth the money, and it wasn't even all that expensive." Hiram stated with a bit of indignation before shifting his gaze to her. "I'd be happy to send you the information on it, it's an amazing mattress, and since we spend so much of our time sleeping during our lives, it's a worthwhile investment."

At that, Santana knew which of the fathers Rachel got her verbosity from. Still, she agreed; no one messed with her sleep, and getting kickass sleeps year-round would be amazing.

"Anyway, it was great down there. The weather was warm, and I got to actually swim in the ocean. I taught Rachel to swim a little too, so that was a bonus." Santana added with a shrug, though LeRoy's spit-take seemed to have her thinking she might have said something wrong.

"You taught her to SWIM?!" He exclaimed, eyes wide and focused on her as one hand blindly attempted to wipe up the wine he'd been drinking.

"Uh…well…I'm a trained lifeguard, so…I mean…" Santana started, providing a shrug when she didn't really know how best to continue that, hoping her seeming unsure response would prompt one of the men to clarify things or thank her or something.

"Don't worry about Leroy, he's the dramatic one out of us both. We just…never expected Rachel to swim. We had her in lessons once, but her floating platform flipped over one day, and ever since then she's generally avoided the water at all costs." Hiram explained calmly, though his expression took a confused turn, his mouth quirking to the side for a moment in thought. "How did you get her to agree to lessons?"

Santana decided that eating the second cookie was the best thing to do right at that moment in case they would decide to behead her or something. After a few nibbles, she glanced between them
sheepishly. "I kind of picked her up in a fireman carry and ran her out into the water. And threw her in." She stated quietly; both men were initially dead silent, but soon LeRoy's snickers filled the room, and then both men were laughing loudly.

"She must have been so angry with you!" Hiram said as he wiped stray tears from his eyes, Santana a little too relieved and stunned at first to really respond.

"Well, I kind of guilt tripped her to stay in the water with me, and just took it one step at a time until she was treading water with about ten feet of ocean beneath her. She's a fast learner, and just needed her ego stroked a little bit, I think. I just figured if she has a beach house as a personal sanctuary, she should be able to swim." Santana remarked, and it was true; Rachel needed to know how to swim if she was going to be by the ocean so often. Not just for safety reasons, or because swimming is fun, but because Berry in that damn monokini needed to happen more often.

From there, they chatted a bit about Rachel, the beach house, what they think will happen the next day at school, that sort of stuff. It was weird how nice they were to her, but Santana figured that if they didn't know about her past with Rachel, she'd be awesome enough with Rachel from there on out so that when they DO find out, it won't matter because they'll know and trust her. Seemed like a decent enough plan. However, it was getting late, and the sound of Rachel's door closing let her know the diva was probably all ready for bed, so she accepted hugs from the Berry men and made her way upstairs.

When she peeked her head into Rachel's surprisingly tastefully designed and decorated room, she couldn't help but smile. Rachel was halfway under the covers of her bed, seemingly too tired to will her body to get fully under them, Berry splayed out diagonally with one of her footie-pajama'd feet hanging off the side of the bed. As if she was gonna let it stay that way. Ridiculous.

Santana moved to the girl's bedside and rolled Rachel further into the bed and got her propped up and tucked in. Honestly, she wasn't sure how Berry didn't get cricks in her neck all the time from her crazy sleeping habits, but she supposed it was a mystery that would probably go unsolved.

"Sleep tight, Rach. See you tomorrow morning." She whispered stroking her thumb across Berry's forehead.

Rachel, in turn, groaned and lazily flailed an arm out until it came in contact with Santana's face, flat on her nose, of course. She frowned at the offending hand, but faster than she thought possible, Berry had sat up and the hand was replaced by Rachel's lips pressing against her cheek.

And then Berry flopped back down, and almost immediately started snoring. Santana was pretty sure the snoring started just before the diva's head hit the pillow, actually, but she wasn't sure how that was even possible.

A little flabbergasted at the turn of events, and kinda thrilled at the kiss, she made her way back downstairs, wished a goodnight to the Berry men, and headed off on foot with her luggage before they could remember they came in Berry's car. Yeah, it was probably a twenty minute walk, but she had stuff to think about. Mostly if Rachel had changed her mind about maybe leaving open the possibility of the two of them becoming something more, why Rachel wanted her to stay and wish her goodnight, and what the hell she figured she'd have to work through the next day at school.

She knew it would be a long walk, and probably a sleepless night of stressed-out thinking, but in less than ten hours, she'd have all the answers to her questions, most likely. And as she trekked across town to her house, not much of that changed.

However, when she got home and back into her bed, most of those thoughts shifted to the back of
her mind as she kind of just wished they'd had one more magical day away from Lima, Ohio. Memories of her and Rachel fooling around in the Atlantic Ocean saw her to sleep that night.

Santana woke to her phone buzzing at the fresh hour of six twenty AM. She looked at the device curiously for a moment before realizing she'd been pretty much neglecting any texts except those from her parents. Santana quickly unlocked it and scanned through her messages and missed calls, noting they were pretty much all from Quinn and Brittany. She smiled and sent them individual messages, deciding to give them a heads up for the start of the morning. It was a Tuesday, so there wouldn't be an early Cheerio practice at least. Thank god.

'Hey Britt-Britt. I'm good, just spent wknd w Berry. Meet me at the doors, ok? Luv u'

'Q don't b so cranky, I'm gr8. Was just takin a holiday w Rachel. I kno ur confusd but I'll explain. Meet me at the doors, k?'

Happy with her responses, she hopped out of bed and quickly went about her morning prep, soon bursting out her front door after kissing her mom and little sister goodbye, and promising Olivia that they'd have a girl's day next Sunday to make up for not being around all weekend and Monday.

Her parents had thankfully brought the car back from school Friday, so she quickly set off for the short drive and soon found herself in the parking lot, spotting two anxious looking blondes by the doors.

It was a little weird to see them actually waiting for her, seeing as Quinn usually came in later most mornings, and Britt tended to watch cartoons until she absolutely had to cross the road to get to school, often regaling her with what happened on SpongeBob while they made their way to the field for practice.

It hit Santana then that she wouldn't be making those treks anymore with the blonde; it had been their tradition, her listen to Brittany talk about cartoons and Lord Tubbington on the walk to the field and during warm-ups, and despite not being fond of that massive cat-beast, she was going to miss that. She'd miss the workouts, the competitions, the locker-room chats. The status power of being a Cheerio would be missed too, for sure, but she'd survived that before, and it didn't sting as much as missing out on some quality time with Britt. Definitely something I'll have to get used to, I guess...I'll still have her around in glee at least.

Rachel's car was in the parking lot, as expected given the girl's crazy need for being aggressively punctual, but wasn't visible. Which, really, was cool enough. Rachel and her dads had done enough, and she'd see the diva later on. She'd woken with a specific mission regarding Berry anyway, so it wasn't like she'd be put off of that by Rachel not being at the doors without being told to be there or whatever.

Santana got out of her car, locked it, and made her way toward the school, letting herself be engulfed in one of Britt's trademark hugs when she got closer, just enjoying the feel before the blonde eventually let go. "You weren't at glee on Friday." Britt stated, her worry and confusion clear in her tone and her eyes as she cocked her head, waiting for an answer.

"Thursday was really bad, so Berry grabbed me Friday morning and took me away until yesterday, Britt." Santana explained, hoping her friend would understand the simplicity of it.

Yet, Brittany only seemed more confused. "But...you don't usually like Rachel. Did she take you to the Shire? It looked really pretty in the movies, but I don't think they have indoor plumbing there."
Santana chuckled and walked the rest of the way toward a fidgeting Quinn, trying to figure out a way to explain. "No, she didn't take me to the Shire, she took me to a beach. And yeah, I wasn't Rach's biggest fan, but she's in my good books now."

She thought it would clarify things, but Brittany only seemed even more confused. "But…wait…it's, like, cold outside. Wouldn't the beach be cold? That doesn't sound fun, all the seals and crabs probably migrated or are asleep in their little homes. Wouldn't glee have been more fun?"

"I…no. Not really, Britt. People weren't being all that great to me last week, and it was getting hard to handle, so I was gonna fight them. Rachel thought that'd just get me expelled, so she dragged me off on a weekend getaway while her dads threatened legal action against the school." Santana explained, shifting her gaze between Quinn and Britt equally so that she could at least tell if either of them were catching her drift.

"San you know I don't like violence. It reminds me of baby seals and poor Wile E Coyote. You can always just cut people down with your vicious words, San. Keep your hands for, like, making those really tasty burritos you make, or during sweet la…" Brittany rambled nervously as the tended to whenever violence was brought up; it made the leggy blonde anxious and uncomfortable, so Santana usually strayed from the topic, but it really did need to be addressed. There wasn't any hiding from it.

Santana sighed, hugging her friend again. "They're not scared of me anymore, B. They don't care what I say, they just want to hurt me, so I was going to try and fight them…but they're a lot bigger than me." Santana clarified, giving Britt a light squeeze. "Rachel convinced me it was a bad idea, and told me I needed a vacation instead while her dads talked to the school about it all. I gave it a shot."

"I don't like when you fight." The blonde noted sadly, sniffling a little. "They were just being really mean, though, right?" Santana didn't know how to answer that question; she'd always tried to shelter Britt from a lot of the bad shit in the world, and she didn't have the heart to tell her that she'd been wrong. Adding to that, Quinn had been entirely silent and seemed to be listening intently, occasionally sending suspicious glances her way. Eventually, she cracked under the pressure of both their stares, sighing.

"They weren't just being mean, Brittany…they were threatening me and trying to do really bad things. They gave me bruises." She added, pulling up her sleeves to show some of the slightly fading marks, hoping both of them wouldn't make too big of a deal about it, given Rachel had promised it was all dealt with.

"San?" Quinn asked, wide-eyed. "They…what? You…" the blonde started again, but couldn't seem to find any more words, as the girl clearly struggled with what she'd just seen and heard.

Santana released herself reluctantly from Britt and walked closer to Quinn. "I'm okay now. Coach broke it up before anything really bad happened, and Rachel's dads had their lawyer friends threaten to sue the school if they refused to help me again. If anyone pulls shit, they'll be dealt with."

Quinn, however, sent a venomous glare at one of the broken lights above the entrance. "I asked her what was going on! She didn't say anything about people touching you! They shouldn't have touched you at all to begin with, San!"

Honestly, Santana agreed with Quinn on that last point, but it was moot given that it had already come and gone, without retribution or fanfare. Santana didn't like crying over spilled milk.

"You had eyes, Quinn! You had ears, and you know how the school treats gay kids. It's always been with violence." Santana interjected, earning a stunned look from Quinn, who was clearly taken
aback. "Q, you know I love you, right? I knew you had your own shit going on, and Berry didn't think I'd take well to her just diving into my business, so she pulled some strings behind the scenes for me. She made a decision. Don't get mad at her, okay? She didn't know what they did either until Saturday, she just saw some of the lighter bullying."

Quinn's posture slumped as she looked at Santana with hurt, accusing eyes. "You…you could have told me! I would have helped if you would have told me." The blonde stated firmly, a teary Brittany nodding profusely beside her.

"When Finn got away with outing me, and no one in glee gave a crap about it because I was in the Troubletones, I figured that kind of set the tone. I know you don't like causing unnecessary drama, Q, and you had a lot on your plate already. And B…I know you listen to Artie and hate arguing with people, but it would have been cool for you two to give the oaf a bit of hell for me. Maybe then I would have come to you, but this shit happened all last week. It wasn't just one or two people after that Josh kid, and sometimes it happened with you in my line of sight. It wasn't a school secret." Santana stated with a sigh, giving both of her blonde friends a pointed look. It had been so long since she'd just been truly open with them, and she needed to set the tone for how their relationship together would change. "I don't want either of you feeling guilty or shit, because it's over, and I was a ghost most of the week whenever I could be…but I needed help. I'm not invincible."

Quinn nodded sadly at that, but Britt only seemed to appear more determined. "You might not be, San, but the Unholy Trinity is. We're like…Charlie's Angels, but I guess Rachel was Charlie this time, though Rachel's a girl, and Quinn doesn't really like her, so…"

"Thanks, Britt, Q." Santana noted as she interrupted her BFF, offering the taller girl a brief smile. "We should get prepped for class now, anyway."

The girls all nodded in agreement and formed a line as they marched confidently through the halls; alone, she would have been just as antsy and nervous, but with her two oldest friends with her, Santana felt stronger. Especially with Quinn back in HBIC mode. And no matter what happened that day, she knew she had a life ahead of her to look forward to, and at least a few more months to enjoy alongside her friends.

Life wasn't perfect, but it was getting better. And hopefully she'd get a start to it that very morning, a hope that only grew when she spotted Rachel waiting at her locker.

That morning, when she woke up, there was only one major goal in mind: kiss the girl again. Since that first enormously glorious kiss on the beach with the wind, sand and rain storming around them, Rachel had kissed her on the cheek twice. Which meant that Berry was owed an equalizer.

"Want us to give you space, S? Berry looks like she's in her war-room commander mode right now." Quinn noted quietly as they strolled through the halls toward a very determined looking Rachel Berry. The girl, as usual, was decked out in her usual fashion, though at least she was wearing the black and white bunny-patterned sweater that was kind of adorable on her.

"Nah, but don't crowd her. She looks a little on edge and I don't want her to get scared off or anything." Santana answered before shooting Rachel a legitimately happy smile, just fucking tickled pick to have her friends by her side and a berry enticing individual in her sights.

Santana noticed Quinn and Britt slow their pace a bit, letting Santana get to her locker as they stepped into her flanks, scanning around the halls for potential threats. Rachel, despite being, like, a foot away, remained silent, so Santana cocked her head to the side, deciding to take the initiative.

"Hey, Rachel, what's up? How…are you?" She asked, stumbling over her words when she realized
just how little game she had at the moment, and how ridiculously anti-smooth she was being. So not clutch. So it wasn't a surprise when Rachel kept silent, Santana close enough to see some nervousness in Berry's eyes as the girl gave the slightest of nods and lightly nudged her back against her closed locker.

Now, at this point, her mind was buzzing with reasons for why things were going wrong, because historically, most times a person has pushed her back against a locker, it's been out of some sort of anger. And Berry's face was firm and like the girl was about to go to war, which had her wondering what the fuck happened between last night and that morning, so she went to step forward and figure shit out.

Only to be pushed harder against the lockers, the impact causing a light clatter that very much gained her blonde friends' attentions. "Berry, I swear to GOD if you lay another…" Quinn started, as Rachel stared up into Santana's eyes fiercely, the diva pressing hard against her, keeping her up against the lockers, and the heat she felt swell through her was both embarrassing and awesome, because goddamn if Rachel wasn't smoking hot right then.

Quinn's sentence didn't even finish before Rachel pulled Santana's head down to indulge in a surprisingly gentle kiss full of a familiar longing and desperate need which she was all too willing to return in kind as their mouths moved together. She'd only ever really kissed one girl before, but while Brittany was a dancer in the purest sense, Rachel had a way of using her lips and tongue to transform their kiss into a rhythmic dance, each other's soft, muted sounds becoming the melody. The previous kiss during the storm had been electric, chaotic, impulsive, and perhaps those elements remained present as Berry clung to her and seared Santana with her confidence in what they had; she'd experienced a last kiss before, and this one wasn't it. This was a promise, a declaration that they would endure. She could feel Rachel's heartbeat with how tightly Berry was pressed against her, and it was just as frantic as her own, but their pace remained slow, deliberate, feeding their passion into each other as she reveled in Berry's fruity scent and firm touch that told her more about what Rachel was feeling than she was sure words would. However, Santana also wouldn't put it past Berry to try.

Rachel eventually took a step back, attempting to put space between them. It remained an attempt, mostly because Santana followed the diva's lips and kept the kiss going for a few seconds longer, because Rachel was wearing this delicious peach lip gloss and between that and Rachel's kissing, she was already kind of addicted. Or at least spiraling toward it blissfully.

It ended with Rachel's hand tangled in her hair, and Santana's hands on the diva's waist, her breathing a little heavy from being caught off guard and the fact that she hadn't really considered her lungs during it all. "God, you taste amazing." She spoke, the words bubbling up from her chest, feeling a little light-headed and unfocused. Still, Santana knew she had to say a little more than that, knowing Berry. Or, well, she could leave it at that and leave the both of them blushing like idiots and too flustered to say much of anything. "You know, I was gonna get to that, tiny. Way to beat me to the punch."

Rachel's eyes kept darting between Santana's own dark brown globes and her lips, and it was the flash of sheer nervousness that let her know that Berry was about to ramble on again. "Well, firstly, you don't need to instigate every kiss, Santana, I'm very capable of doing so myself, and more than happy to. Secondly, I was worried that, after a kiss-less Monday from you, that you had either decided to change your romantic intent with me or slow any such progression so as to let me set the pace, so thirdly, I decided that if the latter was the case, I'd do so. Fourthly, I was thinking about my future for a little while on my elliptical this morning and…"

Santana interrupted the diva with a quick chaste kiss, lightly taking Berry's lower lip in between her teeth for a brief nibble before letting it go. "Rach, easy. It's just me." Santana noted with as soothing
a voice as she could, keeping eye contact with the diva, whose expression seemed to indicate that maybe she was understating how intimidating she was. Which, whatever. She didn't want Berry to feel that way, and eventually they'd get there. "Okay, maybe that's a bad way to put it, but hey. You've kissed me more than I've kissed you. I just wanted to even the scorecards and remind you I'm into you, which I couldn't do yesterday because I was pulling Driving Miss Berry duties, and when I wasn't, we were basically around your dads. Did you expect me to make out with you after you'd done your crazy long night-time ritual?"

Rachel actually cocked her head to the side at that, clearly thinking that over. "Well, while annoying, it would have been quite exhilarating. Though yes, it probably would have kept me awake for a while and kept me from getting my standard seven hours of sleep. Thank you for your restraint, Santana."

"Oh my god, what are you two even talking about?" Quinn asked in exasperation, looking at the both of them as if they had grown extra heads. As if the girl hadn't just seen them getting their mack on.

"San and Rachie totally got their sweet lady kisses on this weekend." Brittany explained unsurprisingly succinctly, causing a groan from Quinn, whose mind was likely going over the potential social devastation that their possible relationship would cause.

"Thank you, Brittany. Santana and I did indeed bond over the weekend and revealed our affection toward each other physically. It was in such dramatic fashion too! A tropical storm had started its run through the area, and I had in turn given into impulse and danced in the rain and heavy winds along the beach, and Santana…showing clear concern for me…searched for me along the shore to ensure I was okay, and to bring me back inside. And with the wind and rain buffeting our skin, our collective passions being fed by the storm, and the absolutely electric atmosphere drawing…" Rachel excitedly began retelling the blondes of their night-time kiss that stormy Sunday, only muffled when Quinn's hand shot out to cover Rachel's mouth, leaving an unimpressed Rachel Berry huffing into Q's hand and stomping her foot on the tile floor.

"I'm just going to assume it was a kiss like in the movies or something, and go before both of your overwhelming…insanity…makes my ears bleed." Quinn added, smirking at Santana mirthfully; she could tell the blonde was happy for her, which was what mattered more than Rachel narrating that night's events in her opinion. She was happy Q accepted her so quickly, and Brittany just looked fucking thrilled, so that was a plus too.

With that, Q dragged Britt off to her locker and Santana replaced the blonde's hand with her own lips, catching Rachel off guard. It was a quick kiss, but hey, no way she'd let blondie's hand be the last thing to touch her diva's lips. Not a chance in hell. "You're welcome, for not macking on you last night. Can't promise I'll hold off if I find myself in your room again, though." She added with a cheeky smirk, enjoying the blush on Berry's cheeks.

"Admittedly, I did sort of want to hold off on intimacy until the dinner date later this week…of which you haven't given me a set date and time yet…but I also wanted you to know that I care for you, I want to be with you. And…somewhere down the line, when I go to New York, I'd like for us to have a fresh start there away from Lima, but until then, I'm here in your corner." Rachel spoke, and though the girl was entirely sincere, there was this little spark in Berry's eyes that just held Santana's focus, as if the diva would jump her if she looked away. It was predatory, and she honestly had her thinking about just breaking out into Missy Elliott's 'Work It' right then, but her inner Snixx kept that on a leash. She wasn't Berry, she could control herself when it came to sudden musical outbursts.
So instead, Santana ghosted her lips back over Rachel's again, teasingly, just to see how Berry would react. The hitched breath and immediate pair of hands cupping her ass was pretty clear that the spark she'd noticed was one she'd have to remember in the future. "You do weird things to me, Berry."
She began, holding the back of Rachel's head in one hand as the other lightly trailed down one of the diva's arms. "Friday. Six o'clock. Lucky you for making family dinner night. Maybe luckier depending on how you play your cards, tiny."

"Luckier…how?" Rachel asked, her breath almost hot enough to sear Santana's lips.

"I know you like being first…and I've never made out with anyone in my hammock before."
Santana added, feeling goosebumps along Berry's arm as she slowly dragged her fingers up and down the diva's arm, her other hand massaging the girl's scalp. "Or on my bed." She finished with a whisper, knowing it was probably a little cruel to say such things with the dinner days away, but she was a sexual being, and Berry was just bringing that side of her out.

"R…really? You've never…?" Berry squeaked out into her ear quietly, both of the diva's hands clenching Santana's ass in response. She jumped a little in surprise, but it felt pretty good; still she didn't want to put on a show, and students were just starting to fill the halls now.

So she took hold of both of Rachel's hands and gave them a squeeze as she rested her cheek against the diva's. "That beach house was your sanctuary. My bedroom is mine. Q and B have been in there a few times, but…everything's happened away from there. I can't promise a weekend vacation, but…I can offer Friday night, since my parents are taking Olivia to the movies after dinner."

Rachel's eyebrows cocked upward at that. "Santana, if I'm interrupting family night, it can happen another time. I can be patient. I think I can." 

"You're not, that's happening Sunday. Friday night, we're gonna watch us some horror movies."
Santana noted with a wicked smile, knowing her plan was utterly perfect as Rachel gasped in shock and stepped back out of her personal space.

"Santana! I…if I watch horror movies late at night…" Berry started in a stage whisper, looking at her chidingly and in disbelief.

"Then you'll be too freaked to go home, and you'll have to sleep over. Drat." Santana answered sarcastically as her smile grew, opening her locker to grab her books for the first few classes. "Why, we might be forced to huddle close because there's safety in numbers. And of course, if we survive the night, we'd have to have a home-made vegan breakfast to celebrate. I'm sure you could think of a better way to spend a night, though."

Rachel was biting her lip when Santana had finished packing her bag and turned around, the diva stepping back into her personal space, their bodies nearly touching. "Well…if I can't find a hotter girl to be with that evening, I might show up."

Santana laughed as Rachel pulled a line from Puck of all people, stepping backward and away from her, blowing her a cheeky kiss in the process. Berry never was one for subtleties. Santana was pretty sure that having Berry 'help' her model and buy some clothes at Eden would be both amusing as hell and a little energizing, if she knew the diva.

And as Rachel walked down the halls toward her own locker, Santana had a feeling the week would be full of little moments like that. And since no one had harassed her yet that morning, and teachers were seemingly patrolling the halls, she hoped that those moments with Rachel would replace the bad ones from the previous week.
Because she was, in a way, both healing and growing, and maybe this time instead of stalling at budding, she'd bloom.

End Notes

If you can believe it, most of this came about in a single, long sitting. I sat down a second day for 4 or so hours to edit, trim, and expand certain sections, but a lot of it happened on one happy day of release. Lots of good memories working through my head of the road trips I've been on, the vacations I've had…fun stuff. Didn't think this story would pass the 12k mark, but it ended up over 40k, so…yeah. This was my entry for Day 4 of Pezberry Week 2014, I Hope you enjoyed it, and I hope you've enjoyed all the other submissions so far from our content creators :D The rest of my PW14 entries will be in my Pezberry one-shot archive I'll have up in the next few days. This one was just a little too big to not be on its own.

Thanks so much for reading and being awesome!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!